

LIFE ROLLS ON | THE 10TH COMMANDMENT | WHAT IS SALVATION? | PURSUIT OF THE NEW

new identity

MAGAZINE

God in focus. World in scope.

SEEING WHO GOD SEES

HAVING CONFIDENCE IN WHO
GOD CREATED YOU TO BE

AMAZING GRACE

RECEIVING GRACE FROM GOD
AND HAVING GRACE FOR OTHERS

Muting The Noise of the World

DECONSTRUCTING THE PRAYER
HIKE FOR CITY DWELLERS

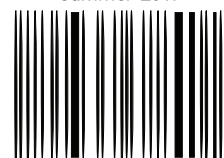
PLUS
A
MUSIC
PLAYLIST FOR A
MISSIONARY

The What-If Syndrome

HOW DO WE KNOW IF OUR
DECISIONS ARE THE ONES GOD
WOULD HAVE US MAKE?

SUMMER 2011

Summer 2011



ISSN 1946-5939

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welcome...

"GROWING IN GOD" IS A PHRASE YOU MIGHT HEAR CHRISTIANS SAY A LOT. But what does it mean to grow in God? Does it mean having more faith that God is a loving God who cares for every one of us? Does it mean spending more time in prayer and communion with Christ? Does it mean discovering your own biblical convictions and developing a foundation to stand on them?

It means all of these things, and many more. It may sound overwhelming or impossible, but we must remember that it is a process that will take our lifetime, a process that won't be finished until heaven. These things take time because we're all human and flawed, sinful and stubborn, and abundantly resistant to change. Speaking personally, I often have good intentions then feel like a failure when I don't follow through on the promises I've made to myself and so much more to God. God has so much grace for us. There is relief in the knowledge that the perfect "me" that I desire to be can only be achieved through the transforming work of God, and cannot merely be fulfilled by my own efforts. We cannot make real change without God, nor are we expected to. Even so, it does not mean that we shouldn't make *any* effort.



Our "growing" should not be the same as a gardener who plants a seed in dry dirt, without sunlight and stares at it saying, "Grow, grow, grow." We must play our part in God's efforts by being active in our faith, open to where God would lead and pursuing God's way and will for our lives. It is he who does the growing in us after all, but we can surround ourselves with water and sunlight by striving to be teachable by God's Word, shape-able through Christ and genuinely desire change in ourselves to reflect more of Jesus. It's about letting go of those things in our lives that don't bring us health, closeness, or connection with God, or hinder the example we're making to the world of who God is within us.

Through the pages of *New Identity Magazine* we want to help this growth process. Our biblically based articles and perspectives are like added nutrients, helping to challenge you to think about your faith in new ways and to delve more internally and spiritually to discover more about God and yourself. We can't *make* the growth happen, that's the Holy Spirit's territory in each individual, but we can actively participate in what Jesus would have us be and do through reading the Bible and applying it to our lives. That's where articles such as "Amazing Grace," "Seeing Who God Sees," "The What-If Syndrome," and "Muting the Noise of the World," to name a few, come in. We hope they stir your soul, encourage you to examine biblical truths that would help your own roots grow, and help you find your own convictions in Christ, in all the confusion that life brings.

Overall, we must remember that it's not about us succeeding or failing in our quest for impossible perfection in ourselves, it's about honoring God in our efforts, being the best examples of Jesus' followers we can be, and showing the God of the universe that we love him enough to try our very best.

Cailin

CAILIN BRIODY HENSON
Editor-in-Chief

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



Games for Heroes

Do you have video games and systems that you no longer use and wonder what to do with them? Games for Heroes, a non-profit started by teens Jack Wilson and Peter Gallagher, collect handheld video games and gaming systems to send to troops overseas and to those recovering from injuries at home. Donating to Games for Heroes is a green and generous way to clear out unwanted items. Games for Heroes also collects batteries for the games and accepts cash donations to buy new items at discounts. To help, visit www.gamesforheroes.com. —Rachel Gooneratne



Spoke Folk

Spoke Folk is a summer ministry that combines biking, music, and building community. Each tour lasts for 12 days, involves about 40 miles of biking, and includes an evening concert and worship service with each host congregation. Teams are made up of young adults who not only have musical talent and passion to share the Gospel, but also other skills that are necessary to support the ministry, including counseling, hospitality and relationship building. If you're interested in a volunteering vacation, visit www.spokefolk.org. —Rachel Gooneratne



Landesa

Over 660 million people in the world live on less than \$2/day and more than 380 million live on less than \$1/day. Landesa partners with governments and other development organizations to help the world's poor secure land rights in an effort to break the cycle of poverty. As landowners, poor families become self-sufficient farmers who can sell their crops and increase their income. In addition to securing land rights for families, Landesa helps set up financial support systems and provides public awareness programs. Support Landesa by attending their International Women's Day luncheon on March 15th or visit their website for other ways to get involved: www.landesa.org. —Rachel Gooneratne



Friends Missionary Prayer Band

Friends Missionary Prayer Band (FMPB) is a missionary movement that works with churches and other Christian agencies to reach the unreached in India, primarily utilizing the power of prayer to support and encourage the ministry. FMPB also hosts radio programs, is involved in church planting, and provides training programs for those interested in various areas of service. FMPB's social outreach programs include child care, life skills, job training, malaria control, and medical camps in the communities that have been touched by FMPB volunteers. FMPB welcomes prayer partners, child sponsors and missionary sponsors. To find out more about these and other support opportunities, visit www.fmpb.co.in. —Rachel Gooneratne

new identity

MAGAZINE

SUMMER 2011

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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.

Publisher/Editor-in-Chief Cailin Briody Henson

Editorial Board Jerine Griffith, Cristian Vasquez,
Alexa Wan

Copy Editor Jerine Griffith
Fact Checker Crystal Lassegard

Layout & Design Cailin Briody Henson

Director of Photography & Casting Alexa Wan

Research Editor Rachel Gooneratne

Contributing Writers Ramon Mayo, Kelli Ward, Nicholas
Sowell, Kevin C. Neece, Matthew
Hamilton, Delbert Teachout,
Noah Nelson, Tom Koel, Erica
Westbrook, Erica Mongé-Greer,
Gustavo Vazquez-Lozano

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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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Life Rolls On



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Pushing the limits and changing lives. The inspiring story of a foundation committed to challenging fears and drowning doubts.



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.

Imagine you're an up-and-coming surfer, gaining more and more national attention with each surf contest you enter. You have sponsorships coming in regularly, endorsements follow, and success is your common trait. Then, one day, it all comes crashing down. This is the story of a man who changed an entire demographic. While surfing one day, Jesse Billauer was pushed head first into a shallow sandbar, fracturing his neck and severing his spinal cord, leaving him quadriplegic. This is Jesse's story. An up-and-coming superstar who had his entire career ahead of him but sadly had it end short. But Jesse didn't give up there, knowing in his heart he would do whatever it took to surf again and not just surf again, but inspire others to chase and pursue their dreams even if they also had physical limitations.

Jesse founded Life Rolls On in hopes that people might be inspired, freed, hopeful, and happy about where they are in life. Life Rolls On (LRO) is a subsidiary of the Christopher & Dana Reeves

Foundation. The Reeves' goal is to improve quality of life for young people affected by spinal cord injuries. Their aim is to use action sports as a way to inspire limitless possibilities despite paralysis. They want to shift stereotypes and beliefs of the general public and those with spinal cord injuries that life does "roll on." The Reeves feel that early outreach and communication immediately after an injury can have a huge impact on those affected by the injury so they offer LRO as a resource during the time that can be the most traumatic and overwhelming for an individual.

Jesse Billauer wanted to infuse a sense of accomplishment and drive in young people, and convince them not to settle for little just because they have physical limitations. Featured in the surf movie *Step Into Liquid*, Jesse continues his career in pro surfing while also inspiring others through motivational speaking. With programs like They Will Ski Again and They Will Surf Again (TWSA), LRO is bringing hope to those who never thought something like this might even be possible. With over 1.2 million people in the United States alone with spinal cord injuries and approximately 12,000 new spinal cord injuries each year, there is a huge need to reach out to these individuals. Imagine if only a fraction of those individuals lived an extreme sport lifestyle, you would find a growing demand of at least hundreds to thousands that could be impacted by Life Rolls On.

In June 2010, I was able to partake in the program They Will Surf Again as a volunteer. It made a lasting mark on my life. The day began with an early morning set-up as the sun was rising. After a morning breakfast and orientation, the full purpose of why I was there began to take shape as participants for the day started signing in. We had paraplegics and quadriplegics, each excited for what the day would hold. Many were participants who had been to multiple TWSA events, and others had never even surfed before. I saw wheelchair after wheelchair come up as the participants arrived for the day's events. The volunteers were split into groups of three with about sixteen people per team. Each team was responsible for the surf sessions of about six or seven para/quadruplegics.

With a frigid temperature of about 57 degrees fahrenheit in the water, all volunteers including participating surfers had wet-suits. Special wheelchairs were used made of largely rounded plastic tires that enable the participants the ability to quickly and, without problem, move on sand and get to the water. Our first participant had never even been in the ocean! You could see the excitement and anticipation in his eyes as he would not only enter the ocean for the first time, but also surf for the first time. Along with the wheelchairs, special boards were made to allow the surfer to lay down onto the board with a railing on both sides of him or her. At the front of the board is a bar to hold onto if they are paraplegic. This design worked quite well as the surfers seemed to fit snugly on the board with little to no problem.

We took the surfer from the wheelchair, and carried him

out to about waist-high water where we could then transfer him/her to the board. We got them centered and comfortable, and then would tow them out past the break. This could be tricky at times as at certain intervals you would find fairly large sized waves coming at you. This seemed to be the most challenging. But once we got them out past the break, it was a matter of instilling comfort and confidence in the surfer. We waited for the right wave, saw it, and then told the surfer they were going. With a push into the wave, our first surfer rode it all the way in and was ecstatic with joy. His first wave was a success!


Joining us in this cause was extreme sports celebrity Sal Masakela, best known for his X-Games and Olympics voice as a commentator. Down-to-earth and humble, Sal cared for the participants just as much as anyone, always willing to carry them out to the board or tread water in the deeper areas to take the time and connect. He was assigned to my orange team and did an amazing job pushing the surfers into the right waves and making them feel

very comfortable. Sal and I mostly stuck to the deep-water section so we could talk to the surfers and make them feel comfortable before going into a wave. The second greatest challenge we had were wipeouts. With quadriplegics having no ability to stay afloat, all volunteers were stationed throughout the water, from sand to deep waters.

This way, we were able to grab a surfer and pull him or her out of the water if they went down or fell off without them being stuck under water for too long.

