



THE INMATES ARE RUNNING THE ASYLUM

STEPHEN ALTROGGE

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**Thoughts On Following Jesus, Amish Romance, the Daniel Plan, the
Tebow Effect, and the Odds of Finding Your Soul Mate**

By Stephen Altrogge

The Inmates Are Running the Asylum: Thoughts On Following Jesus, Amish Romance, the Daniel Plan, the Tebow Effect, and the Odds of Finding Your Soul Mate

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WELCOME TO MY BRAIN

History is full of great men. Men who have literally changed the course of history. Men of courage and ideas and inventions and intellect. Men who fight the status quo and disrupt the system and stick it to The Man. Men who step into the line of fire and lead the children to safety (not sure if that analogy works, but you get my point). Men who stand up to tyrants and dictators. Men who aren't afraid to throw a punch and take a bullet and kiss a baby on the head. Men of steel and velvet.

Winston Churchill was such a man. Theodore "Teddy" Roosevelt was such a man. Franklin "Teddy" Roosevelt was such a man. George Washington and Thomas Jefferson and John Adams and John Hancock were such men.

I bet you would like to meet a great man. To be able to say that you brushed shoulders with greatness. To be able to say that you stood in the shadow of magnificence. To be able to tell your children and grandchildren that you met a history-maker. I wish I could help you there, but I can't. Unfortunately, you're stuck with me.

Now, before you dismiss me out of hand, you should be aware of what others are saying about me and about this book. Here is just a sampling of what is being said.

“Stephen is certainly one of my favorite people in the entire world.”

- Stephen’s mom.

“I don’t really know Stephen, but he paid me twenty bucks to say that he’s awesome.” - Guy on the street.

“From what I know of Stephen, I certainly wouldn’t trust him with any significant responsibility. Plus, I think he stole the steel and velvet analogy from me.” - John Piper

“I have endorsed every book written in the last twenty years. This is the first book I have ever refused to endorse.” - J.I. Packer

“I’m sorry, who are we talking about?” - George W. Bush

“I don’t want my name anywhere near that guy.” - John MacArthur

As you can see, despite not being “great” in the war-hero sense of the word, I certainly have left an impression on people.

What follows is a collection of essays on a variety of subjects, ranging from parenting, to Amish romance novels, to the statistical odds of finding your soul mate. As you’ll see, I process the world through a rather strange, multi-lens, set of glasses. I process the world through the lens of the Bible. I process the world through the lens of humor. I process the world through the lens of a parent. I process the world through the lens of tech-

loving nerd. These essays will give you a glimpse of the world through my eyes. Hopefully you don't get sick to your stomach.

THE INMATES ARE RUNNING THE ASYLUM

I have a business idea that is going to make me millions of dollars. If you promise not to steal it, I'll share the idea with you. It goes like this. I'm going to gather all the living authors of parenting books together into one room. I'm talking Dr. Spock (is he still alive?), Dr. Phil, the people who wrote those *What To Expect When You're Expecting* books, Paul Tripp, that lady who sneaks vegetables into her kids desserts, and every other parenting author. Then, I will invite parents throughout the world to attend this gathering of authors. And here's the real kicker: I'm only going to charge one dollar per person. One dollar! How will I make millions of dollars if I'm only charging a dollar per person? Because every parent in the world will come. I'll probably need to rent out a couple of stadiums, because this is going to be bigger than the Rolling Stones and the Beatles and Taylor Swift combined. How do I know every parent will come? Because I'm going to offer every attendee the opportunity to slap every parenting author in the face. Repeatedly. With something cold and wet, like a piece of fresh salmon.

Genius idea, am I right? I'm going to be filthy, stinking, diving-into-giant-piles-of-dollar-bills, rich. I'm finally going to be able to do what every rich athlete does: buy his mom a house. Granted, my mom already has a pretty nice house, but that's beside the point. The first rule of getting rich is that you always buy your mom a house. I'm pretty sure that's in the

rulebook they hand out at gatherings for rich people.

Now, if you're not a parent, my idea might sound somewhat insane, and perhaps even a bit pathological. After all, slapping is a tactic usually reserved for terrorists, guys who ask women if they're pregnant, and people on the verge of a nervous breakdown. To the non-parent, the idea of slapping someone probably sounds a bit extreme. And you're absolutely right; my idea is insane. But what you don't understand is that every parent is insane, and would jump out of their suspenders at the opportunity to slap a parenting author in the face.

If you're not a parent then you probably haven't read any parenting books. Parenting books make everything sound so simple, easy, and logical, as if parenting were like putting together a bookshelf. If you simply follow the steps, everything will go as planned. Your children will be well-adjusted, polite, godly, hygienic, and respectful. They will wake up promptly at dawn, make their beds, eat a healthy breakfast of whole grain, steel-cut oats, study the Bible in the original Greek and Hebrew, and diligently go about their schoolwork. They will never cause trouble, never talk back, never take drugs, and never sneak out at night to go to a party.

Parenting books always have catchy, easy to remember phrases which capture the essence of their teaching. The circle of obedience. The heart is the start. The fruit and the root. Grace in the face. God first, others second, me last. That kind of thing.

Parenting books also have checklists. Loads and loads of checklists. Checklists are like crack for parenting authors. Did you point your child to the appropriate scripture when you talked to them? Check. Did you

discipline your child in a gentle and loving manner? Check. Did you have your child apologize to all the appropriate parties? Check. Did you avoid raising your voice when speaking to your child? Check. Did your child pray a prayer of repentance? Check. Was the prayer sincere? Check.

When I read parenting books, I highlight like crazy. I scribble notes in the margins. I think to myself, *Oh this is really good, now I finally I understand parenting.* Reading parenting books makes me feel powerful and in charge. Like I can actually handle being a parent. Like being a parent really isn't that complicated. "I'm ready to raise some kids who are going to change this world, gosh darn it!" I say to myself.

But there are certain things that parenting books can't prepare you for, such as dealing with real, living children.

For example, I'm sitting in my living room, reading a book, when I hear a loud, eardrum rupturing scream. I race back to my daughter's bedroom, anticipating blood spattered on the ceiling or a severed limb or an armed burglar. Instead, I find two of my daughters sitting on the floor, crying hysterically.

I immediately take charge, asserting my biblical, God-given, parental authority. I'm going to get to the bottom of this immediately. "Alright girls, what happened?"

Ella, who is three, says, "Charis told me that if I don't cover up my doll with a blanket it will be angry at me."

Charis, who is six, and has perfected the ability to look simultaneously innocent and offended, immediately says, "No I didn't! She's lying."

I've read enough Christian parenting books to know that I'm supposed

to get to heart of the matter. In other words, it's not enough to just have my kids obey. They need to obey from the heart. Kids that don't obey from the heart turn out to be bad apples who go to jail for selling drugs, or something like that. So I say to Ella, "Ella, are you angry? It's a sin to be angry?"

Ella responds by asking, "Dad, will my baby be angry at me if I don't put a blanket on it?" Hmm. She didn't exactly answer my question. In fact, she answered my question with a counter-question, which I believe is something they teach in the military.

I try another tactic. "Charis, did you tell Ella that her baby would be angry at her?" Now I'm going to get the truth of the matter. I'm going to put all of my children back onto the path of righteousness.

"No, I said that babies get cold if you don't put blankets on them." This is starting to turn into an episode of *Law and Order*. I feel like I should be pulling out yellow crime scene tape and getting sworn affidavits. I glance around the room, looking for any evidence that might help me make sense of the situation.

I start racking my brain, drawing on all the knowledge I've derived from every parenting book I've ever read. I say, "Okay, Ella, you cannot scream at Charis. It is a sin to be angry and a sin to scream at your sister."

"But I didn't scream!" says Ella. Now she is working the innocent/offended look.

"I heard you scream!" I say, starting to feel frustrated and slightly confused. Is Ella trying to use reverse psychology on me? Are Charis and Ella working a good cop / bad cop routine?

“That wasn’t me, that was Gwendolyn.” I now see my youngest daughter, Gwendolyn, sitting in the corner. Gwendolyn is almost two.

“Why did Gwendolyn scream?” I ask.

“Because Ella grabbed a doll from her,” chimes in Charis. As the oldest, Charis feels that it is her solemn duty to make sure I get all the facts straight.

“No I didn’t!” protests Ella. By this point my head is spinning. I feel like I should put up a poster board with pictures of my children on it and draw connecting lines between each of them, visually representing the relationship between all of their alleged crimes. All thoughts about getting to the heart of the matter or bringing my child into the “Circle of Obedience” have evaporated. I’m simply trying to get my kids to stop screaming at one another, stop grabbing things from one another, and stop making threats against each other’s dolls.

I wish I could say our family devotional times were better, but they’re not. Make no mistake, I go into them with grand intentions. We’re going to read the Bible and pray together, just like the Wesley’s, Spurgeon’s, Moody’s, and Graham’s. My kids are going to sit quietly with their hands folded, listening intently as I read from the old family Bible. After all, the family that prays together stays together, right? As the family unit dissolves throughout the world, my family is going to shine forth like a beacon of light. Like a lighthouse. Like a beacon of Gondor (nerd reference to *Lord of the Rings*).

But problems start before we even get started. My girls start jockeying for seats, like basketball players trying to get in the best position for a

rebound. Ella and Gwendolyn both want to sit on my lap, which is sweet, but makes it impossible for me to see the Bible. When I tell them to sit next to me, they start crying, which makes me feel like the loser dad of the century. My kids probably won't remember the Bible reading, but they will remember that dad wouldn't let them sit on his lap!

Finally, after everyone has been seated, I begin reading. Within one minute, Ella is climbing onto my shoulders, and Charis is dangling upside down off the edge of the couch. "Girls, please sit still and pay attention," I say in a calm, yet authoritative voice. "Calm" and "authoritative" are buzzwords in parenting books. If a parenting book ever suggests speaking to your kids in a "panicky" and "desperate" tone, you can get rid of the book.

Charis and Ella resume their proper positions, and I resume reading. A minute later I hear the sound of water splattering on the floor, as if someone just got plastered with a water balloon. Gwendolyn has managed to find an unattended cup of water and dump it all over the floor. We use big cups in our house. Like thirty-two ounces, big. Family devotions grind to a halt while we sop up the mess.

I continue reading. I'm getting to heart of the lesson, explaining how we all need a savior, and how Jesus is that savior. Finally I'm gaining some momentum. "Jesus made everything!" exclaims Ella.

"Yes he did!" I say, eager to encourage. As parents, we live for these kinds of moments.

"He even made our treadmill!" says Ella.

Well crap. How do I explain that, technically speaking, Jesus gave

men and women the ability to create things, and that men and women took the materials Jesus made and crafted them into...

"You're right Ella, Jesus made our treadmill," I mumble, feeling somewhat heretical. I bet John Calvin never had challenges with his kids. His kids probably understood the inner workings of the Trinity at birth.

"I believe in Jesus," says Charis. "Some of the kids at school believe in Santa, but I told them that Santa isn't real."

"Whoa wait, who did you tell that Santa wasn't real?" I imagine getting calls from angry parents, upset that our daughter ruined Christmas for them. When we tell people that our family doesn't believe in Santa, they act as if we just proclaimed our allegiance to the Nazi Skinhead party. People seem to think that if our children don't believe in Santa, they will be grow up to be maladjusted, angry, sociopathic murderers. Nonetheless, we try to keep our kids from dropping the Santa bomb on unsuspecting children. "Who did you talk to?" I ask.

"I don't know, just my friends."

I'm now faced with the difficult task of teaching my six year old how to deceive someone without actually telling a lie. "Charis, when your friends talk about Santa, you don't need to say anything. Just smile, nod, and say, 'That's nice.'"

Now I can't even remember the point I had originally been trying to make. It's time to move to prayer. "Girls, what are you thankful for?" I ask. I'll take anything by this point. They could be tell me they are thankful that tomatoes grow on trees, and I would accept it. I'm just trying to make it to the finish line.

“I’m grateful for mommy and daddy,” says Charis.

“That’s good Charis, why don’t you thank Jesus for mommy and daddy. What are you grateful for Ella?”

“I’m grateful for...stinker head,” she says, exploding into giggles. As a parent, I know I’m not supposed to laugh when my daughter says something heretical or irreverent, but sometimes I can’t help myself.

After I regain my composure, and everyone prays for something real, I conclude devotions.

Like I said, parenting books make everything sound so easy and logical, but life with young children is never easy and logical. Life with young children is 85% insanity, 10% vomit, and 5% dedication. Don’t get me wrong: I really am grateful for the wisdom I’ve derived from the Christian parenting books I’ve read. Things would be much worse without the parenting books, I’m sure of that.

But when I look back on my own childhood and consider my own journey to faith, I’m keenly aware that my faith in Christ is not because my parents read all the right books and followed all the proper parenting procedures (you know, the procedures from the manual they give you at the hospital). My parents were absolutely fantastic, and they faithfully taught me the word of God, but it was God and only God who caused me to trust in Christ. If the responsibility for my salvation lay with my parents, I never would have trusted Christ at all (my parents would wholeheartedly agree).

