

# Dumb . . . or Dangerous?

*Sue Bohlin blogs about the viral video of Victoria Osteen teaching that we should worship God and do good for ourselves.*

The latest video to go viral, at least in the Christian sphere, is a clip of Victoria Osteen at the massive Lakewood Church in Houston, followed immediately by a completely out-of-context (but hilarious) snippet from The (Bill) Cosby Show.

Here is the transcript of her 33-second message:

“I just want to encourage every one of us to realize when we obey God, we’re not doing it for God—I mean, that’s one way to look at it—we’re doing it for ourselves, because God takes pleasure when we’re happy. That’s the thing that gives Him the greatest joy this morning. So I want you to know this morning, just do good for your own self. Do good ‘cause God wants you to be happy. When you come to church, when you worship Him, you’re not doing it for God really. You’re doing it for yourself, because that’s what makes God happy. Amen?”

Then we see an incredulous Bill Cosby: “That’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard in my life!”

I found myself unable to stop thinking about this video, it was so disturbing to me.

Is it true? Does our happiness give God the greatest joy? Should we obey Him and do good so we can be happy? When we go to church and worship God, is it really for and about us?

:::shudder:::

As the apostle Paul was fond of saying, “May it never be!” Or, as Rick Warren said in his opening sentence of the mega-hit *The Purpose Driven Life*, “It’s not about you.”

The Osteens preach a “gospel of self.” Jesus, on the other hand, said, “If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me” (Matthew 16:24). Denying ourselves means taking ourselves off the throne of our lives and making Jesus Lord, following Him in obedience and submission. The crazy (as in, crazy-beautiful) thing is that when we follow Him by abiding—staying connected and dependent on Him, He flows HIS joy into us: “These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full” (John 15:24). Denying ourselves and abiding in Jesus leads to a supernatural degree of happiness and joy—but it’s not the kind of “God wants you to be happy” we see in Mrs. Osteen’s teaching.

There is a massive disconnect between a false god who is all about making ME happy and the true God of the Bible. One of the greatest minds in Christianity, A.W. Tozer, wrote about our concept of God:

“What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us. . . . [T]he gravest question before the Church is always God Himself, and the most portentous fact about any man is not what he at a given time may say or do, but what he in his deep heart conceives God to be like. We tend by a secret law of the soul to move toward our mental image of God. This is true not only of the individual Christian, but of the company of Christians that composes the Church. Always the most revealing thing about the Church is her idea of God.” (*The Knowledge of the Holy*, New York: HarperCollins, 1961, p.1)

It is dangerous teaching that promotes a god who is all about our happiness. This sets people up for all kinds of disastrous beliefs about the way life really is. And when they expect God to make and keep them happy, they are frustrated and turn away in disbelief because their [expectations](#) were not met—expectations that the true God never promised. A few days ago, Probe Ministries received an email asking for advice from

a woman whose life had skidded off the rails, and she was confused because she just *knew* God wanted her to be “happy above all.”

Ultimately, that is true in a way: God delights in His children being full of joy and the kind of biblical happiness that is found in every reference to being blessed. (See the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5, for starters.) But we find that kind of happiness NOT in ourselves but in intimate connection with the true God. Again, it’s not about us.

Think about what happens when parents indulge their children’s every whim because they want them to be happy. Do you get stable, productive people who are others-aware and open to serving them? No! You get spoiled brats! Can you imagine our heavenly Father indulging His children’s immature, self-centered ideas of what would make us happy to create a world of spoiled brats? “May it never be!”

God does want us to be happy. By His definition, in His way, in His timing. And it’s so much more than the “spoiled brat” concept of happiness, it’s about finding our happiness in relationship with Him.

Because it’s not about us.

It’s about Him.

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# Luke, I Am Not Your Father

One of the greatest movie lines in history is in *Star Wars*, when the evil Darth Vader reveals the awful truth to our hero Luke Skywalker: “Luke, I am your father.” (Actually, this is a misquote, but it’s become part of our cultural lexicon anyway. Check out this [YouTube video](#) of a four-year-old’s priceless reaction to seeing this scene in *Star Wars* for the first time.)



Luke is understandably traumatized by the revelation that the enemy is actually his daddy.

He’s in good company. Millions—probably billions—of people in human history have sustained “father wounds” because their dads were punitive, abusive, evil, distant, judgmental, absent, unsafe, or just disengaged. We live in a fallen world where our relationships are broken, and where hurt people, hurt people. A father’s role is incredibly powerful, both for good and for evil, and every father makes an indelible impression on his children whether he intends to or not.

