

Free Indeed!

Recently I had the privilege of speaking in a women's prison. I shared my story which I call, "[How to Handle the Things You Hate But Can't Change](#)." (How's that for a topic of interest for incarcerated people?)



But then I was able to speak briefly about what we have in common, a situational loss of freedom. I have lost the ability—the freedom—to walk, and they have temporarily lost the ability—the freedom—to walk out of lockup. Still, even while imprisoned by our situations, Jesus offers *true freedom*

that has nothing to do with our circumstances. He promised to His disciples, “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” He even said, “If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.” (John 8:32, 36)

So what does THAT mean?

What was so crazy great about this opportunity to speak to and hug and love on the precious ladies in the women's prison, was that the previous weekend I had given four messages on freedom at a women's retreat at sea. (You can listen to the recordings [here](#), if you like.) So many facets of freedom were already rolling around in my head as I thought about Jesus' offer of freedom to women in prison.

- As we look at our past, Jesus can set us free from guilt

when we confess our sins and receive His forgiveness and cleansing (1 John 1:9). He can set us free from shame, that feeling of not just *making* a mistake, but *being* a mistake, when we receive His gift of honor as He showers pleasure and acceptance on us.

- As we look at our present, Jesus can set us free from the “tapes” of lies and misbeliefs that control our lives, as we replace the lies with His truths. For example, a number of the ladies at the retreat had lived in bondage to the lie that

<u>Lies/Misbeliefs</u>	<u>Truth</u>
“If I mess up, that would be the end of the world. I have to be perfect.”	❖ Only God is perfect ❖ He has promised to hold my hand when I stumble. ❖ Psalm 18:35 ❖ Psalm 73:23 ❖ I am longing for Eden

they had to be perfect in order to be acceptable. The weight of needing to be perfect is soul-killing because it's impossible for imperfect people to be perfect! But we can be set free by embracing the truth that only God is perfect, so we can let go of the unrealistic expectation that we can ever live perfectly this side of heaven. God knows we will stumble, and He has promised to hold our hand when we do. And beyond that, He understands our longing for perfection is actually a longing for the perfect home of Eden, which we will get to experience on the New Earth we read about in the book of Revelation.

- We can walk in the breathtaking freedom from the soul-crushing imprisonment of unforgiveness by forgiving those who have hurt or offended us. The weight of others' sins against us is bad enough, but Jesus said that if we refuse to forgive, we will be subject to tormentors—demonic torturers (Matthew 18:34-35). When we release our offenders over to Jesus for Him to deal with, we are set free—free indeed!

- As we think about the future, there is glorious freedom when we trust God instead of being controlled by fear. So often, we are in bondage to fear because we want to be in control. We forget that we are not God, wanting to manage not only our own lives but the lives of others. There is freedom in trusting God instead of trying to control others.

- Proverbs 29:25 assures us that fear of man is a snare. This isn't talking about being afraid of people like some are afraid of heights, or the dark, or spiders. Fear of man is about working for other people's approval and fearing their disapproval. When we look to Jesus, though, we see how He modelled living for "an audience of One," caring only about pleasing His Father (John 8:29). When we follow Christ's example, living to please the Father instead of fickle people, there is freedom! I can personally attest to this. Because of my stubborn attachment to a biblical sexual ethic, I have been slamed online by people who despise God's standards. The slime slides off, though, when I keep my focus on the Lord and, like Jesus in Hebrews 12:2, I can "despise the shame" by refusing to accept it. That's what freedom feels like!

- There is true freedom in accepting God's choices for our lives: personality and temperament, introversion or extroversion, health limitations, even capacity. (Some people naturally have a "gallon" energy tank, while others naturally have a cup.) Resenting and fighting God's choices—even gender!—leads to expending mental and emotional energy that is restricting and costly. But embracing God's right to make these decisions for our design and our lives, laying down our non-existent "right" to define ourselves the way WE want, brings us freedom.

<i>Lies/Misbeliefs</i>	<i>Truth</i>
"My parents' problems were my fault."	❖ I don't have that kind of power.
"I am responsible for my parents (or my children's) happiness."	❖ Each one bears his own load – Gal 6:5
	❖ Each one is responsible for his own choices – Ezek. 18

- One of my dear friends discovered, in the process of working through the challenges of parenting a prodigal adult child, that there is freedom in owning 100% of our own part and 0% of other people's choices and behaviors. There's no point in taking on

guilt or responsibility for someone else's choices; they are completely responsible for their part.

- And finally (though definitely not exhaustively), we are free to choose our attitudes. We can decide to either live in bondage to an attitude of entitlement or a continual expectation of the negative, or live in freedom by developing an attitude of gratitude. I love Dr. Charles Swindoll's poem on Attitude:

The longer I live, the more I realize the impact of attitude
on life.

Attitude, to me, is more important than facts.

It is more important than the past,
than education, than money,
than circumstances, than failure, than successes,
than what other people think or say or do.

It is more important than appearance, giftedness, or skill.
It will make or break a company . . . a church . . . a home.

The remarkable thing is we have a choice
everyday regarding the attitude
we will embrace for that day.

We cannot change our past . . .
we cannot change the fact that people
will act in a certain way.

We cannot change the inevitable.
The only thing we can do is play on the one string we have,
and that is our attitude.
I am convinced that life is 10% what happens to me
and 90% of how I react to it.
And so it is with you . . . we are in charge of our Attitudes.
It's possible to be "free indeed." Regardless of your
circumstances. Choose the freedom Jesus offers!

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Shame-Based Families, Grace-Based Families

The messages of a shame-based family:

"Don't talk, don't trust, don't feel."

"Everybody has to put their needs aside so we can tiptoe around _____ and not make them mad."

"Why did you do that, you dumb b*tt?"

"If you disappoint me this much, how much more are you disappointing God?"

"Oh please, you're not wearing that, are you?"

"Loser . . . stupid . . . such an embarrassment . . . I hope nobody knows you're my daughter . . . You'll never amount to anything . . . I wish I'd never had you . . . You're so fat. And ugly."

Every message of a shame-based family is an arrow into

someone's heart. Left there unacknowledged and not pulled out with truth, it starts generating lies and pain that can last a lifetime.

Lots of people grew up in this kind of family, but we are not sentenced to repeating it into the next generation. We can put on the brakes and steer our families in another direction altogether-the direction of grace.



Grace-based families also have messages:

"You are loved and valued, no matter what you do."

"When we disagree, you never have to worry that I will stop loving you."

"I was wrong and I am sorry. Will you forgive me?"

"Did you do your best? You're the only one who can know."

"Let's talk about why you did that. What other choices did you have? What can you learn from this?"

"Can you help me understand what happened, what you were thinking or saying when you ____?"

The underlying message of a shame-based family is, "You are not acceptable and you risk being rejected and abandoned." The underlying message of a grace-based family is, "You are an important and cherished part of this family and you will always be loved and accepted, even if we need to discipline you for wrong choices."