My dad read the Bible to us most mornings before he went to work. I would repeatedly fall asleep during these family devotion times. My dad

would say, “Stephen, sit up. You’re laying on the couch, and you’re falling asleep.”

“I’m not falling asleep,” I would protest, as I forced my heavy eyes open. I would hold my eyes wide open to demonstrate my alertness. This probably also had the effect of making me look like a strung out meth addict.

Dad never bought my sleepy lies. “Stephen, I want you to sit up. This is the Bible. It’s important. I don’t want you falling asleep during devotions.”

I would grumble and complain, as if my dad had just informed that I would spending the entire day working in the salt mines. “Can’t believe I have to sit up...so stupid...I can pay attention with my eyes closed.”

One summer, dad informed me and my siblings that he would be waking us up at 8:00 AM for family devotions. I was aghast and appalled at the prospect of having to rise so early during the summer months. I felt like my God-given, Constitutionally-protected rights were being violated. I was pretty sure that sleeping until the crack of 11:00 was a right protected by the government and ordained by God himself. Getting up at 8:00 was akin to torture, and I told my dad as much. “You are ruining my summer,” I strongly informed him. If you could only see my body language when I communicated this statement, you would have thought I said, “Sorry dad, it’s stage four terminal cancer.” I was that serious and that angry.

Despite our protests, dad forced us to wake up “early” for family devotions during the summer. My siblings and I complained incessantly

about having to wake up early, and my dad probably questioned the fruitfulness of his efforts.

But God honored my dad's faithfulness. I can't point to any particular day when everything suddenly clicked for me. I didn't have a "come to Jesus" moment when the spiritual lights went on and I fell to my knees in tears. I didn't kneel in the front of a church after an altar call. I didn't go outside one night and scream up at the heavens in desperation. I didn't hit rock bottom or come to the end of myself or any other cliché. All I know is that at some point between the ages of thirteen and fifteen, God caused me to come alive spiritually.

Parenting has become such a high-stakes game in recent years. If you spend more than fifteen seconds on the Internet you will feel like a failure as a parent. Your kids aren't getting a classical education. Your kids are eating processed food which might cause them to become delusional maniacs. Your kids aren't learning Latin. Your kids are getting vaccinated or aren't getting vaccinated - either way they're screwed. Your kids are watching too much television and playing too many video games. Your kids don't eat free-range, gluten-free, locally sourced poultry. Your kids are homeschooled, and therefore won't have any social skills. Your kids go to public school, and will therefore become drug dealers. You are a failure as parent, and when your kids show up on "America's Most Wanted", you're going to be the one to blame.

I think that, perhaps, we're all putting a little too much pressure on ourselves as parents. The Bible is pretty clear when it comes to our job description as parents. First and foremost, we're supposed to show our

children what it looks like to love God. One of the things I remember most about my childhood is that my mom and dad regularly read the Bible and prayed. I was a hardcore homeschooler, K-12, baby. I was homeschooled before it was cool to be homeschooled. And you know what? I hardly remember anything from high school. I did all the Advanced Placement classes and SAT prep classes. I was a good student in high school, but I don't remember much. I also hardly remember anything from college, and I graduated at the top of my class. But I do remember my parents' devotion to the Lord.

Our kids won't remember much, and that's probably a good thing. They will remember whether or not we loved Jesus. They'll also remember whether or not we taught them about Jesus. If I can manage those two things - loving Jesus and teaching my kids to love Jesus - I think I'm headed in the right direction as a parent.

Now if you'll excuse me, someone is screaming.

I STILL WANT TO BE FAMOUS

I became a full-fledged member of the cult of Christian rock 'n roll when I was fourteen years old. My initiation ceremony was an intense event created and performed by the bands Audio Adrenaline and dcTalk. When I saw those bands play live in concert, I became a hard core disciple of the religion known as Contemporary Christian Music. I was in. I was a believer.

Up until that point, my exposure to Christian music had been solely through Compact Discs (shiny circular disks which contained music, computer games, or 12,000 free hours of America Online). The first CD I ever owned was *Not Ashamed* by Newsboys, a Christian band which was formed sometime around 1913, and continues to play to this day. I remember opening the CD and marveling at its shimmer and shine and incredible thinness. It was a wonder of technology! All that music on a thin disk. What would they think of next? CDs were so much better than those clunky cassette tapes, which tended to jam and then need to be rewound with a pencil. I could tell when a tape was starting to jam because the sound would garble and go up in pitch. When that happened I had to get the tape out quickly or it would be ruined. But that wasn't a problem with CDs.

I remember the burnt plastic smell of the insert, and I remember paging through the insert and intently reading the lyrics. I placed my first

CD into my first CD player (both received as Christmas presents) and pressed “play”. The CD player whirred and buzzed and made a high-pitched whine as it unlocked the magical music residing on the CD. Then, without any warning, I was submerged into the opening groove of the record, a high-energy track entitled “I Cannot Get You Out of My System”. The track is a strange mix of synthesized drum sounds taken straight from the 1980s, somewhat catchy guitar licks, and a blues organ. To top it off, the band hailed from Australia, so the lead singer regularly said the word “Oi”. In fact, the first line of the first song is, “Oi boy, got a new gig.”

Not Ashamed was released in 1992, and as my first CD, it certainly played a formative role in creating my passion for Contemporary Christian Music. However, *Not Ashamed* was quickly pushed out of my life by dcTalk’s groundbreaking album, *Jesus Freak*. I say “groundbreaking” without the slightest touch of irony.

In order to understand just how groundbreaking *Jesus Freak* was, you need to understand the contemporary music scene of the ‘90s. Up until the release of *Jesus Freak*, Contemporary Christian Music had always been about five to eight years behind secular music in terms of musical style. The big Christian musicians were Michael W. Smith, Steven Curtis Chapman, Newsboys, Petra, and Carman (yes, I probably should include Stryper, but they were an ‘80s glam band).

In 1991, Nirvana released the album *Nevermind*, which totally obliterated the musical landscape. It was grungy, raw, loud, angry, and angsty. In contrast to the epic, hair-sprayed, overproduced glam-rock of

the '80s, *Nevermind* was a soundtrack for cynical, disenfranchised, twenty-somethings. Kurt Cobain, the front man for Nirvana, was the polar opposite of spandex-wearing musicians of the '80s. He had greasy blond hair which masked his eyes, and wore ripped jeans, flannel shirts, and Chuck Taylor's. In the song "Smells Like Teen Spirit", Cobain screamed himself hoarse as he proclaimed, "Here we are now, entertain us!"

In 1992, Steven Curtis Chapman released the album *The Great Adventure*, which opened with the very cheerful, slightly sassy phrase, "Saddle up your horses, we've got a trail to blaze." Not exactly the most edgy or grungy or groundbreaking stuff. Kurt Cobain was telling his listeners to load up their guns, and bring their friends. Steven Curtis Chapman was telling his listeners to saddle up, partners! In 1995 Carman, who looked like a Las Vegas lounge singer, released an album with the somewhat embarrassing title *Righteous Invasion of Truth* (R.I.O.T.). When a middle-aged white guy releases an album entitled R.I.O.T., it might be an indicator that he's trying a bit too hard. I mean, this is Carman we're talking about here, not 50 Cent or Puff Daddy. But *Jesus Freak* changed everything for the Christian music scene.

I still get chills when I hear the opening guitar riff from "So Help Me God". It is rough and raw and edgy and grungy. This is not the pre-packaged, synthesized, artificial sweetener sound of the 1980s. This is powerful and in your face, sort of like something Nirvana might write, except with much better vocals and tighter guitar parts. Kurt Cobain was a musical genius, but he certainly wasn't a musical prodigy. dcTalk's harmonies in the chorus are crazy good, and the melody is fantastic.

I remember laying on my bed, listening to *Jesus Freak* again and again and again, which I could do because I had a CD player with a “repeat” function. I couldn’t get enough of it. It was a drug, and I was a junkie. I needed a fix like, every fifteen minutes. And I wasn’t the only one. *Jesus Freak* took the Christian world by storm. Everybody was listening to it and talking about how freaking awesome it was. For the first time in a long time, we had a Christian band that was actually cool. We had a Christian band that was ahead of the curve instead of behind it. We had a Christian band who actually sounded good.

The television show “Lightmusic”, which was kind of like a Christian version of MTV (minus the sex, drugs, and debauchery) played the music video for “Jesus Freak” incessantly, including one episode in which they played “Jesus Freak” and only “Jesus Freak” for the entire episode. dcTalk mania swept through the evangelical Christian world, and I, along with all my friends, were swallowed up by the wave.

I’m sure there were aggressive, edgy, Christian albums prior to *Jesus Freak*, but I sure as heck didn’t know about them. Listening to the album made me feel cool and aggressive and sort of rebellious (in a Christian kind of way), feelings I didn’t get when I listened to “Friends Are Friends Forever” by Michael W. Smith.

Then I saw dcTalk live in concert, and everything changed for me again. I’m not sure what I was expecting from the concert, but I certainly wasn’t expecting to have my life turned upside down.

My brother, my dad, some of my friends, and I, all traveled to Pittsburgh to see dcTalk and some other band called “Audio Adrenaline”.

Honestly, we were there to see dcTalk. We didn't really care about the warm-up act. But Audio Adrenaline absolutely blew me out of my ill-fitting Levi's (I was homeschooled and hadn't yet discovered Tommy Hilfiger or JNCO).

Here's what I remember about Audio Adrenaline. They were loud. Really, really loud. But not in the "let's just make a lot of noise and scream" sort of way. They were loud in the "turn the amps up to 11 and rip off sick guitar solos" kind of way.

They were also grungy. The bass player had long blond hair with dark brown roots, which curtained off his entire face. Throughout the concert he whipped and thrashed his head to the music. All the band members wore ripped jeans and flannel shirts. The lead singer kept the mic in its stand and leaned over it, like all cool lead singers do. They were everything I wanted to be.

Here's what I remember about dcTalk. They were also very, very loud. They were absolutely insane on stage. They were moving at top speed from the moment they took the stage. They moshed and slam-danced and climbed on the backs of their band mates. They ran back and forth across the stage. They did flips. At one point in the concert, front man Toby Mac climbed up onto a stack of speakers that had to be at least twenty feet tall. He then launched himself off the speakers out into adoring crowd who, thankfully, caught him. The entire band was awesome at working the crowd. They had us in the palms of their hands for the entire show. They could have told us to slap each other in the face, and we would have done it. And when they played the opening bars of "Jesus Freak" we absolutely

lost it. dcTalk was also everything I wanted to be.

My plans to form a band began on the drive home from the concert. My friend Ben, who had come with us, would play the drums, and I would play the electric guitar. I didn't know who would play bass, but I would figure that out later. Plus, bass players are kind of like air fresheners: you can plug them in as needed. All that mattered was that I was going to be in a band, and I was going to freaking awesome, just like dcTalk and Audio Adrenaline. I was going to play loud, aggressive, head-banging Christian music that would inspire millions of Christian kids to simultaneously slam dance and follow Jesus.

There was only one problem with my grand plan: Ben didn't have a drum set and he didn't know how to play drums. But that wasn't going to stop us. In fact, the only thing that could have stopped us from starting a Christian band was the Rapture, and I'm not even sure that could have stopped us. Ben got a drum set for Christmas, and I already had an electric guitar, a Fender JagStang, which was the kind of guitar Kurt Cobain used. So we were basically 75% of the way to becoming a killer Christian band.

I wish I could say that my dreams came true; that I became a famous Christian artist who sold millions of records, influenced millions of kids, and eventually founded his own record label. But it never happened. Ben and I did jam a couple times, if you could call it that. It was more like me playing random guitar chords and Ben laying down a herky-jerky beat that didn't remotely match what I was playing. We even gave ourselves a name: "36 Grain", which was an obscure reference to rifle ammunition.

Ben's family was into hunting, and he had rifle ammunition sitting on his dresser, which served as the inspiration for our band name. Unfortunately, we never made it past the name and awful jam-session stage. Bands are like gnats: they spring up quickly and die just as fast.

A lot has changed since my initiation into the world of Contemporary Christian Music. I wish I could say I still loved Christian music, but the fact is, I don't. I've strayed from my first love. I'm not sure when I stopped liking Christian music, but I think it was sometime around 2005. I slowly realized that almost all Christian music sounded the same. Everyone started to sound like "Sonic Flood". The melodies and music became boring and predictable to me, as if everyone was trying to sound like everyone else. I realize this makes me sound snotty and arrogant and hoity-toity, and maybe I am. I tend to think that Contemporary Christian Music reached its peak around 1997, and then started to slowly decline. I don't have any empirical evidence to prove that hypothesis, but it's what my gut tells me.

