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LIVING YOUR FAITH

IN A MESSED UP

WORLD

A LOOK AT

THE CONTEMPORARY TESTIMONY

JANE VOGEL AND MARY SYTSMA

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About the Authors

We are grateful to Jane Vogel and Mary Sytsma for writing this course and pilot-testing it at Wheaton (Illinois) Christian Reformed Church.

Jane Vogel grew up in a church that encouraged her to teach church school and VBS as a teenager, and she's been active in church education ever since. She got hooked on youth ministry while completing her Master's in Church Education at Calvin Theological Seminary and has since served as a full-time church staff person, an author of youth materials, and a volunteer leader.

Mary Sytsma has taught English for over two decades at the high school and college levels. She has been a church school teacher for as long as she can remember and has served with Jane Vogel as a volunteer youth leader at Wheaton Christian Reformed Church.

Jane and Mary have coauthored *Questions Worth Asking: A Study of the Heidelberg Catechism*; *Sunday Morning Live: How and Why We Worship*; and *Route 66: A Road Trip Through the Bible*. These courses, designed for high school students, are published by Faith Alive Christian Resources.

Feedback

We welcome your comments. Call 1-800-333-8300 or e-mail us at editors@faithaliveresources.org.

Contents

Session 1: What Gives You Hope? (CT 1-6)

Session 2: What Does It Mean to Be Human? (CT 7-12)

Session 3: Why Is the World So Messed Up? (CT 13-17)

Session 4: God: A Hands-off Deity? (CT 18-22)

Session 5: Is Jesus Who You Think He Is? (CT 23-27)

Session 6: Spirit or Fake: How Do You Know? (CT 28-30)

Session 7: What Is True? (CT 31-33)

Session 8: The Church: Where All Are Welcome? (CT 34-38)

Session 9: The Church: Why Bother? (CT 39-40)

Session 10: Is Jesus the Only Way? (CT 41-43)

Session 11: How About Hooking Up? (CT 44-46)

Session 12: How Do You Balance Work and Play? (CT 47-49)

Session 13: How Green Is Your Church? (CT 50-51)

Session 14: Governments and Justice: How Can You Make a Difference? (CT 52-54)

Session 15: What Do You Long For? (CT 55-58)

Note: leader guide segments will be released online in groups of five. New issues will be added to some sessions each year.

How to Use This Course

Audience

Living Your Faith was pilot-taught to juniors and seniors in high school by authors Jane Vogel and Mary Sytsma. It's intended for this age group and for young adults who have recently graduated from high school. Experienced leaders could also adapt the course for adult classes or small groups.

Basic Focus

In fifteen sessions, the course uses the framework of the Contemporary Testimony to discuss current events and issues such as earth-keeping, war and peace, advances in science and technology, consumerism, gender roles, and many more.

Our World Belongs to God: A Contemporary Testimony confesses the Reformed faith in a fresh and contemporary way. It summarizes our beliefs and speaks to a variety of issues faced by modern Christians. Throughout, it strongly affirms that “as followers of Jesus Christ living in this world . . . we declare with joy and trust: Our world belongs to God!” While the Testimony doesn't have the official status of a creed, it was adapted by the 1986 synod of the Christian Reformed Church for use in congregations; the edition used in this course is an update approved by Synod 2008.

The Contemporary Testimony was written for all churches within the broad Reformed tradition.

Goals

We want to acquaint students with the content of the Contemporary Testimony and help them see its relevance for responding to the world in which we live, the world they see online and in the daily news. We want to challenge students to live out their faith and recognize that every aspect of their lives and their world belongs to God.

Components

The CT journal is the only printed piece. It contains the Contemporary Testimony in its latest (2008) edition, supporting Scripture passages, and a variety of ways students can respond personally, including journaling options. Please note that some of the student response sections (“notes,” “reflections,” “things I wonder about,” and “journaling options”) may not be used in a given session.

The online leader's guide, available for downloading and printing at www.faithaliveresources.org/livingyourfaith, includes clear and concise plans for fifteen sessions. Each session includes a launch activity, an exploration of a contemporary issue as seen through the lens of the Contemporary Testimony and Scripture, and a personal response section. Student handouts for downloading and printing are included with most sessions as a means of getting into a contemporary issue. We plan to update this online leader's guide each year—that's the main reason it's online.

