

Critique

Helping Christians Develop Skill in Discernment

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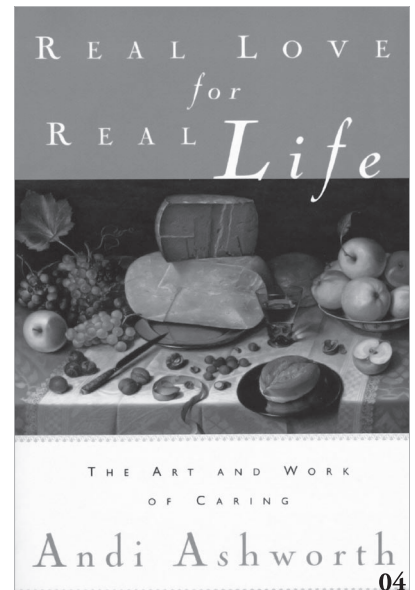
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Editor's Note



Holy but winsome

As I travel and speak people often ask what Ransom is about, which is a question I tend to think about anyway. For one thing, it's easy to lose focus in the midst of all the busyness, or to be distracted onto

rabbit trails that are interesting but not quite to the point. So reviewing what our focus is, what we believe God has called us to do is a healthy exercise. If nothing else it helps me decide what to say Yes to, and what to say No to—and both are equally important.

Thinking about what Ransom is about also gives me the opportunity to reflect on how to express it creatively. I realize that people must choose with care what to give attention to, and if I can't verbalize what Ransom is about in a way that captures their attention, I can't blame them for ignoring what we offer. I am also keenly aware that there is a fine line between finding a creative way to say what we are about, and engaging in spin, a line I do not wish to cross. So it becomes an ongoing exercise in discernment, which seems appropriate enough.

One way to capture what Ransom is about is to pose three thought experiments, questions that cut to the heart of what it means to live faithfully in a pluralistic world:

Question #1: Consider asking ten non-Christians this question: If you converted to Christianity today, do you think your life would be larger, fuller, richer, more attractive and creative, more involved with the people, circumstances, art, & culture around you? Or do you think your life would be smaller, narrower, more withdrawn, judgmental, and negative, less win-

some and creative, less involved with the people, art, circumstances, & culture around you? Now, how do you think they will respond? Where did they get this impression? Why did we teach it to them? And how can we, by God's grace, reverse this—at least in our own lives?

Question #2: How can we live a life that is 'squeaky clean' (above reproach at work, in one's financial dealings, and in one's relationships with the opposite sex) without being or appearing to be an unapproachable prude or a frightful bore?

Question #3: How can we live out and talk about Christianity winsomely in a way that might make sense in our postmodern and pluralistic world, without swerving from, dumbing down, or compromising the historic biblical faith?

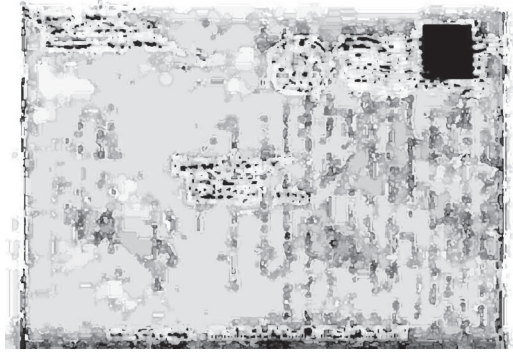
We are interested in exploring these questions. It's what we keep in mind as we prepare talks, as we edit *Critique* and *Notes from Toad Hall*, and as we spend time in conversation. We want to stimulate Christians to reflect deeply on these issues, to discuss them honestly, and to seek answers that will exhibit glimmers of glory and grace in our dark world. We are not interested in doing it alone—we are *Ransom Fellowship*, after all. This is a task not for a few "experts," but for the community of God's people to work on together.

And if Ransom is able to contribute a bit to this end, we'll be very grateful.

Sources: The first question comes from Ellis Potter, a former Zen Buddhist who was converted to Christ at L'Abri, and has gone on to have a rich teaching ministry. The second is excerpted from *A Public Faith* by Charles Drew (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress; 2000) pp. 40. I am grateful to both. ■

~Denis Haack

Dialogue



re: "Christian" metal and testosterone

Send e-mail to:

letters@ransomfellowship.org

You are invited to take part in *Critique's* Dialogue. Address all correspondence to:

Ransom Fellowship
1150 West Center Street
Rochester, MN 55902

or e-mail:
letters@ransomfellowship.org

Unfortunately, we are unable to respond personally to all correspondence received, but each one is greatly appreciated. We reserve the right to edit letters for length.

I often read the articles on your site and find them helpful when it comes to faith and my family. I'm an assistant youth group counselor and I would just like to point something out.

In the article "Would Jesus Mosh? How 'Christian' Is Christian Metal?" [http://ransomfellowship.org/Music_Metal.html] David John Seel, Jr. stated, "Raw physicality and self-inflicted pain are dominate themes. The testosterone level is palpable. It's choreographed antisocial aggressive behavior. There are good reasons why heavy metal concerts have been called the 'sensory equivalent to war.' Bruised and bloodied bodies leave concerts high on animal carnality and social disregard."

Mr. Seel should know that the testosterone level is a misnomer, (for future reference) unless you are discussing women. Recent medical research has found that such violent and aggressive behavior is actually prevalent in males with a testosterone deficiency and with higher than normal (for males) estrogen levels. The adverse is true with violent women.

In addition, adolescent years are tumultuous, especially emotionally. Many of the students in the youth group for which I am an assistant counselor state that loud energetic music expresses their feeling. They've also said they feel like they are proclaiming their faith with the strength of emotion it deserves when they do it loud and frantically. Through many classes regarding human behavior, it's been stated and shown again and again that this behavior wanes with age naturally, unless there are underlying physical or emotional issues.

However, I've told them that moshing harms you and others. Rock all you want, express your faith, just don't be violent or inflict pain.

Thank you for listening to a nitpicker!

L.A. Williams
via email

David John Seel responds:

One approaches a response to a person with an email address, "Lady Vixxen," with some caution. I appreciate your corrective on male hormones. In general, I do not see my responsibility as a teacher or discipler as a champion of adolescent irresponsibility, but as a guide and advocate for adult maturity. I actually don't believe in a separate social category of "adolescents." They are and should be treated as adults in my view. Jesus at 12 or Mary at 16 is the exemplar of such expectations.

