

## MAGNETS

I said farewell to my reputation on a Monday evening in February. The Facebook post had been written since December, but I promised Aaron I would give him a chance to talk to the elders of our church before I posted it. For two months, the announcement sat in the Drafts folder of my email account, growing more potent in my imagination as it aged, ripening like a cheese:

Dear friends,

I'm delighted to announce that I have a book coming out with InterVarsity Press this August! But given the book's topic, I should probably mention a few other things too:

(1) I'm gay. (2) Because of my commitment to follow Jesus and the way I understand the Bible, I'm choosing to remain celibate. (3) No matter who you are, I continue to love you just as I always have. If you're LGBTQ and pursuing same-sex sexual expression or marriage, I love you. If you're a Christian who's troubled or

offended by my very existence as a gay man, I love you. If you think I've gotten Jesus or my sexuality all wrong, I love you. Perhaps you'll stop loving me, and that will break my heart, but I won't stop loving you.

If you're full of questions for me, perhaps I can interest you in a forthcoming book, now available for preorder on Amazon.

One closing request: if you feel the need to say something less-than-delightful to me about all this, please do it privately. I don't want to stifle you, but I want this space to remain as safe as it possibly can for the people I love all over the messy, glorious spectra of theology and sexuality.

The Amazon link at the end of the announcement displayed my book cover, a gray outline of half my face beside the words *Single, Gay, Christian*. When my editor first showed me the cover to get my approval, I wanted to object: "But it's my face!"

Then again, I concluded after a few hours of angst, it was also my name on the cover. It was my life. Why shouldn't it be my face?

I obsessed over every word I had written in that Facebook post and the corresponding book, imagining the vast and contradictory range of ways people might respond. The conservatives, I worried, would find me far too progressive, and the progressives would find me far too conservative. Every camp seemed prone to vilify people whose thinking was not identical to their own; and I, to the best of my knowledge, thought identically to almost no one.

I fantasized that if I found the perfect words, I could preclude every objection and keep the whole world happy. I could stand in the chasm between crowds, making everyone feel simultaneously loved and respected and understood. But each time I assuaged one set of possible concerns, I seemed to invite a new onslaught of criticism. I softened the blow toward one crowd only to fan the flames of another.

People-pleasing was one of my first and most enduring talents. I mastered the art of selective self-presentation, learning to emphasize whichever of my traits were most palatable to a given crowd while minimizing the bits of me that wouldn't please them. At the age of twenty-six, I was at the height of my game. When people needed a leader, I took charge and pretended to want authority. If the mission brief called for followers, I could be the sheepest of sheep. My academic colleagues knew me as open-minded, intellectually curious, and unusually smiley for a grad student. Among evangelicals, I was a golden boy: biblically literate, musically competent, excited about Jesus, comfortable on a stage. I knew when to talk about politics, when to talk about theology, when to be lighthearted, when to sit in silence and let someone else do the talking.

I knew how to manage my reputation. I knew a recipe for disaster when I saw one.

That Monday evening in February, alone in my apartment, I sat at my laptop with my finger poised over Facebook's "Post" button. I read and reread the four little paragraphs that spelled the end of my carefully controlled reputation. The moment after I clicked "Post," I slammed

down the laptop lid and sat pressed against the back of my chair, as if I was on the climb hill of a roller coaster. I breathed too fast, feeling suddenly hot in the face and cold in the chest, waiting for the moment I would teeter over the roller coaster's peak and the world would blur out of control.

My phone started buzzing. The blur began.

On roller coasters, there's a fine line between exhilaration and terror.

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I've always aspired to be likable. When my twelfth-grade Bible teacher asked our class to make a list of the ten highest ideals in our lives, I gave the number four slot to "Being Nice." I worried, upon completing the list, that "Being Nice" might be a shallow and insufficiently Jesus-y goal. Then again, I reasoned, too many Christians (both historical and contemporary) had used Christianity as an excuse for heinous and selfish behavior. I would be a Christian who balanced the scales by bearing witness to the kindness and gentleness of Jesus. I would be likable, and people would like me so much that they wanted to like Jesus too.

I never dreamed I would turn into the sort of person who receives occasional hate mail. I never dreamed I would find myself called into the middle of a fiery conflict, reluctantly accruing enemies on both sides of the battlefield. But God has a screwy sense of humor.

I don't disagree with my high-school self that following Jesus ought to be attractive to people. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control — Paul's list of fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23 would fit well in a how-to book on likability. Jesus was wildly attractive to huge masses of people. Would it be such a wonder if his followers carried at least a trace of that same allure?

On the other hand, Jesus also made ferocious enemies. He was magnetic in both senses, repelling as well as attracting. His most important work happened not through his accolades but through a death sentence. Would it be such a wonder if Jesus' followers garnered the same vitriol — if we, like bits of metal in the presence of a magnet, became magnets ourselves?