Another reason I don't like Christian music anymore is because certain Christian bands have gotten...weird. Let me explain. Newsboys are still releasing albums and playing to this day. Except that Newsboys isn't really Newsboys. The lead singer for Newsboys is now Michael Tait, who was one of the original members of dcTalk. This is strange. It would be like Jerry Seinfeld taking a starring role in "The Office". To hear him sing with Newsboys does something strange to my brain. I'm not even sure if there are any original members of Newsboys left. And Newsboys aren't the only band mashup currently in existence. Kevin Max, who was also

with dcTalk, is now the lead singer for Audio Adrenaline. The only thing that could make the Christian music scene weirder would be if Toby Mac teamed up with Carman and Steven Curtis Chapman.

I did end up getting to play in a real band after I graduated from college. We called ourselves “Willis”, which was a humorous, witty reference to the television show “Different Strokes”. We didn’t take ourselves very seriously, even calling our style of music “clown rock”. I often took to the stage wearing American flag pants, a sleeveless t-shirt, and a head band. The highlight for the band was when we opened for the moderately famous band, “Starfield”. I’m pretty sure the guys from “Starfield” thought we were a joke, which we sort of were. Another highlight for our band was when we played in front of ten people in a tiny Baptist church. In the middle of our concert an old woman stood up and walked out. Right before exiting, she turned around, glared at us, and gave us the thumbs down sign, indicating both that she really didn’t like us and that we were too loud.

One thing hasn’t changed since my initiation into the world of Christian music: I still want to be famous. I still have a deep-seated longing to be adored by lots of people. I want people to think I’m a brilliant writer. I want people to think I’m funny, insightful, penetrating, and smart. I want people to want me. I want lots of people to follow me on Twitter and like my Facebook page. I want to be at the center of attention. In the words of Audio Adrenaline, “I want to be famous, the star of the scene.”

However, as I get older, I’m starting to learn that even when my

dreams do come true, I'm not any happier. For example, I've published a couple of books. Having a book published was a dream come true for me. Lots of people have said nice things about my books. Heck, I've even been interviewed on big radio stations. And you know what? I'm still not satisfied. I want more people to read my books. I want more people to say nice things about me. I want more radio stations to interview me, even though I hate doing radio interviews. I want to be on a best-seller list. I want to do book tours, even though I don't like traveling. I want to be in high demand.

In Ecclesiastes 2:9-11, Solomon says, "So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me. And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun."

Solomon had everything I crave. He had fame and adoration and praise. He had the resources to accomplish whatever he wanted, and he certainly accomplished a lot. He built cities and temples and wonders. He had armies of servants and armies of warriors. He was about as famous and adored as a person can get. The Queen of Sheba was blown away when she surveyed all that Solomon had acquired and accomplished. Yet when he surveyed all his accomplishments, he concluded they were vanity. You can hear the disappointment in Solomon's voice. He climbed the ladder of worldly happiness, only to discover that it was very boring and

lonely at the top.

So maybe it's a good thing that my dream of becoming a Christian rock star didn't come true. I might have been famous, but I wouldn't necessarily have been happy. I might have been a rock star, but I wouldn't have been satisfied. That seems to be how this world works. Dreams that revolve around us tend to be very hollow and unsatisfying, and the little things, like getting to kiss my daughter at bed time, are the most meaningful.

AMISH VAMPIRES

Amish people bring out the worst in me. Wait, that didn't come out quite right. I don't have any particular beef with Amish folks. They seem like nice, quiet folks, who live off the land and have a penchant for giving their sons prophetic names, like Ezekiel. What I should say is that books written about the Amish bring out the worst in me. Well, that's not quite right either. I'm all for anthropological studies of the Amish people. I'm all for books about the history of the Amish. Heck, I'll even take books like *A Day In The Life of An Amish Boy*.

The books that bring out the worst in me are Christian Amish romance novels.

Now, you, the astute and ever observant reader, may ask: Have I actually read any Christian Amish romance novels? No. If any of my friends saw me reading an Amish romance novel, they would mercilessly mock me and, in order to escape the merciless mocking, I would probably be forced to become Amish, which would be really hard for me because I like electricity and indoor toilets. But that's beside the point. My opposition to Amish romance novels is deep-seated and existential. The fact that these novels exist is sufficient cause for me to oppose them. The fact that the "inspirational" book section of Wal-Mart is composed almost entirely of Amish romance novels, Joel Osteen books, and Guideposts devotionals is another reason I'm opposed to Amish romance novels.

However, despite the fact that I am not Amish, have never had an Amish friend, and have never read an Amish romance novel, I'm convinced I could write one. And given that Christian Amish romance novels are like high-grade meth for Christian women, perhaps I should consider penning a genre of the Amish variety. I could become the Christian version of Nicholas Sparks. Don't believe I could do it? Then let me show off my skills.

TITLE: Forbidden Amish Love

Ezekiel was waiting behind the horse barn for her, just like he promised. The pale moon cast a faint glow across the rolling landscape. The wheat, which was almost ready to be harvested, rustled gently in the nighttime breeze, as if whispering a sweet lullaby. Samantha's heart was anything but quiet. It hammered in her chest, like a blacksmith striking a red-hot horseshoe. Speaking of red-hot, Samantha was full of red-hot, yet godly love for Ezekiel.

"I knew you would come," whispered Ezekiel when he saw her. Ezekiel was tall and broad, with thick, muscular arms that were strong enough to tame a wild stallion and gentle enough to tame Samantha's wild heart. His eyes were blue and thoughtful, and his hair was brown and lustrous (not to be confused with lustful). His hair, though cut in the absolutely bizarre way that Amish men cut their hair, was still beautiful, like that of newborn

colt. Samantha wanted to touch it, but didn't because Ezekiel was wearing a straw hat.

"I had to finish my chores and wait until everyone was asleep," whispered Samantha, breathlessly. "I spent all day canning apples and sweeping my electricity-free house. Here, I made something for you. I've been working on it for the last six weeks." She placed a bundle into Ezekiel's arms.

"It's a quilt!" he said with delight, his eyes sparkling like the stars in the night sky. He held the quilt up and examined it proudly, like an Amish father admiring his newly born son (delivered by a midwife, of course).

"It has forty-five squares in it," said Samantha. "One square for each day that I have loved thee. The blue squares are arranged in the pattern of a dove, which signifies that our love is a divine love."

"I will treasure this quilt more than a thousand buggies," said Ezekiel, hugging it to his chest. "I will think of you each night as I go to sleep."

"Father still says we cannot see each other," said Samantha, a single tear rolling down her smooth, milk-white (yet not pale) cheek. "I can hardly bear it. I think of you every moment of every day. When I churn butter, my heart churns in longing for you. When I beat dust from the rugs, my heart beats with love for you. When I clip-clop along in the buggy, my heart clip-clops along with yours, as if we were one."

Ezekiel knew that Samantha's father, Jedediah, was a stern man. "What must I do to earn your father's approval?" he asked. "I would shear a thousand sheep in return for one hour with you. I would castrate a thousand bulls in return for one meal with you. I would reap a thousand

acres of wheat in return for one smile from you.” Ezekiel knew that it was physically impossible for him to reap a thousand acres without the aid of modern machinery, which was forbidden in his Amish cloister. Nonetheless, he was even willing to use modern machinery if he could but have Samantha’s hand in marriage.

Samantha took Ezekiel’s hand in hers. Her heart skipped a beat as she felt his strong, calloused grip. “Father wants me to marry Tobias Stoltzfus. He says that Tobias is a worthy man.”

Ezekiel’s eyes burned with holy fury. “And what do you think?” he asked.

Samantha looked longingly into Ezekiel’s eyes. “I think Tobias Stoltzfus is rather plain and boring. But father says Tobias has inherited a large tract of land from his grandfather. Father says Tobias could provide a comfortable life for me.”

Ezekiel placed both of his large, strong hands around Samantha’s small, delicate hand. “Does your father think love can be purchased, like a mule or an ox? Does your father not see that the love between us runs deeper than a thousand oceans?”

“Then what shall we do?” asked Samantha.

“We must escape this place,” said Ezekiel, firmly.

Samantha gasped. “Leave? But where shall we go?”

“I do not know. But I do know this: Our love is so strong that nothing can break it. We may not know where we are going, but we will have each other. As long as I have you by my side, there is no obstacle too great.”

Samantha thought of all she would be giving up by leaving: friends,

family, apple pie, hymn sings, the tranquil Amish life. She leaned her head against Ezekiel's chest and breathed deep. He smelled of fresh-cut hay and hotcakes, two of her favorite smells. She looked up into his eyes and said, "My heart belongs to you."

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Not too bad, right? I could see this story being turned into a movie as well, with Kirk Cameron starring as Ezekiel. And really, the possibilities in this story are endless. What if Tobias actually turned out to be a mob informant who had been placed into the Witness Protection Program? What if Samantha's father was actually planning an arranged marriage between Samantha and a 92 year-old oil tycoon? What if, just prior to their escape, the Rapture occurred, and Samantha was left behind? What if Ezekiel challenged Tobias to a duel to the death, only to discover that Tobias was actually an accomplished mixed martial arts fighter? What if Ezekiel was not all he claimed to be? What if (gasp!) Ezekiel was actually a vampire? Okay, that might be taking things a little too far. However, as you can see, I could write an epic Amish romance novel that would take the world by storm.

Why do I dislike Christian Amish romance novels so strongly? It's not so much the novels themselves I dislike, it's what they represent. Christian Amish romance novels, along with so much other Christian pop culture, present a safe, sanitized, romanticized view of the world. I suppose that's what make's them so popular. People want to escape from the brutal

realities of the real world and hang out in the quaint, quiet, peaceful world of the Amish. We live in a world that is becoming increasingly fractured by technology. We live in a world where everyone walks around staring at their smart phone. We live in a world in which gunmen stroll into schools and execute innocent children. We live in a world where dictators commit genocide. We live in a world where innocent babies are aborted by the millions. We live in a world full of cancer and car crashes and heartbreak. The idealized Amish world provides a momentary escape from the awful real world. Compared to our frantic, fractured, chaotic lives, the Amish way of life seems peaceful and appealing.

There's nothing necessarily wrong with a momentary escape from the real world. If you enjoy Amish romance novels, I won't hold it against you. However, I think the dominating sadness of this life is why I have always been drawn to epic, good versus evil stories, like *Lord of the Rings*. Evil is very real, and it is everywhere. Satan is very real, and he wants to bring as much destruction and despair into the world as possible. Jesus said that the thief comes to kill and destroy, and everyday we are confronted with the death and destruction that sin and Satan have brought upon the world. Every day we are reminded that Satan prowls about like a roaring lion. The entire creation groans, longing for rescue and light and goodness.

The brilliant actor, Phillip Seymour Hoffman, just died from a heroin overdose. The U.N. publicly lambasted the Catholic Church for the way they have handled the thousands of sexual abuse cases involving priests. Four car bombs were recently detonated in Baghdad. My grandfather fell

in his driveway, broke his ankle, and has been in the hospital for over a month. All of my daughters have hacking coughs. I regularly deal with intense physical anxiety. Evil and sadness and grief are everywhere.

I need more than escape; I need hope. I need more than fantasy; I need a real rescuer. I need hope that evil won't ultimately win. I need hope that sadness won't have the final word. I need hope that hurricanes and heartaches and headaches won't last forever. I need hope that Satan won't have the ultimate victory. I need hope of deliverance. Fantasy can provide a brief respite from this world, but it can't provide me with any true, lasting hope.

1 John 3:8 says, "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil." What a beautiful, hope-inspiring verse. The Son of God invaded our fallen, evil world, and he destroyed the works of the Devil. When Jesus was on the earth, people got small glimpses of his Devil-destroying work. Jesus healed paralytics. He gave sight to the blind. He cast out legions of demons. He even raised people from the dead. Paralysis and blindness and demons and death were the works of Satan. Jesus destroyed the works of Satan on a small, local scale when he was on earth. Darkness and death and gloom fled before Jesus. Demons cried out in terror when the Son of God approached them. Prostitutes became chaste, tax-collectors became men of integrity, and drunks went dry. Wherever Jesus went, he brought the wonderful, joyful, hope-giving rule and reign of God with him. Jesus began his public ministry by saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." Everything Jesus did was a glorious manifestation

of the kingdom of God.

Someday soon, Jesus will bring the kingdom of God to earth on a global scale. When he returns, he will obliterate all the works of Satan. He will return in glory, the conquering, ruling, mighty king. Every knee will bow before him, every tongue will confess that he is Lord. Jesus will place his foot upon the necks of his enemies, and he will drive wickedness out of the universe. Satan, along with all who followed him, will be cast into the Lake of Fire. Evil, which seems so prevalent and dominant now, will be distant memory. Jesus will wipe every tear from our eyes and erase every sorrow from our hearts.

One of my favorite Christmas carols is “Joy To The World”. Except “Joy To The World” isn’t actually a Christmas carol. Sorry to burst your Christmas bubble, but it’s the truth. The song is really speaking about the second coming of Christ. That’s why it says, “No more let sin and sorrow reign, nor thorns infest the ground // He comes to make his blessings flow // Far as the curse is found, far as the curse is found, far as, far as, the curse is found.”

Right now, the curse of sin is spread across the entire world, even in Amish country. But when Jesus returns he will make his blessings flow as far as the curse is found, and that also includes Amish country.

