



the fellowship message

"Proclaiming freedom for the captives." ISAIAH 61

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Pursuing a Legacy of Holiness by Russ Sweet

What does it mean to persevere toward becoming whole in Christ Jesus? Sometimes we think we have arrived, but then we enter a new life stage. We recognize that we have become complacent or even cavalier, and we realize that we have so much work left to do. Circumstances may open new wounds or reopen old wounds that require us to deal with the issues in our lives. This has been my story and my experience in dealing with my own sexual brokenness.

At the age of eleven, I accepted Christ as my personal Savior while attending church camp. Like many people, I thought that would solve all of my problems. I had felt uncomfortable with my sexuality even before I hit my teen years. If anything, my salvation experience only heightened my awareness of what I was dealing with, but offered no opportunity for answers or hope. Dealing with same-sex attraction wasn't a topic to discuss with my youth pastor, and certainly wasn't a topic to discuss with my family. In fact, who could I discuss it with? And so, I struggled secretly—in high school, in college and in adulthood. I dated girls a lot, though I was shy about it. I had developed a belief in the sanctity of marriage, as well as purity before marriage. In fact, I really looked forward to a life-long companion in a wife. I buried myself in all kinds of books about biblical marriage and Christian masculinity. I've often looked back on those books as me trying to find redemption from the struggles I was feeling.

I met the woman who would become my wife the first day we arrived at college. We developed a fast relationship. In less than two years we were engaged, but our engagement lasted over a year, as we finished our bachelor degrees. So where did my same-sex attraction live during this time? It was still there, but only in my head. I believed marriage was going to solve it once and for all, and I simply failed to deal with it. If I had an issue that required counseling, I only peeled the onion so far, and then I was done. Even then, I knew my shame and guilt about my struggle was a slow-growing cancer. I continued to shove it down deeper, until I discovered the internet, and things began to accelerate out of control.

In 2001, my wife discovered my history, and from then on, I really needed some help to preserve my marriage. Unfortunately, I focused on my pain through this time, and failed to recognize her wounding and betrayal. I felt like the victim, because I was ashamed at getting caught. I failed to admit that in my own brokenness, I had shattered my wife's world. In effect, I was minimizing my sin and blaming everyone and everything else. In I John 1:8 it says, "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us."



Russ is an alumnus of PF's Taking Back Ground program.

What I didn't know was that God was preparing to redeem my struggle long before I got caught in my sin. Several years previous, I had read about Exodus International and had filed it away in my head, thinking "that may come in handy someday." Well, the time had come. I looked up Portland Fellowship online, met with Phil Hobizal, and joined the Taking Back Ground program in 2001. To say I was a willing and fully-engaged participant would be a gross overstatement. Like so many things in my life, I wanted to try to look good on the outside while continuing to engage in bad behavior. Matthew 6:24 speaks of "serving two masters". This definitely described me as I struggled to overcome my sexual sin, and yet, wasn't willing to fully walk away from it. I was angry at God and myself for being in this position. I came into TBG in a huff, and pretty much left the same way. I did change some, but it wasn't what it could have been.



In 2018, I decided to return to PF and reinvest myself in the TBG program. The main difference this time was that I decided to submit to the process and the teaching. Did I successfully complete every lesson, and make it both years without a slip into sin? Of course not. There were ups and downs. The greatest news is that I didn't linger there or begin the slippery slope into the abyss. The reality is that not only was TBG an investment in my healing, it was an investment in my ministry, my marriage, and most importantly, my relationship with God. This second time through TBG, I dug into the truth about who I am in Christ, and who God wants me to become. I had parental issues to deal with. With both my parents being deceased, I had to let go of a lot of the hurts and misunderstandings. I learned about accepting what I cannot change and moving on. I realized that both my parents had their own demons to contend with, and how their cycle of brokenness affected my experiences. As much as I wanted to blame them for everything, viewing their experiences and mine with compassion allowed me to put that part of my life to rest.