The secular heavy metal scene is filled with attitudes and antics that are largely incongruous with godliness. Much of my analysis in the article you quote is from secular sociologists who have studied this world much more closely than I. One can approach heavy metal music from a number of different perspectives: from the point of view of understanding the adolescent mind and reaching them, from the point of view of creating a thinly veiled Christian alternative, and from the perspective of analyzing the worldview from which it emerges. I would hope that as you work with young adults, you teach them to ask a wide range of thoughtful questions that this musical genre raises and have them examine them in the light of a biblical understanding of reality. The essence of godliness is learning to love like Jesus. Anything that legitimizes anger would seem to be counterproductive to discipleship.

Nonetheless, thank you for your thoughtful response. Blessings on your ministry to young adults. It is a noble and humbling calling. Only God is sufficient to the task. ■

Andi Ashworth talks

Sometimes I feel overwhelmed by the brokenness. News of earthquakes and hurricanes, friends whose eyes fill with tears when I ask how their lives are unfolding, haunting photographs of children picking through piles of trash in one of the many slums which now dot the sprawling urban centers around the globe. I listen as Death Cab for Cutie sings “Crooked Teeth,” evoking a lostness that so many share. “You can’t find nothin’ at all if there was nothin’ there all along / There were churches, theme parks, and malls, but there was nothing there all along.” We yearn to be home, to be swept up and enfolded in a relationship that will finally not disappoint.

The brokenness will always haunt us in this in-between time, while we trust a Savior has appeared yet wait for his return to complete our redemption. It’s called the *consummation*. The word is intimate and relational, with sexual overtones. In the gospel we are not merely promised the legal forgiveness of an aloof God, but of being “in Christ,” an intimate relationship with a God who is both infinite and personal.

In a world of such brokenness, our gospel can seem unbelievable. When every significant relationship seems to fragment and disappoint, why hold out hope that an invisible God and an obscure Hebrew rabbi have managed a cosmic solution? Especially when so many of this God’s loudest followers are so negative, withdrawn, and judgmental? Our calling as Christians is to live out and talk about the gospel in ways our pluralistic world might be able to understand. Which is why how

we treat people is so vital: our relationships must reflect something of the reality of the relationship on offer in the gospel. It will never be perfect, but it can be real. And one aspect of this involves *caring* for people. It’s something our world is starving for, yet few seem to have time or stomach for.



So, we thought we should talk to Andi Ashworth about caring, and let you listen in on our conversation. We chose Andi for two reasons. The first is that she has written a superb book on the topic, *Real Love for Real Life*. The other reason is

that we’ve come to know Andi, so we can confirm that she lives what she teaches. Andi listens, really listens. She makes you feel at home, as if she really wants to be with you instead of doing something else. And over the years she has richly touched a multitude of people, not with fancy programs, but by caring for them. Andi doesn’t just talk about grace, she embodies it.

We have room for only part of the interview here; the entire conversation with Andi can be found on Ransom’s web site (http://www.ransomfellowship.org/Conv_Ashworth_Andi_Caring.html).

Critique: What do you mean by caring?

Andi Ashworth: God designed us for relationships and he designed us to care for each other in those relationships—in marriage, families, friendships, the Body of

Christ, neighborhoods, schools, offices—across the whole spectrum of life. Giving care to each other is really about being human—the need to give and receive care is woven into the fabric of our being.

We can understand caring best if we think of it in three broad categories. The first is a calling that we all share as followers of Jesus: to live in such a way that love is embodied and real to other people. It’s a lifestyle of caring, something that comes with an increasing sensitivity to the needs of others. No matter what kind of work occupies the main part of our day we can approach the people around us with an attitude of care, a welcoming demeanor that exhibits interest and empathy. In any situation, whether sharing an office, a classroom, or a neighborhood, people always have so many more aspects to their lives than the one dimensional setting in which we know them. So we’re called to care about people in tangible ways, not as projects, never as projects, but as

human beings with complex lives. The love of God and the love of people is so tightly woven together that you can’t separate the two, and it grows and deepens as we mature in the faith.

How we treat people is vital: our relationships must reflect something of the reality of the relationship on offer in the gospel.

The second category of caring is something that’s more focused and intensive and seasonal: the season of raising children and creating a home that’s interesting and alive and welcoming, the season of walking through an illness with a friend, the season of caring for an elderly relative. Even if the caregiving is long-term, it’s still temporary in the sense that it won’t always be the same.

The third category is more of a long

about caring

term vocation—a lifework that manifests over a lifetime. Some of God's people have specific caregiving gifts that coincide with a longing to respond to human need in practical, creative ways. In this category some people are naturally more nurturing than others. Some are drawn to care for the sick or the dying. Some are gifted at creating beauty in their environment, or maybe they're skilled cooks and they love to serve in that way. Some people have a heavy emphasis in their lives to the area of hospitality. It's more intensive and continual than the general calling to practice hospitality that all Christians share.

In Quentin Schultz's new book *Here I Am: Now What on Earth Should I be Doing?* he writes, "We are all called to care compassionately. We glorify God by being kindhearted, empathetic servants in all stations." It's a good summary. Caring is a way of being and doing that connects across the whole of our lives. Our stations include jobs, situations, and relationships so it's all encompassing.

So much of caring involves the "ministry of presence," which is a phrase I stole from the author Christine Pohl. As I understand it, the ministry of presence means being fully present with another person, paying attention to them, listening, and being interested in who they are. I struggle with this one. I have the appearance of being a good listener, but the reality is that my mind is noisy and it wanders easily. I can be quite a ways into a conversation before I realize how much I've missed. So I want to hone my listening skills because I think there are times when it's the best gift we can offer. In general, we're a busy, distracted people always on call through e-mails, cell phones, Blackberries, Palm Trios, laptop computers and the like. When you're on the receiving end, the one needing the

care of a listening ear, you realize how much it matters for someone to be fully present and truly engaged in what you're saying.

Critique: How does caring fit in with family, community, home?

