

CONFESSIONS
OF A PASTOR

CRAIG
GROESCHEL

Multnomah Publishers® Sisters, Oregon

CONFESSIONS OF A PASTOR
published by Multnomah Publishers, Inc.

© 2006 by Craig Groeschel

International Standard Book Number: 1-59052-720-8

Cover photo by Christian Sangree

Interior design and typeset by Katherine Lloyd, The DESK, Sisters, Oregon

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from:

The Holy Bible, New International Version

© 1973, 1984 by International Bible Society,

used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House

Other Scripture quotations are from:

Holy Bible, New Living Translation (NLT)

© 1996. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

All rights reserved.

The Holy Bible, New King James Version (NKJV)

© 1984 by Thomas Nelson, Inc.

Multnomah is a trademark of Multnomah Publishers, Inc.,
and is registered in the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office.
The colophon is a trademark of Multnomah Publishers, Inc.

Printed in the United States of America

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in
a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means—
electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise—
without prior written permission.

For information:

MULTNOMAH PUBLISHERS, INC.

601 N. LARCH STREET • SISTERS, OREGON 97759

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Groeschel, Craig.

Confessions of a pastor / by Craig Groeschel.

p. cm.

ISBN 1-59052-720-8

1. Groeschel, Craig. 2. Clergy--United States--Biography. 3. Christian life. I. Title.

BR1725.G92A3 2006

277.3'083092--dc22

[B]

2006019252

06 07 08 09 10—10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0

I Have to Work Hard to Stay Sexually Pure

Ouch! It's tough to admit those words to myself. It's even worse to see them written on a page, where that embarrassing admission just sits there, glaring back at me—where other people will see it, too.

I wish my story was clean. I'd like to tell you that when my wife, Amy, and I dated, we loved Jesus so much that keeping our hands to ourselves was easy...a piece of cake: no heavy make-out sessions, no wandering hands, no runaway thoughts.

That would be a lie.

I wish that when I became a pastor, all sexual temptations vanished—that God supernaturally shielded my eyes, body, and mind, that all past sinful thoughts and memories disappeared, that every temptation to glance at the wrong things faded, that my mind became like Christ's.

CONFESSIONS OF A PASTOR

If only that were true.

Before we continue, you need to know that this topic makes my wife uncomfortable. Amy (who is simply amazing) would tell you she's nervous about my transparent confessions—especially those regarding sexual vulnerabilities. However, because she believes in Christ's power to set people free, she completely supports this work.

Most people avoid discussing sexual purity, especially around churches. When it is discussed, it's generally superficial, out of touch, and watered-down, or it's the other extreme—the heavy-handed, sex-is-bad-and-only-for-procreation-so-whatever-you-do-DON'T-enjoy-it message.

Not here. Truth, authenticity, transparency, and hope-filled grace are my goals.

And speaking of truth, I must admit that I am, for better or worse, writing this chapter from a guy's perspective. The male experience is what I know, so I'll mostly deal with that. But don't ever think that sexual purity is only a male issue. Women have to work hard to avoid temptation, too. You'll just have to forgive me if I don't talk about the ladies' side quite as much.

Okay, I'm going to type fast and get the truth out, blunt and to the point, without holding back. Some of what you read may embarrass you. Parts may make you smile. But if you're honest, as I will be, you may find you identify with much of my story.

SEXUALLY CURIOUS KID

My childhood was characterized by intense curiosity about the opposite sex. You know, innocent (or not-so-innocent) inquisitiveness. Most kids have it.

For a few years, I settled for casual observations of the differences between boys and girls. One day, the pressure just became too much. With unbridled passion, I stripped the clothes off my sister's Barbie Doll. Barbie was buck naked... and I liked it. I'd seen my first naked woman. The fact that she was plastic made no difference to me.

I discovered nude pygmies in a mid-1970s issue of *National Geographic* magazine and stared contentedly at them. My friends joined me. We'd laugh, tell jokes, feel guilty...and then look some more.

That was just the beginning.

