

These 21 Ministries Are Making a Massive Impact in the 21st Century

Charisma Media has launched a new award called Ministry Today 21, which recognizes 21 churches and ministries that are most influencing the 21st century. *Ministry Today* magazine has announced its list in its special May/June issue.

Entries on the list range from local churches that are using innovative means to advance the gospel and demonstrate the life-changing power of God to specialized parachurch ministries that focus on things like restoring marriages, caring for the needs of the downtrodden and discipleship training.

“All of these have become models for others to emulate in the ministry world today,” said *Ministry Today*’s managing editor, Shawn Akers. “We want everyone to know, however, that this is not a list ranking the 21 best churches or ministries in the United States. The Ministry Today 21 was created as a resource for pastors and ministry leaders from which to glean ideas that could possibly enhance their own kingdom efforts.”

Ministry Today’s core values are not simply to play up the biggest and the best, Akers added. However, the publisher believes ministries and churches should be recognized for being godly examples and models for others.

“This special issue of *Ministry Today* was created not to promote one church or ministry over another, but to show all ministerial leaders how God is glorified through these effective and successful organizations,” said Charisma Media CEO and *Ministry Today* publisher Steve Strang. “We’re confident that the 21 ministries and churches we chose do simply that. Other churches throughout the world certainly can

learn from their example.”

Since its publication, the May/June issue has received a great deal of positive feedback from pastors and ministerial leaders throughout the nation.

“I received my copy of the new *Ministry Today* magazine, and it is great,” said Jimmy Evans, co-founder of MarriageToday in the Dallas area. “Thank you for including us in this, it is truly a great honor. And, I really believe this magazine will be of great benefit to pastors receiving it.”

“It is my wish that this special issue of *Ministry Today* will not only bless all ministerial leaders, but will also be a blessing to the communities and the world in which they serve,” Akers said. “I am proud to partner with these ministries and churches in reaching the world for Jesus, and I look forward to highlighting other worthy ministries in future issues.”

Click [here](#) to read a list of the 21 ministries featured on the list. You can also read more about each ministry in the print magazine or online at [.](#)

When God Helps a Single Mom of 5 Kids

You know that old saying about getting your ducks in a row? My ducks aren't in a row. In fact, I'm sure my ducks aren't even in the same pond.

I really want them to be—at least in the same pond. Golly, I don't care about lines. I was never particularly fond of

staying in the lines anyway.

But as a single mama, I think I might need some lines drawn—some boundaries established.

Lately I'm recognizing a decidedly annoying trend with my children: stepping—no, make that leaping—across boundaries. My room, my bathroom, my closet, my clothes, my makeup, my socks, my shoes, my jewelry, my papers, my pens, my desk, my computer, my drinks, my snacks, my stuff—it all seems to be fair game. No one bothers to ask, no one bothers to put back, no one bothers to thank, but it all sure bothers me!

I got myself into this particular pond. I jumped in when my husband left. I allowed my children to sleep on my floor, my oldest daughter to share my bathroom, and my kids to use whatever they needed out of my stuff. I didn't do much more than request that they take care of the things they borrowed and put them back properly, but I didn't really offer consistent consequences—unless you count my exasperated nagging as a viable consequence. (I wouldn't, because it was a clearly ineffective consequence.)

Unfortunately, it isn't just the little things like borrowing without asking; it's the big stuff like irresponsibility, disrespect and laziness that I need to address more diligently too. This is my opportunity to show my children that I take my responsibility as mom seriously, that I desire to respect the Lord by raising His children well, and that I will be persistent in my efforts to train them.

Being a single mom, it's easy to make excuses for letting little things slide. But those silly little things become scary big things quite quickly. I've been experiencing that lately. By not training my children well in the little things, I have not equipped them well to deal with the big things.

So here I am, frustrated and a little bit fearful but ready to make some changes. Ready to jump into an altogether different

pond and push all my kids in too—whether they want to or not. A friend of mine keeps reminding me that sometimes the best things we can do for our children are the things they least want to do. Amen to that.

Praise God that He is the God of second chances—in life and parenting. I'm praying more diligently, seeking wise counsel more conscientiously, and holding to my convictions more solidly. But I also know that my strength to do those things is totally and completely rooted in Christ.

I know myself, and I'm tired, weak and exhausted. That's why God tells me, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matt. 11:28-30).

Ahhh ... rest, easy yoke, light burden. Why would I not accept that offer?

With God I know I can make changes in my life and the lives of my children. With God I know we can become a family that treats the blessing of each other and the material blessings we have with respect. I believe God is going to do great things in my family. I know He has faithfully shown me things that need to be dealt with, not because He wants to crush me with regret but because He wants to show me His love and grace as He restores our family.

That new pond? It's beautiful. There's even a Lifeguard who delights in watching us splash around together—in a line or not!

Lord, please give me the ability to lay my burden down and pick up Yours. I know I will be challenged daily and I will struggle, but Lord, You are faithful and loving and You will provide all that I need to meet each day with peace and joy.

I'm thankful that You show me what I need to work on, what needs to be done, but Lord I'm even more thankful that because of You, I am not measured or valued by what I accomplish in a day or how well I do anything.

I am Your daughter, and I am loved because You made me. Father, please help me raise my children well. Please enable me to be strong, consistent, gentle, loving and graceful with my children. Just like you are with me! In Jesus' name, amen.

Sue Birdseye is an author and single mom of five kids that range from 4 years old to 17 years old. This article is adapted from her blog, .

