

A Proud Christian

7 Ways to
Improve Your
Confidence
as a Believer

8 Time
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Chesley 'N.I.F.T.Y.' Christian

A
PROUD
CHRISTIAN

*7 Ways to Improve
Your Confidence
as a Believer*

By Chesley 'Nifty' Christian

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WHAT CONTROLS US?

“How can I have more confidence? How can I be bolder with the gospel? How can I influence those around me to be Christians without feeling like I’m selling something?”

These were questions I heard all of the time; they were connecting questions. Connecting; in the sense that different races, genders and age groups would vigorously look for answers. These were the internal conflicts and the external struggles of young Christians.

As a gospel musician and motivational speaker, I have had the opportunity to tour North America a few times. I’ve seen and met so

many people with different backgrounds and after every concert; these were the questions I was asked to answer.

In my opinion, I am more of a storyteller. Every time I am in front of a crowd, I tell stories so people can relate and see that I go through the same things as they do.

Before embarking on my music career I studied Psychology and Sociology at the University of Toronto. By no means am I an expert on these subjects, but studying them for so long ingrained a new habit in my system. I found myself a constant observer of people's behavior. I took note of even the most

insignificant actions, such as when a person trips on a curb and then looks down accusingly as though it purposely meant to trip them.

I couldn't help it. Each instance of behavior I witnessed was inevitably followed by the question "why?" Researchers continuously embark on new journeys by asking themselves, "Why does *this* happen? Why does *that* happen?" Studies and experiments are conducted, textbooks are created.

During my tours, I came into frequent contact with more Christians, and so I paid close attention to our interactions. I discovered that much of our behavior is dictated by fear. Fear of going to hell, fearing what others may think of

us, fearing that we might let God down, fearing that we are not worthy of His grace.

Fear is a strong controlling agent. It is used in the media everyday to control our thoughts and ultimately our actions. Think about the way Muslims were treated after September 11th.

The other controlling agent in our lives is the reward. Many of us will work hard to change our behavior if a reward of some sort is the end result. For us Christians, our reward is everlasting life with our Father in heaven. We are all aware of this reward, but fear plays a bigger role in our lives. Why?

The answer; fear is more pervasive. We see it more, we feel it more and because of that, we believe it more. By contrast, we only hear (or read) of the reward. The intangibility of the reward is outweighed by the frequency and realness of fear.

Fear must be battled with confidence. A Confident spirit will help you to exhibit the same actions that fear will inhibit. This belief lies at the heart of my decision to write this book. It is not my intention for this writing to result in a bunch of cocky Christians walking about and ultimately conveying a negative impression to the non-believers. Rather, I pray that the outcome of this work will be a host of bold believers inspired to overcome their fears

and answer God's call in their lives without reserve.

I wasn't always a confident person; I was once timid, shy and in addition, I struggled with a (slight) speech impediment. When I took the time to observe my own behavior, I discovered a few exercises that helped to build my confidence. Allow me to share what I've learned with you.

AN EARLY OBSERVATION

There is a strong correlation between one's confidence and their perceived 'coolness' to others.

Do you remember that cool kid in elementary school? The one that wasn't afraid to speak his mind to the teacher, the one who would make fun of the kids who were less cool; the one you and I probably envied to some extent at that point in time?

Being cool is simply a state of mind. It is not the clothes you wear, the music you listen to, the people that you hang out with or the way you speak; rather, it is the state of mind you possess when you do all of these things. For instance, let's take two kids. One of them decides to moon their teacher and ends up getting a bunch of laughs from the rest of his classmates; he enjoys the attention. The other

kid performs exactly the same action, but his face turns red as he is doing it. Both kids are doing the same thing, but the one who is *not* embarrassed is perceived to be the cool one.

I remember a time when I was dared to dance in front of my class (I only accepted the dare because if I did it – I would have won myself a comic book). So I did it... I did the running man in front of 18 other kids – my running man left a lot to be desired; I was met with a classroom full of blank stares. Instead of receiving appreciation and approval, the only thing I had succeeded in doing was to make a complete fool of myself. My friend Karl was offered the same deal so to speak; he went up and danced in front of the class. Not only did

the teacher compliment him – but the class applauded him as well!!! I was confused – I knew my running man was better than his. We both were pitiful at dancing – but I at least, had a little more rhythm. For the longest time, I would wonder why he was given a positive response for the exact same dance.

The answer was simple – he didn't care. He didn't care what anybody thought of his dancing. The kid that mooned the teacher didn't care that he would be in trouble, he was too confident in who he was to care about what other people thought of him.

In any given relationship, there's always some sort of influential pull. You are either being

influenced by the people around you or the people around you are being influenced by you. If you are the latter, then there's a good chance that you're the cool one.

Step One:

MAKE THE CHOICE

Your self image is how you perceive yourself. For example, I may think of myself as a quiet, handsome, intelligent young man, while you may think that I am loud, ugly and obnoxious. Your perception of me is what I would call your perceived image.

When we place greater value on the perceived image, we usually end up modifying our actions until the perceived image is somewhat similar to our self image (or what we would want our self image to be).