Some families had cable television with R-rated movie channels. Mine didn't—but we had the fuzzy channel. Although the TV signal was encrypted and the images were blurred, I discovered that if you watched long enough, you could occasionally see something that looked like a naked grownup...doing grownup sexual things. Then it would quickly become fuzzy again. I loved the fuzzy channel.

Up to this point, my experiences were pretty innocent compared to many young children today. Naked Barbies are the least of our worries. Because of the Internet, kids have

CONFESSIONS OF A PASTOR

easier access to more porn than ever before. In a recent study, nine out of ten children between the ages of eight and sixteen said they had seen porn online. And most of them said they stumbled upon it accidentally while doing their homework.² My relative naïveté remained intact until I was ten—when my first exposure to out-and-out porn shattered it. My childhood friend, Stephen, also ten, was my supplier. Or maybe I should say Stephen's dad was the unwitting purveyor for both of us. Stephen had discovered his dad's hidden stash of *Playboy* magazines. My lucky friend beamed when he boasted his discovery to me. Together we inspected those pages in total awe.

I clearly remember the adrenaline rush driving the turn of each page. I didn't know what it was like to do drugs, but it must have felt similar to the hormone-charged thrill of looking at these off-limits pictures.

I remembered the pictures vividly—as if they were burned onto the hard drive of my brain. Years later, I could still recall exactly what I'd seen. I couldn't always remember to do my homework, but I could retrieve Miss February's image in an instant.

It didn't help preserve what shreds of sexual innocence remained when, at the prepubescent age of twelve, I was introduced to the idea of masturbation by—believe it or not—the teacher of a church sex-education class. According to her logic, relieving the tension of this God-given impulse would keep us from doing something worse.

I HAVE TO WORK HARD TO STAY SEXUALLY PURE

My parents were furious.

Armed with “revelations” from porn, sporadic parental advice, encouragement to masturbate, and many ideas from my friends (most of which I later discovered were not true), I ventured into the world of high school: car dates, proms, short skirts, truth or dare, beer...and bad movies. All were the makings of a very dangerous time.

The slippery slope of sin became steeper and more slippery every week. First, I made out with a girl. Then I went to second base. Third. Before long, I'd given away my virginity.

I knew I'd never get it back.

FROM CASANOVA TO CHRISTIAN

For a season, I pursued selfish, sinful sexual satisfaction. I'll spare you the details...but it got ugly fast.

By the time I was a sophomore in college, I was dragging around heavy chains of sin. My image—and not my will—drove all my decisions. I was trapped in daily-woven webs of deceit.

Desperate, I reached out to God for freedom.

He didn't waste any time, and He didn't skimp on His life-changing power. One ordinary day, I was walking across the college campus to class. An older man who was a member of The Gideons—an organization whose Bibles you've seen in motel and hospital rooms—was handing out free New

CONFESSIONS OF A PASTOR

Testament Bibles. Spotting me—and maybe sensing the fear and pain welling up inside me—he said warmly, “You look like you could use one of these.” Was he ever right.

For the first time in my life, I started reading the Bible. I devoured it. I couldn’t get enough. As I began pursuing God, He was pursuing me. Finally on one fantastic day, I surrendered all to Him...or so I thought.

My life changed immediately. The reality of the risen Christ—His love and grace—quickly filled my heart. In a single moment, I was transformed. Saved. Forgiven. And very different. My party friends said I “got religion.” This phenomenon was the talk of my small college, on par with a mass UFO sighting. The wildest hell-raiser on campus had become a Bible-thumper, a Jesus freak, a fanatic. Overnight, God dominated every area of my life, except one.

I still wanted to have sex.

Truthfully, it had become a part of my life. To say I “wanted it” is really an understatement. At the time, I believed I needed it. I didn’t know how to let it go—or even if I really wanted to. But I knew the fight for purity was one I *had* to win.

So, finally, after a lot of battling with myself and my sinfulness, I surrendered, completely, 100 percent. I prayed sincerely, “God, I won’t fulfill my selfish, lustful desires. I promise I’ll live a sexually pure life.”

One short prayer, one tough road ahead.