IN PRAISE OF BORING BUCKET LISTS

I'm not exactly sure when it started, but at some point in the last decade every person suddenly became obligated to make a "bucket list". A bucket list is a list of things you want to accomplish before you die (or "kick the bucket"). My introduction to the concept of the bucket list came from the movie *The Bucket List*, starring Morgan Freeman and Jack Nicholson. In the movie, Freeman and Nicholson both end up in the same hospital room after being diagnosed with terminal illnesses. Freeman is a retired mechanic who has been married to the same woman for forty-five years (of course Morgan Freeman would play that role - the dude also played Nelson Mandela). Nicholson is a bitter millionaire who has been divorced multiple times and is completely disillusioned with life, which is also a fitting role given that Nicholson has played the Joker and Colonel Jessup ("You can't handle the truth!"). Through a series of fortuitous events, Nicholson discovers a bucket list Freeman had created and then thrown away. Nicholson and Freeman then set out on an epic quest to fulfill the items on the bucket list, and in doing so, Nicholson learns valuable lessons about love, happiness, and what truly matters in life. I'm almost positive the phrase "feel good movie of the year" was attached to the movie.

Every so often I hear someone talking about their own bucket list. They post their bucket list on their blog or on Facebook, and they publicly

celebrate whenever they accomplish one of the items on their bucket list. They'll post a picture of themselves standing at the end of the Appalachian Trail, along with the caption, "So stoked to have hiked the entire trail!" And though the contents of each person's bucket list vary, there is one common theme that runs through every bucket list: every goal on every bucket list is epic.

Everyone wants to climb a mountain, fish in the Amazon, write a best-seller, hang glide, ski the Rockies, own a sports car, see the Eiffel Tower, sip espresso in Italy, smoke a Cuban cigar with Fidel Castro, become a karate champion, ride bareback on dolphins, go on an African safari, and retire by the age of 45. If you were to only look at our bucket lists, you would conclude that my generation is the most ambitious generation to ever walk the face of the earth. Everybody wants to accomplish a lot of awesome things.

Now, I'm all for ambitious goal-setting and for trying to achieve great things, but the whole concept of a bucket list kind of bothers me. When you think about it, the whole concept of a bucket list is profoundly selfish. I realize this kind of crazy talk flies in the face of the "you can do whatever you want when you grow up" talk that we all heard in school, but hear me out. A bucket list is a list of all the amazing things *I* want to see and do and experience in my life. I want to go to Paris. I want to fly fish on the Amazon river. I want to surf in the Pacific, catch salmon with my bare hands in Alaska, and eat lobster tail on the coast of Maine. If I don't accomplish these things I will feel that I was somehow ripped off, as if life didn't give me everything I deserve. My self-esteem will suffer, and I

will perpetually feel like a failure. If I don't accomplish every item on my bucket list, it is proof that I never lived up to my potential. If there ever was a testimony to our first-world, post-modern, existential selfishness, the bucket list is it. I seriously doubt that the men and women who live in the slums of India are making bucket lists. They're simply trying to put food on the table.

The utter self-centeredness of most bucket lists is completely contrary to almost all of scripture. Philippians 2:3-4 says, "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others." Don't look only to your own interests, but count others as *more* significant than yourselves. In other words, I'm supposed to treat others as being more important than me. I'm supposed to hold others in higher esteem than myself. If anything, I should be making a bucket list of ways I want to serve others before I die.

In Matthew 16:24-25, Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." The Christian life is a life of death! Following Jesus means daily dying to myself. There is no halfway when it comes to following Jesus. I'm either all in or not in at all. Jesus told the rich, young ruler to sell everything he had. Jesus told a grieving son to let the dead bury the dead. Jesus didn't say, "Find self-fulfillment, achieve your goals, and then follow me in your spare time." Jesus didn't encourage his followers to achieve their highest potential. Jesus calls for total,

wholehearted allegiance, and anything less is wickedness. All of our goals and dreams and desires must be submitted to King Jesus.

Another thing that bothers me about bucket lists is that the goals on most bucket lists don't align with God's goals for us. The goals God lays out for us in scripture are profoundly "ordinary". 1 Thessalonians 4:3-4 says, "For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor..." Wait, what? God's will for my life is that I be holy and abstain from sexual immorality? Where's the excitement in that? Where's the fun and the thrill? I mean, holiness doesn't exactly give the same adrenaline rush as dropping out of a helicopter and skiing down the slopes of a mountain. Holiness won't earn me a Red Bull sponsorship or entrance into the X-Games. It seems that God cares more about personal holiness than he does about white-water rafting and hiking the Appalachian Trail. God cares more about our character than about all the "awesome" things we accomplish.

In the parable of the talents, the master says to his servant, "Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master." The master, who represents God, praises his servant for being *faithful*. He doesn't praise his servant for being awesome. He doesn't praise his servant for being extreme, innovative, productive, or edgy. He doesn't praise his servant for taking the road less traveled, finding self-fulfillment, or adding his verse to the story (see *Dead Poets Society*). He praises his servant for faithfully working with what he was given. The thing God cares about and honors is

faithfulness, not famousness. Face it: faithfulness is pretty boring. Faithfulness looks like creating spreadsheets and changing diapers and caring for aging parents and setting up chairs on Sunday morning. Nobody gets a standing ovation for faithfulness. Nobody makes documentaries about faithful servants. Nobody notices faithful servants. Nobody except God, that is.

The master praises his servant for being faithful over *little*. Our culture is obsessed with the big and the epic. Every Super Bowl is “an epic rivalry for the ages”. Every tech company is trying to release the next big thing. Every summer, Hollywood releases a flurry of epic, blockbuster films. But God isn’t impressed with the epic and the big. The master doesn’t praise his servant for accomplishing massive, world-changing things. The master doesn’t praise his servant for accomplishing everything on his bucket list. The master doesn’t praise his servant for inventing the next big thing. The master praises his servant for faithfully stewarding the little he had.

Maybe we should rethink the idea of bucket lists. I’m not saying we should do away with them completely. I have things that I want to accomplish in my lifetime. I want to go to the Caribbean with Jen someday. I want to see Paul McCartney in concert before he stops touring or dies (which could happen simultaneously). I would like to write a book that sells a lot of copies (see previous chapter on Amish romance novels).

Maybe our bucket lists should be more about faithfulness than awesomeness. Maybe our bucket lists should be more about serving others than serving ourselves. Maybe our bucket lists should be more about holiness and less about fun. When Jesus returns and creates a new heaven

and new earth, I think we'll look back on our bucket lists with contempt. All the things we strived and strained for will seem paltry and silly. The adventures this life offers can't hold a candle compared to the adventures of the new heaven and new earth. Those are the adventures really worth living for.

REALITY ISN'T REAL

The title of this essay might make you think I'm going to address existential questions of magnificent importance. Or, you might think I'm going to construct an elaborate, difficult to follow, yet slightly plausible theory regarding virtual reality, the Matrix, and alternate universes. On both counts you would be wrong. This is an essay about a reality that isn't real, otherwise known as reality television.

My first memory of reality television is the show "Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?", which, according to the always-reliable Internet, first aired on September 4th, 1998. I'm not sure if "Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?" was technically a reality television show, but the line between reality television and regular television has always been a little blurry anyways. The show was originally hosted by the semi-hyper, ever-young Regis Philbin, who was approximately 103 years old when he began hosting the show. I'm pretty sure that Regis, who is still going strong to this day, served alongside Dick Clark and General Robert E. Lee in the Civil War.

Contestants would sit across from Regis and attempt to answer a variety of trivia questions. The more questions they answered, the more money they won. The more money they won, the harder the questions became. As the contestant pondered each question, intense, ominous music played in the background, the kind of music that typically accompanies interrogation scenes in action films. Over top of the music

was the sound of a heartbeat, like something out of an Edgar Allen Poe story. It may have been artificially constructed, but at times the tension would be almost too much to bear. The producers of the show must have instructed the contestants to reason through the potential answers out loud, because almost every contestant would provide running commentary on what answer he was going to pick and why he was going to pick it.

The average viewer, such as myself, would stand up and scream at the television, trying to telepathically persuade the contestant that his reasoning was faulty. Regis would also provide commentary, at times interjecting jokes, other times reminding the contestants of just how much money they were going to lose if they got the answer wrong. Regis really was the perfect guy for the job. He was funny, dramatic, intense, and hyper, all at the same time. And his teeth were perfect, which wouldn't really matter in Britain, where everyone has jigsaw puzzle teeth, but matters a lot in America (I'm sure I just offended every British person).

When the contestant finally settled on an answer, Regis would dramatically pause, and then say, "Is that your final answer?" The contestant had one last chance to change their mind, one last chance to retract an incorrect answer, one last chance to save themselves. After the contestant said, "Final answer," Regis would stop and stare at the contestant for an uncomfortably long period of time. As Regis stared deep into the trembling soul of the contestant, the tension would build, and build, and build, until both the contestant and the viewing audience were on the verge of a complete nervous breakdown. Then he would explode into, "That's correct! You've just won \$25,000 dollars!" The show could

take you from the highest of highs to the lowest of lows in the span of thirty minutes. One time I saw a guy win a million bucks. Another time I saw a guy lose several hundred thousand dollars. By the end of every episode my nervous system was shot.

The show “Survivor”, which was most definitely a reality television show, first aired on May 31st, 2000. I never really got into that show, probably because the commercials always showed people screaming at each other, insisting that they weren’t there to make friends, and getting physically hurt. Also, there was a creep ball on the first season named Richard Hatch, who insisted on walking around the island naked. Richard Hatch is currently in jail for tax evasion. The moral of the story? If you’re going to be on a reality television show, put some clothes on.

“Fear Factor” was another big reality television show in the early 2000’s. I imagine that the original pitch for the show went something like this: “Imagine feeling nauseated and on the verge of vomiting for an entire hour.” The entire show revolved around people doing things that were scary/crazy/revolting, like spending an hour in a box full of spiders, or eating a pound of earth worms, or dropping venomous snakes into their pants. I still can’t quite understand why that show appealed to people. When one of my young children vomits all over my couch, it is disgusting. When a grown man is forced to eat vomit...you get the point. Thankfully “Fear Factor” was canceled after a few seasons.

Although I never watched it, I’m pretty sure “The Real World” on MTV was also a prime player in the early years of reality television. I didn’t watch it because it was on MTV and because it mainly centered

around young people sleeping with each other and getting drunk.

Reality television has come a long way since those crazy, Philbin-filled early years. Survivor is still going strong, although the producers have to keep coming up with new ways to keep people interested. The producers did celebrity Survivor, in which they rounded up a bunch of desperate for work, high-maintenance, B-list celebrities (see Stephen Baldwin), and dropped them into the middle of the jungle. The producers did guys versus girls Survivor, in which the teams were split by gender. The producers did all-star Survivor, in which previous contestants were brought back for yet another chance at the grand prize. The most recent season of Survivor broke the teams up into “brawn”, “brains”, and “beauty”. If you are unemployed or have 3-4 spare days, you can find detailed summaries of each season of Survivor on Wikipedia.com.

Since the creation of Survivor, hundreds of other reality television shows have been created. There are family-friendly shows like “19 Kids and Counting”, a show about a kind of cool, kind of odd, kind of inspiring, Christian family who take the Genesis mandate to be fruitful and multiply very seriously. There are shows about women having their first baby, women who didn’t know they were pregnant having babies, and women having octuplets (yes, eight babies from one womb). There are at least three reality television shows about logging, which would seem ludicrous if there weren’t also a massively popular reality show about a family who makes duck hunting gear. There is a show about Amish kids sowing their wild oats, as well as a show about the “Amish Mafia” (whatever that is). There are shows about people who are preparing for the apocalypse,

people who are extreme cheapskates, and people who spend all year preparing their house for Christmas. There are approximately forty-five shows with the word “Wars” in the title - Storage Wars, Cupcake Wars, Baking Wars, Mining Wars, Logging Wars, Barbershop Wars, etc. There are innumerable talent shows, all of which feature three judges, one of whom is a British jerk who insults little girls and old people alike. There are at least four house-buying shows, in which extremely young couples must purchase a house with the limited budget of \$800,000. Off the top of my head I think can of four shows about pawn shops / antique shops. There are shows about drug addicts, drug interventions, hoarders, paranormal hunters, paranormal interventions, paranormal drug addicts, and crab fishermen.

I think we can safely say that every possible reality television show has been invented.

What does the extreme overabundance of reality television shows say about us as people? A lot, actually.

The biggest thing it says is that we have terrible taste in television. I’m sorry, but if you like the show “Storage Wars”, I’m not sure we can be friends. Just kidding. Sort of. My dad watches “Storage Wars”, so I should probably watch my words lest I get written out of his will. Nevertheless, the idea of a show centered exclusively around contrived rivals buying the contents of old storage lockers strikes me as really, really stupid. I mean, how many times can you watch someone dramatically open a storage locker? I guess some people must enjoy it or it wouldn’t still be on television.