My marriage is stronger. I am blessed with a very loving, gracious and, might I add, perceptive wife. I have had many failings since 2003, and along the way we have had difficult conversations—her loss of trust in me, and the pain of me wounding her all over again. That cycle needed to stop, and I put much-needed boundaries in place. My wife and I are both physically and emotionally

attracted to each other, but too many times, shame and guilt have stood in the way of me completely accepting her love, grace and belief in me as a man. I continue to work on hearing her support and compliments as genuine and real, instead of hearing them through the filter of "I don't deserve to be loved this way". I have often said that when my wife married me, she did not sign on for this. And yet, she loves me more than any human being has. To be loved without conditions is so powerful—it is really what gives me the strength to carry on.

SSA is not what defines me. It is a condition that I struggle with as a result of living in a fallen world. It doesn't mean I stop pressing on in God's healing work in my life; the Lord is using it to teach me to be a better man as I run my race. In my TBG small groups and large group discussions, I found those who spoke truth into my life. When I failed in my efforts, I found both love and support, as well as difficult discussions about what I was going through. It was uncomfortable, but the discomfort is where my growth came from. My same-sex struggle has been mostly based in envy. I sought masculine affirmation from men who appeared to have and be everything I lacked, which developed into unhealthy attractions. Now, as I share with friends about my struggle, I am building relationships with men in healthy ways, men who spur me on in my walk with Jesus. My confidence in who I am in Christ gives me the courage to share and hopefully minister to others.

Moving forward, I intend to apply the lessons from TBG to many other areas of my life. I know God wants me to be whole and holy in my relationship with Him and with others. As I enter my later years in life, I think about my legacy: *How do I want to be remembered?* I have had great teaching, sat under loving leaders and received unimaginable love from the people at PF. However, the staff will be the first to say they can't fix you—but God can restore you. And that is an on-going process we will continue until that day. My life verse continues to be Philippians 1:6—"...being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." That is how I want to be remembered—I want it to be said of me that I lived well, loved deeply and demonstrated a life of holiness.

Exploring Taking Back Ground: A Six-Part Series by Phil Hobizal

Section Five—Breaking Free

This is the fifth installment of a six-part series, where founding director Phil Hobizal shares the heart behind the lessons for each section of our TBG program. To read the previous articles in this series, visit www.portlandfellowship.com/newsletter.php.

In part two of Year Two, we explore subjects that involve personal responsibility—“Breaking Free” from thoughts and behaviors that are in conflict with our faith in Christ. Jesus’ death and resurrection gives us freedom from the consequences of our sin and the hope of new life. In our redemptive state, God calls us to die to our old selves. This involves choice, which also means activating our wills to do what is right. He’s given each of us freewill, seeking a people who choose Him.

Forsaking old patterns of behavior and thought is painful, but that pain only lasts a moment in comparison to the future that God has set before us. Sadly, those who oppose our message—that a person’s sexual preference and behavior can change—use terms like “conversion therapy” and “sexual repression” to imply that seeking change is something foisted upon individuals through guilt and manipulation. The reality is, those seeking change have made a personal choice, aided and encouraged by the Spirit of God, to live a different life. We will need to make hard decisions. However, there is comfort in knowing that God is with us every step of the way.

Many of us have struggled with various forms of addiction, such as drugs, alcohol and sex. The vicious cycle of dependence is devastating to our souls and requires honest assessment and accountability, knowing when to reach out for help. As we have found, things don’t just happen to us; there are triggers that lead to our responses, and the devil is well aware of how to tempt us. God wants to break those patterns and establish healthy choices in our lives. We are not called to manage our sin, but to forsake it.

Pornographic images are a formidable enemy and have become even more powerful through the internet. These images pollute our thinking and rob us of the pure conscience God designed for us. Instead of providing the intimacy it promises, this fantasy world leaves us empty and isolated. Sexual imagery coupled with self pleasure reinforces biological responses to SSA. Choosing instead to be holy in our thoughts and actions paves the way for a fruitful life. Cleansing our minds by confession and prayer strengthens us to “...demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and...take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.” (2 Cor. 10:5).