Shame-based families shame out loud through name-calling, deadly comparisons ("Why can't you be like ____?"), and anything that indicates the person is not good enough. Grace-based families affirm out loud with uplifting expressions of belief in each other, appreciation for each other, and affectionate use of each other's names. Each person feels that their name is safe in everyone else's mouths—but most

especially mom and dad's.

The focus of shame-based families is on performance, looking good and being good on the outside. It's all external. Not embarrassing the family is huge. The focus of grace-based families is on the heart, remembering that character is shaped and developed in the family. The child's value—which never changes—is separated from his or her behavior, which is eminently changeable. These families remember that God is not real pleased with our choices sometimes, but He never stops loving us.

Shame-based families specialize in unspoken rules and expectations. They are discovered when one gets broken. Often, one of the unspoken rules is that no one is supposed to notice or mention problems; if you bring a problem into the light by asking, "Hey, what about this?"—YOU become the problem. When one of my friends told her parents that her brother had been molesting her, her father threatened, "Don't you ever talk about this again. It is over." When the abuse continued and she told her youth pastor, her father responded that his daughter was mentally ill, a pathological liar, and not to believe her.

There is often a "can't-win" rule in effect: children are taught never to lie, but they are also not allowed to tell Grandma her cooking tastes awful. Or children are taught that smoking is bad, but if they point out that mom or dad smoke, they are shamed and shut down.

In grace-based families, rules and expectations are clearly spelled out. If an unspoken rule comes to light because someone broke it, it gets talked about without shaming the one who broke a rule they didn't know was in place. If someone notices or mentions a problem, the problem is addressed instead of attacking the one who brought it up. In grace-based families, the *problem* is the problem, rather than the person who identified it.

Shame-based families often use coded messages to communicate, saying one thing while intending that their audience read their minds and respond to the actual message they wanted to give without coming right out and speaking it. Someone might say, "I have such a headache" and the second person replies, "That's too bad" or "Sorry" and then continues to do whatever they were doing. The first gets upset that the other person didn't offer to get them a pain reliever. The one with the headache used to be me, until a wise mentor responded with, "Would you like an Advil? Healthy people ask for what they need and want. Just ask me if I have one." Whoa. That was a game-changer for me!

The communication in grace-based families tends to be clear and straight. It's about saying what is true and what is actually meant. Scripture calls that "speaking the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15). And healthy communication does not involve an unnecessary third person, a term called "triangulating." If someone complains about another person, or gives a message for another family member, a wise person redirects them to the one they actually need to communicate with, refusing to be the third person in a two-person communication. Another wise person has said, "If you don't have a dog in that fight, stay out of it." That works!

Shame-based families are preoccupied with fault or blame. They are always looking for where to place or shift the blame when something goes wrong. Then the culprit can be shamed, humiliated, and made to feel so bad they don't do it again.

In grace-based families, the emphasis is on responsibility and accountability. People are responsible for their choices and held accountable for their behavior. Grace-based parents try to remember that all of life is training for a child, and it takes many, many times to learn wise and healthy behavior. So while a child may be disciplined, they are not punished for not getting something right. Instead of being shamed for slamming the door, they may be instructed, "OK, I guess you

need practice in closing the door without slamming it. So you'll be practicing 25 times in a row, starting right now." Another way that grace-based families can build responsibility and accountability is by using natural consequences without anger: "Since you left your bicycle in the driveway again, you will lose the privilege of enjoying it for a week." And sometimes, discipline without punishment means talking about what happened without shaming, by asking good questions: "So what can you learn from this?" "What can you do differently next time?"

Family is meant to be God's safety net underneath is, the safe place to fall when we make mistakes and learn painful life lessons. By His grace and through being intentional, shame-based families can become grace-based families as we reflect on how God, the perfect Parent, loves us perfectly and unconditionally-yet teaches us to be responsible as we grow up to maturity.

Note: the grace-based family in the picture are my friends Rick and Abbie Smith with their sons Noah and Jaxten. If you want a blessing, check out their story of grace at noahsdad.com/story.

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The Dark Underside of Abortion: A Christian

Worldview Perspective

Sue Bohlin looks at the common effects of an abortion on the women who choose it. From a biblical worldview perspective, it is not surprising that many women experience guilt, shame and denial. Christ can bring forgiveness and healing for those who have taken this brutally wrong path in their past.

Laura's Story

No matter how many times Laura^[1] took the home pregnancy test, it kept showing up positive. She was pregnant, and seventeen years old. She'd gotten an A on her paper against abortion in school. Her parents would never understand, especially since her mother volunteered at the crisis pregnancy center! Her boyfriend was hot, but hardly husband material. He was more committed to skateboarding than to her. Laura had never felt more confused in her life.

When she called her boyfriend to tell him she was pregnant, he just said, "That stinks. Well, I gotta go," and he was gone. She carried her horrible secret for three weeks before finally telling her parents. Her father exploded: "What did I ever do to deserve this? Well, we'll just have to get rid of it. It's the best thing for everybody. You're too young to be a mother." When Laura's eyes flooded with tears, he said, "You may hate me for a while, but I'm willing to take that risk. You'll get over it. You're young. You can have a real life with a real future this way."

Her mother, visibly shaken, said, "How could you do this to us? What would people think of us, to have a pregnant daughter? You've really gone and done it now, Laura." Two days later, her mother took her to a Planned Parenthood clinic. Laura cried the whole way there: "Please, no! Don't make me do this, don't make me do this!" Nobody listened, nobody cared that she didn't want the abortion. When a counselor asked if

she was sure, she just shrugged her shoulders, beaten and defeated.

As soon as it was over, everyone seemed to forget about it. Her parents never brought it up again. All her relationships fell apart. Laura was deeply depressed, not knowing how to handle her feelings. She was too ashamed to talk about the abortion with her friends, and her parents made her promise not to tell anyone.

She didn't get over it. She was stuck in a place filled with anger and hurt. She couldn't overcome the loss of her baby, and she didn't even have words for that. Anything related to babies made her cry: new baby announcements at church, diaper commercials, even driving by Babies-R-Us. Everything triggered relentless heartache. There was a wound in her soul that would not stop bleeding.

Abortion is not the cure to a problem pregnancy. It is what counselor Theresa Burke calls an "emotionally draining and physically ugly experience."[\[2\]](#) The majority of those who have an abortion experience a variety of problems afterwards. One post-abortal woman described it as "emotional torture."

In what follows, we're going to explore the ugly underside of abortion.

Why Women Choose Abortion

The banner of the pro-choice movement is, "Every woman has the right to choose." But why do women choose to have an abortion? Many women report that they didn't want one. Various studies have found that sixty-five to seventy percent of women who get abortions also believe it's morally wrong.[\[3\]](#) When women violate their conscience or betray their maternal instincts, that's going to cause a lot of stress.