WATCH: After Drowning, Woman Encounters Angels in Visit to Heaven

Mary Neal drowned during a kayak accident. She describes an intimate experience with angels and heaven that may change your view of eternity.

Meet the Billy Graham of Iran

Not long after the Iran hostage crisis, the authorities arrested Hormoz Shariat's 16-year-old brother, Hamraz, on a

minor political charge. At the time, Hormoz was a new believer in America and was confident his brother, a political activist who had a small role with the Mujahedeen, would be released. But in 1984, after two years in jail, Shariat's brother was executed by a firing squad.

Shocked by the news of his brother's death, Shariat broke down crying, asking God why He let it happen. He felt anger toward God and the people who killed his brother. A few days later, Shariat told God he wanted revenge—but then he recalled the Bible's words that say, "Vengeance is Mine" (Deut. 32:35; Rom. 12:19). Shariat told God he hated those who had killed his brother—but then he remembered Jesus said anyone who is angry with their brother has already murdered them in their heart (Matt. 5:21-22).

He says he felt the Lord saying to him in prayer, "You know who your enemy is? These people—the clergy and the leaders of Iran—are not your enemy. They are lost children. You have only one enemy. Satan has been working to bring about this injustice. If you want to hurt Satan, evangelize. It hurts him really bad when you bring people to Christ."

As Shariat tells it, that's when he committed himself to sharing the gospel the rest of his life.

"I had a vision that by the end of my life I could bring 1 million Muslims to know Him," he says. "I also learned that God's love is the greatest power we have to stop Islam and help Muslim captives be free."

Visions of Jesus

In the three decades since Shariat set his resolve, this minister—dubbed "the Billy Graham of Iran" by *New York Times* best-selling author Joel C. Rosenberg—has not only watched that goal come to fruition, but has also been given a front-row seat to one of the most astonishing supernatural phenomenon in modern times: thousands of people in Iran and

throughout the Middle East reporting visitations of Jesus in dreams and visions.

“It’s amazing,” says Shariat, who founded the satellite broadcasting ministry Iran Alive Ministries in 2001. “God is graciously appearing to people in visions, dreams and through miracles. Sometimes they have dreams or visions of Jesus, run across our satellite television broadcast, hear the gospel, and then they believe. They may have, as children, had dreams or saw visions of Jesus. The vision or dream prepares them for the gospel. Other times they watch our program, ask if this is true or not, and then they have a dream or vision that confirms what they heard.”

Shariat believes the message is clear—that God is telling Christians in the West, “You look at them as terrorists who have no hope of salvation. Are you looking at them that way? I’m not. Look at Me. I’m appearing to them. I’m doing it Myself. Would you join Me to reach out to the Muslims?”

Rosenberg wrote about this phenomenon of dreams and visions in his book *Inside the Revolution*. “It’s an exciting development,” he says, “and it’s consistent with the Bible prophecies found in Joel 2, in which the Lord says in the last days He will pour our His Holy Spirit and people will see dreams and visions.”

Explosion of Faith

Since the hostage crisis ended in 1981, Rosenberg says the number of Christians in Iran has increased exponentially, from 500 to a conservative estimate of 1 million. Shariat, however, says the number may be far larger, noting that Iran—the world’s only theocracy, with 76 million residents—has the fastest-growing evangelical Christian population on the planet, according to the latest edition of Operation World’s manual. In fact, more Persians have come to Christ in the 35 years since the Islamic Revolution than in the prior 1,400

years combined—and most of these conversions have occurred in the past decade, as an estimated 62 million Iranians have gained access to the gospel message through satellite TV broadcasts.

“Some people put the number [of Christians in Iran] at 3 to 5 million,” says Shariat, who launched Network 7, Iran Alive’s 24/7 satellite broadcast network, into Iran, the Middle East, Northern Africa and Europe in January 2012. Shariat says it is hard to estimate how many have come to Christ through his broadcast because the phones are controlled and it is dangerous and expensive for Iranians to call the ministry.

“Nevertheless,” he says, “over the last 12 years of broadcasting, we have the names of over 27,000 people who have called us to pray to receive Christ or to indicate that they have done so through our broadcasts. Probably 10 times that many have made the same decision but did not dare to call us.”

The program has more than 100 million potential viewers, and Shariat estimates that at any given time, 3 to 6 million people are watching.

Hungry for Christianity

The remarkable growth of Christianity in a nation whose Islamic leaders are believed to be developing nuclear weapons and have called for the annihilation of Israel and America—labeling the U.S. as the “Great Satan” and Israel as the “Little Satan”—is certainly one of the most surprising developments in the Middle East in recent years.

While many factors play into what Rosenberg describes as a “historic spiritual awakening” in Iran, faith leaders say Shariat’s satellite broadcasts have played a key role. Rosenberg says, “Satellite television has been a game-changer in Iran, and Hormoz [Shariat] is at the forefront of that.”

“I see him operating in his anointing, and God is using him,”

agrees Kamil Navai, pastor of the Iranian Christian Church in Sunnyvale, Calif., a church Shariat co-founded with Navai and pastored for many years. "It's like David, with only one stone and a sling and taking on the giant of Islam."

David Cannistraci, pastor of GateWay City Church in San Jose, Calif., and a longtime friend of Shariat, says people in Iran are "very hungry for the faith" and that Shariat is the "single greatest hope for his nation in our day."