The battle for our minds began in the Garden, when Satan asked Eve, “Did God really say...?” (Gen. 3:1), bringing into question the character of God and the truthfulness of His Word. Doubt is the enemy of faith. Our journey is one that is solely based on the promises God has made. We hope in what we cannot see (Heb. 11:1), believing that “...he who began a good work in [us] will...carry it on to completion...” (Phil. 1:6).

Another obstacle to overcome is self-centeredness. Disappointments, wounds and insecurities can cause some of us to be overly self-aware. Still others are bound by a sense of self-importance and superiority, seeking praise to feed their egos. Our perspective is distorted by the inability to be objective. We must become a sober people, not thinking of ourselves more highly or lowly than we really are (Rom. 12:3), but coming instead to see a true reflection of ourselves in God’s eyes as we fix our gaze on Jesus.

Comparison easily leads to envying the physical attributes and talents of others. We have been uniquely designed by God, and no amount of desiring what another has or is can change that. Self-acceptance honors God’s creative work in us. As believers in Christ, we must develop a lifestyle of repentance, facing the reality of our broken human state. The Holy Spirit enables us to bear the fruit of self-control, saying “yes” to what is good and right, as Jesus did.

Taking Back Ground: Section Five

- Addiction
- Pornography and Masturbation
- Deception: The Power of Unbelief
- Self-Centeredness
- Our Identity in Christ
- Envy
- Repentance

september - october calendar & services

september 11 & october 9 hope group

For friends and family of gay or trans-identifying loved ones. Join us for a time of prayer, support and encouragement. *Please check the RSVP page to see if we're meeting online or in person.*

7:00 p.m.

To RSVP for this month's Hope Group, please go to:

portlandfellowship.com/rsvp.php

tuesdays in september tbg leadership training

Volunteer leaders will gather to learn and grow together in preparation for the upcoming Taking Back Ground program.

7-8:30 p.m.

tuesdays in october taking back ground

PF's intensive discipleship program for men and women struggling with unwanted same-sex attraction. Group for wives and fiancées also.

7-9:30 p.m.

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Stay connected for updates, prayer requests and inspirational resources. Like and follow our page at: www.facebook.com/portlandfellowship/

additional updates

www.portlandfellowship.com
Please take advantage of your online profile. If you don't have a username, please email or call.

speakers, counseling and support for youth

can be set up through the office.

Differing Views Document: Español

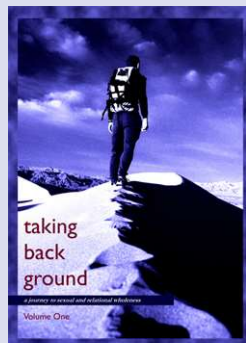
We are very excited to announce that we now have our *Differing Views on Christian Doctrine, Identity and Homosexuality* chart available in Spanish. Special thanks to our ministry partners at MILAMEX (Mexico City, Mexico), for helping us with the translation. The Spanish document can be found on our website, www.portlandfellowship.com/clarity.php.



Estamos muy emocionados anunciar que nuestro documento, Diferentes Perspectivas de Doctrina Cristiana sobre la Identidad y Homosexualidad, ya está disponible en español. Les damos agradecimientos especiales a nuestros colaboradores ministeriales de MILAMEX (D.F., México), por ayudarnos con la traducción. El documento en español se puede encontrar en nuestro sitio web.

Taking Back Ground + Wives Group 2020-21

We are currently receiving applications and doing intakes for our 2020-2021 Taking Back Ground program. TBG is our two-year discipleship series that offers support and encouragement to Christians struggling with unwanted same-sex attraction and/or gender confusion. We also offer a wives group for wives and fiancées of men struggling with homosexuality.



Taking Back Ground takes place on Tuesday evenings October-May, and includes worship, large group discussion, small group accountability and prayer. For more info and registration, please visit our website or call the office at 503-235-6364.

**We are continuing to follow all state/county health guidelines regarding Covid-19 and group gatherings. We hope to have some TBG elements in person at PF, but we will be utilizing Zoom calls as well. We'll keep all registered participants updated via email.*



The Fellowship Message is a monthly publication of Portland Fellowship, a ministry proclaiming freedom from homosexuality through the power of Jesus Christ.

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