Years after their abortion, women will often say that they

didn't want to have one but they felt forced to. They thought it was wrong, but they did it anyway because they felt pressure—from circumstances, or from one or more key people in their lives. Often it's boyfriends, sometimes husbands. When a boyfriend threatens to leave unless a girl has an abortion, most of the time they break up anyway. Then she has lost both her baby and her boyfriend. Crisis pregnancy counselor Dr. Julie Parton says that almost as often, the pressure comes from parents, especially Christian parents.[\[4\]](#) She says that there are three main factors influencing Christian mothers to push their daughters toward abortion: selfishness, shame, and fear.[\[5\]](#)

But the bottom line reason for abortion is spiritual. Even though they're usually not aware of it, people are listening to the voice of the enemy, who Jesus said came to steal, kill, and destroy.[\[6\]](#) Satan hates women, and he hates the image of God in the unborn baby. Abortion hurts women and destroys babies.

And for every woman who has had an abortion, there is a man whose baby has died. Whether he pushed for the abortion or fought it,[\[7\]](#) God's design of his masculine heart to protect and provide has been violated as well. Dr. Parton points out that over forty-five million men have bottled-up feelings about their abortions, and wonders if there is a connection with the heightened amount of violence in our culture of death. Could road rage be the boiling over of deep-seated anger in some of these men?

We need to talk more about the ways that abortion steals, kills and destroys. But it is crucial that you know that *abortion is not the unpardonable sin*. Jesus Christ died to pay for all sins, including abortion. He extends cleansing and forgiveness to every man and woman who has been wounded by abortion. He offers reconciliation with God and the grace to forgive ourselves. No sin is greater than His love or His sacrifice to pay for that sin. There is peace and joy waiting

for those who have received Christ's gift of forgiveness and cleansing from guilt.{8}

Post-Abortion Syndrome: Self-destruction, Guilt and Anger

Abortion is deeply troubling because it touches on three central issues of a woman's self-concept: her sexuality, her morality, and her maternal identity. She also has to deal with the loss of a child. This loss must be confronted, processed, and grieved in order for a woman to resolve her experience.{9}

Many women find themselves troubled after their abortion because they don't think through these issues before their abortion. The fact that they experience relief immediately after the abortion is no guarantee that problems won't surface later. Unresolved emotions will demand our attention sooner or later.

For millions of women, Post-Abortion Syndrome is an ugly after-effect of abortion, consisting of a number of powerful emotions that can erupt in dangerous and destructive behaviors. Far from being "no big deal," which is how abortion is often minimized in our culture, abortion is a traumatic event in the life of most women who have one. Life becomes divided into "before the abortion" and "after the abortion." So it is no surprise that so many experience some degree of post-traumatic stress disorder. They used to call this "shell shock" after World War II. PTSD is a collection of negative, destructive behaviors and ways of thinking.

In many women with a history of abortion there is an alarming increase of self-destructive behavior. Many women are consumed with self-hatred, expressing it in drug and/or alcohol abuse. Millions of women battle depression and suicidal thoughts.{10} One woman said, "I became a tramp and slept with anyone and everyone. I engaged in unprotected sex and each month when I

wasn't pregnant I would go into a deep depression. I was rebellious. I wanted my parents to see what I had become. I dropped out of college. I tried suicide, but I didn't have the guts to slit my wrists or blow my brains out. I couldn't get my hands on sleeping pills, so I resorted to over the counter sleep aids and booze."{11}

The majority of post-abortive women are plagued by guilt.{12} As one woman put it, "I hated myself. I felt abandoned and lost. There was no one's shoulder to cry on, and I wanted to cry like hell. And I felt guilty about killing something. I couldn't get it out of my head that I'd just killed a baby."{13} This high guilt rate is unique to abortion compared to any other medical procedure. There are no support groups for those who had their appendix or gall bladder removed, and people don't seek counseling after orthopedic surgery. Guilt is a painful aftereffect of abortion.

Some women react with anger and rage. They feel deeply isolated and angry at anyone who hurt them and their baby. They are irritated by everyone and everything, and no one can do anything right. They can fly into rages with the slightest provocation. Often, they are not aware of the connection between their abortion and a constantly simmering heart full of anger, especially since most women feel pressured to have the abortion in the first place.

Post Abortion Syndrome: Shame and Denial

A huge aspect of Post-Abortion Syndrome is shame. Post-abortal women often feel like second-class citizens. They live in fear of others finding out their terrible dark secret. One woman told me that whenever she would walk into a room, she was constantly scanning the faces: *Do they know? Can they tell by looking at me?* Some women are afraid to attend an abortion recovery group where anyone would know them, even though everyone is there for the same reason. When a Christian has an

abortion, she often goes into one of two directions; she either cuts herself off from God because she's so ashamed of herself, or she tries to become the ultimate "Martha," wearing herself out in service to try and earn her way to back to God's approval and blessing. The shame of abortion drives many women to perfectionism because they feel so deeply flawed and sinful.

Denial – Many women spend huge amounts of mental energy trying not to think about their abortion. Romans 1 calls this "suppressing the truth in unrighteousness." The horror of participating in the death of one's child is too painful to face, and many women work hard at maintaining denial for five to ten years.[{14}](#) But eventually reality usually comes to the surface.

Some women find themselves falling apart when their youngest child leaves home, or at menopause. Others become uncontrollably sad when they hold their first grandchild. One woman's denial system shattered when she saw a museum exhibit of pre-born babies and saw what her baby looked like when she aborted him. Another woman almost lost it in nursing school when she learned about prenatal development. The abortion counselor had told her it was just a blob of tissue. Even those who deny their unborn child was a human being and not a clump of cells admit they have to work at maintaining denial. One woman said, "I didn't think of it as a baby. I just didn't want to think of it that way."[{15}](#)

Child abuse – As the number abortions continues to rise, so does the incidence of child abuse.[{16}](#) Unresolved post-abortion feelings are tied to patterns of emotional or physical abuse of living children. One mother erupted in intense rage whenever her newborn baby cried. She came to realize that she hated her daughter for being able to do all the things that her aborted baby could never do.[{17}](#) One woman beat her three year old son to death shortly after an abortion which triggered a "psychotic episode" of grief, guilt, and

anger.{18}

Healing After Abortion

Post-Abortion Syndrome is a dark, ugly underside of abortion. Researchers have reported over a hundred psychological effects of abortion stress, including depression, flashbacks, sleep and eating disorders, anxiety attacks, a diminished capacity for bonding with later children, increased tendency toward violent outbursts, chronic problems in maintaining intimate relationships, and difficulty concentrating.{20}

Death – Women who abort are approximately four times more likely to die in the following year than women who carry their pregnancies to term.{21}

Breast Cancer – The risk of breast cancer almost doubles after one abortion, and rises even further with two or more abortions.{22}

Cervical, Ovarian and Liver Cancer – Women with one abortion face a 2.3 relative risk of cervical cancer, compared to non-aborted women, and women with two or more abortions face a 4.92 relative risk. Similar elevated risks of ovarian and liver cancer have also been linked to single and multiple abortions. These increased cancer rates for post-aborted women are apparently linked to the unnatural disruption of the hormonal changes which accompany pregnancy and untreated cervical damage.{23}

Damage to Cervix and Uterus – This causes problems with subsequent deliveries, and can result in handicaps in subsequent newborns.{24}

Increased Risks for Teenagers – Teenagers, who account for about thirty percent of all abortions, are also at much higher risk of suffering many abortion related complications. This is true of both immediate complications and of long-term

reproductive damage.[{25}](#)

What do you say to someone who's experienced the trauma of abortion? It's a terrible loss. How do you help someone grieve? What do you say? Perhaps something like, "I'm so sorry. It must be very difficult for you. Do you want to tell me about it?" We can offer a listening ear, full of compassion and grace: "What was the abortion like? What has it been like to live with it?" Seek to validate the woman or man's grief with honor and respect so they can get to a place of healing peace.