The abundance of reality television also says that we are a people bored with reality. In many countries people don't have time watch reality television because they actually have to live in reality. They have to catch fish and drive rickshaws and work in factories to support their families. The very idea of two sassy cupcake bakers getting into a heated argument over who has better decorating skills would strike them as supremely ludicrous. Those of us in the Western world, however, have become bored with reality and thus have created a new "reality", which isn't reality at all.

As Christians, we have the opportunity to speak the truth into the existential boredom of our friends and coworkers. We know the One who created reality. We know the One who infuses reality with meaning and importance. Every day, eternal, magnificent, unseen realities hang in the balance. Eternal rewards are won and lost. Souls are sent to Heaven or Hell. Satan prowls about like a lion, looking to destroy. God saves sinners through the proclamation of the gospel. Men and women are rescued out of slavery from sin. From the divine perspective, there is no such thing as a boring day. Momentous, eternity-altering things are taking place on a moment by moment basis, and we have the privilege of participating in those incredible moments.

I'm not going to go so far as to say it's a sin to be bored. I will say, however, that life is too meaningful for us to be bored. It sounds terribly cliché, but life really is a grand adventure. Not in the "let's climb Mount Everest" sort of way, but in the "we know the One who created Everest" sort of way. I think one of the reasons the book *Pilgrim's Progress* has been so successful is that it helps the reader grasp the incredible realities taking

place every moment of every day. There are no dull moments for Pilgrim as he travels to the Celestial City.

Those who don't know Christ are on a desperate search for meaning. My generation in particular, has been told again and again that we are destined to accomplish great things. We are supposed to dream big dreams and then achieve those dreams. Whether they acknowledge it or not, people desperately want their lives to count for something. Nobody wants to get to the end of their life only to feel like a failure. Nobody wants to waste their life. We all have eternity stamped upon our hearts.

People watch reality television shows because they want to experience a meaningful reality, even if that means experiencing it vicariously through someone on television. We want to change our lives for the better, so we watch *The Biggest Loser*. We want to experience true love, so we watch *The Bachelor*. We want to experience fame and fortune, so we watch *American Idol*.

As followers of Christ, we understand ultimate reality. We understand that true life change comes through the power of the gospel. We understand that true love is only possible by the power of the Holy Spirit. We know that true fame means being famous in God's eyes. The gospel gives us meaningful reality, and the gospel compels us to tell others about that meaningful reality.

THE TEBOW EFFECT

Remember Tim Tebow? Let me refresh your memory. Tim Tebow was the superstar quarterback at the University of Florida from 2006-2009. During those glory years, Tebow led the Florida Gators to two National Championships, while managing to snag the Heisman Trophy for himself. During his college career he won a lot of games, won a lot of hearts, and broke a lot of records. He was known for his ferocious competitiveness and his refusal to lose. In 2010, Tebow was drafted by the Denver Broncos.

In addition to being a superstar athlete, Tebow is also a superstar Christian. Tebow is, arguably, the most outspoken Christian to ever play professional sports. There have always been outspoken Christian athletes, like Kurt Warner, Reggie White, and David Robinson, but those guys weren't even close to Tebow in terms of outspokenness. Some Christian athletes let their play on the field be the primary testimony to their faith, but not Tebow. When he was in college he would wear eye black patches under his eyes which had "3:16" printed on them, a reference to John 3:16. He constantly talked about his faith in television and radio interviews, and constantly glorified God for his success (not in the generic, "I want to thank God and my mom," way, but in the true, biblical way). He was/is a regular speaker at Christian conferences, and appeared in a somewhat controversial pro-life Superbowl ad created by Focus on the

Family. He even goes into prisons and preaches the gospel to the inmates. Every Christian mom wants their daughter to marry Tebow, and every Christian dad wants their son to grow up to be like Tebow.

In contrast to his college career, Tebow's professional career has been a bit of a let down. Before he was drafted, there was a significant amount of discussion about whether or not Tebow could actually make it as an NFL quarterback. The Florida Gators ran a somewhat gimmicky option read / spread offense, and quarterbacks who thrive in that type of system don't always do so well in the pros. Additionally, Tebow's throwing mechanics were a bit goofy. He didn't have the smooth, fluid throwing motion associated with stellar quarterbacks like Tom Brady and Peyton Manning. Tebow's motion was a bit awkward, with a slight hitch, and his accuracy was suspect. He was known for being more of a smash mouth quarterback than a precision passing quarterback, the kind of guy who would run over a defender rather than pass over one.

Tebow didn't do a whole lot in his first season in the NFL. He played in a few games, but the results were rather pedestrian. However, in his second season with the Broncos, things began to look promising. Tebow managed to turn around a flailing team and lead them to the playoffs. With each win, Christians got more and more excited. For the first time in a long time, an outspoken Christian was succeeding in a primarily secular environment. People started talking about Tebow in semi-messianic tones, as if he were sent by God as a sign to the unbelieving world. Every clutch Tebow victory (and there were several) was yet more proof that God was on his side, and that God was honoring him for his outspoken beliefs.

When he led the Broncos to beat my beloved, and heavily favored, Pittsburgh Steelers in a dramatic overtime playoff win, Christians went absolutely bonkers. They breathlessly pointed out that Tebow had thrown 10 passes for 316 yards, for an average of 31.6 yards per pass, all of which happened to match up to Tebow's favorite verse, John 3:16. This statistical phenomenon was empirical proof that even the most hardened skeptic could not deny. It was kind of like *National Treasure* meets *The DaVinci Code*, only even better. Of *course* God was on Tebow's side. The numbers proved it, and numbers don't lie! After the win over Pittsburgh, the upcoming weeks were a foregone conclusion in people's minds. Tebow would lead his team to the Superbowl, win the Superbowl, and then Tebow would ascend to heaven in a cloud of glory.

Unfortunately, Tebow and the Broncos got destroyed the very next week by the New England Patriots, ending the dream run. It turned out that even Tebow, the anointed one, couldn't beat Tom Brady. Then Tebow was released by the Broncos in the offseason when they acquired Peyton Manning. Peyton Manning has since gone on to break almost every meaningful NFL passing record. Tebow, on the other hand, bounced around from team to team before finally being released by the New England Patriots. As of this writing, he is a sports analyst for the SEC Network.

A similar phenomenon occurred with Jeremy Lin, the current point guard for the Houston Rockets. Lin played basketball at Harvard, which isn't exactly known for cranking out NBA superstars. Harvard is a school for lawyers and future politicians, not professional athletes. I imagine that

the Harvard basketball head coach describes plays using quadratic equations and the philosophy of Aristotle. Lin was not drafted out of college, and ended up bouncing around in the NBA's Development League for a while. Then, in 2012, Lin just sort of came out of nowhere. At the time, he was playing for the New York Knicks. Playing for any New York team puts you at the center of attention, in good ways and bad ways. Being at the center of attention is bad when you are Alex Rodriguez and you have just been suspended for an entire season for steroid use. Being at the center of attention is good when you happen to be Jeremy Lin in 2012. Through a series of fortunate events, which involved Lin being on the court at just the right time and hitting a series of clutch shots in clutch games, Lin lead the Knicks on an improbable winning streak.

Like Tebow, Lin is an outspoken Christian, and the evangelical world rabidly embraced him, just like we did with Tebow. For a few brief weeks in 2012, everybody was talking about "Linsanity". And then, just as quickly as it sprang up, "Linsanity" passed. Lin is still in the NBA, but he's not nearly the celebrity he was. Now he's just a slightly above average NBA point guard who also happens to be a Christian.

Why do we Christians get so excited about guys like Tebow and Lin? Why do we get so lathered up when a Christian athlete starts to succeed at the highest level? I suspect the answer has something to do with the way the media usually treats evangelical Christians. Generally speaking, the media doesn't like orthodox, Bible-believing Christians. The media often accuses Christians of being homophobic, narrow-minded, unintelligent, and intolerant. Of course, it doesn't help when people like Pat Robertson

publicly proclaim that a disaster in Haiti was because the people in Haiti practiced witchcraft. Because of our relationship with the media, not many Christians become true, honest-to-goodness celebrities. Kirk Cameron, the sort of famous Christian actor from *Growing Pains*, stars almost exclusively in somewhat cheesy Christian films, like *Left Behind* and *Fireproof*. I don't expect Cameron to star in a blockbuster film alongside Russell Crowe or Liam Neeson any time soon.

But there was something different about Tebow and Lin. They were real celebrities, and they were definitely ours! They belonged to our close-knit evangelical circle. They weren't like U2 or Creed, who sort of sounded like Christians but also talked a fair amount about sex and drugs. Tebow and Lin were full-blooded, honest-to-goodness, purity-ring-wearing, abstinence-adhering, evangelical Christians. It was like they were proof that Christians are normal people too, and that Christians can actually be successful. We embraced them so quickly because we wanted to identify with them. Tebow and Lin were generally respected by the watching world, and that made us really, really happy. Through Tebow and Lin, we were saying, "See, Christians can be awesome too!" I heard numerous Christians talk about how God was honoring Tebow and Lin for being outspoken about their faith.

Now don't get me wrong: I'm happy when guys like Lin and Tebow do well. These days it's difficult to find role-model athletes. Trash talking, taunting, and even on-field fighting are becoming common practice in the world of professional sports. Guys like Alex Rodriguez and Lance Armstrong are getting suspended and banned from their respective sports

for using performance enhancing drugs. Barry Bonds owns about a dozen Major League Baseball records, yet will never get into the Hall of Fame because of his steroid use. Professional football players are constantly in each other's faces, jawing and shoving and disrespecting. If my daughters ever play sports, I want them to treat their opponents with respect, give glory to God, and not cheat, just like Tebow and Lin.

But I feel somewhat uncomfortable when Christians start attributing an athlete's particular success to God's special blessing. I know, I know, every party has a pooper, and I'm being that pooper. Why do I insist on ruining everyone's fun? Why can't I let everyone be excited for guys like Tebow and Lin?

Because when we talk about Christian athletes, we are also making loud statements about the God they (and we) serve.

Tim Tebow's professional career hasn't turned out like he hoped it would. He got cut or traded by three different teams, and now he isn't playing football at all. So what does that say about God? If Tebow's success was the result of God's special blessing, is Tebow's failure the result of God's displeasure? Did Tebow do something to make God angry? I don't think so. From all outward appearances, Tebow hasn't changed his tune. It's not like he suddenly turned into a raging atheist. He is still regularly talking about his faith and still giving glory to God at every opportunity. He's still a Christian, he's just not a quarterback. Jeremy Lin has done a little better. At least he's still in the NBA. But he's not at the level of someone like LeBron James or Kevin Durant.

The reality is, worldly success is not necessarily an indicator of God's

favor. Yes, God rewards those who work diligently, and I suspect part of Tebow's success can simply be attributed to his work ethic. But more often than not, those who publicly follow Jesus will be mocked and rejected by the world. This is why Jesus said in Luke 6:22-23, "Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man! Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets." When we boldly and publicly follow Jesus, we will be hated, reviled, spurned, and rejected. We won't be celebrated or honored. We won't be put on a pedestal and adored by millions.

Additionally, God tends to gravitate toward the weak and lowly, not the celebrities. God doesn't do star struck. He isn't impressed by celebrities or entourages or bling or Escalades. In 1 Corinthians 1:26-27, Paul said, "For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong..." Does God choose the wise, noble, and exalted? Yes. On rare occasions. But more often than not, God chooses the weak, lowly, and unimpressive. God doesn't need big time celebrities to act as his spokespeople. He doesn't need Tim Tebow or Jeremy Lin or Kirk Cameron or Brian Welch (the former guitar player for Korn who became a born-again Christian). He can save people quite effectively on his own, thank you very much. He doesn't need celebrity endorsements to advance his kingdom.

When a Christian enjoys success in a secular arena, we should be

happy. After all, the Bible commands us to rejoice with those who rejoice. But we should be careful about equating success with God's favor, and we should be careful about proclaiming what God is or is not doing in a particular person's life. The world's ideas of success runs counter to God's ideas. God's blessings take on many forms, including the form of trials and challenges. As the famous hymn declares, God moves in mysterious ways. Because Tebow is God's son, God delights in Tebow just as much, if not more, now than when Tebow was on the playing field. Tebow is experiencing God's favor just as much now as when he was the starting quarterback for the Denver Broncos.

Will Tebow play again in the NFL? Maybe. I don't think he'll be a starting quarterback. But honestly, I don't really care. I'm confident that Tebow will continue to glorify God no matter what his circumstances, and that's what really matters.

THE ODDS OF FINDING YOUR SOUL MATE

Helping people find their soul mate is big business these days. As of this writing, there are approximately 23,000 different dating websites, each claiming to be responsible for more relationships and more marriages than any other website. Some sites bring people together by shared interests. If you're interested in cooking, you can take a cooking class with other attractive people who are also interested in cooking. Presumably, you and that special someone will hit it off while sautéing mushrooms. You will fall in love, get married, and open a successful restaurant in New York City.