Andi Ashworth: Our role as family members, community members, and makers of homes always includes the work

of caring. For example, my role as a grandmother calls me to a work as a grandmother. I'm called to be thoughtful and intentional about the gifts I want to impart, to care for my grandchildren physically and emotionally when they're with me, to love them in ways that are a grandparent's unique privilege. It involves lots of the hours and days of my life. A role and a relationship doesn't exist apart from the work it takes to serve the people in those relationships. A role such as husband, wife, parent, friend, grandfather, or citizen doesn't stand on its own without responsible, necessary caring activity woven in. Of course, the closer the relationship, the more care is involved. But in some way we're all called to care for the people around us—whether we share the same home or the same community.

The classic Protestant doctrine of vocation, which comes from the 16th century Reformers, sees the whole of our life as our vocation under Christ. It's a way of understanding our vocation as the people of God that makes the most

sense to me as I've read the Scriptures over many years. Our vocation is a combination of our stations in life and the avenues through which we relate to others: in marriage, family,

friendships, neighborhoods, citizenship in a city, state, and nation, and membership in the body of Christ—both locally and globally. It also comes through the gifts and talents God has given us to be used for the sake of others. When we understand our vocation in this way we see that the caring work, which flows from our roles and relationships is so intertwined with other kinds of work that it's hard to separate it all. And we shouldn't try. When we do our lives get compartmentalized and we view some parts, perhaps the paid, professional part, as very important and the work of care as incidental.

Martin Luther wrote, "The entire world is full of service to God, not only the church but also the home, the kitchen, the cellar, the workshop, and the field of townsfolk and farmer." This view of serving topples our neatly defined categories of work as one part of life, service in the church as another, and life at home as completely separate from both work and service.

Critique: Where do singles fit in?

Andi Ashworth: Singles fit in everywhere. As the Bible makes clear from beginning to end, caring is everyone's responsibility. Unless a person lives as a hermit, completely cut off from human relationships, there are always people to care for in some way. All you have to do is walk out your front door and look around.

Critique: It's obvious that caring for people is a lot of work, but you describe it as an "art" too. How does art figure into it?

Andi Ashworth: I understand the art of care in two ways. The first idea is from the Webster's *New Collegiate Dictionary* which gives one definition of art as a "skill acquired

Unless a person lives as a hermit, there are always people to care for in some way. All you have to do is walk out your front door and look around.

Conversation cont.

by experience, study, or observation.” As you care for people in different ways, especially in long-term situations, you have a growing body of knowledge, of skill and expertise.

The second way to think of the art of caring is in the use of skill and creative imagination. Caregiving is a very creative work. You are imagining for the good of other people and then creating—creating beautiful things or beautiful experiences. We can serve people through visual beauty, taste, good smells, music, texture, and color. Part of our image bearing capacity is to create in all of life because we’re made in the image of God, the Supreme Artist. It’s just so obvious that God cares about beauty because it’s everywhere in the creation. Our desire for beauty is a reflection of a God who loves the beautiful. We respond to beauty in deep ways. When beauty is offered as a gift of love, what is seen or heard or tasted goes past the surface and into the heart.

Right now as I’m answering this question, I’m sitting with my laptop at the edge of Lake Tahoe in Northern California, looking out at one of the most beautiful, clear lakes in the country. The lake is ringed with the snow-capped Sierra Nevada Mountains. It’s a breathtaking view and I am definitely being cared for and refreshed through this beauty! But I’m also cared for through the beauty that people create with God-given resources. I’m cared for when I walk through a garden, enjoy the food and fellowship of a wonderfully prepared meal, or partake in a celebration. I’m cared for by the mood that’s created through thoughtful attention to detail in a room. All of those things and hundreds more are places to

use imagination and creativity. It’s about making artful choices in how to live and care for others.

The big idea is that we can be designers in caregiving. We can co-create with God in making memories for our people. This aspect of caring is something I like to call living art, because it’s art that’s passing, it comes in moments of time and then it’s gone. But it’s permanent in the memory. It’s art that tells a story. The story says: this is evidence that I love you. Add it to your memory bank and call it to mind when you need to remember that you’re loved. The memories can be an accumulation of smaller, daily experiences where you put in a little more thought and effort to make special

We’re all called to give care in some way, but it takes discernment to know what that means beyond our immediate circles of family and friends.

times out of ordinary days. Or they can be a product of the more set apart times of lavish care. For example, celebrations can be a time for lavish care. You do a lot of planning, cook favorite foods, dress up the environment of the house. The extravagant care says, “This is my opportunity to show you through my efforts and my artistry how much I love you. Because I love you so much I will not hold back; I will give my all.”

Our society places such a high value on speed and efficiency, and the creation of beauty isn’t practical. It’s not convenient. In fact, it’s almost getting to be politically incorrect to do things in the caregiving realm that take time, because as a culture we value convenience so much. But if we’re convinced that going the extra mile actually matters, we’re more

likely to take the longer route to create meaningful experiences: beautiful environments, home cooked meals that invite conversation and lingering at the table, traditions that create strong connections within our families. We need a longer view towards what we’re creating, which is hopefully a slow but steady undercurrent of good in the hearts and minds of those we care for. There’s definitely a place for short cuts and conveniences. We all feel the pressure and overload of modern life and are grateful for things that help. But there are also times to resist the shortcuts, to resist the dehumanizing of our lives.

So much in caregiving is about living from a place of hope—hoping that small deeds done with great love will matter in the grand scheme of things. We can’t control the outcome, but we do have the starting place of faith, hope, and love and that’s the mindset we can work from. When we

live in light of the gospel and view time and people from the perspective of eternity, we can have faith that even the small things we do to show our people they matter, can make a difference.

Critique: Why should we bother?

Andi Ashworth: Caring for people in concrete ways is deeply connected to following Jesus—that’s why we should bother. It’s the outworking of our faith. It’s a life of response flowing out of the care and grace we ourselves receive from God. We really can’t separate real demonstrations of care from the gospel itself. The summary command of our faith is this: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. And love your neighbor as yourself. (From Mark 12: 30-31) Our neighbor ranges

from the ones with whom we share a house to our literal next-door neighbor to a neighbor across the world. Our neighbor is someone in need, whether the person in need is our roommate or children or someone in another country.