What if you're the one who's had an abortion? You need to grieve. Grief is a natural and necessary response to loss. It's more than a single emotion of sadness. It includes feelings of loss, confusion, loneliness, anger, despair, and more. It can't be turned on and off at will. Working through your grief means confronting your loss, admitting it, grieving it with tears and other expressions of sadness.

The pain and grief of abortion is complicated by the fact that it is also sin. But it is not the unpardonable sin. Confess it, and receive the cleansing and forgiveness that Jesus offers. He paid for your abortion on the Cross. He offers you the healing that allows you to be at peace with God and with yourself. He offers you the courage to tell your story with someone safe, which transforms your pain into something redemptive. He offers you the stability that means you don't fall apart if someone else is talking about abortion, or pregnancy, or babies in general.

Dr. Parton suggests three steps toward healing. First, acknowledge the wound that needs to be healed. It may take ten to fifteen years before a woman may be willing to take this step. Second, reach out for help. The Bible tells us, "Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another that you may be healed."[{26}](#) Find others who have walked the same path, either in person or online.[{27}](#) Dr. Parton says there is an

unusual strength of emotional bonding in post-abortive groups. Receive God's forgiveness and cleansing in community; that's His plan. Third, get into God's Word. It's a supernatural source of comfort and encouragement.

There is a dark and ugly underside to abortion, but it's not too dark for God to redeem. Praise the Lord!

Notes

1. This account is based on a true story, with the name changed, found in Theresa Burke and David C. Reardon, *Forbidden Grief: The Unspoken Pain of Abortion* (Springfield, IL: Acorn Books, 2002), 23-25.

2. Ibid., 41.

3. Ibid., xx.

4. Personal conversation with the author, Sept. 21, 2007.

5. **Selfishness** – because she had all these dreams, plans, hopes, and ambitions for her daughter. When the daughter turns up pregnant, mom has to grieve the loss of all her dreams for her precious daughter. She'll say things like, "I just can't stand by and watch you throw your life away" or "If you have a baby right now you're just going to be stuck for the next eighteen years."

Shame – Mom feels that if her daughter's pregnancy becomes public knowledge, everyone will know she was not a good mother. She failed at teaching her daughter morality and purity and the things a good Christian mother should have taught her.

Fear – of rejection. She fears that her Christian friends will judge and reject her. So she thinks, or says, "How could you do this to me?" The mom can be so focused on her own stuff, her selfishness and shame and fear, that she can't or doesn't step up to the plate and help her daughter do what they both know is right, because these other factors are overwhelming her.

6. John 10:10.

7. I am aware that many men never know about the abortion of

their child. Some find out later and they often experience deep grief and anger, not only at the loss of their child's life, but the unilateral decision to keep them in the dark about their own child's life or death.

8. Come to our website at Probe.org for help with that. [“The Most Important Decision of Your Life”](#) and [“How to Handle the Things You Hate But Can't Change”](#).

9. Burke and Reardon, *Forbidden Grief*, 33.

10. Sixty-three percent of women who have had an abortion seek mental health care. There is a one hundred and fifty-four percent increase in suicide. The suicide rate within one year after an abortion was three times higher than for all women, seven times higher than for women carrying to term, and nearly twice as high as for women who suffered a miscarriage. Suicide attempts appear to be especially prevalent among post-abortion teenagers. Afterabortion.org,

www.afterabortion.info/psychol.html (accessed Feb. 23, 2008).

11. “Before I Had Time to Think,” Afterabortion.org, www.afterabortion.org (accessed Feb. 23, 2008).

12. A poll by the *LA Times* revealed that fifty-six percent of those who admitted to an abortion felt guilty. But since another poll showed that seventy-four percent of those who admitted to having an abortion believe it's morally wrong, I believe that number is way too low. See Burke and Reardon, *Forbidden Grief*, 47.

13. Linda Bird Francke, *The Ambivalence of Abortion* (New York: Random House, 1978), 61. Cited in www.abortionfacts.com/reardon/women_who_abortion_and_their_views.asp (accessed February 23, 2008).

14. David Reardon, *Aborted Women-Silent No More* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1987).

15. Francke, *Ambivalence*, 63.

16. Psychologist Philip Ney has studied the connection. He sees several effects of abortion:

1) Failure to bond with subsequent children. One mother admitted, “We had our first daughter and I never felt the deep love for her I should have. For several reasons, I guess. The

first is that I had never grieved over the loss of the child I had aborted. I was also afraid to love her too much. I felt that God was just going to take her away from me to punish me for killing my first child."

2) The weakening of maternal instincts. Killing one's own child violates the God-given instinct to nurture and protect. It can result in a hardened heart as a way of protecting herself from the truth of her action.

3) Reduced inhibitions against violence, particularly toward children. (Theresa Karminiski Burke and David C. Reardon, "Abortion Trauma and Child Abuse," Afterabortion.org, www.afterabortion.org.)

17. Reardon, *Aborted Women*, 129-30.

18. Ibid.

19. R.F. Badgley, et al., *Report of the Committee on the Operation of the Abortion Law*, Minister of Supply and Services, Ottawa, Canada, 1977, 313-319.

20. The following citations are found in "A List of Major Physical Sequelae Related to Abortion" at Afterabortion.org, www.afterabortion.org (accessed Feb. 23, 2008).

21. Gissler, M., et al., "Pregnancy-associated deaths in Finland 1987-1994 – definition problems and benefits of record linkage," *Acta Obstetricia et Gynecologica Scandinavica* 76 (1997): 651-657 .

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Olympic-Sized “I Infections”

Feb. 11, 2014

As the 2014 Olympics continue to unfold, televised by the NBC sports team, anchorman Bob Costa’s very public battle with a nasty eye infection continues to be as hot a topic of conversation as which Americans are winning medals. Now both eyes are red, swollen, and painful-looking. As they say here in Texas, bless his heart!

If the spiritual dimension of life were made visible in the physical realm, most of us would be walking around looking like Bob Costa. His eyeball is inflamed and infected, interfering with his vision and affecting the way people see him. It’s a startling picture of our warped and diseased perception through which we experience life. No one is immune, since all of us have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23), and all of us live in a fallen world. We all have a spiritual eye infection.

