

# What if Somebody Had Shared Jesus With the Orlando Killer?

America has been in mourning for days. We've cried for the 49 victims of the senseless Orlando shooting. We've prayed for the families and friends of the innocent people who died in the Pulse nightclub, and the 53 others who were wounded in the massacre. We've shaken our heads in disbelief that the deadliest terrorist attack since 9/11 occurred in a nice town known for its theme parks, palm trees, and carefree attitude.

We've also listened to countless theories about why Omar Seddique Mateen, the 29-year-old Muslim-American assailant, would walk into a gay nightclub and mow down people with an assault rifle.

At first, news reports focused on the fact that Mateen was a Muslim, of Afghan heritage, and that he called 911 during the shooting and acknowledged allegiance to the Islamic State. FBI officials theorized that he was a "lone wolf" terrorist who was radicalized by reading articles about ISIS.

But after two days, other facts surfaced about Mateen's complicated life. Now, it has become apparent that he may have actually been a gay man who was deeply conflicted about his sexuality. *The Palm Beach Post* released a story this week claiming that Mateen had visited the Pulse nightclub a dozen times and that he set up profiles on gay dating sites.

Mateen's first wife, who left him after he abused her, told the *New York Times* that she believed he was gay. A male classmate of Mateen's said Mateen tried to pick him up at a bar in south Florida. At least four regular patrons of the Pulse nightclub said Mateen was a frequent customer for many years, and that he often sat in a corner and drank heavily.

Why would a Muslim man frequent the same gay bar for years and then open fire on dozens of unsuspecting people with an assault rifle? Was he mad at homosexuals? Was he troubled that his sexuality conflicted with his Muslim heritage? Had he been jilted by a boyfriend at the club and then vented his anger on everyone there?

We may never know what was going on in the mind of Omar Mateen. He's gone, and he took 49 others with him.

Much of the national discussion today is about how we can prevent these horrific massacres. The Orlando attack marks the 24th mass shooting in the United States since President Obama has been in office, and I'm sure he is weary of having to console the country in a speech—especially when words seem powerless to change anything.

When I think about the Orlando tragedy, I can't help but wonder what might have changed if a loving, caring Christian had befriended Mateen and led him to Christ. I have lived in Orlando for 24 years. It is possible that I have even passed this man in a store or sat near him in a restaurant.

He lived his entire life in the United States, first in New York and then in central Florida. He worked as a security guard. Did he ever meet a Christian? Did any Christian ever show him kindness or offer to share the gospel with him?

When I first began following Jesus seriously, I was challenged to be bold about sharing my faith with others. I tried not to be obnoxious, but I believed Christians have a serious responsibility to talk about Christ everywhere we go, without fear.

When I was a college student, I prayed every day for “divine appointments”—special, God-ordained opportunities to share Jesus with strangers or friends. I also prayed for supernatural boldness to speak to people about God. I even worked up the courage to walk into a bar and share my faith

with a man sitting at the counter.

Today I don't hear many Christians talking about radical evangelism. Most believers keep their faith to themselves—we hide it under our bushels until we get to church where we don't have to worry about what unbelievers think about us.

But Jesus called us to be aggressively evangelistic. He said: "You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do men light a candle and put it under a basket, but on a candlestick. And it gives light to all who are in the house" (Matt. 5:14-16, MEV). Today I'm concerned that our light has dimmed and our salt has lost its savor.

It's too late to reach Omar Mateen. But it's not too late for us to begin preaching the message that has the power to transform a troubled potential killer into a peaceful, law-abiding citizen. Please pray today, and every day, that God will direct people into your path so you can give them the words of the Savior. {eoa}

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## **4 Promises That Will Carry You Through Any Crisis**

I've spent the past week sitting by my father's bed in a hospital in Georgia. He fell while doing yard work (no 89-year-old man should be trimming weeds) and he hit his head on the concrete walkway behind his house. He has a fractured rib, 12 stitches in the back of his head and two bruises on his brain.

After a week, he still has no idea where he is.

On Monday, he said my name. On Tuesday, when I asked him the name of his church, he answered correctly. But when a nurse asked him who I was, he told her I was his grandson.

We don't know what the next day holds for my dad, or the next month. Hundreds of people are praying for his healing, and there are signs that his motor skills and brain function are slowly coming back online. But whether he pulls out of this and goes back to driving his car, or whether he ends up in months of rehab, or if he dies, I've had to face the reality that we all get old, life is terribly fragile and death is inevitable.

We don't do a good job preparing people for death and dying. I never had a class on it in school. We rarely even talk about it in church until someone has a funeral. It's easy to develop a notion that life goes on and that we will never get old.

Yet the Bible doesn't dance around the topic of death. In Genesis, the word "death," "die" or "died" appear 68 times. It reminds us: "And Adam died," "And Abraham died," "And Isaac died." One entire chapter, Genesis 23, is devoted to the death and burial of Sarah. On and on it goes, like the somber toll of a bell. Death is a cold, dreary specter that is an undeniable part of our existence on this side of eternity.