I HAVE TO WORK HARD TO STAY SEXUALLY PURE
LIKE A VIRGIN

Although that road was filled with potholes and broken glass, it was also marked by a series of greater and greater victories.

For two years, I completely stopped dating. People thought I was out of my mind, but I was obeying what I believed God had shown me. The next girl I dated, I married.

Although we weren't perfectly pure while dating, Amy and I waited until our honeymoon to share the gift of lovemaking. This decision became a blessing that no one can ever take from us.

On our honeymoon night, I prepared a bowl of water. Imitating Jesus, I knelt and washed my bride's feet, explaining that I would serve her as Christ served His church. We read the Bible together. We prayed with passion. Then I unwrapped my wedding gift, and we shared in the holy, right, and pure gift of married lovemaking. Sealing our covenant vows was one of the most spiritual moments of my life. For me, it was confirmation of God's healing miracle. I experienced sex as though I'd been reborn as a brand-new virgin.

Married at last, I assumed all the sexual temptations I once battled would vanish.

How wrong I was.

CONFESSIONS OF A PASTOR

FLIRTING WITH DANGER

I was a newlywed and an associate pastor, and no one I knew talked about sexual temptation. I kept my thoughts and struggles to myself. Most people do.

Plenty of guys would probably say that my vulnerabilities were minor and normal. I'd occasionally do a double take at a woman—a woman I wasn't married to, that is—or watch an R-rated movie with lots of skin. My little indulgences weren't doing any real harm...or so I thought.

My long sleepwalk ended during one painfully sobering moment on a ministry trip. I had just finished preaching and was at the airport waiting to fly home. Before boarding the plane, I went to use the men's restroom. In the privacy of a restroom stall, I noticed a magazine on the floor next to the toilet. I leaned over to see what it was. It was a *Playboy* magazine.

Suddenly my heart raced. I felt that familiar druglike rush. There I was, all alone, an anonymous man in a private stall at an airport far from home...a *Playboy* within easy reach.

But I wasn't just any guy. I was a Christian...and I was a pastor.

I wish I could tell you I thought, *How sad. I'll pray for the poor person who bought this. I'll throw it away so no one else will be tempted.* I wish I could tell you that, but it wouldn't be true. Instead, I was seized by a sinful desire to look.

I HAVE TO WORK HARD TO STAY SEXUALLY PURE

By the grace of God, I didn't. Somehow I came to my senses and escaped the trap. But I also realized just how vulnerable I was, and it scared me. What was *wrong* with me? I loved my wife. I loved Jesus...but I still *wanted* to look.

Years later I told that story in church. Many were shocked at my honesty. To my surprise, several men chuckled and said, "I would've looked," or, "Man, you're *way* too serious about purity. Looking at that stuff is no big deal."

For me, sexual purity has become a profoundly big deal. It should be for you, too. Why am I so serious about purity? Because God's serious about it. Ephesians 5:3 says, "But among you there must not be *even a hint* of sexual immorality" (emphasis mine).

Not even a hint.

What is a hint of sexual impurity? Certainly looking lustfully at someone in a magazine, on television, or in person would fall somewhere north of the "hint" mark, wouldn't it? Jesus said that just to *look* lustfully at someone is the same as committing adultery. Yet I know many people who say, "I'm just window shopping, not buying."

How's your thought life? Do you catch your mind wandering to sexually explicit thoughts about someone besides your spouse? Impurity. Laughing at that sexual joke in the break room at work? Impurity. Are you honoring God by reading women's magazines with articles like, "73 Sinful Ways to Drive Your Man Crazy in Bed"? Or by dropping

CONFESSIONS OF A PASTOR

sexual innuendos? Or masturbating? The list could go on and on.

You have to quit playing your little rationalization games. You know you're justifying sin. It's wrong. Worse, it's dangerous.

What if you're a single person? What should your standard of purity be? Just fooling around? You know, "doing everything but"? A quick game of naked Twister? How about a sleepover? We won't mess around. We'll just cuddle in bed.

WARNING! BOUNDARY VIOLATION!