"As Hormoz has explained it to me," Cannistraci says, "people tend to think of Iranians through the filter of national news—crazy people in the streets calling for the death of America. But Hormoz points out that Islam is not Iran's original religion. Christianity pre-dated Islam in Iran, and the heart of the Iranian people is longing for freedom."

In fact, Islam didn't come into existence until the seventh century.

"Prior to that time, the gospel had made inroads into Iran," Cannistraci says. "They were invaded by the Muslims and forced at the point of a sword to take on Islam. Today they are very hungry for Christianity, and this is what explains the pent-up demand and hunger for Christian programming.

"So Hormoz has just stepped into an environment that is a spiritual vacuum. He's a man at the right place at the right time for such a time as this."

Simplicity of Faith

Shariat was born Sept. 9, 1955, into a Muslim family in Tehran, Iran. He grew up as a fairly devout Muslim but began to question his Islamic faith as a teen.

"I started thinking, 'What is this religion I'm following? I'm repeating these prayers, but it's not adding anything to my life. I'm not changed. I don't have peace. I don't have joy. I

don't even experience the presence of God,'" he recalls. "So I stopped doing it, and I focused on my studies and being a good person."

Shariat, along with his wife, Donnell, came to the U.S. following the Islamic Revolution in 1979 to earn his Ph.D. in computer engineering at the University of Southern California. The revolution reawakened his spiritual yearnings, and he began to read the Bible.

"I was struggling with every verse," Shariat says. "Who is this Jesus? At the time, my theory was that all religions were the same. But the more I studied the Quran and the Bible, the more I realized that both could not be true. They are so contradictory."

After struggling for a while with this dilemma, Shariat began attending the Church of the Open Door in downtown Los Angeles in 1980, famous for its huge "Jesus Saves" sign on the building.

"I went there to get my answers," Shariat says. "After a few weeks, I realized the message was simple: You believe the simple truth that you're a sinner and that God loves you. I read the Sermon on the Mount and learned that we're all sinners. The basic message of the gospel was very logical to me. I came to the point where I said I was going to try it. I said, 'Jesus, come into my heart and my life.'"

Satellite of Hope

After obtaining his Ph.D. in 1987, Shariat obtained employment in San Jose doing artificial intelligence research. He and his wife also felt led to start a house church, which began with just a few people but quickly grew to include hundreds of Muslim converts and now remains one of the largest churches of its kind in the U.S.

After planting more churches among Iranian Muslims in Northern

California, Shariat founded Iran Alive Ministries in 2001. Shortly after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, Shariat's first satellite broadcast program aired in Iran.

"From day one, the response was amazing," he says. "We were getting hundreds of phone calls. TV is a lifeline for Iranians. Christian television is not entertainment. This is their only source of hope."

Although satellite dishes are illegal in Iran, Shariat reports that more than 80 percent of Iranians have access to satellite television broadcasts.

"A friend of mine came back from Iran recently and showed me pictures of Bedouin tents with satellite dishes," he says. "They don't have running water, but they have a satellite dish with a generator. [It's] their only connection to the outside world."

In 2003, Shariat's ministry became involved in planting underground churches in Iran. In recent years, hundreds of house church leaders have been arrested, including American pastor Saeed Abedini, who's married to Shariat's niece, Naghmeh. Abedini, whose plight has gained international media attention, remains imprisoned in Iran's deadliest prison.

Shariat says that after several decades under the current regime, many Iranians are concluding Islam is not the answer. They see the regime as a problem and the reason for their miserable lives, and they're turning to Christianity despite severe government persecution.

"I've seen a new movement and a new mindset developing among Iranians, especially young people," he says. "I read more and more young people's blogs that are saying, 'If we want to have a future, we need to get rid of Islam.' I believe Islam is experiencing its greatest defeat in history. It's so wide and deep that it's irreversible."

Battle for Souls

This is where the connections to America's most beloved evangelist come in. Rosenberg says the impact Shariat is having on the Persian-speaking world is "evocative of how God used Billy Graham for much of the 20th century."

"The difference, of course, is that Billy Graham used stadiums as well as broadcast television and radio to preach the gospel, and Hormoz Shariat doesn't have access to stadiums in Iran," Rosenberg continues. "But through the miracle of global satellite television technology, he is able to broadcast the gospel in Farsi into Iranian homes in a way that allows him to bypass the Iranian government and Islamic religious system. That is an extraordinary development in the last decade and has really opened the doors for the gospel in unprecedented ways in such a closed country as Iran."

At this time, a cosmic, supernatural battle is underway for the souls of the Iranian people, Rosenberg says. Christ will win, but Satan is fighting very hard.

"That's my perception of what's happening," Rosenberg says, "and so what you have inside Iran is a conundrum. Iran's leadership is arguably the most evil and dangerous political leadership on the planet right now, feverishly trying to acquire operational nuclear warheads and the means to deliver those warheads against Israel and the U.S. Simultaneously, more Iranians are coming to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and in the process renouncing Islam than in any other time in the history of Islam. Those two truths are simultaneously operative in Iran, and it's a complicated and fascinating development."

Ironically, more Iranians are coming to faith in Christ than Israelis, yet Iran's leadership is preparing to try to annihilate Israel.

"I believe the prophecies of Ezekiel 38-39 and Jeremiah 49

indicate that a divine judgment of Iran's leadership is coming," Rosenberg says. "At the same time, I believe those prophecies indicate a great spiritual awakening and revival is coming to Iran as well."

The prophet Ezekiel foresaw the end-times war of Gog and Magog, a reference interpreted as an alliance between Russia, Iran and other nations to attack Israel. Furthermore, Rosenberg says the references in Jeremiah 49 to the wrath of God in Elam refer to modern-day Iran.