Surfer after surfer made their way into the water as our team came to aid the brave individuals teaching us all that nothing can stand in your way if you have the drive or passion. People of all ages showed the courage of trying something new. We had young teenagers to middle-aged fathers showing up to try surfing or *shred the gnar* once again. It was a testimony to myself and the other volunteers who witnessed the surfers that day. The surfers taught me that no matter what happens to you, you have the choice to make anything a simple road block or a dead end street. These courageous individuals proved that they would not let life get them down, that regardless of their bodily limitations, they were going to still have fun, be adventurous, and seize life by the tail.

It's times like these and people like this, that make life all the more optimistic. These are some of the happiest people I've ever met. I never heard them complain once. And if we, in our constant state of bickering, have even more to be grateful for, one can see how much we have to gain and learn from them. This remains one of the most humble experiences I've ever had in my life. And I have those amazing individuals to thank. Arms or no arms, legs or no legs, these people continue living life to its fullest. It is in this state you see that life is never about ability, but rather being comfortable in your own skin and appreciating what life still has to offer.

For more information on Life Rolls On, please visit: www.liferollson.org 

"You could see the excitement and anticipation in his eyes as he would not only enter the ocean for the first time, but also surf for the first time."

Never Give Up



Photo by Bethan | Flickr (CC)



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.

I'm tired. I'm banging my head against the wall. And here, cradled in my arms, slumbering in pink fairy pajamas, this child, the reason tomorrow will come and with it all the doubt, fear, rejection and disappointment that comes from a dream not yet realized.

Tomorrow I'll be in my car fighting gridlock on my way to meeting one-thousand-and-one. I'm pitching yet another television series. I'm prepared to deliver. I'm prepared to get a 'yes'. I'm prepared to hear 'no'. Preparation is key. Preparation takes years.

I know this because of a woman named Doria Cook Nelson.

Doria has buckets of weapons. Sticks, staffs, single edge sabers, and broad swords. She's written numerous articles for *Inside Kung-Fu* magazine.

She's won numerous medals and trophies in Tai Chi Chuan. How many?

"Oh gosh, five years worth, five tournaments a year, five categories each tournament..." she says.

Doria likes Jimi Hendrix and the movie *White Squall*.

"It's about death and the uncontrollable force of nature," she says.

At fifteen she was already training for the half-mile in the Olympics.

In her twenties she was an accomplished actress.

And somewhere in her thirties she became a step-mom to a very lost, very angry, and very frightened boy.

By sixteen I was kicked out of high school for fighting and driving my 74' Super Beetle through the football field at half-time, because you know, the motorcycle-through-the-hallway thing had been done before. I had long hair, a leather jacket, Doc Martens and embraced the sweeping Seattle grunge movement with vigor.

I was sent to live with my dad and step-mom in California. I arrived on their doorstep a horrible liar, a bad thief and stupid. At the time and for the life of me, I couldn't understand why Doria and I didn't get along.

Things have changed and the Sunday before my pitch I sit with her on the porch hoping for some inspiration. She pours me some exotic imported green tea. Doria's a tea connoisseur.

"Tai Chi is the study of how to balance opposite forces. Learning various Tai Chi postures can be applied to anything in your life," Doria tells me.

"Sounds a lot like preparation," I say.

"Yes, you can apply it to anything, such as business confrontations, an adventure you take overseas, staying healthy..."

"Even a reckless teenager," I say. Doria laughs.

"Yes. Even that," she says.

Doria has brown curly hair that springs and falls at her shoulders. She wears bright colors of vermilion and purple. Recently she had hip replacement surgery. I ask her if the years of Tai Chi helped her recovery.

"I've been recuperating very quickly," she says.

She's modest. Her body's adapted to the new ceramic and titanium now substituting bone at a phenomenal pace. Since I've known her, Doria's been on a self-imposed cocktail of supplemental

vitamins, vegetables and Chinese herbs. I'm fairly certain she'll survive Armageddon.

Over some thirty years, she's been instructed by 3 different generations of Tai Chi masters. She's taught throughout the world – Greece, China and Europe, but now she mainly stays local. She also only teaches the physical advantages of the art form, not the spiritual. And there's a reason for this.

An odd thing happened in my early twenties. I became a Christian. At my insistence, Doria and my dad started going to church with me. She accepted Christ into her life shortly after my father.

"My relationship with God before I became a Christian wasn't as personal," she says. "The juice that was driving me before to be great in a tournament isn't as intense now. It's no longer the priority. I've let God move into my daily agenda and my family's become more important," she says. I ask her what has been her greatest accomplishment.

"Transitioning away from me being a priority of everything, to other people being a priority," she says.

My dad and Doria championed my education all the way to Pepperdine University. Doria read the very first script I ever wrote and said to me, "You can do this..."

I've been doing "this" ever since. My dad showed me anything was possible. Doria taught me about preparation.

On Monday I'll slip into a cheap blazer and enter another pretentious office building overlooking the Sunset strip. It'll be a meeting that could change my life. I'll walk into a conference room full of hundred-dollar haircuts and regal custom tailored suits and pitch my heart out.

"We all believe in you, Noah" Doria likes to say. "Never give up," my dad adds.

And it's for these reasons that whether those faces in the conference room tell me 'yes' or 'no' tomorrow, I will still be a long way from that kid kicked out of high school. The one who lied, stole, had no idea who he was, but later graduated with honors, went on to University, and became a writer on the most successful television franchise in history.

I'm light years away.

In a child's bedroom, in fact.

I'm cradling my daughter in my arms.

In a few minutes her eyes will close. I'm praying. And shortly she'll be dreaming.

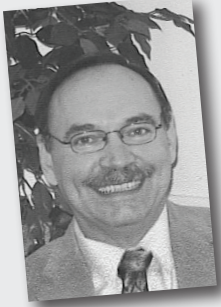




amazing grace

*Discovering what it means
to receive grace from God
and have it for others.*

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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.

Grace is a word that's hard to understand because it means different things to different people. Consider this scenario.

When I consider my life, my reward looks dismal. As I remember the things I've done, things I'm too ashamed to tell, I think, "There's no way God will let me into heaven!" In my imagination I see myself standing before the throne of God with fear and trembling. My fate is in his hands. I hear Satan accusing me of all the things I did and many more things I didn't do. I want to argue, to defend myself. But then I remember, it doesn't matter anyway. If I broke one part of the law, I broke it all. I can feel the demons of hell gloating over me, hissing at me. I hang my head in shame. I am so afraid. What can I do?

When I look I see Jesus. I see his wounded side and nail scarred hands. Pain shoots through my heart and tears begin to fall as I realize my sin caused his agony. What'll he say? What'll he do? My heart sinks.

He looks at me with compassionate eyes. Did I hear him say that he already paid the required amount for all my sin by going to the cross for me? He says that all the things I did, and said, and thought about, have been paid in full by his own blood. My record is clean! Jesus cleansed it by shedding his blood on the cross!

God looks at me and asks me whether I believe that Jesus did all that for me. I say, "With all my heart, soul, mind, and strength I do." The tears fall even harder but the fear is replaced with relief. Joy floods my soul. I laugh. I cry. I run to Jesus. I fall at his feet and say "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you." He says, "Stand up. I love you. You are my friend."

That is grace.

What other ways can we describe grace? People who teach about grace often describe it as God's unearned favor. God loves us even when we feel unworthy. Grace is the power of God. When we face temptations, it is grace that prevents us from yielding to the temptation. Grace can be described as a state of reconciliation to God. The phrase "fallen from grace" comes from this meaning. Grace enables us to live at peace with our neighbors. Grace is a gift from God. We can't boast about how much grace we have because it's a gift.

Grace is receiving favor. My friend Sharon describes how

that type of grace worked in her life.

"I didn't want to be with my mom when she died. I experienced grief when my husband died—I couldn't bear the thought of doing it again," Sharon remembers. "Her passing was imminent. Dad was with her at the nursing home when a raging snow storm started to pass through our area. I called and told him to head home and I'd sit with mom. 'Oh, God, please don't let her die while I'm there,' I cried out in my heart. Instead of answering that prayer, God began pouring his strength and grace upon me. Mom died four hours later. Her last words were, 'You were a wonderful daughter.'"

"God knew I *had* to be there when she passed—she needed to say those words and I needed to hear them. They were God's grace-gift to me."

For the rest of her life, Sharon will know her mother found favor with her.

What does the Bible say about grace? How do we accept God's grace when we feel so undeserving? Why do we struggle with having enough grace for ourselves and others? How is our relationship with God influenced by grace? Can we have too much grace?

How do we accept God's grace when we feel so undeserving?

Grace rules out anything we can do. It's given freely by faith in our Savior. "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." (Eph. 2:8 & 9, ESV) We have nothing to boast about. God gives the gift, the grace, and the gospel. That's grace, upon grace, upon grace.

We may think that because of the way we've lived we're unworthy of grace. I've met many people who felt they had been so bad that God couldn't help them. The truth is everyone who is saved has felt undeserving. We might think, "How could someone like me ever receive God's grace?" That's a good question. But if we felt good enough to receive grace it wouldn't be grace and it wouldn't be salvation. On the other hand, if we feel we don't need it, we'll never receive it.

In Acts 2:47 we read about the believers finding "the favor of all the people." Paul usually begins his letters by wishing grace and peace on his readers. He says to the Corinthians, "Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Cor 1:3, NIV) The readers were already believers, they had already received grace for salvation, so Paul was probably asking for God's favor as they lived from day to day. Paul may also have been wishing them God's presence and peace.

Exodus 33:15-17 is a story about Moses asking for God's favor and presence. Moses says, "If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us?" (NIV) Moses may have felt undeserving of leading his people and wanted God to be with him as reassurance.

Why do we struggle with having enough grace for ourselves and others?

As Christians we have to be careful of three sources that can prevent us from receiving grace: the devil, the world, and our flesh. These are our enemies. They entice us to become entangled in our pleasure seeking activities, drawing the noose tighter around us until we are trapped in bondage from which we can't escape. They tell us we're not saved because we're not good enough. Has anyone been there besides me? They point to the mistakes we've made since becoming a Christian. Or they tell us we are saved so eat, drink, and be merry.

Christians will have struggles. That's because there's a devil that's always looking for people he can influence. Remember he even tempted Jesus in the wilderness. Another source of our struggle comes from the world. Life is full of sinful things to see, hear, and do. Our third source of struggle comes from our flesh, our humanity, our desire to gratify our appetites, habits, or addictions. Our flesh is constantly in opposition to the Spirit, like the old cartoons that had the devil on one shoulder and an angel on the other shoulder while they both tried to influence the decision. In the cartoons the angel always won, but that isn't necessarily true in real life. Sometimes we yield to our flesh. These struggles can cause us to feel undeserving of grace. The struggle doesn't mean we're not Christians, it means we are or there wouldn't be a struggle.