King David talked about walking "in the valley of the shadow of death" (Ps. 23:4a). He could write those words because he faced life-and-death crisis regularly. Only those who have lost a loved one or cared for a sick person know how tangible that shadow of death really is. It weighs on us like a thick fog. It makes us feel lost and alone.

I have felt that fog this past week. I felt it when I had to restrain my dad from pulling out his IV tube. I felt it when I asked him a simple question and got a blank stare. I felt it when I heard another patient in the hospital scream in pain.

Yet David was sustained in that dark season. He was not

overcome. He wrote: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me" (v. 4). We have the promise of His presence no matter what is going on around us.

If you are walking through the valley right now because of a death, an accident, a serious medical condition, a financial crisis, the loss of a job or any other tragedy, stand on God's immovable promises and let His words bring security to your soul. These four promises have meant the most to me during the past seven days:

**Nahum 1:7 says, "The Lord is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble, and He knows those who take refuge in Him."**

"God is good, all the time," has become a religious cliché. But it is a powerful truth if you let the words sink in. When we walk through dark times we are tempted to doubt God's goodness. Don't let the devil accuse God of abandoning you; run into the Lord's strong arms and let Him remind you of His faithful care.

**John 16:33 says, "These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world."**

It does not matter what the world throws at you. Jesus said we would face trials and tests, but those words are followed by a comma, not a period. He calls us to face our difficulties with faith. He has already overcome every possible problem we could face. Knowing this will give you supernatural peace.

**Philippians 4:6-7 says, "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."**

When we face a crisis, our first reaction is to worry. But the

antidote to worry is prayer. Share your fears and anxious thoughts with Jesus and let His peace override them. His peace will shield you from the darkness of despair.

**John 11:25-26 says, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die."** This is the ultimate source of all our joy.

Death is not final when the person who dies is a Christian. Jesus removed the sting of death; it has been swallowed up in Christ's ultimate victory. Don't let death or the threat of death steal your hope.

Let God's promises guide you like signal lights through your dark valley. The future is bright on the other side.

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## **Still Single? Ask These Questions Before You Say 'I Do'**

Last year, I had the privilege of performing the wedding of a Russian-speaking couple in Seattle. I met Roman when I was teaching at a ministry school two years ago, and he has traveled with me on a missionary trip to Peru. When he got engaged to his girlfriend, Ina, he asked me to do the honors—and I was thrilled to be a part of their big day. The celebration ended with a Ukrainian feast for 300 people!

Like many Slavic Christian immigrants, Roman and Ina got married young. Roman turned 21 only a week after his wedding, and Ina is only 18. Yet they are incredibly mature and

responsible for their age. When I did premarital counseling with them (I have a conviction that I won't marry anyone without doing basic counseling) I was amazed to see how ready they were to embrace a lifelong marriage covenant.

But not every Christian who is old enough to get married is actually ready to tie the knot. And if you aren't ready, the worst thing you can do is rush to the altar. When I talk to singles about their desire to get married, I always ask if they have gone through this simple checklist. You can also share this with single friends who are eager to tie the knot:

**Have you fully surrendered your life to Jesus?** You can't build a strong marriage on romance, sexual passion or feelings alone. Your marriage will be weak if you are weak spiritually—and the same is true if your partner is not wholeheartedly sold out to God. You are taking a huge risk if you get married when your spiritual life is not healthy.

**Do you get along with others?** If you have a history of broken relationships and continual drama, don't expect marriage to be any different. You need to get control of your anger, jealousy, pouting sessions and pity parties now, not after you commit to live the rest of your life with your spouse.

**How have you and your partner handled conflict?** All couples have arguments. But if you are having shouting matches and continual disagreements before your wedding, you are asking for trouble. And if there has been any form of physical or verbal abuse, call things off immediately and get counseling.

**Have you been open about your past?** Marriage is about intimacy. But you will never experience this gift if you can't be transparent about your faults and struggles. If you hide your pain behind a mask, you will bring that pain into the marriage and it will eventually hurt your spouse. Whether you deal with depression, addiction or some form of sexual brokenness, get as much healing as you can before marriage.

**Do you trust your partner's past?** Don't rush into a marriage if you feel unsure about your partner's history—especially if he or she has been married before. It's OK to ask lots of questions. Get all the cards on the table. You don't want to wake up after the honeymoon and learn that your Dr. Jekyll has become a Mr. Hyde.

**Are you planning a life together, or just a wedding ceremony?** Too many couples today are in love with the idea of marriage, but they haven't thought beyond the honeymoon. If you are obsessing over cakes, flowers and the guest list, get your priorities straight. You don't want to spend \$25,000 on a wedding and then watch it disintegrate after one year.

