Kingdom Singleness

Renea McKenzie takes a look at two books providing thoughtful responses to being Christian and single.

While studying at L'Abri Fellowship, I encountered two books that really made an impression upon me for the simple reason that, of all the many books I come across in my years of work with students, my studies, and my personal reading, I had never seen even the likes of anything like them. I'm speaking of Laura Smit's *Loves Me, Loves Me Not* and Lauren Winner's *Real Sex*. These two books contain what's desperately missing in the "Christian living" section of our bookstores, particularly for singles.

A Theology of Romance



I really appreciate and highly recommend Laura Smit's book, *Loves Me, Loves Me Not: The Ethics of Unrequited Love*.{1} It isn't your typical book on singles and romance. Right away, the subtitle lets you know this book is special because while there are countless books on mutual love and our moral responsibilities as Christian lovers, hardly anyone writes about our responsibility toward virtue when feelings are not mutual. Smit begins with a "theology of romance" in which she details God's nature as love, God's creational plans both in Eden and in the New Heaven and the New Earth, sin's effect on those plans, and finally, virtuous and vicious romance, how sin twists God's intentions for love and how we can be virtuous by shaping our romantic lives to God's plans. This framework is centered on New Testament teachings on marriage and family and singleness, teachings many Christians, myself included up to now, have been successfully avoiding.

Smit notes the importance of pouring a new understanding of marriage and family into new wineskins. In Matthew chapter 19, Jesus makes this astonishing statement: “For some are eunuchs because they were born that way; others were made that way by men; and others have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it” (v. 12). And shortly after that, in response to the Sadducees, Jesus declares, “At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven” (Matt. 22:30).

Jesus also asserts that the way we think about family changes when he enters the scene. Jesus is teaching and his biological family interrupts him, expecting that they deserve more of Jesus’ attention than the crowd. And it was natural for them to expect this. But again, Jesus turns social expectation on its head, responding, “‘Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?’ Pointing to his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers. Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother’” (Matt. 12:48-50).

Jesus seems to be saying marriage is not ultimate; only the union between Christ and his Church is ultimate. He is also saying our biological families are not ultimate; only the family of faith is ultimate. Saying all this about marriage and family was a big deal. In Jesus’ day, everyone’s number one loyalty was to his or her biological family, people who were married were higher on the social ladder than those who were not, and couples who had children (well, sons) were even higher. Jesus came and changed our primary loyalties, and he declared that the only members of society who are valuable to God’s kingdom are those who do God’s will, regardless of their social status.

By looking into these passages of Scripture, Smit is asking us to consider: Should Jesus’ teachings change the emphasis American Christians place on marriage and family? Why do most unmarried Christians feel social pressure from the church to

get married and start a family? They also feel excluded from congregations whose messages and activities have a biological family focus instead of a spiritual family focus. How then can we change our focus and the ways in which we interact with one another so that we are following in Jesus' revolutionary footsteps?

A Theology of Romance Gets Personal

Smit suggests that not only will the way we think about (and consequently our behavior toward) others change, but so will the way we think about our own lives. To give you an example of how we, the Christian culture in America, think about marriage, specifically the expectations we have regarding marriage in our own lives, let me share with you this story.

Several weeks ago, I was subbing in AWANA, and the third through fifth grade girls were asked what they foresaw in their future. Every girl there stated, rather confidently, "I'm going to go to college then get married." What a wonderful vision for one's future! What's interesting is that each child had the *same* vision for her future, which simply speaks to the fact that marriage is socially expected for church girls (and boys too as a matter of fact). It's what Christians consider normal and the "natural thing to do." Again, marriage is wonderful. The question is, are we limiting ourselves, and our daughters, and ultimately, Christ and the Church, when we consume this view of marriage and personhood wholesale? Is it a limited vision rather than a Kingdom-vision?

To give you a clearer picture of what I mean by "Kingdom-vision," let's look directly at Smit. She notes:

> Our primary loyalties shift when we come into contact with Jesus. Whereas in the Old Testament the family was one's primary loyalty, Jesus redefines this, saying, "Whoever does

> the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother" (Matt. 12:50). Jesus is our family now and the community of faith is our primary social commitment. "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son and daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it" (Matt. 10:37-39). Jesus insists that his followers live sacrificial lives that will make little sense in the eyes of the world.{2}

That's interesting, isn't it? Think for a moment about the political implications for the Religious Right. Marriage and family concerns wouldn't cease to exist, but would rather exist within a broader context, under a farther-reaching banner. What might such a banner look like? Let's look again at Smit. She posits:

> If all Christians everywhere were to take [seriously Jesus' teaching that marriage is not ultimate], stop getting married, and stop having children, perhaps the church would start to grow through evangelism rather than through procreation. In this case, the church would be a blessing to the nations, just as we are supposed to be, with most of our nurturing energy going outside our own community. Finally, if we actually converted everyone in the world, and everyone in the world then embraced continent singleness so that no children were being born (a rather unlikely scenario), wouldn't that mean it was time for Jesus to come again? All Christians are supposed to be longing for his second coming and doing everything possible to bring it about.{3}

Wow! What a bold statement! Well, don't worry, in the very next lines she says,

> I do not believe that all Christians need to be single [or stop having children], but all Christians must come to terms

> with Jesus' teaching that marriage is not ultimate. Taking [this] teaching seriously will change how we think about the possibility of marriage in our own life and how we treat people around us—particularly within the church—who are single.{4}

I think it important to note that throughout her entire book, Smit never once devalues marriage or children—particularly within the church. And that is part of the point. Jesus came and demolished value hierarchies society had placed upon people. The apostle Paul states that this is to be the case particularly within the church: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). Marriage and children and sex and singlehood and abstinence and romance each offer valuable life-pictures that teach the church about who God is and our relationship with him.