I'll never forget how un-cool it was to proclaim your faith in high school. Christianity has always been in a class by itself – for better or for worse. Multiculturalism was accepted (or tolerated – take your pick). It wasn't a big deal to see an Indian and an Asian hanging out. The thing is; most other religions were tied to their respective cultures. For example, if you were Hindu, we could have probably made an educated guess as to what country or geographical region you came from. The same holds true for Buddhism, Judaism and Muslims – I call this cultural religion.

Consequently, if you were associated with any cultural religion there was little ridicule attached. It was universally understood that the

religion was attached to your culture, and because cultural diversity was accepted – very little derision resulted from cultural religious associations.

Christianity is detached. To date it is the most multicultural religion – so multicultural that it has no culture of its own. I can tell you I am Christian and I bet you'll have a harder time guessing where I am from; than if had I told you I was a Buddhist. Therefore, Christianity for the most part, is a religion of choice.

In your growing years, the choices you make play a tremendous role in your self image as well as the perceived image that others have of you. Choices like the clothes you wear (and

how you wear those clothes), the music you listen to, the friends you keep, your extra curricular activities and of course, your religion of choice.

Usually, your self-image is contrary to what your perceived image is to others. The guy that smoked in high school to impress the pretty girl - was perceived to be a loser by the pretty girl. The guy who got good grades and thought he was on top of the world – was perceived to be a nerd.

Christianity was (and sometimes still is) associated with rules – rules that were un-cool to youth culture. In my high school – there were three specific rules that branded Christianity as

unpopular – No drugs, no swearing and no sex. It wasn't so much the actual religion itself that was unpopular – it was the fact that a person would willingly choose *not* to do those things and still expect social acceptance.

THAT CHRISTIAN KID

My first day of high school was a day of observation. I didn't know who the 'in' crowd was; so I hung back and tried to determine who I might get along with from the people in my immediate environment. My school had just been renovated and my locker was located in the west wing – which was the newer addition to the school. Directly across from my locker was a Spanish guy named Dan. He was quite

outspoken, and was what we used to call a 'hardcore Christian'. When he met people, one of the first questions he would ask them was 'are you saved?'

If the answer was 'yes', he would then ask what church they attended and whether they enjoyed the church service. He would engage them in a bit of polite conversation and then invite them out to his church youth service, which was held on Thursday nights at the time.

If the answer was 'no', he would give a brief description of salvation and what it entailed; then he would invite them to his church service to learn more about Christianity. He was

actually a nice guy but nearly everyone had a problem with him. They found him irritating.

As nice as he was, there was a certain sincerity missing. After a while, it was common knowledge that each time Dan was speaking to somebody, there was some sort of religious agenda involved. He had the purest of intentions in that he didn't want to see any of his classmates going to hell due to his failure to mention the gospel. He felt as though he had a responsibility, and to some extent he was right. He got so wrapped up in his mission that he forgot that his classmates were people and not projects.

That's my personal psychoanalysis; anyway, after months of hearing him in between classes, I decided to introduce myself. I knew exactly what questions he was going to ask, I knew he would lead into the 'small talk' and then inevitably, the church invitation would be extended. Mind you, at this point in my life, I was not a Christian – I mean, I went to church with my mother and I knew the Christian principles – but I was not living the life of a Christian and did not intend to at the time. I just thought it was interesting and was curious to see how his church would have been 'different' than the other churches I had been to in the past.

Our conversation went precisely as anticipated – and even though I was expecting every part of

it, I was still surprised to see that it actually happened. This was what I meant about his sincerity. Have you ever had a telemarketer call you with a sales pitch so stilted and predictable, that you just *knew* they were reading from a script? It felt to me almost as if Dan's script was written on my face.

His youth night service was being held the next day and of course, he offered his invitation. I asked him for the address and directions and promised him I'd be there. His face lit up; it was the face of accomplishment. This was on a Wednesday just before lunch period. The next day, each time he passed me in the hall, he would find some way to give me a gentle reminder about his service that night. It became

a little annoying after the third time but I was too nice to say anything. Before I knew it, the school day was over. I went home, watched a little Television and did some of my homework – I always saved the bulk of it for early in the morning - I was funny that way. Something about doing things at the last minute always brought out the best in me. Anyway, I got dressed and hopped on my bike and I was on my way to church on a Thursday night. I'm pretty sure my mother thought I was lying to her when I told her where I was going. Oh well.

I arrived ten minutes early and saw Dan greeting the guests at the church entrance. It was the first time I had seen him so sincere. He

was interacting with everyone, but you could clearly tell there was no agenda behind his conversation now. He was relaxed, uncomplicated; it was good to see that side of him. As I walked by him, he struck up a conversation about one of the subjects I was taking and how difficult it was. He never asked me about school when we were actually *in* school, and it threw me off a bit. I seemed to be his only guest, so he showed me where to sit and sat with me.

His church service began with singing. He was right, it was different. The style of songs being sung was surprisingly, very contemporary. The choir was singing praises over hip-hop beats. I was shocked at first but after a while my head

began nodding to the rhythm. Dan gave my arm a light punch “I told you it was different bro!” I had never bopped my head in church before; I struggled with mixed emotions. I was being forced to grudgingly admit to myself that I was enjoying a church service. The featured speaker was refreshingly compelling. He spoke about popular celebrities and their influence on youth culture and how Jesus needed to be more apparent in the media. He was encouraging us to take charge of the media – since we call in and vote for particular songs and videos, and challenging us to make a change in that format. I was genuinely impressed. This was probably the best church service I had ever been to in my life. At that point, I decided I was never going back.