**Are you financially responsible?** You don't have to have boatloads of money to be a happy couple. But if you have not planned how to pay your bills, financial stress will choke your marriage. Be wise. Many couples today have not even learned how to manage a bank account, create a budget or save money. Find a mentor if your parents didn't teach you the basics of life management.

**How does your family and your partner's family feel about this marriage?** There's no guarantee that all parents will be happy with your choices. But if there are major conflicts in the extended family, you may need to assess whether this is a wise decision. Romeo and Juliet loved each other, but their story ended in tragedy because of their parents' attitudes. Seek pastoral support if family members are trying to stir up conflict.

**Do you and your partner have similar goals and dreams?** You don't have to like the same movies or prefer the same kinds of foods. But when God puts two people together, they support each other's dreams. This is especially true when it comes to expectations about children. If your spouse doesn't want kids, and you do, don't assume this will just "work out." If you are a woman who wants a career and your fiancée prefers you to

stay home, it's time to reevaluate.

**Do you and your partner pray together?** This is a perfect way to tell if you are spiritually compatible with your partner. If you feel a deep level of spiritual intimacy when you pray with your fiancée, that's a good sign God is putting you together. But if your partner isn't interested in growing spiritually with you, take that as a hint to look elsewhere. When God brings a man and woman together, they should become one in every way.

*J. Lee Grady is the former editor of Charisma. You can follow him on Twitter @leegrady. You can learn more about his ministry, The Mordecai Project, at . His work to protect women from abuse was featured in the March issue of Charisma.*

Please consider donating to *The Mordecai Project, India*, and help put a stop to the horrific atrocities women in India face daily. To donate, visit .

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## 6 Dangerous People Who Could Hurt Your Church

For more than 2,000 years the church has survived wars, persecution, heresies, tyrants, charlatans, false prophets, swindlers and divisive rebels. Satan has attacked the church from outside and infiltrated it from within, yet Christianity is growing faster in some parts of the world than at any time in human history.

But that doesn't mean the devil is backing off. He is a relentless enemy, and we must constantly be aware of his schemes. When the devil attacks, he normally uses human agents

to carry out his work. That is why church leaders are called to protect God's people from those who might hijack our mission.

In all my years of ministry I've noticed that the devil's tricks are actually the same no matter where I go. He uses a familiar cast of characters to sow discord in the church, to distract us from our mission and to veer us off course. If these people are busy in your church, they must be confronted. Never allow these six people to get their hands on the steering wheel:

**1. The financial controller.** Every church needs the wise counsel of older saints, including those who have business experience. But sometimes when spiritually immature people are put in such positions, they can develop a sense of ownership or entitlement. If this is not checked, they begin to use their money to buy influence. This was the sin of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5—and their severe punishment made it clear that God doesn't like it when people try to control His church with their money.

James 2:1-7 warns church leaders not to seat rich people on the front row of the church. Yet in many congregations, wealthy members have bribed their way into a place of favor so they can make decisions. Weak pastors won't challenge this behavior because they fear offending big donors.

**2. The self-appointed prophet.** We should earnestly desire the gift of prophecy in our churches. But the apostle Paul also warned the Colossians about super-spiritual people who claim to always know what God is saying to the leadership (Col. 2:18-23).

The difference between true prophets and self-appointed ones is their attitude. Legitimate prophets are loving, servant-hearted and submitted to godly authority. Dangerous prophets are those who can't be corrected. They are spiritually proud,

they tend to be loners and they leave a trail of damaged relationships in their wake. Never allow someone like this to be in a leadership position.

**3. The attention-getter.** In the church we encourage volunteers to discover their gifts. This works well until someone comes along who needs to prove something to himself or everyone else. Then things get weird—especially because churches have platforms and microphones. Emotionally needy people want the stage. They may even ask for a chance to preach or sing a solo—and they might get mad if you don't let them.

From my reading of Scripture, God does not pick people who want the spotlight. He calls broken men and women who know they have nothing to offer. He chooses leaders who trust not in their own ability but in His. We must teach immature attention seekers that God must crush all selfish ambition before He puts them in a visible position. And we must teach that ministry is about serving when no one else sees.

**4. The bitter avenger.** The church is full of people who have been hurt by pastors or by other church members. That's understandable. But if someone has not resolved their hurts, they can spread their resentment like a cancer. Hebrews 12:15 warns us to be careful of those with a "root of bitterness" because this will cause trouble and defile many. Bitterness is often the cause of church splits. Never allow a bitter person to be in a leadership position.

**5. The sexual predator.** Paul told the Ephesian elders to "be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock" (Acts 20:28). This watchful attitude is especially important in today's carefree sexual environment. Wolves prey on the innocent—and that includes children, abused women who have low self-esteem and anyone struggling with sexual confusion. Churches must enforce strict rules about who works with kids and youth. And we must be willing to confront any immoral person—man or woman—who is using church to find a new sex partner.