It’s really an “I infection.”

We’re stupidly, pathologically self-centered and self-absorbed. Our life theme song is “It’s All About MEEEEEEEEEE!” Everything and everyone is evaluated in terms of how it benefits us or costs us. Adding insult to injury, this “I infection” is not only ugly, but it stinks to high heaven. Some people’s “I infection” comes from a vaunted sense of entitlement. They were showered with excessive parental adoration, believing that every successful trip to the bathroom deserved a round of applause, that they were owed a celebratory party and gifts for turning another year older, that they should receive a trophy for showing up to games.

Others’ “I infection” comes from the desperate fear that at their core, they really don’t matter and there’s nothing there anyway. They are plagued by a shame that colors all of life in

the kind of emotional gunk that blurs Bob Costa's eyes. Everything feels sticky and painful and gross. It just hurts to live.

Still others experience an "I infection" fueled by unhealed wounds that continue to fester and cause pain. It's like walking around with an arrow stuck in your heart, and it doesn't take much for life experiences to brush up against the arrow and cause a fresh wave of pain to an old wound. So they live life in a defensive mode, trying to protect themselves from the relentless presence of unfinished, undealt-with pain.

No matter what the cause of our "I infection," the cure is the same: we need to come to Jesus, in the humility of abject need and dependence on Him. The "I infection" of selfishness is the symptom of a heart that God calls deceitful above all things and desperately wicked (Jer. 17:9). This kind of heart is incurably diseased—we need a heart transplant. Fortunately, God's really good at that. He promises in Ezekiel 36:26 to give us a new heart and put a new spirit in us, which He does the moment we trust in Jesus to save us from our sins and our sin-diseased hearts.

When the person with a sense of entitlement develops an attitude of gratitude, disciplining herself to give thanks for the abundant showering of blessings and gifts from Jesus, her now-thankful heart clears up the ugly "I infection."

When a person infected with shame comes to Jesus, His loving acceptance and grace heals the "I infection" and allows him to see himself as beloved and valuable.

When the ones with unhealed wounds come to Jesus, giving Him access to the places of the heart that hurt and ooze, He pours His love into the wounds as they are exposed to the light by telling their story and then forgiving the ones who caused the wounds. Jesus heals their "I infection" through grieving and forgiving.

Bob Costa may have an eye infection. What's your "I infection" that you need to take to Jesus?

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/tapestry/sue_bohlin/olympic-sized_i_infections

Permission Givers

Recently I was shopping in a store clogged with shoppers seeking Grand Opening bargains. I wanted three of an item; as one of the stockers opened a box for me, another lady said, "The limit is six, right? Give me six!" Suddenly I wanted to have six as well. She had given me permission to buy more than I intended. It was like she whipped out a permission slip and handed it to me. And I took it. This lady had no idea what she did!

We often function as "permission givers" in each other's lives. It's part of living in community. We give each other permission not just for things we do, but how we think. And that's why we need to be careful what we're giving permission for. That was Paul's argument in 1 Cor. 10 when he warned the believers that they could end up giving permission to eat meat that had been offered to idols, which was sold at cut-rate prices in the meat market, to other believers for whom it would be sin because of their weak consciences.

We can give permission for evil as well as for good.

Right now, the top three best-selling books are the Fifty Shades of Grey trilogy, which is female erotica. Verbal porn. Many people are enthusiastically hitting the LIKE button on Facebook whenever anyone mentions it, each one giving permission to others to read it. In Dannah Gresh's blog ["I'm](#)

[Not Reading Fifty Shades of Grey,](#) she mentions a friend who “regretfully can’t get the images out of her head.” (And that’s why I’m not reading it either.)

We can give permission for others to endorse what the Bible calls sin by reassuring each other that we’ve outgrown the ancient, outmoded values that were given for our protection. We can give permission to continue building an addiction to sexual sin like using pornography by reassuring each other that “everybody does it.” And it starts early; my friend has been intentional about teaching her 11-year-old son to choose purity, warning him that others will want to show him dirty pictures. Sure enough, last month in the bathroom of a boy scout camp, another 11-year-old offered to show him his porn collection on his cell phone.

But let’s talk about giving permission for *good*! That’s where this social dynamic can really shine!

For over a decade, I have participated in an online support forum, and I did a search for my posts using the word “permission.”

- “I wish someone had asked me when I was growing up what it was like to be handicapped, to be stared at, to be different. It would have given me permission to find and use my voice, instead of living in bondage to shame that wasn’t mine.”
- After people responded to a post that I also shared here, [“What Would You Say to Your 8-Year-Old Self?”](#), I affirmed posters for the really powerful truths they would want to say to their younger selves. “Now—will you give that same little self permission to receive that truth? And ask the Holy Spirit to seal it to your heart?”
- One of the young women I mentor gave herself permission to agree that there *would* be a last time for destructive behaviors that she repeatedly fell into: sinful relationships, indulging in drugs, and self-injury. That permission-giving

opened the door to believing that the same power that raised Jesus from the dead was available to her for living in sobriety.

• A number of us encouraged a young lady terrified of doctor visits, who confessed her irrational fear of the crinkly paper on the exam table. I uploaded a “permission button” and wrote, “I give you permission to sit in a chair in the exam room till the very last second.” It was amazing how comforting that was!

Permission

• “Denying pain doesn’t make it go away, just harder to access because you try to bury it. Give yourself permission to feel pain. You don’t have to do it by yourself—invite Jesus into it, grab a hold of His hand, and hang on for dear life.”

• “You have permission to break a promise you never should have made in the first place, what has been called ‘foolish vows.’ For example, when you promise you will never leave or abandon a friend where the relationship has turned unhealthy and sinful.”

• “Please give yourself permission to think of [a certain person] as an illegal, immoral, harmful substance like crack cocaine that you just cannot have even a tiny bit of, because there’s no such thing as a tiny bit of a life-controlling, life-dominating, life-destroying substance.” “The Holy Spirit knows every single thing we need to let go of [in forgiveness]. Each memory is like a splinter He wants permission to remove. But you have to cooperate with the process, thus the need to give Him permission.”

• “Give yourself permission to mentally fire your sister as the supposedly ‘older and wiser’ sister. She may be older, but she’s not wiser, and you don’t have to follow her advice when it is not wise because it’s informed by the world, not by God.”

• And finally, “Give yourself permission to become comfortable

with new habits you'd like to form, such as stopping in the middle of the conversation to pray. And praying out loud. And using new expressions like 'The Lord bless you!' And even something as prosaic as wearing a wrap instead of a sweater, or wearing a hat. Give yourself permission to step outside your comfort zone and practice this new thing you want to become comfortable with, and tell yourself, 'It's OK to not be comfortable with this yet. I'll get there eventually.'"

What have you given—or received—permission for?

