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Additional Articles

A Response to the *Revolve* New Testament

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The Bible has been reprocessed in postmodernity in a variety of ways. Audio tapes with accompanying sound effects, cinematic and television productions with dramatic savvy and special effects, claymation enlivened with the voices of celebrities, comic books with colorful caricatures, computer generated vegetables that talk and sing with astonishing biblical acumen, eschatological novels and movies, even Broadway musicals with amazing technicolor dreamcoats.

So it should surprise few that the Bible is undergoing yet another facelift, this time under the creative scalpel of the editors of Transit Books, a division of Thomas Nelson Inc. But like a recent photo of Michael Jackson, this latest makeover of The Holy Bible looks very little like the original.

Meet *Revolve*. It is an edition of the New Testament that utilizes about as much camouflage as a stealth B-2 Bomber in its efforts to disguise itself. Looking nothing like any other Bible, *Revolve* was designed to spare teenage girls the embarrassment of being caught with a traditional copy of the Scriptures.

At first glance, *Revolve* looks any other glossy teen magazine splashed with photos of attractive and trendy co-eds, colorful call-out boxes, and advertisements. This teen 'zine could sit on the shelf next to copies of Glamour and Seventeen and appear to be just another pop-culture offering. But a closer look at the cover reveals four unexpected words cutting across the top, "The Complete New Testament."

The creators of *Revolve* wanted to design a Bible that looked at home in the backpacks of the girls 12-17. Laurie Whaley of Thomas Nelson publishing said, "Teens were saying that they found the Bible to be too freaky, too big, too intimidating... *Revolve* shows girls that reading the New Testament is just as easy as reading an issue of Seventeen or Vogue."

Right alongside the text of the New Testament are "call-out boxes" like those found in any other teen magazine. Included are things like Christian Q & A's, devotional thoughts, shopping tips, beauty secrets, opinions from guys, advertisements, top ten lists, quizzes, and so on. What are these things like?

Let me take you on a quick tour of *Revolve*...

- The cover resembles any other teen magazine with three smiling girls with bare shoulders and perfect teeth. Open the magazine and inside the front cover is an advertisement with a photo of an emaciated girl promoting a book called *Diary of an Anorexic Girl*—published by Transit Books, coincidentally.
- Flip to page 198 and you will find an ad for an agency whose mission is to end homelessness. Go to page 33 and you can take one of many quizzes in the magazine/Bible. This one is entitled, "Do you have a healthy body image?" With the multiple choice answers being—"never, sometimes, often, always"—readers are asked to respond to the following ten statements:

1. I enjoy shopping for clothes.
2. I feel self-conscious when I am around someone I think is beautiful.
3. I love having my picture taken.
4. I try on a few different outfits before I finally decide what to wear.
5. I feel comfortable in a swimsuit.
6. When I look at myself in the mirror, I cringe.
7. There are parts of my body that I'm really proud of.
8. I am critical of other women's bodies, no matter how beautiful.
9. I eat what I want without really thinking about the fat or calories.
10. I weigh myself more than once a day.

At the bottom of the page you can rate yourself and tell if you have a "poor body image," "average body image," or "super body image."

- Scattered throughout the 388 page New Testament are echoes of David Letterman's Top Ten Lists. On page 109 you can find a top ten list with the title: RANDOM WAYS TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN YOUR COMMUNITY. From number 10 to number one they are: Do yard work for the elderly or sick; Donate your old clothes to needy families; Recycle cans and bottles; Use washable containers instead of plastic wrap for your lunch; Clip plastic rings on soda six packs; Offer to baby-sit your neighbors' kids for free; Drop a dollar in charity boxes; smile freely; Pick up some else's litter; and the number one way to make a difference in your community is... Plant a tree.
- Another top ten list is on page 294. The title is "RANDOM WAYS TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN YOUR SCHOOL." Again from number ten to number one they are: Pray for your school; Lead a Bible study; Take on a campus beautification project; Be nice to an underclassmen; Have school spirit!; Organize a group to raise money for charity; Help the cleaning staff after school hours; Pray for your teachers; Get involved, make some new friends; and the number one way to make a difference in your school is... Start a prayer club.

[What I find remarkable that is the telling someone the good news of how they can be forgiven of their sins and inherit eternal life with the true and living God did not make the top ten ways to make a difference either in the community or at school!]