Romans chapter seven explains why we don't seem to have enough grace. Paul describes the struggle between the flesh and the Spirit. When the flesh wins, grace loses. That is why Paul says we have to die to self daily and walk in the Spirit. Remember Galatians 5:16 says when we walk in the spirit we will not fulfill the lusts of the flesh. How do we walk in the Spirit? For me, it's a mental attitude. We need to realize grace is in front of us, behind us, under us and over us. It is to the right and the left and it fills our hearts. When we're in that place, we can walk in the Spirit.

Grace has two directions. One direction is from God to us, the other direction is from us to others. If it seems difficult to receive grace from God, it's harder to give grace to others. People are always going to disappoint us. When we learn the difficult task of forgiving when someone does us wrong, we're beginning to experience grace.

God's grace makes Christians peculiar people. We can learn to forgive, to pardon, and to treat with unearned favor those who become a part of our lives. I know it's easy to hold a grudge.

I've done it often, even when the person was innocent and the offense was only in my mind. But we're to forgive them, even if we think they don't deserve it, even if they'll probably never return grace to us. It's hard to remember, as Romans 5:8 says, that "while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." We didn't deserve it. We didn't earn it. We can never be good enough. But he showed us grace anyway. We can learn to grow in that type of grace.

How is our relationship with God influenced by grace?

Many people who call themselves Christians say, "I don't have a religion, I have a relationship." Religion implies that humanity is and people are trying to do something to appease a deity. In Christianity the deity has died for us. I believe that without the grace of God there'd be no relationship. Jesus told us in Matthew 7:22-23 that in the last days there'll be people who call him Lord, but he'll deny ever knowing them. The relationship was only in their minds, not in God's heart.

Christians who make the claim to have a relationship are saying they've accepted Jesus as their Savior. They're saved by the grace of God and their faith in him. Anything less is not a relationship. Do we spend time alone with God each day? Do we daily pray and read our Bibles? Do we bless or curse others in the language used to talk to them? Can others see the strength of the relationship in us through our actions? Our attentiveness to justice? Concern for the poor? Dispossession of our wealth and the

sharing of our possessions?

I attend a large church where it's difficult to know everybody. Sometimes when I'm shopping someone will tell me they saw me at church. Immediately I try to remember what I've just been doing or saying. I don't want anyone from my church seeing me act in an ungracious manner. I especially don't want God to see me acting that way. Sometimes it embarrasses me when I remember what I said or did.

The last verse in the entire Bible says, "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with God's people" (Rev. 22:21). He has given us many opportunities to choose him or reject him. We can receive his blessings or his wrath, but our destiny is determined by our choice. If we consider giving up our own understanding and follow him, then we'll receive the results of his grace.

God knows the condition of the world and our hearts and he doesn't want anyone to perish; he wants us all to come to him. His love for us never ends and reaches all around the world and

"If we felt good enough to receive grace it wouldn't be grace and it wouldn't be salvation. If we feel we don't need it, we'll never receive it."

into our hearts. It extends throughout eternity. It's gentler than a feather, mightier than a hurricane, and stronger than a mountain. Yet, it grieves him. God's kind heart is broken, when even one of his creation reject him and chooses to continue to live according to the flesh. Every person who continues to live in sin is a person for whom Christ died in vain. How can anyone neglect so great a salvation? People marvel at the martyrs and wonder how they could do what they did. I think they understood his grace enough to receive it. I have many friends on Facebook who live in countries where it's difficult to minister but they continue each day by God's grace and thank him for providing for them.

Paul knew better than anyone the effects of God's grace. He was changed from being a persecutor of Christians to being an apostle for God. God is merciful, God is love. God is grace. It's through his grace we are able to have a relationship with him. We may have learned that even though we received new birth, it is impossible to live a Christian life on our own strength. That is what Paul was telling the church in Rome. They couldn't work their way into God's grace. They had to learn that God himself is dwelling in us, helping us to live right, if we let him.

Can we have too much grace for ourselves?

Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 12:9 that God told him, "My grace is sufficient for you." I've often wondered about that verse. Was Paul referring to grace as his ministry gift, his power to operate in his ministry, his protection in his travels, his favor with God, or his salvation? It could be all of them, or none of them. It seems that he wasn't healed from his illness. I sometimes wonder why. Paul accepts his ailment as part of God's grace for him.

We see grace again in James 4:6. "God gives grace to the humble." Also, 1 Peter 5:5 says "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble." James doesn't specify what type of grace. Let's assume these verses mean that all the benefits of being saved are God's gifts to us. What would that mean? We can read Psalm 103 and see a partial list of the benefits: forgiveness, healing, protection from harm, loving kindness, and good food. It seems to me that asking if we have too much grace is like asking, can we have too much forgiveness? Can we have too much love? Can we have too much mercy? Doesn't God give us what we need when we need it?

What is our power if we are living in grace?

There is a popular saying among Christians. It's the phrase "We are not under law but under grace," based on the scripture in Romans 6:14 (NKJV), "For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace." The popular teaching is that once we're saved we can do anything we want because we are covered by grace.

I think there's another type of grace. As sinners saved

"God's grace makes Christians peculiar people."


by grace, we need to be careful to not consider God's grace as a license for lasciviousness. Hebrews 12:28 defines grace as a force "whereby we may serve God acceptably." When we're saved by grace we learn that the same grace that saves us is the same grace that empowers us to live holy lives. We don't need to sin because grace gives us power to overcome sin. "Through him and for his name's sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith." (Romans 1:5, NIV) What else can this mean except that our faith gives us power to obey God? What are we to do with that power?

"We have different gifts, according to the grace given us." (Romans 12:6) What gift has God given us? It seems to me we're given a double measure of power. Power to live obediently and power to perform the gift he has given to us. Some of the grace gifts are righteousness (Romans 5:15), and eternal life (Romans 6:23). In 1 Corinthians 3:10, Galatians 2:9, and Ephesians 3:2 Paul talks about using the gift he received from God's grace. These gifts may have been wisdom, knowledge, faith, miracles, or healing.

We have considered some of the dimensions of grace. We have seen that it's the gift of God that allows God to accept us into his kingdom. It's unmerited favor. Grace is the power of God living inside us through the Holy Spirit that enables us to resist temptations. Grace is the force that enables us to live at peace with our neighbors. Grace gives us favor to live day to day. Grace can be God's presence. We can't boast about how much grace we have because it's a gift. But these are only the beginning of grace. We'll never know how much it cost for Jesus to go to the cross for us. We'll never be able to understand the fullness of God's love.

There is one dimension important enough to review again. Ephesians 2:8 indicates grace is a free gift. It isn't the payment of a debt. "Now to a laborer, his wages are not counted as a favor or a gift, but as an obligation (something owed to him)." (Romans 4:4, AMP) Nor is it obedience to the law. "For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." (John 1:17, NIV). We ought always to remember that we don't deserve grace. It's God's free gift.

The Christian life is an adventure and only two things help us succeed; God's grace and our faith. Without them we have no relationship with Jesus. Without them there is no salvation. Without them there is no power for living.

Throughout our lives God introduced us to people, brought us through circumstances, put us into situations where we could choose his grace and change our lives. God, in his grace gave us a chance to be saved from our sin. All it took was faith. How much faith? Faith the size of a mustard seed can move a mountain. (Matthew 17:20) Less faith than that can move God. He wants to extend his grace to us. Thank God if we are humble enough to receive it. Thank God for his saving grace. 

Seeing Who God Sees

Having confidence in who God created you to be.

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When I was in the 6th grade, a friend told me I had the ugliest smile she had ever seen. She suggested that I not smile so hard. I don't have the best memory, but when certain hurtful words from my past are used, I can vividly tell you when, where, and how I felt at the time. To this day, I have my friend's comment in the back on my mind when I smile. When I see or hear something really funny, I cover my mouth to keep from showing all of my teeth. The ironic thing is I've been to dentist who have marveled over my teeth. One time I went to the dentist, the dentist actually invited some of his colleagues in to look at my teeth. They were so amazed that my teeth were so straight although I never wore braces. A person may think that being praised by an expert or professional in the field of teeth would have cured my insecurities when it comes to my smile, but for some reason, my friend's comment meant so much more. Not only did the dentist think I had pretty teeth, but I'm a NFL Cheerleader for crying out loud! Ten times out of ten times I am smiling as part of my profession. How do I still have these thoughts that haunt me and try to pull down my self esteem? Why is that? What are some hurtful words from your past that you are still dealing with? How does God bring healing to our hurting past?

I wanted to get a broader picture of how people may have been hurt in their past from words and how those words effect their self esteem today. I went to talk to a few of my friends and also my church pastor to gather some true stories about self esteem. I have a habit of gravitating to people who have a special something about them that I admire. I am extremely blessed to have a pastor at my church, Pastor Cori, who is articulate, intelligent, genuine, and most importantly to me, human. She is so down to earth and easy to talk to, which is why I went to her to ask her about what God says about self esteem. Pastor Cori pointed out Psalm 139:13-16 and specifically verse 14. Psalm 139:14 says, "Your works are wonderful, I know that full well." There it is as plain as day, we are wonderfully made period, point blank. You would think that there is nothing else to say.....but there is so much more to say. Even with the word of God as protection against hurt, if you don't consistently foster your relationship with him, you are susceptible to feelings of pain.

Hurt That Lasts A Lifetime

It is so cliché to say that "sticks and stones may break your bones, but words may never hurt." Words do hurt, and they can hurt for a lifetime. My Aunt Linda proved that words can hurt a life time. As I talked to a few of my friends, I decided to call my Aunt. Surely she can't still be hurting from words from her past. She is very mature and is a tell-it-like-it-is kind of person. I've always



ERICA WESTBROOK

Erica Westbrook is an Instructional Designer who works at a Fashion University. She loves to dance and is an NFL Cheerleader. While she resides in San Francisco her heart belongs to her husband and North Carolina. Erica is also founder of The Christianista a website dedicated to the fashionable, fierce, fun, Christian soul. Erica's ultimate goal is to bring people to Christ through fashion. You can check her blog out at www.thechristianista.com.

looked up to her as a wonderful wife and mother who always seemed to be ahead in life. She went to college, so I went to college. She moved away from her family for greater opportunities, so I knew it was OK to move away too. She pledged a sorority so I pledged. As you can see she has a very positive impact in my life. To my dismay, I learned that my Auntie, in all of her awesomeness, had been carrying words such as buckteeth and knot knees from her past with her. It wasn't until God helped her venture out from her small community and enlarged her scope to see that there were bigger problems in the world other than hurtful words that were used against her. She told me that God made her feel like the apple of His eye and beautiful.

