

ENGAGE

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Identity, world and Word

by CPYU President Walt Mueller

I use the fact that I'm a "youth culture watcher" as an excuse to regularly play a little game that might sound a bit strange—at first. I call it "assuming identity." Here's how it works: First, I pretend I'm someone I'm not. The identity of that generic someone is usually a child or teen, say a 14-year-old girl, a 17-year-old boy or a male fifth grader. For some strange reason the younger the someone, the better I do! I never give my alter-identity a name, but I do try to imagine what it's like to live in their skin developmentally. In other words, I try to picture what a kid that age feels, thinks and desires. Then, after imaginatively assuming that identity, I take a short "walk" through a popular cultural expression (music, video, film, book, TV show, place, etc.), imagining how that particular thing will effect my young "me," particularly at the level of identity formation. In other words, I try to figure out how it will shape me, my values, my attitudes, my behaviors and my understanding of myself.

Recently, I asked a room full of youth workers to play along with me. I told half of the room to assume the identity of a 14-year-old boy. The other half became 12-year-old girls. After jokingly telling them to "keep your hands off each other," I lowered the lights and played a music video by 19-year-old pop star Rihanna—a teenager herself. And so we watched and listened as this talented young singer performed her catchy hit song from early last year, "Shut Up and Drive."

When the lights went on I asked the "teens" in the room what the song taught them about "themselves." The girls learned how important it is to have a slim and trim body, and to wear clothing that shows that

body off. They learned that being a "girl gone wild" isn't a bad thing, but maybe the normal thing. They learned that they had power over guys and that they could boss the guys around, telling them what to do—particularly when it comes to relating to each other sexually. Not only that, but they learned that



relating to each other is *all* about sexuality. The boys learned that their identity lies in their sexuality, that girls are to be viewed as objects no different than a car, and that they hold the keys to those "cars" in their hands. Finally, one "girl" said, "I want to *be* Rihanna. She's got it *all*!"

Without hesitation, I believe that the defining and single-most important issue we

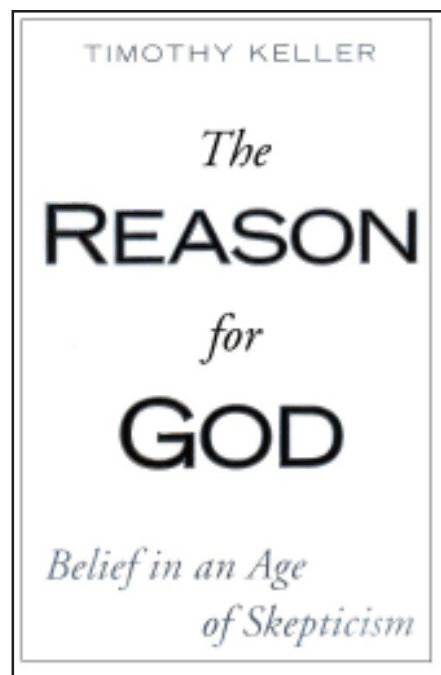
Identity, world and Word

must address with kids is *identity formation*. The reason? It's the single-most important issue in a teenager's life. And the place they land now in terms of their own understanding of themselves will in many ways determine who they are for the rest of their lives. In the end, every teenager chooses to find their identity in something. And it's not just teenagers—it's the most important issue for all of us.

As I've worked with and raised teenagers, I've realized that this struggle to find one's self is normal, and it plays a role in determining who teenagers become as adults. Some developmental experts have labeled this process "the teenage identity crisis." You and I went through it. Remember? Most likely, you looked to certain identity models during your own teenage years. TV or music stars, sports icons, or people you knew. Your own sense about your changing self and lack of self-acceptance may have caused you to emulate your heroes. Teenagers still dress, walk, talk, think and act based on what they see in those they look up to. There was a time in your life

you tried on some different "yous" for size and feel.

In one way, this adolescent search for identity isn't anything new. I grew up in the 1960s. I remember people stereotyping confused teenagers as being on a quest to "find themselves." Back then, the stereotype had the puzzled adolescent hopping into an old VW bus and heading west to California on the quest to discover their identity. But the times have changed. Today, "California"



comes to students 24/7 as the digital and media revolution has created a world where identity-shaping institutions and their messages live everywhere all the time.

In the quest to discover and adopt an identity, the teens you know and love are looking for answers to questions such as: Am I worthwhile? What makes me worthwhile? How am I unique from others? Is that uniqueness good or bad? What makes me special? And most importantly, who am I? In a perfect world, all of our teenagers would accept proper guidance and be drawn to Godly identity-shaping models. They would understand themselves and find their identity in who they are as unique individuals created in the image of

God for a relationship with Him. But we don't live in a perfect world. Life in a fallen world presents kids with two options: either finding one's identity in Christ, or choosing to find that identity in something else. Our kids embrace idolatry when they base their value, worth and identity on someone or something other than God. That's why we should always be playing "assuming identity." We want to know who's sending identity messages, what those messages are and how kids are embracing those messages. To undo the wrong with the right, we must first know and understand the wrong that's being embraced so we can challenge that wrong with the right.

Our imperfect world is marked by the waning influence of institutions (family and church) that traditionally helped teenagers understand and assume that their identity should be found *in* Christ. And as brokenness from our Creator continues to undo that perfect world and those voices of truth grow dim, the door has been opened for other social factors and cultural institutions to step in and fill the void, sending powerful identity-shaping lessons with increased volume that teach our kids who they should be and how they should live. Eventually, the blind start leading the blind, as teenaged influencers like Rihanna (and she's not alone by any stretch of the imagination), show their peers the way through the teenage years, telling them "This is where to find your identity," and leaving them saying "That's who I want to be."

So where are kids landing in their search for identity? And what effect is that having on their lives? In his recent book, *The Reason for God*, Timothy Keller offers us answers that can shape the identity-things we talk about with our kids. First, he defines "sin" in terms that speak volumes to the adolescent search for identity: "Sin is not just the doing of bad things, but the making of good things into *ultimate* things. It is seeking to establish a sense of self by making something else more central to your significance, purpose, and happiness than your relationship to God." Then, he goes on to share what he's learned by playing his own version of "assuming identity" as a culture watcher. While there are an infinite variety of "identity-bases," Keller's categories sparked some thoughts and revisions of my own about the identity-bases that are living and thriving in today's youth culture:

- **Sexual partners and romantic others.** With family breakdown on the rise, more and more of our students are seeking intimacy and identity in significant others or temporary sexual encounters. When our kids center their identities on their love interests or sexual partners rather than on God, they will become emotionally dependent, jealous and controlling. The other person's problems will be overwhelming to them. And, they will reduce the identity of others to pure objects.

- **Academic or athletic achievement.** Many of our students look to find their value and worth in their accomplishments in the classroom or on the field. When this happens, they become driven, boring, and shallow. They can lose family and

friends, unless of course their parents and friends are finding their own identity through their teenager's successes as well. If something goes bad and it all falls apart—either temporarily or forever—they are a failure. Inevitably, the last whistle will blow and it all will come to an end. Or, somebody else's grades eclipse their own. What then? Depression can set in. Might this offer a clue to why so many of our kids are depressed?

• **Money and possessions.** Our kids are being hammered by marketing messages that leave them believing that “Whoever dies with the most toys wins” and “You



are what you have.” Happiness is equated with having. But finding one's identity in stuff leads to being eaten up by worry and jealousy. In order to maintain and improve their lifestyle they may choose to do unethical things. Eventually, life blows up. Like the rich young ruler, they walk away from Jesus very, very rich in the things of this world, but unable to enjoy them because they are very, very sad.

• **Pleasure, gratification and comfort.** Our kids are growing up in a world where pain is to be avoided at all costs, while pleasure is something to be pursued. Kids want to “feel good.” They take pills, abuse drugs, engage in extreme sports, binge drink and get involved in all kinds of sexual behaviors to temporarily numb the pain and turn up the

volume on the pleasure. The sad result, Keller says, is that “you will find yourself getting addicted to something. You will become chained to the ‘escape-strategies’ by which you avoid the hardness of life.”

• **Relationships and approval.** There's a scene in *Mean Girls* where the dastardly trio known as “The Plastics” stand in front of a single mirror, jockeying for position as each girl verbally criticizes her own flaws. What each one hopes is that the other two will argue away their self-criticism by denying the flaws even exist. Kids who find their identity in relationships and approval are always getting hurt by criticism and constantly losing friends. They fear confrontation—both giving and getting—and they wind up becoming useless friends.

• **Noble causes.** The emerging generation of students wants to make a difference in the world. We know that more and more are getting involved in social causes, most of those causes being noble in character. But when one's identity is found in the cause *and not* in doing good as a servant of God committed to the cause of Christ, you begin to compartmentalize people and the world into “good” and “bad.” You demonize those who don't share your commitments. In the end, you wind up being controlled by your enemies, and without them, your purpose fades.

About CPYU and ENGAGE

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We are a ministry working with churches, schools and community organizations to build strong families by equipping parents, pastors, youth workers and educators to understand the world of children and teens, by equipping teenagers to deal with the challenges of adolescence, and by equipping both parents and teens to live by the light of God's Word.

Our resources include parent education seminars, youth worker training, printed and audio materials, a Web site, and a daily syndicated radio feature.

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• *Religion and morality.* Today's teens are no more or less spiritual than previous generations. All humans since the beginning of time have been equally spiritual. The difference with today's kids is that their search is more *conscious* and *overt*. They are self-aware of their spirituality and embracing a variety of spiritual systems and beliefs. If this is where they find their identity, they will tend to be proud, self-righteous and cruel when they are living up to their own moral standards. And when they don't, they experience devastating guilt.

If our calling is ultimately about pointing kids to Christ and praying that He would embrace them so hard that they would find their identity solely in their embrace of Him, then what can we do to help our kids find their way through youth culture's current muddled and confusing identity mess? Here are some suggestions to get you started.



First, continually look in the mirror to check on yourself, asking this question: "Where am I finding my identity?" Since identity is a constant struggle for us all, we must recognize that along with all the other identity bases that knock on the door of our ultimate allegiance, parenting and youth ministry throw in a few extra. Do we find our identity in our kids' achievements? Do we find our identity in the size of our youth group? Our ability to make kids laugh or sing? Our perceived ability to identify with and relate to kids? The fact that there's a group of kids who like, adore and follow us around? That we have power over a group of people who pay attention when we speak? Keller reminds us that "every person must find some way to 'justify their existence,' and to stave off the universal fear that they're a 'bum.'" Hmmm. How many of us got into youth ministry in the first place in an effort to somehow find acceptance and significance. Ultimately, our identity can and must be found in Christ and Christ alone. We must be sure that with Augustine we are able to say, "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee!"

Second, continually check in on the identity-shaping world. Watching culture is not a once-and-done past-tense activity. For the Christian, culture watching is an active and

ongoing responsibility. Because culture is constantly shifting and changing, the responsibility lies on us to stay on top of the nuances of our kids' youth culture, particularly the messengers and messages that are shaping their identity. But it's not just something we do. It's something we do with *a purpose*.

Theologian John Stott calls this "dual listening." He says that we "stand between the Word and the world with consequent obligation to listen to both. We listen to the Word in order to discover even more of the riches of Christ. And we listen to the world in order to discover which of Christ's riches are needed most and how to present them in their best light." When it comes to the task of shaping identity—both our own and our kids'—dual listening is a necessity. We must know their world in order to bring the light of the Word to bear on it.

Third, confront the lies. Several times in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus issues "You have heard it said ... but I tell you" statements. Each and every time, Jesus is issuing a corrective to conventional, widely held, cultural wisdom that his hearers had not only heard, but had allowed to become a part of their very lives. Jesus confronts and undoes the cultural "you have heard's" with His Word-centered "I tell you's." As followers of Christ and ministers of His Kingdom message, we need to follow suit. As already stated, we must know the identity lies of our culture. Then, we must shed the light of God's life-changing and identity-giving truth on those lies. A hallmark of our nurture of our children is continually assuming the same "you have heard it said ... but Jesus tells you" posture on identity matters.

Finally, nothing speaks louder than embodied truth. Kids are sharp, very sharp. It doesn't take long for them to pick up on what it is that's got a strangle-hold on your identity. If you have embraced the Christ who has embraced you, then *that* mutual life-giving strangle-hold will serve as a compelling embodiment that turns conventional cultural wisdom on where to find one's identity upside-down! The *who* you are, sends strong messages on the *who* they've been made to be.