With that in mind, we are now ready to consider the romantic lives of unmarried folk with nuance. Smit's book challenges Christians to govern our romantic relationships with a Kingdom-perspective, reminding us to readjust our ingrown eyeballs: to look up toward God and out toward others. How do we do that when we're in love with someone who doesn't love us back?

The Ethics of Unrequited Love

Loves Me, Loves Me Not helps us learn how to behave virtuously in loving someone who does not return our romantic affection. It also helps us to behave virtuously toward someone who cares romantically for us, when we desire only friendship for him or her. Smit encourages her readers to consider true Christian charity in these situations and whether or not charity—or we might use the word *agape*—supports or rejects society's scripts for such roles. Whether we realize it or not, our society has our lines and stage directions all laid out. From film and

literature alike we know how to behave if we find our love rejected. We will hold on to our rejected love by continuing to pursue until resignation is absolutely necessary; in which case, we resign to martyrdom upon the cross of love, sometimes in a gallon of ice cream and sappy movies, sometimes quite literally, leaving our legacy behind on the suicide note. Or, we simply move on. It is their loss, and undoubtedly there is someone out there who is more deserving of us.

Certainly both scenarios can be true. Sometimes we ought to continue to pursue and not give up too quickly; sometimes our love is misplaced upon someone undeserving and we must recognize the fact and move on. But motives matter. That is Smit's point.

How do we counter our ingrained selfish patterns and social scripts when we love someone who doesn't love us back? I'm not going to give away the whole book; I'm hoping you'll pick up your own copy. But I will pass on one practical tip from Smit: we must desist from wanting to posses the other person. Now, that sounds creepy in the restraining order kind of way; and you're thinking, *I don't do that*. But we all do it. We do it when we create a whole imaginary life with our crush—where we go on dates, how we sit together in church, how he kisses me hello, how she makes my friends envious. We also get possessive of our crush when we allow our hurt and jealousy to win over our charity (love) for him or her. Because if I didn't think he and his affections were (or ought to be) *mine* I wouldn't be jealous that, in reality, he's interested in another girl. But the truth is he's a person, not an object; and as a person he is free to be interested in whomever he chooses. And if I really love him as a person rather than lust after him as an object, I will honor, value, and even celebrate that freedom. Not that at times it won't be painful; it will be.

What about when someone loves us and we don't return their romantic feelings? What's easiest is to simply ignore that

person. Don’t return his calls. Pretend you didn’t see her. Flirt with someone else right in front of her. Tell him you have to wash your hair. It’s much more difficult to actually continue to be that person’s friend, behaving in Christian love toward him or her, considering them to be better than yourself. Part of the reason this path is more difficult is because it makes you all the more attractive and difficult to get over, and it’s easier to convince ourselves that we’re doing the other person a favor by being a jerk.

Sometimes it is appropriate and necessary and loving to give the other person his space or to stop returning her phone calls. Sometimes it isn’t. Sometimes I wish God designed our relationships to be governed by clear-cut, black and white formulas: do this, get this result . . . always. But he didn’t. God designed our relationships to be governed by faith. So we have to work hard to live counter-cultural lives, acting out according to God’s script rather than what’s socially expected of us. Smit’s exhortation to consider what motivates our behavior is key. Are we responding lovingly or selfishly? And while motives cannot always be wholly separated or distinguished in such a clear-cut way, God always honors the search.

Smit has in *Loves Me, Loves Me Not* some very powerful exhortations for the church that I appreciate on two levels: one, she forces readers to think seriously about New Testament teachings on marriage, family, and singleness; and two, she gives singles in the church a voice, in part simply by writing a book that addresses the lives of unmarried folk in a thought-provoking, holistic, and meaningful way. If my brief look into the book has sparked your interest, and if you want the specific, and I think rather good, suggestions Smit makes as to how we can pursue loving virtue in our relationships, be sure to pick up a copy of this singular book.

Why We Need *Another* Book about Sex

Lauren Winner, author of *Girl Meets God* and, recently, *Mudhouse Sabbath*, put out a book in 2005 titled *Real Sex: The Naked Truth about Chastity*.{5} And that's exactly what Winner designs to do: talk about sex in a realistic fashion, from a biblical worldview, that allows us to get past various myths, including the highly eroticized and romanticized beliefs about sex we frequently absorb from both the world and the church.