GROWING UP

I grew up in a town called Markham. My mother was the owner of furniture store and my father worked for an engineering company. I had a little sister as well, she was very outspoken – and remains that way today. I was the shy one. I never really understood why genetics had to be so random. Everybody in my family had this aura of confidence around them – except me. My father was well educated; his confidence came from how intelligent he was. My mother was a looker – her confidence came from her beauty. My sister, well...she just refused to take crap from anybody. I remember a time we were at a birthday party and I was happily playing on my own with a spider man

toy. I was six years old and my sister was two. Another kid my age suddenly snatched the toy away from me and started to play with it. My sister went up to this 6 year old kid and grabbed the toy back from him! She waddled over to me, put the toy in my hand and then went about her business. To this day, my father teases me about it.

I don't know why, but I was the timid one. My parents wanted me to be more confident as a child, especially my father. He would have me stand in front of the mirror day after day, stare squarely at my reflection and say out loud "I am the best". My parents even gave me a little gold chain that said 'the best' on the pendant;

subliminal strategies that did not manifest until years later.

My parents were not Catholics but they wanted me to attend a Catholic school. They liked the idea of God and prayers being present in a school environment.

My school contained a handful of blacks. My classes would usually include just about two or three other kids of color, and they didn't want to talk to me either. I was short and skinny for my age, and the fact that my speech was often disrupted; punctuated by brief periods of stuttering did little to help my situation. I was a prime target for bullies.

The first few years of grade school were no picnic. I hated who I was and I hated my school. It wasn't until Grade Six that I finally found something that I was good at; Drama. It provided a certain escape for me. It was an outlet to be whoever I wanted to be without any social repercussions. I couldn't quite understand it, but each time I played a role, I would never stutter.

My Grade Six teacher encouraged me to join the drama club and take on a number of roles in the upcoming school play. My friend Karl and I came up with a pretty neat concept at the time. I would play a talking baby with extremely long arms. Karl hid behind me and his arms became

mine. I put baby shoes on my hands...and my hands became baby feet. Karl would make hand gestures to match my monologue and at one point he even picked up a few cookies and fed them to me. We stole the show. Because I was the 'face' of the act I ended up receiving a great deal of recognition from the crowd. I loved it. Things began to change for me from that point onward. I began getting involved in extra curricular activities. My dad signed me up for the local soccer team, and my mom signed me up for karate class. I kept busy and my confidence began to rise internally. This went on for about two or three years until my parents split up.

My dad moved to Philadelphia. My sister and I stayed with my mother; we ended up moving to a smaller town called Ajax which was about twenty minutes east of Toronto.

Ajax was much more multicultural than Markham at the time so I wasn't as much of a visual anomaly. People were a lot nicer. I was invited to a house party not too long after I moved to Ajax and I loved every minute of it. I didn't even dance (I didn't know how to at the time). I spoke a little, but I didn't know many people and so, just as I did in high school, I stood in the background and took in everything and everyone around me. I noticed the DJ's were the most popular people at that party and then a light bulb went on over my head.

That day was a Friday. On Saturday I made my way to the local pawn shop and picked up a turntable and a little mixer. I hooked them up to my boom box (do you remember those?! I grabbed a bunch of my mother's records and started my DJ career. I practiced like a mad man and eventually started to collect records of my own. I don't think my mom would have let me leave the house with her records anyway.

I spent 6 months practicing and I didn't tell anybody. I was still relatively unknown during my freshman year in high school, but I wasn't a nerd either. Devon was one of the most popular DJ's at the time. His parents would get home from work at about 8 pm so everyday after

school a bunch kids would head over to Devon's house for an 'after school jam'.

One evening, I finally worked up the nerve to ask Devon if I could play 4 records. "Sure." That was his reply. If had known it was would have been *that* easy I would have asked ages ago. I took over the turntables and Devon went for a bathroom break. I knew this was my chance; I had to make everybody in that room dance or face the consequences of ridicule. Or so I thought. I went through Devon's records and found a Will Smith record, the song was called 'Summertime', until this day it remains a classic. When I put that record on, everybody in the basement went nuts! I had done it; I was officially a high school DJ.

The next day at school was great. People were approaching me in the hallways and giving me compliments. That was new to me. But I realized something, being *good* at something made me ‘interesting’ to people; and it wasn’t the fact that I was just *good*; it was the fact that I *displayed* it publicly. My confidence began to grow; I was meeting people and talking to pretty girls (finally).

This was why I couldn’t go back to Dan’s church. I was finally getting attention. Attention that I thought was long deserved. I was hanging around with popular people and I didn’t want to be associated with Dan, at least not yet anyway. I decided to put church on hold to pursue my

popularity quest. I was scared of embarrassment; and the very thing I feared would be the instrument God would use to make His presence known...

A NEW ENDEAVOR

I spent the next year building relationships with people and building my record collection. My best friend Dave had introduced me to his older brother Steve. Steve was and remains a perfectionist until this day. He too took up an interest in music. He began buying records of his own and practicing on his dad's turntables.