Other sites match people by compatibility factors. Dr. Neil Warren, the founder of eHarmony.com, spent three years researching the characteristics of successful relationships. Now, for a low monthly fee, you can benefit from his patented "Compatibility Matching System", which will match you up with other highly compatible, attractive individuals. This matching system is guaranteed to connect you with a person who is highly compatible with you. This isn't about love at first sight, or mushy feelings, or a heart going pitter patter. You can't rely on those things. This about cold, hard, facts. You can rely on the Compatibility Matching System. As I look over eHarmony's website, I can't help but think of Michael Lewis' book, *Moneyball*, which chronicles the rise of Sabermetrics within professional baseball. Put simply, Sabermetrics takes a very

scientific, mathematical approach to evaluating baseball talent, in the hopes of identifying a talented player others might have missed. The “Compatibility Matching System” feels like the romantic version of Sabermetrics.

If you happen to be a country boy who wants to marry a good ol’ fashioned country girl, you can use the website FarmersOnly.com, the #1 dating site for country folks. I’m not joking. Their jingle goes, “You don’t have to be lonely, at FarmersOnly.com.” The commercials features a guy in overalls and a John Deere baseball cap, talking about wanting to find a girl who likes fishing and hunting. Honestly, the first time I saw it I thought it was a spoof. The commercials are low budget and low quality, like something shot on an old video camera, and the dialog is unintentionally hilarious. Apparently us city folks just don’t get it.

Let’s step back for a moment and consider the big picture. Every dating website promises to help you find that one special person you were always destined to marry. But what are the odds of actually finding your soul mate? In other words, what are the odds of you finding that one person whom you were eternally predestined to marry? You know, the one person in the world who will complete you, make you happy, finish your sentences, be the yin to your yang, and hold your hand while you take long walks on the beach? Nicholas Sparks makes millions of dollars telling stories about people finding their soul mate. Well meaning men and women tell single folks that they will know when they’ve found “the one”. But what are the mathematical odds of finding the one? How can you be absolutely sure you’re going to find your soul mate?

The current population of the world is somewhere around seven billion people. Let's first take the politically correct, non-xenophobic position, and assume that your soul mate could be located in any country. Your soul mate might currently be living in China or India or Siberia or Illinois. Wherever he or she is living, the mathematical odds of you finding your soul mate at around 1 in 7,000,000,000. Wow. Those are absolutely terrible odds. You have a better chance of winning the lottery and getting struck twice by lightning, all on the same day.

For the sake of hope, let's assume your soul mate lives in the same country you do. The current population of the United States is around 315 million people. So, assuming you live in the United States, the odds of you finding your soul mate are around 1 in 315,000,000, which are still really, really bad odds. I don't care how many compatibility tests you take, when the odds are that low there is almost no way you are going to find your soul mate. You could spend every day of your entire life actively searching for your soul mate without ever having success.

Don't despair yet. You are not yet doomed to be a lonely single person who spends her years accumulating cats. We haven't included God in the equation. Many pastors and churches teach that God has one special person for you, one person created by God to be your soul mate and best friend. God will most certainly bring that person into your life, and when he does, you'll know it. How will you know? You just will. You'll get a special feeling in your heart (not to be confused with heartburn), or you'll get goose bumps, or you'll have love at first sight, or you'll have a dream, or you'll look up in the sky and see a cloud in the shape of a heart, or your

hands will accidentally brush during a prayer meeting.

While the idea of having a God-ordained soul mate is certainly attractive, it also seems a bit problematic to me. The whole concept raises a lot of questions for me. Is it possible for someone to miss the person God wanted them to marry? After all, none of us knows every detail of God's plan for our lives. Isn't it within the realm of possibility that God could bring two people together, only to have one of them decide that the relationship isn't working, and therefore accidentally ruin God's plan? This certainly seems like a very real and very terrifying possibility.

Is it possible for a person to marry someone God didn't want them to marry? Is it possible for someone to accidentally marry someone else's soul mate? And if that happens, what happens to the rest of us? Doesn't that throw the whole plan into disarray? If someone accidentally married my soul mate, that means I accidentally married someone else's soul mate, which then caused someone else to marry the wrong person. If a guy in 1592 married the wrong person, then we've had massive soul mate mismatches for the past four hundred years! It's like a some sort of horrible divine chain-reaction. It's the divine equivalent of a nuclear meltdown. What if I somehow discover that I married the wrong person? Do I need to get a divorce because I'm actually married to someone else's soul mate? This whole soul mate thing is getting freaky scary, freaky fast.

Maybe, just maybe, we've got the whole concept of a "soul mate" wrong. Despite the well-meaning advice of many Christian love gurus, you won't find the phrase "soul mate" in the Bible. It's just not there, not even in the original Hebrew and Greek. Given the significance of marriage

in God's eyes, you would think that if each person had a predetermined soul mate, God might have something to say about it. You know, something like, "You'll know your soul mate by the butterflies in your stomach, and please don't mess it up, because that ruins everything for everybody (Proverbs 32:7)." The closest thing you come to any sort of soul mate talk is the Song of Solomon, which involves two lovers talking passionately, and even erotically, about each other and to each other. (Side note: You might want to avoid having your kids read Song of Solomon before the age of 13. It can create some awkward conversations.)

The Bible is full of marriages. Abraham sent his servant to find a wife for Isaac. The servant prayed that God would bring the right woman to a particular well at a particular time and that the woman would offer to water his camel. God answered the servant's prayer, bringing Rebekah to the well. The servant went to Rebekah's house and then proposed to Rebekah on behalf of Abraham and Isaac. Rebekah accepted the proposal without ever seeing Isaac, let alone going on any sort of date. She didn't ask the servant whether Isaac would be compatible with her. She didn't try to figure out if she and Isaac had shared interests. I guess you could call this a semi-arranged marriage.

Jacob worked for his uncle Laban for seven years so that he might marry Laban's daughter, Rachel. On the wedding day, Laban pulled an absolutely awful prank, tricking Jacob into marrying his eldest daughter Leah, who wasn't exactly a looker. You would think Jacob would realize something fishy was going on, but he didn't. He was stuck being married to a person he didn't even like. So Jacob worked another seven years in

order to marry Rachel as well. Dads, if you're looking to marry off two of your daughters to one guy, this is the way to do it.

David was in love with Saul's daughter, Michal. Before he would let David marry Michal, Saul insisted that David go to battle against the Philistines and circumcise 100 of their men. This has got to be one of the most bizarre marriage requirements in the history of marriage. Can you imagine if you met your girlfriend's dad, and the first thing he said to you was, "So, what do you think about circumcision?" Single guys: if you're going to ask a girl out, first make sure her dad doesn't have any strange pre-marriage requirements.

Solomon, who wrote much of Song of Solomon, was addicted to getting married. Over the course of his life he married 700 women. He could have been the star of a TLC reality show called "My 700 Sister Wives".

Paul, the great missionary and apostle, wished that everyone could be single like he was. However, he also realized that young folks tend to burn with passion for one another. His advice? If you're burning up with passion, get married and have great sex with your spouse.

My point in listing all these examples is not to poke fun at marriage. My point is that the whole concept of finding the one, perfect soul mate, is completely absent from scripture. I suspect that the idea of a soul mate was invented by romance writers so that they would have something to write about.

In fact, I would even go so far as to say that the idea of a soul mate is harmful. If you go into marriage expecting your spouse to satisfy your

every need and complement you perfectly, you will be sorely disappointed. If you expect your spouse to satisfy the deepest longings of your soul, you are in for a massive let down. Marriage is a covenant between two, imperfect, very flawed, sinful people. You're not perfect and your spouse isn't perfect, so don't expect your marriage to be perfect.

If you're single, don't obsess over finding the perfect person. Don't spend years and years waiting to find the perfect person who will be your everything. There is only one perfect person, and his name is Jesus. Unfortunately, you don't get to marry Jesus (I realize that's a weird analogy if you're a guy). You can, however, marry someone who loves Jesus very much. That's the kind of person you should be trying to find. Compatibility comes through Christ, not through some mathematical formula invented by the owner of a dating website. True love between two people only happens when those two people first love Jesus.

My wife, Jen, is absolutely my soul mate. I love her more than any other person on this earth. I can't believe I get to be married to her. She is my best friend, the person I love being with the most. I absolutely cannot imagine my life without her. But the reality is, we're not perfect for each other. I struggle with mental illness, specifically chronic anxiety. Every single day I experience some amount of anxiety. When I'm feeling really anxious, it is difficult for me to be around other people. It can be tough for me to take care of our kids. It's really quite debilitating. When Jen was imagining the perfect spouse, I seriously doubt she was thinking of someone who struggled with mental illness. She certainly wouldn't have checked the "chronic anxiety" box on the perfect soul mate survey.

However, I would venture to say that, in some ways, my health struggles have actually served to knit us closer together. When I am feeling anxious, Jen takes care of me. She serves me. She tells me to rest while she takes care of our kids. When she serves me it dramatically increases my love and affection for her. I can't tell you how grateful I am for her. She really is the perfect person for me.

We became soul mates when we vowed to stay faithful to each other until death parted us. Genesis 2:24 says, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh." When we said, "I do," we became soul mates. God knit us together into one flesh. I hold fast to Jen and she holds fast to me. We really do belong together.

Is Jen the only person in the world I could have married? No, of course not. The whole idea of a single soul mate is ridiculous. But now that we are married I can't imagine anything else. God has caused us to become soul mates.

LET ME MAKE YOU UNCOMFORTABLE

I have a weird relationship with evangelism. In case you're unfamiliar with the term, "evangelism" usually means telling an unbeliever about Jesus. The goal of evangelism is that the unbeliever would become a believer. Now, just to be clear, I'm all for evangelism in the general sense. The Bible makes it clear that every person must have faith in Christ, and the way people come to faith in Christ is through hearing about Christ. The only way people will hear about Christ is if someone tells them about Christ. If we don't tell people about Christ, they will go to Hell, which is an absolutely terrifying thought. So when I say I'm all for evangelism, I really mean it. Eternal realities hang in the balance when we talk about evangelism. Heaven and hell hinge on effective evangelism. Personally, I really want to become more effective at telling other people about Jesus.

I feel conflicted, however, regarding various methods of evangelism. There is a broad spectrum of opinions when it comes to exactly how evangelism should be done. At the one extreme, you have people who think evangelism should be done strictly through actions. The general idea is that if you do good deeds, like feeding the poor and caring for the homeless, the world will notice. When the world notices, you will then have the opportunity to tell them about your motivation for doing good deeds, which is, presumably, Jesus. These folks point to Jesus as our prime example. He fed the hungry, touched the sick, and spent time with

the lowly. True evangelism, they say, consists of doing these types of things.

On the other extreme, you have people who think evangelism consists of standing on a street corner and yelling at strangers about the wrath to come. I like to call these guys “prophets of doom” and/or “prophets of rage” (both of which would also make great band names). These types of evangelists tend to carry large, neon signs with provocative sayings scrawled on them. These provocative sayings are usually aimed at homosexuals, Hollywood, evolutionists, or some combination of the three. These types of evangelists also tend to carry thick, King James Version Bibles, which they can pound with their open palm. These types of evangelists also seem to sweat a lot.

Both extremes are wrong. The people who say, “Preach the gospel, and use words if necessary,” seem to forget that the very essence of the gospel is words. They might as well say, “Feed the poor, and use food if necessary,” or, “Pay the bills, and use money if necessary.” The gospel is primarily a message which must be communicated with words. It is good news which must be believed. The good news is that God sent Jesus to live and die in the place of sinners. People cannot embrace the good news if they don’t first hear the good news. Feeding the poor is a good thing, but it isn’t the same thing as proclaiming the message of the gospel. Caring for the homeless is a noble thing to do, but it isn’t preaching the gospel. Preach the gospel, and use words, always.

The crazy street corner preachers aren’t usually right either (I say usually because I’m sure some get it right). The street corner preachers

always seem angry at the audience, which runs completely counter to the goodness of the gospel. A doctor shouldn't be angry when he is administering life-saving medicine to a patient, and a preacher shouldn't be angry when he is proclaiming the soul-saving news of the gospel. A preacher should be appropriately joyful when he preaches, not always foaming at the mouth. The street corner preachers also tend to obsess on the wrath of God, while neglecting to talk about the love of God. Street corner preachers are more provocative than persuasive, and provoking people to anger doesn't usually lead people to believe in Jesus.

Is there a middle ground between the say-nothing evangelists and the in-your-face evangelists? I'm sure there is, I just have trouble finding it. I know that I am supposed to tell people about Jesus, but I'm just not sure how to do it.

I have godly friends who are committed to cold contact evangelism. Cold contact evangelism usually involves going up to a complete stranger and striking up a conversation about Jesus. In principle, this is a really great idea. If everyone desperately needs to know about Jesus, then it is imperative that we tell as many people as possible. If my waitress is going to Hell, why am I not telling her about Jesus the second she comes up to my table?

