

ENGAGE

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Beneath the skin

by CPYU President Walt Mueller

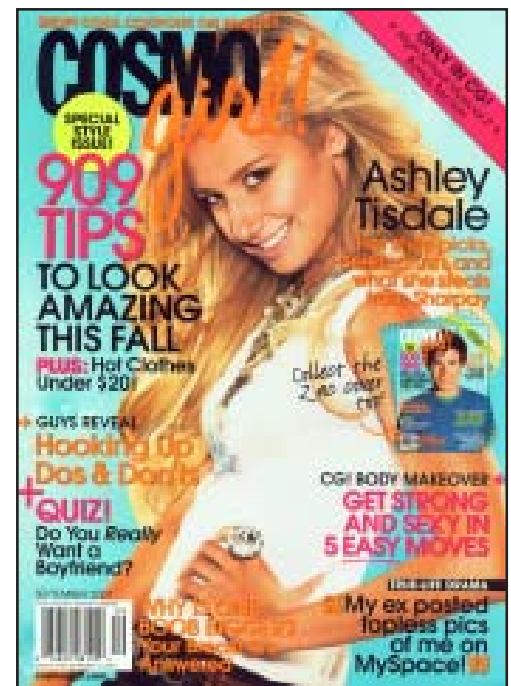
Walking through the mall with my wife can be dangerous. This time, her elbow in my side—accompanied by the admonition to “keep walking and looking straight ahead”—was justified. Lisa’s move into the preventive mode was almost reflexive. Like most good wives, her reflex was rooted in understanding four ingredients that have combined in an all-too-often lethal combination that’s killing people and relationships in today’s world: 1) maleness; 2) the universal scope of human depravity; 3) our culture’s obsession with outward appearance; and 4) the fact that we just happened to be walking past Victoria’s Secret, which at our mall, incidentally, sits directly across from the store most-frequented by kids—the Build-A-Bear Workshop.

On this particular day (like all other days), the sparkling floor-to-ceiling windows at Victoria’s Secret were graced by a half-dozen or so scantily-clad mannequins sporting a variety of sexy negligees (do they still call them that?) while standing and laying in a variety of seductive poses. While I didn’t take measurements that would result in accurate math, my estimates are that the garments worn by the skinny yet well-endowed plastic ladies in the window might, on average, cover only about 5 percent of their bodies—if that. The rest was exposed skin. A bit ironic I must say, being that this is a store that sells clothing! The fact that I’m telling you this is proof that I didn’t follow Lisa’s instructions. As always, heads of all ages and genders were turning to look at a window display that I’m sure sells a good amount of sleepwear, but is probably most effective at selling life-shaping messages about identity, especially to those little eyes walking out of Build-A-Bear. In other words, the Victoria’s

Secret window is not so much about *what* we’re to wear, but about *who* we’re to be.

Where we are

This got me thinking. I’m a 51-year-old man who’s been hammered by a lifetime of visual images that have combined to define personhood, maleness, femaleness, how to view myself, how to view a woman and what makes a person valuable. I’m also a Christ-follower who has consciously sought to



understand how the Gospel and a biblical world and life view counters this message—a message that by the way, I can choose to accept or reject—with the Truth. Even with all my years of life-informing faith, my accumulated wisdom, my conscious resolve and elbows in the side, I still find my heart and mind are battlefields over these issues. It’s the Kingdom of God versus the Kingdom

Beneath the skin

of the world, the flesh and the devil. Take away the faith, wisdom, resolve and my wife's elbows, and you've got a picture of how hard it is for our kids as they get pounded with these messages.

Last year, the folks at the Dove Soap Campaign for Real Beauty released another in their line of thought-provoking video ads that cut to the heart of our culture's appearance obsession. Dubbed "Onslaught," a shot of a young girl's innocent face is followed by a volley of sexually charged advertising images for diets, exercise, cosmetics and plastic surgery. The message at the end? "Talk to your daughter before the beauty industry does."

In today's world, our identity is wrapped up in what we look like. You are what you look like. And what you look like (i.e. sex appeal) determines not only your value and how others think of you, but how you think of yourself.

While each of us has grown up with this pressure, it's still a relatively new thing. My two grandmothers lived their teen years when the last century was young. The blitz of post WWII marketing was still years away. Marketing existed in the print media of the time, but it was more about selling goods and services than about selling image. Visual broadcast media was non-existent. If my grandmothers were ugly, they didn't know it. Why? Because media-defined standards didn't exist for the simple reason that media as we know it today was yet to be born.

By the late 1950s and 1960s, a booming post-war economy combined with the expansion of the media machine (think television) to not only change the world, but to establish standards to "help" us discern beauty from unsightliness. As my mother and the maternal peers of her time raised their children, they were being hammered with ads like the one for Warner's "Concentrate Girdle" and "Little Fibber" bra that picture a pear, along with the text, "This is no shape for a girl." Or take the ad for Formfit Rogers pantyhose, where the text over a "perfectly-shaped" female form tells readers to "Be Some Body." It only got worse for my wife and her peers.

In today's world, my two daughters and the girls you know and minister to are at least two generations removed from female relatives who grew up in a world largely void of this pressure, who—as a result—didn't have to struggle the way our girls do today. Print media, broadcast media and the Internet shape that supermodel image that's become an all-consuming passion and pursuit in today's culture. Brea offers deep insight into the effect this lifelong image-barrage has had on our girls, and how it only intensifies and continues during the university years: "It's hard to feel beautiful when looking through fashion magazines. It is even harder at college. College is like walking through a fashion magazine 24/7. It's difficult enough to stay on top of schoolwork nevertheless to stay on top of what you look like in comparison to the hundreds of other young beautiful women walking around campus. It is the only time in your life when you are surrounded by people your own age all trying to look their best. It makes you question your own identity and self-worth. It's not easy." The pressure existed for

Brea long before she set foot on the college campus. Experts estimate that 42 percent of first to third grade girls want to be thinner, 51 percent of 9 to 10 year old girls feel better about themselves when dieting, 53 percent of 13 year old girls are unhappy with their bodies, and up to 20 percent of young women practice some form of disordered eating including dieting, purging and binge-eating.



But it's not just our girls. My two boys have grown up in a culture that has sent them impossible-to-miss messages about the skin-deep attributes that not only make a female valuable, but worthy of their time and attention. These attitudes are multi-generational as well. Before I entered my own teenage years, The Okaysions had me and my male peers singing, "I'm a girl watcher, I'm a girl watcher, watching girls go by, my my my ... I was just a boy, when I threw away my toys, and found a new pastime to dwell on." To our boys, girls are less and less people, and more and more objects to be ogled and used. On top of that, more and more of our boys are defining themselves by outward appearance and/or athletic performance. An estimated 10 to 15 percent of people with anorexia or bulimia are male, and the use of performance enhancing drugs (including steroids) is widespread.

What should we make of it?

If we look realistically at our cultural obsession with what lies on the outside, there are some realities that we must recognize and understand before framing a ministry response.

First, it's not getting any better. Sure the folks at Dove are speaking up. And, there are a growing number of voices saying, "Enough is enough!" But the fact remains that these attitudes are so well-entrenched in our collective consciousness that it will take much more than a few Dove ads or outspoken critics to release the strangle-hold this stuff has on our hearts and minds. Not only is it not going to go away any time soon, but it's a cancer spreading like wildfire. As long as there are people who define themselves by what lies on the outside, who are horribly dissatisfied with what they see in the mirror, and who are willing to spend money in an effort to remedy their image anxiety, it's only going to get worse. Face it, we've grown up believing that human value and worth—both our own and others'—lies solely in what we look like on the outside. While we'd love to deny it, this belief has become a foundational tenet of our collective worldview.

Second, at its root, this is an issue of idolatry. Anything that consumes our time, thoughts, resources and energies other than the one true God is idolatry. The fact that the first two commandments God uttered cut right to the heart of the matter of idolatry indicate just how easy it is to get our eyes and allegiance off the Creator and onto created things. "You shall have no other Gods before me" and "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below" are right on the mark. If we want to discover our culture's golden calf, we don't need to look any further than the images we wrestle with in our own mirrors, or the faces and bodies on magazine pages that attract our longing, lustful and jealous stares.

Third, we must think theologically about the realities that exist. This cultural reality doesn't exist in a vacuum. It's a presence in our world that's woven in and through God's continually unfolding Divine drama. The perfect created order has crumbled due to human rebellion. We are still naked and ashamed, including being ashamed of what we see in the mirror. In an effort to appease our own insecurities, we pour loads of shame on those who don't measure up in our eyes. Perhaps even worse, our kids are being socialized into a world where they are taught that it's right and proper to feast your eyes on the nakedness of those whose appearance measures up to our culturally defined standards of beauty, as if indulging in these things will somehow bring fulfillment and redemption. In the end, it's all a futile pursuit, as the only way the Fall that undid God's perfect Creation can itself be undone is through God's provision of Himself as the Redeemer, through His Son Jesus Christ. In today's youth culture, perhaps the greatest diversionary weapon in the enemy's hands is our obsession with the skin-deep self.

How should we respond?

To choose not to understand and respond to these realities is to not only fail in our parenting and youth ministry callings, but to fail our kids. What are some steps we can take to begin to undo what's been done?

First, we must teach a theology of the Fall. There's a reason why time and gravity are not kind to the human body. God's perfect order has come undone. Life in a post-Genesis 3:6 world is a cursed life marked by death, disease and suffering. Feeling immortal and invulnerable, our teenagers rarely gain a perspective that helps them understand that while every new day is filled with opportunity for service to the Kingdom, it also means we're one day older and one day closer to physical death. Hair turns gray—or falls out. Organs break down. Wrinkles appear. Waistlines expand. Yet the multi-billion dollar cosmetic/weight-loss/plastic surgery industry continues to grow. One recent Sunday morning I turned on my TV as I was getting dressed and ready for worship. As I flipped through the channels it struck me that on this day dedicated to worship of the Redeemer, more than one-third of the stations were running infomercials for exercise machines, weight-loss plans and age-reducing cosmetics. What I saw reminded me of a two-page print-ad for Botox that I stumbled upon in *Entertainment Weekly* a few years ago. There was a picture
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About CPYU and *ENGAGE*

This journal is produced quarterly by the Center for Parent/Youth Understanding, a nonprofit organization recognized for tax-deductible giving by the federal government. We depend on private donations for our funding.

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.

President

Dr. Walt Mueller

Associate Staff

Paul Robertson

Vice President of Administration

Cliff Frick

Director of College Transition Initiative

Derek Melleby

Research Specialist

Doug West

Research Assistant

Chris Wagner

Editor

Randy Buckwalter

Editorial Assistant

Lisa Mueller

Design

Classic Communications

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To subscribe to this publication or for more information, contact us at:

Center for Parent/Youth
Understanding
PO Box 414
Elizabethtown, PA 17022-0414
Voice: 717.361.8429
Fax: 717.361.8964
E-mail: cpyu@cpyu.org
Web site: www.cpyu.org

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I love technology by David Frazee

“I love technology.” Those three words evoke images from the closing scenes of the now teenage cult classic movie *Napoleon Dynamite*. The words are from the song—if you can call it that—Napoleon’s brother Kip wrote and sang as a tribute to the online dating service and technological world that made it possible for him to meet his new bride Lafawnduh. Maybe not to the level of making a true love vow through song, but today’s culture is passionately embracing technology and all its gadgetry.

It is not just the young who are smitten by the technology bug. I was on an elevator recently and could not help but listen in on a conversation between a woman and her high school-aged daughter. With cell phones out, the daughter was explaining the use of various keys in relation to their text messaging



function. I could not help but smile and comment to the confused looking mother, “Texting? Yep, teenagers text all the time.” I am not so sure my words brought her any comfort as she struggled to comprehend the number of times she had to push a specific number key to get the desired letter of the alphabet. “I love technology?” Love it or hate it, technology impacts all of us and continues to change and to bring considerable change to the adolescent experience. For parents reading this article, we have gone a long way from “spinning the vinyl” to downloading the MP3 ... or MP4 for that matter.¹

I spend a lot of time with teenagers. As a result, I am constantly asking questions concerning the latest and greatest techno gadgets, and then get to witness first hand the impact such gadgets have on teenage culture. I read popular and researched articles, watch news reports, skim technological Web sites ... you get the picture. I am very intentional about keeping up with change. Still, I continue to struggle to keep my head above the waters of the next technological wave hitting the beaches of teenage America. For instance, just for fun, one of my student interns, Justin Tuley, mentioned I should visit the Trendhunter Web site.² Wow! This Web site is to technology what Willy Wonka’s Chocolate Factory is to candy. Anything imaginable or soon to be imagined can be

found on this site. I found a phone with five fold-out touch screens, a bike powered iPod, digital coffee tables, a robot golf caddy, digital eating wearable to teach kids how to eat with utensils, and I even found a digital Bible key chain and a cross-shaped MP3 player. After touring the “Technology Trends and Gadgets” link for 30 plus minutes, I had barely made a dent in the 181 pages of content. Needless to say, I had to call it quits and move on to my day job. So, before the next wave hits the shore, let’s take a snapshot look at two of the top technologies used by today’s teenager.³

Social networking sites

“Hello, my name is David and I have a Facebook account.” You respond, “Hi, David.” Facebook, like other similar sights—MySpace and Digg, are just two examples— are places of real, social networking used by students and an ever-increasing number of adults.⁴ It is a place where you can post pictures from your latest adventure, talk smack about your favorite sports team, connect with long lost school buddies, join or create an interest group, support a cause or political candidate, play games, post announcements and communicate through instant message chat, person to person message exchange or comment on any of your “friends” home page pictures or “wall” so all your “friends” can read and react.