Dave and I usually exercised together in his basement, so each time I went to Dave's house, we hung out and exercised, and then I would head up to Steve's room to practice with him on the turntables. Eventually, Steve and I were getting paid to DJ house parties.

I remember the first time I went to the school talent show. I just went to observe. Most of the acts were dance related. But toward the very end, a singer emerged. Her voice was angelic and she had the crowd cheering for her. Just before the song's end, her brother appeared on stage, performed a rap verse, and then left as suddenly as he had come. The crowd went insane! I didn't think our school had rappers. It was at that point I decided that I was going to enter the talent show next year and win it. There was just one obstacle; I didn't know how to rap.

Step Two:

ACT AS IF YOU NEVER HAD A CHOICE

(Eliminate Options)

When I worked in the finance industry I had the opportunity to meet a very nice elderly couple. They walked into my office and we did more chatting and laughing than actual *business*. They mentioned that they were about to have their 50th anniversary. I was excited for them, and I admired the longevity of their relationship, so I asked, “Tell me; what’s the secret to a long happy marriage?” The man smiled at me and replied, “Eliminate your options son”.

I leaned back in my chair and paused as I considered his words; then I thanked him. At first I was wondering if ‘options’ meant other prospective women for the cheating types or if it meant divorce. I had a feeling he meant both. Either way, what he was saying made sense logically.

He eliminated the option of divorce and he eliminated the option of cheating with other women. There were no other choices for him. It is such a simple concept that many of us neglect to use in our lives.

Think about when you were a child and you were learning to walk. You probably don't remember the experience but the simplicity is still there. You wanted to walk. You didn't want spend the rest of your days crawling, you were determined to walk. At some point, you eliminated the option of crawling. Now, more than likely, you are a successful walker.

Most of us had to go to school in our early years to learn basic scholastic skills such as reading, writing, and counting. Our parents and guardians didn't offer us much choice as kids. We did as we were told and today most of us possess those basic skills.

Humans tend to be curious by nature; exploring the unknown is an appealing idea to us. Not that being curious is a bad thing, but it does have its dangers, especially when your soul is at stake.

In becoming a confident person in God, I always tell people to act as if they never had a choice or eliminate their options. Here's what I mean.

As I mentioned earlier, Christianity is a religion of choice. Whenever there is a choice involved, that means that there are other options involved as well; as one cannot make a choice unless there is a selection to choose from. In this case, Christianity is a lifestyle that requires a certain

mind set. The other options are the other lifestyles and religions that exist in our society.

In the beginning stages of your walk, it is vital that you eliminate all of your options. The moment you make the choice to walk with God, you are simultaneously making the choice to eliminate all other lifestyles as an option.

I know this is easier said than done. I bring it up so that you may be aware of the notion; and just being aware will help.

It's almost like having a child. When you have a child there are very little options involved. Today, I have a beautiful six year old boy. However, I did not have a choice in what his gender would have been. I didn't choose what

complexion his skin would be, I didn't choose his height, weight, or health status. I didn't and couldn't choose any of those things. The only choice I made was to love him and take care of him to the best of my abilities.

What if we treated God like our child? I know this may be contrary thinking for some of you but think about it. A good parent pays attention to their child, listens, nourishes and communicates well. A good parent constantly thinks of their child and their well being.

Imagine if we all made the same effort with God. To listen to Him, pay attention to Him, communicate with Him and love Him unconditionally. A good parent is proud of their

children and speaks highly of them to their peers. Imagine being so proud of God that we spoke highly of Him to our peers.

Now, I know God is our father, but let's be honest...we give more attention to our children than we do to our parents, or even our mates. Acting as if God is our child can help us with our walk. Just be sure not to take the analogy too literally. Trying to put God on 'Time Out' might not work out for ya.

My point is simple, treat Christianity as though it were your ethnicity; something you cannot change about yourself; and would not change even if given the ability to do so.

WHY I DID IT

After I won my high school talent show, I began receiving offers and invitations to perform in other talent shows; when I did *those* shows I started to get invitations to perform in clubs and the snowball effect began. I often used foul language in my songs, and I noticed that each time I cursed I would get a good reaction from the crowd. Maybe it was the way I said it; who knows? My audience's enthusiastic response served as positive reinforcement to keep cursing on the stage. I did this for years.

Towards the end of my high school year I was invited to audition to be the opening act for a

popular mainstream artist. Now at this point, I was personally a very cocky performer. The first show I ever competed in was my high school talent show, and I won it. From that point onward, I had never experienced any form of failure when it came to performing. I was also making a little money from it, so I felt this audition was a shoo-in for me.

My plan was to keep my audition short and sweet. Everyone had two minutes to audition; I was going to make mine sixty seconds flat. I figured that if I left my audience wanting to hear more, I would surely be booked for the performance. I didn't want to overdo the cursing so I strategically placed those words in three distinct places.

The audition took place at a local recreation centre. The sound system wasn't of the greatest quality but it was enough to get the job done. There were about twenty-five to thirty different acts auditioning for this one open slot. I was about tenth or so in line. The people that went before me were average at best. I was so arrogant at the time I was inwardly laughing at them. My confidence grew with each audition attempt I witnessed.