"I believe Iran is going to become arguably the greatest sending country of gospel-preaching missionaries the world has ever known in the not-too-distant future, based on the prophecies of Jeremiah 49 and Christ moving His spiritual throne there in the end times," he says. "It's an intriguing development, and that's why we as believers in the West need to be praying for our enemies in Iran, knowing that, yes, some are going to be judged, but some are going to come to faith and be used by Christ to preach the gospel all over the planet."

Shariat also believes Iran will become a largely Christian nation in the end times, making it Iran Alive's mission to transform Iran into a Christian nation in this generation.

"We believe this is a possibility," Shariat says. "This is already happening fast, and it's very possible. Christians in the West need to work together. If we are ready and work together, it's very likely in one generation—30 to 40 years—that we'll see Iran become a Christian nation."

He knows it cannot be done by the work of one person or ministry alone.

"There is a historical window of opportunity to impact Iran and the Middle East with the gospel," Shariat says. "It will not last forever. The task is greater than what one ministry can accomplish. We cannot do it alone. I am making a

Macedonian call to our brothers and sisters to join us to transform Iran and the Middle East with the gospel.”

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Watch a report at on Iran’s amazing revival that is seeing countless Muslims become followers of Jesus

Sen. Ted Cruz Blames Palestinians for Failed Peace Talks

U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz (R-TX), who may be considering a 2016 presidential run, on a visit to Israel this week blasted the Palestinians for derailing the peace talks.

Cruz, who met with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and other senior Israeli officials on Sunday, said the Palestinians are to blame for the talks’ collapse for refusing to recognize Israel as a Jewish state and renouncing terrorism.

“The principal impediment to peace is that, to date, the Palestinians have refused to recognize Israel’s right to exist as a Jewish state and have refused to renounce terror,” Cruz

told The Jerusalem Post.

Cruz also criticized U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry for using the term “apartheid” when discussing Israel’s possible future if peace talks fail.

“Those words will be repeated by enemies of Israel, by Hamas and Hezbollah and Iran, and all of them will say, ‘This is not our characterization, these are the words of the U.S. secretary of state,’” Cruz said.

For the original article, visit .

How to Raise a Pagan Kid in a Christian Home

Every imperfect and normal family wants their kids to turn out right. So, we establish goals for character development and try to create an environment where our kids can mature. Church, school, sports teams, family relationships... each of these provides a context where our kids can learn to “love your neighbor as yourself.”

Unfortunately, our “good” objectives might have absolutely nothing to do with the gospel of Jesus Christ. And we inadvertently end up raising pagans instead of Christians.

Too many times, (Christian) parents have it as their goal to make their kids good and moral. It is as if the entire purpose of their family’s spiritual life is to shape their children

into law-abiding citizens who stay out of trouble. The only problem with this goal is that it runs in stark contrast to what the Bible teaches. The gospel is not about making bad people moral, but about making dead people alive. If we teach morality without the transforming power of the gospel and the necessity of a life fully surrendered to God's will, then we are raising moral pagans.

We end up teaching the wrong thing because we have the wrong objectives.

This sentiment was stirred in me afresh when I read an interview with VeggieTales creator Phil Vischer. He was reflecting on how the "Christian message" he was trying to teach wasn't Christianity at all...

"I looked back at the previous 10 years and realized I had spent 10 years trying to convince kids to behave Christianly without actually teaching them Christianity. And that was a pretty serious conviction. You can say, "Hey kids, be more forgiving because the Bible says so," or "Hey kids, be more kind because the Bible says so!" But that isn't Christianity, it's morality...

"And that was such a huge shift for me from the American Christian ideal. We're drinking a cocktail that's a mix of the Protestant work ethic, the American dream, and the gospel. And we've intertwined them so completely that we can't tell them apart anymore. Our gospel has become a gospel of following your dreams and being good so God will make all your dreams come true. It's the Oprah god."

So what is your objective?

Do you teach your kids "be good because the Bible tells you to" or do you teach your kids that they will never be good without Christ's offer of grace? There is a huge difference. One leads to moralism; the other leads to brokenness. One

leads to self-righteousness; the other leads to a life that realizes that Christ is everything and that nothing else matters.

I want my kids to be good. We all do. But as our kids grow up, the truth of the gospel can easily get lost somewhere between salvation (where we know we need Jesus) and living life (where we tend to say "I've got this"). My experience is that the vast majority of parents are encouraging moral behavior in their kids so that God will bless their (usually self-centered) pursuits. It's the American Dream plus Jesus. And it produces good, moral pagans.

Consider the key objectives you have for your kids. Seriously, take a minute to think about what would deem you a successful parent. If your goals are focused on your kids' behavior, their happiness, or their accomplishments (but don't include a dependence upon Christ and a submission to His will and work), then you might want to make some adjustments.

Because the world has enough pagans. Even plenty of really nice ones. What we need is kids who fully grasp the reality that they have nothing to offer, but who intimately know a God who has everything they need.

*I have added a follow-up post that offer some suggestions of How to Guide Your Kid to a Faith That Lasts. I hope it's helpful!

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The Root of Deception in the American Church

It is the betrayal of the wisdom and power of God, and stands in direct contradiction to the gospel of Jesus Christ and to Christianity. It's been around for thousands of years, before creation as a matter of fact. It was born from rebellion in the heart of Lucifer before the creation of man, and in the same way it deceived Eve, it is at the root of all deception. It's humanism.