You're familiar, no doubt, with the statistics on Christian sexuality. We don't stand out as very different in our sexual behavior, which means our basic beliefs and ideas about sex must not be that different either. If all those books in the "Christian living" section of the bookstore aren't helping us develop ideas regarding our sexuality that differ from social norms, if they aren't helping us believe that what the Bible has to say about sex is relevant and true, something isn't right. So what makes Winner different? *Real Sex* offers an alternative to the magazine-like "Seven Secrets to Sexual Purity" by stretching beyond spoon-fed "dos and don'ts" derived from proof-texted Scripture, and instead presents the case for sex within marriage from a holistic, biblical view of who we are and how we relate in the world sexually.

From the creation-fall-redemption narrative presented in the arc of the gospel, Winner posits that an important part of who we are is that we are embodied, and the main way in which we relate in the world sexually is communal. Chapter three is aptly titled "Communal Sex: *Or, Why Your Neighbor Has Any Business Asking You What You Did Last Night,*" and helps remind us that community is a part of the creational order; we were created in and for community. And though we have fallen from God's original order for creation, he has, throughout history, made a way for his people to live redeemed, creational lives. When Jesus Christ came embodied to earth, he came as the Way, finally making it possible for those who believe to no longer

live under compulsion of the fallen, distorted patterns of the flesh, but rather in habits redeemed and restored to God's creational intent. Winner reminds us that Scripture flies in the face of our over-individualized, over-privatized American way, exhorting the community of the faith to be intimately involved in one another's lives. She puts it this way:

> The Bible tells us to intrude—or rather, the Bible tells us that talking to one another about what is really going on in our lives is in fact not an intrusion at all, because what's going on in my life is already your concern; by dint of the baptism that made me your sister, my joys are your joys and my crises are your crises. We are called to speak to one another lovingly, to be sure, and with edifying, rather than gossipy or hurtful, goals. But we are called nonetheless to transform seemingly private matters into communal matters (53).{6}

Already we're presented with a meaty alternative to the false views of sex, or we could say, unreal sex propagated in force by our surrounding culture. The next two chapters speak truth against the lies about sex we hear both from our culture and our churches. These chapters give readers an opportunity to take a step outside of their everyday, cultural surroundings and consider them. Opening up the conversation of sex and our sexuality to the whole of Scripture and to our Christian communities is like opening the windows of a dark room. By this light we see the lies our culture tells about sex, and we can work together to begin rejecting such ideologies, establishing a core understanding of human sexuality that, in fact, stands apart; we can develop beliefs and habits of a sacred sexuality. Winner points out that society tells lies, like "sex can be wholly separated from procreation" (64), cohabitation is a good practice-run (68), modesty doesn't matter (71), and "good sex can't happen in the humdrum routine of marriage" (77).

Of those four statements, which strikes you as most dangerous?

We might think it’s the prolific idea of shacking up; and in fact, the church is usually pretty clear on its position regarding premarital sex. However, I would like to suggest that a subtle distortion is always more dangerous than an obvious one. Winner agrees; she states,

> Too often we assume that contemporary American sexual life is a one-dimensional world of licentious prurience. Yet it may be more important for contemporary Christian ethics to constructively engage secular romanticism than to righteously denounce sexual libertinism. It is, after all, pretty easy for us Christians to distinguish ourselves from the sex-is-recreation ethic. The real question is not whether we can counter the message that sex is just like racquetball, but whether we can also articulate a Christian alternative to the regnant ideal of sex as an otherworldly, illicit romance, an escape from quotidian, domestic life (80).

Sex isn’t meaningful because it’s an erotic escape from everyday realities. Rather, sex is meaningful because it’s real (81). And while romance is certainly appropriate, even important, as part of sustaining love, if it serves merely to compartmentalize our lives rather than integrate them, our lives will be less, not more, fulfilling.

Getting Real

This next chapter is perhaps where we get a bit more personal: “Straight Talk II: *Lies the Church Tells about Sex.*” In an effort to do right and protect the biblical ethic of sex within marriage, and with honorable intentions, “the church tells a few fibs of its own” (85). Winner chooses to discuss four of these fibs: “premarital sex is guaranteed to make you feel lousy” (85), “women don’t really want to have sex anyway” (90), “bodies (and sex) are gross, dirty, or just plain unimportant” (93), and finally, that good sex is all about

technique, a secular myth that we can, and should, Christianize (97).

I can't talk about all of these ideas (and I wouldn't want to give away the whole book!), but I do want to address a couple of them. I'm sure some of you are thinking, "Doesn't premarital sex make you feel lousy, full of guilt and regret? And if it doesn't, shouldn't it?" It's possible there's more truth in the second thought than the first one because, let's face it, sex feels good, even sinful sex. If it didn't, premarital (and extramarital) sex would certainly be a lot easier to avoid. We wouldn't need Winner's book, or any other book, not to mention the community of faith, the Bible, or the Holy Spirit for that matter; at least, not insofar as we need them for our journey toward right-living (89). "What the church means to say," posits Winner, "is that premarital sex *is* bad for us, even if it happens to *feel* great" (90).

But at least we've come to recognize that sex in marriage feels great and should feel great. And while it seems we may never be able to fully shake Gnostic parasites from the gospel, I believe churches have generally come to embrace marital sex as good. However, the message from the pulpit can still be a bit confusing, especially for women. Winner notes a study of teenage girls which shows the "strongest predictor of teenage virginity" isn't church involvement or the youth group, but team sports (18). That may seem obscure, but athletics teaches girls (and boys) something about bodies being good, not to mention useful—for other purposes than sex. This is a message we are not communicating well.