As the introduction suggests, the world of Internet social networking can become rather addicting. For instance, if a student develops a connection with me during a speaking event and they discover I have a Facebook account, they will contact my account within hours after the event and ask to be added to my list of friends. Then, if I do not confirm them as friends soon enough, they get upset with me. Understand it is not because I am something special; it is because this is what teenagers do! Teens socially network on the Internet and take such interaction seriously. According to the March 2008 issue of *Current Health*, the top online activities of teenagers are networking on social-networking sites, reading blogs, watching videos and listening to podcasts.⁵ John, a teenager I spoke with recently said he believed that while online, teenagers spend “75 percent of their time on Facebook type stuff (Stuff included video and podcasting sites), while much of the Internet remains unexplored.”⁶ John’s comments are right on target with that reported by *Current Health* writers.

Setting aside the growing number of adult online social networks (By the way, my Facebook friends list includes college presidents and various professionals), some adults frequently respond, “What do these students do in the ‘real world?’” Let me say this clearly, the online social network *is* part of a teenager’s real world. Furthermore, the farther down the technological road we travel and the gadgets used to connect us in cyber space become faster and more user friendly, the stronger online social networking will become.

As with all technological advances, there is good and bad to consider. The good is found in the way teenagers are using

social-networking sites to create community with those who want to stand against social injustice, poverty and social inequity. Teenagers are also using online communities as avenues of moral accountability and spiritual discussion. The bad—as online interaction continues to be a clearer reflection of face-to-face interaction—is seen in the increasing concern with cyber bullying, sexual deviance and predator like behavior found among some social-networking sites.⁷

A darker side of social networking does exist. While Facebook is one of the current “hot sites” for social interaction and is constantly monitored, there are other social-networking sites that can be accessed by teenagers that are not monitored by administrators, monitored infrequently, and/or monitored with adult audiences in mind.



For instance, over the last few months, Juicy Campus—a site in which users can post, anonymous, slanderous, unverifiable comments for anyone to read—has received mainstream press coverage for the lawsuits being generated by universities, businesses and individuals against the content and procedures followed by the developers.⁸ Such sites have generated a lot of discussion on how far is too far when it comes to the lack of control present in certain social-networking Web services. Related—but different in presentation—are a number of image pages⁹ that make for interesting conversation starters and social interaction. One of my favorite sites, because of the dramatic way it has impacted pop culture, is Post Secret.¹⁰ This site features a number of card size images with messages representing a secret participants want to anonymously share with the Post Secret social network. The cards are monitored and posted via administrators. It is interesting to see which cards evoke response and interaction from viewers who identify with a particular shared secret. In short, there are countless social-networking sites based on music, sports, schools, sexuality and just about any other topic you can imagine. Be warned and informed, not all of these sites are monitored and/or appropriate for teenage participants or any participants for that matter.

With that warning and in keeping with the usual online safety rules, the majority of teenage online users participate in relatively safe social exchange areas. So, whether I like it or not, checking my Facebook account has become more than a leisure type activity, it is something that I do frequently every day. Why? Because Facebook is a place teenagers use to contact me and begin life-changing conversations. Note that I said “begin.” Teenagers who trust my presence in cyber land trust my presence in “real” land and typically carry on conversations with me face to face. So, “Hello, my name is David, and I am a proud Facebook user.” By the way, if you want to wade into the waters of Facebook or another online social-networking site, join to authentically interact with teenagers. Veteran social networkers know how to protect their virtual turf. If they think you are networking to spy, they won’t confirm you as a “friend” and/or drop you from their groups.

Video entertainment

I am going to assume you are aware and acknowledge the amazing advancements in portable video technology. If not, go to your local shopping complex, look in the electronics department and be amazed. Even though I do not advocate constant noise on trips (I prefer talking), such advancements have been the answer to many a parent’s nightmare scenarios during long commutes and trips. However, you may not be aware of the explosion of online movies, commercials, political statements, satirical spoofs and wide array of advertising pieces flooding the online video market. The videos are produced and posted from a wide range of video expertise. There are professionally done videos and others that are creations of people simply messing around with a cheap camera and some low-grade video editing software.

Whatever the format, online video resources have changed the way consumers access and use the Internet. Advancements in technology have made it possible for someone to watch newly released movies from the privacy of their home as well as participate in board meetings, academic classes, political rallies and even church services from the comfort of a location of their own choosing—in *real time*—via video links. As mentioned earlier, the excitement generated by online video technology has made video entertainment a solid second place time grabber for teenage Internet users.

If “video killed the radio star,” then YouTube killed *MTV*. At present, YouTube is one of the hottest video posting and viewing areas online.¹¹ Alright, do me a favor. Stop reading this article, go to www.youtube.com and look around for a while. No really, it’s okay. Go look around. What did you find? Being an election year, you probably encountered a number of Obama and/or McCain political messages. More than likely, you noticed that not all the videos were created and endorsed by campaign officials. There were many videos produced by private individuals who have strong feelings for or against a given candidate. Through YouTube, anyone with a camera and editing software can voice their opinions. The goal of YouTube video posting is to attract viewers (score hits) so that it makes the recommended video selection list and/or the currently being viewed video list. Either way, the more people watch, the more attention is placed on the product, person or idea being communicated in the video. Entertainers such as Will Ferrell have brought a lot of attention their way by posting videos that are a little edgy and start a swell of online chat on, you guessed it, social-networking sites.

Advertisers have caught on to this and now frequently employ YouTube as a platform to launch viral advertising campaigns. According to Trendhunter, “the video, which is called ‘Why every guy should buy their girlfriend a Wii Fit’ has gone more than a Wii viral—it had 1,014,120” views in its first six days!¹² Did you pick up on that? Over one million viewers in six days! That is an enormous return for a crudely constructed online video. It is easy to see how the popularity of YouTube and similar online video Web sites factor into the program shifts being experienced by MTV, VH-1 and other TV video watching stations. You no longer have to wait for

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your favorite music video to cycle through network programming. Instead, online users can have instant access to their favorite bands via online video entertainment.

Like social networking, there is a dark side to be aware of with video entertainment. I am sure there have been pornographic selections prior to my discovery, but fairly recently, I began noticing blatant postings of pornographic video selections on YouTube.



The content is alarming enough, but even more alarming is the simple “confirm you are over 18” type boundary that exists

between a minor and explicit content. While YouTube’s terms and conditions state that users must be over 18, emancipated, or gain permission from a guardian, etc., this may sound cynical, but anyone can lie. YouTube is an awesome entertainment area and avenue for evangelistic interaction. (Yes, I said and believe that.) However, the pull to sample explicit material has to be taken seriously. By the way, material that would be labeled *soft core porn* is accessible to all YouTube participants.

“I love technology.” Those three words may evoke totally different images after reading this article. If you are a little—or a lot—alarmed at the dangers involved with social-networking and video entertainment sites, you are not alone. However, there are steps you can take that can help alleviate the fear and bring back the love to technology.

What should we do?

Same old song—Stay vigilant. I am still amazed that parents allow their teenagers to have a computer in their room.¹³

Parents, you have to encourage your teenager to practice safe

Internet usage and hold them accountable to the standards you set. Chief among all Internet safety practices is to never provide identifying information. Remember, even innocent exchanges of information with a trusted friend on Facebook can be traced, leading to unwanted attention from predators.

Acknowledge the importance of and strive to remain informed of the important role social networking and video entertainment plays in the life of teenagers. A lot of fear is generated from a lack of education concerning the Internet and its use. Related to this is the tension caused when adults attempt to downplay the significance of the Internet with teens. Parents, even though it may not make sense to you, acknowledge that social networking occurs for teenagers in cyberspace and attempt to remain educated on the sites your teenager is visiting. Education takes the fear away and gives you more control over usage.

Encourage your teen to take a technology fast. Okay, this has to be done by the entire family to work, but it really can be a blessing. Develop a plan and find a day or series of days in which all technology is declared off limits. It will be awkward at first, but imagine the peace and refreshment that will come from placing all phones, computers, TVs, radios, iPods, etc. in the off position. ■



Dr. David W. Frazee is a presenter for ParenTeen Seminars (www.parenteen.com) and for three years was the host of the weekly TV segment, “The Teenage Tighrope” (www.theteenagetighrope.com). He also served as the director of the youth and family ministry program at Lubbock Christian University for five years. Dr. Frazee currently works as the director of student ministries at the Richland Hills Church of Christ, while continuing his speaking schedule and teaching as a graduate adjunct professor of youth ministry and related studies.

¹ If you are confused about what a MP3 or MP4 is you can simply “Google” (Term used to describe putting a word or phrase in a search engine, such as Google, and follow the resulting “hits”) each and find out more about these data formats.

² www.trendhunter.com (Caution, this Web site contains information that is not suitable for children and should be approached with a high level of accountability for any user.)

³ The sources used in the production of this article came from my own experiences with technology, academic journals, popular magazines, Internet sources, web site builders, cell phone associates, and a number of conversations with teenagers who live in cyberspace and cell phone land daily. Each source will be individually noted as appropriate.

⁴ For a great article on Facebook being the future of online social networking and how 35 plus year olds are the sites fastest growing demographic read “Why Facebook Is the Future.” (2007, September). *Time*, 170, 54.

⁵ Pulse. (2008). *Current Health*, 34 (7), 4-5.

⁶ While 75 percent is a random number supported only through John’s online experience, John is a teenager who spends considerable time online and works part-time in the field of video/online production.

⁷ A couple of articles that are interesting reads in this area of cyber world realities are: Chibarro, Julia S. (2007, October) School Counselors and

the Cyberbully: Interventions and Implications. *Professional School Counseling*, 11(1), 65-67; and Kaveri, Subrahmanyam and Gloria Lin. (2007, Winter). Adolescents on the Net: Internet Use and Well-being. *Adolescence*, 42 (168).

⁸ www.juicycampus.com (Caution, if you choose to visit the site, know the material is often graphic and mature in nature.)

⁹ Image pages make use of pictures to communicate messages and stir up online conversation.

¹⁰ www.postsecret.com (Caution, this is getting repetitive, the *Post Secret* Web site often contains information not suitable for younger users. Note, the song “Dirty Little Secret,” by All-American Rejects, was inspired by this Web site.)

¹¹ There have been religious offshoots like GodTube. However, YouTube remains king over all other video hosting sites and has a sizeable menu of religious selections.

¹² Sexy Fitness Videos? Is Hula Girl A Stealth Nintendo Viral? (VIDEO). *Trendhunter Magazine*. Retrieved June 4, 2008, from <http://www.trendhunter.com/trends/nintendo-wii-hula-viral-girlfriend>. Note, this video is accessible to all age groups and does not require adult viewer authorization.

¹³ Check out Kaveri’s article above for some of the latest information on adolescent Internet use.

10 SITES TO CHECK OUT ON THE WEB!



HANG 10

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



T4G

<http://t4g.org>

This is the online home to the ministry conference created by four friends who differ on theological issues, but agree on the nature of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Conference

sessions can be downloaded in mp3 format, including presentations from the four friends: Mark Dever, Ligon Duncan, C.J. Mahaney and Albert Mohler.

six19

www.six19.org

six19 is billed as “a response to the culture of lust that has overrun everything that surrounds us.” Believing that God ordained sex to be enjoyed, six19 wants to reclaim the land by helping male visitors see through culture’s distortions and perversions of sexuality. The site includes information on curriculum, resources and six19 meetings.



Church Leadership.org

www.churchleadership.org

The home page for the Francis A. Schaeffer Institute of Church Leadership Development. The site’s purpose is to “point the church back

onto the path of making disciples and leaders” by leading Christians “away from our false perceptions and into His way.”

My Yearbook

www.myyearbook.com

Founded in 2005 by a pair of high school friends, this social networking site is one they hope will keep friends connected for life as visitors find friends through searching by schools. Filled with a variety of features, the creators hope it will “connect everyone to everyone like never before.”



National Alliance for Youth Sports

www.nays.org

With more and more children and teens playing organized sports, this site is designed to encourage

parents, coaches and others to promote healthy participation and sportsmanship. Includes news, articles and other resources, with special sections just for parents, coaches and league administrators.

Teen Chat Decoder

www.teenchatdecoder.com

This site serves as a translator for clueless parents and other adults who are stumped by the rapidly developing language of acronyms teens are using in their communication with others via text and instant messaging. Type the acronym into the search bar, and the translator immediately translates your search into normal everyday language.

YouthTRAIN Live!

www.youthtrain.blogspot.com

This youth ministry blog comes to us from the folks who live down under. It exists to help train, resource and support youth workers. Regular posts include news, statistics and youth ministry programming helps.



Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network

www.rainn.org

Among its programs, RAINN created and operates the National Sexual Assault Hotline at 1.800.656.HOPE. This national partnership of

more than 1,100 local rape treatment hotlines provides victims of sexual assault with free, confidential services around the clock. The hotline has helped more than one million since it began in 1994.

Make You Think Values Collection

www.makeyouthink.tv

This organization produces short 8 to 10 minute DVD films designed to be used by teachers, parents and leaders to inspire young people to consider the importance of living out solid values. The films are extremely well-done, very thoughtful and include a helpful discussion guide.

Darkness to Light

www.darkness2light.org

This organization’s mission is to diminish the incidence and impact of child sexual abuse, so that more children will grow up healthy and whole. Their programs raise awareness of the prevalence and consequences of child sexual abuse by educating adults about the steps they can take to prevent, recognize and react responsibly to the reality of child sexual abuse.

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!

Prodigals—Let them come home *by Abraham Piper*

When I was 19, I decided I'd be honest and stop saying I was a Christian. At first I pretended that my reasoning was high-minded and philosophical. But really I just wanted to drink gallons of cheap sangria and sleep around. Four years of this and I was strung out, stupefied and generally pretty low. Especially when I was sober or alone.

My parents—strong believers who raised their kids as well as any parents I've ever seen—were brokenhearted and baffled. I'm sure they wondered why the child they tried to raise right was such a ridiculous screw-up now. But God was in control.