Children grow up receiving many messages about what a father is like by watching their dads—and boy, do they watch their dads. The only way a boy can learn how to be a man is by watching and copying men, and a father is the closest man to a child. The way a girl learns the value of being female is by watching how her father treats her mother and herself. Children can grow up learning that a father is loving and kind, disciplining from a teaching heart that wants them to

grow up to be good adults, a man of integrity and honesty. Many of us were blessed to grow up with just such a dad, and with the “heart template” of a father like that, we can become a parent very much like our wonderful dads—and the generational blessings of a good example are handed down through the years.

But children can also grow up learning that a father is a mean bully whose anger is to be feared and avoided. They can learn that a father’s temperament is volatile; they never know if he will embrace them warmly or freeze them out with contempt or indifference. They can learn that a father’s word cannot be trusted, and that he presents himself with one face in the world and the church, but quite another at home. They can learn that a father is non-communicative and authoritarian, a deadly combination. Some children grow up learning that a father is nothing more than a sperm donor who is there to conceive them but disappears forever.

This is bad enough, but it gets worse.

God puts children in families where they learn about Him from the way their parents model parenthood. Our concept of “father” is whatever our own dads looked and acted like. Then, when we discover that God reveals Himself as Father in His Word, we paint the face of our heavenly Father with a brush dipped into the bucket of whatever our own fathers were like.

One of my friends shared with me several hurtful stories of the way her dad related to her in judgment throughout her entire life—including the breathtaking condemnation, “If you disappoint *me* this much, how much more must you disappoint God??” She really struggled with trusting Him. One day I told her, “Sweetie, you don’t know God. He is not a heavenly version of your earthly father. He is who He is. Let’s pray that you will see Him as He really is.” Later, she told me that being told she didn’t know God was the turning point in her relationship with Him, and she started reading the

scriptures with an eagerness to find out who He actually is. She started living out Romans 12:2—"be transformed by the renewing of your mind"—and gratefully allowed the Holy Spirit to change the earthly-father filter through which she understood God the Father to be.

One of the kindest things God can tell us is, "Child, I am not your earthly father. I am your heavenly Father. Let Me transform the way you see me through the power of My word." One of the best places to marinate and meditate is Luke 15. Jesus told all three stories in that chapter to reveal to us the heart of His Father. We are most familiar with the third story, the parable commonly called "The Prodigal Son." But it's really about the amazing, grace-filled Father. That story is the best and most accurate filter in the whole Bible for testing our conception of God.

If we see God as vindictive and full of wrath, anxious to blast us with His angry thunderbolts: how does the Father in Luke 15 compare? Where is the judgmental condemnation in that story? It's not there!

If we see God as distant, unapproachable and uncommunicative, what do we do with the picture of the Father out looking every day for His lost child to return, running to meet him when he finally does?

If we see God as stingy and mean-spirited about His wealth, how does Jesus' picture of the Father's generous heart correct our perception?

If Luke Skywalker were real and looking to the Lord, I think he might hear, "Luke, I am NOT your father. I am your Father. Come here and let Me enfold you in My good, loving and safe embrace."

This blog post originally appeared at

## Focus on What's Fixed

My husband and I recently took an Alaskan cruise. As we settled ourselves for sailaway in front of large windows on one of the highest decks, I heard a little girl ask, "Did we start moving yet? How will we know when we're moving?" I don't know what her mother said, but I do know the answer: you fix your gaze on what *isn't* moving.

I was looking at the building in this picture I took; when the ship starting pushing away from the pier, I knew we were moving because of our view through the window in relation to the stationary building.



And I thought, "Little one, the answer to your question is wisdom for life as well. Stay focused on what is unmovable, unchangeable, what is true for all times and all people in all places. Then you will be able to respond wisely to what moves and changes in your life and in the world."