"How you are fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! How you are cut down to the ground, you who weakened the nations! For you have said in your heart: '**I will** ascend into heaven, **I will** exalt my throne above the stars of God; **I will** also sit on the mount of the congregation on the farthest sides of the north; **I will** ascend above the heights of the clouds, **I will** be like the Most High.' Yet you shall be brought down to Sheol to the lowest depths of the Pit. Those who see you will gaze at you, and consider you, saying: 'Is this the man who made the earth tremble, who shook kingdoms, who made the world as a wilderness and destroyed its cities, who did not open the house of his prisoners?'" (Is. 14:12-17)

Lucifer asserted his own will above God's will. He deified himself to be as God. Then after his fall from heaven he subtly disseminated his humanistic philosophy, the ascension and exaltation of self, into Eve's ears.

"The serpent was more cunning than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made. And he said to the woman, "**Has God indeed said**, 'you shall not eat of every tree of the garden?'" And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat the fruit of the trees of the garden; but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God has said, 'You shall

not eat it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die?'" Then the serpent said to the woman, "**You will not surely die.** For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened **and you will be like God**, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:1-5).

Notice how Lucifer, now Satan, deceived Eve. He made her doubt the Word of God by making these three core statements:

"Has God really said not to eat of every tree of the garden?"

"You will not surely die."

"You will be like God."

Therein those three statements lay the deification of man.

First, Eve began to doubt the absolute authority of the Word of God. Unless the Bible becomes the basis and authority of our total belief system we will give place to lies, heresies and doctrines of demons. Satan asked Eve a question that amounted to: "Did God really mean what He said?" That subtle questioning of God's Word then turned into a bold contradiction of it: "You will not surely die." And finally, it ended with a false promise: "You will be like God."

It was when Adam and Eve acted on Satan's subtle suggestion that sin was birthed. Then with sin came sickness, disease, poverty, hatred, strife, suffering and death. It all began in Lucifer's heart, and then was injected into God's first creation, before being passed on throughout every generation.

We need to understand the spirit or the heart of man. In the center of every human heart there is a throne. This throne is always occupied by either of two aspirants: God or self. When God is enthroned by the human heart and will, then man is positioned correctly under God's authority. When self is enthroned then God becomes dethroned, and man lives independently of God and becomes his own master, a god unto himself. He establishes the standards of his own happiness and

interprets them. This is the deification of man, and it is what Satan offered Eve and what he offers every human being. The Bible correctly calls this self-enthronement godlessness (Rom 1).

The gospel of Jesus Christ is one of self-denial.

“If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me” (Matt. 16:24).

Self-denial is the giving up and surrender of every part of you to God. The real gospel brings man under the total possession of the Lord Jesus Christ. Man has a natural aversion to denying himself, and any gospel that caters to this aversion is another gospel.

Let's look at the account of the rich young ruler and see a demonstration of this aspect of the gospel.

“Now as He was going out on the road, one came running, knelt before Him, and asked Him, ‘Good Teacher, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?’ So Jesus said to him, ‘Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God. You know the commandments: “Do not commit adultery,” “Do not murder,” “Do not steal,” “Do not bear false witness,” “Do not defraud,” “Honor your father and your mother.” ‘ And he answered and said to Him, ‘Teacher, all these things I have kept from my youth.’ Then Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, ‘One thing you lack: Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross, and follow Me.’ But he was sad at this word, and went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions” (Mark 10:17-22).

This young man was not a casual seeker like so many are today, but was very earnest and sincere. He *ran* to Jesus and *knelt* before Him to inquire of how to obtain this great salvation. Did you notice that when Jesus quoted the Ten Commandments He

purposely left out four of them? The commandments He quoted all had to do with the man's relationship to other people, while the four He omitted were in respect to his relationship to God. According to Jesus, that is where this man fell short. That is also the reason Jesus did not acknowledge the "Good Teacher" greeting, but instead pointed the man to God. In other words, Jesus is saying to the rich man, "Since you don't believe I am God why do you call me good? Only God is good." This rich man needed to be made aware that it was his relationship to God that lacked. His love for riches stood between him and God. In fact, his wealth had become his god. Self was on the throne.

The way to be delivered and set free from the greed and covetousness that was in this man's heart was for him to sell everything he had and give it to the poor. Then in doing so, he would not only have treasure in heaven, but he could then take up his cross and follow Jesus. But the rich man just wouldn't do it. He went away sad. The philosophy of humanism is to make man happy, but the gospel can actually make a man sad until he gets off his throne and surrenders.

Jesus let this man walk away. He did not go after him. He did not change, alter, or modify the gospel for this man as is commonly done today. He understood that self and God could not jointly rule in this man's heart. Man cannot serve two masters. It was one or the other. There was no negotiation. Today our modern gospel is so different. We have modified the gospel to suit man's love for sin and self.

This is the root of our deception in the American church today.

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Are You Fulfilling Your Purpose in Life?

God loves you and He has a plan for your life. You are a wonderful creation made by God and you have a unique purpose to fulfill in this world. Ephesians 2:10 (AMP) says that as Christians, “we are God’s [own] handiwork (His workmanship), recreated in Christ Jesus, [born anew] that we may do those good works which God predestined (planned beforehand) for us [taking paths which He prepared ahead of time], that we should walk in them [living the good life which He prearranged and made ready for us to live].”