I'm reading a book of interviews with Bono (from the rock band U2) titled *Bono in Conversation with Michka Assayas*.

Speaking of the African AIDS, poverty, and famine emergency and our responsibility to help other nations in great need, Bono made the point, "You can't have the benefits of globalization without some of the responsibilities. We are now next-door neighbors through television images, through radio, through the Internet..." (pg. 189). As my friend Steve Garber teaches, with knowledge comes responsibility, and responsibility leads to care. To know is to care.

Critique: How does one get started nurturing a life of caring for people without taking on too much too quickly?

Andi Ashworth: Of course this can be a very overwhelming thing. Sometimes I can't bear to open a newspaper and read of more people in pain and despair across the world or to learn about another person's tragedy in my own community. There's no possible way to respond to all the need we become aware of, even within our own circles of friends and acquaintances. It's so important to understand that we have layers of responsibility that begin with the people closest to us in relationship and in geography and moves out from there.

For years my pastor, Scotty Smith, has been encouraging our congregation to examine whether we're living driven lives rather than called lives and to say "yes" and "no" in light of our callings. We're all called to give care in some way, but it takes discernment to

know what that means beyond our immediate circles of family and friends. We have to start by assessing our responsibilities and commitments.

Is our life full in areas that we know God has already called us to? Can we handle one more involvement and stay true to our current responsibilities? Do we have an opening in our lives just waiting to be filled? Is the caring opportunity an area we're drawn to and gifted for? Are there already people in

place to give the care that's needed? Do they need back-up people to give them respite? Is there a way we can contribute to a team effort? Can we do something short term? Can we be faithful to pray? Can we give money? Can we be politically active on some scale to affect good change?

There are so many ways to give care. The possibilities are endless as we pray and imagine how we might contribute something good to a particular situation. But we do need navigational tools to help us in our caregiving. Without them we're in danger of putting ourselves in the place of God, who is the only one able to care for everyone everywhere at all times.

Critique: In your book you say "isolating oneself in the Christian life is a dangerous thing to do."

Andi Ashworth: The only way I know to answer this is to say that if you want to be in relationships where it's safe to admit need, you have to be that kind of person yourself. You have to be willing to admit need and be vulnerable and real and down to earth. More often than not, that kind of demeanor draws others out of their self-protective shells and frees them to be honest too. Be a safe haven for others and there's a good chance that those kinds of relationships will spread.

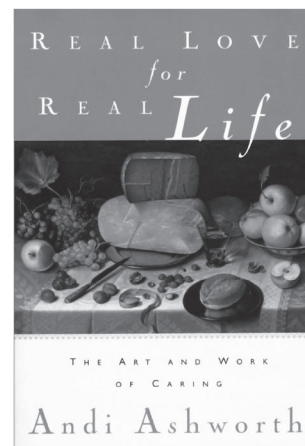
I know that many churches are not safe

places to admit deep need and ongoing struggles. No one can change the people around them, but we can all begin with ourselves to offer what we'd like to find in other people. Of course there's risk involved and you may get burned. But there are always people out there who long for honest, safe relationships and will respond when they find it in others. Honest strugglers are a gift to the Body of Christ. They set the tone for others to be real about ongoing struggles with sin and life in a fallen world. Even when people do put off an attitude that things can always be tied up in a nice, happy Christian bow, it can't last. At some point life will overwhelm them, suffering will enter in, and they will have to admit need and vulnerability. ■

~Andi Ashworth & Denis Haack

Editor's Note: Only about half the interview fit in these pages; the entire conversation between Denis Haack and Andi Ashworth is available on Ransom's web site (http://www.ransomfellowship.org/Conv_Ashworth_Andi_Caring.html).

Recommended Reading:



Idols of the Heart

One of the themes that winds its way through the Scriptures is idolatry. The biblical story barely opens, for example, when Rachel steals her father's "household gods" when she and Jacob return to Canaan (Genesis 31:19). Later, after Israel becomes a nation, the people convince Aaron to sculpt a golden calf at Sinai (Exodus 32). Solomon, whose wisdom, and scientific and artistic prowess attracted a steady flow of world leaders to his court was seduced by idolatry (1 Kings 11:4-5). And the apostle John ends his first epistle with a curt warning to his readers: "Little children, keep yourself from idols" (5:21).

Idolatry, it turns out, is a always a temptation in a fallen world. Which is why John Calvin says in the *Institutes* that our "heart is a perpetual factory of idols" (I.11.8).

The difficulty with this is that we tend to view ourselves as too sophisticated to fall for something as vulgar as idolatry. This is especially true of those of us who feel confident in our identity as the people of God. We realize we can elevate things to be central in our affections, making idols out of them. Still, it is probably safe to assume that few of us spend much time agonizing in spirit over whether there are idols in our lives.

Four common idols

In his blog for September 22, 2005, Dr Timothy Keller identifies idols that can tempt Christians today. They often don't appear wrong when they show up, and so don't generate much reflection. They creep in, perverting our priorities so quietly that at first it's difficult to spot the problem. They can exist under a thin veneer of Christian practice and verbiage which means they are easily masked—sometimes even from the person who has been seduced into worshiping them. But they are dangerous, subtly subverting our affections away from true faithfulness. And they are so common in our world that those with eyes to see know we are literally surrounded by their shrines. Which means we should probably agonize over them regularly.

Here are the four common "heart idols" that Keller identifies. The list is meant to be suggestive, not exhaustive—our heart's idol factories are capable of clever combinations and variations.

Idol #1: Comfort (Privacy, lack of stress, freedom).

Price We Will Pay: Reduced productivity.

Greatest Nightmare: Stress, demands.

Others Often Feel: Hurt.

Problem Emotion: Boredom.

Idol #2: Approval (Affirmation, love, relationship).

Price We Will Pay: Less independence.

Greatest Nightmare: Rejection.

Others Often Feel: Smothered.

Problem Emotion: Cowardice .

Idol #3: Control (Self-discipline, certainty, standards).

Price We Will Pay: Loneliness; spontaneity.

Greatest Nightmare: Uncertainty.

Others Often Feel: Condemned.

Problem Emotion: Worry .

Idol #4: Power (Success, winning, influence).

Price We Will Pay: Burdened; responsibility.

Greatest Nightmare: Humiliation.