**6. The immature know-it-all.** Long ago, Satan led an angelic rebellion in heaven. Since then, many young leaders have tried to overthrow older leaders to start new movements. This process is always messy and divisive—and those who lead such rebellions discover that the ugly cycle is repeated when they get old. What goes around comes around.

We could eliminate this pain if young leaders would emulate David, who waited patiently for God to give him the throne instead of grasping for King Saul's position. Any young leader who is too eager to rule has not been fully tested. 1 Timothy 3:6 warns that we should never put a new convert in a position of leadership, "so that he will not become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil" (1 Tim. 3:6).

The Bible has given us clear warnings about who to trust in leadership. Never give these six characters a position in your church until they have fallen on the rock and allowed the Holy Spirit to transform their character. {eoa}

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## **10 Occupational Hazards of Ministry**

When I surrendered to the call of God several years ago, I did it soberly because I knew I was stepping into a dangerous assignment. Despite what you might hear from a few prosperity preachers wearing silk suits and pancake makeup, ministry is not glamorous—nor is it risk-free.

When you answer God's call, you put your life on the line. Just ask the apostle Paul, who told the Galatians, "From now on let no one trouble me, for I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus" (Gal. 6:17). The Greek word for "marks" is

*stigma*, and it refers to the marks that were burned into the flesh of a slave to show who owned him.

Paul was saying, "I have the scars to prove I serve Jesus."

Ministry has a long list of occupational hazards, and I do an injustice to any young leader today if I don't warn him or her of what might happen on the job. I'm not sharing this to scare anybody. But if the Occupational Safety and Health Administration can require businesses to display a poster to encourage workplace safety, we should at least read this list of ministerial hazards when leaders are ordained.

To all my young friends who are considering a ministry career, I offer these warnings:

**1. The devil will attack you and your loved ones.** I don't focus on the devil or his demons, but it is foolish to be ignorant of hell's schemes. Satan hates ministers. You are in a war, and your enemy plays dirty. You must learn to fight both defensively and offensively if you expect to win.

**2. Religious people will hate you.** Jesus and Paul both proved that persecution comes not just from worldly unbelievers but from self-righteous saints who think they are doing God a favor by discrediting you. Religious people hate change. Many pastors I know have been chewed up and spit out by mean-spirited people who love their sacred cows more than they love Jesus. God's leaders must have the guts to challenge lifeless, status quo tradition.

**3. You will face discouragement often.** Preaching is a unique effort that requires you to lean wholly on God for a word from heaven. No wonder it is emotionally draining! Charles Spurgeon told his students that he often got depressed after intense ministry. He wrote: "How often, on Lord's-day evenings, do we feel as if life were completely washed out of us! After pouring out our souls over our congregations, we feel like empty earthen pitchers which a child might break." Don't be

shocked when heavy feelings come.

**4. Your pride will be wounded.** You may think your sermon was awesome, but some people will yawn, some will sleep and others will remind you of the points you missed. Don't let the criticism make you bitter; allow it to nail your flesh to the cross so you can remember that ministry is not about you anyway.

**5. Your heart will be broken.** You may invest your time and energy into people who eventually walk away without even thanking you. Sometimes a close disciple may prove to be a Judas. Don't let disappointment cause you to close your heart to people. Keep on loving and giving, despite the heartache.

**6. Your knees will become calloused.** Any good leader knows that prayer is the fuel that keeps him or her going. As long as hands are raised to heaven and hearts are bowed low, heaven's oil will not run out. Never let the flame of prayer go out in your personal life.

**7. Your priorities will be turned upside down.** For me, God's call included traveling—which meant spending lots of time away from home. I would personally rather sleep in my own bed than in a strange bed in Nigeria or India, but when you pray, "Here I am, Lord, send me," you do not have the luxury of running your own schedule. Your life is not your own.

**8. Your dreams and ambitions will be misunderstood.** Joseph was thrown in a pit after he shared his dream. David's brothers questioned his motives when he came to the battle to challenge Goliath. Anyone who attempts great things for God will be maligned. If you are worried about your reputation, or you want everyone to say nice things about you, don't pursue a ministry career.

**9. Your faith will be stretched to the breaking point.** God gave Moses a stick and told him to split the Red Sea. He told Gideon to win a battle with 300 ill-equipped soldiers. Leaders

who are following the Spirit will be constantly challenged to look beyond natural circumstances and believe in God's supernatural ability. This is never comfortable. Jesus calls us out of the boat and onto the water. Get used to it.