What should we do? Have more church sports leagues? Perhaps. But, maybe not. We can, however, change the language we use when we talk about sex and modesty. Personally, as a woman who grew up constantly hearing from youth group and other parachurch media that my body was the vehicle of lust and destruction for young men everywhere, it took lots of time to unlearn negative associations about my body and become

comfortable in my own skin, though perhaps less time than others; I played sports. The way we talk about sex and modesty in the church isn't only damaging to women. To suggest that men simply can't help themselves is to suggest that men are less than human, or that they can experience the fruit of the Spirit in all areas but lust. It is essentially degrading to men to imply that men are animals and women are angels, that somehow women are morally superior to men and therefore responsible for them (73). Certainly we are responsible *to* one another as brothers and sisters, but responsible *for* is another thing entirely.

The last few chapters of Winner's book touch on topics such as kissing, pornography, and masturbation, and dish out practical—and I think rather good—ideas to guide us in practicing chastity within our caring, Christian communities. Winner reunites chastity with the other spiritual disciplines, and talks about what marriage, children, sex, and singleness teach the church, and why each is important in God's economy, an economy of repentance and forgiveness. Placing sexual purity back within a story that's bigger than itself makes the issue of chastity important, rather than indifferent; and gives it meaning by giving it context.

Notes

1. Laura Smit, *Loves Me, Loves Me Not: The Ethics of Unrequited Love* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005).
2. Smit, *Loves Me*, 65.
3. Ibid., 71.
4. Ibid.
5. Lauren Winner, *Real Sex: The Naked Truth about Chastity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005).
6. Page numbers in the text refer to Winner, *Real Sex*.

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Engage, Maverick!

I really enjoy Scott's blog which helps us engage creatively and redemptively with pop culture which is so widely influential. So when Scott asked if I would write a guest post on discerning when we should and should not engage, I was thrilled and honored. I deal with the subject of engaging culture on my blog as well (though not nearly as cohesively as Scott does here), so some of my readers may recognize a few things I'm about to say, but this is a great opportunity to bring those somewhat miscellaneous thoughts into a more cohesive treatment. So, thanks again, Scott!

Throughout history the large majority of Christians, Catholic and Protestant, all across the world, have consistently believed that a major part of our calling is to engage our various cultural contexts to meet people where they are, or perhaps more accurately, meet people halfway, and be salt and light. We get this example from Christ himself who entered into a particular cultural context and met people halfway (between where they were and where Christ was wanting to take them, namely, the Kingdom of God) with metaphors and social activities they already had a cultural framework for.

One of my favorite passages of Scripture is Matthew 10 where Jesus is sending out his apostles. In his instructions to them he tells them to show 'em how to live life to the fullest as we were always intended to live it! ("preach the Kingdom of God"), do creative and redemptive works in their lives ("heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons"), and in all this remember, "be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves."

These are Jesus' instructions to us, his modern-day hands and

feet. We are to engage. And we are to do so shrewdly, wisely and with discernment. Not everyone has the same level of freedom to interact with various aspects of our unbelieving society. Everyone is different. There are certain things which are particularly spiritually unsafe for me; I know it in my guts and bones; I just can't go there. But I also know that doesn't mean it is as dangerous for others as it is for me, and I don't begrudge others their freedom.

Personal conviction derives from the way God has uniquely created us as individuals and how our singular personality and wiring is affected by the Fall – our particular tendencies, weaknesses, addictions, our circumstances, our personal history. These are the primary factors we should consider when we prayerfully decide whether a particular book, movie, song is spiritually safe for us to read, watch, listen to, and engage through our Creation-Fall-Redemption view of the world.

Anyone who believes he or she is safe from the all the various temptations available in pop culture is a fool. My friend and colleague Todd Kappelman wisely notes and advises, "Exercising rampant Christian freedom does not necessarily mean one is a strong Christian [referring to 1 Cor 8]. It could indicate that one is too weak to control one's passions and is hiding behind the argument that they are a stronger brother." When we engage our culture, we must use a "framework of moderation," to use Todd's phrase, that addresses *our particular weaknesses*, for we are all of us the weaker brother somewhere. We need to be honest with ourselves about our weaknesses, and the best way to do that is to ask God and ask other believers who love us and are discerning and nuanced in regard to engaging culture, to invite the inner circle of our faith community into the part of our lives where we ask serious questions about the books we read, the movies we watch and the music we listen to.

There is a difference between conviction and legalism. One of those differences is the legalistic compulsion to impose one's

personal convictions on others. It is possible to abstain in a genuinely free way. I greatly admire my friends who abstain; who don't even have a TV, for example. Together we add to the richness of each others' lives by bringing perspective to one another about who God is and how we relate to him. Together we present to the world a more complete picture. It is the diversity of the Body that most beautifully represents Christ to the world. And it is vital to our Christian calling to live as much as we can in the tension between the pulls of legalism and libertinism. The ebb and flow of this kind of living is part of what in means to live the full, rich, abundant life of Christ.