- On page 209, there is another interesting top ten list. The title is "RANDOM THINGS TO LOOK FOR IN A GUY." From number ten to number one they are: Gentleness; Strength; Self-control; Loyalty; Friendship; Humor; Integrity; Leadership; Honesty; and the number one thing to look for in a godly guy is... Respect.

[Godliness, holiness, or even spiritual maturity didn't make the top ten things a young woman should look for in a guy!]

- One more top ten list, please. On page 265 is a list with the heading, "RANDOM THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT BEING A *Revolve* GIRL." From number ten to number one they are: *Revolve* girls are fabulous friends; *Revolve* girls don't kiss and tell; *Revolve* girls enjoy spending time with family; *Revolve* girls are respectful of others; *Revolve* girls know their bodies are temples of God; *Revolve* girls should never gossip; *Revolve* girls are not argumentative; *Revolve* girls have good posture; *Revolve* girls don't talk with food in their mouths; and the number one way to be a *Revolve* girl is... *Revolve* girls don't call guys.

[By the way, on the same page as "RANDOM THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT BEING A *Revolve* GIRL" is a cartoon of Mary and Martha who are wearing low-riding jeans, skin tight shirts, and sporting

hourglass figures.]

- Guys are a big deal in *Revolve*, so much so that there are call-out boxes all over the place with the picture of some hunk and his opinion. On page 9 there is a call-out box called "Guys Speak Out" with a question and an answer. The question is, "What should girls care about most when they're in high school?"—the answer—"Probably school. It's the most important factor in helping you achieve your goals in life—more than looks or socializing."

[So the authority is a guy and what girls should care about most is NOT God!?!]

- But there is another feature in *Revolve* that got my attention. Every few pages, there are call-out boxes called "Beauty Secrets." For example, on page 5 there is this tip: "As you apply your sunscreen, use that time to talk to God. Tell him how grateful you are for how he made you. Soon, you'll be so used to talking to him, it might become as regular and familiar as shrinking your pores."
- One final example comes from the most famous verse in the Bible, John 3:16. On page 137, instead of including something about how to become a Christian, *Revolve* places this "beauty secret" alongside John 3:16: "When you pluck your eyebrows, it helps to start by placing a warm rag over them. This warms the pores so they are ready for the pain. Remember this if you ever have to break bad news to someone—a warm hug or kind words will help ease their pain. A good friend in times of need is a great comfort."

Agnieszka Tennant observes, "On page 186, the girls can find the 'Top Ten Great Christian Books.' C. S. Lewis and Dorothy Sayers haven't made the list. Top honors go to *Witnessing 101* by Tim Baker and published by Transit Books. In fact, all of the top ten books have been recently published by Thomas Nelson, most of them through Transit Books."

Here's another curiosity: The eighth of the top ten great Christian books is titled *Why So Many Gods?* Its authors are Tim Baker and Kate Etue. Kate Etue is also the senior editor of *Revolve*. She was the one promoting the biblezine on CNN recently.

What should we make of *Revolve*? It's not a magazine. It's not a Bible. It's not even a study Bible, Whaley says it is "an inspirational and motivational Bible product."

Why should this pop-culture teen 'zine warrant our attention? Get this—it has broken all records for Thomas Nelson publishing for the most Bibles sold in the first month of publication—over 30,000! With over 40,000 already sold, the company is quickly printing another 60,000. Chances are, if you haven't seen someone with one of these things, you will with 100,000 in circulation.

So, what are we to think about a New Testament packaged to resemble a fashion magazine?

First, I want to commend what I believe to be a good motive on the part of the designers. I support efforts to reach teenage girls with the life-transforming gospel contained in the New Testament. In fact I have given almost 23 years of ministry to reaching teens with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

But let's ask some probing questions about propriety and wisdom. A Bible with dating tips, makeup secrets, top ten lists, and interviews with teenage boys—where did all this come from?

The creators unashamedly tell us. Laurie Whaley says, ""The research that we did with teens across the country indicated that they find the Bible to be very intimidating ... and some of them even

called it 'freaky,'" Whaley said. "... And so we asked them, 'Well, what do you read?' And the response that came back was, 'We read magazines.' And so that was where the initial idea came to take the message of the Bible and to put it in a format in which teen girls were accustomed."