Time wore on and I was now third on the audition list. It was at this point that my conscience decided to make a very unwelcome entrance. I suddenly had this 'feeling' that I should change my style of music into a more gospel format. It was so random it was

unbelievable. So I did what many of us tend to do when we hear the voice of reason in our heads – I ignored it.

Take one: It was my turn to show these people my stuff. I gave the sound technician my CD with background music, took the microphone and proceeded with my performance. I was off to a great start, the crowd was into it and I was setting them up for my first curse word. Just as I was about to say it, my microphone shut off and the CD began to skip. I blamed the sound technician and gave him a dirty look. I laughed it off and jokingly said the system couldn't handle my energy.

Take two: My conscience was now growing louder in my head saying, ***“I told you so!*** I blocked it out and restarted my performance. Again, it started off great, and just as I began gearing up once more for my much anticipated curse word, the CD started to skip and microphone began giving feedback. A voice emerged in my head, a very loud voice. ***“If you are not going to do this for me then you are not going to do this at all”***. I then had an internal argument with God. (Don’t act like I’m the only one!) “Why would you wait until now to tell me this?” This was my angry mental reply. If this was indeed God speaking to me, urging me to change my ways, why couldn’t He have just told me *before* I wasted gas and time

going to the audition? I ignored His voice and asked if I could give the audition another shot.

Take three: Now I was off to an awkward start. I could tell everybody was thinking that I gave the sound technician a defective CD. The CD was brand new. I always burned new CDs for each performance, even if I was doing the same songs. My sister often teased me about my paranoia. I lowered my voice a little, anticipating the microphone's next issue of feedback. As a precaution, I had asked the sound technician to hit pause if the CD should begin to skip; then I would finish the song in accapella format. At the precise moment that I

was about to swear, the CD thankfully did *not* let me down. But my microphone went dead.

It was a humbling experience to say the least. I decided to stay for the next audition just to see if the problems were technical. As you may have guessed, the next performer had a flawless performance, with no technical problems whatsoever. God had made His presence known and I was angry with Him for it. As I was leaving the recreation centre some guy gave me a flyer for a church revival he was having.

It began to make a little more sense to me now; God didn't want me there to audition, He wanted me there to receive this flyer. This

happened on a Friday night and the revival was taking place on the following Sunday.

I knew God was real before, but after what I had just experienced, I had no doubt about His existence. I spent all of Saturday in my bed, staring at the ceiling. I took time to reflect on everything. God had just intervened in my life and He wanted me to do something for Him. When I had gone to Dan's church a few years ago, I wasn't ready to do it. At this point, I still wasn't quite ready, but I was motivated now. I thought that if I kept on doing bad things that God would intervene and embarrass me somehow. *Fear* motivated the hell out of me...literally.

However, I didn't want live my life that way. I didn't want to embark on a journey with God out of fear. I had always thought it should be out of willingness, maybe eagerness, but never fear. The flyer was on my night table; I leaned over and picked it up. At that moment I decided I was going to attend the revival. Maybe some of my concerns would be addressed.

I was hoping to enjoy the church service, but initially, things did not go as expected. The music was very traditional; unlike the modern sounds of Dan's church, and I was beginning to fall asleep. I excused myself briefly and went to the bathroom. I figured if I got up and walked to

the bathroom I would wake up and be able to pay attention to the preacher who was about to go on. I walked back into the congregation and took my seat. The preacher began. His topic was listening to God's voice and ignoring it. That caught my attention.

It was almost as if he had thrown a massive spotlight on me. He had somehow pinpointed me as though he knew every detail of my life. Many people were nodding their heads in agreement. When I saw the amount of consensus in the congregation for all of the points he was making, it dawned on me that I wasn't the only one who had purposely ignored God's voice.

It may sound a little selfish, but I felt better knowing that I wasn't the only one – especially in church. Regardless, I liked what he was saying and I really felt the need to officially make the change. He made the Altar call but I didn't get up. I didn't want to be the first. For some reason, this was a dilemma for me. I wanted to get up; I just didn't want to be the first. I said a silent prayer to myself asking God if another person would get up and go up to the altar before me. I waited. The pastor made his final altar call in a “going once, going twice” tone. About five people got up including me. I silently thanked God and made my way to the front of the church.

It was official. I dedicated my life to God and I dedicated my music to His will. The pastor didn't answer any questions I had about fear. But after I went up to the front of the church, fear disappeared. I dedicated my life to God not because I was afraid he would embarrass me, but now there was purpose. I *wanted* to do this now. Being at that service made me realize that other people had experienced the same struggles I was going through. Maybe I could help more people like these. I decided to use music as medium to reach these people and my journey on a new path began. Failing God was not an option.

Step Three:

KEEP A JOURNAL

When I was in grade school my parents both encouraged me to keep a diary. My mother said that as we get older we tend to forget the little details of our childhood. I have now misplaced that diary and I fully understand what she was talking about. My dad encouraged me to keep a diary because I needed to improve my writing skills and he thought it was a great way to practice.

I had a little black book; it was my journal. I believe I wrote it in everyday for about a year or so. After I had come to the realization that I was

the only guy who kept a journal in my grade I ditched the idea.

My mother wanted me to document my experiences. She always joked that when my brain became old it would forget.