When you cannot personally engage by reading/watching/listening to this or that for whatever reason, abiding an attitude of general engagement as a member of the Body of Christ fosters that humility-infused unity so foundational to our new life.

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the unfit ones

outside the box
in need of a home
but this box is comfort
it's all that we've known

why won't you just fit?
square peg

round hole

we'll file off your edges
('til you're smooth just like us)
with the blade of this Book
which says, by the way, don't fuss

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When the Church Is More Cultural than Christian

July 7, 2011

So, I'm reading this excellent biography of Bonhoeffer right now, and I've been mulling this question. Well, I guess it's twofold, really.

Background: You probably know this already, but just in case. In Nazi Germany the German church pretty much abandoned any form of orthodox Christianity in order to fit in with the culture. Bonhoeffer, Niemoller and others formed the Confessing Church as a stand for true Christianity in the face of the cultural abdication of the wider church. Most were either imprisoned or killed for their efforts.

1 – Do you think that the American church is undergoing a similar shift to fit in with cultural norms on a broad scale that could threaten orthodox Christianity (clearly, hopefully, not to the extent of the Reich church, but still, I see some possible parallels)? What do you think are the areas in which the American church is most at risk? Why?

2 – Do you think we have leadership that is taking a stand for orthodoxy in a counter-cultural and true way on the national scene? If so, who?

Yes. The American church acquiesces to the culture in various ways which are detrimental to the Gospel. It's tricky because it is vital to the Gospel that the Gospel (whose hands and feet are the church) be relevant. Churches which are highly separatist and never adapt to or accommodate culture do violence to the Gospel as well, so it's tricky. And we'll none of us ever get it 100% right. Ever. I keep trying to tell God humility is overrated; he never listens.

I think there are two veins in which American churches are perhaps more American than Christian. One is liberal; one is conservative. (Brilliant, I know.) The tendency is to point the finger at the other and overreact for fear of falling into the other's traps. We're so focused on not falling into *this* trap, that we don't even notice that what we think is a bunker is merely another trap of another sort.

Now to your actual question: What are these traps?
Liberal:
Of course there are the far left examples like: Employing poor hermeneutics which 1) Undercut Scripture as a text which is not historical or literal at all, and 2) justify sin, usually sexual sin such as premarital sex and homosexual sex and the sexually-related sin of abortion. And then there is the slightly more subtle trap of feeling the need to bend over backwards to kiss the keister of Science. Finally, there is the acquiescence of the (pseudo)tolerance mantra of hypermodernism: partly out of fear of being legalistic, partly because it is more comfortable, we succumb to Relativism.

Conservative:
Employing poor hermeneutics which truncate Scripture as a text which is entirely literal (it seems to me that this is a very Western thing to do, but I could be wrong; it could simply be

a human thing to do… we feel more comfortable in black and white). Such a lack of hermeneutic leads to overly hard-nosed positions about creation and "the woman issue" among other things. It also leads to, instead of justifying sin, creating an extra hedge of rules so that we can be darn sure we avoid the undignified, socially unacceptable sins, perhaps especially, sexual sin.

And then of course there's the idea of a Christian America; or that politics can fix every(one else)thing.

Traps for all:
Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is probably a problem for both sides. So is materialism of course, privatism and spiritual professionalization—You'd better keep your hands off of my individual rights and my private life… and: spiritual things go in one compartment, which is private and has no business interfering in the public sphere: ie. faith and science and/or faith and business. Professionalization is also quite Western. I love this quote from GK Chesterton's *Heretics*:

> *But if we look at the progress of our scientific civilization we see a gradual increase everywhere of the specialist over the popular function. Once men sang together round a table in chorus; now one man sings alone, for the absurd reason that he can sing better. If scientific civilization goes on (which is most improbable) only one man will laugh, because he can laugh better than the rest.*

Professionalization probably also includes running our churches too much like businesses.

Finally, Q number 2: Yes. What's tricky about this is that one must sometimes be under the radar to be counter-cultural, partly because when you're counter-cultural, no one wants to listen to you! Eugene Peterson, Tim Keller, NT Wright, Nancy Pearcey, Os Guinness (an outside perspective is always helpful) and the Trinity Forum, Jamie Smith, especially in the

area of how we do church and spiritual formation… I'm sure there are others, including my colleagues who are currently working on assessing and addressing this issue of cultural captivity: first creating an Ah-ha moment about our cultural captivity, and secondly, creating a way out of captivity and into freedom.

Good question!

This blog post originally appeared at reneamac.com/2011/07/07/when-the-church-is-more-cultural-than-christian/

If Christ isn't in the name, how will I know it's Christian?

July 22, 2011

Recently, long-standing evangelism non-profit Campus Crusade for Christ officially announced its plan to change its name to Cru. I admit the over-priced wine bar with mediocre cheeseboards was the first thing I thought of when I heard the news. But the second thing I thought was, *Naturally, that's what people call it anyway.* So I didn't think anything of it. I wasn't freaked out because Christ is no longer in the name. For heaven's sake, Christ himself said, "Be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves;" not, "Subtlety is a sin. Be as obvious and explicit as you can be because that's how people will know you belong to me." No. He said, "They will know you are my followers by your love for one another." But yet again, people

only see Christians calling their brothers and sisters names like “coward” and “repulsive” and griping at each other. That’s just great. (You can read more about how Christians are going to the mattresses here on Fox News’s report.)