Woman vs. Men and Self Esteem

When I think of self esteem and self-worth I automatically think about women. Men are stereotyped to be macho, proud, and confident. So I picked the most confident male I know, Darryl, to interview. Darryl is the type of person who will walk into a room and make everyone laugh and want to be friends with him. He speaks to all types of audiences about various subjects and seems to be accepted by many. He was the student body president of every school he attended and I think that he should teach a class on confidence. My perception of Darryl was a little different than who Darryl really is. After talking to him more I have learned that he too has had self esteem issues and words from his past continue to haunt him. Words like "Uncle Tom" still sting a little and affects him. Even someone like Darryl in the midst of doing positive things can be brought down by such words. Knowing that there is someone greater than the person who is criticizing him is what Darryl says helps him with his self-worth. In Exodus, Moses is less confident about his speech which is slow. Exodus 4:10-12 (NIV), "Moses said to the LORD, 'Pardon your servant, Lord. I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue.' The LORD said to him, 'Who gave human beings their mouths? Who makes them deaf or mute? Who gives them sight or makes them blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now go; I will help you speak and will teach you what to say.'" God simply steps in when we acknowledge that we are not good enough to accomplish that which God has called us to do without his assis-

tance.

Christianity and Self Esteem

I called up one of my friends, Fatimah, who is very beautiful and a talented graduate student. I asked her her views of her self-worth. I think Fatimah is the most poetic, eclectic, and funny person I know. She reminds me of a modern day neo soul hippie who is always making me think about something “deep” or sending me links to poems and quotes and always wears a flower in her hair. I think of her as strong minded, yet she still deals with words from her past that to this day make her feel unaccepted, ridiculed and helpless. Listening to her story about how she converted from Islam to Christianity while in college, and the first sign of God in her life, I understood that was when he freed her from the hurtful words from her past. Fatimah says she felt weak before God showed her her worth and that she grew in him to believe that she was bigger than any of the hurtful words that were used against her. I have to agree with her and what she says rang true to me.

Pastor Cori brought something to my attention along these same lines. Pastor Cori pointed out 2 Corinthians 5:17-18 (NIV), “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come, the old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.” Because of Christ’s sacrifice, we’re experiencing God’s recreation of the fallen creation. With Christ comes the opportunity to be recreated and with recreation comes new confidence in God and in ourselves.

My Truth Is Amazing

I have this thing where I always tell people and myself “I don’t have to lie, my truth is amazing.” The enemy wants to steal our confidence to make us feel worthless and something that God has not proclaimed us to be. Lies come in hurtful words that we sometimes believe and become. The good news that John 14:6 tells

“The enemy wants to steal our confidence to make us feel worthless and something that God has not proclaimed us to be.”

us is that God is the truth and the light and he is amazing and is all mine! So we don’t have to listen to the lies because it is our God who is our truth and we are amazing! When I think about me and my smile and my insecurities, I realize that God has been there to help me get over it. In 1 Peter 3:3-4 (NIV) it says, “Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as elaborate hairstyles and the wearing of gold jewelry or fine clothes. Rather, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God’s sight.” Not only did God have to remind me in his Word that it’s not all about outward appearances but he knows me so well he did even more, he made it very clear to me. Since that 6th grade insult, my smile has been the most complimented of my features and I’m sure it’s God’s way of reminding me to rely on him and not on the words of others - good or bad. God has reached out to me through scripture and people and I’m so thankful that he is fading those hurtful words from my memory.

Action Plan

It is so easy to tell someone to not let words hurt, when words can often hurt more than physical pain. Along with telling myself that “my truth is amazing” I have three things that I do when I try to get over hurtful words that were used towards me and to keep my self esteem in check.

1. Get to know God even more.

I have to continually strengthen my relationship with God. If I am experiencing hurt that won’t seem to budge, I start reading about God and how amazing he is and about his life. Jesus was criticized, lied on, beaten, and eventually killed, yet he still loves and forgives.

2. Forgive.

The second way for me to let go of hurt is to forgive people who caused the hurt even if they haven’t apologized. I have to forgive like God has forgiven me.

3. Apologize.

To bring things full circle it’s important to realize that I am human and I could have hurt someone. I have gone to people who I have caused hurt and apologized. Sometimes we can say hurtful words and are the cause of someone’s pain and low self esteem. We must ask ourselves, “Am I the cause of someones hurt?” These are my personal action steps to heal myself from hurt and repair my self esteem.



IN PERSPECTIVE

Showcasing today's touchy subjects.

Contraceptive Series **Abstinence**

Faith-based perspectives on abstinence as a contraceptive.

Everybody's Doing It...Or Are They?

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GUSTAVO VAZQUEZ-LOZANO

Gustavo Vazquez-Lozano is a writer from Mexico. He was born in 1969. He has written about the historical Jesus and the critical-historical method for reading the New Testament. He made a translation to Spanish of the gnostic gospel of Judas. He has published several fiction books: novels and short stories. He is living in Mexico and is starting as an independent publisher.

Is abstinence a viable —and realistic— option for Christians? Is it possible to restrain from sexual relations? Or is it an excessive demand on couples, especially young ones, in a world that has glorified sex and practically throws it in the face? What does the Bible say about abstinence?

Sex is everywhere. Not only in movies, music and television. It is inside and outside the church, as an important part of the lives of the community of believers. Sex is a complicated thing, for sure. It is the source of much joy, sorrow, regret, inspi-

ration and life-changing events in people's lives all over the world. There must be something about sex that fascinates people and provokes some of the greatest accomplishments (and alas sometimes mistakes) of their lives. But the most important thing about sex is that it is supposed to engender life, a new human being—as was designed by the Creator of all things.

People have sex. Cats have sex, and mice and rabbits too. Fish have sex. Plants have it and insects too, meaning that the species come in two genders—male and female—and they must join in order to reproduce. True, human beings are more complicated than corn or mosquitoes, and sex and contraception are very touchy subjects. However, a great deal of teachings in the New Testament have to do with sex and its acceptable use. For many years the teachers of the church avoided the discussion about such matters or considered sexual human dynamics a taboo. But after all, sex comes from the beginning of God's creation and was a part of God's plan for his creatures.

With this article, *New Identity Magazine* begins a series on contraception, the first one being dedicated to abstinence. But what is contraception? In the most simplest of terms, contraception is a situation in which a sexual relation intentionally will not result in a pregnancy.

So, is abstinence actually a form of contraception? Or is it like calling a hunger strike a type of diet? Since this article is the first on the topic of contraception, it is worthwhile to offer a little historical context. Why would people, in the first place, opt for contraception?

Fertility and happiness

Sex is a gift from God, and for many centuries it meant making babies, which always meant good news. In the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), there are a lot of men and women who joyfully receive the news of a pregnancy. Historically, a large family was a sign of God's blessing. In agricultural societies, like there where when the Bible was written, it is not surprising to find that a large family was considered a godsend—a symbol of a successful life, honor and respect. Consequently, a barren womb was a disgrace. But it would not always be that way.

With the Industrial Revolution and the consequent increase in population, the dominant perspective about large families slowly started to change. Thomas Malthus, a British scholar, proposed that the population would grow faster than the agricultural output, so there would be a catastrophe if demographic growth was not curbed. This was a pivotal idea in the history of contraception: soon,

a large family would not be a promise of prosperity and an advantage, but the likelihood of poverty and unsatisfied needs.

Feminism and fertility

During the twentieth century, another important development took place in the Western world—women began to infiltrate the work force at a rapid rate. With that came the notion that females could—and should—control their fertility. Suddenly, the ideal life for women for the first time in a millennium began to look different.

In this way, the so called power of women to consciously delay or avoid pregnancy gave them a new sense of independence and security. Or did it? The thing is that this perception, which may seem natural to a lot of women, especially newlyweds, is relatively modern and did not always prevail in society. But that doesn't mean that abstinence is a new idea.

In the past, many women in the church understood that avoiding marriage, and therefore sexual relations, could give a new purpose to their lives. Unlike what many people assume today, in different stages of history abstinence was a source of power and independence for people who practiced it. That would be great to chronicle in another article! What the present feature intends to do is to discuss abstinence inside marriage. For a good discussion about sex before marriage from a Christian point of view, read "Saving Sex

For Marriage" by Nicholas Sowell, Cailin Henson and Leila Evangelista, published also in *New Identity Magazine*, Spring 2010.

“Contraception doesn't necessarily mean putting physical barriers or flooding the body with hormones. In fact, nature has its own contraceptive method – abstinence.”

Abstinence as a contraceptive method

Contraception doesn't necessarily mean putting physical barriers or flooding the body with hormones. In fact, nature has its own contraceptive method. Abstinence as a contraceptive method is supported by the fact that women are not always fertile. They can conceive only a few days of each month, three at most. So abstinence as a means of contraception, to begin with, doesn't mean to give up sex forever.

Not all Christians have reached a definite posture towards artificial, non-natural contraceptive methods. The Catholic church, for example, forbids artificial means of contraception in every case. Other denominational churches, especially of the Lutheran tradition, are more tolerant. In 1930, the Lambeth Conference, the conference of bishops of the world-wide Anglican communion, presided by the

Bishop of Canterbury, resolved that birth control was morally permissible, and that opened the way for more widespread use.

But certainly nobody would discourage abstinence as a means of contraception, which doesn't involve anything "artificial" as pills or physical barriers. Besides, it's cheap, there is no health risk involved and it's totally effective. But, is it realistic? Or is it like asking someone who wants to reduce his cholesterol levels to stop eating completely? Does abstinence have a special moral value? Does it give us a superior spiritual quality, compared with the use of physical barriers, for example? Is it better or worse than other methods? Can it be practiced? Should it? What do Christians think about it?

Christians speak out

"Abstinence and sexual relations have a lot to do with the unique care that we need to have for our body, soul and spirit", says Kenia Nunó, who recently was on a mission to China. "(Temporal) abstinence in marriage can give an adequate value to sexual relations when they come, and above us, honor God."

"There are several birth control methods available that can be useful within marriage," adds Pastor Mario Ceballos of Calvary Chapel, "For sexual union is not only to become parents. Abstinence is certainly a good way to control the number of children in a household, but we are talking, of course, as a way of life between married people. From a biblical point of view, the single person and anyone who is not married by the civil law should abstain from sexual relations."