I have reservations about cold contact evangelism for several reasons. First, it scares the crap out of me. The idea of going up to a complete stranger and initiating a conversation about Jesus is absolutely terrifying to me. This is somewhat odd, because I am not at all nervous about being in front of people. I've heard it said that people are more afraid of public

speaking than death, but public speaking doesn't make me nervous at all. Cold contact evangelism terrifies me. In all honesty, I would rather run through Central Park in leopard skin Speedo than talk to a complete stranger about Jesus (for the record, I don't own a Speedo). I know I'm not supposed to be afraid to talk about Jesus. I know I'm supposed to be bold as a lion, just like the early disciples, but I'm not. I'm a pansy. I hate that I struggle with fearing other people, but it's a reality I must deal with.

The second reason I struggle with cold contact evangelism is because it feels very similar to a lot of things I really don't like. I really don't like it when Mormons interrupt my dinner to tell me about Joseph Smith, the angel Moroni, and some mystical golden tablets. I really don't like it when I'm walking through the local mall and someone asks me to complete a survey. I really don't like it when I shop for a car and the salesman pressures me to do something I don't want to do. Cold contact evangelism feels like a semi-spiritual combo of Mormon missionary techniques and used car salesman tactics. I realize there is a big difference between sharing the gospel and being a salesman, but I think the average non-Christian probably places them in the same category. And unfortunately, I think the average non-Christian responds to cold contact evangelism and sales pitches the same way: by shutting down.

The third reason I struggle with cold contact evangelism is because it feels so abrupt and impersonal. When I interrupt a complete stranger to talk with them about Jesus, it feels like I am invading their personal space. Like I don't really care about them or their needs. Like I'm trying to meet a daily quota. There is no relational building between me and the

person I'm talking to. There is no friendship, no back and forth, no question and answer. It's just me talking to them and at them.

Yet, in spite of all my inner conflicts, I don't have a good alternative to cold contact evangelism. Hell is very real and lots of people are willingly and unwillingly going there. Eternal realities compel me to tell people about Jesus. I suppose I could insist that all evangelism should be done in the context of friendships, but I'm not so sure that's a good solution. Church folk like myself tend to be a bit isolationist. We're not real good at making friends with non-Christians, or reaching out to others (I'm speaking generally), which in turn tends to hamper our evangelism efforts. Yes, there are some Christians who are really good at reaching out to non-Christians and sharing the gospel, but I would venture that they are the exception, not the norm.

I can't help but think of D.L. Moody's response when someone criticized his methods of evangelism. He said, "Well, I like my way of doing it better than your way of not doing it." It seems like that quote applies well to me. I may be uncomfortable with certain methods of evangelism, but I can't claim that I'm doing it any better. It's not like I'm out and about saving souls by the thousands. I'm certainly not a Billy Graham or D.L. Moody or Charles Spurgeon. I'm a timid guy who wants to get better at telling people about Jesus. I guess you could say I like the evangelism done by the cold contact folks better than the evangelism not being done by me.

JESUS ISN'T REPUBLICAN

I don't follow politics particularly closely. I've tried to make myself care about politics in the past, but I just can't do it. Whenever I start reading news articles about foreign policy, or tax increases, or the inflation of the dollar, my eyes start to glaze over, and drool begins to run out the corner of mouth. It's all...so...boring. The Fed has stated that the interest rate in Syria will lead to a surplus in GDP flux capacitors, which will in turn cause the going rate for Beanie Babies to become unstable, which will blah, blah, blah, blah. I know this is a flaw on my part. I understand that politics are important, and that it matters who is in office, and that foreign policy does affect my life in some distant, abstract way. I know that political uprisings in foreign countries matter, both in those countries and on a global scale. But, as the great politician G.I. Joe used to say, "Knowing is half the battle." I *know* political things matter, but have trouble understanding exactly why they matter. If you are able to follow and understand all the intricacies of politics, more power to you. I wish I were more like you.

There is another reason, however, that I don't like politics: everyone is always outraged at everyone else. Listening to political talk radio shows is brutal. Honestly, I think I'd rather be water boarded with Mountain Dew than listen to talk radio. Rush Limbaugh, who is one of the big names in Republican talk radio, spends approximately three hours every day

screaming into a microphone about how all Democrats are insidious idiots who want to ruin the American way of life. Listening to him is the equivalent of listening to a headache (that illustration makes perfect sense in my head). Limbaugh, as well as guys like Sean Hannity and Glenn Beck, are constantly outraged at Congress, outraged at President Obama, outraged at the new healthcare system, outraged at Hollywood, outraged at the gay agenda, and outraged about a thousand other things. The Democrats aren't any better. Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert, both of whom have daily television shows, constantly lampoon Republicans as being ignorant, intolerant, backwards morons. The Republicans think the Democrats are communists who want to turn us into a socialist state. The Democrats think Republicans are fundamentalist idiots who cling to old ideals.

In recent years, there have been significant cultural showdowns between conservatives and liberals. Several years ago, Dan Cathy, the president and chief executive of Chick-fil-A, went on record saying that the company supported the traditional definition of marriage as being between a man and a woman. This caused a massive backlash. Mayors of several cities threatened to oppose Chick-fil-A restaurants, and the gay community was in an absolute uproar. The conservative community lashed back, organizing a massive "Support Chick-fil-A Day", in which millions of people around the country ate at Chick-fil-A as a show of support. The event was such a success that some Chick-fil-A restaurants actually ran out of food. The conservative community declared the day a "victory" for free speech and a victory over the gay agenda (this second point was more

implied than stated outright).

Several months ago, Phil Robertson, one of the stars of the massively popular reality show “Duck Dynasty”, made some rather crass remarks to the effect that he thought homosexuality was wrong. Essentially, Phil articulated the biblical position that homosexuality is wrong, but he did so in a rather crude and unhelpful way. Again there was a massive backlash. The gay community immediately pressed the A&E network to suspend Phil Robertson from the show, which it promptly did. The conservative community fired right back, creating petitions for the reinstatement of Robertson which garnered hundreds of thousands of signatures. The Robertson family issued a press release saying that they couldn’t see how the show could go on without Phil. Finally, A&E relented under the immense pressure and reinstated Phil Robertson. The conservative community again celebrated the “victory”.

Just to be clear, I do understand that some issues of free speech were at stake in both of these instances. I am very grateful for the right to free speech. Free speech allows us to freely proclaim the gospel and stand for righteousness without fear of political reprisal. I want to preserve free speech as much as possible.

However, I am concerned that at times, Christianity and conservative politics are a little too closely linked in the United States. I’m not enough of a historian to know exactly when conservative politics and evangelical Christianity became intertwined, but I suspect it began in the abolitionist movement of the 1800’s, increased with the prohibition movement of the 1900’s, and came to full fruit with the “Moral Majority” in the 1980’s.

However it happened, evangelical Christianity and conservative politics are currently joined at the hip in the United States. If you are a Christian, people automatically assume you hold to conservative politics. I'm not so sure this is a good thing.

The union between Jesus and politics presents unique challenges and temptations for us as Christians. We can be tempted to adopt attitudes that are more politically driven than biblically driven. Take the issue of gun ownership, for example. Generally speaking, conservatives are passionate about the right to bear arms, and many Christians have adopted this passion as their own. I have lots of friends who own guns and are passionate about owning guns. Generally speaking, I don't have any problem with a person owning a gun as long as they use it in a responsible manner. I do have a problem, however, when Christians cling dogmatically to their right to bear arms, as it is a God-given right. The truth is, the Bible doesn't have a whole lot to say when it comes to gun control. Scripture makes it clear that one reason the government exists is to punish wrongdoers, but it doesn't go into any specifics about how exactly a government should do that. There are parts of the Bible that sort of seem pro-guns, like when it talks about a husband clinging to (and presumably protecting) his wife. There are other parts of the Bible that seem distinctly anti-guns, such as Jesus' insistence that we always turn the other cheek to those who do us wrong. As Christians, it is of the utmost importance that we hold fast to the clear teaching of scripture and nothing else. If our politics take us places scripture does, not then we need to reconsider our politics. Perhaps we should stop buying those bumper

stickers which say, “You can take my guns and my religion from my cold, dead hands.”

Another problem that arises when politics and faith are woven together too tightly is that our politics can separate us from unbelievers without giving us the chance to speak first. The issues of homosexuality and gay marriage are a prime example of this. The Bible clearly calls homosexuality a sin. The Bible also clearly says that marriage is between a man and a woman. It is right for Christians to say that homosexuality is a sin, just as it is right to say that greed, anger, and lying are sins. However, conservative Christians tend to be passionately, almost violently, opposed to homosexuality and gay marriage, much more so than any other sinful lifestyles. For example, conservative Christians don't seem particularly angry over the issue of men and women living together and having sex together before marriage, which is just as sinful as homosexuality. Conservative Christians don't seem particularly outraged over the prevalence and accessibility of pornography, which has ruined many marriages. It is almost as if conservative Christians see homosexuality as the unforgivable sin. The aggressive political opposition by Christians to anything related to the issue of homosexuality, has made it very difficult for the Christian community to reach out to homosexuals. Homosexuals automatically assume that Christians hate them, even though this is only sometimes the case.

I'm not at all suggesting we should stray from the Bible's orthodox teaching regarding homosexuality. I am suggesting that we need to think carefully about how we oppose homosexuality. We need to learn to speak

against homosexuality, without alienating those men and women who desperately need the gospel. We need to learn to call homosexuals to repentance, while simultaneously expressing the love of Christ for them. We need to learn to hold courageously to our convictions, without driving people away from Jesus. After all, it does us no good to win the culture war if we end up losing the people.

Politics are important. They matter. The very existence of the United States is the result of a political and military revolution. I'm grateful for the men and women who have entered the political fray on behalf of Jesus. But our politics must always be in submission to the Word of God and the lordship of Christ. Our politics should be derived from our theology, not the other way around.

If our political opinions always perfectly match one political party or another, perhaps we need to reevaluate those opinions. Because Jesus wasn't a Republican or Democrat.

ORGANIC, LOCALLY-SOURCED, FREE-RANGE CHRISTIANS

I feel bad for gluten salesmen. Simply put, the gluten market just isn't what it used to be. At some point in the last ten years, approximately 85% of people in the United States discovered that all their sicknesses and ailments were the result of gluten. Bad skin? Gluten. Stomach problems? Gluten. Fingernail sensitivity? Gluten. Bad bowel movements? Gluten. Headaches? Gluten. Backaches? Gluten. Heartache? Gluten. Honestly, I'm not even exactly sure what gluten is. I think it has something to do with wheat. Whatever it is, everyone and their mother is now on a gluten-free diet, and is morally obligated to tell everyone else several times per day that they are on a gluten-free diet. Gluten is the new fat. People have started treating gluten like it is the Ebola virus, taking drastic measures to avoid it. In the past year, two families have given us the contents of their pantries because they were going on a gluten free diet.

In recent years people have also become obsessed with freshness. Gone are the days when it was okay to eat preservative-laden, MSG-laced, Yellow 5 colored foods. Gone are the days when a family could sit in front of the television and enjoy a microwave TV dinner. Gone are the days of Hamburger Helper, Chef Boyardee Ravioli, and Kraft Mac 'n Cheese. Now everything must be hormone-free, free-range, farm-to-table, organic, locally sourced, and preservative free. Eating pre-packaged, processed deli

meat is equivalent to eating newborn puppies. If I tell people I like to start out my day with Pop Tarts, they look at me as if I said I like to start out my day with a pint of fresh blood.

Selling freshness is big business these days. For economic reasons I don't quite understand, fresh food costs three to five times more than non-fresh foods. A normal bag of oranges costs a few dollars. A bag of organic, pesticide free, locally sourced oranges costs three payments of \$49.99. I'm sure it has something to do with shelf-life or the cost of transporting fresh food or something like that. Or maybe we're all just getting ripped off. I don't know. Regardless, if you plan on shopping at stores like Whole Foods, you should also plan on selling your children into indentured servitude. That's the only way you're going to be able to afford it.

So what does eating gluten have to do with following Jesus? Nothing. And everything.

There is nothing inherently wrong with eating a gluten-free, free-range, hormone-free, always fresh, never frozen diet. If you are on such a diet, more power to you. I really do hope that you are healthier as a result. If you want to give away your gluten-loaded food, I will gladly take it.

It is wrong, however, to attach a moral value to a particular diet.

As Christians, one of our great temptations is to attach moral value to practices above principles. We are constantly tempted to moralize our preferences and then judge others based upon those morals.

Taking care of our bodies is a good, biblical principle. 1 Corinthians 16:19-20 says, "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own,

for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.” In its immediate context, this passage is a command to honor God with our bodies by avoiding sexual immorality. However, I think this passage can also serve as an encouragement to honor God with our bodies in general. It is good and right to seek to honor God with our bodies. Paul spoke of disciplining his body so that he wouldn’t be disqualified in his service to the Lord. It is good and right to care for our bodies so that we might serve God and others more effectively. That much is clear in scripture.