Why are those things wrong? Because they're intimate acts reserved for marriage. Sex. Undoing bras or zippers. Messin' around. All these are appropriate for marriage...but none are appropriate outside of marriage.

I have performed wedding ceremonies for three couples who saved their first *kiss* for their wedding day. Why? Because they saw kissing as an intimate act reserved for marriage. Now *that's* a commitment to purity.

Not even a hint.

For me, sexual purity is vital. Why? Because the stakes are so high. If I fell into sexual sin, I would break God's heart and drag His name through the mud. When I met my heavenly Father face-to-face, I'd have to answer for those sinful actions. I would lose my wife's trust and inflict untold hurt upon her. I'd risk losing my family and the admiration and respect of my children. I'd lose my reputation and my job as

I HAVE TO WORK HARD TO STAY SEXUALLY PURE

a pastor. Everything that matters to me could be destroyed in a moment.

The same is true for you.

THE BEST DEFENSE

I've been very honest about my struggles. Now allow me to speak honestly about my successes. I've lived for several years at a level of sexual purity I didn't even believe was possible. Don't get me wrong: I'm still tempted...just as you will always be. Remember, it's not a sin to be tempted...it's *how you respond* to temptation that matters.

My thought life is purer than it's ever been. My sex life with my wife is holy and gratifying. Christ has made me strong where I was weak. Not for a moment do I believe that I've arrived, but God has given me some proven biblical principles that absolutely work. They're not easy to live by, but they're effective. I want to share with you the lessons I've learned on the hard road to purity.

King David was a man with a heart for God—and yet he stumbled. His life reveals several hazards to watch for on the dangerous road of life. Here's his story:

In the spring, at the time when kings go off to war, David sent Joab out with the king's men and the whole Israelite army....

CONFESSIONS OF A PASTOR

But David remained in Jerusalem. One evening David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of the palace. From the roof he saw a woman bathing. The woman was very beautiful, and David sent someone to find out about her. The man said, “Isn’t this Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam and the wife of Uriah the Hittite?” Then David sent messengers to get her. She came to him, and he slept with her.... Then she went back home. The woman conceived and sent word to David, saying, “I am pregnant.” (2 Samuel 11:1–5)

In five short verses, the Bible tells how David’s life was turned upside down with one wrong decision. But the wisdom we gain from reading about David’s sin may keep the same thing from happening to us.

READY OR NOT, TEMPTATION IS COMING

The first thing we learn from his mistake is to *watch for temptation*. Always be ready. I don’t wonder *if* I’ll be tempted—I try to establish action plans for the times *when* I’m tempted.

You may have noticed that David wasn’t where he was sup-

I HAVE TO WORK HARD TO STAY SEXUALLY PURE

posed to be. Verse 1 says that at the time of year when kings normally went off to war, David stayed behind. Temptation has a way of finding the person who's in the wrong place. That's why the best defense is to avoid tempting situations completely.

I never travel alone. It's been years since I've been alone with a woman other than my wife. We don't have the wrong kind of movie channels, and I've asked a friend to monitor all my Internet activity. By planning ahead, I've eliminated many temptations before they start. If I didn't avoid temptation, I know that resisting it would be more difficult, and I might give in.

Maybe you find yourself beaming with confidence, thinking, *I'm strong. I don't need those kinds of precautions to keep from sinning.* Remember the warning of 1 Corinthians 10:12: "If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!"

Are you really honest with yourself about your vulnerability, or do you live on the edge of danger? If I sound overly dramatic, it's only because I care. I've seen too many good people slide into destruction because they weren't willing to be honest.

One of these people was a mentor of mine, a pastor and close friend. I'll call him Barry. Barry and I prayed together weekly and talked openly about our weaknesses...or so I thought. Little did I know, Barry had a porn problem. His "little sins" led to bigger sins, and he ended up committing

CONFESSIONS OF A PASTOR

adultery. Haunted by shame and guilt, one day my good friend—father of two—hung himself.

I buried my friend. If only he'd been honest!