One morning, before 8 o'clock, I went to the library to check my e-mail. I had a message from a girl I'd met a few weeks before. Her e-mail mentioned a verse in Romans. I went down to the Circle K and bought a 40-ounce can of Miller High Life. Then I went back to where I was staying, rolled a few cigarettes, cracked open my drink and started reading



Romans. I wanted to read the verse from the e-mail, but I couldn't remember what it was, so I started at the beginning of the book. By the time I got to chapter 10, the beer was gone, the ashtray needed emptying and I was a Christian.

The best way I know to describe what happened to me that morning is that God made it possible for me to love Jesus. When He makes this possible and at the same time gives you a glimpse of the true wonder of Jesus, it is impossible to resist His call.

Looking back on my years of rejecting Christ, I offer these suggestions to help you reach out to your wayward child so that they, too, would wake up to Christ's amazing power to save even the worst of us.

Point them to Christ. Your rebellious child's real problem

is not drugs or sex or cigarettes or porn or laziness or crime or cussing or slovenliness or homosexuality or being in a punk band. The real problem is that your child doesn't see Jesus clearly. The best thing you can do for rebellious children—and the only reason to follow any of these suggestions—is to show them Christ. It won't be simple or immediate, but the sins in their life that distress you and destroy them will begin to disappear only when they see Jesus more as He actually is.

Pray. Only God can save your children, so keep on asking Him to display Himself to them in a way they can't resist worshiping Him for.

Acknowledge that something is wrong. When your daughter rejects Jesus, don't pretend that everything is fine.

If you know she's not a believer and you're not reaching out to her, then start. And never stop. Don't ignore her unbelief. Ignoring it might make holidays easier, but not eternity.

Don't expect them to be Christlike. If your son is not a Christian, he won't act like one, and it's hypocrisy if he does. If he has forsaken your faith, he has little motivation to live by your standards, and you have little reason to expect him to.

If he's struggling to believe in Jesus, there is little significance in his admitting that it's wrong to get wasted, for instance. You want to protect him, yes, but his most dangerous problem is unbelief—not partying. No matter how your child's behavior proves his unbelief, always be sure to focus more on his heart's sickness than its symptoms.

Welcome them home. Because your deepest concern is your son's heart, not his actions, don't create too many requirements for coming home. If he has any inkling to be with you, don't make it hard for him. God may use your love to call him back to Christ. Obviously there are instances when parents must give ultimatums: "Don't come to this house, if you are ..." But these will be rare. Don't lessen the likelihood of an opportunity to be with your child by pushing him away with rules.

If your daughter stinks like weed or an ashtray, spray her jacket with Febreeze and change the sheets when she leaves, but let her come home. If you find out she's pregnant, then buy her folic acid, take her to her 20-week ultrasound, protect her from Planned Parenthood, and by all means let her come home. If your son is broke because he spent all the money you lent him on loose women and ritzy liquor, then forgive his debt as you've been forgiven, don't give him any more money—and let him come home. If he hasn't been around for a week and a half because he's been staying at his girlfriend's—or boyfriend's—apartment, urge him not to go back, and let him come home.

Plead with them more than you rebuke them. Be gentle in your disappointment.

What concerns you most is that your child is destroying herself, not that she's breaking rules. Treat her in a way that makes this clear. She probably knows—especially if she was raised as a Christian—that what she's doing is wrong. And she definitely knows you think it is, so she doesn't need this

pointed out. She needs to see how you are going to react to her evil. Your gentle forbearance and sorrowful hope will show her that you really do trust Jesus.

Her conscience can condemn her by itself. Your role is to stand kindly and firmly, always living in the hope that you want your child to return to.

Connect them to other believers. Obviously, you are distant from your wayward child; otherwise you wouldn't think they're wayward. This is another reason why pleading is better than rebuking—your relationship with your rebellious child is tenuous and should be protected if at all possible.

But rebuke is still necessary. A lot of rebellious kids would do well to hear that they're being fools, but you're probably not the one to tell them. Try to keep other Christians in their lives and trust God to connect your son or daughter with a believer who can point out your child's folly without getting the door slammed on them.

Respect their friends. Of course your daughter's relationships are founded on sin. And, yes, her friends are bad for her. But she's bad for them, too. And nothing will be solved by making it evident you don't like who she's hanging around with.

Be hospitable. Her friends are someone else's wayward children, and they need Jesus, too.

E-mail them. When you read something in the Bible that encourages you and helps you love Jesus more, write a couple lines and send them to your child. The best exhortation—better than any correction—is for them to see Christ's joy in your life.

Don't stress out when you're composing these as if each one needs to be singularly powerful. Just whip them out and let the cumulative effect of your satisfaction in God gather up in your child's inbox. God's Word is never useless.

Take them to lunch. If possible, don't let your only interaction with your child be electronic. Get together with him face to face if you can. You may think this is stressful and uncomfortable, but trust me that it's far worse to be in the child's shoes. He is experiencing all the same discomfort, but compounded by guilt. So if he is willing to get together with you for lunch, praise God, and use the opportunity.

It may almost feel hypocritical to talk about his daily life, since what you really care about is his eternal life, but be sure to do it anyway. He needs to know you care about all of him. Then, before lunch is over, ask about his soul. You don't know how he'll respond. Will he roll his eyes like you're a moron? Will he get mad and leave? Or has God been working in him since you talked last? You don't know until you risk asking. God will give you the gumption.

Take an interest in their pursuits. Odds are that if your daughter is purposefully rejecting Christ, then the way she spends her time will disappoint you. Nevertheless, find the value in her interests, if possible, and encourage her. You went to her school plays and soccer games when she was 10; what can you do now that she's 20 to show that you still really care about her interests?

Jesus spent time with tax collectors and prostitutes, and He wasn't even related to them. Imitate Christ by being the kind of parent who will put some earplugs in your pocket and head downtown to where your daughter's CD release show is. Encourage her and never stop praying that she will begin to use her gifts for Jesus' glory instead of her own.

Point them to Christ. This can't be stressed enough. It's the whole point. No strategy for reaching your son or daughter will have any lasting effect if the underlying goal isn't to help them know Jesus.



The goal is not that they will be good kids again. It's not that they'll get their hair cut and start taking showers; it's not that they'll like classical music instead of death core; it's not that they'll vote conservative again by the next election. The goal is not for you to stop being embarrassed at your weekly Bible study or even for you to be able to sleep at night, knowing they're not going to hell.

The only ultimate reason to pray for them, welcome them, plead with them, eat with them or take an interest in their interests is so that their eyes will be opened to Jesus Christ.

And not only is He the only point, but He's the only hope. When they see the wonder of Jesus, satisfaction will be redefined. He Himself will replace the money, or the praise of man, or the high, or the sex that they are staking their eternities on right now. Only His grace can draw them from their perilous pursuits and bind them safely to Him—captive, but satisfied.

God will do this for many. Be faithful and don't give up. ■



Abraham Piper lives with his wife and son in Minneapolis, where he works for Desiring God Ministries. His is the son of pastor, author and speaker Dr. John Piper.

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Strong fathers in challenging times by Paul Robertson

We live in a time and culture when the importance of fatherhood is very much maligned. The media has gone out of its way to portray fathers as unreliable, silly and spineless. Can you name even one television program where a father is portrayed as he should be? Not since *The Cosby Show* has fatherhood been presented as the noble calling it really is.

There is an endless stream of research to show the significant impact an involved father has on the lives of his children. Children with caring fathers who are involved, nurturing and playful are more likely to do better linguistically and cognitively. Even toddlers with involved fathers can be expected to begin school with higher levels of academic readiness. These children also cope better with stress and frustrations in school than kids without involved fathers. The trend to academic achievement continues into the teen years. Teens are likely to have better verbal skills and do better in school thanks to fathers who stay involved. One 2001 study found that highly involved biological fathers had children who were 43 percent more likely than other children to achieve mostly “A” marks and 33 percent less likely to repeat a grade (*The Importance of Fathers in the Healthy Development of Children* – Rosenberg and Wilcox, 2006).

The same researchers show children with involved dads are more likely to be emotionally secure, be confident to explore their surrounding, and have better social connections with peers as they continue to mature. These same children are less likely to be getting into trouble at home, school and in public.

Fathers who simply spend time in unstructured play with their children will find that their children are adjusted both emotionally and socially. For example, fathers who spend time wrestling with their kids can teach them how to deal with aggressive impulses and physical contact without losing their tempers. Fathers also teach their children the importance of achieving and accomplishing tasks that often lead to teens who are more likely to exhibit self-control and be well-behaved.

In order to stay connected with their children, fathers have been required to play a variety of roles. In light of the complicated and challenging youth culture our kids face, these tasks take on an even greater sense of importance compared to prior generations. We have focused on the five roles outlined by Garret Evans and Kate Fogarty (*The Common Roles of Fathers: The Five Ps*) from the University of Florida as they apply within the current youth culture.

Participator

In the distraction of our daily schedules, we have forgotten the importance of simply being there for our kids. Some children learn that dad only will show up in crisis situations when mom can no longer handle things. Participating fathers are there to help their children with the everyday issues, which in turn leads to more meaningful relationships. It is a great way to teach basic life skills, such as making good choices, choosing good

friends and learning to discern the important issues of life. The culture and all its temptations make a father’s involvement crucial. Dad leads the way by being an example of what he wants his children to become. We all know that “more is caught than taught” and it were never truer than in issues of parenting.

Playmate

Fathers tend to engage in more physical play than mothers, who tend to be nurturers. Roughhousing has a number of benefits—builds muscles and coordination, is a place to teach rules and self-control, teaches taking turns and how to play



physically without hurting others. It also is a wonderful time for meaningful conversations and building deep emotional bonds. Dads often underestimate the benefits of simply playing with their kids.

As children turn

into adolescence, the physical fun side of life can be carried on into organized sports and recreational activities that offer even more avenues to continue to grow together.

Principled guide

Given today’s youth culture is permeated with an indifference to morality, perhaps the greatest role a father now plays is that of principled guide. It takes a great father to guide his children through their media minefield. Kids are looking for direction and guidance, which need to come from the home. Fathers help young people to see the dangers ahead and how to set boundaries for healthy living. Proper discipline teaches socially desirable behavior and builds character. It enables children to understand the consequences and reality of their own decisions and actions; something that is often missing in the media they watch.

It is important for fathers to catch their children doing something good. We have a natural tendency to only notice our kids when they do something wrong. Guiding fathers recog-

nize and reward the goodness in their children. True discipline is as much about reward as it is correction. Building reasonable, consistent boundaries in a youth world of “anything goes” will pay great dividends in the future for loving parents.

Provider

Society still values a father who provides tangible resources for his family. Some fathers believe that if they provide enough material things for their kids that they will be happy. If possessions made one happy, this generation of young people should be the happiest ever. However, most long for relationships more than resources. Dads can provide time helping with homework, attending school activities and caring for their children. There is a nurturing side to fathers that all kids long for. He sets the character example for what he wants his son or daughter to be when they grow up.

Teenagers are dying for relationships. The popularity of such Web sites as Facebook and MySpace are evidence. When surveyed, most young people agree they would rather have interaction with real people. For these young people, time with their father can be a life-changing experience as face-to-face guidance on a variety of life issues can be provided best through real interaction. For example, most kids learn most of what they know about sex from the media. Is there a less trustworthy source than their music and movies? Young people need to hear the truth from dad ... and mom.

Preparer

Many teens and young adults are struggling in the real world because they were never properly prepared for the real world; somehow life is much simpler on TV. Fathers need to help their children discover their God-given gifts and passions and guide them into developing those passions into a God-glorifying vocation. Direction on values, morality, integrity and character also are part of the preparation. Parents want their children to grow up to be responsible citizens and it doesn't happen by chance. It takes an involved father to assist them in making the right choices in a world where cheating, bullying, intimidation and lying have become the new life-skills to get ahead. The ultimate goal is to prepare them to live life on their own with honor and Christ-like compassion.

In my own research, I've asked a number of young people what they expect their father to be in a world that is changing quickly and that often fails to provide positive direction for them. Here is a sample of what I've heard.

First, they expect their fathers to ask them how they are doing, how their day was and then take time to listen to their answers. They need to know their father cares about them. In one survey, 73 percent of our teens said having someone to listen to them is “very, very important.” The Internet may be a great place to chat, but is anyone really listening?

Second, they expect their fathers to be consistent and to model the behavior and beliefs they talk about. Fathers are expected to teach moral beliefs and standards, and to be an example. Teens hate hypocrisy and double standards. They want authenticity in their media world of shallowness and lies.

Third, young people long for fathers to love them unconditionally. They need to know that regardless of how stupid they can be, their dad will love them “no matter what.” Teens want to see the emotional and compassionate side of the man they look up to. It makes their fathers human in a rather impersonal, technological world.



Fourth, girls want their fathers to treat them with respect both verbally and physically. Dads need to set the standard for what their daughters should expect from the other men in their life. Honoring your daughter makes her feel worthy and loved and helps her get beyond the simple notion of being an “object” in her youth culture.

Fifth, as much as they need guidance they also need freedom. Freedom is earned as they prove they are responsible. Preparing your teens to live in the real world is a long and complicated process but very rewarding when done properly.

No doubt we live in a busy world where everyone's schedule is more than full. Fathers feel the pressure—often feeling no one else understands—of providing for the family while juggling a hundred other important issues. However, in the end, dads only get one chance to raise their kids properly. If as one mother said, “When you die, the only thing you take with you is the love and memories of your children,” then the question becomes, “What will their memories of us be?” ■



Paul Robertson lives in Toronto and serves as Associate Staff for the Center for Parent/Youth Understanding

Why students abandon their faith: Lessons from William Wilberforce by Derek Melleby

College transition is a hot topic in youth ministry circles. More and more parents and churches are recognizing that students are not prepared for the challenges that college brings. Anecdotal evidence is easy to find. We all know students who have grown up in the church and have made commitments to follow Christ, but have walked away from the faith during college. Some students, of course, return to faith and church later in life, often after marriage or having children, but it's seldom with the same vibrancy exhibited during their teen years. Clearly, college has been a difficult place for Christian students. Many students come out the other side no longer identifying themselves as Christian.