Others Often Feel: Used.

Problem Emotion: Anger.

The danger of idolatry

"For followers of Jesus Christ," John Seel and Os Guinness write in *No God But God*, "breaking with idols and living in truth are finally not a test of orthodoxy but of love. That is why idolatry is worse than apostasy—it is adultery. Love is the final expression of truth, just as loyalty to truth is the vital test of love." The heart idols that Keller identifies do not change one's creed so much as undermine one's affections. That tends to subvert one's priorities and values, in small ways at first, but with greater effect as time goes on.

When I read Keller's list it resonated deeply, and I could see how some of the four are animating forces in my life. Though I do not like confessing it, they tend to shape my priorities in unconscious, but effective ways. They are deeply rooted in my psyche; a quick acknowledgment of their existence is not sufficient to dig them out.

Suddenly, I find St John's final exhortation to be eminently practical, written not to a more unsophisticated, less educated, more primitive people, but to me. ■

~Denis Haack

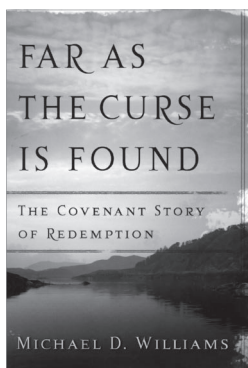
Sources: Timothy Keller's blog is available online (www.redeemer2.com/visioncampaign); *No God But God: Breaking with the Idols of Our Age* edited by Os Guinness and John Seel (Chicago, IL: Moody Press; 1992) p. 216.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What has been your response to the biblical texts on idolatry in the past?
2. Do you tend to see our postmodern world primarily in terms of worship—either of the true God or of idols? Why or why not? If not, how would that perspective change how we see our culture and our neighbors?
3. Without naming names, have you been on the receiving end of the what “others often feel” in Keller’s list? If so, what was it like? How did the idolatry reveal itself? Did you recognize idolatry as a dynamic at the time?
4. Reflect on each of the heart idols in Dr Keller’s list. Which resonate with you? To which are you most tempted or drawn?
5. What dynamic in your life makes you susceptible to this/these heart idols?
6. Christians believe that people tend to become like the God/gods they worship. How is this revealed in case of these four heart idols?
7. To what extent have you experienced grace in dethroning this/these idols of the heart?
8. How might we develop greater sensibility to the presence of idolatry?

Briefly Noted: Far as the curse is found

by Travis Scott



In the fall of 2002 I had the privilege of sitting in Michael Williams’ Covenant Seminary Theology class. One thing I remember in particular was how often friends and I commented that his lectures would make an excellent book. My hopes for such a book have been met.

Far As The Curse Is Found is an introduction, overview, and explanation of covenant theology. Williams traces God’s redemptive acts throughout history in a manner that is clear and engaging. The beauty of this book is that Williams writes with a pastoral passion for showing people the beauty of our Creator-Redeemer God and his loving faithfulness to his world and his people. *Far As The Curse Is Found* is not written as a book for the theologically-initiated only. It is accessible to all readers no matter what level of theological study and understanding they possess. For the person who has never studied covenant theology or a redemptive-historical approach to the Scripture (terms which themselves may sound imposing) Williams offers helpful explanations and footnotes. For those who are well versed in the subject Williams offers practical wisdom and piercing insight into the living out of these beliefs.

For anyone committed to pursuing the development of a world view that is integrated and biblically consistent, *Far As The Curse Is Found* will push you and spur you on towards that goal. ■

Book Recommended: *Far As The Curse Is Found: The Covenant Story of Redemption* by Michael D. Williams (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed; 2005) 302 pp. + indices.

Postmodern mysticism

In the Sixties it was widely believed that over time religious belief would be seen as superstition and secularism would prevail. Instead, the yearning for and embrace of a myriad forms of spirituality has exploded on the cultural landscape. It is an aspect of postmodern life which is changing the face of culture. It is also a reality that makes some Christians rather uncomfortable. Beliefs that may seem incomprehensible are expressed, practices which seem foreign are extolled, and no one can be certain what might arise in the next conversation.

The question worth considering, however, is whether the postmodern

yearning for spirituality is not a wonderful point of contact with those who do not share our Christian faith.

In her book, *Mysticism*, Evelyn Underhill claims that human beings have within them a profound yearning for some sort of spiritual reality. Underhill's research causes her to conclude that we can identify

three deep cravings of the self, three great expressions of man's restlessness which only mystic truth can fully satisfy. The first is the craving which makes him a pilgrim and a wanderer. It is the

longing to go out of his normal world in search of a lost home, a 'better country';... the next is that craving of heart for heart, of the soul for its perfect mate, which makes him a lover. The third is the craving for inward purity which makes him an ascetic, and in the last resort a saint.

Wheaton College professor Jerry Root argues that this yearning provides an important point of contact between Christians and those who do not share their convictions and values. "Most people can identify within themselves a

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What forms of spirituality have your neighbors and co-workers expressed an interest in or embraced? What forms have you noticed in popular culture—in television programs, music, or films? How were they made to appear attractive?
2. To what extent has this made you uncomfortable or uneasy? How has Christian unease in postmodern spirituality been expressed in the public square? What has been the result(s)?
3. Underhill's claims in *Mysticism* that spiritual yearning—and the three categories she has identified—is universal. Yet, some Christians might argue that the New Testament claims the opposite. In his letter to the church in Rome, for example, St Paul argues that "there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one... the way of peace they do not know. There is no fear of God before their eyes" (Romans 3:11-12, 17-18). Does this text deny Underhill's conclusions? Why or why not? What other texts might help us understand this text, and a fuller biblical understanding of this topic?
4. Other Christians argue that the church must take a lesson from Old Testament prophets and condemn postmodern spirituality as idolatrous (and in some cases, demonic). How would you respond?
5. How might we learn to get past our unease and embrace conversations on spirituality with non-Christians? Since we are called to live faithfully surrounded by postmodern spirituality, how might we learn to use it with those who do not share our faith as a point of contact for the gospel?
6. To what extent do you live out Christian spirituality in a way that can be understood in our post-Christian world? Can you talk about your spiritual pilgrimage in ways that are intriguing to unchurched friends? What plans should you make?
7. What non-threatening questions might you ask a non-Christian that will invite them to talk about their yearning for spirituality?