**10. Your character will be tested in the heat of God's furnace.** The work of the Refiner is never finished. You are engaged in a heavenly process, and you go from one level of glory to the next. The Spirit will regularly turn up the heat to test your motives, adjust your attitude and chisel your character until you look like Christ. The best leaders have learned to live in the fire so they can be examples to the flock. {eoa}

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## **The Shameful Secret of 'Christian' Domestic Abuse**

Last Saturday, police responded to a call from a home in the tranquil Minneapolis suburb of Eden Prairie. Inside they found that Lyuba Savenok, a 23-year-old mother of two small children, had been stabbed multiple times. She was pregnant with her third child. Both died that morning.

Later, Lyuba's husband, Yevginy ("Eugene"), confessed that he had killed his wife and fled the house with his kids. They are now in the custody of family members while he awaits trial.

This cute couple with the adorable son and daughter attended a large evangelical church. It was later reported that Lyuba had filed for police protection from her husband when they lived in the Chicago area. She told authorities that Eugene hit her repeatedly, gave her a bloody nose, pulled her hair and once broke a window in a fit of rage.

Police were called to the Savenok home last August, where they learned that Eugene had hit his wife so hard on the back that bruises were evident. He was supposed to answer for that crime in court this week. Now he will be tried for murder.

We all know domestic violence goes on behind closed doors in this country, even in the suburbs. But what is tragic is that it goes on in Christian homes—and this sin is rarely addressed from our pulpits.

Because I have many friends in Russian-speaking churches in this country, I was horrified to hear of the case of Lyuba Savenok—who was from an Estonian heritage. But when I talked to some of my Slavic friends, I learned that domestic abuse is a shameful secret that people only whisper about at church. It is seldom confronted.

“My sister was raped, drugged and hit for 17 years,” one Slavic woman from a midwestern state told me. “I have witnessed emotional abuse, physical abuse and a lot of sexual domination—even the use of drugs—to control women. I think there should be a wide investigation into abuse in the Slavic community.”

One woman from Florida said when her friend sought help from a pastor after being in an abusive marriage for 20 years, she was told to submit to the cruelty. “They told her to become a better wife, and that might change his behavior,” she said.

Some of the people interviewed for this article were even worried about using their names because it is considered inappropriate to talk about abuse in the Slavic church.

“When abuse is brought to light, it is swept under the rug because religious practices have priority,” said one Slavic Christian woman from California. “Unfortunately, church leaders are not equipped to deal with this issue.”

Research shows that domestic violence is rampant in Russian

families. And many Slavic women are afraid to even report abuse because their husbands have threatened to hurt them if they do. Tanya Levchyk, who started a Facebook group for Slavic Christian women, said it is past time for Slavic pastors to deal with the elephant in the room.

“Many times Slavic women are afraid to voice their fears because of the great emphasis that is made on reputation in our community,” she said. “They feel they will be ridiculed instead of protected, and it will always be their fault simply because they are female.” Levchyk’s Facebook group now reaches 14,000 women.

My Slavic friend Paul Muzichuk, 31, who has done missions work in eight countries, said he believes the death of Lyuba Savenok should serve as a wake-up call to church leaders—both in the Slavic community and in the wider body of Christ.

“My heart is broken for Slavic women who hide in abusive relationships and hidden pain,” he said. “Fear, religious pride and the Slavic ‘macho’ attitude needs to be confronted so Slavic women can be set free from years of abuse.”

Stephan Karnauch, who grew up in a Slavic home in New York, said it’s past time to expose the painful truth of abuse and to teach men how to treat women with respect. “By exposing this truth we will finally be able to protect families and we will equip our children how to be godly spouses, parents and lovers of Christ,” Karnauch said.

We need to face the fact that Lyuba’s murder doesn’t just represent an issue among Slavic believers. For years American pastors have been telling women to “just submit” to abusive husbands without realizing that such advice can actually provoke more abuse.

Instead of misusing Ephesians 5:22 (“Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord”) to put women at risk, we should be using the Bible properly to warn abusers that God strongly

opposes men who view their wives as inferior. First Peter 3:7 warns a husband that his prayers will be hindered if he does not honor his wife “as a fellow heir of the grace of life.”

Let’s have the courage to pull the rug back. Let’s confront abuse, heal its victims and stop twisting Scripture to protect abusers. {eoa}

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## **What Would Jesus Say to a Transgender Person?**

Ever since Bruce Jenner announced in April 2015 that he had become a she, the debate over transgender rights began heating up. That same month, a gender-neutral restroom opened in the White House. Now, a year later, the federal government has sued the state of North Carolina over its so-called “bathroom law,” which requires people to use the bathroom that corresponds to their original gender.

Many ordinary Americans are scratching their heads. The word transgender is foreign to them—along with all the other new terms that have been coined in recent months to describe a person who wants to change their gender or isn’t sure about it. These terms include “gender fluid,” “pansexual,” “bigender” and “genderqueer.” The transgender phenomenon makes no sense to people who assume we live in an orderly world in which men are men, women are women and everybody just accepts the rules of biology.