Solid statistical data, however, is hard to come by. There have been a few studies completed, and they often affirm the anecdotal evidence, but this is not an easy phenomenon to track empirically. A few years ago George Barna conducted a study revealing that "65 percent of high school students stop attending church after they graduate." This statistic helped to ignite the national conversation about college transition. Fill a room with 100 Christian students and 65 of them wouldn't be Christians after high school? That was hard to believe, but with anecdotal evidence so strong, this statistic was rarely questioned at first. Various denominations followed suit and estimated that between 65 percent and 94 percent of their high school students stopped attending church after high school as well. But like any statistical data, there are holes in the research. The Barna statistic, for example, was the result of a survey that included Christians as well as non-Christians. The denominational statistics were more anecdotal than scientific. The truth is we don't have concrete, scientifically verifiable, statistical data to determine the number of students who seem serious about faith in high school and walk away from it in college. But we do know that it happens and there is a growing concern something should be done about it.

I am convinced that a new approach is needed when confronting the issue of college transition. Rather than questioning the statistics, or giving too much weight to individual stories and experiences, we need to be reminded of this remark from the writer of Ecclesiastes: "What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun" (1:9). This verse helps us keep things in perspective. In all times and in all places, at some point young people have to take ownership of their faith. This is not new. We can debate the statistics, trying to convince ourselves that it is not as bad as some say it is; or tell personal stories to make it seem even worse; or we can recognize that the challenge for students to make the faith their own is a perennial one. The challenge will always be with us.

I was reminded of this recently when I read *Real Christianity* by William Wilberforce, the member of the British Parliament who worked to abolish slavery. Written in 1797, Wilberforce makes keen observations about why young people

often walk away from the faith. We can learn much from his insights regarding the human condition:

"Think about what happens to many young people who are raised with all the benefits of prosperous parents who are cultural Christians themselves. As children, they are taken to church, where they hear the parts of the Christian message that their particular church embraces. Although it is rare in our times, maybe they even receive some measure of religious instruction at home. Eventually, they leave home, and launch out into the world. Some go to work; some go to college. They face temptations that they have not faced before and give in to them. Their lives might get out of control with the use of alcohol, and they might give in to sexual indulgence. At the least, they never read the Bible or make any attempt to develop a spiritual life. Most don't even attempt to take what knowledge is at their disposal and form their own beliefs and convictions. They don't learn to think.

"Maybe they travel to a foreign country. Things are even worse there. They begin to embrace the ideas to which they are exposed. By the time they return home, they are further away from faith than before. Along with their previous frivolous way of life, they now begin to be consumed with the demands of making a living in the workplace and the desire for a career and success. Most of what they hear about Christianity is in a negative context. If they go to church at all, they hear things that either make no sense to them or that they find offensive to the way they live. They have no grasp of the Bible to compare with what they hear.

"The result is an attitude toward Christianity that is not only negative but also one that is rooted in a faulty sense of intellectual superiority. The young also have a way of seeing right through the charade of those who profess the faith but don't live the life. What began as a vague, almost imperceptible doubt soon grows. By slow and steady degrees, the doubt becomes most fixed in their minds. In a twisted kind of way, the young men and women begin to hope their doubt is well founded. Any reason that reinforces it is welcomed. Doubt becomes greater, not based on evidence, but merely by dwelling in the mind. This is certainly not always how it goes, but in general you could think of this scenario as the genesis of unbelief. This is not always the process, but generally speaking, it is the natural history of skepticism. If you have carefully observed someone you know drifting into unbelief, you have probably seen something like this occur."



Wilberforce perceptively describes the process by which young people walk away from the faith. His hypothetical scenario is not true for everyone who leaves the faith, but there are four timeless truths concerning those who walk away from the faith that can be drawn from his words. Being attentive to these areas can help us as we prepare students for the challenges ahead.

First, students who walk away from the faith succumb to temptations they haven't faced before. Many students may have been exposed to the temptations of alcohol and sex in high school, but in college, being away from home and parents makes the challenges more difficult to withstand. As one student recently said to me, "I didn't know it was possible to go to college and *not* drink!" Parents and youth workers must work diligently to remind students of the dangers of alcohol abuse and promiscuous sex, while also casting a better vision for what college can and should be. It *is* possible to find a caring community on campus that fosters a healthy social life, but it requires intentionality. Help students to make the needed college connections before they head off to college. Visit www.liveabove.com to see a listing of ministries available on campuses across the country.

Second, students who walk away from the faith didn't learn to think. The problem that Wilberforce diagnosed over 200 years ago is still with us today. Many students lack critical thinking skills, failing to take what knowledge is at their disposal to form their own beliefs and convictions. We must continually create space for students to wrestle with the big questions of life. College should not be the first time that students engage in abstract or deep thinking, but for many students it is. Critical thinking and Christian discernment are spiritual disciplines that need to be developed. Like anything worthwhile in life, the developmental process takes time and is difficult. A youth group devoted to these activities may not draw the biggest crowds, but if we are serious about preparing students for life after high school, helping student to "learn to think" will be a mark of our ministries.

Third, students who walk away from the faith are consumed with the demands of making a living and the desire for success. It is so easy to get caught up in the world's definition of success, and it's often difficult to understand how faith relates to day-to-day choices and career decisions. In contemporary American culture, the chief end of man is often expressed as: "He who dies with the most toys wins!" The student who mentioned that he didn't realize that it was possible to go to college and not drink could easily add: "I didn't realize it was possible to go to college and *not* follow the American Dream!" The temptation to live a life based on material possessions and upward mobility is pervasive, and many students find it too difficult to live a counter-cultural life based on following Christ. The attitude becomes: "You can't follow Jesus in the

'real world.'" Once again, community is essential to withstand the challenge. College students need to be surrounded by other people who live life differently than the world around them. Teenagers need to be continually exposed to examples of what it looks like to be in the world but not of it. For Christians, calling is more important than career.

Fourth, students who walk away from the faith see right through the charade of those who profess the faith but don't live the life. It was true in Wilberforce's day, it is true in our day and it will be true until Jesus returns: the problem for most people who walk away from the faith is not Christ, but Christians. Students who are contemplating leaving the faith are longing not to be around perfect people, but to be around people who are perfectly honest about their own shortcomings and desire to change. Honesty must always trump superficiality.

Wilberforce's words remind us that the problem of students leaving the faith after high school is not *new*, and the reasons for why students drift away are unlikely to change. Learning



from the past can help us in the present to ensure that our ministries are addressing the central challenges students face. If Wilberforce's timeless diagnosis is correct, youth ministries that focus on community, discernment, calling and honesty will prepare students for life after high school. ■



*Derek Melleby serves as director of the College Transition Initiative for the Center for Parent/Youth Understanding. If you want to know more about CPYU's College Transition Initiative, or to book a CTI Seminar at your church, visit CPYU on the Web at cpyu.org. If you'd like to learn more about the college experience, order Derek's book, *The Outrageous Idea of Academic Faithfulness: A Guide for Students*, from the resource center on our Web site.*



The Christian Vision Project

Under the direction of cultural expert and *Christianity Today* writer Andy Crouch, The Christian Vision Project DVD,

Intersect Culture: Taking Your Group to a Place Where Faith & Culture Meet (Christianity Today International, 2006, ISBN# 0-917463-30-7) is the perfect tool to use to get your church, family or small group talking about the intersection of faith and culture. The DVD contains six sessions all looking at a Christian response to culture from a variety of angles.

The sessions include: *Begin*—God calls the church to be a counterculture for the common good; *Dwell*—When we live closely with others, we find new opportunities to minister; *Unite*—We serve more effectively and joyfully when we serve together; *Reconcile*—God wants to heal our racial and ethnic divisions, especially in and through his church; *Invest*—Transforming entire communities begins when we give ourselves to people, one by one; and *Abide*—Spiritual disciplines help us to abide in Christ so we can serve faithfully.

Each 15-minute session includes commentary and insight by Christian leaders such as Tim Keller, Lauren Winner, James Meeks, Brenda Salter McNeil and Ken Fong. A leader's guide is provided that helps guide group discussions, connects each session's main idea to a biblical text, and suggests weekly activities to engage the material more deeply. The strength of the DVD is that it not only presents challenging ideas about how to engage the culture, but it also details the stories of those who have put these ideas into practice.

—Derek Melleby



The trouble with hyper-reality

"If we are going to live as Christians in this age, we have to understand the times and how they are radically altering the

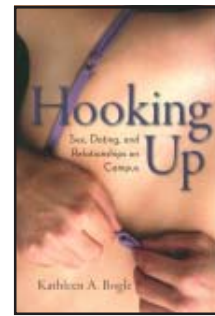
way we think, behave and live." So begins the new book and DVD curriculum by Mark Sayers entitled *The Trouble with Paris: Following Jesus in a World of Plastic Promises* (Thomas Nelson, 2008, ISBN# 978-1-4185-3339-7). Using vivid illustrations and video clips, Sayers exposes the ways in which our culture offers people a hyper-reality, "a condition in which artificial stimulation is preferable to interaction with reality." In hyper-reality, "you are not defined by your character, but by your cell phone, clothes, car, looks and house ... you are what you consume."

The problem is that people don't live in hyper-reality, and hyper-reality doesn't ultimately deliver on its promises. The paradox is that while our standards of living have increased and we live longer, we are less happy and our lives lack meaning. In this scenario, the lure of hyper-reality is attractive. A better future is just around the corner with the purchase of a new product or vacation or a better job.

The challenge is to live a life in God's reality. God's reality is not just some future time of bliss, singing on clouds in "heaven," but is the promises and dreams of God breaking into the present, giving people the power to join God as he makes all things new.

This book and DVD curriculum is a fantastic resource. It creatively shows how our culture keeps us from living fully, the way God intended. Each day, young people have a decision to make: will they follow the "plastic promises of the world" or God's reality found in Jesus? *The Trouble with Paris* is a tool that will help students choose Jesus, and live a faithful life in the present age.

—Derek Melleby



Sex on campus

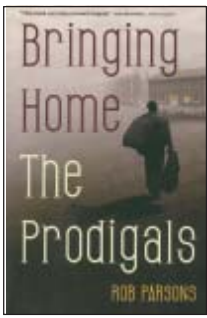
In his seminal essay "Hooking Up," social critic Tom Wolfe aptly described the sexual culture this way: "In the year 2000, in the era of hooking up, 'first base' meant

deep kissing, groping and fondling; 'second base' meant oral sex; 'third base' meant going all the way; and 'home plate' meant learning each other's names." In a new book, *Hooking Up: Sex, Dating, and Relationships on Campus* (New York University Press, 2008, ISBN# 978-0-8147-9969-7), sociologist Kathleen Bogle details the history of the hook-up culture, and provides research on how that culture plays itself out on today's college campuses.

In the book, Bogle notes the difference between the dating culture (roughly 1920-1970) and the hook-up culture. In the dating era, people generally followed the following cultural "script": "The man was supposed to contact the woman to ask for a date in advance, giving her at least several days' notice; and he was responsible for planning the activity for the date, such as going to dinner or a movie, as well as picking the woman up and driving (or walking) her home. Because the man was responsible for the initiation and planning the date, he had to pay the expenses." Sometimes this would lead to sexual intimacy, but only after several dates. Now, through a series of cultural shifts discussed in the book, "in the hooking-up era, this sexual norm is reversed. College students, following the hook-up script, become sexual first and then *maybe* go on a date someday."

Hooking Up includes transcripts of interviews with students so readers can learn about college life through student voices. This book reminds us that college students desperately need a different script to base their relationships on. The Bible, of course, is a script that will never change and can always be trusted. If nothing else, this book serves as a reminder for why college preparation and college ministry is vital.

—Derek Melleby



Leave the light on

“There is no family, no matter how godly, how expert at parenting, or how devoted to each other, who is immune from the circumstances that

cause us to cry out to God for our children.” My experiences listening to family’s stories—many of them families I have known for a long time—have convinced me that these words are very, very true. Our sinful natures, the appeal of cultural idols and the teenage drive for independence combine with a variety of other forces, leading a growing number of kids from Christian homes to walk away from the faith of their parents.

For this reason I have looked for helpful resources to hand on to the parents of prodigals. Now—in addition to John White’s *Parents In Pain* and John Miller’s *Come Back Barbara*—I’m adding Rob Parsons’ *Bringing Home the Prodigals* (Authentic Publishing, 2007. ISBN#10:1-934068-69-1). The executive chairman of Care for the Family in the UK, Rob Parsons has committed to writing the helpful information and principles he has communicated for years in his live seminars. Both preventive and redemptive in nature, *Bringing Home the Prodigals* not only offers suggestions on how to forgive and welcome home our wanderers, but how the church and families can prevent making prodigals (primarily through legalism and judgment) of those who were never prodigals in the first place.

Parsons’ book is filled with hopeful words for parents of prodigals, and challenging words to those who seem to glory at seeing other’s kids “go off the rails.” Parsons writes, “Many of us need to repent of the way we have judged other people’s children and instead begin to support each other. The time has come to let the masks drop, to begin to say ‘me, too,’ and to set each other free from the intolerable burden of being the perfect parents.” This book will help each of us reflect on the grace shown to us, and then shower it on those who need it.