I agree with Cru: they needed to drop “crusade” from the name. It certainly does recall The Crusades, an awful, dark, embarrassing time in Christianity, or at least medieval Christendom… I’ll let my historian colleagues correct my armchair claims here; but that is all the more to the point: popular perception matters; words have baggage, and it is naive to think we can simply plow through it. I will say, it does make it a bit ironic that crusade is the one word they’re keeping, even if it is a shortened version of it. Nonetheless, Campus Crusade for Christ is a dated (and long) name; hence why people commonly shortened it to Cru even before the official name change.

I agree entirely with Cru vice president Steve Sellers when he said it is “more important that the organization is effective at proclaiming Jesus than it is important to have the name of Jesus in the name of the organization.” The fact that people are chalking this up to succumbing to political correctness is evidence that they care more about the outside than the inside; more about appearances than heart; more about rhetorical positions than actually taking a stand. This kind of attitude common among Christians is sad. It isn’t a witness to the world, as Cru has been and continues to be; and it isn’t worthy of the calling we have received in Christ. It reminds me of how many Christians understand “Christian art.” But that’s another blog post for another day.

Part of thinking through our Christianity includes thinking before reacting, perhaps especially on social networking sites where we feel emboldened by our anonymity amid the mob and where instant gratification is part of the point. It also includes being mindful of passages like Matthew 10 and 1 Peter 3 when quoting Romans 1:16.

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Interracial Dating

July 21, 2011

Dear Renea,

We are a strong, white, Christian family. Our 22 year old daughter is dating a black boy. He is very nice, kind, well-mannered. However, we just are not in favor of this inter-racial relationship. We never envisioned one of daughters dating a black boy. We know all the biblical verses pertaining to this. We're just not sure what to say to her. Need some thoughts on this situation. Your thoughts are so welcome. Thanks.

Dear E,

Thank you for writing in with your question.

I'm surprised to hear you mention knowing the scriptures pertaining to interracial relationships because I confess, I am wholly unaware of any verse which addresses the subject. Old Testament passages speak about the importance of Hebrews marrying Hebrews and not pagans who worship false gods and idols, but that has to do with a person's relationship with God rather than his or her nationality. We know this to be the case when we consider heroes of the faith such as Rahab and Ruth, neither of whom were Hebrews, both of whom came to fear (know) the Lord better than many natural Hebrews and were used by God in significant ways, most significantly as women in the lineage of Christ! This is the same vein which runs through

the New Testament command not to be unequally yoked in 2 Corinthians 6. Biblical warnings against marrying certain types of people have everything to do with their relationship with the Holy One (and ours) and nothing to do with nationality, ethnicity or race.

That being said, your feelings and your conflict are real and no doubt a significant part of how you were raised. Based on your letter, it seems you and your husband probably grew up in Bible-believing churches and/or homes which taught against interracial marriages. You certainly grew up in a time in our culture when such relationships were anathema. Your situation reminds me of what the Disciples must have experienced upon seeing Jesus conversing with, not only a *woman* one-on-one, but a *Samaritan* woman. That's not how they grew up! That's not how a good Jewish man was to behave, yet here was their Master, their Teacher, their Messiah breaking all the rules about race-relations (and gender-relations). I'm sure it was a shock. I'm sure it was quite unsettling, perhaps even unacceptable at first. And I appreciate that what I am saying might be just as jarring, just as maddening perhaps, just difficult to accept.

And so it's okay to need time to wrestle with this radical biblical truth that goes against everything you've been taught just as Christ's first followers were constantly having to do. Since Christ's Loving-Truth sets us free, I beg you to wrestle with it, to try to accept it; but even if you cannot, I appeal now to your love for your daughter, a love that has no doubt grown from parent-child love to also include friend-love now that she is an adult. Support your daughter, love your daughter, respect her (decisions) as the adult she is. Don't let your preferences—reasoned as they may be considering the difficulties that can still come as a part of interracial relationships—drive a wedge between you, driving your daughter away from you. Don't give the Enemy a foothold to break down and breakup your family, your love for one another. I implore

you with familial affection in Christ our Lord.

Dear E, may our great God give you grace and bless your family in this scary step of faith we call life.

With love and respect,
Renea

This blog post originally appeared at
reneamac.com/2011/07/21/interracial-dating/

Is Public School to Blame?

June 30, 2011

I was having a conversation recently about the reason so many students turn away from the church after high school, and it was suggested that it's because they don't get the proper biblical worldview/foundation in public school and only get an hour during the week at church.

It seems to me this is a big generalization since public school students can get a strong foundation in the home and Christian school and home school students don't necessarily get a good foundation (or it is a skewed perspective that actually turns them away from the church).

So I started thinking about the data that has been collected on this and wondered when the information is gathered and compiled if it takes into account what kind of schooling the student had – public, private Christian or homeschool. My guess is that the data wouldn't be significantly different if you did divide the three groups.

Also, does it make a difference if they go to a public college

or a Christian college? I would hope that students who go to a Christian college are more likely to continue going to church and to have a more biblical worldview, but is that true?