This is true in both the small things and the world-shaking immense ones. Ray and I have been away from home for two and a half weeks, on an itinerary that has meant a lot of shifting and changing locations, unpacking suitcases one week and trying to live out of them the next. We remind ourselves that the inconvenience is temporary because, Lord willing, we'll be home soon. That is a small, small thing made easier by remaining aware that "this too shall pass," that the comforting security of home and routine is right around the

corner. But on the other end of the scale there are also horrible, horrible things happening in our world, particularly the explosion of Islamic terrorism in Iraq, persecuting Christians who are losing everything up to and including their earthly lives. West Africa is seriously shaken by an Ebola outbreak that is causing instability in everything. If that's not enough examples for you, Lael Arrington recently blogged here about "[Five Ways to Dispel Dread.](#)"

It can feel like the world is wobbling on its axis. Even our own little worlds. It is crucial to keep our eyes on the One who says, "I the Lord do not change" (Malachi 3:6), on the One who promises, "I will never leave you or forsake you" (Joshua 1:5). We need to stay focused on the unchanging Word of God, in which He reveals that He knows how the future will unfold, and has everything under control—even the end-times horrors that appear to be right around the corner.

Later on our cruise, as we were sailing from one port to another, I knew we were moving—apart from feeling it—because I could see the churned-up wake next to the ship. But in order to tell how much we were rolling from side to side, I focused on the horizon which appeared to rise and fall. But since I knew it was unmovable, that meant the rising and falling was happening on the ship. I sat looking out the window, gazing at the horizon that reminded me of God's unchangeableness. A good and loving God is always, always in control. I am so glad.

This blog post originally appeared at [blogs.bible.org/focus-on-whats-fixed/](http://blogs.bible.org/focus-on-whats-fixed/) on August 12, 2014.

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# If God is So Good, Why Does He Let Me Hurt?

This is probably the biggest question, and the biggest obstacle to trusting God, in Christianity. It's a legitimate question, and it deserves a thoughtful answer that honors the amount of pain attached to it. Disclosure: I am writing this while beset by the most physical pain I've experienced since post-polio syndrome started attacking my body with the "unholy trinity" of pain, weakness and fatigue. It hurts to stand, it hurts to walk. Every single step.

Why does God allow it? And my pain is *nothing* compared to the horrific suffering of millions around the world. Doesn't He care? Why doesn't He stop it—surely He can. He could stop it all with a single word. So why does He let innocent people—especially children, for heaven's sake—suffer?

We need to put evil and suffering into perspective, and that means the Really Big Picture. Starting before the beginning of time. When all there was, was God: Father, Son and Spirit, engaged in a three-Personed "holy hug" that had no beginning and has no end. A continual celebration of love, adoration, respect, and delight in each other. At some point Father God decided to create mankind and draw us into His circle of love, adopting us as sons (Eph. 1:4-5) and creating a Bride for His eternal Son (Rev. 19:7), a fit companion who would reign with the Lamb (Rev. 22:5).

But God knew that all of human history would unfold between the bookends of the creation of mankind and the Marriage Feast of the Lamb. The God of light and life, of love and truth, knew that all those things are found only in Him; He knew that to reject Him meant choosing darkness and death, isolation and deception. He knew that Adam would rebel, that His perfect creation would crash and burn in the Fall, and that everything

would be infected and corrupted by sin. He knew that every human being would be born with a compulsion to reject Him, to live disconnected from Him, independent from Him—something like spiritual HIV+, insuring a death sentence. And sure enough, the mortality rate is still 100%.

God knew all this, and He created us anyway. Because He knew the end result was worth it.

Because God is love, He created people to love, and He created people to love Him back. In order for us to choose to return His love, we needed to be free to choose NOT to love Him. God made us with the very real option to say no to Him, so that our yes would mean something. The alternative would be the equivalent to making a phone say, “Good morning, I love you.” The words might be there but there is no heart and no choice behind them—they are nothing more than the result of a programming code. God wanted real and actual love, and that meant that some people He made and dearly loved, could and would say no.

When people say no to God, they not only cut themselves off from relationship with Him, they open the door to all kinds of evil. Some of it comes from sinful human hearts; some of it comes from the demonic realm, angels who also said no to God and became devils. Evil was unleashed by Adam when he disobeyed God in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3) and it has been causing havoc, pain and suffering ever since. Sometimes we need to remind ourselves that this world plagued by pain and disease, deliberate meanness and selfishness, is not God’s original perfect creation. If it were, God would indeed be a horrible monster. He knew Adam would open the door to all kinds of evil and suffering, and He allowed Adam to do it anyway. Because He knew the end result was worth it.

Why does God let people suffer?