History tells us that the famous monk Bernard of Clairvaux hadn't always found his identity in Christ. He was born into the luxury-filled life of nobility. Eventually he learned that his identity could only be found in Christ. Out of that experience of living on the foundation of a new identity base, Bernard would pen these words to his now-classic hymn: "Jesus, Thou joy of loving hearts! Thou fount of life! Thou light of men! From the best bliss that earth imparts, We turn unfilled to Thee again." That, and only that, is the place where our children and teens will truly find themselves. ■



Dr. Walt Mueller is President of the Center for Parent/ Youth Understanding

Self-embedding: The next cutting? By Chris Wagner

Editor's note: While it's important to inform parents of new trends and behaviors affecting teens, it's also important not to sensationalize them. It's always possible the teens you know have never heard of the latest trend we are addressing. When that's true, we feel responsible to make you aware of the trend, but do not want to spread over-hyped widespread panic about the issue. We especially do not want to turn impressionable young teens onto any new and harmful behaviors. Unfortunately, lots of media coverage about a specific trend can cause a buzz that leads to an increase in the activity, as opposed to healthy discussion and awareness. We hope this is not the case with our trend alerts. Please pray with us that our trend alerts, including this one, will be informative and helpful to youth workers and parents without sparking interest from curious children and teens.

Last December, at the annual meeting of the Radiological Society of North America, researchers presented a new adolescent trend, labeling it "Self-Embedding Disorder." A new category that falls within the realm of self-injury, self-embedders intentionally insert foreign objects under their skin and leave them there as the open wound left behind heals.

There are literally only a handful of known self-embedding cases. The researchers just happened to stumble upon this finding as they were tracking medical cases that required Image Guided Foreign Body Removal, a technique in which foreign objects are removed from the body using simultaneous ultrasound and live X-ray during extraction. Premed student and intern Adam Young, along with Dr. William Sheils II, chief of radiology at Nationwide Children's Hospital, began noticing that several case histories revealed that the objects being removed were intentionally put under the skin by the patient.

All in all, 10 of the 500 patients in their study were found to have self-embedding disorder. In each case, the patient was a teenage girl, though further investigations have revealed it also occurs within males. What they found was that these girls were self-embedding on more than one occasion, with the average recurrence being three times. In fact, nine of these patients had intentionally embedded 52 objects under their skin.

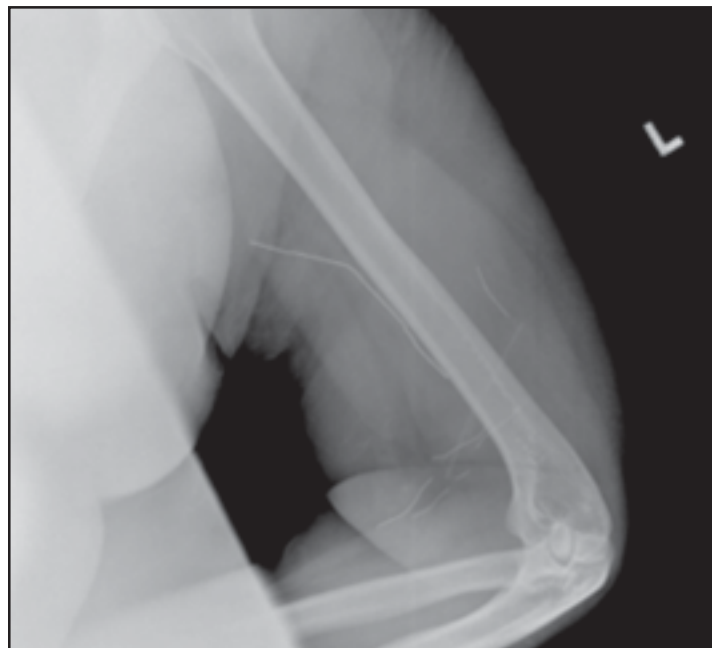
What kinds of objects did they find? Objects included "needles, staples, wood, stone, glass, pencil lead" and even an unfolded paper clip and a chunk of crayon. Self-embedding was discovered primarily in the hands and arms, but there also were cases that revealed insertion in the neck and ankles. Some doctors who have been dealing with self-harm patients for many years note that self-embedding is not entirely new, but believe it is possible that the behavior is increasing.

How do we respond?

First, self-embedders need immediate medical attention. Deep muscle or bone infection, and damage to the arteries, veins, nerves or tendons is possible. Since some objects used in self-embedding are not metallic, they may not be seen by an X-ray.

Second, it appears that self-embedding is "cutting gone to the next level," according to Sheils. In fact, 90 percent of the girls in the study had cut themselves prior to self-embedding.

As such, it is probably safe to say that addressing self-embedding will have many parallels to addressing cutting. (To discover the motivations of cutters as well as different treatment options, consider reading *Inside a Cutter's Mind* by Jerusha Clark, reviewed in this issue of *ENGAGE*. Also consider *Hope and Healing for Kids Who Cut* by Marv Penner, available at www.cpyu.org.) Common characteristics of self-embedders, as reported by the *Los Angeles Times*, are a history of sexual abuse, bipolar disorder, depression and borderline personality disorder. Just like cutting, self-embedding reveals underlying issues that must be addressed. Full recovery will not happen without first speaking to these deeper issues.



The thin white lines that appear in the upper arm of this X-ray reveal pieces of metal, such as staples and an unbent paper clip, that were intentionally embedded by a teenage girl.

Finally, the issue of suicide must be brought up. Many believe self-harm is, in essence, a suicide attempt. However, this is very rarely the case. In fact, cutting generally is not associated with an attempt to take one's life. It is possible that self-embedders have no suicidal intentions. However, there is still so little known about this disorder to firmly state so. But, it is clear, that self-embedders, like cutters, have most likely experienced suicide ideation. In other words, though they are not to the point of acting out their thoughts, the idea of suicide is something they've seriously contemplated.

Clearly, self-embedders need our support, help and prayer. If you suspect someone you know is struggling with this issue, or any other form of self-harm, seek out the help of a medical professional who is trained in such matters. ■



Chris Wagner is a Research Assistant at the Center for Parent/Youth Understanding

Mindy Meier: Sex on campus *By Derek Melleby*

It's probably not surprising to learn that a hookup culture of casual sex exists on college campuses. What might be shocking are two discoveries made by sociologist Donna Freitas in her groundbreaking research and book *Sex & the Soul: Juggling Sexuality, Spirituality, Romance, and Religion on America's College Campuses*. After many years of surveying and interviewing college students, here's what she learned: First, most students don't want to participate in the hookup culture, but feel pressured to for lack of an alternative. Second, while many students identify themselves as "spiritual," their spirituality has very little influence on their sexuality. Third, even though most students are frustrated and have been hurt by the hookup culture, they have very few places to openly discuss their concerns.

Freitas also interviewed students at evangelical colleges. While the hookup culture was not as prevalent, students still felt like they had limited ways to discuss sexuality on campus. There was intense pressure to be engaged before graduation ("ring by spring") and students who were in sexual relationships didn't have many people who they could confide in. Freitas concludes, "The prevailing religious message about sex among students is either to guard purity with one's life or to see sex as irrelevant to one's spiritual practices and religious commitments."

Because we must address this sobering sexual reality, I spoke with Mindy Meier, author of *Sex and Dating: Questions You Wish You Had Answers To*, about Freitas and her research.

Derek: Before we talk about Donna Freitas' book, tell us about your work and what led you to write your book, Sex and Dating.

Mindy: I work for InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, an interdenominational parachurch ministry that serves college students. Part of my job is meeting with students, and sex and dating are frequent topics of conversation. I find that the same questions come up over and over again during Q & A sessions on sex and dating and student appointments. I simply took these questions and gave brief three- or four-page answers to help college students think through these issues. Each question involves a personal story of someone who is wrestling with the issue raised. Students are very busy and a book written in a Q & A format allows them to zero in on topics of interest and skip the ones that do not intersect their lives.

Derek: From your own experience, do you think Freitas provides an accurate picture of the sexual culture on today's college campuses?

Mindy: Yes, I think Freitas presents an extremely accurate picture. She interviewed students from a wide range of schools. The fact that she allowed students to answer in writing and also did personal interviews makes her research very enlightening. She is an academic researcher but also captures subtle nuances with colorful narratives used to describe the people she interviewed. I found her book very engaging. The student stories rang true with my experience on college campuses.

Derek: Reading Sex & the Soul, especially the students' stories, can generate a wide range of emotions. What were some of your emotions while reading the book? Which student stories stood out?

Mindy: The stories that elicited the strongest reaction in

me were the ones where students admitted being part of the hookup culture and felt empty afterwards, but saw hooking up as the only way to somehow stumble into a lasting and meaningful love relationship. They know in their gut that this process is off target, but do not see any other alternatives for finding the love connection they long for.

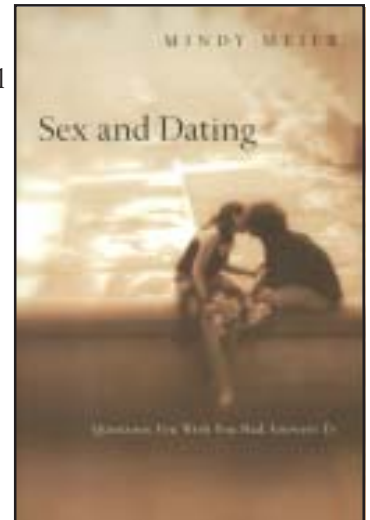
They find themselves swept down river by a strong cultural pull called peer pressure, which makes them feel powerless. They are afraid to come out and denounce the hookup scene. It's as if there is some invisible gag order on college campuses that renders them mute. I found myself feeling deep sadness as I read those stories. I kept thinking that if only one or two gutsy students would go public with their true feelings, dating with an emphasis on building a rich friendship was seen to be a viable way to find a lasting love relationship, others would find the courage to follow. I wanted them to find that lasting love their hearts were hungry for, and experience the joy and ecstasy God intended them to have.

Derek: Did you disagree with any of Freitas' research?

Mindy: No, but I did have some disagreement with a few of the solutions she proposed. Freitas accurately points out that there is a great problem with many college students at non-religious schools (which Freitas calls "spiritual schools") exhibiting a complete disconnect between their spiritual beliefs and their sex lives, because their spiritual beliefs have little impact on their dating and sex lives.

Freitas rightly points out that college students need adult mentors, and that sex, religion and romance should be topics of conversation on college campuses. She cites the wonderful dialogues that students, staff and faculty have at Evangelical colleges, where great effort is made to integrate a person's faith into all aspects of life, whether that be entering the marketplace as a finance major or setting sexual boundaries with their date on Saturday night. This faith-integrated learning atmosphere gives students a place to ask the "big questions" of life. Freitas proposes that this could happen at non-religious schools. She states, "Professors need to embrace the idea of themselves as 'spiritual guides' of a sort and their syllabi as 'confessions of faith.' The campus should be a culture forged by a shared identity, mission, and values of its own, each forming a sense of itself as something special and set apart from the broader culture" (Page 67).

But is that realistic at a large state university? Professors who teach at Evangelical Christian colleges are really bivocational. They see themselves as experts in their discipline



(geology, computer science, English literature, etc.) but also as deeply devoted followers of Christ who want to shape the next generation in their faith tradition. It is precisely this integration of faith with all of life that energizes them. Many professors at a state university or even a Catholic university would say, "Look, I love physics or microbiology or Russian literature, I am an expert in that area, but I never signed up to be anyone's spiritual guide." People become professors because they know a great deal about a given body of information and have devoted years to be an expert in their field, but they often have no training in how to engage students in meaningful dialogues about faith, romance, sex and religion. And they often have no desire to have that kind of relationship with students.

Derek: Freitas concludes that most college students, regardless of their institution of higher education or spirituality, lack safe places to discuss sexuality and faith. What advice would you give to those who want to engage students in these kinds of conversations?