Good question. Actually, studies show parents are the most influential in regard to the beliefs of young adults. So you're right, school really has little to do with it. As a kid who went to public school and loved it, I'm actually quite offended by this very unfair, very common stereotype about public school. Truth be told, public school forced me to know what I believed and why in a way a Christian environment couldn't have.

You're also right that going to a Christian college can be really helpful, but it depends on the college/university, and it depends on the person. I know going to a Christ-centered university where integration of faith (worldview) and learning was important was super-helpful for me. However, if I had gone to a public university, I know I would have been involved in a local church and a campus ministry; studies also show that such involvement significantly lowers the risk of faith abandonment during the college years. Community is key.

All that to say, public school, private school, home school… it doesn't really matter. When we grown-ups complain about the worldview issues of young adults, we really have no one but ourselves to blame because in both the home and the church, young people are watching how we walk the talk.

This blog post originally appeared at
reneamac.com/2011/06/30/is-public-school-to-blame/

Contemplative Prayer

June 16, 2011

Dear Renea,

I work with a wide variety of Christians in a largely Evangelical area. Some of them are particularly skittish and nervous about the concept of contemplative prayer. Some claim it's nowhere to be found in Scripture.

What would you say to such a person?

Dear V,

This is a great question! I confess, because I've never been uncomfortable with contemplative prayer, I've never really considered the need to make a defense for it. Simply let your Bible fall open at random; the chances of it opening to a psalm about meditating on the Lord or his statues are pretty high.

I would also want to say that there are lots of elements in our contemporary worship habits which are not mentioned in Scripture, that Scripture does not have an explicit list of how we should do church or how we should manage our personal spiritual disciplines. The Bible provides us with broad principles, which gives us a lot of freedom (and a lot of responsibility to apply those principals with integrity).

I would also be tempted to say (though this is often a really tough sell, especially for those already skittish about such things) that as believers, we are in the business of redeeming culture. Every person is made in God's image and has God's law written on his or her heart. A cultural practice such as Eastern/New Age meditation, is certainly a misdirected spiritual behavior because it isn't directed toward the One True God. It isn't that there is no value in that practice; on

the contrary, I believe Western Christianity has quite a lot to learn from Eastern spirituality, especially since our spiritual roots are Middle Eastern. So we have the power (and responsibility) to redirect what is misdirected, to re-orient reality toward the Kingdom of God.

People are often more hard-nosed about Eastern practices because it is so other to us Westerners (and the Southern Hemisphere has yet to have any influence anywhere near what the East has in our society). So, it's scary, unfamiliar. We're afraid of it, so we throw the proverbial baby out on the street and slam the window shut. To be fair however, our generation didn't have to deal with New Ageism when it first became a phenomenon. We haven't had to watch, helplessly, as many of our friends became swept up in its deception. So we want to remember to be gracious toward one another's fears and intolerance.

Keep asking good questions,
Renea

This blog post originally appeared at
reneamac.com/2011/06/16/contemplative-prayer/

"I Don't Feel Connected to God"

April 28, 2011

What should I do if I don't feel like I need to repent? How can I make myself more humble towards God?

This question is coming from a time of doubt in my life. I

just have not been very connected with Jesus lately. I feel somewhat connected with God, though the personal relationship I used to have with His Son has gone out the window. It's a strange situation. Part of this problem may be coming from not being humble before God – I feel like I can get by on my own sometimes. I don't have any specific sin, just general ones that I struggle with day to day like pride. I was mostly looking for repentance in general.

Thanks for responding, and I hope this is clarifying. I also hope you enjoy your job. Thanks!

Hey Kara,

Yes, this is helpful, thanks. It seems as though you're basing the status of your relationship with the Lord only on how you feel. Perhaps you no longer have those warm-fuzzy feelings that you used to have in high school (I'm guessing based upon your email address that you graduated in '09). This kind of experience is very common for several reasons. Firstly, in most of American Christianity (especially in Evangelical and Charismatic circles, and most especially in youth group programs) we over-emphasize feelings. Of course some of this is very natural because as we are growing into adulthood through our teen years, our emotions are developing and often on overdrive, which isn't bad per se; it's just how it is. Other reasons we often over-emphasize feelings have to do with our Church history in this country, especially the Great Awakenings and the efforts made to reach those on the Frontier. At any rate, the point is you're not alone. I have experienced the same exact thing you're talking about.

Here's my recommendation. We are all driven much more by our bodies than our brains. We typically consider this a bad thing, but it isn't. It's how we were created, embodied. I don't start feeling tired until I brush my teeth at night. Why? Because I brush my right before I go to bed and my body associates the two habits. But if I wait until I *feel* tired,

I'll stay up way too late. We have all sorts of routines like this. Since we are creatures of habit (by God's design), what we often need are habits and routines (which is a word we're really scared of) to help us remember God because *most of us* feel like we can get by on our own most of the time.

So, some suggestions.