God uses suffering to cleanse us, to mature us, to burn up

shallowness. (Please see my article [The Value of Suffering.](#)) [He uses pain](#) as His instrument to shape us into the image of His Son (Rom. 8:28-29). God has no magic wand that instantly transforms us from something broken and dirty (and we are far more broken and dirty than we have any idea) into something whole and beautiful. There is no divine “Bibbity-Bobbity-Boo.”

Instead, the Son left heaven, wrapped Himself in human flesh, and came to earth where He lived a perfect, sinless life. Every day of His earthly life, He suffered as a human, limiting Himself to a body that would get tired, hungry, thirsty and dirty. What the first Adam messed up, Jesus the Second Adam corrected. Where Adam disobeyed the Father, Jesus learned obedience through suffering (Heb. 5:8). Jesus suffered throughout His incarnation simply because of His limitations as a human, then suffered an unimaginably horrible death through crucifixion, made even worse because He absorbed all the sin of every human being who had ever lived, was living on the earth at that time, and would ever exist in the future. He took our sin into Himself, actually becoming our sin (2 Cor. 5:21), so that when He died, our sin died with Him. But the Father raised Him from the dead, and He is alive at His Father’s right hand right now in heaven.

This means that God knows what it means to suffer. There is no pain, no suffering we can endure, that God Himself did not experience even more during Jesus’ time on earth. This same suffering God promised, “Behold, I am making all things new” (Rev. 21:5). The Father knew He would send the Son to suffer, and the Son knew that’s what He would leave heaven for.

He did it anyway. Because He knew the end result was worth it.

God allows pain and suffering and evil because He has a plan, and He’s working His plan. The end result is that He is redeeming and restoring all the evil, pain and suffering of this sin-sick world. He will set all things right in the end. The last chapter of the Bible makes it clear that there is a

happy ending to what is NOT a fairy tale. What started out as a Three-Personed holy hug of the Father, Son and Spirit loving each other while still remaining one God, will be a hugely enlarged circle of love that includes millions, possibly billions of people God made in His image, marked "Mine," and drew into the divine circle to love and be loved forever.

At that point I believe we will agree, as we look back on evil, pain and suffering on earth, that it was so, so worth it.

This blog post originally appeared at [If God Is So Good, Why Does He Let Me Hurt?](#) on July 15, 2014

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## Transgender Children

How should we think about the growing number of children being told they are transgender? A recent YouTube video from parents of a six-year-old transgender child named Ryland went viral, with well over six million views in just a couple of weeks. A beautiful little girl announced she was a boy, *insisted* she was a boy. Her parents' research apparently was limited to LGBT (lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender) sources, and they decided to raise her as a boy, cut her hair like a boy, dress her like a boy, and use male pronouns to feed her illusion that she is a boy. The internet exploded with enthusiastic praise for this family.

How should we think about situations like this from a biblical perspective?

That's the key: we need to understand that this is really a worldview issue. Perspective is crucial. Where you start makes

all the difference. If you leave God out of it, starting with the person trying to make sense of the feeling that one's body is not aligned with their internal sense of gender, then confusion is inevitable. If people feel free to define themselves as they wish, then sex and gender can be seen as elastic or fluid—and manipulatable. It's the modern-day expression of an Old Testament phenomenon that never worked out well, when "every man did what was right in his own eyes" in the times of the Judges (Judges 17:6).

But if you start with God as creator, with the right to choose a baby's gender, then that makes a huge difference. When baby Ryland's birth was announced with a happy, "It's a girl!"—God was speaking His intention for her identity and her life.

Sometimes children try on alternate identities—girls saying they are boys, boys saying they are horses. Parents are responsible for modeling logic and wisdom (not to mention life experience) in their response to this kind of proclamation. When Ryland started screaming "I'm a boy," it was a perfect opportunity to ask some critical thinking (and critically important) questions: "What *is* a boy?" "Why don't you like being a girl?" Their video says that Ryland "began to show aversion to anything feminine." This, of course, is the story of many girls whom God created as tomboys, who don't like the stereotypical pink-girly-girl attributes our culture labels as feminine. The problem is not an aversion to pink frills; the problem is a too-narrow definition of femininity. [Please see my post [The Gender Spectrum](#).]

If Ryland's parents continue down the path of other parents who enable their children to feed the unrealistic fantasy that they can choose to be anything they want, including the other gender, that will include giving Ryland powerful hormones to suppress puberty, and other powerful hormones to cause her body to mimic maleness: muscle mass, a stubble, a deeper voice, more body hair. But as one girl who stopped taking testosterone [put it](#), "This is not who you are. You are hiding

behind a chemically induced mask.” No hormones or surgery can turn Ryland into a male. Nothing will change her XX chromosomes. Most boys grow up to become fathers, but she can never father a child. She is NOT a boy, she will NEVER be a man. It is neither loving nor wise to cooperate with confusion, which will only get worse with age.