—Walt Mueller



Screaming skin

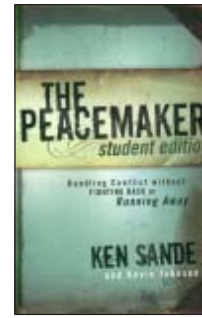
Several years ago I was speaking at a youth ministry training event when during a conversation with a youth worker, I

couldn’t stop staring at his arms. They were marked from his wrists to where they disappeared in his sleeves with hundreds of layered horizontal scars. I boldly asked him, “Would you tell me about your arms?” What I then heard was a story of a journey from brokenness to wholeness ... a brokenness that had led to an adolescence marked by regular self-abuse. Twenty years ago this behavior was largely hidden, overlooked and misunderstood. Now, self-mutilation has moved into the mainstream, as more kids are cutting to cope with their emotional pain, and more parents and youth workers are scrambling to help.

Parents and youth workers will most likely be unable to handle the kind and depth of counseling needed to help habitual cutters. But if we realize how we are uniquely positioned to discover the behavior, refer kids for help, and pray for and support cutters, an understanding of self-injury is a crucial weapon in our ministry arsenal. Dr. Marv Penner’s new book, *Hope and Healing for Kids Who Cut: Learning to Understand and Help Those Who Self-Injure* (Zondervan/Youth Specialties, 2008. ISBN# 978-0-310-27755-2), offers both an explanation *and* course of action that youth workers and parents alike will find immensely helpful.

No one knows how many of our kids are cutters. The behavior is most often shrouded in secrecy. Statistics are way too low. As Marv says, “For every cutter who is identified, it’s likely there are several others who are suffering alone without anyone to offer support, encouragement and understanding.” Whether you know it or not, you *do* know kids who cut. For that reason, this book must be read, and then placed on a nearby shelf. Sadly, you *will* need to reference it from time to time.

—Walt Mueller



Conflict resolution

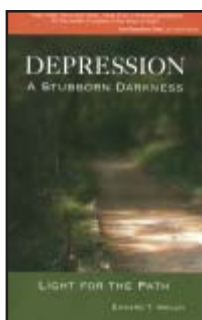
“God invites you to be a peacemaker. In fact, he wants you and every Christian alive to master his way of handling conflict.” So say

authors Ken Sande and Kevin Johnson in their newly released book, *The Peacemaker: Handling Conflict Without Fighting Back or Running Away (Student Edition)* (Baker Books, 2008. ISBN#978-0-8010-4535-6), which is the student’s version of Sande’s *The Peacemaker* edition for adults. The book is a helpful tool for use in a sinful and depraved world whenever two or three are gathered together in close relationship, because there will inevitably be disagreements and conflict.

A veteran consultant and mediator, Sande develops a practical guide for resolving conflict steeped in Scriptural truth and biblical principles. After developing a theology of conflict illustrated with examples that will resonate with high school students, Sande and Johnson take readers on a journey through “The Four G’s of Peacemaking”: 1) Glorify God; 2) Get the log out of your own eye; 3) Gently restore; and 4) Go and be reconciled. Teaching students these principles relatively early will serve them well throughout the course of their lives. The book teaches them how and when to overlook mistreatment, how to admit wrongs, when to defend one’s own rights, how to correct others, when to forgive, how to strike fair bargains, what to do with unreasonable people, and how to use conflict to showcase God’s love and power. If you’re serious about learning how to honor God in conflict resolution, this book will cut you to the core.

If you’re a youth worker or teacher looking for a book to study with your students, consider *The Peacemaker (Student Edition)*. It’s timely, practical and there’s a helpful discussion guide included at the end.

—Walt Mueller



Battling the blues

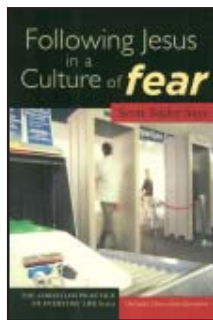
It's no secret that depression has reached epidemic proportions in today's culture, especially among our children and teens.

The evidence is there in statistical research, the growth of pharmaceutical treatment options, increased counseling caseloads and the personal experiences of people we know and love ... sometimes including our own selves. While emotional suffering is nothing new (just read the Scriptures from cover to cover), sometimes understanding and treating depression can be as confusing as depression itself.

Dr. Edward T. Welch, a counselor and director of the School of Biblical Counseling at the Christian Counseling and Education Foundation, offers a biblically based understanding of depression in his encouraging and hopeful book, *Depression – A Stubborn Darkness: Light for the Path* (New Growth Press, 2004, ISBN#10:0-9762308-0-1). Welch digs deeply into the Scriptures to discover a theology of pain and suffering, and an understanding of depression's causes, along with helpful steps for moving to hope and joy. In a day and age when medication is oftentimes a quick first step that might only mask depression's symptoms, Welch offers a more cautious approach designed to address root spiritual and circumstantial causes based on a clear understanding of God's sovereignty over a fallen and depraved world. Still, he does not discount medication as an option.

This user-friendly and very accessible book is a must-read for anyone ministering in today's world. It not only will help the reader, but it will equip the reader to help and understand others. While teenagers might not choose to read *Depression*, their parents, pastors and youth workers will find a treasure trove of helpful information and advice that will help them become better helpers.

—Walt Mueller



Follow Jesus, not fear

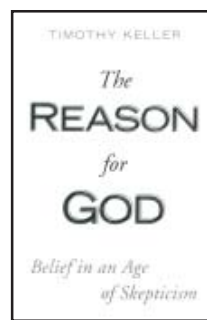
One of the most repeated phrases in the Bible is “do not be afraid,” and yet many believers live in constant fear. It is often difficult to *not*

be afraid in the culture in which we live. Almost every day there is a new study that reveals something new to fear. Scott Bader-Saye, the author of *Following Jesus in a Culture of Fear* (Brazos Press, 2007, ISBN# 1-58743-192-0) remarks, “We are surrounded by fear just to the extent that we are surrounded by people who profit from fear.” There seems to be a lot of money in the “fear business,” and Bader-Saye challenges Christians to place more confidence (trust) in Christ.

While Bader-Saye's book extracts illustrations from many aspects of life, his most perceptive examples often come from his reflections on parenting. Young parents, especially, are prone to being persuaded by people benefiting from keeping them in a state of fear about their children. He warns, “What happens when we parent out of fear? We begin thinking primarily about what we want to prevent and avoid rather than what we want to encourage and develop ... It is not enough to keep our children safe. Their physical safety is a backdrop against which we ... need to help them discover the joy of living, the thrill of new experiences, a robust engagement with the world around them, and a dynamic relationship with the God who made them. All of this can easily be squelched when we parent out of fear.” Parents will be challenged by this book!

Bader-Saye does an excellent job of pointing out how our culture perpetuates a constant state of fear, offers insight into how to navigate fidelity to Christ in such a culture, and suggests practices for Christians to follow (hospitality, peace-making, generosity) in order to live counter culturally. The book is challenging and encouraging, and the discussion questions at the end of each chapter make it an ideal small group resource.

—Derek Melleby



Answering doubt

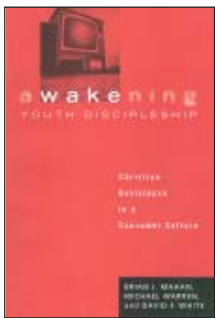
Here's something I've never written in the first sentence of a book review—until now: *hands down one of the best books I've read in recent years.*

After reading it, I wasn't at all surprised that Timothy Keller's *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (Dutton, 2008, ISBN#978-0-525-95049-3) had found its way onto the *New York Times* Bestseller list shortly after coming off the press. A Presbyterian pastor who leads a rapidly growing and culturally engaged flock at Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, Keller serves up a compelling and reasonable apologetic for today's postmodern doubters and skeptics ... who do, by the way, make up a large portion of his community and congregation.

Using his backgrounds in theology and philosophy, along with his sharp analysis of contemporary culture, Keller takes readers through answers to a series of familiar questions and faith-barriers such as: “How could a good God allow suffering?” and “How can a loving God send people to hell?” In the book's second half Keller masterfully weaves a tapestry of the reasons for faith that is centered on the cross and the unfolding divine drama of creation, fall and redemption. In effect, he invites readers to join in on God's dance.

For the last several months, Keller has been criss-crossing the country to share the book's message with captive packed-house audiences made up of believers and doubters alike—most of them younger in age. A humble and unpretentious man whose draw is the fact that he speaks to people's hearts without being flashy, Keller is showing that in the midst of the shift to the postmodern, reasonable truth is still heard by those whose hearts are hungering for God. Reading *The Reason for God* is not only a wonderful individual exercise, but it will go a long way in shaping your conversations with the doubters and skeptics you know.

—Walt Mueller



Resisting consumerism

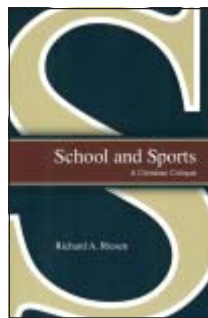
Brian Mahan, Michael Warren and David White, the authors of the penetrating book, *Awakening Youth Discipleship: Christian*

Resistance in a Consumer Culture (Cascade Books, 2008, ISBN# 978-1-55635-136-5) challenge the current state of youth ministry in America. The authors are quick to point out that, “Youth ministry, like contemporary Christian music, has become a significant industry in the U.S. In this youth ministry market we see high energy, high visibility and high budget programs, promising high-yield youth ministry.” Quoting recent research, however, they conclude, “The version of Christian faith [youth] have internalized does not, for the most part, influence the shape of their lives, their relationships or perspectives on vocation.” Put simply, while there is a lot of youth ministry activity (books, conferences, college degree programs) there doesn’t seem to be much Gospel transformation among youth.

In nine succinct chapters, the authors set out to explain how this has happened. First, White summarizes the creation and history of adolescence, illustrating how youth have been marginalized in society. He then offers a challenging critique of comfortable Christian parents who don’t really want to see their kids radically transformed by the Gospel. Second, Warren explains how much of today’s youth ministry is shaped more by the techniques and assumptions of marketers and entertainers than the Gospel. And finally, Mahan directly challenges youth ministers (and himself) to consider how they have conformed to the patterns of this world by not inviting kids into the story of the Gospel, but rather into the story of the American Dream and consumerism.

This slim volume does not provide easy answers, but does issue a clarion call to think more deeply about what youth ministry should look like in our consumer culture.

—Derek Melleby



Athletics in education

What is the proper role of athletics in education? More specifically, what role does athletics play in the Christian school? Can academic and

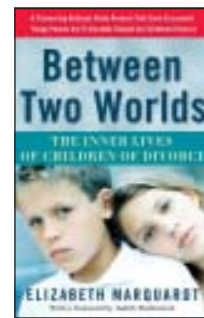
athletic goals co-exist in ways that stay true to a school’s mission? These are the questions Richard A. Riesen, in his book *School and Sports: A Christian Critique* (Grasshopper Books, 2007, ISBN-978-0-9796845-0-0), aims to answer. While he offers his own conclusions, his primary goal is to begin a dialogue, and possibly spark changes, among the sphere of private Christian schools.

With 15 years’ experience as head of a Christian school, Riesen is able to reflect on his personal insights, as well as the experiences of his peers. He has rightly realized that the amount of time, energy and money spent on athletics is often disproportionate to the resources spent pursuing academics. He does not advocate the abolition of sports in school, but, rather, is calling Christian schools to re-evaluate the emphasis they put on interscholastic athletics.

School and Sports begins with a theological look at athletics and moves to a discussion of whether or not it is a school’s responsibility to help develop the body, in addition to the mind, in the first place. Riesen then views the connection between mind and body, and the conclusions and assumptions that have been made throughout history. One of the main assumptions Riesen seeks to dismiss is that athletics builds character, one of the primary justifications for the inclusion of athletics and physical education in the curriculum.

The questions Riesen poses are challenging, especially given the fanaticism that so often accompanies sport. However, those involved in Christian education—teachers, coaches, athletic directors and principals—should seriously weigh the arguments in *School and Sports* and use the dialogue within to determine the proper role athletics should play in their own school.

—Chris Wagner



Children of divorce

An unfortunate reality of life in today’s world is that Elizabeth Marquardt is not alone. She is a child of divorce, much like a growing number

of kids who sit in our church pews or come to youth group every week. Not only that, but many more children of divorce who may never set foot in church populate our schools and communities. Because of her own experience of feeling like a football tossed between two people who are no longer married, Marquardt embarked on a study of the spiritual lives of the one-quarter of today’s young adults who are children of divorce. She endeavored to discover how childhood divorce affects young people’s moral and spiritual journeys and religious identities.

Previously released in her book *Between Two Worlds: The Inner Lives of Children of Divorce*, Marquardt’s research findings are now contained in a 30-minute documentary film produced especially for clergy and lay leaders to use in their congregations. Narrated by Marquardt, the film features interviews with seven grown children of divorce who talk about their faith, families of origin, and marriage hopes and fears. The interviews are compelling, and oftentimes emotionally moving.

The DVD can be ordered online from the Institute for American Values (www.americanvalues.org). This film serves to inform those who may have benefited from growing up in an intact family about the difficult realities they have never experienced or understood. In addition, youth workers, pastors and other church leaders are given suggestions on how to best minister to children of divorce in preventive and redemptive ways. Included on the DVD are additional resources and PDF handouts. Marquardt’s research shows that two-thirds of children and teens who were active in church when their parents split up had no one from their congregation or clergy reach out to them at that time. That’s a reality that shouldn’t exist.

—Walt Mueller

The latest cell phone use: Sexting by Chris Wagner

As if keeping tabs on teenage sexual behavior hasn't become difficult enough, teenage sexual trends have now gone mobile. Recent news stories from across the country are reporting on a new trend known as "sexting."