Mindy: I would tell parents, youth workers and campus ministers to not be afraid to have honest open conversations about sex, sexuality, dating and love relationships. We must banish the notion that sweeping talk of sexuality under the rug will make for sexual purity. It is crazy wishful thinking to believe that if we don't talk about sex, students won't think about it or engage in sexual activity. Nothing could be further from the truth. High school and college students are eager to have meaningful discussion about sex, dating, love relationships and romance in the context of their religious beliefs. Spiritual and emotional health is being able to talk honestly about the things that really matter to us.

In these open and honest discussions, we need to move beyond "sin management" as our primary way to discuss faith and sexuality. Too quickly we want to answer the question, "How far can I go with my girlfriend/boyfriend?" We can get gridlocked by endless discussions about sin management. By doing this, we unknowingly cast sex in a bad light. We focus on the 'don't' of sex. Purity culture in some cases leaves students with the notion that sex is bad. Many devout Christians marry and are very uptight about sex. They have a hard time developing a healthy sex life after they are married, because in their single years remaining pure required them to exert great effort to repress their sexual longing.

When I speak to college students about sex, I start by painting for them the wonderful and glorious picture of God's gift of sex. When students come to terms with the fact that their sexual longings are God-given and fundamentally good, they have a healthier view of themselves and sex. When they understand the purposes of sexual intercourse and the wonderful way it acts as super glue bonding a husband and wife together, this view will inform the choices they make in their dating lives.

As we engage in this ongoing dialogue, we need to hold two great truths in tension. First, that God has given the gift of sexual intercourse to a husband and wife committed to one another for life. The Bible is clear in teaching that sexual activity outside the marriage relationship is not God's will. God's prohibitions are not given to spoil our fun, but rather to protect something of great value. The second great truth is the

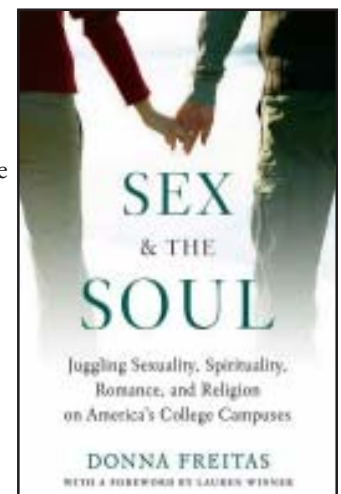
fact that Christianity is a religion of grace. We are broken people, living in a broken world. We are not always perfect in living out our beliefs. There must be a way for students who have failed sexually to hear a redemptive narrative. Forgiveness and healing are possible at the cross of Christ. People are not ruined for life or doomed to a miserable marriage because of past mistakes. Our God is a God of new beginnings. Allowing students to hear stories of Christians who have failed to live up to God's ideal but have found forgiveness, redemption and healing will help them in their own journey. Too many Christians suffer alone in shame because of sexual sin. We are told in James 5:16 to confess our sins to one another and pray that we might be healed. Surely this applies to sexual sins.

Derek: Lacking from Freitas' book was a significant discussion of how evangelicals at secular schools work out their sexuality in relation to their faith. What would you like to add?

Mindy: There are many churches and parachurch ministries like InterVarsity that offer a safe place for dialogue about sexuality in relation to faith on college campuses. This can take many forms: speakers at large group gatherings, one-on-one counseling sessions, and sharing in Bible or book studies.

Recently, I spoke at an InterVarsity retreat in Virginia where 365 students gathered for a weekend. The title of the conference was "The Sex Conference: Healthy Sexuality in a World of Brokenness." We began by helping students develop a healthy attitude about sexuality. Then elective seminars were offered dealing with recovery from sexual abuse, singleness, sex in an age of technology (pornography), body image and pursuing holiness in dating. Saturday night we had a time of repentance and healing focusing on the Cross. Sprinkled throughout the weekend were personal testimonies. One woman shared her healing journey after being sexually abused; another man shared about coming out of a homosexual life style. On Sunday I gave a talk entitled, "A Vision for Healthy Relationships."

So many students who attended this weekend, commented on how much they appreciated being able to bring these topics out in the open, to voice questions and think about how faith in Christ intersects their sexuality. They wanted to know what it would look like to honor God in their dating and romantic lives. An event like this draws a subset of the larger campus—those interested in integrating their faith and their personal lives. Finding like-minded people who share their beliefs and values made them realize that they are not alone. There is a better way than the hookup culture. ■



Derek Melleby serves as Director of the College Transition Initiative for the Center for Parent/Youth Understanding

Internet gaming for n00bs: Prepare to get pwned!

by Greg Jones

Some of the hottest new video game titles on the market today brag about their Internet gaming capability through either the free services provided by the Wii and Playstation 3, or the pay-as-you-go service of Xbox Live. While all of these consoles offer different programming related to their audience and available games, there are some common themes about Internet gaming. Real-life competition, even if they have a silly screen name, is usually more fun to play against than an artificial intelligence opponent, what most people call “playing against the computer.” Despite the obvious advantages of playing against other people, such as social networking and increased fun, there are individuals who use this avenue of the Internet to do harm. This article is a guide to safe and enjoyable use of Internet gaming, specifically with the console format, with a few rules to keep everyone coming back for more.



The lingo

First, the term “n00b” is a common buzz word in gaming. A “n00b” is spelled with zeros, not letters, and it refers to someone who is a new player or a “newbie.” Therefore, often gamers are excited to play against a group of “n00bs” because they are inexperienced and therefore easy to beat. In like fashion, this term has become an insult. To call an opponent a “n00b” is to say that he/she is unable to compete and plays like a beginner.

The second unfamiliar word in the title is “pwned.” While it might seem to translate as something dirty, it really is just a form of “getting owned” or beat really badly by another player. Both of these terms tend to be overused clichés, and at this point are only used by extremely young gamers or as sarcasm.

The pros

Players enjoy Internet gaming for several reasons. First, gamers like Internet competition because it is infinitely more fun to defeat an opponent with a real brain and hands. Defeating the “computer” or artificial intelligence opponents gets old quickly, but real humans can solve problems and pose entirely different challenges. Whether it is a game that involves strategy or reflexes, there are added levels of difficulty when the opponent can adapt to the gamer’s moves.

Second, players love Internet gaming because of the endless stream of competition. Even in the middle of the night, there are people in other parts of the world just getting home from work, eager to play a few rounds of golf, take a few laps around the track, or capture a few flags on the battlefield. While most games brag of 30 hours or slightly more of game play, the Internet game modes provide almost infinite new competition and therefore equally limitless hours of gaming.

And third, gamers enjoy Internet gaming because of the connection and cooperation with friends. Through various programs, players can link up with their buddies to play games either against each other or against other members of the gaming community. Sometimes groups of friends divide to play amongst themselves, while other times they rally together to form a team. This all depends on the players, their style and the type of game. This can create a truly enjoyable experience, where the excitement is no longer in the isolation of one’s basement or living room, but rather can be shared with friends across town, the country or the world. This friend connection also allows for competitive and cooperative performance comparisons, because most games now keep statistics on victories and other achievements.

The cons

While these reasons may sound positive, there are other experiences related to Internet gaming that can make it dangerous, particularly for younger gamers. Think of the Internet gaming community as a combination of a men’s locker room, a smoke-filled bar and a fraternity house. Depending on the title, most games are dominated by males, hence the male-dominated analogies for the community. That said, there is a definite anonymity on the Internet if one does not reveal one’s voice over the microphone, so there are probably more women and children playing than most of the men and teen boys know. These other members of the audience, who may not be acclimated to the comments and behavior of a male locker room, probably find much of it offensive (for good reason). This is why parents and young gamers must be careful with Internet gaming.

Just as some parents do not understand why their children want to play online, they are also unaware of the dangers that exist in the Internet gaming community. First, the most obvious threat to developing young minds is the offensive language. Aside from the relatively tame insults of “n00b” and “getting pwned,” some gamers use racially derogatory comments that are often anti-African American or anti-Semitic. In addition to these comments, there are often locker room style insults about sexual performance, members of one’s family, etc. While these might be typical of most male competitive interactions, they need to be understood within their context. Parents cannot let young children have access to these Internet games, even with supervision.

Second, Internet gaming, for some reason, seems to encourage cheating. This may seem like a small point in comparison, but it is really important that young people learn to play by the rules. Whether they are “glitches” (loosely defined as holes in the code that allow players to go places they are not supposed to go) or quitting early (universal unsportsmanlike conduct), some players on the Internet cannot stomach losing so they show their immaturity by cheating.

Third, playing on the Internet tends to consume more time than playing against artificial intelligence. Whether it is the appeal of playing with friends or wanting to beat the next level of competition, Internet challenges seem to make time limits more difficult to maintain. For parents, it is especially important not to let young gamers play online in the evening or before bed because the intensity of playing keeps them awake.

What now?

It is not my intention to make parents afraid of letting their children play online. Nor is it my intention to give gamers full license to play their games all night long. This is merely meant to start conversations about proper playing and conduct.

Here are some suggestions to curb the negative effects of playing on the Internet, for gamers of all ages. First, try to arrange to play with friends. Whether it is a game from the hit football game series “Madden” or a first person shooter, the game is both more fun and safer if two friends connect in a “private chat” or “party mode” and only communicate with each other. This still provides the connection between friends and excitement of gaming, but essentially feels (for the gamers) like they are at each other’s house. It is a safer way to prohibit those offensive strangers from entering the home.

Second, if friends are not online, plug in the microphone, but turn it all the way down and do not listen to the people online. While it’s possible people might talk “strategy” or topics relevant to the game, most often the conversation is very crass and useless to the gamer. If they leave the headset unplugged the sound will come through the monitor (making the insults louder), so the easiest way to keep everyone happy is to just mute the people whose behavior is not welcome.

Third, as a parent you should get interested in the games, even if you have little interest in them. This is essentially a universal parenting lesson, but is particularly important for the gaming world. For parents, this might mean learning about and playing a sport or adventure game online that is not all that compelling, but will mean a lot to children and teens. However, learning about the various games in a “wow, this one looks cool, what’s it about?” kind of way shows children and teens that parents care, but also provides an easy way to check out the games. Related to the parental involvement, get in the habit of renting before you buy. Trying a game online can make or break a video game purchase for gamers of all ages. Also, while trying the game online, take a listen to who is “out

there” in the game’s community. Some games have “safer” crowds than others.

And fourth, it’s important to pay attention to *when* they play. During later hours, when they ought to be in bed, older gamers tend to make their presence known in the lobbies of Internet games. Probably the best time for younger gamers to play is after school when some of the older players are still at work or attending college classes. While these are not univer-



sal rules, they can help control both the amount of time played and appropriateness of the competition.

Video games provide an avenue for children and teens to experience fantasy, adventure, competition, cooperation and imagination in ways they might not find otherwise. Internet gaming provides players with new people to meet and play against at almost any time, all from the comfort of the gamer’s own console. These freedoms also invite scores of threats via people who are a part of a lost and broken world.

Playing games on the Internet is much like sending kids to high school. They might get bullied or teased, but for the most part they must learn to filter out the bad and consume what is good. In school, the good is in their education. With gaming, the good is with friends and with fun. To completely turn off the possibility of Internet gaming is like taking a student out of school. Instead of such drastic measures, simply work with these young minds and help them learn how to avoid the bullies, stand up to false information and brush off that which is useless. ■



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In search of good film: Nine signposts By Greg Veltman

“We are lonesome animals. We spend all of our life trying to be less lonesome. One of our ancient methods is to tell a story begging the listener to say—and to feel—‘Yes, that is the way it is, or at least that is the way I feel it. You’re not as alone as you thought.’”

—John Steinbeck, *In Awe of Words*

“Movies are the stories of a postmodern generation.”

—Denis Haack, Ransom Fellowship



A friend and I were waiting in line at the theater. And we kept waiting. Mind you, this was not a long line. There was only one gentleman between us and the woman selling the tickets. We were in conversation and barely noticed that the line was not moving. That was until the man in front of us turned around and asked: “What movie are you planning to see?” We gave him a little synopsis about what we knew about the film we were there to see. Upon further inquiry, we learned that we were a part of a weekly ritual for this man who would show up at the same time every week at this particular local theater regardless of what was playing and decide, right in front of the ticket booth, what film might be worth his eight dollars.