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/tapestry/sue_bohlin/permission_givers on July 2, 2012

Zap the Lies, Hug the Truth – 2

In my last blog post [“Zap the Lies, Hug the Truth – 1,”](#) I shared how one of my friends faced the lies of the enemy in the wake of a molestation, and successfully stood against them in the truth of God's word.

Today I will let another friend share how the Lord Jesus has met her on prayer walks, addressing the lies that have held her in bondage since her trauma-filled childhood and then adulthood.

This is what she wrote to me:

Jesus said, “First I will take off the lie you have believed, then I will wash you with the water of the word of

truth, then I will put on your real identity in Me.”

I saw a picture, and realized it was me—as a beggar. My whole body was covered in rags and filth. The filth was garbage and dirt and waste that had been there so long it had hardened into a thick leathery shell all over my body. This shell adhered to my skin like glue, penetrating the rags I was wearing as clothes.

“This is going to hurt some,” Jesus said, “and your soul will be naked and exposed before Me, but it will be all right.”

I nodded my assent.

He then reached out and pulled off a piece from my shoulder to my elbow on the front side of my arm. The skin underneath was very pink and soooo tender.

Jesus: “Tell Me the lie you believe about your weight.”

Me: “I’m fat and it makes me ugly and undesirable. I’m huge and when people look at me they just see the fat lady. I’m gross.”

Jesus (commanding tone): “NOW, tell Me the truth I have shown you about this.” (With that, He put water on the exposed skin, and it healed and tanned.)

Me: “That I’m 20 lbs. overweight, that I have a sedentary lifestyle due to chronic pain and damaged joints. That I am making appropriate efforts by walking and watching what I eat. That my body type will NEVER be 5’5” and 100 lbs. and that is okay with You because You made me to be this size.”

Jesus: “What is another lie you believe?”

Me: “That I am worthless, of no value, that I benefit no one and that people would be better off without me. I am refuse.”

Jesus: "Now what is the truth I am showing you?"

Me: *tears* "That You, Lord God, wanted spiritual offspring, and I am that. You, God, benefit, You gain a daughter. That my kids gain because they needed a mom who could make it alone (with You) with five kids. That my students benefit because others have given up on them. That my pastor benefits because he is seeing someone walk out of sexual brokenness first hand. Sue benefits because she sees how my relationship with You works. The online community of women benefit because You speak through me to encourage them."

Abba: "You are Mine, My daughter, heiress, friend. Your purchase price is set, the holy blood of the son of God. I did not find that price too high. You are precious in My eyes."

So my friend writes me these healing scriptural truths she hears from the heart of God as they go walking, and then when she forgets them, I have the privilege of reminding her what He has said. It's like that old saying, "A friend is one who knows the song of your heart, and will sing it back to you when you forget the words."

This blog post originally appeared at
blogs.bible.org/tapestry/sue_bohlin/zap_the_lies_hug_the_truth_part_2
on Sept. 15, 2009.

Turn to Jesus, Tiger

Yesterday (Jan. 5, 2010), Fox News commentator and analyst Brit Hume *became* the news with his delightfully provocative

comments about and to scandalized über-golfer Tiger Woods, which instantly showed up in places like an entertainment “news” show and in several YouTube videos.

“Tiger Woods will recover as a golfer. Whether he can recover as a person, I think, is a very open question, and it’s a tragic situation. He’s lost his family; it’s not clear to me whether he’ll be able to have a relationship with his children, but the Tiger Woods that emerges, once the news value dies out of this scandal, the extent to which he can recover, it seems to me, depends on his faith. He’s said to be a Buddhist; I don’t think that faith offers the kind of forgiveness and redemption that is offered by the Christian faith. So my message to Tiger would be, ‘Tiger, turn to the Christian faith and you can make a total recovery and be a great example to the world.’”

I love it that someone spoke the plain, un-PC truth that Buddhism offers no solution to the weight of grief and shame that Tiger is carrying.

But Jesus does.

Our culture has become voracious in its appetite for celebrity and celebrity news, which is why a man’s unfortunate and self-indulgent choices to engage in numerous extramarital affairs gets much more attention that it deserves. This isn’t just about news that sells newspapers and magazines; this is a real life train wreck, with real life trauma and pain to a man and his family. And that’s why what we believe matters, because real life in a fallen world involves pain and suffering—some because of our own sinful choices, some because of others’ sinful choices, and some because pain and suffering is inextricably linked with a world hostile to God and intent on operating independently from Him.

Pain and suffering is not optional, but we have choices in how we interpret our experiences and how we respond. Brit Hume,

himself a Christ-follower, knows that God can bring hope and change and redemption out of the most painful parts of life. He knows, because he is a man forgiven by God and others for his own sins, that there is freedom and relief in the forgiveness made possible by Jesus' death and resurrection.

Tiger needs to know.

Would you join me in praying for the man, every time you hear or see him mentioned in the media? Pray for grace to repent and not merely grieve that he got caught. Pray that he turns to Jesus.

This blog post originally appeared at
blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/turn_to_jesus_tiger

What Would You Say to Your 8-Year-Old Self?

Recently I watched Disney's *The Kid* again. This is a movie recommended by a counselor friend of mine, and I have heard of several other counselors who assign people to watch it because of its insights into why we can become the adults we are. Bruce Willis plays a not very nice man who meets up with his 8-year-old self, and the two have some important information to give each other.

There is a scene where a friend helps him process what it means to be talking to his little boy self, and asks, "What would I say if little Deirdre turned up, bursting out of her St. Mary's uniform, asking me what comes next?" Suddenly, my eyes welled with tears at the thought: what would I say if little 8-year-old Susan LeClair appeared in my living room? What would I want her to know, after 30+ years of intentionally seeking "wisdom beyond my years," the prayer the Lord instructed me to pray for myself right after becoming a Christian?



Here's my first pass:

"You are not damaged goods. You are not the ugly crippled girl you think you are. God made you beautiful, and He put you in a handicapped body to greater put His glory on display. Your frailty will make your gifts, and your intensity, less threatening to others. When His joy radiates out from you, He will get the glory, and you will love that. It's OK that you had polio. One day, your scars will be beauty marks, and you will see that your ever-present limp simply *is*. It's not a shameful thing. Jacob's limp was the souvenir Yahweh chose for his nighttime wrestling match with Him.

"Your purity is a precious gift. Don't let anyone steal it from you.

"Your intellect doesn't make you better than anyone else. It's like the color of your hair or eyes. It's just part of the package God put together when He made you. Yes, you're smart. Don't be a show-off about it. That's ugly. And nobody will figure out, especially seventh-grade girls who will leave a deep wound on your soul, that you're desperately trying to cover up a core of shame by proving you're not hopelessly rotten, damaged, not-OK. Speaking of which, you ARE hopelessly

rotten, damaged, and not-OK in your flesh, the part of you that operates independently from God. That part of you deserves to die, and one day you'll recognize that and it will be crucified with Jesus. Then He'll give you a new heart and a new spirit that is whole and perfect and indescribably lovely—just like Him. You will realize that all the parts of you that you really like are all gifts from Jesus or His character shining through you.