Out of Their Minds

11/9 and 9/11

kind of homesickness,” Root says, commenting on Underhill’s conclusions. “It is a desire for home that haunts us even in our own homes.” Even beyond the lack of roots produced by our mobile, fast-paced world, people desire a sense of belonging that they realize cannot be fully satisfied in the here and now. “Most people have a longing to connect relationally on a deep level, to love and be loved,” Root continues. If the first yearning is for heaven, perhaps this second one represents a yearning for God. To be known and accepted unconditionally with a love that will never prove unfaithful. “Each of us longs to have what is broken in us repaired,” Root says. “No honest person denies the dark side of all humanity. Our cultures are continually shocked by it. Our sociopolitical institutions are clouded by it. When the longing to be mended remains a mere abstraction, generalized to the condition of the masses, it does not stir us as dramatically as it might. But in honest, vulnerable moments, when the participants in the conversation unmask themselves, owning their own sense of inner darkness, the points of contact become obvious.” ■

—Denise Haack

Sources: Underhill quoted in “Evangelism and Discipleship” by Jerry Root, in *Introducing Christian Education: Foundations for the Twenty-first Century* edited by Michael J. Anthony (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House; 2001) p. 58.

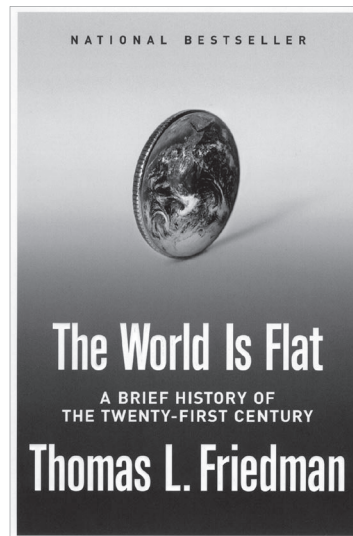
Though we didn’t notice it, there was a discordant note in this exciting new era [beginning with the fall of Communism]. It wasn’t only Americans and Europeans who joined the people of the Soviet Empire in celebrating the fall of the wall—and claiming credit for it. Someone else was raising a glass—not of champagne but of thick Turkish coffee. His name was Osama bin Laden and he had a different narrative. His view was that it was the jihadi fighters in Afghanistan, of which he was one, who had brought down the Soviet Empire by forcing the Red Army to withdraw from Afghanistan (with some help from U.S. and Pakistani forces). And once that mission had been accomplished the Soviets completed their pullout from Afghanistan on February 15, 1989, just nine months before the fall of the Berlin Wall—bin Laden looked around and found that the other superpower, the United States, had a huge presence in his own native land, Saudi Arabia, the home of the two holiest cities in Islam. And he did not like it.

So, while we were dancing on the wall and opening up our Windows and proclaiming that there was no ideological alternative left to free-market capitalism, bin Laden was turning his gun sights on America. Both bin Laden and Ronald Reagan saw the Soviet Union as the “evil empire,” but bin Laden came to see America as evil too. He did have an ideological alternative to free-market capitalism—political Islam. He did not feel defeated by the end of the Soviet Union;

he felt emboldened by it. He did not feel attracted to the widened playing field; he felt repelled by it. And he was not alone. Some thought that Ronald Reagan brought down the wall by bankrupting the Soviet Union through an arms race; others thought IBM, Steve Jobs, and Bill Gates brought down the wall by empowering individuals to download the future. But a world away, in Muslim lands, many thought bin Laden and his comrades brought down the Soviet Empire and the wall with religious zeal, and millions of them were inspired to upload the past.

In short, while we were celebrating 11/9 [the date in 1989 when the Berlin wall came down], the seeds of another memorable date—9/11—were being sown. ■

—Excerpted, Thomas L. Friedman



Excerpted from: *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century* by Thomas L. Friedman (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus & Giroux; 2005) p. 55

Decorating or desecrating

I was recently at a social gathering with friends when their four year old daughter began pointing at my arms and exclaiming that she wanted stamps like mine. She had mistaken my tattoos for the ink stamps that her mother would occasionally place on her hands. I wish all of my interactions with people confused about tattooing were this innocent and humorous.

People have varied reactions to my tattoos. Some are curious while some are repulsed, some are interested in what the markings

mean while others are simply confused. On several occasions other Christians have attempted to evangelize me. Apparently the presence of ink underneath my skin clearly sets me apart as someone in need of salvation.

Tattooing and body modification, for good or ill, has been on the rise for the past several decades. It is a phenomenon which has in many ways become mainstream in Western culture in general and American culture in particular. If you don't think this is true ponder for a moment the fact that there is now a reality television show based around the daily happenings in a tattoo shop. Lamentably, the Christian Church has had an inadequate response to this rise in tattooing. In one camp are the many Christians who have participated in a knee-jerk reactionary condemnation of all forms of body modification, and this condemnation all too often extends to those who participate in such practices as well. In the other camp is a large group of Christians who have uncritically accepted the various

forms of body modification without giving proper thought to the practices themselves and whether or not they are legitimate endeavors for Christians to engage in.

What is it?

As we begin to explore the question of tattooing we must ask the most basic

question: What is it? Jane Caplan has described tattooing as "one of many forms of irreversible body alteration, including scarification, cicatrization, piercing, and branding, and it is prob-

ably the oldest and most widespread of these."¹ Caplan also gives a more detailed definition and description of tattooing:

Tattooing is the puncturing of the skin and the insertion of an indelible pigment into the dermis to a depth of between 0.25 and 0.5 cm, by means of a needle or other sharp instrument. The pigment is inserted either by dipping the instrument into it beforehand, or by rubbing it into the punctures. Instruments may be made of many substances, including bone, shell, wood or metal, and needles can be used singly or bound into bundles. This basic technique is found throughout the world, with local variations; modern innovations include more stable pigments, a greater variety of colours, and the electrical tattooing machine.²

