

**PRISM**  
**STUDY/DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**  
**WINTER 2014 ISSUE**

**Sure, You're *Born Again*, but Are You *Growing Up*?** (page 4)

How long have you been a Christian? How have you matured spiritually since first forging a relationship with Christ? What practices have helped you in your journey of spiritual maturity? What practices or habits do you find hinder the journey?

In what form does Beauty appear in your life? What part does it play in your spiritual journey? What about Goodness? Truth?

**Disunity Whiplash** (page 5)

Identify the “them” in your life. In what ways do you keep yourself apart from them? Take a few moments to visualize an individual from this “them” group. You know how you differ from them, but what do you have *in common* with them?

Imagine a scenario in which you need to ask a specific person from that group for help of some kind and the person kindly obliges. What does it feel like to ask that person for help? How does it feel when the person responds with loving help? What have you gained from this exercise of the imagination?

**Life Together** (page 6)

In what small groups have you found solidarity, comfort, challenge, and/or growth? What was it about the group that made that possible?

Consider Heather Zempel’s comment that “in the end, the community we experience is going to be the final proof of God’s existence.” What does she mean? Does that resonate with you? Why or why not?

The author suggests that when we minimize the mess in our lives, we are hiding from others and miss the opportunity to be known, to repent and grow, and to work things out in community. How have you experienced both hiding and authenticity?

### **Which Way Does Your Faith Point?** (page 7)

Consider the ways you judge or “doubt the authenticity of Christians whose lifestyles look different from” yours. How can you begin to focus on the real person behind those differences? Can you imagine God loving you passionately, eternally, sacrificially in spite of the way your lifestyle differs from God’s preference for you? Why or why not?

### **Listening to the “Disreputables”** (page 10)

The author of this piece, John Backman, has written an excellent book called [Why Can’t We Talk?](#) In it he recommends an activity to help us consider why the folks we disagree with believe the things they do. He suggests picking a controversial topic such as abortion, LGBTQ issues, or evangelism and trying to “fathom the line of reasoning behind it.” The website [ProCon](#) is a great place to find multiple sides of an argument. Backman writes: “What do you hear in this position? Can you see how a reasonable, goodhearted person *might* come to that belief? How might you open a dialogue with such a person?”

Who would you add to the list of modern “lepers” on page 11? Who makes the top three on your personal list of folks you find unsavory and eminently avoidable?

### **Fighting the U.S. Caste Culture** (page 16)

How do you relate to Michelle Alexander’s awakening to the “magnitude of the harm caused by mass incarceration to communities of color”? Is this idea new or familiar to you? What experiences explain your exposure or lack thereof to this issue?

Identify one or two “cultural narratives” that you think exacerbate the high rates of incarceration among people of color. Where do these narratives come from? What feeds and keeps them alive?

Check out this [Profiting Off Prisoners infographic](#). What information here is new to you? Can you see how a system can be built that is fueled by and depends on arrests? For the juvenile parallel to adult incarceration, read about the [Kids-for-Cash scandal](#) that was exposed in Pennsylvania in 2007, and watch the new [documentary](#)

[film](#) made about it, which perfectly illustrates how a few profit from the pain of many.

When it comes to America's broken penal system, Alexander says she's saddened by the silence of so many faith communities. Is your church silent? If so, how can you help break that silence? If not, in what ways is it speaking out, and how can you help? Consider proposing a study of Alexander's book, [The New Jim Crow](#), and request [free copies of the study guide](#).

### **Americans Who Tell the Truth** (page 22)

Who are your heroes (famous or not, living or dead)? What is it about them that you admire?

Think about the statement by Frederick Douglass that inspired Robert Shetterly: "Find out what any people will quietly submit to and you have found out the exact measure of injustice and wrong that will be imposed on them." What injustices and wrongs do you see imposed on your community? In what ways have you submitted to these injustices? In what ways might you refuse to submit?

Think of an example in your own life, or the life of someone you know, of using "anger in a positive way, in the service of love rather than hatred," and share it with the group. What was the result?

Shetterly says the keys to making a real change are courage and perseverance. Do an individual assessment of your courage and your perseverance, say, on a scale of 1 to 10. Share them with the group. Where does courage come from? What helps us persevere? Brainstorm some ways you can support each other and encourage improvements in those areas.

What kinds of stories—personal or communal or national, historic or present—inspire you? What motivates you to tell the truth? What do you most desire to tell the truth *about*?

### **"A Good Question Is a Gift"** (page 25)

Krista Tippett says she starts all her interviews by asking people about their religious backgrounds, whether or not they are religious, because it's a place that

forms people in sometimes beautiful, sometimes difficult, and often deep ways. Have each person in your group share something about the spiritual environment he or she grew up in. Answer some of these questions: What was hard about growing up in that environment? What did you enjoy? How do you see traces of it in your life today?

Reflect on and share reactions to Tippett's statement: "A profound encounter with religious difference actually has a paradoxical effect: Yes, your heart and mind are opened to another tradition in a way, but you also understand your own identity better."