Videos accompany eight of the sessions. They feature short, lively segments that can be used as a “launch” activity or elsewhere in the session to stimulate discussion and gain insights. The videos are included on the DVD that accompanies the course.

Session 3: Why Is the World So Messed Up?

Contemporary Testimony

Paragraphs 13-17

Scripture

Genesis 2:8-9, 15-17; 3:1-8; Romans 1:21-23; 3:9-20, 21-26

Focus

Sin infects all people and systems, alienating us from God, from each other, and from the creation.

Contemporary Issue

The messed-up state of our world

Goals

Participants will

- identify things that show that the world is not the way God created it to be;
- explore how Scripture and the Contemporary Testimony address the fallen nature of all of creation;
- reflect on how God gives us hope and a purpose in a fallen world.

Materials

- CT journals, pages 14-19; pens
- Student handout 2, “Sinfully Delicious”—one copy for every two students
- Course DVD, track 3, “Crash”
- DVD player and monitor
- For option 1 of step 2: a roll of paper or a large sheet of paper, fine-tip markers
- For option 2 of step 2: current magazines, newspapers, scissors, tape, newsprint

Background

In the Reformed tradition we’ve often used the term “total depravity” to describe the effects of sin in human life. It’s important to understand what this term means and what it doesn’t mean. It means that sin infects every aspect, every nook and cranny of human life and culture, or “all spheres of human life.” It does not mean, however, that human beings are as bad as can be. It doesn’t mean that human sin is so deep and pervasive that no good can be found.

The image of God by which we know God and, in significant ways, are like God, is “defaced,” but it is not destroyed. There remains what Calvin called the *semen religionis*, the “seed of religion.” All human beings, deep down, know God and know right and wrong, even though they may choose to ignore God and their conscience.

There’s another important term in the Reformed tradition: common grace. Common grace is not the grace that saves us through Jesus Christ, but the grace spread through the world that makes it possible for people to do good. By God’s gracious withholding hand, things are not as bad as they could be, though they are dark indeed.

The CT uses the word “estranged” (paragraph 15). We are estranged from God, from our neighbor, and from the creation. The world God created to be our home is now filled with violence, bitterness, and destruction.

Still, God will not let go. The very end of the story of the Fall in Genesis hints at God's continued grace. Adam and Eve slink into the shadows of the garden. Ashamed at their nakedness, estranged from each other and from the Creator, they hurriedly sew leaves together in an attempt to cover up.

Just before they are expelled into the dark world now filled with danger and foreboding, God makes garments out of animal skins for them. Mercifully, God doesn't leave them in their shame. He doesn't accept their cover-up, but covers them himself with more permanent clothing. Just one more sign that God remains committed to his creation.

But our world,
broken and scarred,
still belongs to God,
who holds it together
and gives us hope.

Step 1: Launch

(3-5 minutes)

Distribute copies of handout 2, "Sinfully Delicious." (To save paper, make one copy for every two students and have students share the copies.) Ask: **If you didn't know the word "sin," how would you define it based on what you read here?**

Make a transition to step 2 by explaining that the working definition you'll be using of "sin" in this session includes the idea that sin is "not the way things are supposed to be."

Step 2: Contemporary Issue: Our Messed-up World

(10-15 minutes)

Option 1: Illustrations

Unroll a length of paper table-covering (or provide other large sheet of paper), provide markers, and give these instructions: **During the next three or four minutes, write or draw illustrations of everything you can think of that shows that the world is not the way it's supposed to be.** Have everyone work together, writing or drawing on the same sheet of paper. (If your class is large, divide into two or more groups and supply separate paper to each group.)

After three or four minutes, have participants share what they wrote and drew.

Option 2: Clip-Art Collage

Distribute current newspapers and magazines that you've collected. Divide into groups of two to four students and supply scissors, transparent tape, and a sheet of newsprint to each group. Say: **During the next five minutes, find and clip headlines or pictures that show the world is not the way it's supposed to be. Make a collage of the items you've clipped.**

Display the collages and read a few sample items from each.