“Oh, and Mom tells you that since your eyes change color depending on what you're wearing, you have hazel eyes. You don't. They're green. Mom doesn't know everything, but it will take you 40 more years to learn that.”

In the movie, Deirdre says she would answer little Deirdre's question by saying, “Baby, don't you worry about a thing. Everything's just going to be great!” If it were me, I'd cup little Susan's face in my hand and reassure her, “Sweetheart, I'm not going to spoil the adventure by telling you how it's going to play out. I can just promise you that because you'll put your trust in Jesus in college, He's going to give you a life so full of joy that you can't begin to imagine it right now. He's not going to make your dreams come true; He's going to give you new and better dreams, and make those come true. There will be pain, but the joy and richness will far outpace it. It's going to be a delightful life, sweetie. I promise.”

What would you say to *your* 8-year-old self?

This blog post originally appeared at
blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/what_would_you_say_to_your_8-year-old_self on June 9, 2009.

“It’s Not Your Fault!”

There’s a great scene in the fantasy movie “Disney’s The Kid” where a middle-aged man, played by Bruce Willis, meets up with his little boy self. The two of them go to their childhood home where the boy learns the horrific news that his mother will die soon, and his father blames him. The grown-up version of the boy knows that he carried the terrible burden of guilt and shame about his mother’s death for years. He kneels down, looks his little-boy self full in the face, and assures him, “It’s not your fault,” lifting the burden from the little boy before he ever has to carry it. These four words, “It’s not your fault,” are truly one of the most powerful gifts an adult can give a child. This is a powerful truth that children need to hear and they can’t tell themselves; only an adult can give them this “special revelation.”

Children are naturally self-centered and they think everything that happens to them is connected to them and their choices or their character. Of course that’s not true. Stuff just happens, but a child can’t know that. A little girl’s parents divorce and her world falls apart. She thinks, if I had obeyed more, if I were prettier or more talented, my daddy would still be here. She needs for both parents to say, “This is about us. It’s not your fault.”

A beloved grandparent dies. Or a pet dies, and a child blames himself. He needs to be told that it’s not his fault, and no matter what he thought—like not wanting to visit with his grandpa one afternoon—or what he did—like forgetting to feed the cat—he doesn’t have the power to make those kinds of things happen, and it’s not his fault.

My friend’s son has Tourette’s syndrome, and we were talking one day about how to help him handle it. I suggested she make sure he knew he wasn’t responsible for it, and she assured me, “Oh, he already knows that.” But that night, as she was

tucking him into bed, she said, “You know this isn’t your fault, don’t you?” His eyes got big and it was like a huge weight rolled off his shoulders. With great relief in his voice, he asked, “*It ISN’T???*” My friend had thought he already understood, but we can’t ever assume kids own that truth until we give it to them.

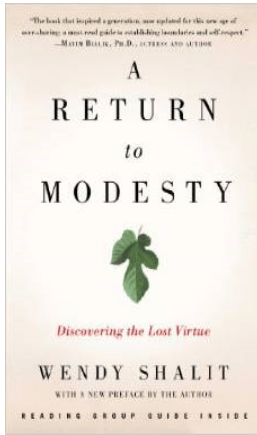
And if children don’t know that bad things are not their fault, they can take on guilt that weighs heavily on them for years. Others react by wrapping themselves in shame. For example, when a girl is sexually abused, she feels dirty and broken, like damaged goods. She needs to be told, “It’s not your fault.” Even when those broken little girls are grown-ups, the little girl inside still needs for someone to tell her, “It’s not your fault.”

Has a bad thing—or something a child perceives as bad—happened to a child you know? Give them the gift they can’t give themselves, the truth that will set them free. Tell them it’s not their fault.

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A Return to Modesty

The Loss of the Virtue of Modesty



This article is an examination of Wendy Shalit's book *A Return to Modesty: Discovering the Lost Virtue*. The book was written in 1999 and addressed to her "parents, and anyone who has ever been ashamed of anything." *A Return to Modesty* is an examination of public and personal attitudes toward the problems faced by young women at the end of the twentieth century, and the beginning of the twenty-first.

Shalit's starting point is the change from a healthy modesty toward sexual experience to a sheer embarrassment at the lack of experience. Her book is not a call to a prudish, Victorian sexuality, but a reminder of the value inherent in female modesty and the rewards for those who wait until marriage to become sexually active. Arguing against a culture which systematically attempts to rid us of our romantic hopes and natural embarrassments, Shalit offers young women an open invitation to cultivate one of the most feminine of all virtues, and to do so without shame or regret.

A Return to Modesty is divided into three parts: the first concerns our present view of sexual modesty and the problems with this view. The second section surveys the intellectual battles which led to our present situation. And the third is a look at women who are saying "no" to contemporary values and returning to an earlier conception of modesty.

The War on Embarrassment, the title of the first chapter,

looks at the early and middle '80s when sex education in grade schools was beginning to become more commonplace in the United States. Young girls ten and eleven years of age sat in mixed company as instructors discussed the particulars of intercourse, venereal disease, and birth control. The result, argues Shalit, is that subjects that had been discussed privately among the separate genders are brought into the open in such a way that all modesty is systematically removed. Preteen girls are taught to be ashamed if they are embarrassed, and embarrassed if they are ashamed. The ensuing confusion leads to a schizophrenic approach to sexuality which will follow the young girl through puberty and into young womanhood.

The impact of this early exposure to sexuality is discussed in the second chapter, *Postmodern Sexual Etiquette*. Here the modern dating scene is shown to be a direct revolt against the supposedly debilitating sexual disease of Puritanism and the Judeo-Christian ethic.^[1] The traditional maturation cycle of courtship, love, and marriage has been replaced by a sequence of hook-ups, dumpings, and post-dumping checkups. The result, which we will discuss, has been that women are generally disrespected, trivialized, and abused in ways that should concern us all.

The Normalization of Pornography

As we continue our examination of modesty, I would like to cover the statistical fallout from our behavior during the last half of the century.

Stalking, rape, and harassment of women in the work place and at home all increased dramatically during the latter part of the twentieth century. But nothing is as alarming an indicator, says Shalit, as the "normalization of pornography."^[2] The contemporary debate is little more than a "ping-pong" game over censorship with feminists and conservatives crying "yes," and the civil libertarians

volleying back “no.” What is missing is the realization of how our views of pornography have shifted and a recognition of the impact that this has on the lives of ordinary men and women.[{3}](#)

One indicator of our growing acceptance of recreational pornography is the increase in strip clubs in the past decade, up over 100 percent from 1992. Strippers have become a kind of cultural wallpaper, and are present to such an extent that they are no longer shocking.[{4}](#) Women who object to their husbands and boyfriends looking at porn are accused of being prudish and full of hang-ups. The result has been a plethora of diseases and disorders as women attempt to look like the airbrushed super models seen in magazines and film.