Throughout history, various cultures have preserved their heritage and traditions through the use of stories. Some stories are documented in books, others remain verbal. Scientists document their findings for future generations to remember, and improve on. Every textbook is basically a story of the ‘findings’ and essentially proves ‘something’ took place.

The bible itself is a collection of journals; look at the impact it has had to date. Everyone has different experiences with God. God blesses all of us in different ways just as many characters in the bible were all blessed in different ways.

At the end of every week, take the time out to reflect what God has done for you and document all of the good things that happened to you during the course of that week. Keep the journal in a safe place. It will serve many purposes as time passes.

Firstly, many of us tend to communicate with God more frequently when our circumstances are difficult. It is during these times that our faith is tested, despair emerges and seeds of

doubt are planted. This is the time where your journal will serve as a means of encouragement. Read it when things are rough; and reflect upon all the good things God has done for you in the past. Since the writings will be *your* personal experiences with God, they may boost your faith even more than a passage from The Bible might have done. When you see how God has worked in your life before, you will begin to believe that He will work in your life again.

Second, your journal will serve as a ‘fact’ book. At some point, people from other religions and cultures will try to discourage you. They will try to persuade you that God does not exist, or that if He does exist, He doesn’t love us. If you are not prepared, they will put your faith to the

test. Simply review your journal entries. These entries serve as your personal evidence of God. Just as scientists document the phenomena they encounter to later prove a pending theory they may have; you document the great works God creates in your life – not to prove anything – but to simply remind you.

Thirdly, as my mother said, we will forget some of these things when we get older. The journal can be used to teach your children about God. Just as many cultures pass traditional teachings or share valuable lessons through stories; your journal of God will hold more weight in the eyes of your children, more so than the bible.

This is because the events of The Bible took place in a different time period. It is difficult for some to believe that many of those stories actually occurred. While our children may appreciate The Bible's stories and believe them to be true, the truth of the matter is that these stories will not hold the same weight and emotional value as the personal blessings their very own parents experienced and documented.

On a subconscious level, this also tells our children that God was powerful in those days and remains powerful today, blessing those who have faith in Him.

Step Four:

EVALUATE YOUR PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Have you ever liked someone so much that you were willing to compromise your character so you could spend more time with them? It happens to the best of us.

When I was in high school there were a couple of 'all age' clubs in the area. I was never the club going type. I hated the atmosphere, I (still) wasn't the greatest dancer, and at that time people were allowed to smoke inside buildings. I hate the smell of cigarette smoke, especially on my clothes. Everybody would wear their nicest clothes to the clubs, and everybody

would regret wearing them when they got home. But it still persisted regardless.

I was on the tenth grade soccer team so we would travel to different schools to compete. One of my closest friends at the time, Mike, was on the soccer team with me.

Mike was the tallest person in his grade. We met shortly after I moved to Ajax in the eighth grade. He was good at every sport. I was only good at soccer, nothing else. I would watch other kids play at recess because usually they would play basketball. I was short and clumsy...I still am actually, so I would watch from the sidelines.

One day, one of the kids forgot to bring their basketball and another had brought a soccer ball. So at recess, I asked if I could play on one of the teams. I pretty much boasted about my skills until they agreed. I ended up on Mike's team. He was a forward and I was a mid fielder. My strategy was to take the ball from the opposing team and pass it to Mike. It worked like a charm.

After the game Mike introduced himself and invited me to play basketball the next day. I wasn't interested and I told him I sucked at basketball. He said something that I still remember to this day; "And you'll always suck until you play with people better than you".

There was something about that phrase that took away my intimidation and replaced it with eagerness and motivation. The next day, I was playing basketball. But it wasn't until the ninth grade that Mike and I became close friends. We had science class together, I loved science; Mike hated it. We paired up for some science project and we were given two weeks to complete it. We usually would meet up at Mike's house to work on it. When we finished the project, I said, "Let's watch some TV". Mike told me that his parents put a code on the TV, so he wasn't able to watch anything. I was like, "Are you serious?" I laughed and asked him to give me the remote, a piece of paper and a pen. Then I asked him to tell me all of the birthdays of the people that lived in the house

with him. He had two other sisters, so I had a total of five birthdays on the paper.

It took me eight tries to crack their code. Mike was ecstatic and from that day forward he held a deep respect for me.

We used to take the bus to and from school. A week after our project, one of the nearby buses got cancelled so the bus that Mike and I were on was extremely crowded. I was standing up and facing the window, my knapsack had a few textbooks in it, and each time the bus turned or went over a bump in the road, my knapsack would slightly push the guy behind me, who was facing the opposite window. I didn't realize

that my bag was touching him at all until he turned around and threatened me.

Now remember, I grew up getting picked on and beat up by older kids when I was in Markham, and here I am in the ninth grade, my third month in high school in a relatively new town, and an extremely hostile, much bigger Grade Eleven kid is about to pound my face in on the bus for something I had no idea was happening. He threatened that the moment I stepped off the bus, he was going to pound me as much as my bag had been pounding his back during the bus trip; he said he needed space to kick my behind (I am paraphrasing by the way, I can't really relay *exactly* what he said).