In other words, the fundamental presupposition is that the gospel is best packaged in a culturally relevant way. But the Bible and its message are fundamentally counter-cultural. Russell Moore of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary rightly points out, "The 'freakiness' of the Bible... is precisely what gives it the power to save. It is a message that is not glamorous at all. It is a message of a crucified and resurrected Christ who calls all people everywhere to reconciliation with God through Him. It is that otherness of the Bible that gives it its power."

Os Guinness rightly observes, "By our uncritical pursuit of relevance we have actually courted irrelevance; by our breathless chase after relevance without a matching commitment to faithfulness, we have become not only unfaithful but irrelevant; by our determined efforts to redefine ourselves in ways that are more compelling to the modern world than are faithful to Christ, we have lost not only our identity but our authority and our relevance. Our crying need is to be faithful as well as relevant."

The authority of the Bible is being eclipsed in practice by the assumptions of the modern world. By the way, the company is now planning a magazine Bible aimed at teen guys. Whaley says teen guys can expect their version of the holy book to be a bit more explicit on sex and relationships. It will also feature articles on cars, music, outdoors, sports, and money.

Is the church losing her identity and credibility? Are we trading the eternal for the temporal, the lasting for the trendy, the essential for the trivia, the transcendent for the transient, and the profound for the mundane?

Revolve is representative of contemporary attacks on the Bible that must be taken seriously by serious Christians. Consider the following attacks on the Bible that *Revolve* unwittingly joins...

1. Adding to the Bible

Let me be clear. The editors of *Revolve* have not added anything to the text of the New Testament—at least not explicitly. But putting all the call-out boxes with advice, even imperatives, within the context and covers of God's Word passes them off as authoritative.

These call-out additions are not the same as notes in a study Bible. Whereas a study Bible's notes are there to explain what the Scriptures say, these *Revolve* additions are there to add in what the Scriptures do not say. And the brains and wisdom from which this data comes is suspect.

Listen to these words from the *Revolve* website...

Many teen girls are intimidated about reading the Bible. However, *Revolve* makes the New Testament approachable and helps readers understand biblical teaching through real life scenarios and familiar magazine features. To make the notes as relevant as possible, each has been written by women in their early twenties who have spent time with young girls and know what teens are looking for in life and from the Bible. Through this new Bible format, young girls learn to approach family, friends and life with Christian beliefs and morals, while at the same time not feeling excluded from pop culture.

In other words, the authorities are such because of their age and the advice they give is a self-help

therapy for fitting into pop culture. It is questionable whether or not the target audience will have the discernment to distinguish between the authority of the biblical text and that of the other "stuff." In effect then, the Bible is being added to with non-biblical material.

2. Editing the Bible

At issue here is the translation, or rather paraphrase that is used. The New Century Version is the text of choice for *Revolve*. It is not a pure translation, but rather a highly contemporized translation that over uses dynamic equivalence. As such, it is among the loosest in relation to the original text.

God did not have a speech impediment when He spoke His Word. He supernaturally froze the words, idioms, illustrations, and allusions. Resolving difficulties in understanding the text is the job of the preacher, not the translators.

There is also a not so subtle commentary on the importance of the Old Testament by its absence. The editors have commented that it is too big and complicated for such a format. So, what is the criteria for printing God's Word—size and complication? If that is the case, why did they choose to include the Book of Revelation?

3. Trivializing the Bible

At the heart of *Revolve* is the blatant attempt to package the words of Scripture as much like the world as possible. But notice what is left out in the call-out boxes—how to die to yourself, how to treasure Jesus above all else, how to clearly explain the gospel to someone, and how to make your focus God rather than yourself!

Most of the "extra stuff" in *Revolve* is little more than can be found in *Vogue* or *Seventeen*. It is trivial and attempts to help girls with things that have nothing to do with the claims and challenges of the New Testament.

On the same page as John 20, where the resurrection is narrated, are shopping tips! When the Gospel of Mark is introduced, it is called "the gospel for smarty pants." On the same page where the incarnation of Jesus is discussed by the Apostle Paul in Philippians 2, you find this "Beauty Secret:"

Applying Foundation—You need a good, balanced foundation for the rest of your makeup, kinda like Jesus is the strong foundation in our lives. Keep him as the base, and build everything on him. If it doesn't fit in his plan for you, it will fall off the foundation. Everything else will fit where it needs to go.

This is no mere illustration, it is a trivializing of the precious reality of Christ being the foundation of all living for the Christian.