This seemingly random conversation got me thinking about what goes into our decisions to see a film, be it at the theater or in the comfort of our own homes. Are we thoughtful about these choices? Should we be? How might we go about this? I believe it is worth reflecting on, but instead of setting down some hard and fast rules about what makes certain films worth watching, I want to set up some signposts that might be helpful for individual and communal decisions toward viewing and engaging films.

1. Films are not books

As with books, films tell stories. Films sometimes use extensive voice-over to allow the author or narrator to tell the audience something. There are books that have been adapted

to film. But after this the similarities diminish.

Some of the differences are easy: films average about two hours in length, show the story visually, depend mostly on dialogue and action to move the plot along, and use actor’s facial expressions to show emotions and thoughts. But the significant difference is the way in which films engage our imaginations. Writers use words artfully and poetically not only to tell the story, but also set the context and allow the reader to enter a different world. But filmmakers must offer a visual look into the story that allows the audience to suspend disbelief for a time to enter into the story. Films show the story. One does not read the film. One critically views a film and starts the interpretive process with the uniqueness of this medium in mind.

Films have a team of storytellers. In film it is important to pay attention to the actors and actresses as the primary storytellers, but the director, writer and those working on the technical aspects like light, sound (the music and score can be an invaluable part of this), set design and graphics have a role in telling the story. It is not enough to have a good story. Good film needs good storytellers. Saying something like, “The book was better!” is not to make a critique, but to miss the point.

2. Viewing, not watching

While films are not books, viewing a film is not a passive activity. Instead, it is participating in a different medium in its own distinct way.

Films allow us to be voyeurs, to watch uninvolved in the comedy and tragedy of the characters on screen, and to go home after escaping our routines and problems, if only for a time.

But a better use of film is to think of the audience as viewers. To be a viewer is to take up the vocation of an engaged audience member: to ask questions, to discuss the implications of the story, and to discern the good and the bad that the film offers. It is work we often avoid. It is challenging. Others seem to do it better. Initially we will need to be guided by wise mentors in discernment, but at some point we must make the choice for ourselves to stop watching, and become viewers of film.

3. “Everything is permissible”

In 1 Corinthians 10:23 (NIV), Paul says, “Everything is permissible,” but not everything is beneficial. “Everything is permissible”—but not everything is constructive.

Paul was not talking about film here, but it’s useful as we consider how to engage film. Like the man ahead of me at the theater, how do we decide what to see? Discernment is more complex than simply saying a film is all good or all bad. Paul is talking about the exercise of Christian liberty when we are in a non-Christian context (eating meat set aside for the worship of idols). Knowing what is beneficial and constructive involves knowing ourselves, our community and our culture.

What weaknesses and obstacles might we encounter in film that we might better avoid than test our ability to engage it? There are viewers who are sensitive to violence, sexuality or language, and we should respect our own and others' limitations (for me, war movies are especially hard to watch). We should let our community help decide what we should see. And while the Motion Picture Association of America rating system has its flaws, it may be helpful by listing objectionable things we will see in a particular film.

It might seem as if only films that portray hope, ideal love and happiness would be beneficial and constructive. So, what are we to do with films that show human brokenness? We often confuse benefit and constructiveness with a shallow kind of joy. Hard films can also tell the truth. Sometimes that is why they are hard to watch. We need to be alert to our tendency for cynicism and numbness toward our own brokenness, but this does not mean that we should avoid films that seem to be more about our brokenness than about human redemption.

4. Where's the moral in the story?

In his book, *The Three, the One, and the Many* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), Colin Gunton writes about the connection between art and its role toward portraying good and evil:

"For aesthetics, the chief question concerns in what sense art may be conceived to embody being, meaning and truth. Defenders of the autonomy of art argue rightly that it should not be compelled to serve some extraneous moral, and certainly not political, end; its task is to serve reality as it distinctly perceives it. But that raises the question of reality ... To suppose that meaninglessness, the evil and the discordant are the essentially real is to serve a Manichean vision, which holds that reality is irredeemable. To suppose otherwise, however, is to be involved in the question of whether art should incorporate some kind of redemptive vision, as for most of history it has done. It is therefore inextricably involved with the question of moral good, which does not mean that it must be didactically moral, but rather must in some way or other come to an understanding of its relation to human moral reality (175-176)."

Often we ask about the moral of a story, looking for a quick aphorism or proverb to sum up the lesson that might be gleaned from the story. Aesop's fables can be good, but often this is too pragmatic and simplistic as an approach to film, which is a storied art that is more complex. Good stories often navigate between perceiving reality as being irredeemable and preaching a simple moral lesson.

Gunton makes the important point that art needs to place itself in a moral universe. It is the complexity of this moral universe that gives good stories excitement, adventure and ultimately a view of how reality is and should be. Instead of looking for a simple story of redemption or an ironic and cynical "take" on the inevitability of evil and the tragic nature

of life, we should take up Gunton's question as to whether or not it helps us understand the question of reality and what moral action looks like. Good films tell stories that are set in a morally complex world, providing us with insight into our own and others' behavior and actions.

5. Toward responsible action

All stories invite a response from the viewer. A comedy misses its mark if the audience is not laughing. It is a rare and unimaginative story that does not argue for a particular response from the audience.



Part of the discernment process is to ask questions about what response the story may be aiming at, and to be in dialogue about what response you and others had while viewing the film. There are plenty of formulaic films whose only required response is laughter for a couple of hours, to excite one's sentiments and nostalgia, or move the audience to tears. But good films provide a space of play for the consequences of human behavior. In other words, they point out the good and bad ways we live in the world, leading the audience to better understand their own stories and the decisions they make in life. The characters of film can become mentors or foils to our own lives. If the film is truthful, it will show the consequences of actions, and shed light on our own responsible action in the world and the consequences of doing good and bad.

6. Imagination: Our minds at play

Responding to film requires that viewers use their imaginations. Metaphor is especially important here. Most films use imagery and metaphor to relate the story on screen to the audience. With our imaginations we can see how these metaphors and images extend into our own world. By using our imaginations, we can better understand what we long for. We can imagine ourselves and the world differently. We play with the stories and ideas to understand how we might act and

In search of good film: Nine signposts

imaginatively change what we believe and how we act. To approach film imaginatively is to allow film to change our ways of seeing things, to gain new insight, and to equip ourselves to transform the world.

7. The human condition

Writing about teaching stories, Walker Percy says, “Bad books always lie. They lie most of all about the human condition” (*Signposts in a Strange Land*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1991). Percy argues that good stories illuminate the human condition for us, while bad stories deceive us about who we really are.

So, what exactly is this human condition? In its most basic sense it is the capacities of human beings that make us distinctly human—that defines our identity, beliefs and behaviors. The obvious distinction is that we have physical bodies that look and behave in certain ways. Communication is fundamental to our being human, as is using language and speech to communicate with and relate to one another. We all go through the cycle of birth, life and death. Humans possess imagination that bestows the ability to act and to change ourselves and the world through imaginative action. Being human also means realizing that humans are broken and not always acting in ways that help humans flourish, instead of choosing to “give up on” our humanity. Humans ask questions. We are curious: Why are things the way they are? What does existence mean? How do we know anything at all? And that’s only the beginning!

Good stories illuminate what it means to be human: our brokenness—yes, but also our imagination, hope, love and grace. Good films have characters that help us understand ourselves and our place in the world. I think this is often why we like films about superheroes. The heroes are both like us and different from us. They give us a glimpse of what makes us human, and the dreams and desires we have about the world put to rights.

8. Community and context

The preceding signposts point out ways of thinking about film and stories. It is also important to remember the community and context that we view a film in.

Some of the films we love most are those that we watch at a moment when the connection between the story and our own lives is significant. Or maybe the people we viewed it with and the discussion we had about it made the film more illuminating than if we had just watched unreflectively. It is our memory and relationships that often determine our judgment of a film. While this should not be the only method, understanding the context and the community that we are in helps us understand ourselves, our strengths and weaknesses, and what we love. When it comes to great movies we tend to think of films that explore universal themes that transcend

time and place. But sometimes a good film does the opposite, going deeply into a particular time and place and lingers with us in memory. In the context of good conversation, we might also change our minds about a film, seeing something we did not see before, or thinking of the story in a new way. Pick your film friends carefully and remember that the setting and your own mood also play a part in viewing film.

9. Have fun and delight in creativity

Sometimes a Will Ferrell movie is just a Will Ferrell movie. If all of these signposts find you thinking that engaging film is going to take an advanced degree, I have not forgotten that watching films can be entertaining and fun. Comedies are easy to have fun with, but serious films also can be enjoyable. If we do not enjoy the challenge of discerning the themes and the drama of the human condition, maybe we should find an activity that we do enjoy. Oftentimes we can feel that thinking about film ruins it, making it unnecessarily serious. But I have found that thinking thoughtfully about film can be fun. It allows the viewer to participate in the work of art, delighting in the creativity of the story and the storytellers.

Testing the theory

You can tell a lot about a culture from its stories. Our culture tells a lot of its stories through films. As with Denis Haack, whom I quoted above, I think movies are the predominant way our culture tells stories; about ourselves and our desires and longings. John Steinbeck highlights the power of stories to connect us to others: they help us see that “we are not as alone as we thought.” We live in a morally complex world with others and in order to be truly human we must act and imagine in ways for us to flourish in this community in which we take an active part.

I hope these signposts can be a helpful ways to start or enhance your own engagement with film. Use these signposts to watch good films, support good storytellers, and engage others in conversations. Ask someone what film they have seen recently and what she thought about it. Build or find a community with whom to watch and discern film. Take up the responsibility, but don’t forget to have fun! ■

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Get your ticket! By Greg Veltman

Now that we've set up some signposts, what sort of films might be worth seeing?

The American Film Institute lists the 100 greatest films of all time, including *Citizen Kane* (#1), *Casablanca* (#2), *The Godfather* (#3) and *Lawrence of Arabia* (#5). I point to some of the great storytellers.

- The late Swedish film writer and director Ingmar Bergman, whose ability to capture human psychology through dialogue and the camera is amazing (*The Seventh Seal*, his faith trilogy: *Through a Glass Darkly*, *Winter Light* and *The Silence*, and his intensely inter-personal *Persona*, *Scenes from a Marriage* and *Autumn Sonata*).
- American director Alfred Hitchcock is a master at telling fun, suspenseful, and thoughtful stories. My favorites are *Rope*, *Vertigo*, *The Birds*, *Rear Window* and *I Confess*.
- Polish director Krzysztof Kieslowski and his writing collaborator Krzysztof Piesiewicz's three colors trilogy: *Blue*, *White and Red*, and his *The Decalogue* (10 vignettes, one for each commandment) are well worth exploring.
- Woody Allen also has some great philosophical, yet humorous films in *The Purple Rose of Cairo* and *Love and Death*, and he explores relationships in *Husbands and Wives*, *Manhattan*, and *Crimes and Misdemeanors*.
- The Coen brothers, Ethan and Joel, have a growing collection of great films (*O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, *Fargo*, *Raising Arizona* and more).
- Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu and Guillerma Arriaga have perfected postmodern storytelling showing the connections between people through overlapping vignettes (*Amores Perros*, *21 Grams*, *Babel* and *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada*).

Now, here are some specific films by name:

Paris, Texas—From director Wim Wenders comes a heartbreaking story of a man trying to find redemption from a very broken past.

Magnolia—P.T. Anderson finds a way to connect a smorgasbord of vignettes to the regrets of our lives.

Wit—A poignant film about the difficult relationship between the life of the mind and the life of the body.

The Matrix—Changed how all action movies are made and asks the question: How do we know what is real?

The Wizard of Oz—A culturally influential film with a deep metaphor.

House of Sand and Fog—This film shows the importance of grace and forgiveness in our relationships to the other.

***The Lord of the Rings* trilogy**—An imaginative story about one's role in the cosmic struggle between good and evil.

The Apartment—Becoming "a mensch" (a true human being) is tough work.

Blade Runner—This futuristic film asks: How do we define what is human?

The Truman Show—In a world with a cacophony of voices, how do we find the one true voice?

Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind—Can you erase love like information on a computer hard drive?

Crash—A film about the problem of race and how it drives the conflict in our relationships.

City Lights—A great love story involving mistaken identity—one of Charlie Chaplin's best works.

Fight Club—A deep psychological look at coping with life in the 21st century.

Love Actually—A romantic comedy about love ... actually.

