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Not Your Grandmother's New Testament: A Look at "Revolve"

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The folks at TransitBooks, a division of Thomas Nelson, Inc., think they have come up with a way to meet that challenge, at least when it comes to teenage girls. They recently released Revolve: The Complete New Testament, and they are getting a lot of attention.

Those looking for Revolve in the Bible section of your local bookstore may be disappointed. This isn't your grandmother's New Testament—not by a long shot. Revolve looks more like the latest issue of Cosmopolitan or Seventeen magazines. The headlines on the book's dramatic front cover promise features like, "Beauty Secrets You've Never Heard Before," and "Guys Speak Out on Tons of Important Issues." Three beautiful and smiling girls look out from the cover photo, and they could just as well be looking out from Glamour or Elle. This product is hip. [see the Revolve web site]

Laurie Whaley, Thomas Nelson's brand manager for Revolve, told Fox News that the company's research indicated that "the message of the Bible didn't need a makeover." But, "perhaps the traditional black leather Bible did, in fact, need a makeover." She went on to say that teenage girls said that the traditional Bible is intimidating, or "freaky."

What do girls read? "Magazines, magazines, magazines," reports Whaley. Armed with that insight, the TransitBooks crew went to work producing a New Testament that looks, inside and out, like a magazine. Some have dubbed Revolve a "biblezine," merging the Bible with the magazine format. According to Christianity Today, 40 thousand copies have already been sold, and Thomas Nelson is quickly printing 60 thousand more. Who could be opposed to this?

Well, Dr. Russ Moore, for one. Director of the Carl F. H. Henry Institute for Evangelical Engagement and assistant professor of theology at Southern Seminary, Moore told MSNBC that Revolve "tends to trivialize the message of the Gospel." The format of the product and its focus on issues like cosmetics and romance actually compromise the Bible's message, he argued. [see Baptist Press coverage]

The Gospel isn't glamorous, Moore insists. "It's a message that's not glamorous at all. It's a message of a crucified and resurrected Christ who calls all people everywhere to reconciliation with God through Him." [see Henry Institute site]

"I don't think it trivializes," responded Whaley. "I understand the concern of trivializing. I think what it does is it pulls out points of reference for teen girls today, and shows them indeed that the Bible and that the message of the Bible and that the teaching of the Bible . . . is prevalent throughout the New Testament."

So, who's right? Is Revolve a great step forward in getting the Bible into the hands of teenage girls, or is it a slick trivialization of the Word of God? After reviewing Revolve for myself, I must report that the reality went beyond my expectations drawn from news reports. This product just might take trivialization to a whole new level.

The sidebars, notes, and short articles scattered throughout the text sometimes deal with the accompanying New Testament passages, but not always. With the text of Matthew 3, girls will find this beauty secret: “As you apply your sunscreen, use that time to talk to God. Tell him how grateful you are that he made you. Soon, you’ll be so used to talking to him, it might become as regular and familiar as shrinking your pores.” Do sunscreen and shrinking pores really belong on the same page as the baptism of Jesus?

Many of the articles contain good material directed to adolescent girls. The authors stress modesty, chastity, and obedience to parents. The notes explaining the biblical text are helpful and sound, and the “blab” sections deal responsibly with teen questions. Revolve was carefully written and attractively designed. It is easy to see why thousands of copies have already been sold.

But what is Revolve’s real message? The New Testament text is all there, but in the New Century Version, a dynamic-equivalence translation that is among the loosest in relation to the original text. The problem is not with the New Testament, of course, but with the accompanying messages. The girls in the photographs are beautiful and thin. Given Revolve’s mimicry of a glamour magazine, how could it be otherwise? Doesn’t this send the wrong message? Isn’t the Bible far more concerned with inner beauty?

One of the “Guys Speak Out” features asks a teenage boy to describe his ideal girl. His answer: “I would have to say someone who takes care of herself and cares about her appearance, but not obsessively. Someone who always looks her best at any moment—because her personality is so great.” Nothing about character, convictions, or a relationship with Christ?

Thomas Nelson is right to be concerned about biblical illiteracy, not only among teenagers, but among Americans of all ages. The motivation behind Revolve is healthy, necessary, and urgent. Laurie Whaley and her team at TransitBooks are to be appreciated for their concern for young girls and their need for the Gospel. The reality is that all thinking Christians concerned about lost people struggle with questions of how to reach secular people who know practically nothing about God, the Gospel, or the Bible.

The problem with Revolve is not heresy or a denial of the Gospel. Not at all. Revolve represents one of those issues that requires the Church to use its critical judgment about what makes evangelistic methods—or formats for the Bible—appropriate or inappropriate.

The biblical text may appear “freaky” to this generation of teenagers [or to their parents, for that matter], but packaging the New Testament as a glamour magazine crosses an important line. That line represents the trivialization of the biblical text and confusion about God’s design for happiness and wholeness in our broken lives.

Important questions revolve around Revolve and a similar product now promised for teenage boys. When it comes to Revolve, perhaps we should remember Marshall MacLuhan’s warning— the medium is the message.