By using the text messaging service on their cell phones, teens engage in sexting by sending flirtatious messages back and forth. Innocent adolescent flirting via cell phones may be harmless enough, however, over time the text messages may become more sexually explicit in nature, even referring to or requesting specific sexual acts and behaviors. Though sexting is still an early phenomenon and little to no research has been



conducted yet, it can be assumed that at least some of these cell phone communications lead to actual physical sexual encounters. The most popular entry on the online Urban Dictionary defines sexting as "the act of text messaging someone in the hopes of having a sexual encounter with them later; initially casual, transitioning into highly suggestive and even sexually explicit."

The aspect of this trend that experts are currently most concerned about moves well beyond simple text messaging. Utilizing the digital cameras on their phones and MMS (multimedia messaging service) technology, teens take sexually charged photos of themselves and send them to other individuals' phones. Detective Brian Marvin, a member of the FBI Cyber Crime Task Force, says, "I've seen everything from your basic striptease to sexual acts being performed." With many cameras now having the capability of recording short videos, both photos and videos are being sent. Sending nude photos and video via cell phones has become so commonplace with teens that students in the Portland area, for example, have labeled it as a major problem.

Officials not only agree that sexting is a major problem, but they offer further warning. Parents and teens must know that taking, sending, forwarding or having inappropriate photos can lead to criminal charges, especially if they include minors.

Reportedly, the majority of revealing images are being sent from females to males. However, males participate as

well, snapping shots of their genitals and sending them to girls. For girls, the recipient is often a boyfriend. Other times photos are sent to a group of male friends, others yet are sent to ex-boyfriends to make them jealous. "Sexts" range from shots of bare breasts or genitals all the way to videos of masturbation or other sexual acts being performed. Girls who send racy images to their boyfriends may be doing so because they feel more comfortable sending photos than actually being nude in person. The perceived risk and emotional attachment seems lessened. Perhaps it is a way for girls to keep sex-crazed boyfriends at bay, or to keep their male counterpart interested, without actually committing physical sexual acts.

Whether sent to an individual boyfriend or a group of males, it is clear that the main reason girls sext is to get noticed. Not only are girls battling each other for the attention and affection of boys, but they're also competing against an onslaught of celebrities, often scantily clad, seen in the media. Laurie Ouellete, a communication studies professor and reality TV expert at the University of Minnesota, says of girls, "The price is that you have to define yourself in the same kind of terms that celebrities are defined." Within the last year, racy photos of celebrities Vanessa Anne Hudgens (*High School Musical*) and Miley Cyrus (*Hannah Montana*), have surfaced. In both cases it was believed the photos were taken and distributed using cell phones.

Impressionable young girls see their media role models behaving in such a way that creates a lot of hype and buzz among their male peers, and suddenly sending nude photos of oneself becomes acceptable behavior in their efforts to vie for male attention. Joe Kelly, president of the Web site Dads and Daughters, told Kevin Giles of the *Star Tribune* that "young people, especially children, are starting to think that it's normal to show flesh in social settings, particularly through technology."

Anecdotal evidence from news reports suggests this form of attention grabbing sexting—as opposed to ones sent with the intent of a real physical hookup—are more common among teens. It does appear, however, that many young adults are engaging in sexting with the hope of having a sexual encounter.

The digital nature of this new trend opens itself up to another nasty side effect. The celebs mentioned above aren't the only ones who are susceptible to having pictures leaked and posted on the Internet for all to see. Many photos that are sent end up on public Web sites or printed out and passed around at school. Photos can also be mass distributed in a matter of minutes using the forward function of a cell phone's MMS capabilities.

Boys who receive pictures or videos may choose to share them with their friends as a way to brag. Sharing exaggerated stories in the locker room is no longer enough. Visuals must accompany these stories in order to validate them. One teen—in an article on wlwt.com—says, "It's like a digital trophy, proving that you did something or you got someone to show you something personal of theirs and you can parade it around

and make sure everyone knows.” Digital photos also can be saved and used to slander someone after a relationship goes sour. Students in Wisconsin were charged with a defamation of character misdemeanor after distributing nude photos of a female classmate earlier this year.

Innocent bystanders are also being affected by sexting. Some teens have reported receiving unsolicited nude photos, oftentimes of someone they don't even know. Unfortunately, teens in unhealthy relationships are also prone to abuse. According to a Teenage Research Unlimited (TRU) survey titled “Tech Abuse in Teen Relationships Study,” of those in relationships, one in five teens have been asked to engage in an unwanted sexual activity by cell phone or over the Internet.

There are several key factors that make this a difficult trend for parents to keep tabs on. First of all, a Pew Internet & American Life Project survey indicates that over 60 percent of teens own a cell phone. No longer do a small minority of teens have access to this technology. Given the device's mobile nature, there are no geographical boundaries to “sexual” behavior. Teens can send text messages at home, in school, while driving, at a friend's house or anywhere they choose. Reporter Lesley Tanner of CBS3 Springfield says “one of the appeals of sexting is the ability to hide the behavior from parents.”

Not only are teen sexting trends not limited by space, but they're not limited by time either. Many teens, especially those in relationships, text message into the late hours of the night and early morning. The TRU survey also states that “nearly one out of four teens in a relationship communicated with their partner via cell phone hourly between midnight and 5:00 a.m.”

Another thing making it difficult for parents is what has been titled the “Text Generation Gap.” When it comes to text messaging, many parents are left in the dark because they simply do not know very much about this technology, nor do they understand the new language teens have developed to communicate through text. Not understanding the different spellings and the use of textonyms (acronyms used in text messaging) make it difficult for parents to monitor normal text messaging, let alone distinguish explicit sexts from appropriate texts. Just like online, the cell phone is one more arena that students are using to define themselves apart from their parents' guidance and influence.

Existing cultural components will not make combating this trend any easier. Similar behavior among celebrities has already been mentioned. Marketers and television show creators are also making sexting seem as though it is normal and appropriate adolescent behavior. To advertise the most recent season of the teen hit “Gossip Girl” posters were created with popular teenaged characters in erotic poses with the acronym “OMFG”—which stands for “Oh my f***ing god”—displayed across the bottom of the poster. Sexually charged images are combined with the commonly used vernacular of today's mobile teens to send powerful and behavior-shaping messages.

The fact that sending nude photos is an obvious form of pornography does not even phase today's teens. The Web site protectkids.com reports that the age group that views Internet porn most frequently is between 12 and 17. In addition, a study of teens in New Zealand found that “only 13 percent of 12- to 13-year-olds were bothered or upset by online nudity or pornography.” Unfortunately, pornography has become such a pervasive and normal part of life that teens do not even blink an eye at participating in such behavior.



What parents can do to help teens steer clear of this growing new trend is to talk about it. Ask your child if they know about sexting, whether they know people participating in it, or whether or not they've sent or received sext messages themselves. Let your teen know what they should do if they receive unsolicited sexts. Discuss what types of mobile communication are appropriate and what are inappropriate. Set parameters for when, how often and for what purposes a cell phone can be used.

Do you allow your teen to take a cell phone to school? If so, set limits for its use during this time. Perhaps only calls to mom or dad are appropriate. With so many students texting and sexting through the night, it may be appropriate to take away cell phones during these hours. If necessary, check your teen's cell phone and look through the text messaging history. Be aware that many phones can be set to delete texts or picture messages as soon as they are sent. Browse through the monthly cell phone bill to discover more about when and how often your teen is texting. If you find the parameters you have set have been broken, take away cell phone privileges. It's important for teens to know the proper way to manage new and emerging technologies.

Parental knowledge of this behavior can also lead to valuable discussions about the proper view of sexuality and pornography. Our bodies are given to us by God and as such are sacred. When we view pornographic images, we are not giving proper dignity, worth and respect to those seen in the images. Any kind of sexual behavior outside of the God-established realm of marriage is sinful. Stress that viewing

(continued on page 21)

It's not just sex by Jason Soucinek

SEX. No word in the English language is as confusing, divisive, interesting and exploited as much as the word sex. It is a word that can bring great joy and excitement, but also many questions.

I am the rare person who has the opportunity to speak often on this subject, mostly to teenagers. I speak to teens both in schools and churches about the beauty of saving sex until marriage. My heart is to see youth begin taking responsibility for their choices sexually and relationally, and for them to begin challenging the sexual status quo given to them by their culture. This is not an easy task, especially when you begin to realize how convoluted and inconsistent these cultural messages are to a teenager.

Although sexual messages run rampant in our culture, I don't think this is the only reason teens become sexually active. I believe we live in a culture that promotes loneliness. Our loneliness is brought on by a culture that says, "Do what feels good," "It's my body I can do with it whatever I please, I am not hurting anyone," and, "I am my own person." We treat sex like a commodity. This thinking ultimately leaves youth looking in the wrong places for relationships that they hope will fill a void in their lives. Youth look at the relationships portrayed in advertising, movies and music, and are attracted to the bonding power of sex. Loneliness causes them to attach themselves in relationships that are physical and emotional, but not spiritual. They get lost in these relationships—playing house and fulfilling their need to "be known." They want to be held and told something about themselves that makes them feel special and different, even if it is for only a few moments.

I have come to realize how desperately this generation desires relationship—physically, emotionally and spiritually. I've also seen how a message of sexual abstinence and sexual purity opens the door to discussions on many facets of life and penetrates deeper than other topics. As I always tell teenagers, "Sex is more than just sex." You know what? They get it. They just have a hard time articulating this point. Most of the time a discussion on sex brings up issues of depression, self-worth, self-esteem, addiction and so on. However, the one element they almost always bring up is fear.

Teenagers often express a fear that they will end up alone. When I probe, they usually begin to share about their home life. A growing number of students do not have both a mom and dad at home. Thus, healthy marriages are not something they observe very often. But it is something they want for their future. Recently I spoke to a class of 27 high school students. Out of that group, 21 do not have both parents living at home. Many are dealing with a recent divorce, remarriage, living with a sibling or relative, and even mistreatment from a stepparent. Of the other six, only three had parents who are actively involved in their life. Still many, if not all, of the students want to marry. In fact, surveys show that over 90 percent of teens want to marry at some point in their life. However, over 60 percent of those teens who say they want to marry do not think it will be lifelong.^{1,2}

I believe that if we are going to make a difference in the lives of teenagers, we must start sharing God's design for sex with them. I am excited when I share with them God's truth about this gift. It's not hidden. It's revealed in God's living Word. If you don't believe me, turn to the Song of Songs. It's an entire book written about the beauty of sex that is to be shared in marriage, not outside of it. In fact, it is so graphic it should come with a parental advisory. Yet there it is, for the world to read. We need to be brave and honest about sex when we talk to teenagers. If we don't, we will fail them, fail their future relationships, and never let them know the power of waiting.



A year ago I was given an article from a local college newspaper. In it, the individual who was being interviewed said, "The anti-choice, abstinence-until-marriage-folk commonly use scare tactics that ultimately become dangerous to the community at large." This rhetoric is not uncommon among those who disagree with the approach we share with teenagers. These individuals would prefer that we sell youth short of their goals and dreams and give them something that will fill their need for instant gratification, like having sex now and using a condom.

However, this article did get me to ask the question, "Do we, as Christians, use scare tactics to communicate our point?" It was a tough question, but worth answering because it has several implications on the delivery of our message and how it is received. Often I will listen to a sermon or a discussion on sex and feel like I just heard someone tell me a bunch of "don'ts." They did not spend any time addressing God's

intention for sex or the beauty of the marriage relationship, which is the place where sex is to be shared. Instead, they focused their message on the negative consequences of not waiting, with a hope of scaring their audience into abstaining.

Scare tactics are not needed when we share the message of God's design for sex. Something mysterious happens when the reality of God's design for sex meets the culture. Lives are changed. Relationships begin to look different. Marriages begin to flourish. I have met several youth pastors and senior pastors who, for some reason, are afraid of the topic of sex. They are not quite sure how to speak about it. My answer is, "Without fear!" Turn to scripture, pour through what His Word has to say about sex, and begin talking about it.

For too long we've allowed the theory that "Teens are going to have sex anyway" to determine how we will speak to them about the topic of sex. I believe this is dangerous to youth. It only accelerates the loneliness in their lives. Our job, as individuals passionate about teens, is to begin making the attraction of sex in marriage more tempting than sex outside of marriage. In order to do this, we are going to need to open up our Bible, be honest in our approach, and begin pointing youth toward God and His intention for sex, relationships and marriage. This is not simple or easy, but worth fighting for because teenagers are craving an authentic relationship. Why

not point them toward the One in whose image we were made? We need to begin penetrating their loneliness with the power of God. After all, if it is not primarily about sex but relationship, then we must point them toward the "friend who sticks closer than a brother," as described in Proverbs. It is in this relationship where they will find and confirm that they are significant, valuable and unique, and that they don't need to cut corners to find true companionship. ■



Jason Soucinek lives in Spokane, Washington, and is the director of a relationship and media education program, iPULSE. After completing his education at Whitworth University, he worked several years in advertising until the Lord brought him into full-time youth ministry five years ago. He is dedicated to challenging the sexual status quo of the current youth culture and seeing students enter into an authentic relationship with Jesus Christ. You can visit Jason's online home at www.generationallive.org.

¹ "Most Teens See Marriage and Kids in Their Future." Youthview; The Newsletter of the Gallup Youth Survey. Volume 8, Number 10, June 2001, page 2.

² "Changes in Teen Attitudes Toward Marriage, Cohabitation and Children" The Next Generation Series. A Publication of the National Marriage Project, Rutgers University. 2000.

The latest cell phone use: Sexting

(continued from page 19)

nude photos and videos, as well as taking them of oneself or others, is also a distortion of God's sexual plan. Viewing pornography as a teen, or at any age, can establish an unhealthy, sinful and extremely powerful habit.