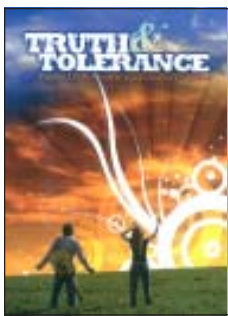
V for Vendetta—How do we stand up for our political beliefs? Is violence ever justified if we are pursuing true justice?

Dogma* and *Thank You for Smoking—Great satires that reveal the hypocrisy that can describe us.

Princess Mononoke—One of Japan's best anime films (with well made English dubbing); a great story of humans' stewardly role on the earth.

Batman Begins* and *Superman Returns—These superheroes point out the reality of fear and the longing for redemption in the human condition.

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Is gay okay?

Thirty years ago, many teenagers struggled with homosexuality. Sadly, there was very little freedom or opportunity to verbalize or process

the struggle. Suffering was increased as graceless labels and persecution came from every corner—including the church. In today's world, the pendulum has swung in a complete opposite direction, leaving kids to grow up in a cultural landscape that celebrates and affirms that which was kept secret just three decades earlier. The good news is that now we have the freedom to speak openly about these issues.

The folks at Exodus Student Ministries have put together a helpful DVD resource, *Truth and Tolerance: Finding Godly Sexuality in a Culture of Confusion*, that helps viewers struggling with homosexuality and homosexual feelings and those who know them and must respond. Using compelling interviews with people who used to be homosexuals, viewers quickly come to understand that homosexuality is not about sex. Rather, it's about a confused identity and unmet emotional needs. Utilizing scriptural guidelines, hope for change is offered while realistically explaining that at times, change is slow and difficult. The DVD contrasts the message of the world ("You can't change") with the message of the Word ("God can change you").

Truth and Tolerance sends a clear message: the opposite of homosexuality isn't heterosexuality, it's holiness. Heterosexual viewers are called to repent for being graceless and unloving. This is a resource you can use to pop the lid off a hot topic, exposing struggles and the sinful responses so often directed to those who bear them. *Truth and Tolerance* can be ordered online at truthandtolerance.org

—Walt Mueller



An integrated life

Theologian John Stott has said that every Christian should experience two conversions. The first is out of the world *to* Christ. The second is

back into the world *with* Christ. Sadly, many Christians fail to take the second step. Sometimes this is out of fear. It can be intimidating to engage the ugliness of the fallen world. But for many, the failure to re-engage the world is because of ignorance and lack of helpful resources.

In their new book, *A Faith and Culture Devotional: Daily Readings in Art, Science, and Life* (Zondervan, 2008, ISBN# 978-0-310-28356-0), editors Kelly Monroe Kullberg and Lael Arrington hope to bridge that gap. With contributions from a number of insightful authors, including John Stott, Dallas Willard, Os Guinness, Randy Alcorn, R.C. Sproul, Frederica Matthews-Green and many more, this devotional takes readers on a 15-week journey "to marvel at the wonders of God and his world." Monroe and Lael explain, "Our hope is that this devotional catalyzes a kind of kingdom education from master kingdom teachers, expanding our knowledge, strengthening our beliefs, and inspiring our love for God and others."

Each week offers short readings from seven key cultural areas: Bible and theology; history; philosophy; science; literature; arts; and contemporary culture. The readings conclude with reflection questions for individual or group study. We need to be reminded that God is not just about the business of redeeming individuals, but that He cares deeply about His entire creation, including the cultures in which we live. This excellent and unique devotional serves as a daily reminder of God's heart for His world. Visit www.culturedevo.com to learn more about the book and to see a complete list of contributors.

—Derek Melleby



Vampire love

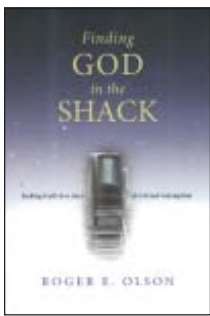
The book and its three follow-up titles have stirred up more literary controversy among Christian parents than anything since *Harry Potter* at the height of his popularity.

This time the book is about teenagers, adolescent love and vampires—a combination that has worked well to market books for years. Still on the *New York Times* Bestseller list, Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* (Little, Brown and Company, 2005, ISBN # 978-0-316-16017-9) is popular among not only teenage girls, but readers of all ages.

The first in Meyer's four-part romance saga of young love between Bella and vampire Edward, *Twilight* also has made its way to the big screen with the DVD set for release in March of this year. Much of the controversy has come from adults who have not read the book, but are quick to pass judgment based on stereotypical assumptions and misinformation. Much to the surprise of older and more discerning readers who have sat down to read *Twilight* responsibly, the book promotes good rather than evil. Edward is a character who knows who he is, knows the evil that lurks within, and who develops the resolve to do what's right rather than what's wrong. The parallels between Edward's struggle and that of depraved yet redeemed humanity are clear, offering a wonderful springboard for discussion of Christian theology with young *Twilight* fans.

While I have yet to read the remaining three books in the series (and I will), *Twilight* offers parents and youth workers a wonderful teachable moment that can last for quite some time. We can come alongside our kids, read with them, think with them and discuss with them—all in an effort to teach them how to think critically and Christianly for themselves. That is, by the way, a skill they *must* develop before launching into life on their own.

—Walt Mueller



Engaging *The Shack*

The novel *The Shack* has reportedly sold over 4 million copies. The self-published phenomenon has been a *New York Times* Bestseller and

author William Young has been interviewed by almost every major media outlet. If you haven't read *The Shack*, someone you know has. And, chances are, it has left a lasting impression on how they view God and understand faith.

The Shack is about a man whose daughter is kidnapped and murdered, plaguing his life with a "Great Sadness." He is invited to a meeting at the shack where his daughter's dress was last seen. There he meets God and engages in long conversations with the Trinity trying to make sense of how a loving God would "allow" such an evil thing to happen.

The book is not without its critics. Some have declared it unbiblical and heretical. In his new book, *Finding God in the Shack: Seeking Truth in a Story of Evil and Redemption* (Intervarsity, 2009, ISBN# 978-0-8303-3708-3), Roger Olson offers a fair and wise assessment. Olson was moved by the book, found it very encouraging, especially for people who have endured hardships, and doesn't want it dismissed. He explains, "*The Shack* is not a book of systematic theology or orthodox doctrine; it's a story—like Jesus' parables—meant to convey a message about God." But, according to Olson, that does not mean we shouldn't read it critically: "However great and inspiring it may be, *The Shack* is just a story and not God's Word ... while there have been amazingly popular and life-transforming books written since the Bible, all must be judged by Scripture."

This book helps to that end, by walking readers through the story and comparing it to God's Word and Church history. *The Shack* is not without its faults, and Olson has provided a user friendly guide to make sure readers do not lose sight of the truth of the God portrayed in *The Shack*. Also included is a small group discussion guide.

—Derek Melleby



Volunteer help

It's always interesting to hear the responses when I ask a room full of youth workers to describe what they do in youth ministry. Those who

volunteer their time to pour their lives into kids usually sell themselves short by almost embarrassingly confessing, "I'm just a volunteer." But with a little bit of information and encouragement, these folks can begin to see that they need to drop the "I'm just a" to confidently embrace the amazing role they play in shaping the hearts and minds of young people.

My friend Jim Hancock made the transition to youth ministry volunteer after more than 20 years of getting paid to minister to kids. His experience as a volunteer taught him quite a bit, and in his signature style he has crafted a helpful and encouraging book for those who pursue this high calling and high privilege without getting paid a dime. *How To Volunteer Like a Pro: An Amateur's Guide For Working With Teenagers* (Zondervan/Youth Specialties, 2009, ISBN # 978-0-310-28776-6) is full of practical advice and helpful tips loaded into 37 short chapters, making it highly suitable for individual reading or small group training sessions. Jim includes guidance on everything from how to build relationships, to crossing cultures, to reporting abuse. One chapter even offers suggestions on how to ask good questions, with Jim passing on the three time-tested best questions he knows.

Youth ministry volunteers aren't chaperones, supervisors or an adult presence. They powerfully serve Christ and kids by becoming the hands and feet of Jesus on the ground, right there where kids live. *How to Volunteer Like a Pro* will encourage and equip them to fulfill their God-given calling as an incarnational presence in young lives.

—Walt Mueller



Pointing kids to purity

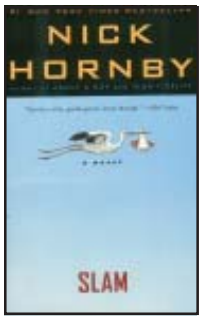
If you're a youth worker who's spent any time at all at a youth ministry conference, you've heard the loud music, you may

have been hit by a blast of invisible air and maybe you've walked away with a huge box of resources. Perhaps you've guessed that I'm referring to the ever-present booth run by the folks at Interlinc (interlinc-online.com) who are committed to pumping out regular resources to help you maximize music and media in your ministry. If you're already a subscriber to the service, then you've most likely seen and used the Winter 2008 *Youth Leaders Only* devoted to helping you lead your kids to experience sex in healthy and God-honoring ways. If not, then you need to go online and check out how to order your own copy of "The Naked Truth: The New Sexuality and Youth Ministry."

Both the Media Resource Book and accompanying DVD are loaded with print and video resources that will inform your understanding, shape your teaching, and serve as thoughtful discussion starters to use with your kids. As always, there's so much here that you might never have the time to use it all. However, you should take the time to view and read it all so that you can choose those elements that best suit you and your youth group. Along with the normal abundance of discussion guides and lesson plans, youth workers will find some great articles on a variety of issues related to teens and sexuality. The DVD features clips from Greg Stier, Doug Fields, Shaun Alexander, Tony Dungy and others. There's something that should be able to get any kind of group talking.

While you're at the Interlinc site, be sure to check out other editions of *YLO* and Interlinc's additional resources.

—Walt Mueller



Teen life

British author Nick Hornby's most recent novel, *Slam* (Riverhead Books, 2007, ISBN # 978-1-59448-345-5), is about a boy named Sam. Written in the first-person, Sam tells

the story of being raised by his single, young, divorced mother. He's a decent student who plans on being the first person in his family to attend and graduate from college. Skateboarding is his obsession and he has a poster of Tony Hawk in his room. He talks to the poster and the poster talks back. In fact, it's safe to say that the poster functions as his mentor, giving him direction and frequently offering advice.

Life is going along as "normal" for an average 21st century teenager, until his new girlfriend, Alicia, gets pregnant. Sam and Alicia have major decisions to make and the book does a marvelous job at revealing how a teenager navigates these challenges. How will they tell their parents? Will they keep the child? Will they stay together in a relationship? Will Sam be able to go to college? Will Alicia drop out of school? Readers are given a unique, and I would say, accurate, look into how an adolescent shaped by contemporary youth culture processes such questions.

I highly recommend this novel for any student of youth culture, especially parents and youth workers who want to better understand the world of teenagers. Hornby knows their world well and his book helps us to see life through the thoughts and actions of teens. This book should be of special interest to anyone reaching out to teens from broken homes or helping teens navigate the challenges of teen pregnancy.

—Derek Melleby



Can we know God?

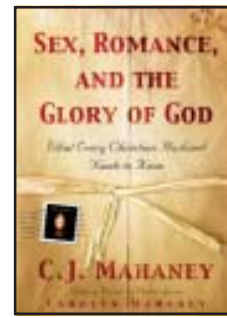
Donald Miller of *Blue Like Jazz* fame has recently directed a DVD curriculum called *The Open Table: An Invitation to Know God* (Thomas

Nelson, 2008, ISBN# 978-1-4185-1099-2). As Miller explains in the forward, the Christian faith is an oral tradition. We learn about God, Jesus and the Gospel through stories. The DVD features different people from different walks of life reflecting on life's big questions such as: What do you think of when you think of God? Do you think life is what it ought to be? Will God break into our lives? Can I know God? How do we follow Jesus? The DVD comes complete with a small group leader's guide and is supported by a participant's guide that is sold separately. There also are a few bonus features that allow some of the stories to be expanded.

Each 10-minute video segment would work well in both a Christian and seeker setting. The people being interviewed are well-spoken, thoughtful and engaging, but it doesn't come across as scripted or trite. Their approach is humble and honest, truly trying to communicate what their relationship with God means in their own language without using Christian buzz words. Some of the segments are quite moving as stories are told concerning the brokenness in the world as well as in their own lives.