Mike overheard the situation. He pushed me aside and looked the guy directly in the eye. Mike was tall so he towered over him and quietly said eight words; “If you touch him I’ll break your neck”.

The commotion was over. Situation defused – Whew! I got off at Mike’s stop and walked home... just in case. From that point forward, no one ever messed with me in high school.

Fast forward to grade ten. Our soccer team traveled to a school in a city called Oshawa, which was about a fifteen minute drive for us. Our rule was simple; we would only pick up girls from that school if we won. Now, because Mike was good at every sport, he had already

visited that school the previous year and knew a few of the girls. When the game was over (we lost by the way), I was introduced to a bunch of girls. It was great; I was still getting used to the idea that girls were actually interested in having a conversation with me. On the bus ride home Mike asked me if I had taken any of their numbers down. I wasn't that bold yet. Mike slapped the back of my head, "are you crazy?! That Caroline chick was specifically asking about you, that's why I brought you over there and introduced you!" Well, she hadn't said anything to me, how was I supposed to know?

The next day at school Mike came to my locker and said he had good news for me. He said, "I spoke with Caroline's friend last night and

we're all going to that Oshawa club on Saturday, make sure you get her number then!"

Mike was more excited about my hook up than I was, I didn't have the heart (or guts) to tell him that I hated clubs. So on Saturday, I found myself at the club looking for Caroline. We got to the club at 9:30 and we waited for almost two hours. Now, at the time I didn't realize that club nights didn't actually start until about midnight. So by 11:15pm I was ready to go home. I was dying of boredom. The club was empty and Caroline wasn't there. Just as I was leaving, Caroline walked in behind two of her friends.

She looked amazing. She was a soft spoken person, very quiet individual. I had to initiate all

of the topics of conversation with her. It was actually a little awkward for me. I didn't know if she was feeling me or not. So I decided to cut my stay short and see if she wanted exchange numbers. She did. I left the club early and told myself I would call in two days.

Do you remember the two-day rule? We used to have a two-day rule when we exchanged numbers with girls. We would never call the next day because that would make us look desperate, and we wouldn't call on the third day because they could have lost interest or anticipation.

So I called Caroline exactly two days later and we hit it off. We genuinely liked each other.

Now, here's where it got a little complex. Caroline thought I liked going to clubs so she would ask if she could see me the next week at the club. I thought Caroline liked going to clubs, so I would make my way out there so she could be happy. I went to that club for 3 straight weeks.

It turns out that neither of us liked going to clubs. She didn't want a boyfriend who loved clubbing and I didn't want a girlfriend who loved clubbing. We never communicated this to each other at the time, so we eventually grew apart.

It wasn't until we met up a few years later that we discovered this information. We had a laugh about it and moved on with our lives.

The moral of the story, it rarely works out when you compromise your character.

PEOPLE NEED YOU:

Humans are selfish by nature, for the most part; we maintain relationships with people for what they can do for us. Some of our friends make us laugh, others give encouragement and others just allow us to be ourselves. It is rare for us to keep a friend that has an adverse affect on our emotional stability.

I started off doing secular music and I would work the club circuit on a bi-weekly basis. When I got saved, I changed my stage name and began doing gospel music. Many promoters and club owners were not aware of my ‘change of heart’ and still invited me to perform at their clubs. I informed them my name had changed to

reflect my spiritual growth. They would reply with, “I don’t care what you talk about when you’re up there, just give a solid performance”.

This was the first time I began to notice my self-image outweighing my perceived image. I suddenly didn’t care what they thought of me. What could these people do for me that God couldn’t?

I knew these crowds were used to hearing about drugs, sex and violence and they needed to hear what I had to say. They needed my presence. I however, did not need them. Once I internalized this, the influential pull in my relationships began to work in my favor.

We need to ask the question ‘Why’ more often. If there is somebody that we are trying to impress in our lives; *why* are we doing so? What is it about them that is worth the compromise?

People will always expect you to do things that are at odds with your true nature; from drinking, to drugs, to sex. If these things are out of character for you, ask yourself what it is about that person that is worth the compromise? If you take the time to reflect before you contemplate the compromise, you will see that these people need your influence; and not vice versa.

Now, don't get me wrong, we also need to grow continually and there are people who can influence us to do so. For instance, my mother, who is also the pastor of the church I attend, often urged me to give money away to charitable causes. At the time, that was out of character for me. But it was a trait that I wanted to include in my self image. So I compromised, and now I am a better person because of it.

I am of the belief that our self image should be as close to Christ as possible. That's why I love those 'What Would Jesus Do' bracelets. Every relationship that we have, and that we would like to have should be evaluated. Each of us has an ideal self image in our heads as to what we would like to be. For most Christians, it's as

Christ-like as possible. Every relationship should either help us get closer to that image *or* help others become closer to that image.

If this result is not being achieved in your relationships, modifications should be made.

Step Five:

HELP THOSE AROUND YOU

We have a tendency to perform actions that feel good. The more these actions are performed, the more our characters begin to take shape. If we are to be honest with ourselves, sin is something that feels good. Anything that feels good has the potential of becoming addictive. Drugs are a prime example of this notion.

Helping people *also* feels good; I can probably argue that it feels *better* than the actions that result from sin. Here's the difference: when we perform a sinful action (which feels good) we either end up feeling a touch of guilt after the

action has been performed or we find a way to justify the action in our minds.