When adults tell a child “you are transgender,” and the child then parrots that idea, both the parents and the child get something right and something wrong. The something right is an awareness of a heartbreaking brokenness, which is what can happen in a fallen world. The something wrong is the diagnosis of *what* is broken: it’s not their body, it’s their feelings. Transgender transition and therapy try to change the part that is healthy (one’s body) and bring it into alignment with what is broken (one’s thinking and feeling).

To return to a biblical perspective: God says, “Be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2). Regardless of what the situation, whenever our thinking and feelings are out of alignment with God’s intention, we need to submit our will and our thinking to the transforming power of God. What does that look like? Speaking the truth to oneself, encouraged by other truth-speakers. In the case of those struggling with their gender: “God made me female (or male), and I choose to trust that He is good and He knows what He’s doing. I surrender my beliefs and feelings about femaleness (or maleness) to Him. I choose to pursue intimacy with Him over my own sense of self, and allow Him to change me from the inside out.”

It’s not easy, but it’s always the right thing to choose the truth over an illusion. Over a lie.

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# The Commencement Address I'll Never Get to Give

*May 20, 2014*

Graduations mean commencement addresses. Most of which are eminently forgettable, containing feel-good charges to go do great stuff and change the world. But in my experience, they're always given by men, who are some kind of celebrity.

I am neither.

But I have a few thoughts on practical life lessons that newly-minted graduates might use.

"Hey graduates, congratulations. You made it to the cap-and-gown stage. Not without a lot of help and prodding and prayers and frustration from your parents though, right? Thank them. There's not a single thing you are or do or have that they didn't have a part in. Thank them again.

"Speaking of thanking, one of the most important habits you can ever form is gratitude. Especially toward God. He is continually blessing you with everything from the ability to draw your next breath, to your ability to remember your name, to your ability to walk or drive and think and talk and get a job or more education. Thank Him for all those things. Regularly stop and ask yourself, "What would I really miss tomorrow if I didn't give thanks for it today?"—and then thank the Lord for it. A grateful heart is not a complaining heart, or a critical heart, or an entitled heart. Believe me, it will make you a much better person to live with, or work with, or

play with, or just be with.

“You’ve just finished many years of schooling, and you may have been indoctrinated with a bunch of hoey about how wonderful and special you are because of some well-meaning self-esteem curriculum. You may have thrown away dozens of ribbons or trophies you received just for showing up. Those days are over, because that was never real life. Self-esteem and self-confidence are only gained one way, the hard way: working hard to meet a challenge and not give up until you succeed. You earn self-confidence by doing, not by reciting platitudes in a mirror.

“If you haven’t read Dale Carnegie’s book *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, read it. It’s a classic of how to understand people and how they like to be treated. The reason it’s so true is that the book fleshes out the second great commandment, ‘Love your neighbor as you love yourself.’

“For example, when you see a service person, like a waitstaff or toll booth attendant, call him or her by name. One’s name is the sweetest sound on earth to each person, and service personnel are often treated as if they were invisible. Using someone’s name says, ‘You are *not* invisible to me, and I honor you for your service.’ Prospective employees and spouses have been known to disqualify themselves because of the way they treated people with disrespect or contempt when out in public.

“Everyone has an invisible tattoo on their forehead that says ‘Please encourage me.’ Most people have an invisible speech bubble over their heads that says, ‘Do I matter? Please show me I matter.’ Every single person you will ever meet is infinitely valuable as the handcrafted masterpiece of the Creator God, and they deserve to be honored and respected simply because God made them and He loves them.

“Some final pithy words to the wise.

“Listen to your body. You are fearfully and wonderfully made,

and it will tell you what it needs.

“Learn to recognize the nudges of the Holy Spirit, and follow them.

“Pray for your future spouse. He or she is out there somewhere. Your prayers WILL make a difference.

“If you wonder if you should be doing something, you probably shouldn't. If the thought, ‘Should I be doing this?’ even enters your head, it's an alarm.

“Don't believe everything you think.

“When you're on a road trip, never pass up an opportunity to use the restroom. Consider taking some disinfectant and a roll of paper towels with you, and leave it cleaner than you found it.