> • *Go on walks… without your iPod. You can train yourself to pray for your friends, family, the world… during these times. It will take time to discipline your mind, and that's okay; be gracious with yourself. Eventually, your mind will associate prayer with these walks, and it will just happen without your having to think about it. You might need to make these walks at the same time every week or every day, whatever. This can be tricky when our schedules are regularly changing, but that's okay too. The lunch hour can be a good time for this, especially since we are highly influenced by our stomachs. You can take your lunch with you or use that time to fast and pray (which includes, of course, repentance).*
>
> • *Visit churches with different practices than you're used to. This may seem like an odd suggestion, but if you've only ever experienced one type of liturgy (which all churches have, it's just a church's Sunday morning (or whenever) routine), how can you know if it's a liturgy that is a good fit for you? We're all a bit different, and some habits won't work for some people like they will for others. On the other hand, visiting other churches can help us understand our own church liturgy in ways we never really thought about before, making our Sunday morning practices less mere routine and more spiritually-connected routine. These visits can occur frequently if you're not that connected to your current church or not going to church, or they can be more spread out like once every other month or so. Some churches have weekly communal prayers of repentance. I find these quite helpful.*

> *• Finally, be communal with whatever habits your try. With one or two friends or a mentor you can really trust, let them into this part of your life. Another reason we struggle so much with spiritual habits is because we have the insane notion that we have to do it all on our own—just me and God—like if I tell someone I'm going to try to start prayer-walking or whatever, then I'm just bragging and being unspiritual. This is a trick of the Enemy; he knows us well.*

I hope this will be a helpful start for you. Please feel free to let me know how things are going, because, yes, I do really like my job.

Blessings to you,
Renea

Wow,

Thank you very much for your suggestions! These sound like great ideas that will work. I'm especially excited to see what kind of churches I can visit – although I love my own church, that I am involved in, I love to see different ways of worshiping. Thank you very much.

This blog post originally appeared at
reneamac.com/2011/04/28/i-dont-feel-connected-to-god/

Those are sexy worldview

glasses you've got there.

Feb. 3, 2011

E's email is a response to the post "Glee-tastic!"

Ms. McKenzie

Don't think Glee's overt sexuality has no effect on you. It is shaping you episode by episode. You are not immune.

Hi E,

Thanks for writing. I appreciate where you're coming from. Of course you're right. Whatever I watch shapes me. The question is, am I simply resigned to being shaped passively? Or do I have the option to take a more active role? I want you to know that I do not underestimate the power of our culture to shape us. That's why I work at a worldview ministry. Worldview goes a long way. The healthy view of sex I have intentionally pursued through study and prayer and practice and fellowship makes the nonsense often shown on screen unattractive, uninteresting, and particularly sophomoric. (Speaking of a holistic biblical worldview on sex, let me recommend Lauren Winner's excellent book, *Real Sex: The Naked Truth about Chastity*). Now, that being said, that does not mean that I am immune. I have to be careful (again: prayer, study, fellowship/community, repentance).

I also understand that not everyone has the same level of freedom to interact with various aspects of our unbelieving society. Everyone is different. There are certain things which are particularly spiritually unsafe for me—I know it in my guts and bones; I just can't go there. But I also know that doesn't mean it's *as* dangerous for others as it is for me, and I don't begrudge others their freedom. Especially since it's so important to engage. Personal conviction derives from the

way God has uniquely **created** us as individuals and how our singular personality and wiring is affected by the **Fall** – our particular tendencies, weaknesses, addictions, our circumstances, our personal history. The Apostle Paul calls us "ministers of reconciliation," those who bring back together what has been separated, which Romans tells us is people and all of creation, the combination of the two inevitably including what people create. The Church has, since its inception, chosen to reconcile, or **redeem** culture, generally, in five different ways (for more on this, see our article, "Christians and Culture"). And that's good. Diversity is good. Through it we better image God in all his vastness. Creation. Fall. Redemption. That is the framework we have for understanding the world; and because the Bible is true, it's also the most accurate understanding of the world. However, take out any part—creation, fall, redemption—and our vision is blurred.



Anyone who believes he or she is safe from the all the various temptations available in film is a fool. My colleague Todd wisely notes and advises, "Exercising rampant Christian freedom does not necessarily mean one is a strong Christian [referring to 1 Cor 8]. It could indicate that one is too weak to control one's passions and is hiding behind the argument that they are a stronger brother." If we choose to watch TV or movies at all, we must approach them through a "framework of moderation," to use Todd's phrase, that addresses *our particular weaknesses*, for we are all of us the weaker brother somewhere. "Teach me good discernment and knowledge, for I believe in Your commandments" (Ps 119:66).

There is a difference between conviction and legalism. One of

those differences is the legalistic compulsion to impose one's personal convictions on others. It is possible to abstain from certain types of movies and shows, or even all movies and television, in a genuinely free way. I greatly admire my friends who abstain; who don't even have a TV. Together we add to the richness of each others' lives by bringing perspective to one another about who God is and how we relate to him. Together we present to the world a more complete picture. It is the diversity of the Body that most beautifully represents Christ to the world. It is vital to our Christian calling to live as much as we can in the tension between the pulls of legalism and libertinism. The ebb and flow of this kind of living is part of what in means to live the full, rich, abundant life of Christ.

With affection in our Lord Jesus,
Renea

This blog post originally appeared at
reneamac.com/2011/02/03/those-are-sexy-worldview-glasses-youve-got-there/