But we don’t live in an orderly world. We live in a fallen world that has been marred by accidents, wars, human error, abuse, racism, environmental disasters, poverty, disease, terrorism, social injustice, sexual deviation, addictions and

personality disorders.

As the Temptations sang way back in 1970, the world is “a ball of confusion.”

Transgender people only make up 0.3 percent of the U.S. population, so chances are you have never met one. I have. Several years ago, when I was on assignment with *Charisma* in San Francisco, I carried on a long conversation with Stephanie, a man who was living as a woman in the Polk district of the city. Stephanie had already paid \$2,300 for breast implants but he was saving money for a full sex-change operation.

His hair was bleached blond and he wore thick blue eye shadow and dark red lipstick. He had feminine mannerisms, but the hormone pills he had been taking couldn't soften his square jaw or shrink his thick hands, which were decorated with long purple nails.

“I feel kind of lost sometimes,” he told me after I bought him a cup of coffee.

Stephanie told me his sad story. He had been raised in a trailer park near Pittsburgh, and while still living as a man he entered the Navy after high school. He even married a Filipino woman for a while, but he left that relationship and decided to identify as female. He worked as a transgender prostitute for years in San Francisco, but that income dried up as he got older. He was living on disability when I met him.

Stephanie told me he had attempted suicide more than once, and I could see the scars on his arm where he had slit his wrists. Then he said: “My stepmother told me, ‘If you ever commit suicide, don't leave a note to us because we don't want anyone to know you are related to us.’”

Stephanie displayed a hollow sadness I've never seen on any

other human face. It was as if some invisible California vampire had sucked all the life out of him. I was not revolted. I felt nothing but compassion.

How do we minister to the Stephanies of the world? I did not slam my fist on the table and scold him for being confused. I certainly did not lecture him about which bathroom he should use. I was more concerned for his eternal soul.

In that coffee shop, my two friends and I shared the gospel with him and we prayed for him. I remember struggling with whether to use "him" or "her" in my prayer, but I realized that God is not so concerned with pronouns when a life is teetering on the edge of eternity.

"Jesus, we know you love Stephanie," we prayed. "Heal this body and show Stephanie how much you want to help."

I don't know if Stephanie ever got a sex change operation. I don't know if he ever visited the church I recommended. If he did, I hope he was treated with kindness.

I'm not being soft on sin when I plead for compassion on this issue. I hold to the Christian idea that gender is a fixed component of our created identity. I also believe we need to use common sense when our state and local governments formulate bathroom policies.

But before we hit the streets to protest or pontificate, let's remember that reacting in anger toward the transgender community is not the Jesus way. Jesus always upheld biblical morality, and He certainly affirmed traditional gender identity. Yet His religious critics called Him a "friend of sinners" (Matt. 11:19) because He accepted and loved tax collectors, prostitutes and adulterers before He confronted their sin.

If Jesus had talked to Stephanie, He would have looked past his purple nails and square shoulders. He would have invited

him to discover that our true identity can only be found in a relationship with Him. {eoa}

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## 4 Ear-Tickling Doctrines You Should Never Tolerate

Many today are worried about the Zika virus. But I'm just as concerned about certain destructive doctrines that are spreading like an epidemic.

During a recent trip to Uganda, friends there told me of a growing church in the capital city of Kampala that has been infected by the most serious form of American-style "hypergrace" teaching. This church attracts hundreds of young people who like the idea that they can fornicate whenever they want and still be right with God.

False doctrines are nothing new. In the first century, Paul sternly warned Timothy about certain preachers who know how to slice and dice God's Word to make it fit what people want. He wrote in 2 Timothy 4:3-4: "For the time will come when people will not endure sound doctrine, but they will gather to themselves teachers in accordance with their own desires, having itching ears, and they will turn their ears away from the truth and turn to myths."

The King James Version says the crowds who crave this reconfigured gospel "have itching ears." The Greek word here, *knēthō*, can mean "to tickle" or "to itch." It means that people will gravitate toward teachers who tell them what they want to hear instead of what they need. And while the Bible sharply rebukes the teachers of these dangerous doctrines, Paul also blames the people who ravenously consume this

distorted message.

The warning is clear: Be careful what you listen to!

There are many false doctrines circulating today, but there are four that have spread widely in the modern Pentecostal/charismatic movement. You may not be able to stop the person who is preaching these heresies, but you should never, ever submit to this teaching or support it financially. Don't ever believe these four lies:

**Lie No. 1: You don't need to repent of your sin or focus on sin.** This is the crux of the "hypergrace" movement. While it is true that many legalistic Christians don't understand God's love and forgiveness, we can't swing the pendulum to the other extreme and portray God as being lax about sin. God is still holy, and true grace gives us the power to live a holy life. If a preacher minimizes repentance, or says you should never worry about sin in your life, you should run out the door.