“And finally, do one good thing every day that no one will see but God. It will build your character and make deposits in your heavenly bank account that you'll forget about, but He won't.

“The Lord bless you and keep you. Your real education is about to begin.”

This blog post originally appeared at [blogs.bible.org/the-commencement-address-ill-never-get-to-give/](https://blogs.bible.org/the-commencement-address-ill-never-get-to-give/)

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## **Boy Scouts: Let's Hear It For**

# Masculinity

Ceremonies make me cry. Any ceremony, no matter how cheesy. But some ceremonies are deeply meaningful and important, which is how I about cried off all my makeup recently at a Boy Scout Court of Honor where the son of my Probe colleague Byron Barlowe received his Eagle Scout rank.

Understanding God's gift of gender is a big deal to me, and I viewed the ceremony through that grid. I saw the glory of healthy, godly masculinity on display, particularly the goodness of men teaching boys to be men.

I saw men serving others through leadership and modeling. The long-term commitment of many volunteer years in this particular troop showed that the leaders understood the value of faithfulness and persistence over time. Each Eagle Scout recipient was featured in a video that included remarks by the scout, each of his parents, and his troop mentor, and the many thank-yous to the men who gave of themselves as leaders pointed to their servant leadership.

Boys who had earned badges and who had advanced in rank were rewarded with a badge, affirmation and applause. (Which included the [left handshake](#), which I now know, thanks to Uncle Google, is a worldwide scouting thing.) Nobody gets badges and pins, much less the coveted Eagle scarf and pin, without working hard for them, a powerful antidote to the "everybody gets a trophy for showing up" mentality. It was a good reminder that true self-esteem and confidence don't come by speaking feel-good affirmations into a mirror; they are earned the hard way by accepting a challenge and working through it to achieve a goal. But none of the boys who earned badges and rank advancement did it on their own. It took cooperation with and encouragement from others to achieve these things. The men were teaching boys that "no man is an island," that God intends for men to do life in community, learning to ask for

and accept help from others even as they offer help to others.

In the midst of all this male-glory, I loved that each boy advancing in rank was called forward with his mother, given a pin to place on a ribbon worn over her heart, and directed to give her a hug. When one of the scoutmasters was honored for achieving a leadership rank that he had worked on for many months, his wife was asked to come to the platform to assist with the ceremony, and he asked for the whole family to come up. All nine children. In this troop, boy scouts are not just about boys and men. Their connections and commitments to family are also valued, another glory of godly masculinity.

At one point, one of the scout leaders was at the microphone calling scouts and their mothers forward. His own son and his wife, carrying a toddler boy, stood on stage to receive their pin. As soon as the toddler saw his daddy, he started jumping excitedly and reaching for his father with uncontainable joy and delight in his daddy, who took him into his arms with a big smile. Later, I told this leader something I heard recently from an experienced therapist who wrote *A Parent's Guide to Preventing Homosexuality*: even with boys on the emotionally sensitive, artistic, creative end of [the gender spectrum](#), the ones more at risk for taking a gay identity when they get older, if a little boy lights up and runs to his father when he comes home (or, as in this case, when he sees him unexpectedly), that boy is in a good, secure place emotionally. A warm and positive connection with his father is the best foundation for emotionally and gender-secure boys.

And that is one of the benefits of Boy Scouts for any boy, especially the fatherless or the badly fathered. When a boy receives attention, affirmation and affection ([the Three As](#)) from father-figures, he gets what he can only get from men, and which he needs to grow up to manhood. Even if a boy's dad is not around, those needs can be met by other men who can introduce him to the world of men in safe, healthy, godly ways. (And that is why the idea of gay scout leaders is scary:

men who lack gender security cannot impart to boys what they don't own. They are still looking to get their own need for the Three As met, and that unmet need can so easily turn into predation. Even if they don't intend that initially.)

The final highlight of the evening was the scoutmaster's comments and charge to each of the two Eagle recipients. His grasp of the meaning and application of God's word, combined with his personal knowledge and understanding of each young man's character and story, was one of the most excellent manifestations of a pastor-teacher I've ever seen. The newly-minted Eagles were blessed by a man soaring in his position and responsibility as a spiritual leader as he pointed them, not to himself, but to Christ, and urged them to follow hard after Him. This is what godly leadership looks like.