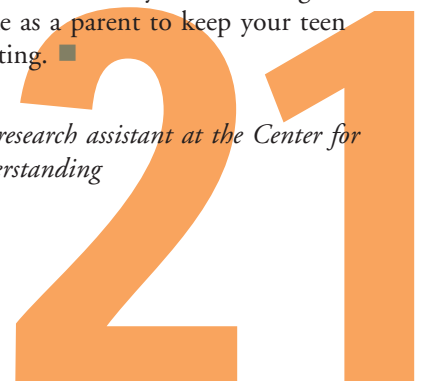
Parents should keep in mind that the impulsive nature of teenagers means they are often snapping nude photos of themselves without much thought. Encourage your teens to think about their actions and the possible consequences they may have. Remind them to consider what God's Word has to say about certain behaviors, such as sexting. Make them aware that possessing explicit photos of minors can lead to criminal charges. Also help them realize how easy it is for these photos to spread into the wrong hands. Embarrassment and shame always come after the fact, once it is too late. Unfortunately, with digital technology and the Internet, deleting all the images is an impossible task. Let them know that not only could their peers and classmates see the images, but future employers and college admissions counselors as well, who are now using the Internet to do background searches. A quick and rash decision to send a nude photo can have negative long-lasting effects. Hopefully, knowing the possible consequences ahead of time will deter teens from sexting.

If you're unfamiliar with text messaging, a great way to spend time with your son or daughter would be to have them sit down and show you the basics of text messaging. At first, they may be suspect of you wanting to enter into what they see as their realm, but it can also open up the lines of communication between you and your child. It will give you another way to stay in touch with them when they're outside the walls of your home. You can also model what the proper use of text-messaging looks like. However, don't fall into the trap of relying too heavily on text messaging. Face-to-face communication is still the most effective way to build relationships with teens.

Knowing the facts about sexting and discussing this trend with your teen is only the beginning. Having a strong, open relationship with your teen and modeling a life of integrated faith, as well as a biblical view of sexuality, will be the greatest preventive steps you can take as a parent to keep your teen free from the dangers of sexting. ■



Chris Wagner is a research assistant at the Center for Parent/Youth Understanding



The hubbly-bubbly *by Allison Davis*

Recently, I joined a group of my friends from college and went to the nearest hookah bar. We sat on cushions on the floor around a small coffee table. Colorfully patterned sheets draped the ceiling of the former church building that had been turned into a Middle Eastern coffee house and hookah bar. Egyptian music played softly in the background, and a hazy layer of smoke filled the air with the sweet smell of fruit flavors. The room was filled with groups similar to mine; mostly high

school and college aged, talking and joking while passing around a hose to smoke out of the hookah. Nearby a group of high school students complained about their teachers as they passed the hose to take a hit of the fruit flavored tobacco.

Another group of young people laughed together as they sipped on their Egyptian coffees and teas. This bar didn't serve alcohol, but did allow customers to bring their own if they were of age, and they also allowed them to smoke cigarettes and cloves. The positive mood and the calming ambiance made it easy to see why this exotic environment is rapidly gaining interest among youth in America.

Our waiter brought out a large bong-like contraption and placed it on the floor at the center of my group of friends. He shuffled some coals around at the top of this thing and then passed around a hose with a cobra head mouthpiece for each customer to smoke out of. When the hose was passed to me I looked into the face of the cobra with an opening at the mouth and thought of all the mouths that had probably touched this little head. I turned to my roommate, and my confused expression revealed my complete ignorance regarding all things hookah. She explained the procedure to me, "suck in the smoke, but don't inhale." I shot her another confused glance and she took the hose from my hand to show me how it was done. She held it to her mouth like a pipe and breathed in, then blew out a ring of smoke. She handed the hose back to me and repeated the instructions, "suck in, but don't inhale." I took the hose, suppressed all the germ phobic thoughts running through my head and smoked the hookah. It tasted of a mild peach flavor, and I felt like I was inhaling fog and not smoke. The taste of tobacco was so mild, and it felt harmless. But further research would lead me to discover that not to be the case, and instantly regret having subjected myself to so many health risks.



Young people go to hookah bars to relax, to socialize with their friends and to get a unique Middle Eastern cultural experience. Besides hookahs for smoking, hookah bars often sell Middle Eastern coffees, teas and other beverages. Much of the appeal of hookah smoking is the relaxed social atmosphere that accompanies it. Hookah bars provide a comfortable place to hang out for a few hours, and a mild high from the smoke ingested either first or second hand. Recognized as a milder

form of smoking, hookah smoking is most commonly regarded as a social activity that lends well to talking, hanging out and relaxing. Hookah goes by a number of names including narghile, shisha, goza and hubbly-bubbly. A hookah is simply a water pipe that is used to smoke shisha tobacco. It looks somewhat like a bong and consists of

four parts: at the top a bowl is filled with tobacco and heated by coals, a pipe connects the bowl to the base which is a jar filled with water, and a hose with a mouthpiece draws smoke out of the hookah up through the water. The tobacco is soaked in molasses or honey and can come in a variety of flavors including apple, strawberry, mint and cappuccino.

Hookah bars may be the most popular public venue for smoking the hookah, but they are not the only scene providing this smoking trend. Hookahs are easily purchased online and hookah parties have become popular among hookah smokers. Hookah parties generally consist of a group of friends and a hookah. Smokers may gather in a home or outdoors and socialize while passing around the hose for a hit. And while many hookah bars do not serve alcohol, privately owned hookahs may be filled with alcohol instead of water or may replace tobacco with hashish or marijuana for a stronger high.

The American Lung Association labeled hookah smoking as the "first new tobacco trend of the 21st century."¹ A common misconception surrounding hookah smoking is the false notion that it is less harmful than other forms of tobacco. Most smokers consider hookah smoke less irritating than cigarette smoke, and while the smoke is milder and more pleasant than cigarette smoke, the effects can be just as damaging. Hookah smoke is often marketed as being safer than cigarette smoking because the tobacco is filtered through water, but the water does not filter out the dangerous ingredi-

ents. Instead, hookah smoking has been linked to many of the same health risks as cigarette smoking. Hookah sessions also last longer than smoking a cigarette, and so the smokers are exposed to the tobacco for longer periods of time. The social aspect of hookah smoking—sharing the mouthpiece to smoke—increases the users' risk of spreading viruses such as herpes and hepatitis. Second hand smoke from the hookah also has harmful health risks for those who do not smoke, but are in hookah bars.

As Christians we are placed as stewards over our bodies, with the responsibility of caring for God's creation. This means guarding ourselves against harmful and potentially addictive substances. Inform your teens about the dangers of hookah smoking: viruses, lung disease, cancer and addiction. And keep in mind that while hookah bars may not require customers to purchase hookah, the second hand smoke creates a potential health risk for those present. While for many the appeal of the hookah is its enticing flavor and exotic experience, most young adults enjoy hookah bars for their social atmosphere. The laid back environment found in hookah bars

is similar to the ambiance of a coffee shop or a comfortable living room. For many teens, smoking the hookah has become a way to socialize, and hang out with friends in an adult environment. The risks of smoking are often overlooked or ignored by young people. And the popular opinion regarding hookah smoking is that it is a healthy way to get a high. I had several young adults try to convince me that the herbal components of the hookah, combined with the water filtration, make the hookah a healthy way to smoke. Justifications like these often are logical enough to convince teens and young adults that hookah smoking is a safe alternative to cigarettes. But the reality remains that tobacco is tobacco, and regardless of how it is ingested, it is neither healthy nor safe. ■

Allison Davis is a recent graduate of Geneva College. She served as a CPYU intern during the spring of 2008.

¹ "An emerging deadly trend: waterpipe tobacco use," *American Lung Association-Tobacco Policy Trend Alert*, February 2007, http://slati.lungusa.org/alerts/Trend%20Alert_Waterpipes.pdf, (May 14, 2008).

Beneath the skin

(continued from page 3)

of a good-looking 50-something married couple who were obviously still enamored with each other. The ad read, "We promised to grow old together, not look old together." We just don't get it do we?

Second, we must help them understand that their identity lies in who they are as God's created beings, and that they can only find their security in who they are in Christ. We all will get old. Our bodies will show signs of aging. Few if any of us will ever come close to looking like the manipulated images that command our worship and shape our aspirations for ourselves. We need to teach our students that no matter how much time, money and effort they put into reaching the standard, they'll never make it. It is only when they find their identity in Christ that they will be freed from the belief that personal worth is tied to appearance. They are lovable, worthwhile and valuable regardless of what they look like. God loves his fearfully and wonderfully made children just the way they are. Understanding and embracing this reality frees us from the pressure that we place on ourselves and on others.

Third, we need to live lives that are more than skin deep. Let's face it, there's not a single one of us who doesn't deal with this pressure on a daily basis. How we handle and respond to the pressure in our own lives will go a long way in teaching our kids to do the same. It's a classic case of actions speaking louder than words. In addition, we must be careful to

love *all* students God places in our lives, regardless of where they stand on our culture's appearance-based pecking order. Do you play favorites with the beautiful people who have been entrusted by God to your care? No really, think about it. It happens. Our calling is to see our students as God sees them—the same God who doesn't look at the outward appearance, but rather, who looks on the heart (I Sam. 16:7).

While watching a recent episode of *The First 48*, I did something shameful. The reality police show featured a lead investigator who at some point in his life had been horribly burned. His face and head were so terribly disfigured that he had no hair, and his ears and nose had been obviously reconstructed to look as close to real as possible. I found myself questioning how he could function. Ultimately, I was questioning his humanity based on his appearance. Shame on me. It reminded me of that pivotal line in the film *The Elephant Man*, where an ostracized and frustrated John Merrick cries out a message to all who would judge themselves or another by their outward appearance—"I am not an animal! I am a human being! I am ... a man!"

If only our kids would begin to realize this about themselves and others. ■



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



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 Kissed a Girl"

Background/summary: This is the first single off 23-year-old Katy Perry's debut album, *One of the Boys*. Born Katheryn Hudson, she grew up in a Christian home where both her parents were conservative pastors. She released a Christian album under her real name in 2001. Claiming she was not a good Christian girl during her adolescence, she is pursuing her musical career with a new name, new sound and a new message/worldview. The single was pre-released on April 29, 2008, and quickly rose on the charts. The full album debuted on June 17, 2008. Perry has been dubbed "the next big thing" by *Blender* magazine, and the "one to watch" by *Teen People*.

Discover: What is the message/worldview?

- The video for this catchy and musically formulaic pop song opens with a quick image of Perry lying seductively in bed. Images continue to flash across the screen quickly for the video's duration, showing Perry and other scantily lingerie-clad girls caressing themselves and flirting seductively with the camera.
- While the song's visual content serves almost as a soft-porn teaser that is sure to be a draw for sexually curious young male viewers, the song's title and lyrical content tell Perry's story of kissing another girl. This is really a video for young girls.
- In the song, Perry says she didn't plan or intend the kiss. Rather, with a "drink in hand" she lost her discretion and satisfied her curiosity over another girl who caught her attention.
- After the kiss, she says, "I kissed a girl and I liked it/The taste of her cherry chapstick/I kissed a girl just to try it."
- As she processes her response to the kiss, she describes how it felt both "so wrong" and "so right." Still, this "don't mean I'm in love tonight."
- The random and boundary-less nature of sexual experimentation in today's culture is captured in the fact that Perry says she doesn't even know the girl's name, and that the girl is her "experimental game."
- Perry goes on to justify the kiss by describing "us girls" in purely physical terms as "so magical, soft skin, red lips, so kissable, hard to resist so touchable, too good to deny it, ain't no big deal, it's innocent."
- As the video draws to a close Perry says, "I hope my boyfriend don't mind it." The camera draws back and Perry is seen sleeping in bed next to her boyfriend. As she opens her eyes she realizes she's been dreaming, but the smile on her face as she rests her head back on her pillow indicates that she enjoyed the dream.

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

- The video clearly depicts a current cultural reality related to

our fallenness as human beings, particularly how the fall affects our God-given sexuality. The Scriptures tell us that God made *all things* and pronounced them *all* "good." In Genesis 3:6 *all things* are polluted by sin. "I Kissed a Girl" offers lyrical and visual evidence of this brokenness and how it is being uniquely embraced, expressed and celebrated in today's youth culture through distortions of sexuality.

- God's clear plan for celebrating and experiencing our sexuality in all its glorious fullness invites us into exercising



that gift in the context of a committed, life-long, heterosexual marriage. Fornication, adultery and homosexuality are wrong.

- We all make decisions based on some authority. In this case, Perry opts out of making behavioral choices based on God's plan as revealed in His Word, instead choosing a personal, feeling-based ethic. She does what she does based solely on feeling and attraction, thereby justifying any of the choices she makes. The Scriptures call us to make our choices and live our lives according to the revealed will of God and to His glory, not our own satisfaction.
- Women are depicted as objects. The Scriptures teach that God looks on the heart, not on outward appearance. In addition, we are to find our identity in who we are in Christ. Not in what we look like on the outside.

Decide: What do I do with it?

- Because it mirrors our culture, "I Kissed a Girl" offers those called to love and lead kids an eye-opening glimpse into several rapidly developing mainstream cultural realities. Homosexuality is no longer stigmatized, but is accepted and celebrated as

normal. Feelings are the guide for life. Girls are taught to assume the role of objectified boy toys. Our teenage boys increasingly enjoy watching girl-on-girl sexual activity. Our teenage girls—even those void of lesbian leanings or feelings—are engaging in what we might call “experimental homosexuality.” While it’s not pretty, these are realities we must recognize and understand.

- Because it serves to direct young viewers and listeners, “I Kissed a Girl” is more than a song kids will listen to. It actually serves as a map to life, guiding impressionable kids into accepting and practicing the values, attitudes and behaviors that are depicted and promoted in the song. This includes a postmodern ethical relativism, and homosexuality.
- The song and video should be played for parents and youth workers. Use it to spark discussion on evolving values, attitudes and behaviors, along with how to bring the light of God’s Word to bear on those realities in our ministering to kids.