**Lie No. 2: You can live however you want to live sexually.** Jesus Himself warned us in Revelation 2:20 about the influence of "Jezebel" in the church. He said she was leading Christians to "commit acts of immorality." You can see tolerance of sexual sin in many segments of the church today. Catholic bishops allowed their own priests to commit child sexual abuse for years; mainline churches have embraced same-sex marriage. But their error is no worse than that of certain charismatic preachers who minimize or ignore the sin of adultery and cohabitation among straight people. We should never evaluate a minister just by what he or she preaches; we should also take note of what he or she refuses to confront from the pulpit.

**Lie No. 3: You can buy God's blessings.** I do not believe in a poverty gospel, but the prosperity gospel that emerged in this country in the 1980s almost ruined our witness. The greedy televangelist who manipulated audiences to give in the offering so he could buy airplanes or mansions will give an

account for every soul he turned away from Christ. Especially egregious are the preachers who promised people healings, spiritual gifts or the salvation of loved ones in exchange for a \$500 “seed” offering. God’s blessings are free. Shame on those who merchandised His anointing.

**Lie No. 4: God never calls us to suffer.** Whenever the church enters times of prosperity and ease, our message gets soft. This happened during the 1980s, when preachers in silk ties told us we could name and claim whatever we wanted in Jesus name. And while the verses they quoted about faith certainly apply to prayer, they mixed the message with the idea that life with God is like a bowl of cherries and that any hardship that comes our way is from the devil. These preachers avoided 1 Peter 4:1, which says: “Therefore, since Christ has suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same purpose.”

I don’t know about you, but I don’t trust an arrogant preacher who says he never has struggles or problems. I don’t follow a man because he has a Lexus or a four-car garage; I look for a broken minister who walks with a limp. The preacher who says Christians don’t suffer has never felt the fire of God’s testing, and he is likely an illegitimate son since he has never known the Father’s discipline.

God is cleaning up His church today, and He is refining the message we preach. Don’t prop up or support the false doctrines of the past. Purge their influence from your life and embrace the true gospel—the message calls each of us to take up our cross, die to our own desires and be mature disciples. {eoa}

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# What to Say (and Not to Say) to a Sexual Abuse Victim

My friend “Jake” attended a men’s conference last weekend in a western state. After one of my sermons—which dealt with the topic of freedom from sexual sin—a dark memory from his past surfaced in his mind. He began to sob, and two men seated near him put their arms around him and began praying.

When Jake came to the altar for prayer a few minutes later, he spilled his guts to one of the prayer counselors. Through tears Jake described how he had been sexually molested at age 14 by a Baptist pastor. (He had gone to the church on a Saturday to mow the grass.) He felt so afraid during the ordeal that he stayed silent. He felt paralyzed as the pastor fondled him. When he went home he couldn’t tell anyone, not even his father.

Jake is 67 today. He kept this ugly secret hidden for 53 years.

On the morning after Jake received prayer, he told me that he felt a hundred pounds lighter. “The feeling of shame and guilt is gone!” he said. “I feel so loved by God and my brothers.”

I gave Jake a chance to share his testimony with the men later that morning. He explained that he felt so ashamed after the abuse incident that he quit sports. He was afraid other boys would know what happened to him when he changed clothes in the locker room. He crawled into a shell and then pursued a life of sexual promiscuity with girls, mainly to prove he was still a man.

Yet when Jake finally opened his heart and talked about the painful incident last weekend, God’s healing power flooded his soul—even though the wound had been concealed for decades.

I'm glad Jake found healing in that church last Friday. But after he shared his testimony, one brother walked up to him and made an unfortunate remark. He told Jake: "You know, you could have stopped that man if you'd wanted to." Thankfully Jake got more prayer from some of his friends that morning to counteract those insensitive words.

There are probably people in your church who have experienced the same type of traumatic sexual abuse that Jake did. They need love and support. When you minister to a victim of abuse they need to hear encouragement and affirmation, not suspicion or judgment. Here are five things you should say in this situation:

**1. I'm really sorry that happened.** Galatians 6:2 says we are to "bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ." When someone goes through something traumatic, he or she needs to know we are there to support them. Victims of abuse are tempted to think no one will believe their story. You can say, "That must have been horrible." You can also tell them you believe them.

**2. You are not alone.** Remind the person you are part of a faith family that offers love and healing to people in their situation. Abuse victims are tempted to hide their experience because it is so embarrassing—yet true healing only comes when we bring our darkness into Christ's light. If you are counseling them, stay in touch and set up another time to meet—or get the victim connected to a support group.

**3. That was not your fault.** The most common lie an abuse victim believes is, "I must have done something to deserve this." The devil is an accuser, and he uses abuse to destroy a person's identity and self-worth. Use your words to counteract those lies. In Jake's case, he did nothing to prompt this older man to abuse him—and the abuse itself was a criminal act. He needs to know he did not invite the abuse. (Note: If the person who abused the victim is still alive, and it

happened when the victim was under age, you should report the incident to the police.)