Sexual temptation is dangerous. What starts as a thought can lead to a look, followed by lingering thoughts, which can quickly become actions. The statistics are staggering. Conservative studies show that more than 60 percent of men and 40 percent of women commit adultery.³ Christians aren't exempt from this danger. Watch for temptation.

The danger reminds me of a story about how Eskimos sometimes deal with predatory wolves. To protect the families in a village from harm, someone hunts down a rabbit or a squirrel. Then the villagers dip a sharp two-edged knife into the animal's blood and allow the blood to freeze on its blade. They bury the handle of the knife firmly in the ground with the blood-covered blade exposed.

During the night, a wolf inevitably smells the blood and approaches to investigate. It starts to lick the knife blade. The frozen blood and cold metal numb the wolf's tongue as he continues to lick. Eventually, he slices his own tongue on the blade, and he tastes his own warm blood. Numb to the pain, the wolf licks faster and faster and faster. Without realizing it, he slices his own tongue to shreds. By the time he knows what's happened, too much damage has been done. The wolf slowly bleeds to death.

Pretty gross story, huh? But what a vivid and accurate

I HAVE TO WORK HARD TO STAY SEXUALLY PURE

analogy illustrating what happens to a person who starts dabbling in the world of sexual darkness.

No one wakes up one morning and says, “Gee, I think I’m going to destroy my life. Everything’s going so great; I’m going to do something really stupid.” Yet, countless people inflict just this kind of destruction on themselves...especially when it comes to sex.

Watch for temptation. Avoid it whenever possible. Recognize it when it comes. And when it does come, do what that Gump guy said: *Run, Forrest, run!*

And most of all, be honest. You may be gambling far more than you know.

JUST ONE LITTLE PEEEEEEEEEEEEK?

The second thing we learn from David is to *watch what we watch*. Verse 2 says, “From the roof he saw a woman bathing. The woman was very beautiful.”

It’s not a sin to notice a beautiful person, but it becomes a sin when you notice and notice and notice...and keep noticing. That’s what David did.

The Hebrew word for “saw” is the word *ra’ah*. It implies an extended gaze with enjoyment. *In other words, he lusted*. If you notice someone attractive, you can innocently and purely think, *That’s a nice-looking person*. Or you can *rrrrrraaaAA’aaaahhHHhh! Whoa! Did you see that? Hubba hubba hubba! I’d like some of that!*

CONFESSIONS OF A PASTOR

You get the point.

When Amy and I first set up Internet access, we tried the free AOL thing. Before long we got some strange e-mail. We opened it and were shocked that it led to a porn site. I closed it immediately. That's when I realized I had access to instant porn, just like everyone else who uses the Internet. What used to be difficult to get is now just a click away. That's why I have all my Web activity monitored. I know I'm not perfect, so I have to be smart.

And it's not just the Internet. Sexual temptation comes in every form imaginable. One of my friends loves to *ra'ah* the Victoria's Secret catalog. Another loves to *ra'ah* the wrong shows on HBO. One church member lusts after girls at the gym. Another undresses girls in his mind, *at church*. One female friend told my wife how a sinful chat room relationship took her down. Many are sucked into sexual sin through doorways that most would call acceptable: soap operas, *Cosmopolitan*, romance novels, and *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issues.

What are you tempted to read or watch that you know you shouldn't? Acknowledge it. You won't be free until you do. Remember God's standard? *Not even a hint*.

Watch what you watch.

POINTED ENFORCEMENT

The third thing we learn from David is to *watch our company*. Verse 4 says that "David sent messengers to get her." These

messengers were probably afraid to disobey the king's orders, but a good friend would have said, "David, she's married! Don't do it! Are you nuts?"

Always remember the truth of 1 Corinthians 15:33: "Do not be misled: 'Bad company corrupts good character.'" Even good people in the wrong situation can be bad company.

If you're hanging with the wrong people, you'll end up doing the wrong things. If your friends talk about bad stuff, watch sinful movies, take you dancing at the new bar, trash-talk their spouses, or flirt with everyone they see, they'll hurt you. If one of those friends is a source of sexual temptation... you're walking right into the dragon's mouth.