Movie/DVD: *Lars and the Real Girl*

Background/summary: This critically acclaimed 2007 film from writer Nancy Oliver (*Six Feet Under*) follows the journey of a 27-year-old delusional introvert and the community that loves and supports him on his path to emotional healing. While the film had a limited and relatively low profile theater run, its engaging nature and powerful message has fueled its growing popularity among thoughtful film buffs. The film has created a buzz among movie viewers who endeavor to engage film critically from a distinctively Christian perspective.

Discover: What is the message/worldview?

- Twenty-seven-year old Lars Lindstrom is a lovable and functional introvert who—while he is able to keep a job—struggles relationally. His emotional brokenness is rooted in his upbringing. His mother died during his birth, leaving him feeling guilty, vulnerable and fearful of death. Lars then grew up with his father, who retreated into himself and was never the same after his wife died. Lars’ older brother, Gus, left home to pursue a more normal life and was able to overcome his grief.
- After their father died, Lars and his brother Gus inherited their parents’ house. Gus lives in the house with his pregnant wife, Karen. While half the house belongs to Lars, Gus and Karen cannot convince him to move in. Instead, Lars has chosen to live in the sparsely furnished garage, where he spends his time sitting quietly by himself, shyly avoiding Gus and Karen’s meal invitations. Besides going to his office cubicle job, Lars regularly attends church.
- Karen lovingly reaches out to Lars relentlessly, hoping to see him move beyond his introverted tendencies. At the same time, Margo—a new co-worker at Lars’ office— expresses an interest in him. Lars remains shy, keeping people at arms’ length.
- A male co-worker who loves to use his computer to surf the Internet for pornography—a practice Lars does not like—tells Lars about a Web site where you can design and purchase your

own life-like female sex doll. Even though he acts disinterested, Lars purchases a doll and has it shipped to his home in an effort to find relational—not sexual—companionship.

- Since Katy Perry and her music are finding their places in the collective consciousness of today’s youth culture, she and her music are realities we can’t ignore. Kids are seeing and hearing the music of Katy Perry. We suggest that after securing parental permission, youth workers view the video and deconstruct its message with their middle school and high school students. The exercise not only will offer opportunities to bring the light of God’s Word to bear on the song’s faulty messages, but will serve to teach kids how to think biblically and Christianly about their media choices.

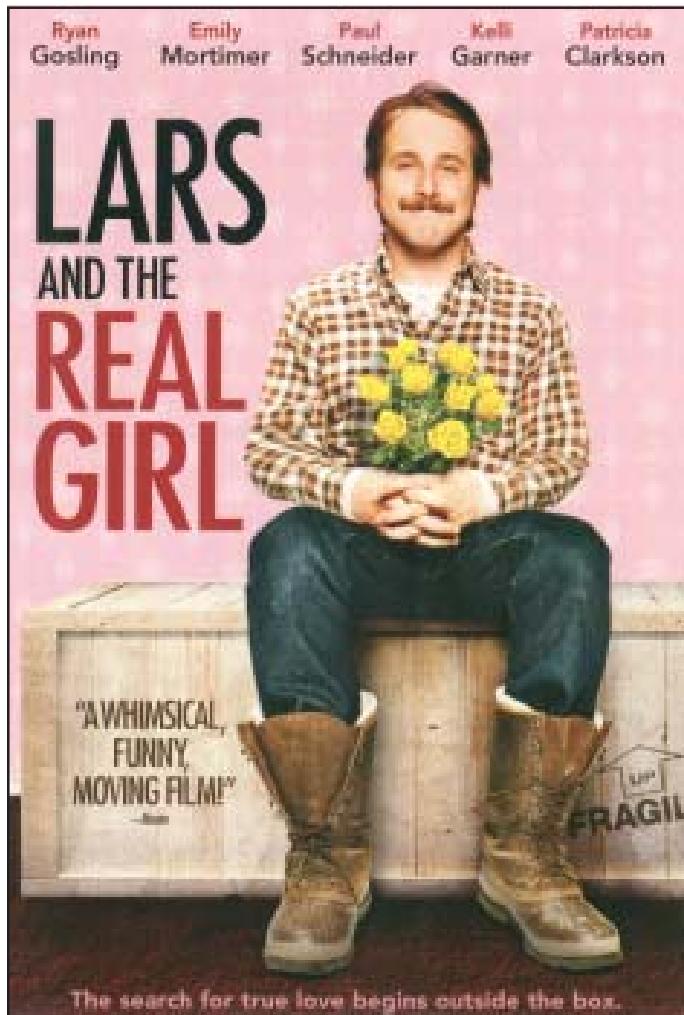
- Katy Perry’s own personal story and transformation can be used to spark a discussion on the true nature of being a Christ-follower, how to integrate faith into all of life, and how to guard ourselves from falling prey to dominant cultural values that oppose the way and will of God.

own life-like female sex doll. Even though he acts disinterested, Lars purchases a doll and has it shipped to his home in an effort to find relational—not sexual—companionship.

- Lars goes to Gus and Karen to announce that he has “a visitor” he’d like them to meet. They are stunned when they meet “Bianca,” the doll Lars purchased. Gus and Karen learn from Lars that Bianca is a missionary on sabbatical who was raised by nuns and doesn’t speak English. Lars treats Bianca as if she is real (respecting and loving her emotionally without ever using her as a sex toy for physical fulfillment). Bianca is safe for Lars because she is made of plastic and will not, like his mother, die. Lars believes God made Bianca to help people.
- Gus and Karen decide to visit the family doctor, Dagmar Berman, with Lars and Bianca. With great sensitivity and tenderness, Dr. Berman plays along, diagnosing a delusional disorder that Lars has entered into as a way of coping with the brokenness in his life. She begins to talk with Lars with great compassion, dealing with his emotional issues through treating Bianca for “low blood pressure.”
- Bianca stays in the house with Gus and Karen, sleeping in the pink room that used to belong to Lars’ mother. Gus (reluctantly at first, but eventually wholeheartedly) and Karen love Lars by treating Bianca with great hospitality.
- As the film proceeds, all the people in Lars’ life—church members, family, co-workers, etc.—unify to love the lovable Lars and his “friend” Bianca by playing along rather than ostracizing, condemning or writing him off as crazy. Lars continues to meet with Dr. Berman and reveals more and more of his brokenness as he tells his own story through Bianca and her “illness.”
- Eventually, the love of those around him leads Lars to let Bianca “die.” In doing so, he comes to life, moving further and further out of his shell, coming to terms with the guilt and brokenness of his past, and into more healthy relationships with both himself and the real people who are part of his life.
- In the end, Bianca has helped Lars and all the people in his life to learn about compassion, love and community.

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

- All human beings have been created by God for relationships. Humankind's fall into sin affects all relationships, as we



are broken people who struggle to relate while experiencing the ugly consequences of the fall, including death. Lars' life trumpets this reality, showing us that sin has consequences, that life hurts, and that the fallout from sin and brokenness extends far and wide.

- Lars' church community bucks conventional wisdom and practice. Instead of turning their back on or condemning Lars because of his delusional behavior, they are led by their pastor to consider the question: "What would Jesus do?" while living out "the one true law of God" to "love one another." With Christlike tenderness and compassion, they embrace Lars (and Bianca) and patiently love him into wholeness.
- In a world where sin leads to deep relational brokenness, there are people who are hesitant to love and be loved. Lars lives out the struggle between retreating from relationships and life, or to engage with and love others. In an adolescent world marked by systemic abandonment, many kids learn to cope in what may seem to be strange and unusual ways, sometimes resorting to desperate isolationistic measures.
- In a world where sex is falsely embraced as an antidote to relational brokenness and personal emptiness, you might

assume that a film starring a sex doll would naturally go down that same path. But just as the Scriptures teach us that sex *is not* redemptive, the film "redeems" Bianca's nature by using her to send a message that it is through self-giving love that we are redeemed, and through the love of others that we are pointed toward the Redeemer.

- The film is filled with strong visual imagery that expresses deep biblical truth, particularly in relation to the movement from death to new life.
- Ultimately, it is the love and "ministry" of a unified community that leads to Lars' healing. Lars would most likely be viewed and perhaps tolerated in most communities as the "village fool" or "idiot." But Lars' family, friends and townspeople live out the priorities of "the upside-down Kingdom" that Christ calls his followers to embrace and live.

Decide: What do I do with it?

- It may come as a surprise to ratings-watchers that *Lars and the Real Girl* is rated PG-13. How can a film about a man and a sex doll get away with such a rating? The reality is that this *is not* really a film about a man and a sex doll (it is void of nudity and sexual content). It *is* a film about the brokenness of humanity, the longing for redemption, and the need for the community to understand and reach out to those who are different with the compassion of Christ. Consequently, this is a great film to watch and discuss with mature and thoughtful teens, either in a family or youth group setting.
- The film can prompt discussions on numerous issues including family relationships, human depravity, the consequences of the fall into sin, the Body of Christ, compassion, love, mission, death, brokenness and mental illness.
- The film could be used as a springboard for self-examination and to spark disclosure of hidden relational issues with kids from difficult backgrounds. Watch together, and then ask viewers where and how they see themselves in the film.
- The film reminds us of the need to listen, to be vulnerable and to be patient with those struggling with brokenness. These should increasingly be marks of our ministries and relationships with students. Are we asking kids questions and inviting them to open up, or do we spend our time talking at them? Are we willing to make ourselves vulnerable as we invest our lives in the broken social outcast? In addition, they are patient with Lars, letting change happen rather than forcing change to move too quickly, or moving on if change doesn't happen quickly enough. Are we patient and faithful, letting God do His work in young lives in His time?
- In the end, Bianca lays down her life so that Lars can live. In this respect, she is the redeemer/Christ-figure in the film. The film can be used to spark discussions on the life, atoning death and resurrection of Christ.
- *Lars and the Real Girl* is an excellent film to use as a "training ground" to teach media/film evaluation skills to students. The film is filled with great imagery and script lines that can be discovered, dissected and discussed in terms of the hints and messages they communicate not only about the film's meaning, but about Christian spirituality and life.

Movie/DVD: *Bella*

Background/summary: An international soccer star, Jose, is on his way to sign a multimillion dollar contract when a series of events unfold that brings his career to an abrupt end. A waitress, Nina, struggling to make it in New York City discovers she is pregnant. A simple gesture of kindness brings them together, turning an ordinary day into an unforgettable experience. *Bella* was the highest-rated film of any movie released in 2007 by the users of Rotten Tomatoes, the largest movie review Web site in the world. It took top prize at the 2006 Toronto International Film Festival by winning the "People's Choice Award." But it is still widely unknown. The low-budget film only reached select cities before its highly anticipated DVD release in May 2008.

Discover: What is the message/worldview?

- The film opens with a narrator saying, "If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans." This quote sets the stage for the message of the entire movie. Life takes many twists and turns, and it rarely goes exactly as planned. But God's hand is still present regardless of the circumstance.
- Doing what is right can be costly. The main characters both have to make difficult decisions. Nina, a recently fired waitress, is pregnant and is set on having an abortion. Jose leaves his job as a cook in order to try to convince Nina that an abortion is not the only option.
- Family and community are essential. The film does an excellent job of showing how important the family is to Latino culture and to all cultures. Parents care for their children. Children deeply respect parents and siblings. Each family member is supportive and wants what is best for the other members of the family.
- Passion is needed to live life well. Jose was a world class soccer player and after a series of events no longer plays. At one point in the film his mother explains that he no longer has passion and that you need passion to play soccer. Nina is in a similar situation. She also has no passion for life and needs a more meaningful reason for living. For both Jose and Nina, the movie is about finding their passion.
- Having an abortion is not an easy decision. The movie does not sugarcoat the complexity of an unwanted pregnancy. Nina does not have a job or a relationship with the father. She can not envision a scenario where having the child would be a responsible decision. But through a series of events, Nina begins to see adoption as a viable alternative.

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

- God is in control of our lives, even when it seems impossible to be true. The Danish theologian, Søren Kierkegaard, once said, "Life is lived forward, but understood backward." This movie serves as commentary on that remark. The characters are forced to trust that making the right decision will work out in the end.
- *Bella* and the Bible affirm life. The movie deals honestly with both the reality of the pain of death and the joy of life. Nina's

initial response is that when "you have a kid you lose your freedom." The father wants her to "take care of it" as if children are simply an inconvenience. The movie challenges this perspective and offers a biblical response, and Nina comes to grips with the truth of a Christian worldview.

- People are interdependent, not independent. Nina is trying desperately to live an independent life, making it on her own. Her pregnancy and interaction with Jose's family remind her of the biblical truth that an independent life is impossible.

Decide: What do I do with it?

- This is a powerful movie that shouldn't be missed. It is a perfect example of why movies matter and how they have the



potential to impact lives. The art of the film itself is worth a discussion. Every shot and scene is intentional. How does the director utilize light and color? What is the significance of flowers, food and butterflies? How does the soundtrack connect with the themes of the movie? Using *Bella* to discuss questions like these will open up students' eyes when watching other films.

- *Bella* is a pro-life film and many Christians have been attracted to promoting its central, life-affirming, message. Too often, however, Christians fail to take into account how difficult it can be to bring an unwanted child into this world. This film offers an opportunity to deal genuinely with the complexity of the pro-life, pro-choice debate. Why does Nina think an abortion is the obvious choice? Why does Jose think adoption is the right decision?
- This movie focuses on two characters who have the opportunity to either run from their past or learn from their past. This is an important conversation to have with teenagers. What are the dangers in running from our past? Why do we often fear learning from our past mistakes? How do you relate to the way the characters deal with the mistakes they have made? Which ways are positive? Which are negative?
- The director and producer of this film have been outspoken about their desire to portray Latino culture in a positive light. They believe Latinos are stereotyped by Hollywood as either criminals or romantics. Do you agree with their assessment and frustration? This film can be used to discuss stereotypes of all kinds, especially those created by the media.