While the interviews feature people being completely open and vulnerable about what they believe, the Gospel is clearly woven into each story, revealing the way God works in his world. *The Open Table* would work well in small groups covering all of the material, or as good conversation starters along side other curriculum.

—Derek Melleby



Best sex

Shoot straight. That's certainly what the culture does with its pervasive and assorted non-stop messages about sex and sexuality. What's resulted is a do-anything sexual

ethic void of any boundaries other than those one sets for himself or herself—and it's assumed that's where sexual freedom is to be found. "Not so!" says C.J. Mahaney. If you believe there's something more, you believe correctly.

Mahaney, of Sovereign Grace Ministries, offers up a much-needed biblical corrective pointing to true and full sexual freedom in his accessible little book, *Sex, Romance, and the Glory of God: What Every Christian Husband Needs to Know* (Crossway, 2004. ISBN # 978-1-58134-624-4). Rooted in the unfolding biblical drama and a deep understanding of God's created purpose for His gift of sex, this book is forthright in setting out clear parameters for men in a world where the messages they usually hear and follow are destructive to relationships and lives. Mahaney reminds men that sexually satisfying intimacy is meant to bring Glory to God, and that "before you touch her body, you must touch her heart and mind." He then goes on to describe ways to kindle romance, communicate and become immersed in "holy, erotic joy." A wonderful chapter by Mahaney's wife Carolyn is included at book's end, offering "A Word to Wives."

While *Sex, Romance, and the Glory of God* bills itself as a book for husbands, I highly recommend it as a book for mature young men who are not yet married. Not only will the book serve to outline a practical theology of sex for marriage, but it will help younger readers (and the youth workers who lead them) understand and practice their sexuality to the glory of God *before* marriage. My guess is that many older readers will find the book helpful, but finish it lamenting the fact that they had never discovered it before.

—Walt Mueller



Help stop the bleeding

It seems as though as little as a few years ago there were very few books and resources available to people who wanted to learn more about self-mutilation, self-

harm, or cutting. Thankfully, the research being conducted in this field has enabled the insight—and therefore the books—about this youth-prevalent epidemic to keep getting better and better. *Inside a Cutter's Mind: Understanding and Helping Those Who Self-Injure* (NavPress, 2007, ISBN # 978-1-60006-054-0), by Jerusha Clark and Dr. Earl Henslin, is no exception.

Self-harm is often misunderstood. Clark thoroughly and gracefully explores the many dynamics that weave through the fabric of a cutter's mind and life in a way that allows those to whom self-harm makes little sense, begin to grasp the reality and rationale of this behavior. Even more, she does so in a way that brings hope into a seemingly hopeless situation. Readers will be encouraged to look at cutting in multi-dimensional ways. Through first-hand stories of self-harmers, insight from medical professionals, counselors and literature, Clark demonstrates that cutting is both physiological and psychological. Written from a Christian perspective, *Inside a Cutter's Mind* also addresses the spiritual needs of self-harmers.

The motivations and needs of self-harmers and, therefore, the necessary steps to full recovery, differ drastically from individual to individual. There is simply no one way to address this behavior. Clark provides us with medical insight that demonstrates why cutters can not simply stop their behavior of their own power. As cutting powerfully affects the brain, body and soul, different treatment options addressing all these areas are appropriately discussed. This book is a must-read for anyone who knows, loves and is trying to offer help to a cutter.

—Chris Wagner



The B-I-B-L-E

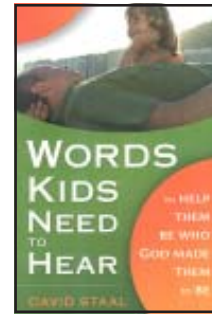
Teaching any subject can be intimidating. Teaching a Bible study can be even more so. Teaching a Bible study to teenagers might seem like the most

daunting task of all. Thankfully, Dr. Allen Jackson has written *Teach: The Ordinary Person's Guide to Teaching Students The Bible* (Clarity Publishers, Student Life Bible Study, 2008). Whether you're a Sunday School teacher, a small group leader or a youth pastor; paid or volunteer; rookie or veteran; this little book has principles that can improve your skills as a Bible teacher to teens.

What this book doesn't offer, or promise, is a quick one-size-fits-all approach. It also doesn't present specific Bible lessons. Instead, *Teach* encourages each teacher to tackle the responsibility of teaching with integrity and purpose. We are reminded of the devastating biblical illiteracy of today's younger generations and we are urged to fulfill our calling to pass on God's truth to them. Jackson emphasizes that teaching takes place within the context of relationships and that we should consider the individual differences of teens and the general volatility of adolescence as we prepare and teach each lesson. *Teach* explores different teaching styles as well as the many diverse ways in which students learn. The book describes the different ingredients that lead to and foster great Bible study and internalized learning. Refreshingly, teachers are encouraged to consider the entire meta-narrative of Scripture when preparing lessons as opposed to proof-texting or even topical studies.

Churches and youth pastors should consider providing this resource to all the adult leaders, paid or volunteer, on the youth ministry staff. Those who follow its advice are more likely to see students who are transformed by the life-changing message of the Bible.

—Chris Wagner



Shaping kids with words

It's easy to forget the power and importance of words. Regretfully, I'm most often reminded of their effect after feeling remorseful over poorly chosen

words. But words can have a deeply positive impact as well. As a relatively new father, I'm just beginning to see glimpses of the effect my words and demeanor have, and will continue to have, on my 16-month-old son. How I long to be more intentional about the words and phrases I use with him.

That's why I'm thankful to have read *Words Kids Need to Hear: To Help Them Be Who God Made Them to Be* (Zondervan, 2008, ISBN# 978-0-310-28098-9) by David Staal. Staal packs this concise book with seven statements he believes are important to share with children and teens alike. Going beyond an explanation of why they're important for kids to hear, he explores different ways to say them and the importance of backing those words and phrases with our everyday actions. As a children's ministry director at Willow Creek Community Church, Staal is able to reference many helpful examples from the lives of families at his church. He also shares his own trials and triumphs in regards to sharing these statements with his own children.

It's not as though these seven statements are new, formerly-hidden-to-parents, catch-phrases. Rather, Staal reminds us that deliberately using these words will help children realize, in healthy and biblical ways, their value, self-worth and the importance of boundaries as they learn to view themselves as not only our children, but as a child of God. Though using these words with younger children is important, let's remember that our teens, regardless of whether they've heard us say them before or not, also need to be shaped by these significant words.

—Chris Wagner

Why I ended my relationship with Facebook

by Jesse Browning

I recently came to the do or die moment of deleting my Facebook account. I've played with the idea for awhile, but I always hesitated when it came to actually pulling the trigger. It was 1 a.m., and I was up late studying. After closing my book and ending my action-packed night of study, I decided to take one last glance at my Facebook page. You know what I'm talking about, you've done it. One more glance just to see if anyone has posted on your wall, or if anyone has broken up, gotten engaged or tagged you in a pic. Then it hit me. "Dear God," I thought, "What the heck am I doing?" Had it really come to that? I had to check my Facebook at 1 a.m. before I went to bed? How pathetic. I knew at that moment it had to be done. I had to pull the trigger. I took a deep breath, and with a few swift clicks of the mouse, my Facebook account was no more.

I haven't regretted it since.



Some people were confused. A few people who know me thought I had removed them from my friends' list. I wish removing annoying people from my life could be that easy. One of my students is currently discussing the formation of a betting pool as to when I'll be back on the Facebook grid. He claimed I wouldn't last five days. It's already been six. Overall, my world seems that much smaller, and I really like that. In a world where we are saturated with communication that lacks true relational depth, it's one less shallow petty waste of time in my already compact and overtly busy life. You don't realize how much time you consume with something like that until it's gone, and trust me I was definitely wasting my fair share of time. Not only was wasting time a factor, but without it there's one less excuse to be online. It seems that no matter where you go online you're inadvertently being exposed to sexual material in ads or media, which for some people can lead into Pandora's box. I'm striving for purity in my life, and with one less reason to be online I get one less reason to potentially be exposed to the kind of material that can prove to be extremely harmful for my soul. I'm also trying to improve upon the quality of relationships and community around me, and although Facebook is great for networking, I'd much rather sit down with you face-to-face, or at the very least over the phone to communicate.

I also was sick of Facebook being yet another mediating force between my life and others. There's a massive false sense of reality through online social networks, and if you don't

agree with me on this, spend about 30 minutes viewing the Facebook profiles of your friends. For many, the foundational content of your Facebook profile is this: "How cool can I convince people I am, without making it look like I'm trying to convince people I'm cool in the first place?" Come on, I've fallen prey to this, and I'm sure many of you have, too. The false sense of reality is believing that we're much "cooler" than what we really are. Trust me, most of us are really not that cool. If you're a Christian, you'll also find the flipside of this. Instead of people trying to convince you how cool they are, you see evangelicals trying to convince you how "Christian" they are. Their own insecurities regarding their faith make them believe they have to put something about Jesus or Christianity on or in every category in the "info" section of their profile, because if they don't they must be failing to be a good witness. They're desperately trying to build some false sense of security and confidence, thinking that if they put more stuff about Jesus on their profile, the more brownie points they're probably getting, the more "Christian" they'll look, and the more converts they might get. These are also the people who send you 80 million "cause" or "group" invitations. You've gotten them. My favorite one is the "Please pray for the salvation of Obama" cause. I don't know if he's "saved," I'm not righteous enough to make that call. But I'd like to personally create a Facebook cause or group for every person that has sent out one of those, asking for prayer about some glaring blemish in their own life. Enough of my Christian pop-culture rant, back to the heart of what I'm getting at. Facebook is yet another mediating force between my own life and others.

By having something like your profile stand between you and another person you're trying to communicate with, you're placing another invisible barrier or lens which distorts what true life together is. For instance, when I look at a friend's profile to get a better idea of who they are, I have to interpret not who they are in person, but rather the mediating example that they have chosen to expose or manifest on a Web page. Often times these examples (profiles) do contain truth about the subject, but they are also exaggerated, and insular in nature. With every technological advance we make, we seem to increase in our communicative capabilities. We also seem to create more and more buffers or language barriers that have to be waded through and interpreted. Example: 150 years ago. You want to talk to a relative who lives in Pennsylvania, but you live in Massachusetts. You have very limited choices; write a hand written letter, pack up the horse and head to Pa., or send a courier or an ambassador type of person to represent you in your place. Around this time the telegraph came to be. This was a pretty cool advance, and messages could be sent over long distances in short time. After this came the telephone. Now you could call your relative from a phone and chat. In some ways, this is better in that you can actually hear

the voice of the person you're chatting with. Then came computers, cell phones, the Internet and the massive expanse of online social networks. All of these things increase our communicative abilities, but they also distort truth and leave room for creating alter egos and projecting images of who and how you *want* to be perceived, rather than who you *really* are. Check out the online world of "Second Life," it's a rather scary concept if you think about what it really is. No place is



this more dangerous than in the world of Christianity, where the true love for God and love for each other is only worked out and learned in communal life on life relationships centered on the Word. I might look like a cool guy on Facebook by the music I say I like, the books I claim to read, and the advice or messages I might give on your e-mail or Facebook wall. In reality, I can be a cocky, arrogant, insensitive, tool bag of a guy. But you'll never know this, and you'll never have the opportunity to lovingly call me on it or hold me accountable. Not unless you become an intimate part of my life and walk alongside me as I strive to walk with and for God. Can truths from one's character be seen from someone's Facebook profile? Absolutely. But it will never be validated or proven as a fact about oneself until you are incarnated alongside each other. This is when our true colors shine. This is when our character comes under fire and is put to the test. You can project an image of who you are to anyone, but it's only validated as your true character and self when it is worked out and put to the test of true communal life. In community, the liars are exposed, the posers are found out and the insensitive self-serving types of people have their true colors revealed. Talk and mediating agents are only truly refined and distilled under the fires of communal life.