It’s so exciting to know we are each created with a purpose and God has a good life that He has prepared in advance for us to live. But it’s important to understand that we have an enemy, Satan, who wants to keep us from having the life Jesus died to give us. Satan has a plan for us, too, and his plan is destruction and death. John 10:10 (AMP) says the enemy “comes only in order to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have and enjoy life, and have it in abundance (to the full, till it overflows).”

The good news is we have everything we need through Christ to overcome the enemy. We just have to know who we are in Christ, believe that we have His authority, and know how to release the power God has given us.

The Measure of Your Faith

Faith in God is required for us to release the power and authority we have in Christ. Romans 12:3 (NASB) says, “...God has allotted to each a measure of faith.” This means God has given you enough faith to do His will, whatever it may be and

no matter what the enemy throws at you to stop you.

There are many challenges and difficult situations we have to face in life. You may have a child with special needs to care for, or maybe you're in a difficult marriage. You could be facing a devastating illness or have serious financial problems. Whatever your situation is, God has given you everything you need, through Christ, to keep you moving forward in His plan for your life.

We need to always remember that God is greater than our problems—nothing is too hard for Him and nothing catches Him by surprise. When we're going through hard times and the enemy is attacking us, we don't need to ask, "What can I do?" The question is, "What can *God* do?" The Word says all things are possible with God, and greater is He who lives in me than he who is in the world. (See Matthew 19:26 and 1 John 4:4.)

I want you to really get this in your heart today: In Christ, you have enough faith and the strength you need to do whatever you need to do in life! (See Philippians 4:13.) Get rid of "I can't" thinking and focus on the truth of God's Word, which says, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me!"

The Simple Solution to Overcome Enemy Attack

Prayer is a simple, powerful way to interrupt Satan's plan because we release our faith through prayer. We need to learn to pray our way through the day; 1 Thessalonians 5:17 (AMP) says, "Be unceasing in prayer [praying perseveringly]." This basically means prayer can be as natural as breathing, and our first response in every situation. It's so amazing that we can talk to God all the time, in every situation.

Now the enemy doesn't want us to pray, so he will do everything he can to discourage us. He wants us to think prayer is hard, that we need to use eloquent speech and sound poetic, that we need to be careful what we ask God for so we don't overload Him with too many requests, or that we have to

be in a certain place with a certain posture (on our knees, head bowed, eyes closed) for God to hear us. But it's actually simple to pray effectively.

James 5:16 (AMP) says, "...The earnest (heartfelt, continued) prayer of a righteous man makes tremendous power available [dynamic in its working]." God wants you to come to Him honestly, with a sincere heart, and just talk to Him as a friend. Be yourself and don't approach conversation with God as a religious activity. Humble yourself before Him and open your heart to Him. He loves you and wants you to walk in His will for your life victoriously.

As a believer in Jesus Christ, you are God's child and He is with you. He will never leave you or forsake you. He is the Almighty God, and if God is for you, if He is on your side, who can be against you? In Christ, you have what you need today to live in victory. All you need to do is believe it and do what God is showing you to do in His Word and as He speaks to your heart. Put your faith in God constantly. Pray, take God-inspired action, and fulfill your true purpose in life!

Reinhard Bonnke Searching for People Who 'Pray and Weep for the Salvation of America'

Few of us know what we want to be at the age of 9, but evangelist Reinhard Bonnke is one of the exceptions. The German evangelist, who has preached in front of crowds exceeding 1.6 million in Africa, says it was at that tender age that he got his calling to be a missionary.

Now, after 35 years and preaching in front of more than 74 million people, Bonnke is bringing his message, "American Shall be Saved," to the United States. His gospel crusade will bring his message from the Lord to Miami, Greensboro, Long Island, Houston, and Pittsburgh.

"Evangelism must always lead into the church," Bonnke says. "This is a central truth I have practiced everywhere. I, the evangelist, bring my nets and borrow the boats of the local churches. Together we will cast our nets into the human ocean and pull them in to be emptied on the beach. My promise to you is not to take a single fish but to leave them all with the local churches. Then I will dry and mend my nets and move to the next place."

Bonnke's next stop is Miami, where he will preach to a crowd at the American Airlines arena on July 18-19. Over 200 churches across racial, denominational, cultural and even linguistic barriers have joined forces to help Bonnke witness Jesus to South Florida.

Ordained in 1964, Bonnke first started working as a missionary in Africa at the age of 27. His first fellowship meeting in Lesotho attracted 100 people, but his audiences quickly grew until they filled an entire stadium. During the 1980s, he preached to crowds of 75,000 in Cape Town and 150,000 in Malawi, eventually peaking at 1.6 million at a crusade in 2000 in Lagos, Nigeria. In 2001, Bonnke moved to the United States after he saw the need to do similar work here, and in 2013 he moved to Singer Island.

"I am scanning the skies for men and women who pray and weep for the salvation of America. As Bill Bright used to say, 'Let's leave our logos and egos.' Let's rally at the foot of the cross of Calvary and preach the Gospel of salvation to the nation," Bonnke says. "The Holy Spirit will cooperate. God is pouring out His Spirit with glorious indifference to our differences! He said, 'I will pour out of my Spirit on all

flesh.' And it seems to me He pours Himself into the mold of any vessel."