A good reputation is a great thing when it happens as a byproduct of our obedience to Jesus. But reputations, when pursued as ends in themselves, are poor companions to obedience. We too easily wind up trying to please everyone, sacrificing sincerity for palatability, misguidedly protecting the gospel from its own radical weirdness. We too easily take the gold trinkets of other people's opinions and melt them into a golden calf, remaking the gift of God into the object of our worship.

"Woe to you," says Jesus in Luke 6, "when everyone speaks well of you." I used to worry, back before the evening of that fateful Facebook post, that perhaps everyone was speaking too well of me.

I'm less worried now.

If you're looking for tips on coming out as gay and celibate, I don't recommend doing it the way I did, by writing a controversial memoir and turning your private life into a public spectacle for strangers to debate on social media. I certainly don't recommend googling yourself afterward, tallying up all the times you've been called a heretic or an apostate, the book reviews and podcasts and radio broadcasts dedicated to proving how little you love Jesus.

"Whatever you do," my wise author friend Heather advised me, "*don't* read about yourself online. Or if you must do it, do it once, get it out of your system, and never do it again. You're already getting enough criticism you *can't* avoid. Why make yourself miserable reading criticism you *can* avoid?"

She was right, and I knew it—so naturally, I ignored her advice. Once I started paying attention to the naysayers, I couldn't seem to stop. People's anger toward me was irresistible the way candy corn is irresistible. (Every time I eat candy corn, I remember after the first mouthful how disgusting it is, like sweet candle wax colored with crayons. And still I keep eating it, hating myself with every bite, a loathing that is also an insatiable desire.)

Besides, my new reputation wasn't all bad. In addition to the people who hated me, there were people who loved me, often far more effusively than I deserved. And there were people who regarded me as an oddity, neither hero nor villain but something morally neutral, like a circus monkey wearing spangled pants.

I gorged myself on people's opinions, reading and rereading, not sure what held my gaze except my own perverse narcissism. I had thought I was done caring about my reputation. I thought I'd said goodbye once and for all. But it turned out I still cared what people thought about me. I cared more than ever.

In the old days, my mission had been to make everyone happy, and I had believed it was possible to succeed. Every time I was criticized, I would alter something about myself in response, hoping I could eventually appeal to everyone. But when my book came out (and I came out with it), I realized for the first time that someone will always dislike us for the very same reason someone else admires us. We don't get to choose whether we're criticized. All we choose is whose criticism we're going to trust.

Googling myself, I learned that Gregory Coles was both "unflinchingly humble" and "disgustingly arrogant." His story was "gut-wrenchingly hard" but also "quite easy." His book was both "thoroughly biblical" and "blasphemous," "too self-centered" but also "not a self-centered book." He was "honest" but "insincere," "gracious" but "condescending," "joyful" but "whiny," "winsome" but "utterly offensive."

Reputations are like surveys, given to the whole crowd regardless of expertise, with every opinion holding equal weight. It's easy, when the poll numbers are in our favor, to root our sense of belonging in our good reputations. But if we only feel at home when everyone likes us, we'll never truly be at rest. A home built on reputation is no sturdier than a foundation laid in Jell-O.

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Jesus could have learned a thing or two from the Pharisees about maintaining an upstanding reputation. The Pharisees were masters of self-presentation, experts at keeping their religious bona fides well polished. They knew which words sounded holiest, which parties to attend or avoid, which robes had the longest tassels and which sackcloth was best for advertising a fast. If you surveyed the Jewish world in the early first century and asked who was winning at spirituality, the Pharisees would have been favored contenders.

Jesus, on the other hand, had a pesky habit of hanging out with the lowlifes of society, getting tarnished with muck and guilt by association. The survey numbers on Jesus were mixed, and he didn't waste much time defending his reputation. He didn't dress the part of a rightful king, didn't tell everyone again and again how perfect he was. He simply kept living like himself in the midst of opposition. He kept acting like the Son of God.

Before I signed the contract for *Single, Gay, Christian*, my prescient agent, Mike, made me promise to stay "humble and non-combative" in the face of criticism. One practical implication of my promise was that I chose to never publicly rebut any of the book's critics. Saying nothing felt like a slow death, like watching a wound bleed without reaching for a bandage. I hated being unable to set the record straight. (Though perhaps *straight* is the wrong



word.) But as I bled, I realized the only thing dying was my own obsession with being thought well of.

There's something remarkably awful and wonderful about being accused of not really loving Jesus, and then responding simply by continuing to love Jesus anyway.

I said farewell to my reputation on a Monday evening in February, and I've been saying farewell ever since. I'm not done caring what people think of me. I have so much pride left to bleed out. But on the other side of this slow death, I hear the whisper of the only voice that matters, welcoming me into the world I was made for, the place I will belong once and for all.