Throughout its history people have engaged in tattooing for a variety of

reasons including religious rites, superstitious and cultic purposes, memorializing the deceased, criminal branding, the marking of slaves, class and caste distinction, group solidarity (as in the case of soldiers), patriotism, anti-authoritarianism, submission, rites of passage, initiation into a sub-culture or group, rebellion, and also for pure adornment. Almost all of these can still be found as motivations for modern tattooing in Western cultures. Victoria Pitts writes that "Body practices [such as tattooing] show how the body figures prominently in our notions of self and community, in our cultural politics, and in social control and power relations."³

While there have been several Christians who have winsomely engaged the topic of tattooing and body modification, these interactions have tended to focus more on discussion and survey of the social and cultural trends within this field. While these individuals are to be praised for their willingness to broach this subject and begin conversation on the topic, they have largely only scratched the surface. As Christians we need to wrestle more deeply with this issue. The question of tattooing and body modification needs to be examined through the lens of biblical ethics. What, if anything, does Scripture have to say about such practices? This isn't to say that proponents of the two camps mentioned earlier haven't put forth biblical support for their rejection or acceptance of tattooing. Each camp tends to have its particular group of proof texts which it lays out as the unquestionable support for their position. I label these as proof texts not to be pejorative, but due to the fact that the passages themselves are usually not thoughtfully engaged or exegeted, nor is their immediate context or place within the broader context of the

the temple?

Bible as a whole taken into account.

My personal reasons for writing on this topic are obvious to anyone who has met me. I am a tattooed Christian and the majority of my tattoo work has been done since converting to Christianity. Due to the fact that several of my tattoos are visible to the casual observer I am frequently asked questions about my tattoos. When it comes to questions about tattoos asked by other Christians they tend to be either questions of curiosity or challenges in the guise of questions. I am frequently asked how I can have tattoos and be a Christian. To many people, Christian and non-, these two things are mutually exclusive. I share this simply to admit

that I am not an unbiased investigator of this subject. I have a vested interest in a particular conclusion.

However, I don't believe that this bias makes me unqualified to do the investigation. I have been very open to criticism of my tattoos and have invited discussion on whether or not it is a legitimate practice for me to engage in as a Christian. To date I have not heard any satisfactory reasons for "repenting" of my tattoos. However, as a person captive to the Word of God I am willing to have my previous views and conclusions changed if the biblical evidence demands that I do so.

My goal

My goal in this article is to explore the biblical and ethical ramifications of tattooing. The field of body modification includes but is not limited to tattooing, piercing, branding, scarification, sub-dermal implants, cyberpunk body-alteration, and alterations such as tongue splitting and flesh hanging. In addition to this, although it is much more accepted within Western society, most forms of plastic surgery should probably be placed

in the category of body modification. The breadth of this discussion forces me to limit the scope of this article to tattooing. As we discuss what the Bible has to say about tattooing there are three main questions for us to explore:

Is tattooing forbidden in Scripture?
Is tattooing permitted in Scripture?
What are some ethical guidelines for tattooing?

Due to space limitations we have decided to place the majority of this article on Ransom's web site (<http://www.ransomfellowship.org/bodymod.html>), along

with questions for discussion. More specifically, the sections that deal with a detailed study of biblical texts to determine whether

tattooing is forbidden or permitted by Scripture (the first two questions listed above) can be read there. These sections wrestle with passages such as Leviticus 19:28, "*You shall not make any cuts on your body for the dead or tattoo yourselves: I am the LORD.*" By putting the full version online we are able to take the time and space necessary to adequately study all the biblical passages relevant to this discussion.

There you will see that I conclude that the practice of tattooing in and of itself falls within the realm of Christian liberty, while some forms of tattooing are expressly forbidden. Since this is true we must practice wisdom and discernment as we determine what may be considered appropriate tattooing for a Christian.

Some ethical guidelines

It is tempting to simply make the assertion that tattooing is a matter of Christian liberty

and leave each person to decide what that means. This is tempting because any attempt I make to come to some conclusions regarding guidelines for tattooing is sure to offend someone. Some people will feel that the guidelines I suggest are too loose and somewhat vague at points. To them I can only say that this is as far as I can go in good conscience. It is not my job to bind each person's conscience with a list of rules regarding tattooing. Other people will see these guidelines as too restrictive and may take offense since one or more of their tattoos may fall outside of the proposed guidelines. To them I say that I include myself as a person for whom these guidelines apply. Some of my past tattoos were outside of the boundaries I set forth here.

I am not claiming infallibility here and the term "guideline" is purposefully chosen over against "rule." If one of the following guidelines seems purposeless or without wisdom feel free to challenge or disregard it. However, if one of them rings true then it is best to heed it lest we sin against conscience. In addition, let me say that some of these guidelines are better founded on Scriptural insight than others. These are the ones that I would try to convince people of; the others are open

for discussion. It should also be noted that these guidelines are recommended for Christians only. While some of them may have relevance to the non-Christian due to their being founded in common sense, the guidelines founded on biblical principles have been formulated with Christians in mind. While

I am hesitant to lay down these guidelines I am convinced that not saying anything on this matter would be cowardly and irresponsible. So without further ado here are some of my suggestions in no particular order:

1. In light of Leviticus 19:28 a Christian should never engage in tattooing for supersti-

The question of tattooing and body modification needs to be examined through the lens of biblical ethics.

Reading the Word cont.

tious and occultic (cultic) purposes. This is directly prohibited for the Christian. This includes any attempts to control, or otherwise affect supernatural forces through tattooing. I would also include any tattooing of an image in an attempt to gain luck or earn favor with God. It would seem also that tattooing pictures of saints and possibly even of Jesus may be idolatrous and forbidden for Christians.

2. Tattooing as a form of mourning also seems to be forbidden in Leviticus 19:28. Tattooing the names or pictures of the deceased may be considered idolatrous in the sense that tattooing of this kind reveals an inordinate value placed on the temporal existence as opposed to the eternal. However, there may be some gray area here. For example, a tattoo acquired in memory of the dead may give glory to God by symbolizing the hope of seeing that person again at the resurrection and therefore would memorialize the work of Christ. It seems that there may be room for discussion at this point.

3. In general a Christian should bear in mind the value and dignity of their body. Remembering that their body is stamped with the image of God and is a dwelling place of the Holy Spirit, a Christian ought to consider at great length whether or not the image they wish to have tattooed on them is worthy of the glory of the human body. Any frivolous tattooing should be rejected as demeaning to the body and the Lord of the body. This would also mean that the tattooing of anything profane or vulgar is prohibited.