Pastor Ceballos considers that abstinence must have a time-limited and well-defined purpose. "Sex should be a part of married life and be practiced frequently, because it is a form of union and expression of love among the spouses. Abstinence should only take place as the Scripture ordains: "The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband. In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife." (1 Cor 7:3-4, NIV) Additionally, Paul said: "Do not deprive each other except perhaps by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control." (1 Cor 7:5, NIV)

"To me, this (1 Cor 7:5) sums it all," comments Carlos Torres, a student of the Bible. "This last verse —then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control—clearly means that abstinence has to be only for a major purpose, like a time or need to pray and communion with God, with or without your spouse, and for an important cause. After this, Paul recommends to be together again, to avoid complications. From this I deduce, and this is only me, I deduce that abstinence shouldn't last too long. Abstinence is not a special grace or gift. Because, if someone has the gift of

abstinence, then why marry? That would certainly mean a martyrdom for his better half. Paul says: "it's a concession, not a commandment." (1 Cor 7:6)

In an article written for the Spanish language newspaper, *El País*, Spanish theologian Juan José Tamayo Acosta reasons: "With Plato began the dualistic anthropologic conception that separates man in two opposing elements: body and soul. In Paul's letters there remain numerous hints of anthropologic dualism, like in the moral exhortations in his epistles. A good deal of the lists of sins in those letters have to do with sexuality, and the moral attitudes that he recommends are body repressive. St. Augustine (354-430 C.E.) adopted the dualistic anthropologic conception, presenting abstinence as the Christian ideal."

But, Tamayo Acosta insists, "this idea doesn't seem to be in line with the origins of Christianity, nor reflects Jewish thought, which considers the person as a unity and not in parts. Every human being is in God's image. Jewish moral is not repressive of the body. The book of Ecclesiastes, for example, affirms material and sensual life in the quotation, "Go, eat your bread with joy, And drink your wine with a merry heart; For God has already accepted your works. Let your garments always be white, And let your head lack no oil. Live joyfully with the wife whom you love all the days of your vain life which He has given you under the sun, all your days of vanity; for that is your portion in life, and in the labor which you perform under the sun." (Eccl. 9: 7-9, NKJV)

Remaining open to life

All in all, topics like sex, contraception and abstinence remind us that we are dealing with moral issues that require much reflection. "In sex," considers Veronica Moreno, a teacher of catechism, "not only the body is given to someone else, but something much deeper. I think that God gave us sexuality as a beautiful gift to make us part of his creation. Sex makes us co-creators, if you will, of the thing he loves the most: a human being. God wanted it to be that way: it is a sublime act that carries the greatest responsibility, the possibility to transmit life."

However, the Church doesn't say that there should always be a conception in every sexual relation, according to Amanda Martínez, faith instructor for married couples.

"What the Church does ask is not to shut down the possibility, to remain open to life, even if pregnancy is not in the couple's immediate plans. In order to practice temporal abstinence in marriage as a contraceptive method, there must be a mutual agreement. Both spouses necessarily have to agree. There must be, also, a good knowledge about the woman's natural cycles or it won't work. If only one of the spouses desires to use this 'natural' way to avoid pregnancy, this can only result in conflict within the couple; not to mention misunderstandings, lack of satisfaction, frustration and spiritual separation."

Therefore, it would go against moral principles to want to take only pleasure and artificially reject the other aspect of the person, which is his or her ability to procreate. "It is like denying his or

“Temporal abstinence, as a contraceptive method, does mean that we can avoid pregnancy, but are nevertheless open to life.”

her whole identity, like saying: ‘I want your body and the pleasure you can give me, but only that, not your procreative possibilities’: in other words, pure selfishness,” concludes Mrs. Martínez.

Biblically though, the mention of abstinence seems to be limited to the purposes of prayer and not specifically for family planning or birth control. More common reasons to participate in abstinence seem to be cultural and environmental, rather than spiritual. Whether that be waiting for financial stability, wanting to limit impact on the earth’s resources by having fewer children, health issues that might cause a high risk pregnancy or for others reasons. Whether these are adequate reasons to practice abstinence are not clear in the Bible.

But temporal abstinence, as a contraceptive method, does mean that we can avoid pregnancy, but are nevertheless open to life. There are many things to benefit from abstinence:

1. We acquire more knowledge and understanding of our better half. The man participates in the woman’s natural cycles.
2. Both man and woman are conscious and responsible about the decision of becoming pregnant.
3. The woman is not seen as a sexual object, someone who is always “available.” Partners can have an equal give and take with their bodies.
4. The whole responsibility is not on the woman. (“What? You forgot to take the pill?”)
Generosity is encouraged, not selfishness.
5. There is room for other displays of affection. The sexual relation is not everything that there is in the marriage.
6. A kind of concurrency is shared between the spouses.

es.

7. Contrary to what it may seem, the person becomes more in control of him or herself.

8. Self esteem grows.

A liberating thought.

Many of us might have come to believe that abstinence is wrong, a kind of limitation, a punishment, something that is impossible to practice. But abstinence in marriage doesn’t mean that you can never have sex. It rather means to accept a certain natural order, an inherent cycle. Once we accept this, abstinence can be very satisfactory and self-fulfilling.

Some couples might be worried about choosing abstinence. There could be more than one reason for abstinence: to avoid pregnancy, sickness of one of the spouses, taking care of spiritual needs, etc. The problem is that the world seems to be saying that not having “action” in bed, is a sign that something is wrong in the marriage. But this is not necessarily so.

The idea that having sexual relations is a requisite to be “normal” and “healthy” can be intimidating to some married couples of certain age. To them, someone has to say that temporal abstinence is a time-honored, heartening thing to do... part of natural cycles. For those couples who need to abstain from sexual relations, the message has to sound clearly and resounding.

Next we’ll take a look at the various Christian perspectives on Birth Control & Family Planning in Part 2 of our Contraceptive Series.

Join the Conversation! What do you think? We want to hear from you. Post your thoughts and ideas about abstinence on at www.newidentitymagazine.com or on our Facebook page.



MEDIANOOMA



How would Jesus view our modern world? What questions would he raise about our lives and how we are living them? NOOMA is a series of 24 short films that explore our world from Jesus' perspective. The films can be purchased for download, online viewing, or as DVDs at www.flannel.org. Flannel is the non-denominational Christian non-profit

organization behind the NOOMA series that is "committed to giving everyone a fresh look at the teachings of Jesus." Trailers for the films can be found on YouTube. -Rachel Gooneratne

To Love, to Be Loved

God is love. When we take up permanent residence in a life of love, we live in God and God lives in us. This way, love has the run of the house, becomes at home and mature in us, so that we're free of worry on Judgment Day—our standing in the world is identical with Christ's. There is no room in love for fear. Well-formed love banishes fear. Since fear is crippling, a fearful life—fear of death, fear of judgment—is one not yet fully formed in love. –1 John 4:17-18 (The Message)

JARGONSALVATION

Dictionary of Christian Jargon for the Ordinary Person

What is salvation? Are you saved? The question that needs to be asked is "What do I need to be saved from?" Most of us go through life as if we are in control and things will turn out all right. We have our good days and our bad days and it all kind of evens out in the end...or does it? Then there are those moments where we completely lose it. It is in those moments where reality suddenly hits us. We lie. We steal. We judge and condemn. We look at others and judge them by standards we do not live up to ourselves. It is in these moments where we are aware of our need of help. We need to be saved.

In the Western world we live with a constant anxiety that cannot be explained. We live with this anxiety to have more; to see more; to be more. We finally get what we were looking for and still end up with the same anxiety. This is because we need to be saved from our sin. For most this sin is a very foreign concept (See the jargon entry in *New Identity Magazine* issue Spring 2010 for more on sin). Our sin takes us away from God and this is hell itself—an eternity without him. So we need to be saved from our sin. We need to be saved from hell. Most of all we need to be saved from ourselves. This is what gets in the way of the life that we want to live. Salvation is taking this damaged and broken life and rescuing it—salvaging it—to be one hundred times better. This is what Jesus did through his life, death, and resurrection. Through Jesus, God is holistically restoring creation, repairing our whole selves, mending the greater community, and liberating humanity from a marginalized existence. – Ramon Mayo

The Space Between

Seeking the Sacred Between the
Pages of Pop Culture

Over the Rhine

Leaving the Edges Wild

Photo and cover image by Michael Wilson, Courtesy of Great Speckled Dog Records



KEVIN C. NEECE

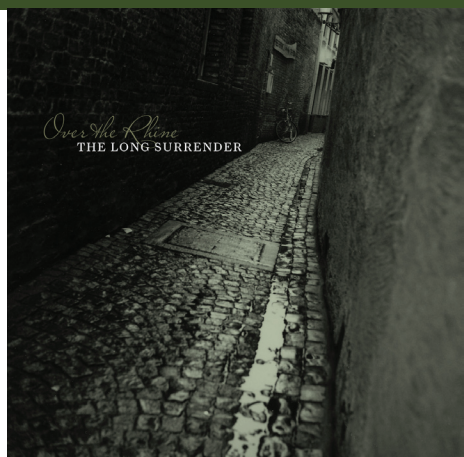
In addition to being a husband and dad, Kevin is an adjunct professor of Fine Arts and Developing a Christian Mind at Dallas Baptist University. His work has appeared in *Next Wave Magazine*, *Breakpoint*, *Worldview Church Report* and *Baptist Life*, among others. He also contributed to the forthcoming 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.

Karin Bergquist and Linford Detweiler, the husband and wife duo known as Over the Rhine, released their first album twenty years ago. Since that time, they have not only proven to be a formidable force in indie music, but have also gathered around themselves a passionate fan base with whom they maintain an intimate and direct connection. Their latest album, *The Long Surrender*, is a unique example of that connection, which is also in evidence on their current tour. I spoke by phone with

Detweiler, the piano-playing half of the songwriting pair, to discuss the sacred surprises *Over the Rhine* continues to encounter.

Linford Detweiler is still discovering his band's latest album. As the scarecrowish piano man talks with me from the Civil War-era home he and his wife, vocalist Karin Bergquist, occupy on a southern Ohio farm, he speaks in gentle, carefully paced tones of why *The Long Surrender* is still surprising him. "Well, we wanted to be surprised by this record," he tells me. "We wanted to make a record that we couldn't imagine in advance...I hear details that I had not heard before even now on the record and what could be more rewarding than making ongoing, tiny discoveries in your own music? It was just an amazing process."

That process had a lot to do with the album's brief but unhurried recording time – less than five days – and its producer, Joe Henry, in whose house the album was recorded. "I will credit Joe Henry with a lot of the atmosphere on the record in creating a space in his house where music can unfold like that in real time." As a result, an astonishing number of the album's tracks (over half, Detweiler tells me) are first takes and many of those were the only takes recorded, with all of the album's musicians playing together in



the same room.

"It felt to me immediately, when I heard the band playing," Detweiler continues, "as if Joe was putting the songs on an after-dark train and we were pulling out of the station and it was going somewhere that we had not named. It felt like he was putting the songs on a lifeboat and pushing them out to sea over the deep. It felt like the house was lifting off the ground and floating out over a stormy sea and...exploding, you know?" he laughs. "It just was a lot of weather in the room. It takes a special guide to fearlessly lead musicians into territory like that."