A young woman named Jennifer Silver was concerned that her boyfriend was reading *Playboy* magazine, but she and her friends were reluctant to say anything which would make them seem prudish or un-cool. In a porn-friendly culture Miss Silver’s opinion was only valued if it was sympathetic to the norm. She said in an article to *Mademoiselle* magazine:

The real reason I hated Playboy was that the models established a standard I could never attain without the help of implants, a personal trainer, soft lighting, a squad of makeup artists and hairdressers, and airbrushing. It’s a standard that equates sexuality with youth and beauty. I didn’t want my boyfriend buying into Playboy’s definition of sexuality.[{5}](#)

Her boyfriend discontinued his reading in light of Miss Silver’s observations, but many men, even Christian men, do not see the harm in this kind of indulgent and sinful behavior.

It is not enough to say we want to return to a more modest culture; we must actively strive to create such a culture. If women are ever going to be able to be modest, men will have to

value that modesty, and one way to do so is by allowing women to be who they are and not place impossible demands on them.

The Intellectual Landscape

In part two of her book Shalit takes aim at the intellectual battles which have led to the present crises in virtue. Under the guise of “being comfortable with our bodies,” our universities, advertising companies, and even fellow Christians have urged women in the last half century to “let it all hang out.” Indicative of this attitude is a quote from *Bazaar*, a leading women’s magazine, in response to a cover which offended some readers:

The barely revealed breast on our August cover wasn’t meant to offend. It was meant to celebrate the beauty of the female form. Bazaar believes that women should feel comfortable with their bodies.

The response to this reader’s letter was in effect saying that, if one should choose to be modest, then it is a reflection of not being “comfortable with one’s body.” The result is that we’ve become so comfortable with the body that people feel free to dress immodestly from the beach to the grocery store.

Shalit continues her examination of the intellectual landscape of modesty with a glimmer of hope based on nation-wide surveys in some of the most prominent women’s magazines. Her findings are that 49 percent of women wish they had slept with fewer men, and the happiest women were those who had the fewest partners.[{6}](#) In addition to these observations, one could add that the same women’s magazines that frequently advocate a more progressive and immodest lifestyle are also full of the confessions of women who have low self-esteem and feel that they are ugly and do not measure up to an increasingly critical society.

Following the statistical surveys, Shalit examines the idea of “male obligation.” In an unusual turn she says that it is difficult to expect men to be honorable. Many women send messages that men are no longer expected to behave like gentlemen.^[7] The short skirts, plunging necklines, and pouty lips so popular today are an invitation for men to stare at and perceive women as objects. The honor women want from men, argues Shalit, begins with the signals that women send. Those interested in a clear guide to a return to modesty, in their own lives or that of their friends and daughters, will find such a guide in Shalit’s book *A Return to Modesty*.

Modest Dress

In an effort to find a way back to a more modest approach to sexuality, Shalit turns to some themes common in most religions. First she makes the observation that there is almost unanimous agreement among religions that modesty is inextricably linked to holiness.^[8] In the first of several examples, Shalit quotes Christ’s admonition: “Blessed is he that watcheth, and keepeth his garments, lest he walk naked and then see his shame.”^[9] After this she recalls the occasion when Moses covers his face, and is afraid to look upon God. Finally, she considers the account of Isaiah when he sees the fiery angels surrounding the throne of God, and four of the six angels’ wings are not functional because they are used to cover their feet. The rationale, says Shalit, is that in the presence of the Holy One, they should cover themselves.

In the section titled *The Return to Modest Dress*, Shalit documents the changing trends in women’s dress. She discusses how women who have rebelled against the immodest dress characterized by spandex, push-up bras, and bikinis have found a new self-respect they never knew was available. In addition to this, these same women have found that they are attracting the kind of men they really desire as opposed to men who approach them for their outward beauty alone.

There is a difficulty for young women who choose to be a part of the counter-culture of modesty Shalit is advocating. We live in a time when the loss of one's virginity is considered a right of passage into maturity. Young women who choose to hold on to their virginity are often ostracized by other girls who wish to have partners in their loss. The result is that one must frequently choose between the loss of innocence, or the loss of fellowship with one's peers. This is a tragic choice to ask of a young, teenage girl who desperately wants to be accepted.

The problem is not confined to young women alone, but is played out among more adult women with the same dire consequences. Men no longer have to marry a woman to get them to sleep with them and the result has been a growing hostility toward the institution of marriage.^{10} The power to say "no" that women once collectively possessed, has been surrendered to the point that it is very difficult to reclaim. Shalit's book shows the way out of a dark forest of our own making.

How To Get There

"Loss of innocence is nothing new," writes Shalit, "but it is our assumption that there is now nothing to lose."^{11} We frequently act as though previous generations have decided that young women need not value their innocence, and we are powerless to resist the pressures of society. However, we are told exactly the opposite throughout the Scriptures. We are told that we can, and must, resist the world. We are told that the individual can choose to behave differently than societal norms. And, we are reminded that the failure to resist the temptations and standards set by secular society is sin.

The first thing we must do in order to return to a more modest society is to believe that it is possible, and to voice our desires for such a return actively. The second thing we must do is realize that cultures differ about what exactly is modest. Shalit cites examples of eighteenth century France

where women would not bare their shoulders, Chinese women shy about their feet being exposed, and native women of Madagascar who would “rather die of shame than expose their arms.”[\[12\]](#)

Shalit proposes that we listen to the universal instinct within us which has been systematically suppressed. We know that we are naturally shy and sensitive to some things and should sometimes, but not always, cultivate our reservations rather than trying to overcome them. Quoting Francis Benton, Shalit writes:

Specific rules about modesty change with the styles. Our Victorian ancestors, for instance, would judge us utterly depraved for wearing the modern bathing suit. Real modesty, however, is a constant and desirable quality. It is based not on fashion, but on appropriateness. A woman boarding a subway in shorts at the rush hour is immodest not because the shorts themselves are indecent, but because they are worn in the wrong place at the wrong time. A well-mannered and self-respecting woman avoids clothes or behavior that are inappropriate or conspicuous.[\[13\]](#)

In order for society, and especially Christians within a secular and hostile society, to return to modesty we must be willing to look a little awkward in our actions and appearances. God has called us to be a strange and peculiar people for His purposes. One of the easiest and most influential ways to do this is through our outward appearances and actions. We should return to modesty before it really is too late.

Notes

1. Wendy Shalit, *A Return To Modesty: Discovering the Lost Virtue* (New York: The Free Press, 1999), 26.
2. Ibid., 49-54.
3. Ibid., 49.

4. Ibid.
 5. Ibid., 52.
 6. Ibid., 90.
 7. Ibid., 104-105.
 8. Ibid., 218.
 9. Rev. 16:15.
 10. Shalit, 227.
 11. Ibid., 241.
 12. Ibid., 232.
 13. Ibid., 232.
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