4. Before acquiring a tattoo a Christian should spend time evaluating their motivations for doing so. Any tattooing for reasons of vanity should be rejected. We should always be on guard against turning ourselves into an idol of self-worship. Getting a tattoo simply because you think it will look cool is never a proper reason for a Christian. Since it is easy to become proud about pretty much anything, a person should consider before hand whether or not a particular tattoo is likely to lead them into vanity. When deciding on a new tattoo it is my personal

Leviticus 19:28, "You shall not make any cuts on your body for the dead or tattoo yourselves: I am the LORD."

policy that I must always choose something which points away from myself and points to my Creator and Redeemer. This way if and when someone asks me about one of my tattoos it is very hard for me to become vain in regards to my body art.

5. A person should always exercise caution when choosing a tattoo shop and artist. While most shops are regulated by state health departments there are still some that are neither sanitary nor professional environments. Make sure that the shop and artist you choose are both licensed by the state and practice universal precautions. You should also make sure that the person doing your tattoo is an actual artist and possesses skill. You can ask to see a portfolio of the person's work or seek out particular artists who have been recommended by people you know and who have had work done by them which you like.

6. A Christian should also consider whether or not they are practicing proper stewardship of their money by getting a

tattoo. Just as our bodies are not our own, neither are our finances and getting a good tattoo can be fairly expensive. This doesn't mean that it is never appropriate to spend your money in this way, simply that it is an issue worth considering.

7. Because of 1 Corinthians 7:4 I believe that it is never appropriate for someone who is married to obtain a tattoo against the express wishes of their spouse. If you desire to have a tattoo more than you desire to please your husband or wife you should seriously reevaluate your motivations for getting the tattoo.

8. As a person who interacts quite a bit with youth, my counsel to teens is always that they shouldn't get a tattoo until they are old enough. By old enough I don't simply mean age. Most state laws make it legal to get a tattoo without the permission of a parent or guardian at 18. However, I can honestly say that I regret all three of the tattoos that I got before I was 20. Since maturity is extremely hard to measure, young people should always consult their parents and/or other trusted mentors before getting a tattoo.

9. Although one would think it unnecessary to point out the permanent nature of tattoos, there are still a high number of people who get tattoos without taking this into consideration. It is expensive to cover a tattoo with more tattooing and even more expensive and painful to have them removed by laser. Also, laser surgery does not usually result in 100% removal. You should consider whether or not the tattoo you are considering is compatible both with the permanent nature of a tattoo and the permanent nature of the body. It is at least a possibility that tattoos will be present on our resurrection bodies.

Unintended consequences

In closing I think it would be appropriate for me to mention that I have experienced several positive and unintended effects from having tattoos. First, I have had numerous conversations with people that I would have never had if I didn't have tattoos. Most people who ask about my tattoos are surprised to find out that most of them have some sort of religious or spiritual significance. This has in turn led to many conversations about faith, beliefs, and religious devotion. This is not to suggest that someone should get tattooed in order to have such conversations but merely that this has been a part of my experience.

Secondly, if I am honest, I have to admit that there are days when I am ready to call it quits as a Christian. There are moments when I am ready to give up and walk away from the faith. In these moments my tattoos have taken on something of a sacramental nature. A sacrament is a sign and seal of the Christian faith. I am not suggesting we add tattooing as a Christian sacrament but I mention the significance of my tattoos as a sign

It is at least a possibility that tattoos will be present on our resurrection bodies.

of my faith, and in the moments when I am tempted to walk away from Christ my tattoos have acted as something as a seal. During these times of doubt I see my tattoos and am reminded of grace, and that I am not my own but rather am a treasured possession of the King of the universe. When I am tempted to sin publicly I remember that I am marked, and that my tattoos publicly declare my affiliation with Jesus. I can only tell you that I have experienced this to be quite a deterrent in such moments. The sacramental function of my tattoos reminds me that there is no

turning back, there is no pretending that the whole Christianity thing was just phase. In moments such as these the ink under my skin calls

me back to sanity and back to faith.

Obviously this article is not the final word on the subject of tattooing. I consider my views to be *a* Christian approach to the subject, not *the* Christian approach. It is my hope that these thoughts of mine clarify some of the issues, and also prompt more serious consideration of tattooing. As I said earlier, body art continues to gain popularity and

acceptance in our culture, and all the signs are saying that this is more than a mere trend. Therefore, as Christians we need to thoughtfully consider how to respond to tattooing.

Let the discussion begin. ■

~Travis Scott

Endnotes:

1 Jane Caplan, ed. *Written On the Body: The Tattoo in European and American History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), xi.

2 Jane Caplan, ed. *Written On the Body: The Tattoo in European and American History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 255.

3 Victoria Pitts, *In the Flesh* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 3.

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Travis Scott, a Contributing Editor for *Critique*, will graduate from Covenant Seminary in 2006.

Editor's Note: Travis Scott's full article—along with more discussion questions—is available on Ransom's web site (<http://www.ransolfellowship.org/bodymod.html>).

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What is your reaction to this piece? Why do you respond that way? To what extent has it changed your thinking on the topic?
2. To what extent do you find Travis's study of the biblical texts surprising? Convincing? Incomplete? Where, and on what basis, would you disagree? Are there other texts that should also be included in the discussion?
3. How have you tended to react to tattooing (before reading this piece)? To people with tattoos? What in your background causes you to react this way?
4. "The sacramental function of my tattoos reminds me that there is no turning back, there is no pretending that the whole Christianity thing was just phase. In moments such as these the ink under my skin calls me back to sanity and back to faith." Discuss.
5. How can believers who disagree on this topic function together in the same Christian community? To what extent should we be able to give one another freedom?

Additional discussion questions are online at <http://www.ransolfellowship.org/bodymod.html>.

Reality is a Blanket?—a review of *I ♥ Huckabees* by Denis Haack

http://www.ransomfellowship.org/M_Huckabees.pdf



The Process of Conversion—an article by Preston Jones

http://www.ransomfellowship.org/Article_Conversion.html



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1. To call attention to resources of interest to thinking Christians.
2. To model Christian discernment.
3. To stimulate believers to think biblically about all of life.

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