Not only should we avoid the wrong company, but we also must surround ourselves with the right company. Proverbs 27:17 reminds us, "As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another." Who sharpens you?

David had a friend named Nathan. Nathan became the sharpening iron—the right company—for David. He took a big risk and confronted David about his sin. David owned up and got right with God. David didn't find freedom alone. He needed the right people in his life.

So do you.

One key to sexual purity in my life is consistent, intentional accountability. This isn't a polite, occasional breakfast meeting. Real accountability partners will kick your butt if

CONFESSIONS OF A PASTOR

you go astray. You have to have honest talks on a rigorous schedule.

In seminary I read the writings of a medieval monk. Once, a friend of this monk committed adultery. The spiritual leader gave the order: "Find five strong monks and show this man the will of God by stripping him naked and dragging him through the thistle bushes."

Now that's accountability!

True accountability attaches consequences to sin (though they don't have to be quite as harsh as getting dragged naked through thistle bushes). My accountability partner was once battling his way to victory over a certain sexual sin. He told me that every time he failed, he'd give a hundred dollars to our church building fund. He paid for a big portion of the building. Today, he's free from that sin.

Find friends who keep you strong, not ones who bring you down.

Watch your company.

DECIDING FACTORS

The fourth warning David's life provides us is, *watch for the moment of decision*. Nine words show David's most critical moment of decision. Verse 4 says, "She came to him, and he slept with her."

Now, before his big failure, David blew through several

I HAVE TO WORK HARD TO STAY SEXUALLY PURE

smaller moments of decision, committing multiple smaller sins. He wasn't where he was supposed to be. He looked lustfully. He plotted and sent someone to get Bathsheba. He flirted. He schemed...then he acted. At any point, he could've stopped and done the right thing.

You can, too.

Perhaps you've had an affair. Maybe you are having one now, or you're dangerously close. Maybe you're consistently committing adultery in your heart. Or you're addicted to masturbation or to fantasizing. Maybe you watch shows you shouldn't watch, or click on websites you know are wrong.

You can't change your past...but you can change your future.

You'll face many moments of decision: maybe a click on the computer, or dialing a sex number, or that second long look at the gym, or flirting at the office. If you decide poorly during the early, small moments, eventually you'll come to the big one. Deal with each battle one at a time. When each battle comes...*win!*

The first battle will be with yourself. If you're trapped, you have to come clean. You have to confess your sin to God and to trusted friends. James says, "Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed" (James 5:16). Who do you need to confess to? Certainly to God. Maybe your spouse? Or a close friend? Or even your pastor?

CONFESSIONS OF A PASTOR

Maybe you're tempted to say, "This is just the way I am—I'll never change." Quit whining, compromising, and belittling the power of Christ. Paul once wrote to a very sexually corrupt group of people: "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it" (1 Corinthians 10:13).

God will give you a way out—but you have to take the first step. And the first step is to face it. Come clean.

If you're honest with yourself in this moment, and you know that breaking through to confession is the battle you now face, take just a moment...the moment of decision. Make it a victory.

What do you want to tell God? Go ahead. Tell Him right now. He's listening.

(I'll wait.)

Great! Now who else do you need to talk to? Put this book down and call them immediately.

(I'll wait, again.)

Did you call? If you're not serious, you won't beat this. You have to hate the darkness. Despise the bondage. Loathe the addiction. Make the call. *Make it now.*

(I'll go do some chores...)

Welcome back. You look relieved, peaceful. Yeah, it was scary. But isn't it nice to know you don't have to hide it any-

I HAVE TO WORK HARD TO STAY SEXUALLY PURE

more, that you're on your way to being free from that sin?

Remember my *Playboy-in-the-restroom* story? I felt such shame and guilt for wanting to look. Years passed. Then one day, out of the blue, I found another magazine. Again I was alone. Again it was within easy reach. This time, though, my mind was different. God had changed my heart. I loved purity more than sexual sin. What I saw made me sad, and I didn't want to look. Eyes averted, I picked up the magazine and put it in the trash. It wasn't until later that night that I realized how far God had brought me. He wants to change you, too. He *can* change you.

Not even a hint.