It’s important to note though, that scripture isn’t clear on exactly how we should honor God with our bodies. Scripture doesn’t prescribe a particular exercise regimen or diet. The Bible isn’t a fitness guide or a health book. The Bible doesn’t command us to do cardio on the weekdays and muscle strengthening on the weekends. The Bible doesn’t have anything to say regarding organic foods, super foods, or free-range foods. In fact, the Bible is very clear that all foods are acceptable to God. Mark 17:18-19 says, “Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.)” Under the Old Covenant, there were many foods that the Jews were not supposed to eat. Refraining from these “unclean” foods was to serve as a reminder to the Jews that they were God’s privileged people. However, under the New Covenant, all foods are permissible for those who follow Christ. The people of God are identified by their confession of Christ and their holy lives, not by diet or dress or temple worship.

In spite of this biblical reality, many people claim that certain diets are

biblical. In recent years the “Daniel Diet” has become massively popular. While in captivity in Babylon, Daniel and his friends resolved not to eat or drink the food of the Babylonians. In Daniel 1:12-16 we see Daniel interacting with the Babylonian steward: “Test your servants for ten days; let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then let our appearance and the appearance of the youths who eat the king’s food be observed by you, and deal with your servants according to what you see.” So he listened to them in this matter, and tested them for ten days. At the end of ten days it was seen that they were better in appearance and fatter in flesh than all the youths who ate the king’s food. So the steward took away their food and the wine they were to drink, and gave them vegetables.”

Why did Daniel only eat vegetables and only drink water? Daniel 1:8 says it was because he did not want to “defile” himself with the food of the king. In other words, Daniel didn’t want to defile himself by eating food which God had declared to be unclean or which had been first offered as a sacrifice to idols. Daniel ate veggies and drank water because he wanted to obey God’s commands, not because veggies and water were some sort of super diet. The verses in Daniel are not a divine prescription for a healthy life.

Nevertheless, millions of Christians are embracing the Daniel Diet. Superstar pastor, Rick Warren, recently created “The Daniel Plan” weight loss plan, a detailed diet and exercise plan meant to help entire churches lose weight together. The Daniel Plan positions itself as, “...a groundbreaking healthy lifestyle based on biblical principles...” On The

Daniel Plan website, you'll find scriptures like Genesis 1:29, which says, "And God said, "Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food." Warren, along with thousands of other Christians, have lost significant amounts of weight by using the Daniel Plan.

There are also a number of food products claiming to be derived from scripture. Ezekiel Bread is a sprouted bread based on Ezekiel 4:9, which says, "And you, take wheat and barley, beans and lentils, millet and emmer, and put them into a single vessel and make your bread from them." Ezekiel bread is touted by many nutrition stores as being the best, most nutritious, most spiritual bread on the market. Those who eat Ezekiel bread are eating the bread of scripture. Also, those who eat Ezekiel bread will experience better digestion, higher vitamin intake, increased absorption of minerals, and the ability to communicate personally with their guardian angel. Just kidding about the last part.

Fortunately, most people don't read beyond verse 9 when it comes to the description of Ezekiel bread. If they did, they probably would never touch the stuff again. God commanded Ezekiel to make the bread and eat it in the sight of all the people of Israel. How was Ezekiel to cook his bread? Over a fire made from human feces. When the people of Israel saw Ezekiel eating the dung-roasted bread, it was to be a sign of judgment for them. "And the Lord said, "Thus shall the people of Israel eat their bread unclean, among the nations where I will drive them." If you really want to be true to scripture you need to make sure the Ezekiel bread you are eating was cooked over a fire of human dung.

It's not that I'm against diets or exercise plans. I'm really not. I regularly exercise and could stand to lose a few pounds myself. I think it's wonderful when people lose weight and start eating healthy meals. Charles Spurgeon probably could have had more years of effective service if he had taken better care of his body. Let's all try to take good care of our bodies.

Let's also stop saying that one particular diet or food or exercise regimen is "biblical". Jesus plainly and repeatedly declared that all foods are clean and acceptable for eating. To declare a particular diet as being biblical is actually creating a form of legalism. After all, if the Daniel Diet is the most biblical diet, shouldn't everyone be doing it? If the Daniel Diet is the most biblical diet, that means people like me, who aren't on the Daniel Diet, are in sin. God doesn't do suggestions. If he commands something, we absolutely must obey it. If God has ordained a particular diet as holy, then we are obligated to observe that diet.

But God hasn't ordained any particular diet. The Atkins Diet is just as holy as the South Beach Diet which is just as holy as the Daniel Diet. As Paul said in 1 Timothy 4:4-5, "For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer." All food is good, and is to be received from God as a gift. If you eat Ezekiel bread, give thanks to God for it. If you eat microwave pork rinds, as one of my friends did when he was on the Atkins diet, give thanks to God for them. If you eat a monster burger smothered in cheese, mushrooms, and special sauce, give thanks to God for it.

We must never go beyond scripture, even if our motive for doing so (losing weight) is good. If you want to do the Daniel Diet, go for it, just don't expect me to join with you. Now if you'll excuse me, I've got a steak to eat.

LESS TEE-BALL AND MORE TRASH-TALK

I have a friend who, for the sake of privacy, I will call Jim (his real name is James). Jim and I went to college together. During my college days, before I had any real responsibilities, I played a fair amount of pickup sports. Pickup basketball, racquetball, ultimate Frisbee (not sure if this is really a sport), football, ping pong, etc. I've always been a competitive guy, and when I played pickup sports I played hard. I ran as fast as I could and didn't hesitate to throw my body around. If I wasn't sweating profusely by the time the game was over, I hadn't played hard enough. I wanted to win. I wanted to score. I wanted to take the ball to the basket. I wanted to be on the receiving end of the Hail Mary. I wanted the chance to out-muscle and out-jump my opponents in ultimate Frisbee. If you were on my team and you weren't hustling, I would call you out. Whoever coined the phrase, "It's not whether you win or lose, but how you play the game," must have been on losing teams a lot, because true competitors hate losing.

James, I mean Jim, was athletic but not competitive. He simply didn't care about winning or losing, and it absolutely drove me crazy. I couldn't fathom not caring about winning or playing well. I didn't want Jim on my team when I played racquetball, because I knew he wouldn't try hard. Whenever he made a mistake, he would laugh heartily, as if someone had just told a hilarious joke about a vegan, a rabbi, and a lion tamer. It didn't

matter if his team was winning or losing; Jim played every game with the same indifference. No matter how much I tried to fire Jim up, he approached every athletic event with the same calculated nonchalance.

Before I go any further, I should make it clear that Jim was (and still is) more godly than me. He realized that pickup sports weren't important in the eternal scheme of things, and that getting worked up about pickup sports was rather silly. Jim would be great as a tee-ball coach. If I were a tee-ball coach, I would be screaming at the kids to slide hard and take out the legs of their opponents. I'd be the idiot coach who instructed his players to run over the catcher when there was a play at the plate. On the other hand, Jim would be the kind of coach who gently encouraged each player about their performance, no matter how bad it was.

With all that being said, I think this world needs a little less tee-ball and a little more trash talk. We need a little less political correctness and a little more straight up honesty.

We are currently living in the age of niceness and respect and self-esteem. From an early age, children are taught that everyone is special, everyone is a unique snowflake, everyone has their own verse to add to the song of the universe. Children are constantly reminded of how important they are, how much they matter to the world, and how they can be whatever the heck they want when they grow up. When kids play tee-ball, no one keeps score because the children on the losing team might feel bad about themselves. Their self-esteem might break under the weight of losing. They might actually feel upset if they lose.

When professional athletes give post-game interviews, they always

communicate in mind-numbingly bland, cliché expressions. There is an unwritten rule that every athlete must use the following words and phrases in their post-game interviews: execution, made some plays, played as a team, played a physical game, 110 percent, execution. Every athlete must also communicate his undying respect for his opponent, even if he absolutely destroyed his opponent on the playing field. If the Miami Heat were playing the Horace Mann Elementary boys basketball team, every player on the Heat would still say that they were taking their opponent very seriously, and that they couldn't afford to underestimate the sixth grade boys from Horace Mann. LeBron James would be quoted as saying, "Andrew Meltzner may only be ten, but he could have a big game at any time."

When NFL cornerback Richard Sherman called wide receiver Michael Crabtree "mediocre", the media exploded, calling Sherman an arrogant, dirty, disrespecting thug. They couldn't believe Sherman had the audacity to say such a thing on live television. From the way people reacted, you would have thought Richard Sherman said he wanted to kill Crabtree's mother and then defect to Cuba.

The cumulative effect of all the niceness and respect and political correctness is that it creates a veneer of false humility which everyone can see through, but no one acknowledges. When number one ranked Alabama Crimson Tide plays the Peoria Dustwipes, no one, including the players and coaches on both teams, thinks the Dustwipes have the slightest chance of winning. Nevertheless, the players and coaches for Alabama will talk about how much they respect the Dustwipes, how

they're taking this game as seriously as any other game, and how they're going to give 110% on the playing field. Of course, no one believes any of this nonsense. Everyone knows that Alabama is going to knock the living crap out of the Dustwipes, and that the final score will be somewhere around 72-7, with the Dustwipes scoring their one and only touchdown after the starters are on the bench and the backup, backup, backup players (the guys who like to think of themselves as "Rudy") are on the playing field.

Just for once, I would like to see an athlete or coach actually say what they were really thinking. I'd like to hear a conversation go like this:

INTERVIEWER: John, quite a game for you guys tonight. You played really well!

JOHN: Really well? Are you kidding? We absolutely obliterated those guys. It was men against boys, warriors against wussies, kings against kittens. Their coach was actually crying after the game tonight. That's how badly we kicked their butts.

INTERVIEWER: What was the secret to your success tonight?

JOHN: The secret? There was no secret. We are simply better than them. They are not good at basketball. Their tallest player is 5' 5", and goes by the nickname "Fruitfly". I am 6' 7" and can dunk a basketball with my eyes closed. We won because those dudes are

absolutely awful, and we are absolutely awesome.

INTERVIEWER: Your next game seems like it should be an easy win for you guys. Are you confident?

JOHN: Heck yes! We're playing the Minneapolis Manatees, who haven't won a game in four years. So, yeah, I think we'll win.

It's not that I want players to be disrespectful or arrogant. There is such a thing as sportsmanship. I would just like to see a little more honesty from athletes. When an athlete repeatedly talks about "execution" and "making plays", he sounds like an IBM robot, mindlessly repeating the same words. I would love to see a player honestly and humbly assess himself, both strengths and weaknesses. I would love to hear Carmelo Anthony say he is a great basketball player but doesn't have the killer instinct of a guy like Michael Jordan or LeBron James. I don't think Melo would ever admit to such a thing, but it's the truth nonetheless. I would love to hear a coach say he expects to win easily, but that there is always the possibility of losing. The next time Alabama plays Peoria, I would like to hear Nick Saban say, "Yeah, we're pretty much expecting to crush those guys. But you never know." Honesty is so much better than false humility.

In Romans 12:3, Paul said, "For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of

faith that God has assigned.” In the verses that follow, Paul talks about the variety of spiritual gifts which God bestows upon his people. Some of these gifts would be more “public” gifts, like preaching or teaching or even miraculous healing. Other gifts would be seemingly less spectacular gifts, such as generosity or administration. Paul knew that we tend to be proud about our gifts and abilities. Therefore, Paul encouraged the Romans to think *accurately* about themselves. He didn’t want them to think too highly of themselves, which is pride. But he also didn’t want them to think too lowly of themselves, which is false humility. Rather, Paul wanted the Romans (and every Christian) to have an accurate, sober view of themselves. Paul wanted the Romans to give thanks to God for their spiritual gifts, and to be able to assess their spiritual gifts correctly. There is a great difference between an accurate assessment of yourself and an arrogant assessment of yourself.

As my daughters get older, I want them to have a sober, accurate view of themselves. I don’t want them to buy into the lie that they can be anything they want when they grow up. I know, I know, that sounds like such a terrible, unsupportive thing to say. The self-esteem police will probably be arresting me any moment. I should be telling my daughters to dream big and follow their dreams. I should be telling them that they can be astronauts or cowgirls or delegates to the United Nations when they grow up. I should tell them the world is theirs for the taking. But those things simply aren’t true. My daughter, Charis, probably won’t be able to play in the WNBA when she grows up. It’s a little too early to tell, but she doesn’t seem particularly coordinated or athletic. She’s tall and quick, but

can't quite seem to get her hands and eyes to work together. She is, however, highly creative, and loves to draw. I want Charis to think accurately about her athletic skill and her creative abilities. I want her to be grateful for her creative abilities and okay with not having athletic abilities. Being bad at sports and good at art is not a reflection on her value as a person. It's simply the way God made her. We can't be whomever we want to be, we can only be who God made us to be.

When we don't acknowledge the gifts God has given us, that's false humility. When we boast about the gifts God has given us, that's pride. When we accurately assess and give thanks for the gifts God has given us, that's true humility. That kind of humility pleases the Lord.

It would be nice to see athletes speaking with true humility.

Now if you'll excuse me, I've got to execute some plays, score some points, and give 110%.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I live in Indiana, Pennsylvania, with my wife, Jen, and my three little girls. You can find me on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), [and my blog](#).

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