Before the recording process even began, though, *The Long Surrender* was already taking shape in a unique way, one that reflects *Over the Rhine's* unusual ability not only to connect with their listeners, but to welcome them in as participants in the life of the band. "When [working with Joe Henry] became a real possibility," Detweiler recounts, "we approached our listening audience and asked if they would step forward and buy their copies of this yet to be released and recorded record in advance and they quickly stepped forward and funded the entire project."

Opening the CD's gorgeous cardboard packaging, one of the first things you notice, aside from Michael Wilson's lambent photography, is that there are two booklets included – one in each of a pair of sleeves. One booklet is filled with the usual – lyrics, liner notes and credits. The other is a list of names. On a dozen pages, mostly filled with three columns of tiny text, *Over the Rhine* lists the names of every single person who helped fund the record. It's an example of the little extras – both literal and figurative – the band tucks into its work for those who are paying attention.

"I think that philosophy affects everything we do, including the songwriting," Detweiler says. "I want people to be able to come in and pick up a CD if they want to and enjoy Karin's voice or maybe be drawn to some of the lyricism of the songs or maybe they just like the vibe of the band. But if people want to go a lot deeper, hopefully, there'll be different layers that they can explore."

One of those layers has always been the spiritual aspect of this band's work, which has received no small amount of attention over the years. Christian imagery and gospel music are never far out of reach for *Over the Rhine*. As Detweiler tells me, "I'm sure that I'm haunted by the hymns of my childhood on a number of levels." This includes, he says, the idea of the altar call. "You know,

[the idea is that] we are going to sing a song and give you an opportunity to step forward and change your life. I wanted that feeling in a couple of the songs on *The Long Surrender*. I didn't really verbalize it to anyone, but when I'm having Karin sing lines like 'orphaned believers, skeptical dreamers, you're welcome. You can stay right here, you don't have to go,' or one of the lines even says 'step forward,' I'm really echoing that feeling of those pregnant moments in those little, white, wooden Protestant churches. After we finished recording [the song] 'All My Favorite People' and played it back, Joe just turned to me and said, 'The buses will wait.'" Detweiler laughs, recalling the revival meeting reference. "So, I guess people got it."

Hymns do indeed haunt these songs, as a close listen to the familiar, hymnal-style chord progressions tucked into the pockets of Detweiler's subtly textured and effortless piano work will attest. Similarly, the album's lyrics are laced with more religious language and Biblical imagery than perhaps any of the band's previous works. As I mention this to Detweiler, he is again surprised. "Wow, really? I hadn't really even analyzed it in those terms, so it's interesting to me. I think I would just come back to Flannery O'Connor's line when she describes the South as being 'Christ-haunted.' I can certainly relate to that idea."

This is not to say that these are outright gospel songs, nor that they aren't. There's an in-between place where *Over the Rhine* seems particularly comfortable living and breathing and telling stories. "I hope all of it feels a little earthy and mundane, everyday. Even the big ideas tucked into the songs, hopefully those ideas are being explored very much with our feet on the earth." He refers to the song "Only God Can Save Us Now," which was inspired by "a 90 year-old, stooped over, bird-like woman in a wheelchair at a nursing home," where the couple regularly visit Bergquist's mother. "Karin just leaned in and said, 'How are you today, Geneva?' She looked up at Karin through her little bird-like glasses and said, 'Only God can save us now.' It's very, sort of unglamorous to be in a nursing home talking to an old woman in a wheelchair. That's a very earthy, earthbound moment. But, on the other hand, maybe those moments are always bumping up against the transcendent if we're willing to be open to that added layer."

That openness to Divine surprises – "the sacred and the unpredictable," as Detweiler says – is recalled in the advice Detweiler's father gave to him upon his first visit to the couple's farm. "He heard birds singing that he hadn't heard since he was a boy growing up in Delaware on an Amish farm. And my father just took me aside and said, 'Linford, leave the edges wild!' You know, give the songbirds thorny places for their wild music."

For Detweiler, leaving the edges wild has become a metaphor for infusing the sacred into both his songwriting and his life. "I kinda want to apply that to a lot of my life, I think – my marriage, my friendships, my work. Wouldn't it be great if we could keep some of the mystery intact and not tame and quantify everything and leave the edges wild? I'm up for it." 🎧

You can read more of my interview with Linford Detweiler at www.kevincneece.com/linford

The Long Surrender is available now at www.overtherhine.com



The What-If Syndrome

*How do we know if our decisions are
the ones God would have us make?*



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.

As Christians it seems as if more weight is put on our decisions because we don't know if we have God's seal of approval on our choice or not. So after going back and forth, we are left with the what if. What if this job isn't for me? What if the man that I'm about to marry is not the husband God wants for me? What if I fail because of this decision? Let's be honest, we all go through this, whether a believer or a non-believer. The wonderful thing about God though, is that he will not allow something to come into our lives without purpose. This means that even if you think you've made the wrong decision, if God's plan is to right it, he will do so, one way or another. God's always there to pick you up and there's always a purpose behind every decision made whether it's to teach you or to help you grow in a certain area.

So how do we stop questioning the decisions that we make every day? In order to be at rest with a decision, we must be sure that our decision aligns with the Word of God and we must go to God in prayer.

God has supplied Christians with his Word, the Bible, for a reason. When making a decision, you should ask yourself, does this coincide with who God is, as represented in the Bible? Does this new job hurt or help people? Does the man I'm about to marry mirror God? If the answer is the antithesis of who God is, then it is not the right move.

As people, we tend to see what is right in front of us. Remember when God called Moses to deliver a speech to the children of Israel and Moses had a conversation with God about his eloquence? Moses didn't see himself as a leader. He saw himself as someone who was never eloquent in speech; in fact he said he was "slow of speech and tongue." But God saw his potential and said, "Who gave human beings their mouths? Who makes them deaf or mute? Who gives them sight or makes them blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now go; I will help you speak and will teach you what to say." (Exodus 4:11, NIV) We may question a decision because it seems as if we are not equipped with the tools we need to succeed, but we must be hopeful and believe that "with God all things are possible." (Matthew 19:26) After all, as his children, God has our backs.

When Jesus taught the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:9-13,

Photo by Bethan | Flickr (CC)

“When making a decision, you should ask yourself, does this coincide with who God is, as represented in the Bible?”

he says to ask God for our “daily bread.” That means that God supplies us with just enough for that day. No more, no less. Also, he makes sure that we are fed every day. For those in a place of privilege, this may mean physical nourishment, but there are also those throughout the world who pray but don’t get fed every day in that respect. Might it also mean a spiritual appetite? Giving us the spiritual strength and perseverance for another day and hope for the future? This hope allows us to rely more on God. This includes not beating ourselves up with what ifs. Is this easy? Sitting back and watching God do his thing? Um...no. But is life easy? The Bible says in Acts 14:22, “...We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.”

Prayer is the most effective tool because God urges us to come boldly to him. That means that we can take anything to him in prayer, anything. Before praying, recount the times in your life when God showed up and showed all that he is and what he can do. Make sure you also “lay aside every weight,” (Hebrews 12:1) meaning that you will not allow any anger, disappointment, or issue of the day to cloud your prayer time. Ask God for what you want, but ask that above all else, his will be done.

What ifs only lead to worry, trouble, and disbelief. Dare yourself to step out of what you see and meditate on who God is. When making your next small or big decision remember these words, straight from the Father’s mouth, to his children’s ears:

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?” (Matthew 6:25-27, NIV).

Since God’s hand is in what you will eat, drink, and wear, he is surely in every decision that you make if you let him lead you.

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

Who are you in Christ?

WRITE,
PHOTOGRAPH OR
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a missionary playlist

Some great inspirational tracks for the mission field.

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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.

Going out on a mission trip? Then don't forget the essentials—your Bible and some great inspirational tracks! Here are some of our favorites.

Jake Hamilton -- The Anthem (album: Marked by Heaven)

A beautiful reminder that we're the ones called to shake this world.

Dominic Ball -- All We Need is Love (album: Public Announcement)

The framework by which we are to go out into the world.

Switchfoot -- Hello Hurricane (album: Hello Hurricane)

This song reminds us that we're given the strength to do all things through Christ.

Abandon -- Song for the Broken (album: searchlights)

We're the aid, mending, and healing to the broken. Be a healer!

This Beautiful Republic -- Change the World (album: Perceptions)

Our call to arms, simply put: go change the world.

Bluetree -- God of this City (album: God of this City)

The hope and vision by which we continually step out in missions.

Lecrae -- Send Me (album: After the Music Stops)

The truth that when we evangelize somewhere, it needs to be because God wants us there.

The Red Airplanes -- Fist Into A Hand (album: The Red Airplanes-album 2)

A heart's posture that's right and fit to be a light to the world.

Josh Garrels -- Break Bread (album: Over Oceans)

A song of believers called to unite and sacrifice.

Cory Asbury -- My Beloved (Let Me See Your Eyes)

The portrait of our God and a reminder of who we serve.



THE 10TH COMMANDMENT

Erica Mongé-Greer begins a series to examine the origin and meaning of the Ten Commandments and highlights how they apply to Christians today.

Photo by dloz | Flickr (CC)



ERICA MONGÉ-GREER

Erica Mongé-Greer is a graduate of Fuller Theological Seminary with a MA in Biblical Studies and Ancient Near Eastern Language and Literature. She teaches at Vanguard University and Life Pacific College, while writing occasionally for freelance publication. Erica lives in Pasadena with her husband, Joshua, and two children: Caleb and Emma.

The Ten Commandments are one of the most popular and well known lists in the Bible. In fact, many modern dictionaries site the “Ten Commandments” as an example of the use of the word “commandment.” Most often, the Ten are associated with movie star Charlton Heston, who played the role of Moses in the 1956 epic production *The Ten Commandments*, directed by Cecil B. DeMille. You can find the biblical record of the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20.

This series of articles will present you with a conversation about the meaning of the Ten Commandments as a whole, and individually. Before looking at each commandment, there are a few things that should be understood about the commandments as they appear in the Old Testament. The scripture itself tells us the story of the Hebrew people, describing how they came into being and how God is leading them in a way that is different from other people in their time. Christians today can relate. Many of us are looking for a new way to understand our faith and live out our lives the way that God would like. No one lives without affecting the people around them, and so it is not surprising that many of the ways God commands us to live have to do with how we treat and respond to other people.

God gives us the Bible as a guide to learn how to live in a healthy way with the people around us. Some of the ways that God called the Hebrew people to be different were that they do not look to other gods, besides the one true God, and they do not oppress or enslave each other. How did they know how to live out their life in a different way than the other people around them? They knew because God told them. God gave them guidelines to help them know how to live in a better way.