This is what makes true Church (where two or more are gathered) such a dangerous threatening aspect for many. True Christian Church is a communal relational act in which a community strives to love the God of redemption, and to love each other. Part of love and true community is admitting that we're flawed, and seeking to iron out these sins and flaws in the fold of the supporting community and the crossroads of grace and repentance. Pride is one of the roots of all sin, and

pride is what keeps us from opening our hearts to the community of saints around us. I don't want anyone to know just how screwed up and ridiculous I really am. I want people to know and think of me as the Jesse Browning they perceive from things like Facebook. My withholding and hiding of known sins in and of itself, only further slows my faith-community around me from growing closer to Christ and furthering his Kingdom. In many ways, the faith of true community is integrated and influenced as a cohesive whole. My sins affect not only the state of my own personal relationship with God, but also radically affect my relationship with every single person who is in the sphere of influence in my life. If you are not opening your hearts to the community around you, and allowing honest evaluation and criticism, you're not truly opening your heart to God. If you are truly opening your heart to God to deal with sin issues, you will see them being worked out in the community around you. If this isn't happening, you're either not truly going to God, or you don't have a genuine faith-Christ centered-community around you. If true life was meant to be lived between just you and your Jesus, there would be no such thing as or need for the Church. You could just sit at home and pray a lot. But fortunately our relational God demands life together as the Church, and life in the midst of the world itself.

I deleted my Facebook account because I need to focus more on the reality of the true community around me. Not an online one that exists in a realm of electronic databases and falsely projected personas. Do I think Facebook is bad? No. Am I calling upon all Christians to delete their Facebook accounts immediately? Not in the least. It was a decision that was made on personal conviction and communal dialogue with those around me. I think Facebook is a great tool to network with people and establish basic communication. In my weakness, it became much more of a distraction than anything else. At some point, I'm sure I'll bring it back just for the purpose of networking, but not for a while. ■



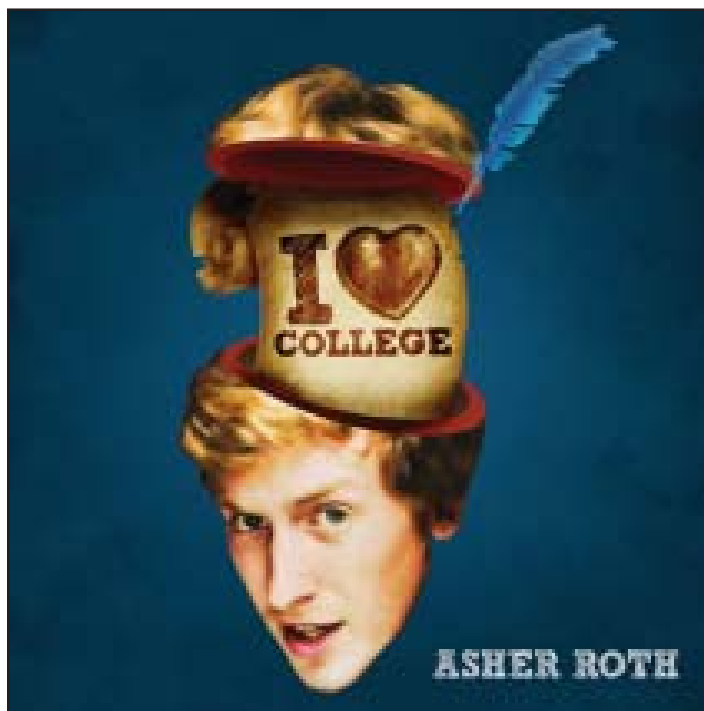
Jesse Browning is currently studying historical/systematic theology at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in South Hamilton, Massachusetts. This article was adapted from his blog—A Narrative Life—which can be read at jessebrowning.blogspot.com.



CPYU looks at three big blips on today's youth culture radar. In this column, we've filtered three popular media expressions through our *How To Use Your Head To Guard Your Heart* media evaluation resource. We encourage you to use our analysis as a springboard for your further examination. For copies of *How To Use Your Head To Guard Your Heart*, please log on to our Web site at www.cpyu.org.

Song/Video: 'I Love College'

Background/summary: An up-and-coming hip-hop artist, 23-year-old Asher Roth is from Morrisville, Pa., a suburb of Philadelphia. Roth was studying elementary education at West Chester University before dropping out to pursue a career in music. His first album, *The Greenhouse Effect*, was released for free on his Web site and its popularity earned him a contract with a major record label. "I Love College" is his latest single from his next album, *Asleep in the Bread Aisle*, due out in



April. In interviews, Roth explains that he is motivated by making hip-hop more accessible to suburban youth by using lyrics that relate to their experiences.

Discover: What is the message/worldview?

- The video opens with Roth sitting on a couch with a girl lying across his legs. He says he feels "nice right now," stands up and discards the girl to the floor.
- The first lyric is: "I wanna go to college for the rest of my life/sip bankers club and drink miller lite." College is a time to party: "Time isn't wasted when you're getting wasted."
- The video is of Roth walking through a fraternity house during a party. Students are drinking, smoking, kissing, playing beer pong and strip poker, and one student is throwing up in the bathroom.

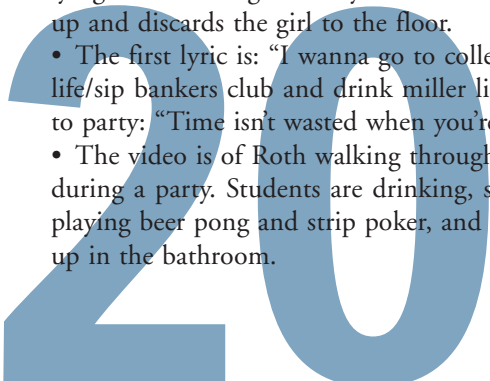
- Women are portrayed as objects. Roth often stops to kiss girls and then moves on.
- Roth "can't tell you what he learned from school," but he did learn a few rules: 1) don't pass out with your shoes on; 2) don't leave the house till the booze is gone; 3) don't have sex if she's too gone; and 4) when it comes to condoms, put two on.
- There is a rallying cry for students, especially freshman, to "do something crazy." A keg stand is suggested.
- The video concludes with Roth explaining that he has to "head back to class for a little bit" and then he wonders: "Do I really have to graduate/or can I just stay here the rest of my life."

Discern: How does it stand in light of the biblical message/worldview?

- We were created to live in community. We are born to connect. Roth concludes that even amidst the partying "his good friends are all he needs." But biblical community has a purpose: to equip and encourage each other to live under God's rule. The community depicted in "I Love College" doesn't seem to be pointing to that end.
- It is not sinful to consume alcohol, but there are biblical warnings about its abuse. For example, Proverbs 20:1 explains, "Wine is a mocker and beer a brawler; whoever is led astray by them is not wise." College should be about growing in wisdom and often the over-consumption of alcohol can hinder this development.
- Women are not objects to be used to relieve man's sexual desires. In fact, men have a biblical responsibility to care for and protect women. There is a very slight glimmer of hope in "I Love College." Roth "learned" to not have sex with a woman if "she's too gone."

Decide: What do I do with it?

- "I Love College" portrays the college experience as one big party. This is not the experience of most students, but it does put forth a vision for what many students want college to be like. One commenter at YouTube wrote this: "I'm a senior in high school and if this is what college is like, I can't wait to get there." Use this video to start a conversation about students' perceptions of college. What do they think college will be like? What are their expectations for the college years? Why are the teens you know going to college?
- It is easy for well-meaning Christian parents and youth workers to focus on what college has become. This video could serve to reinforce college stereotypes, to be sure. But it could also be used to take a proactive approach by having a conversation about what college *should* be. What is college *for*? How should Christians envision college? Parents and youth workers should take the challenge seriously to cast a vision for



college that is more compelling and life-giving than the one offered by Roth.

- Many Christian students are apprehensive about the party scene in college. They worry that they will not be able to withstand the temptations that college culture presents. This video can be used to start a meaningful conversation about the realities of college life. Help students think more deeply about what is at stake when getting involved in situations like this.

Song/Video: 'My President'

Background/summary: This is the fourth single release off Atlanta rapper Young Jeezy's album, *The Recession*. Written prior to the election of Barack Obama, the album was released in late July 2008. The single was released in November before the election, and the video debuted a few days prior to Obama's inauguration as president. The song features a guest appearance by rapper Nas. It is noteworthy that the song confidently anticipated an Obama victory long before election day. It was written on June 3, and in the song Young Jeezy says "We congratulate you already homie!"

Discover: What is the message/worldview?

- The video begins with Young Jeezy pulling into a celebratory crowd and climbing self-assuredly out of a gull-winged Lamborghini. The multi-racial and mostly young crowd is celebrating the election of Barack Obama as they dance, cheer and smile. Throughout the crowd are Obama campaign posters, convention-type signs for all the states, and banners touting famous blacks and others who have stood for civil rights, particularly in recent years.
- Young Jeezy contrasts the freedom of hope and redemption for blacks through the election of Obama and his own material possessions, with his own experience: *My President is black/ My Lambo's blue/And I be Goddamned if my rims ain't too/ My momma ain't at home/And daddy still in jail.*
- The camera shifts from images of the celebratory crowd to clips of American soldiers carrying their dead and wounded. Young Jeezy laments the prior administration: "Just cause you got an opinion does that make you a politician?/Bush robbed all of us, would that make him a criminal?/And then he cheated in Florida, would that make him a Seminole?"
- The singer then tells of his hopeful prescriptive remedy: "I say and I quote/We need a miracle/And I say a miracle cause this s___ is hysterical/But my nephews and nieces/I will email Jesus/Tell him to forward to Moses/And cc Allah."
- After lamenting the fact that up until this point no president has ever done anything for him or other blacks, Young Jeezy celebrates Obama's victory by calling for the newly elected president's face to appear on the \$5,000 bill.
- The song concludes lyrically with Young Jeezy asking for validation: "My president is black, but I'm important too."

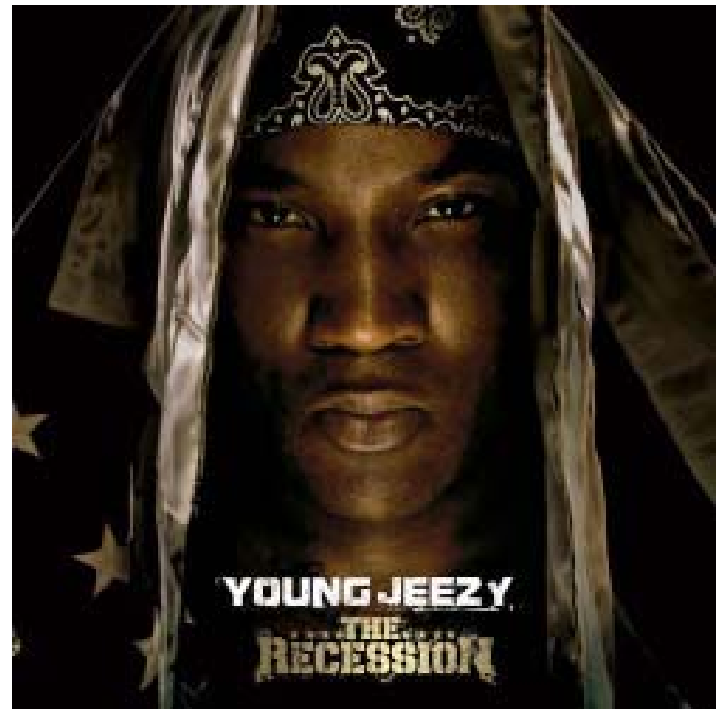
Teach students about the need to connect with Christian community on campus. Most importantly, be open and honest about your own struggles during this time in your life and repeatedly remind students of the need for God's grace.

- Students should love college. It can be a remarkable opportunity to grow and mature into healthy adulthood. But students are up against a lot if they desire for this to be the goal of their education. Be sure to prepare students for the challenges ahead.

Visually the screen goes black and these words appear: "Pray for Barack and family."

Discern: How does it stand in light of the biblical message/worldview?

- The Scriptures are clear that racism, bigotry and oppression are wrong. Jesus commands his followers to show compassion, to be other-centered, to love their neighbor (*anyone* who is in need) and to care for the poor. God's people are called to do justice and to show mercy. This is true worship. However, the



church has oftentimes failed corporately and individually in this calling. This is particularly true in American history as it relates to the horrible oppression of slavery and institutionalized racism.