The Secret to Holy Sexuality

No words in the English language could possibly describe the look of panic on my mom's face as she pulled into the driveway to witness 5-year-old me standing barefoot in the dew-covered grass, holding a fallen electrical line in my tiny hand. I'd been watching *Sesame Street* when suddenly the TV went dead, along with all of the lights in the house. I went outside to ask my dad to investigate but stumbled upon a potential explanation when I saw the severed black cord lying limp on the front lawn. So I picked it up, as if somehow I could reconnect it to its power source and restore everything to the way it was supposed to be—and amazingly, I lived to tell about it.

In many ways this article is my attempt to do something similar—to reconnect us, the body of Christ, to our original Power Source, particularly to restore energy, passion and creative freedom in the marriage bed. Hopefully I'll get better results this time (and avoid any shocked facial expressions in the process!).

Is there any real connection between our sexuality and spirituality? Is there a direct connection between our bodies and our spirits? What happens if we sever the connection God intended through addiction or ignorance, or if it's severed through abuse or trauma inflicted upon us?

The Energy Equation

First, let's think of our spirit as being the energy we're

given as humans who are made in the image of God. Let's think of our bodies as the conduit through which that energy flows. Without the conduit (the body), there would be no way for us to experience that energy and let it flow from ourselves to another human being. But without the energy (the spirit), our bodies alone can't muster the deep human connection we naturally crave.

Oh, many try. They find human outlets for their warped physical sexual desires, which can lead to manipulative seduction, child molestation, sexual abuse, sexual addiction, prostitution and human trafficking, to name just a few. It wears all kinds of ugly masks.

But sharing a physical connection with someone with whom we also share a strong spiritual and emotional bond—that's something else entirely. That's pure love, romance, passion, intimacy, ecstasy. When we're expressing our sexuality in the way our Designer intended, there is an enormous and undeniably powerful connection between our sexuality and our spirituality. Like two sides of the same coin, body and spirit are intertwined.

So, since we can't separate body from spirit or sexuality from spirituality, how about looking to see what we can learn from fully integrating and celebrating the synergy between the two?

A Most Shocking Question

"How is our relationship with God *sexual*?"

This was the question a professor posed to our small group in a human sexuality class at Liberty University. Translation: What does our spiritual relationship with God have in common with our sexual relationship with our mate?

Here are just a few answers that surfaced during this lively discussion, as we discovered both relationships have deep levels of:

- Trust
- Full acceptance
- Closeness
- Openness
- Risk
- Purpose
- Euphoria
- Vulnerability
- Connection
- Honesty
- Intimacy
- Pleasure
- Completion
- Genuine interest
- True communion
- Life-giving transference
- Humility
- Passion
- Transcendence
- Synergy

Given that there are so many more possible answers to the question, perhaps there's a greater connection between spirituality and sexuality that we've ever fathomed!

When we pause to really ponder it, we have to admit it's quite fascinating that God would create us both in His image *and* as sexual beings—simultaneously. It's easy to wonder why God made us this way. Did He design sexuality as a burden or a blessing?

You be the judge. What else in all of creation can:

- Comfort you when you're sad?
- Calm you when you're anxious?
- Provide an outlet for expression when you're excited?
- Relieve boredom?
- Help you forget your current trials and tribulations?

- Make you sleep better?
- Provide intense, guilt-free pleasure?
- Help you feel deeply connected to another human being *and* to God?
- Erase feelings of loneliness and isolation?
- Give you an interesting break from your daily routine?
- Relieve stress and even certain aches and pains?
- Enhance your overall health and vitality?
- Fulfill your hopes and dreams of parenthood?
- Rev your engine, float your boat and light your fire?
- Send sparks through your brain and shivers down your spine?
- Make you feel so giddy, so special, so cherished and so celebrated?

Only sex can do all that—and it does all that quite well!

So, what was God thinking when He created sex? I believe He was thinking, “I’m going to make their day ... and their nights too!”

Seeing and Celebrating God

I also think God created sexual intimacy to provide us with a peek into His own character and nature. As we understand our sexuality more fully, we understand God more fully and vice versa. Here are a couple things we learn about God through our sexuality:

1) He gets giddy when He has our attention. A coaching client once asked me, “Why did God create us in such a way that we have physiological responses to our emotions? When I’m attracted to someone, why do I get butterflies in my stomach, sweaty palms and a racing heart? Why do I get all giddy?”

At first I responded, “I have no idea!” But then it was like God opened my brain and poured the answer in, like liquid Drano to unclog my thoughts. He said, “Shannon, I created humans to respond to love like that so they’d know how I feel

when they turn their hearts and attention toward Me.”

I sat there, blown away, for a few seconds. When I shared the epiphany with my client, she was blown away too. The God of the universe gets giddy over us when we turn toward Him? Yes, He does. And He’s given you a glimpse into that fact through the thoughts and feelings you have toward the object of your affection (your spouse).

2) He’s giving us a foretaste of heaven. One day I was contemplating why God designed the human body to feel such intense pleasure when we experience the height of the sexual experience. Seriously, sex feels plenty good while it’s happening, and it creates beautiful babies and bonds a couple in extraordinary ways. So why give us such a stunningly ripe cherry on top?

Just like a fun game of peek-a-boo, our heavenly Father gives us through this peak of pleasure just a glimpse of the “big finale” we face ahead in heaven.

I mean, let’s think about it. Is there any moment in existence when we feel a more primordial delight, a greater loss of control (in a good way) or a greater sense of absolute euphoria than in those sacred moments of extreme, intense pleasure? I can’t help but believe when Christ returns for us someday and ushers us into our heavenly home, the intensity of the heavenly pleasure we encounter is going to be even more mind-blowing and soul-stirring than the most amazing orgasmic experience we’ve ever had. The joy and delight of sexual intimacy is merely a foretaste of the intimacies and ecstasies that await us there!