Christians today serve the very same God that watched

over the Hebrew people in ancient times. God is present today and teaches us in the same way he taught the ancient Hebrew people. For the Hebrew people, God valued a solid community of believers. For us, he values the same thing. God sent the Hebrew people the Ten Commandments as guidelines so that they would know how to succeed in obeying God by living out this new kind of community. The Ten Commandments are available to us for the same reason — so that we can know how to live our lives among those around us in a God-imagined community.


This article will begin by looking at the tenth commandment, which says:

“You will not desire the house of your fellow citizen, nor will you desire the wife of your fellow citizen nor his male servant, nor his female servant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that belongs to him.”

In respect to our theme of how to create community the way God instructs us, the tenth commandment represents a relational interaction between more than one person. It answers the question: how shall I compare myself to the other people in my community? The short answer is “be satisfied and not jealous!” The tenth commandment provides more details, and those details communicate something about the people. There is at least one person who has things that are considered wealth: a house, a wife, servants and maids (which indicate the ownership of a household and property), animals for labor (which indicates ownership of fields or agriculture) and other belongings. We know from studies in history and anthropology that premonarchy villages that existed in the ancient East did not have a great disparity between the wealthy and the poor. So, we can make an educated guess as to the other person addressed in this commandment: he is also a man of similar

wealth. So, what are some reasons one person might desire the stuff of wealth owned by another? We can certainly answer that from our own experience today. We even have a modern saying: “the grass is always greener on the

“God sent the Hebrew people the Ten Commandments as guidelines so that they would know how to succeed in obeying God...”

other side.” It is easy to want the things that belong to another. It is easy to become bored with our own things. But in order to maintain good community living, God instructs us to put aside these urges and, as Jesus rephrases the commandment nearly a century and a half later, “love your neighbor as yourself” [Romans 13:9]. In order to live out God’s way of community, we must discipline ourselves to love and be satisfied. The tenth commandment teaches us to be both generous and grateful. These are God’s virtues for those of us who want to live in God’s community. 

Luther's Table is a restaurant in downtown Renton, Washington based on a pastime of Martin Luther's, the German priest and initiator of the Protestant Reformation (see article in our last issue, Spring 2011), where he would invite his students to his home after class to discuss theology and share a pint of his wife's home-brewed ale. Luther's Table desires to continue that tradition of conversation and fellowship and to be a place where faith is nurtured and theological discussion is encouraged. In addition to functioning as a restaurant, Luther's Table also conducts worship services once a week. To learn more about Luther's Table, visit www.lutherstable.org —*Cailin Henson*

Luther's Table

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MAGAZINE

Winter 2008/09

PREMIER
ISSUE

Art To Glorify

How artists reveal their faith through works

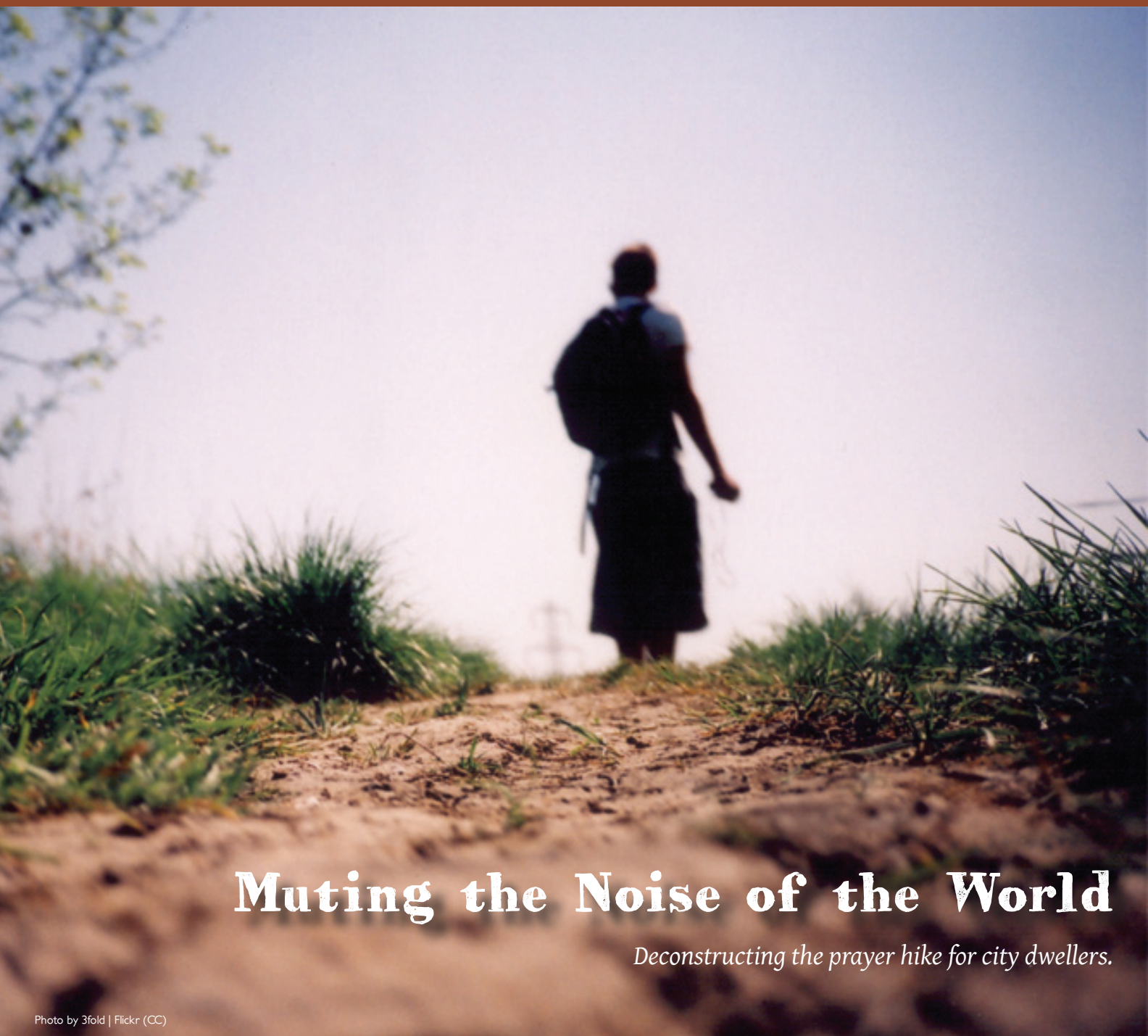


SUPA

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



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Muting the Noise of the World

Deconstructing the prayer hike for city dwellers.

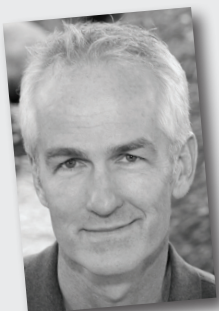
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TOM KOEL

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.

Some people like to do what they call a Prayer Hike. That is where one or more people go on a hike, or walk, and pray as they go. Now, many people, like myself, wind up on a prayer hike inadvertently when they find the trail much longer and steeper than anticipated. But here we are discussing hikes that are focused on prayer from the onset.

This is a great thing to do, and is actually very easy once you give it a chance. You can set a time aside on the weekends or at lunch time, go by yourself or invite some friends, and just give it a



try.

The praying that takes place on such walks is typically non-structured. While it would be possible to step through a structured set of prayers or a memorized prayer, such as the Lord's Prayer, most folks take this time to be an impromptu, go-with-the-flow time to speak to God.

If it comes down to it, even the nature part is optional. I can be found talking to myself pretty much anytime, anywhere. This trait of mine became forgivable and even one to be encouraged when I became a Christian and found that rather than talking to myself, where the returns were dubious if not negligible, I could talk to God and be greatly profited.

While God, fortunately, overcomes the grunge of the city and beauty is found there, he is resplendent in nature. A walk through nature is like finding the path of crumbs in the forest leading one home. For many, a nature setting is the preferred environment with which to connect with God in a special way.

Some folks are most comfortable speaking to God with a formality that they feel honors him. Others are more colloquial. The point is to use the method that best suits your conscience. The impromptu prayer needs to become easy, second nature. The words need to flow directly from the conscience in a way that feels appropriate. If those words need to be filtered or adjusted, the less likely they are to be genuine and really get to the point. Understand here that I am not advocating a prayer with more or less formal language. The language needs to suit you, the one who is praying. My point is that the language needs to come easily. Practice will make this work.

The same can be said for praying alone or among a group of hikers. It can be embarrassing to speak out loud to God in front of others. But it gets easier, and there are advantages to becoming comfortable with it. For one thing, when more than one person prays to God, advocating for the same united thing, it can be very powerful.

Getting Started

So, here you are, taking a walk during the lunch hour through the neighboring park or greenbelt. Maybe you are alone, or maybe a few of you have gotten together.

I always get the immediate things on my mind out there first: the difficult boss, the financial problems, the marriage difficul-

ties, my moral failures. I do that because, to me that is the most honest thing to do. Those really are the things on my mind. God knows that, and to save them, or forget them, seems to me to be edging toward performing for him. I don't want to perform for him. I want to be as real as possible. If something is bothering me, I tell him. Otherwise it is something I feel like he is waiting to hear. So that is where I start.

And then the most amazing thing happens. Something from that outdoor environment gets my attention. It can start from the warm feeling of the sun on my arm, or the sunlight in my eyes that makes me squint. And it feels like the sun says to me – "Isn't that amazing?" And I say, looking down at my arm, "Yes, that is amazing." I begin to feel alive in a world that is alive around me. The smell of wind blowing across the grass. A bird landing on a branch bouncing in the breeze. First one little voice whispers to me. Then more. Suddenly the park itself is alive and comes to greet me.

The trees, with their bark, the skin of the forest, with its scars and wrinkles, lean toward me, and brush me with their limbs. The leaves beg me to examine their veins. "Have you seen this?" Each different, but each spectacular. The infinite busy creatures. The carpet of green, the dome of blue.

A few moments later, I feel like an amazing creature in a world amazingly made. I feel the astounding power of God, where the smallest

thing around me, a leaf, an ant, is more complicated, and alive and amazing than anything humanity has ever thought of.

Really, there is nothing like it. The author C.S. Lewis noted that the best place to take a non-believing scientist or a real thinker is nature. Eventually the noise of God in nature is deafening.

Once you're in that place, just a few minutes into your walk, your mouth will hardly be able to keep from pouring out praise to God. It becomes so easy. Connecting to God like that, in praise, as a consequence of observing nature, is so freeing and so empowering that you will return to your office balanced and ready, clear headed and encouraged.

The prayer that most blesses God, most blesses the one who prays it. And there is almost no easier way than from within the sanctuary of nature, which itself raises up its branches to him in prayer with every sunrise.

So. If you can figure it out, do it! You'll love it!





Will Power Not Always Enough

A look at weight-loss with and without God.

Photo by chelsea sabrina | 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.