I have long seen that women cannot imprint masculinity on a boy's heart; we can confirm it, we can affirm it, we can clap and cheer for it, but we cannot imprint it. We don't have what it takes, because God gives *men* that privilege.

And I am so, so glad He does.

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## The Power of “Witness”

*April 25, 2014*

The day after Easter, our beloved Golden Retriever Calvin, only seven years old (that's mid-life in dog years) had to be

put to sleep because of cancer that had been sucking the life out of him. When our son and his wife moved from Texas to California, they were forced to leave him behind because their housing does not allow dogs, and Calvin became my husband's dog.

Calvin was the exact same shade of red as our Irish Setter, who died seventeen months ago. When we had to put Pele down, there was another big red dog in the house.

But not yesterday. Or today.

And it's painful.

Ray has always connected in a deep and special way with his dogs, and God has used them to "love on" him, as they say here in the South. So the loss of two beloved four-footed family members in less than a year and a half struck a deep blow of grief to his soul.

I looked forward to his return home so I could just **be with** him. I knew I couldn't say anything to make him feel better. [Nothing makes a grieving person feel better](#). But there is comfort in the **being there** for someone in pain.

Or in stress. The next morning a friend and I went into a courtroom with another mutual friend to support her in a legal hearing. Several times, our friend said how much she appreciated us **being there with her** and for her.

I am mindful of the week of comfort Job's friends brought to him when they sat **with him** in his misery, saying nothing in words but everything with their silent, supportive presence (Job 2:13).

I am also mindful of the good news of the Incarnation, the Son leaving heaven to come into our darkness and misery of life in a fallen world, coming as Immanuel: God **with us**.

And I am mindful of the big "no accident" of the timing of our

painful loss: the day after Easter, when we celebrate Immanuel's resurrection from the dead, Who is forever alive and, as He promised, He is *with us* always (Matt. 28:20).

*With us* in pain.

*With us* in loss.

*With us* in stress.

Praise God for the power of "witness"!!

This blog post originally appeared at  
[blogs.bible.org/tapestry/sue\\_bohlin/the\\_power\\_of\\_witness](https://blogs.bible.org/tapestry/sue_bohlin/the_power_of_witness)

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## **The Dark Underside of Female Friendships**

Cherry and Beth met in a MOPS (Mothers of Preschoolers) group at their church, hitting it off immediately. They loved the mutual connection with another mom, understanding the stresses and joys of having small children about the same age. Their weekly play dates became the highlight of each girl's week. They would chat on the phone every day, comparing notes on what they would be fixing for dinner or what great, repeatable golden nuggets their toddlers spouted. That morphed to texting each other throughout the day, at least once an hour.

The intense sense of connection, of feeling heard and understood and valued, grew to be like an emotional drug for them. Over time, they realized they felt closer to each other than they did to their husbands. They preferred each other's company to anyone else's—including their husbands'. Texting

throughout the day felt like a lifeline, a continual source of reassurance that all was right with the world. Eventually, caring for their children, the very thing that had brought them together in the first place, started to feel like an unwelcome burden that interfered with their first love—each other. Anyone and any thing that came between them was cause for resentment and annoyance . . . when it didn't make them outright angry.

This was not normal female friendship. What started out as a lovely gift from God was corrupted into emotional dependency, which Lori Rentzel\* defines as “When the ongoing presence and/or nurturing of another is believed necessary for personal security.” Emotional dependency happens when one or both people are looking to a person to meet their basic needs for love and security, rather than to God (relational idolatry). It is characterized by a desperate neediness of the other.

Emotional dependency (the other ED) is at the core of most lesbian relationships and a lot of homosexual relationships, but it is not limited to these. Husbands and wives can be emotionally dependent on each other, and so can women friends. When friendship spills over the retaining walls of what is healthy into an enmeshment with another person—when they put all their emotional eggs in the other's basket, so to speak—the relationship has become broken and unhealthy.

My favorite anthem to emotional dependency is Barry Manilow's *Can't Smile Without You*, which sounds romantic until you think about how unhealthy it is:

You know I can't smile without you,  
I can't smile without you,  
I can't laugh  
and I can't sing,  
I'm findin' it hard to do anything.  
You see, I feel sad when you're sad,  
I feel glad when you're glad,

If You only knew what I'm going through,  
I just can't smile without you.

Do you see how sick that is?

Emotional dependency feels like, "My happiness, my sense of security, is completely wrapped up in you giving me '[The Three As](#)' I need: attention, affection and affirmation. And if you withhold any of these from me, I will feel insecure, unloved and abandoned."