Letting Go of Sexual Legalism

While God intended our sexuality to be fully enjoyed in the context He provided, it’s unfortunate that the church has historically focused on fear-inducing sex-negative messages instead of empowering sex-positive messages. As a result, many

walk on sexual eggshells. Some Christians have even opted out of sexual intimacy for the most part. They fear displeasing God with any sexual thought, feeling or action.

But does a married couple thoroughly enjoying sex without any guilt, shame or inhibition displease God? Does He roll His eyes in disgust? Absolutely not! I believe a couple delighting in the gift of one another's bodies brings our heavenly Father great joy, like a parent watching a beloved child excitedly open presents on Christmas morning.

Do you know what *does* upset God? The same thing that upset Jesus: legalistic religious people putting words in God's mouth and spiritual burdens on people's backs that He never meant for them to carry.

While I can't speak directly for God or Jesus, I, too, get pretty upset when I hear things from within the Christian community that sound a little something like sexual legalism—things such as “Women shouldn't wear sexy lingerie for their husbands or else it will awaken their appetite to look at pornography” or “The missionary position is the only holy way for a married couple to have sex” or “Oral sex is animalistic behavior” or “A man shouldn't expect his wife to have sex more than once a week or else she'll feel put upon.” When I hear comments such as these, I can't help but think, *Wow! I don't recall reading that anywhere in my Bible!*

These views and sentiments may be well-intentioned and may come from very sincere Christians who deeply love the Lord, but one can be truly sincere yet still sincerely wrong. I believe this might be one of the reasons the world doesn't look to the church as a source of real wisdom when it comes to sexual matters.

If we are ever going to re-establish Christians as authorities on the topic of healthy sexuality, we must move beyond our sexual and religious baggage, study Scripture carefully and

proclaim that a married couple's chosen sexual repertoire is entirely between the husband, the wife and God. Barring any sexual activities specifically forbidden in Scripture (such as adultery or prostitution), there is complete freedom in the marriage bed to mutually experiment, explore and enjoy all of the many wonders of human sexuality.

The Power of a Clean Slate

My guess is that some are reading this and thinking, *How can sex be a sacred activity when it's the motivation behind so much evil in the world?*

I can understand that concern. It's true that sex used for any purpose other than marital bonding is incredibly degrading and destructive. Some of us have been victims of rape or other forms of sexual abuse. Others of us have been harmed by the proliferation of pornography in our image-driven society, perhaps learning of a spouse's addiction and feeling at a loss and to blame for their addiction in some way.

Let me say this: *You are not to blame for someone else's sexual wrongdoing.* The other person is responsible before God for their actions, and they are also responsible for taking the appropriate actions to be made well. God's real heart toward you is to heal you for the ways another person's actions did you harm. I urge you to seek shelter in the comforting arms of the God who loves and cherishes everything about you and longs for you to experience your sexuality in the whole and fulfilling way He intended for you.

What about those of us who weren't victims of another person's cruelty but rather players in a story not reflective of God's best? Premarital sexual activity, for instance, can do a lot of relational damage, and that damage often doesn't surface until long after the honeymoon phase is over. Many Christians bemoan the fact that they still struggle with guilt over premarital sexual involvement years or even decades later or

that they still hold a grudge against their spouse because they feel they were manipulated, coerced or taken advantage of while dating.

If that's you, you can begin the sexual healing process by initiating two small steps:

- 1) Take responsibility for your part in the dance of sexual dysfunction.
- 2) Start with a clean slate by forgiving yourself and your mate completely.

During one of my Women at the Well intensive workshops, a wife was mourning the loss of her virginity prior to marriage. Eventually, I compassionately asked, "Did he hold a gun to your head?"

She was shocked at the question but sat with it just long enough for something to click in her brain. The hard lines on her face melted as she looked me and courageously declared, "No. No, he didn't."

I could tell it was a much-needed "Aha!" moment for her, as I thought she might stand up afterward and shout, "Hooray! I don't have to play the victim anymore!" In truth, the responsibility was on *both* their shoulders, not just his. She could have said no just as easily as he could have.

Unless we are being forcefully raped, we always have a say in the matter. Perhaps we said no with our words but our reciprocal and responsive actions spoke louder in the heat of the moment. We must own up to the power we willingly surrendered and give up the victim mentality. It serves no good purpose.

When we recognize we weren't victims but rather initially reluctant yet ultimately willing partners, forgiveness is no longer a one-way street. It becomes a two-lane highway.

It's amazing how much easier it is to forgive another person

when we realize how much we ourselves are in need of forgiveness for the exact same infraction. Throwing a stone isn't something we're as eager to do when we realize just how much we belong in the middle of the stone-throwing circle.

The Power of Prayer

If there's such a powerful connection between our sexuality and our spirituality, perhaps investing a little more spiritual energy in preparing for sexual encounters is a wise move.

Would you like to guess what my husband and I have found to be the *best* aphrodisiac available? Prayer! When we snuggle up together and hold each other, then pour out our hearts to God on behalf of one another, it creates such an intense bond. In fact, it's sometimes impossible to just roll over and go to sleep. We can't help but want to follow the "Amen" with a whole lot of good lovin'!

Go ahead—give it a try tonight, and see if drawing closer to God doesn't draw you incredibly closer to one another!

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Watch Shannon Ethridge explain why God made you a sexual being and how to embrace His divine purpose for this at