4. Polluting the Bible

Flipping through *Revolve* is a bit like seeing a pure, pristine river with garbage floating down its current. There is a contamination of the pure stream of God's truth and authority. Would Paul have thought it distasteful? Remember his words in 1 Corinthians 2:4-5, "my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and power, so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God."

This biblezine puts man's wisdom (admittedly that of young men and women) parallel with the

infinite value of Scripture. The stream of God's wisdom becomes polluted by things such as "Guys Speak Out."

In a Guys Speak Out section on page 128, the question is asked of a hunk-a-rific guy—"What's most important to you when looking for a girl?" The answer given is not "God," or "Jesus," or even "spiritual things," rather it is "a good personality, someone who takes care of herself." So what is the intended application for the average 15 year old? Shockingly, it is to focus on self to attract guys, not God!

5. Temporalizing the Bible

Revolve attacks the eternity of the Word of God by making an edition that will be out of date in a very short time. Even the newspaper is out of date by tomorrow, and *Revolve* has so attached itself to the ever-changing culture that it is sure to have a short shelf life. Ahhh, but therein is the financial genius. As soon as it is out of date, the publisher can update the pictures, tweak the advice—and whamo, another culturally relevant magazine.

There is a disturbing presupposition going unchecked here. Do we really have to be like the world to reach the world? Do we really believe that the truth of God is eternal that it has relevance for every culture, time, and place?

Scripture is transcendent. But *Revolve's* emphasis on the here and now makes it inherently shallow.

6. Redirecting the Bible

The Bible is about God. But the editors of *Revolve* have tried to redirect the attention to man. The first thing you see when you open the cover is an advertisement that is entirely man-centered.

Senior editor at Transit, Kate Etue says, "*Revolve* is the most innovative, revolutionary Bible product for this generation of teen girls. By mixing pop-culture fashion magazine formats with the eternal truth of Scripture, we've found a way to make the Word of God exciting, relevant and fun for young women again."

Is the Bible's purpose to provide "fun for young women"? The editors seem to admit that the focus of *Revolve* is to make God's truth useful to girls. No well-meaning Christian would disagree with that motivation. But there is little of making much of God and the glory due His name.

7. Neutralizing the Bible

When Cindy Lauper sang her 1980's anthem, "Girls Just Want to Have Fun," none of us in Evangelicalism thought that this would end up being the criteria for the publication of Holy Scripture. The attempts to make the New Testament "fun" have taken the sting out of Scripture. Absent in the extra stuff is the profundity of truth, the heaviness of God, the otherworldliness of the Christian faith, and the awful reality of damning sin.

Os Guinness rightly observes:

The faith world of John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, John Jay, William Wiberforce, Hannah More, Lord Shaftsbury, Catherine Booth, Hudson Taylor, D.L. Moody, Charles Spurgeon, Oswald Chambers, Andrew Murray, Carl Henry, and John Stott is disappearing. In its place a new evangelicalism is arriving in which therapeutic self-concern overshadows knowing God,

spirituality displaces theology, end-times escapism crowds out day-to-day discipleship, marketing triumphs over mission, references to opinion polls outweigh reliance on biblical exposition, concerns for power and relevance are more obvious than concern for piety and faithfulness, talk of reinventing the church had replaced prayer for revival, and the characteristic evangelical passion for missionary enterprise is overpowered by the all-consuming drive to sustain the multiple business empires of the booming evangelical subculture.

Do the editors at Transit Books really believe that they have “found a way to make the Word of God exciting, relevant and fun”? And is this because of a fundamental belief that the Bible in its historical form is irrelevant?

Modern Evangelicalism has now stooped to new lows with the release of *Revolve*. Yes, the Bible can be challenging to understand and apply. It takes hard work (2 Tim 2:15). But to mix God's truth with the kind of peripheral data in *Revolve* is to neutralize the paralyzing and penetrating shock of holy revelation on the sinful soul.

One final comment. It is terribly ironic that the very last call-out box in The *Revolve* New Testament is a brief commentary on Revelation 22:18. The box is entitled: "Learn It & Live It." It reads:

Learn it: If anyone adds or takes away from the Scriptures, they will suffer disasters.

Live it: Don't exaggerate when you talk about the Scriptures. Don't mold them to fit your needs (emphasis added).

May God shelter those behind The *Revolve* New Testament from such disasters.

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