When people feel insecure, they feel powerless. And when they feel powerless, they usually resort to some kind of control to get their power back. Manipulation is the glue that holds emotionally dependent people together, since the desperate neediness (remember, "I can't smile without you"?) drives people to do desperate things to make sure the other person is tied to them at the heart. Such as sending close to 100 texts in a single day, to make sure the other person responds to them. And getting paranoid and angry ("Why aren't you answering my texts? I can tell you read them, my phone tells me you read them, why are you avoiding me? What did I do? Why aren't you answering me? TALK TO ME!!!!"). Such as giving gifts and anything else designed to bind the giver to the recipient. Such as using guilt to force the other person to engage ("You're the only person in the world who understands me! You're the only real friend I've ever had. If you leave me I will be completely and utterly alone!").

The good news is that when friendships have overflowed healthy boundaries into emotional dependency, people can repent of their relational idolatry (making another person more important than God) and step back into balance. The other good news is that every aspect of unhealthy, emotional dependency on a person, is healthy dependency on God. One of my friends told me, "This was life changing for me, to realize that I could redirect my unhealthy energies to Jesus and it would make me a much better disciple!" Contacting Him 95 times a day

through prayer (no texting necessary) is healthy. Feeling desperately needy toward Jesus is healthy. Giving gifts to Jesus to bind one's heart to Him is healthy. Saying, "If you leave me I will be completely and utterly alone" is true-but praise God, He has assured us that He will never leave us or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5).

When I have spoken on this topic in churches, I hear, "I expected that the dark underside you'd be talking about was gossip or something. I never would have expected THIS. Wow. I see how it can happen so easily."

Forewarned is forearmed, I trust.

\*Lori Thorkelson Rentzel's little booklet Emotional Dependency, published by InterVarsity Press, is an invaluable and highly practical resource for understanding this issue.

This blog post originally appeared at [blogs.bible.org/the-dark-underside-of-female-friendships/](https://blogs.bible.org/the-dark-underside-of-female-friendships/) on April 8, 2014.

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## **"Welcome Home": A Biblical Response to the Ukraine Crisis**

*March 11, 2014*

It has been an, um, *interesting* experience to be in Belarus, in the former Soviet Union, for two weeks while their next-door neighbor Ukraine was shaken by civil unrest, a takeover by angry citizens, the disappearance of their president who showed up in Moscow, and then their invasion and occupation by

Russian troops. At the conclusion of one Sunday's worship service, the pastor led us in prayer for Ukraine, which had just called up all eligible men for military service and was preparing for war if need be.

One thing that made it um, *interesting*, for us as Americans was to find that we didn't have access to American websites of particular political views, and even Google search was blocked.

I was so thankful for English-speaking friends who were able to give us their perspective on the nearby tinderbox.

I learned that Ukraine is divided between the western portion of the country, which sees itself as European, and the eastern part, which feels more Russian. There is still some unhappiness over Nikita Krushchev's decision to award the Crimean peninsula to Ukraine, which didn't seem like such a big deal when it was all part of the U.S.S.R., before the fall of the Soviet system in 1991.

What struck me about all this was the role of identity and allegiance to nations. As we prayed for the Christians in Ukraine and Belarus and Russia, I thought about the fact that for believers in Jesus, no matter where we live, our identity should always be first citizens of heaven (Phil. 3:20), and our allegiance to Jesus as our head.

As soon as we landed, I tweeted this: "Talked to a young Belarusian who loved his country so much more after visiting Europe. USA, I love you as least 2x as much. #WelcomeHome." I do love and appreciate my country (especially flushable toilet paper and the Americans with Disabilities Act. Oh, and TexMex), but I am very aware that I have much more in common with my believing brothers and sisters around the world whose language I don't understand but whose heart to worship Jesus I share.

A hundred years from today I won't be an American, I will be a

fully alive, unbelievably glorious citizen of heaven. That's my true identity, my greater allegiance, and I'm sticking with it. Even as tears come to my eyes when U.S. officials check my passport and say, "Welcome home."

That is NOTHING compared to the "Welcome home" that awaits me in my ultimate home in heaven.

This blog post originally appeared at  
[blogs.bible.org/tapestry/sue\\_bohlin/welcome\\_home](https://blogs.bible.org/tapestry/sue_bohlin/welcome_home)