What gifts has pain had to offer you in your life?

Answer the last question posed to Tippett: "Where have you cracked your shins on God's presence lately?"

### **Traveling Down to Mercyland** (page 28)

Phil Madeira's memoir is titled [\*God on the Rocks\*](#), which might suggest both a shipwreck and a place of solid footing. If you were to write a memoir, what would its title be? What would the chapters be called?

Which artists help you articulate "the soul and conscience of society"?

Madeira's advice for Christian musicians is: "Be yourself, hone your craft, be good enough to play anywhere," and be on the lookout for what *others* can teach *you*. What might that advice look like if applied to your (or any) profession?

### **Building the Pro-Grace Movement** (page 32)

What is your reaction to the pro-grace approach? What is hardest about it for you? What is most attractive?

Think of a time in your life when you expected judgment from others and that's precisely what you got. Think of a time when you expected judgment and received grace instead. Which affected you more deeply? How did these different reactions change you?

Go to the [Pro-Grace website](#) and watch the brief animated video found at the bottom left, called “The Caris Approach.” Compare group members’ reactions to the graphic that shows the two sides warring on opposing cliffs while the pregnant woman is alone in the valley. In what specific ways does the video challenge you?

How does your church respond to women with unplanned pregnancies? Consider sharing this article and the website with your pastor and outreach ministers to see how they respond and if a similar program might be launched in your congregation.

### **Wonderfully Made** (page 36)

Have you ever felt judged by others—or judged yourself—based on your body size? Have you ever judged others in the same way? Consider both negative (criticism) and positive (praise) types of judgments. From what attitudes or core beliefs do those judgments stem? Are those beliefs biblical? Explain why or why not.

Consider the early church’s definition of gluttony as a broad range of disordered eating, including “eating too soon, too expensively, too much, too eagerly, too daintily, or too wildly.” How do we see these types of eating in our own lives and in what is encouraged by the culture at large?

Consider the author’s statement that “Two people can each participate in the same type of gluttonous and disordered eating and arrive at different sizes. A fat person can be free from the sin of ‘making a God of the belly’ just as a thin person can be enslaved to it.” Do you ever see the church itself encourage gluttony, according to this definition? How so?

Is there anything in this article you disagree with? Is there anything you are challenged to consider in a new way? Discuss these things with your group.

### **“That You May Prosper in All Things”** (page 40)

Where have you encountered the messages of the prosperity gospel? How have those messages influenced your faith walk and your life choices in the area of friends, spouse, career, etc?

Even people who have not been raised in a prosperity gospel church can be vulnerable to prosperity gospel thinking—e.g. “I’m sick; God must be punishing me”

or “I can’t find a job that supports my family; I must not trust God enough.” In these scenarios we conflate our difficult circumstances with God’s negative assessment of us, and therefore assume either that God is mean or that we are lacking in faith. Brainstorm with your group and make a list of the lies you’ve been told (by others or yourselves) when difficult circumstances beyond your control made you doubt God’s love for you. Discuss how this might look different from God’s loving discipline of us: Why does God allow us to go through hard times? What does the Bible have to say about this? Look up and discuss any of the Scriptures cited on page 43 of the article.

Why do you think people are so vulnerable to the promises of the prosperity gospel?

### **TV = Terror Vaccine? (page 47)**

What disturbs you most when you watch TV? What appeals to you most? If you were in charge of a TV network, what kind of shows would you air?

Take a few minutes to discuss your media habits. What types of things are you drawn to? Making an effort to suspend judgment of each other and yourself, make an honest effort to assess what hungers are being fed by what you turn to. In what ways are your media habits (TV, movies, gaming, or music) shaping your worldview?

### **Immigration Reform & Beyond (page 51)**

The author reminds us that we are called to “speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy” (Prov. 31:8-9). She also reminds us that as members of a democracy, we have the patriotic duty of civic engagement.” What prevents you (or your church as a body) from speaking out against injustices? Consider all the reasons people hesitate to speak out. Have a mini mock debate in which one or more people in your group argue for and against these reasons.

Go to the [Interfaith Immigration Coalition’s resource page](#) to find a list of excellent advocacy toolkits. Consider at least one way that you can help your church or small group engage in this very important justice issue.

### **The Che Guevara Jesus (page 55)**

What is your reaction to seeing Jesus presented in an iconically revolutionary way? In what ways was Jesus revolutionary while here on earth? In what ways does Jesus stand outside human movements, revolutions, passions? In what ways he is right in the thick of them?

Make a shortlist of 3-5 violent revolutionaries throughout history. Make a list of as many nonviolent revolutionaries. Discuss the outcomes of these revolutionaries. Who spearheaded the most dramatic changes? The fastest? The longest-lasting? To which group are you most drawn? Why do you think that is?

What words or images come to mind when you hear “nonviolence”? Make a list and discuss them. How many of the things on your list reflect strength or action? How many connote weakness or passivity? Discuss why that might be.