UPDATE, 7/2010

Consider using the headlines and photos to guide the congregation or youth group in "praying the headlines" as described in this article in Reformed Worship, issue 94: www.reformedworship.org/article/december-2009/praying-headlines

Step 3: Response and Video

(25-30 minutes)

Point participants to paragraphs 15 and 16 of the Contemporary Testimony (p. 17 in the journals) and highlight that sin impacts all spheres of life. Ask: **How do you personally experience that the world is not the way it's supposed to be?**

Before they respond, direct participants to draw examples of their experiences in the “reflections” space on page 17. As an alternative for students who prefer not to draw, you may want to suggest they could dramatize situations with a partner.

When most participants are done, have them share their drawings or dramatizations as they are willing to do so.

Show the course DVD, track 3, “Crash,” which provides another example of the world the way it's not supposed to be. Discuss questions like these:

- **What questions did (or does) Andy struggle with as a result of his accident?**
- **How does Andy answer the question “Is life supposed to be this way?”** (Andy says that from his perspective life shouldn't be this way, but he says that things might be different from God's perspective.) Be sure to point out here that the results of sin—such as Andy's accident—are NOT the way it's supposed to be from God's perspective. Andy later acknowledges this when he says that we live in an imperfect world and that bad things are going to happen in a sinful world.
- **What do you think holds Andy's world together?**

Continue with general questions along these lines:

- **If the world belongs to God, how can it be so messed up? What do Scripture and the Contemporary Testimony have to say about that?** Ask for volunteers to read paragraphs 13-16 and the Scripture passages printed beside them in the CT journal.
- **Look at the last line of paragraph 16. Which things on our list or in our drawings (or magazine collage) are clearly the consequences of human sin?**
- **What examples of suffering are clearly NOT the consequence of the sufferer's own personal sin?**
- **It's not our job to excuse ourselves or to save ourselves (paragraph 17). What is our job in a messed-up world? Look back at paragraphs 10 and 11 to find support for your response.**
- **What might our job look like in the case of the messed-up things we drew and wrote down?**

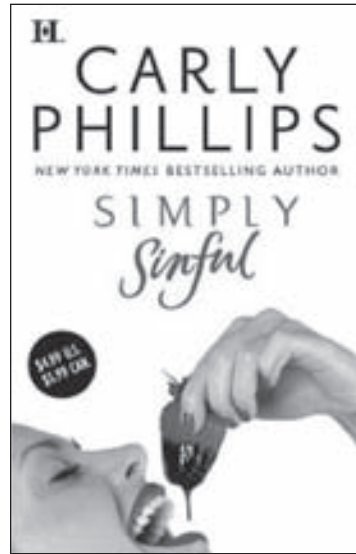
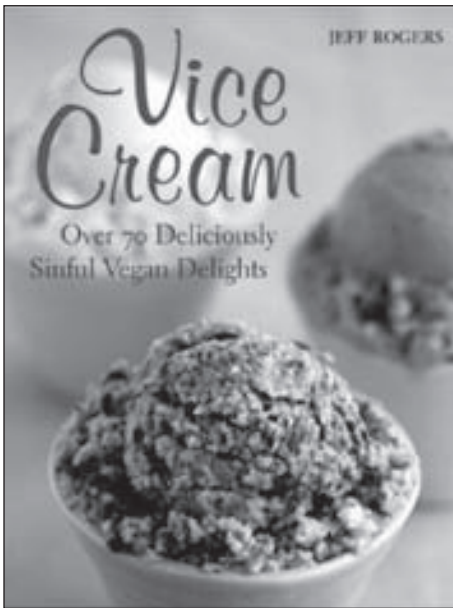
Read paragraph 17 and the Romans 3:19-26 passage printed in the CT journal. Point participants to the “journaling options” section and invite them to reflect individually on one or both of the questions printed there:

1. When have you experienced that God is still holding things together, even in a messed-up world?
2. What if there were no God holding the world together?

Share responses as time permits.

Close your time together with prayer. You—or your students—may want to include petitions for the specific consequences of sin you have identified in this session.

Sinfully Delicious



Pepperidge Farm

flat bread
by Preeti Suchanti
October 30, 2006 issue

Resistance is futile. Each time you bite into a sinfully delicious Milano cookie or crunchy Goldfish cracker, you promise yourself it's going to be the last one. Sigh! If only you could keep your word.

Pepperidge Farm manufactures (oops!—bakes) cookies, snacks, and other delights that are made from secret recipes and have been tempting the taste buds of Americans for over 70 years.

(brandchannel.com)