Diet and exercise have always been considered necessary for achieving and maintaining a healthy lifestyle. With the recent obesity epidemic afflicting America, there has been an increase in weight loss programs, a variety of different diets and an increased focus on proper exercising. Some of those innovative efforts include groups that focus their weight loss through the teachings of Christ.

With so many options for weight loss available, these God-centered weight loss groups focus their efforts on more than just weight loss. There is a genuine belief among these groups that in order to achieve a healthy lifestyle, there must be balance in all aspects of an individual's life.

One such group is First Place 4 Health, which started in 1981 as a ministry of Houston's First Baptist Church. Through its biblical approach to weight loss and overall health management, First Place 4 Health allows Christ to improve every area of a person's life. Despite being based in the teachings of Christ, the program accepts and reaches out to all in need, regardless of spiritual or religious affiliation and usually serves approximately 200 people year-round.

"We have had an ongoing program for thirty years and half the people that come to the program are not members of the Church," Lewis said. "People just feel comfortable coming to our groups." For First Place 4 Health, there is a wide range of people that join their program in search of losing those five to 10 pounds, ending a pattern of 'yo-yo dieting' or outright ending their struggle with obesity. The program is founded on Matthew 6:33 (NIV) "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."

"This Christ-centered, balanced weight-loss and healthy living program has guided hundreds of thousands of people to a healthy lifestyle and a closer walk with the Lord," they profess on their website.

"The whole purpose of the First Place 4 Health program is to learn how to give Christ first place in our life," Carole Lewis, Director of First Place 4 Health, says. "When we do, every thing else that we have need of, will be taken care of."

For First Place 4 Health, overeating is not caused by one particular issue in a person's life. It is believed that people who over-indulge in food lack "balance and harmony" in many other areas of their life as well. First Place 4 Health's approach to weight loss is based on: Christ-centered priorities such as Bible study, prayer and Scripture memory; choices for health including: addressing the whole person—emotions, mind, body and the spirit community; and support and accountability through small groups.

Other groups such as Weigh Down Ministries (WDM), also believe that diets will never work because they fail to "get to the root of the problem." According to Weigh Down's website, diets only make the problem worse because they rely too much on changing the food rather than the individual's behavior. Diets, according to WDM, focus on the fat content and calories in foods when the focus should be on food intake.

"Once you stop going to food for sensual indulgence, escape, spacing out, a tranquilizing effect, comfort, and so on, and start swallowing regular foods only when your stomach growls, you will swallow or eat just one-half to one-third of what you used to swallow," Gwen Shamblin, author of the *The Weigh Down Diet Book* wrote in her book, "The desire eating goes away. That means you will lose weight! You will be able to do this; it happens naturally. You will not have to measure the food or count the grams—your stomach will guide you."

For Robert Sanchez, who was raised a Catholic, weight loss is based on the will and desire of the person seeking to change their lifestyle. However, seeking guidance in God and his teachings as a means of accomplishing one's goals is a valuable option. "I think that whatever motivates you is okay," Sanchez said. "It's not a fact that God makes you lose weight but if it helps you lose weight, that's fine."


For Brandon Izquierdo, a former personal trainer, losing weight and making a lifestyle change are not directly correlated to any faith-based movements since he believes that there are plenty of atheists that are in great health and peak physical condition. In addition, he believes that both goals require a great deal of motivation and dedication. "I can see where it would help because everyone needs a motivation factor. To drop unwanted weight, the key is to believe in whatever workout program you're doing. A lot of the time people give up on a program because results don't come fast enough," Izquierdo says. "A healthy lifestyle comes from an understanding that it is a commitment to live a healthy lifestyle and often times people think that it's acceptable to not workout or eat right for longer than a week at a time."

Still, for organizations like the one Lewis directs, having individuals improve every aspect of their lives through the teachings of God is vital for the success rate of its members being able to maintain the weight off. In addition, the support groups provided by leaders of First Place 4 Health provide fundamental support to individuals involved.

"We know that we have to learn how to love God with our whole person and that is exactly what our program does," Lewis says. "There are spiritual components; there are physical components; mentally we memorize scriptures and that's a huge part of our program and then we offer help in the emotional area since a lot of people are emotional overeaters."

The reasons for weight loss and a permanent life style change vary among each individual. For many, the struggle continues after the weight is lost and it becomes just as difficult to keep the weight off. According to a study conducted by UCLA Magazine (University of California, Los Angeles) two thirds of people who lose weight, gain the weight back, plus additional pounds.

"These are horrible statistics and I don't have the exact numbers because our program is everywhere," Lewis said. "Unless a group registers with our website, they can be anywhere. We don't own the groups; it's not a franchise so they don't tell us how they are doing. We only keep records of people that meet their weight loss goals and register with us."

Lewis said, "I know a lot of great Christian men and women who are overweight. I believe that being overweight is a fleshly problem with a spiritual solution. I believe that God is interested in every part of us; he is interested in our marriage, our careers and our health. God is a perfect gentleman and he is not going to come in unless we ask for his help." 



Pursuit of the New

Taking an honest look at our obsession with new technology.



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MATTHEW HAMILTON

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

The idea of “The New” is a constant presence in the lives of nearly everyone on planet earth. Whether you are IT consultant in Silicon Valley or an Amish farmer in Pennsylvania, all of us make personal decisions as to which technology we incorporate into our lives and which we reject or put off until later. Some would classify this as progress and if no one sought innovation in all aspects of our lives we would be without many of the things that make our lives better. Many more people would die in auto accidents without anti-lock brakes and safety belts, but conversely, many are injured or killed today due to distracting behaviors such as talking or texting on cell phones while driving.

The point is that new things are not evil or wrong in and of themselves. They are a reflection of how people are able to adapt and in some sense realize our God-given potential. The problem lies in letting our pursuit of “The New” get in the way of the one true constant in our lives, God.

When considering how our consumption fits in with our faith there are a few verses that can offer perspective.

History merely repeats itself. It has all been done before. Nothing under the sun is truly new. -Ecclesiastes 1:9 (New Living Translation)

It is important to realize how timeless a statement the verse in Ecclesiastes truly is. To say that our obsession with newer things is a symptom of our time would be short-sighted. The time we spend looking at our cell phones or computers, has had the same net result as our parents spending time in front of the television, and their parents sitting and listening to the radio or going to the local movie theatre. As long as we have the ability to progress with technology, we will also use said technology to distract us as well.

This is not to say that this new technology is completely a bad thing. Many churches can spread their message to anyone anywhere with an internet connection. Through social networks, we can all become aware of the plight of those in spiritual and physical need. For instance, during the recent natural disaster in Haiti you could donate to the relief fund simply by texting with your cell phone.

We live in a time of a virtual existence. We can count oth-

ers as friends without ever meeting them face to face. This change, even within the past 5 years, is a stark contrast to the rest of the timeline of human existence, where most people would literally know by name those who lived within a mile of their home. This technology and our myriad of devices to tap into it are helping us do great things, but it does bring to mind a greater and broader question: At what cost?

As he watched him go, Jesus told his disciples, "Do you have any idea how difficult it is for the rich to enter God's kingdom? Let me tell you, it's easier to gallop a camel through a needle's eye than for the rich to enter God's kingdom. -Matthew 19:24 (The Message)

This I believe deals with the secondary problem with our obsession with the new: the financial impact. We can fill our lives with new phones, laptops, tablet computers, blu-ray players, and even larger items like new cars, but at some point all of us, regardless of our economic status, have a limited amount of funds to work with.

We all have necessities, such as food, clothing, and shelter; and the degree we take care of needs differs from person to person. What might seem a reasonable amount to pay for a pair of shoes for one person, may seem like a small fortune for someone else who would see the same amount of cash as a week worth of groceries.

The same differences can apply to our other spending as well, specifically those things that are purely discretionary. If we want something enough, almost everyone of us can find a means to justify it. Does your cellphone only work on a 3G network? Then you just have to upgrade. (Even though you can make and receive calls just fine.) Is your TV unable to get HD programming? Then it's time to get into the 21st century and get a new 55 inch LED flatscreen.

What Jesus is mentioning in the passage above, is how wealth and property, even the perceived lack of these things, can take priority over the much more important business of our soul. We as humans are mortal, we only have so much time and energy and we often spend these God-given gifts on material things, rather than the things of the spirit. The fact that Christ made the specific point that a rich man can only enter the Kingdom in spite of his riches and not because of them, helps us put into perspective what is actually important in the short time we have here on earth.

"Store your treasures in heaven, where moths and rust cannot destroy, and thieves do not break in and steal. 21 Wherever your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will also be." -Matthew 6:20-21 (New Living Translation)


It is important to realize that the issue of consumption has always been a universal one. All of us have an innate desire to be

in the company of the "have's" instead of the "have not's." Just like Joseph experienced in Genesis 37, people would sell their family as slaves to receive the money and the status that its increase provided. The Old Testament story of Joseph and his rough beginnings are that much more poignant when he shows forgiveness towards his brothers that exchanged his freedom for their gain. It also a quite important part of the Passion story that Christ himself was betrayed for the 40 pieces of silver that Judas thought was more important than his leader. It is no coincidence that when Christ spoke, he often mentioned money and its relationship towards our way of life and, ultimately, our faith. By explaining the eternal life in the monetary terms that listeners could understand, he explained his purpose here on earth and, in turn, our purpose as well.

"And now, dear brothers and sisters, one final thing. Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise." -Philippians 4:8 (New Living Translation)

The New Testament evangelist Paul wrote and spoke on many subjects with his followers, but it is his closing statements to his followers in Philippi that offered them the most simple guidance for their everyday lives. Today, when asking ourselves about making a purchase, it would help to ask similar questions: Is it necessary? Would it be beneficial? Would I honestly use it? Is it worth using money for this as opposed to something else? The more often we answer yes to these questions, the more likely it is that we could answer affirmatively

to the questions Paul posed as well.

More importantly, as it says in Luke 12:33 to, "Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will never fail, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys," and in Acts 2:44-47 that, "All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved," it suggests that the Christian life is to be about the dispossession of wealth and sharing of possessions. These are even tantamount to a proper response to Jesus and his message. In other words, giving away wealth and sharing possessions should be normative for us as Christians, and the accumulation of wealth and possessions (even if they are necessary, beneficial, and to be used honestly, as mentioned earlier) in many ways goes against the Gospel's message. How we do this in a practical sense and in our everyday lives may be an ongoing process of choices and letting go of things that others may find value in. Let's pray and strive that we would continually move more in a direction of finding value in God and in each other, and less in the value of possessions. 

*"If we want something enough,
almost everyone of us can find a
means to justify it."*

prayer plan



Pray for ways you might get more involved with your community this summer.

Try a prayer hike and enjoy God's creation.

Pray for encouragement and peace from God about your decisions and have faith in his will for your life.

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new identity

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