- Governmental authorities are placed in their positions by God. We are called to respect, honor and obey those in authority, unless they demand obedience and allegiance that compromises our faith and calls us to actions that are ethically or morally wrong. In addition, we are to pray for those in authority, regardless of whether or not they have received our vote.
- The ills of this world that have resulted from the Fall cannot be cured or eliminated by human beings. While governments exist for the common good and to maintain order, even the

best human governments cannot ultimately redeem. Sadly, there is still a wave of false hope plowing through American culture as a result of the election of Obama. While change will come in some way, shape and form, that change cannot and



will not be the wholesale elimination of war, strife, discord, poverty and oppression. No governmental leader, agency or administration will serve as savior. It is unfair and wrong to expect that from any human leader. True redemption comes through Christ. While we are called and commanded to pursue and live God's Kingdom order during our lives on this earth, ultimate redemption will not be realized until the new heaven and new earth are ushered in by the King.

- Likewise, the answer to fiscal poverty is not fiscal wealth. Both are filled with their own unique set of trappings that leave people unfulfilled and yearning for more. In fact, the

Scriptures are clear about the dangers of money and wealth. Young Jeezy is not alone in his touting freedom through the accumulation of things (the blue Lambo). Sadly, he reflects the false hope of so many in our culture, including many of us in the church.

Decide: What do I do with it?

- *My President* offers a multi-faceted look into numerous cultural realities including racism, bigotry, materialism, false hope, political divisions and emerging worldviews. This is a song worth watching, listening to, deconstructing and dissecting. Wise viewers will watch through the grid of a biblical world and life view with an eye toward understanding the hopes, fears and cultural realities of the emerging generations and contemporary American culture.
- White Christians must come to an understanding of the institutionalized and systemic racism that has caused so much distress and heartache for far too long. And, it must be addressed through confession and repentance. In addition, our growing multi-cultural population must avoid the temptation to repeat history and fall into the same trap.
- Because of its timeliness and relevance as a pervasive cultural expression familiar to our kids, *My President* serves as a discussion starter that can be used to help them discern the influence of media, understand their own cultural biases (political, racial, etc.), and lead them into applying Scriptural truths to the pressing realities of life.

Movie/DVD: *American Teen*

Background/summary: Released to a very limited theater run in July 2008, this documentary on teenage life from director Nanette Burstein garnered an award at the 2008 Sundance Film Festival. The film follows five students and their peers through the ups and downs of their senior year at Indiana's Warsaw Community High School. While the film had a limited theater run in just a handful of cities, it is slowly emerging from under the radar as a compelling peek into 21st century teen culture.

Discover: What is the message/worldview?

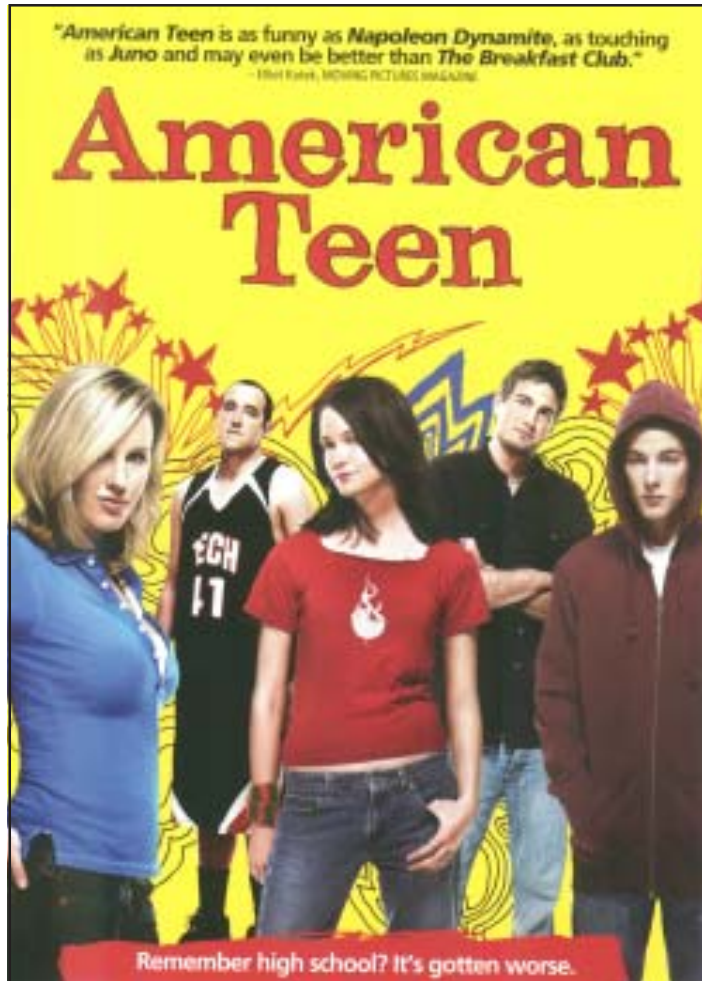
- Burstein's cameras zoom in on a quintet of teens from across the spectrum of teen stereotypes as they spend their senior year at the top of the high school pecking order, dealing with the difficult developmental and cultural issues that have come to mark adolescence, and as they prepare to transition to the next phase of their post-high school lives.
- Megan Krizmanich is immediately labeled as the popular queen-bee and school princess who is obsessed with maintaining appearances and the accompanying social status. Initially, Krizmanich is depicted as the over-involved, jealous and manipulative girl who will step on anyone who gets in the way of her mission to achieve her goals, including maintaining her

status in high school and getting accepted at Notre Dame. However, the cameras catch her in the latter part of the film admitting her struggles and exposing her deep insecurities.

- The introverted, insecure, yet-endearing Jake Tusing spends his days surviving the high school social scene as an acne-covered band geek. Not surprisingly, he retreats into the world of video-gaming where he fantasizes about defeating the villain and riding off into the sunset with the girl. Large portions of the film focus on Jake's attempts to date, his dates and his social struggles.
- Under great pressure to secure a basketball scholarship as a way to pay for college, Colin Clemens is a likable big man on campus whose father alternates between being compassionate and pushy.
- Also a basketball player and popular student, Mitch Reinhold is a good-looking and seemingly humble guy who surprises everyone when he develops an interest in the free-spirited Hannah, who he eventually drops via text message due to the social pressure from peers who are concerned by his desire to cross into a lesser social strata by dating her.
- The film's main study is Hannah Bailey, a free-spirited and lovable young liberal from a broken home who would have thrived in the hippie culture of the '60s. An artist, musician and aspiring film-maker, Hannah implodes emotionally early

in the year after her long-time boyfriend walks away from their relationship after convincing her to have sex.

- While far too many plotlines develop to cite in this limited space, some are worthy of mention. There are the athletic, academic and appearance pressures faced by several of the students. There are the sexual pressures, including homosexual experimentation (girl-on-girl kissing), a flirtatious topless picture that spreads virally through the school population, bullying, cyber-bullying, drinking and criminal behavior.



Discern: How does it stand in light of the biblical message/worldview?

- Sin has polluted the entire world, leaving all people and all things crying and groaning for redemption (Romans 8). The high school campus provides a great case study in the extent and effects of sin. Adolescents groan in a variety of ways, many of them unique to their age and developmental stage. As with all other fallen members of humanity, teens pursue “the way that seems right to a man,” but that way often ultimately “leads to death” (Proverbs 14:12). The film pounds this truth home as it exposes adolescent insecurities and attempts at finding redemption.

- When he shared the Beatitudes, Jesus called his followers to mercy, peacemaking, meekness and purity of heart (Matthew 5).

American Teen clearly exposes how the Kingdom of the world, the flesh and the Devil stand for the opposite. God’s order and design is to undo the evidence of the Fall in the high school social interactions, remaking young people in his image and calling them to follow his will and his way.

- The things of this world (achievements, college acceptance, scholarships, dating relationships) cannot and will not fill the God-shaped vacuum. While it is not wrong to pursue these things, they are not in and of themselves redemptive. The writer of Ecclesiastes reminds us that all of this is vanity. Instead, “the whole duty of man” is to “fear God and keep his commandments” (Ecclesiastes 12:13).

- Jesus Christ modeled a life of compassion for the poor, broken-hearted and down-trodden. He calls his followers to do the same. While some of these people are obvious to us (Jake Tusing), there are others whose hard-hearted shell is simply a cover for their brokenness and vulnerability (Megan Krizmanich). We must look past the hardness to see the vulnerable and broken person living beneath. Then, we must love them as well.

Decide: What do I do with it?

- *American Teen* offers the best and most balanced big-screen peek into suburban middle-class teenage life of any film of the last 10 years. For that reason, the film is a must-view for anyone raising or ministering to teens today. The film should be viewed and discussed in a variety of settings including parent meetings, youth worker training, etc.

- Since *American Teen* offers a mirror into the world of today’s youth culture, viewers should watch with pen in hand, making note of the issues teens face. Then, prayerfully plan how to prophetically, preventively and redemptively address the issues raised by the film.

- The film is perfectly suited for viewing by a high school-aged audience. Use the film as a springboard for discussion, asking kids where they see themselves and their peers in the film. But don’t stop there. Spring into a discussion of how a biblical world and life view speaks to each of those issues.

- Show the film to parents, asking them to discover where they might see themselves in the film. This is especially helpful in sparking an understanding of the pressures parents so easily and unknowingly place on their teens.

- The film reminds us of the need to listen, to be vulnerable and to be patient with young people struggling with brokenness. These should increasingly be marks of our relationships and ministries with kids.

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10 SITES TO CHECK OUT ON THE WEB!



HANG 10

A list of 10 interesting and helpful Web sites to check out next time you're surfing the net



That's Not Cool

www.thatsnotcool.com

This site is designed to raise awareness about digital dating abuse and stop it before it gets worse by addressing problems between teens who are dating or hooking up—like

constant and controlling texting, pressuring for nude pictures, and hacking into someone's e-mail or social networking page.

Media Literacy

www.medialiteracy.com

Billed as the Web's major portal for media literacy education, this site helps teachers, parents and youth advocates learn the skills needed to help children navigate the powerful world of images and sounds. Lots of free stuff, tools, statistics, etc.



Urban Youth

Workers Institute

www.uypi.org

UYWI exists to strengthen a new generation of global urban leaders for transformational ministry. The site is a portal into all things urban youth ministry, including blogs, confer-

ences, downloads, resources and more.

Life in Student Ministry

www.timschmoyer.com

Created by Tim Schmoyer, this youth ministry site offers podcasts, mentoring and other resources. Also featured are a growing number of youth ministry links. Add this to your bookmarked youth ministry pages.

Celebrating Adolescent Life

<http://celebratingadolescentlife.ca>

This site seeks to address the absence of rites of passage markers in North American culture. Celebrating Adolescent Life exists to assist families celebrate and navigate their children's transition into early adolescence through a coming-of-age ceremony supported by practical resources.



The Gospel and Culture Project

www.gospelandculture.org

This site is an online community where specialists in specific areas of cultural interpretation and

theological application dialogue with fellow believers about contemporary questions. The site also communicates about the ongoing work of GCP, and promotes its initiatives and events.

Purity Works

www.purityworks.org

From Jennie Bishop, author of *The Princess and the Kiss*, this site helps parents teach children to embrace purity long before they reach the teen years. They also train individuals everywhere in strategies of planned purity. This model is a great way to learn how to get to the root of purity, going far beyond sexual purity to issues of the heart.



The Thoughtful Christian

www.thethoughtfulchristian.com

The Thoughtful Christian is a Web-based resource center filled with studies ranging from one to four sessions each for adult groups and individuals.

Study topics include parenting, contemporary issues, in the news and popular culture.

Christian Counseling and Education Foundation

<http://www.ccef.org>

Based in the Philadelphia area, this organization has an established reputation as a source of information and help related to biblical counseling. Originally a local counseling center, CCEF now produces helpful printed and Web resources, in addition to running a counseling conference and other training opportunities.

Exodus Youth

<http://exodusyouth.net>

A part of Exodus International, this is the leading Christian ministry focused on the issue of homosexuality. Exodus Youth endeavors to minister to young people affected by homosexuality and their families. They also strive to equip those in the Body of Christ who minister to youth with the tools needed to make a difference in the lives of young people struggling in these areas.

CPYU does not necessarily endorse, support or condone these sites and their sponsors. Some are listed for informational and research purposes only as they are prevalent in youth culture today.

Links to these sites and many others can be found at www.cpyu.org!