**4. Can I pray with you now?** Jesus Christ has the power to heal an abused heart, and any follower of Christ has the anointing to pray for abuse victims. Isaiah 61:1 says: “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor; He has sent me to heal the broken-hearted.” You can pray for the victim to experience healing after they have shared their painful story. Jesus can remove the emotional stain that abuse brings. (Some abuse victims may feel uncomfortable being touched when you pray, so be sure to ask their permission before you lay hands on their shoulder.)

**5. Can I help you find counseling?** Prayer ministry at an altar can be powerful, but most abuse victims need additional follow-up. Do not just pray and then announce, “Now you are healed!” Encourage the person you are praying for to seek more counseling, preferably from a professional who has Christian values. Most abuse victims have layers of hurt piled on top of their pain, and they will need time to process their healing. Sexual abuse is like a serious car accident—it may require extended time for healing. If your church has a counseling ministry, refer them to that resource immediately.

Jesus brings good news to the abused, not shame, condemnation or put-downs. When victims of sexual abuse come to your church, make sure it is a safe place for them to find total transformation. {eoa}

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# How to Respond When Your Faith Is Mocked

*Saturday Night Live* launched the careers of some of America's best-known comedians, including Steve Martin, Ben Stiller, Eddie Murphy, Billy Crystal, Chevy Chase, John Belushi, Will Ferrell and—more recently—Amy Poehler, Tina Fey and Kristen Wiig. But Christians across the country were not amused last weekend when the comedy show aired a skit spoofing the new film *God's Not Dead 2*.

For many of us, SNL and broadcaster NBC crossed a line. The skit, which mocked traditional Christian values by claiming that “God is gay,” had a sarcastic tone that was meant to demean people of faith. Veteran actor Pat Boone, who has a minor role in *God's Not Dead 2*, told *The Hollywood Reporter* this week that the SNL skit was “outright sacrilege.”

“Satan ridicules faith, and they are taking Satan's side,” Boone said of the show's producers.

And while the SNL skit characterized Christians as bigots, it was itself a blatant form of bigotry. The show's producers may think Christians are hypocrites because we hold conservative views on marriage, but denigrating an entire faith community is hypocritical, too.

The definition of mock is “to tease or laugh at in a scornful or contemptuous manner.” Sorry, SNL, but Pat Boone isn't the only guy who's not laughing at this crude joke. A lot of people in this country don't think SNL is funny anymore.

I'm not going to launch a boycott of NBC or call for protests in front of the show's studios in New York. Instead, I'm going to do what Jesus told us to do when people ridicule our faith. Here are three simple guidelines the New Testament gives us:

**1. Don't get defensive.** We should not be shocked when non-Christians mock our beliefs. Jesus was mocked when He was crucified, and He told us that people would hate us because we follow Him. This is the high cost of being a disciple. When we embrace Christianity, we give up the hope of being popular. I don't live for the world's approval, and it's crazy to expect people who have not had a personal encounter with Christ to respect my faith or applaud my morality.

Second Peter 3:3 says in the last days, "mockers will come with their mocking, following after their own lusts." A common characteristic of this fallen world is mockery. Unbelievers sometimes mock God, take His name in vain, attack the Bible, make fun of churches and ridicule anyone who follows Jesus. Persecution should never come as a surprise to you. Don't be shocked when it happens! Paul wrote: "All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution" (2 Tim. 3:12).

**2. Never lash out in anger.** In this world of social media outrage and shout-a-thon talk shows, we Christians think we have the right to jump in the ring and scream like everyone else to prove our point. But that wasn't Jesus' strategy when He was arrested, stripped naked, scourged and interrogated. When Jesus was being reviled, 1 Peter 2:23 says, "He did not revile back; when He suffered, He did not threaten."

Jesus either answered plainly or kept His mouth shut. He trusted the Father to vindicate Him. If you are mocked for your faith, keep your cool and bite your lip. Don't let angry people push your button. God will give you wise words to say if you let His love control your tongue.

**3. Pray for your enemies.** Jesus said it best in Matthew 5:43-44: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and

persecute you.” How many of us actually obey that commandment?

Before you speak with a local abortionist, a gay activist or an atheist professor, adjust your heart before God. Jesus said we must (1) love those who attack us and (2) pray for them. Praying for those who are hostile to your beliefs will enable you see them from God’s perspective. He loves people—even those who mock Him. So should we. After you’ve corrected your attitude, you are more likely to say words that are inspired by the Holy Spirit.

I’ve been mocked for my Christian faith many times over the years. I’ve been called narrow-minded, fanatical, judgmental, Puritanical, Medieval, homophobic, Neanderthal and several choice words I can’t print here. I don’t hate the people who said those things. Instead, I pray they will discover the same mercy I found in Christ—and I pray they find it before they face Him when this life is over. {eoa}