Have you ever given a homeless person a sandwich before? I urge you to try it one day; I can guarantee you won't feel guilty or try to justify it in your head. Take note of how good it feels. It is an *emotional* pleasure that is difficult to put into words, but it feels amazing.

I began to wonder; if giving and helping feels as good as or better than sinful actions; then why do more people choose to sin? For the longest time, this question was a splinter in my mind.

I remember a few years back I was watching television and they were interviewing a popular

hip-hop artist. Before airing the interview, the network displayed a list of credits and achievements the artist had attained throughout his career. He had a number of charitable organizations and foundations and had literally donated millions of dollars to worthy causes. On paper, he was a model humanitarian. However, his artistry depicted him as a drug-using, sex craving killer.

It dawned on me that the world that we live in is a giant billboard ad for sin – and on occasion, you will see only subliminal ads for good deeds. We are constantly bombarded with graphic images openly depicting sinful situations that make people *feel* good. We are rarely shown the

feelings of guilt and justification that usually descend as a result of wrongdoing.

Think about it; the hip-hop artist who speaks about killing people in his songs - I am willing to bet that he has never *really* killed anybody. Here's the irony; that artist has actually *saved* many lives through his organizations and he has not made mention of that fact in any of his songs. We are exposed to the fictitious pleasures of sin while the real humanitarian pleasures remain hidden behind closed doors.

In my opinion, this step is very important because it is a transitional step. At this point, some may not want to boldly be Christians, but

most can certainly see themselves being bold about giving and helping others.

Now, I am not saying you should brag or boast about giving –as the bible speaks against this as well. I do think however, that you should share the experience and let the world know how good it feels to give and help.

When you continually help those in need a few things will begin to take place in your life:

- 1) Your character will begin to define itself.

People choose to help in different ways; some choose to give food, others give money, and others choose to give emotional support. Whatever the case,

you will do something that fits *your* character; and by continually doing it, it will strengthen that character.

- 2) Once your character begins to take shape, you will have more of an influential pull; you will begin to influence people to help others without even realizing. Sometimes just sharing the experience with a friend will pique their curiosity; and they will be tempted to do something humanitarian as well. Influence usually works best when you speak about how it personally made you *feel*. You subconsciously tell the other person that they have to experience the same feeling.

3) God will return the favor. God likes to reward us for our good deeds. I'm not saying we should give solely with the intention of receiving. But when God does reward us, we have another entry to add to our journal. The more entries we see in our journal, the more confident we will be in our Lord and savior.

When Christ walked the earth, he made it very clear through his examples and words that helping and giving is an essential part of being a Christian. Let's follow in his footsteps; through our words *and* actions.

Step Six:

LISTEN TO YOUR FAVORITE PREACHER(S)

I met pastor Ty a number of years ago when I first started to perform in churches. He was the youth pastor of a lovely church located in the west end of Toronto. I was invited to perform two songs one evening for a youth event he was having for his congregation. When I arrived at the church, I was greeted by the host pastor and few friendly kids. They offered to hold my bags for me and gave me a gracious tour of their church. After the tour, I did a quick sound check on their system and then I sat down in the empty auditorium, waiting for the event to begin.

They provided a separate room for me, but I usually don't like those rooms. I mean, they are good places to grab a quick snack and dry off (I sweat a lot on stage) after the show, but I've never been the type to demand isolation from the crowd before an event. I sat and watched as the auditorium slowly began to fill with people.

The night began with a brief play by the youth department of the church. It was very emotional; it basically was about what people would say to God if they passed away at a young age.

After the play I was called up to perform. I gave a brief testimony and performed two songs. They were both well received, thank God!

Following my set was Pastor Ty. When Ty took the stage I was taken aback. I was used to seeing older people take on the role of the youth pastor, but Ty was actually young. I think he was twenty-six at the time; I was about twenty-four or so. But this young brother was full of wisdom.

The first thing he spoke about was cell phones. He described how we treat our communication with God like a cell phone that is over its monthly limit, when in actuality God has given us the unlimited package and already paid its price in full. We really have no reason to be stingy with our Godly talk-time. I thought his message was brilliant. I paid attention to every word he was saying.

Toward the end of his message, he wanted to display his final point by calling up five volunteers to the front of the stage. I put up my hand as well and made my way to the front. He told us to close our eyes and that we would never forget this lesson. I followed his instruction and closed my eyes. There was silence; he wanted us to anticipate something. All of sudden, I felt something hit my forehead. I opened my eyes and noticed there was a bunch of sunflower seeds on the ground. “What the heck? Did this guy just chuck a sunflower seed at me and call it a lesson?!” I didn’t say that, but I wanted to at first.

His point was simple, he was saying that God's word is like a seed that is constantly hitting us and it is up to us to take that seed, plant it in our brains and nourish so it can grow into something bigger. He mentioned how most of us hear God's word but we don't plant it, so it ends up bouncing off our heads...hence his seed throwing. He was right, I didn't forget the lesson.

That evening I purchased a CD from pastor Ty, he had one of his messages recorded on it and I wanted to play it in my car on the way home. As I was listening I realized something, I realized how much I could learn by just listening to wise preachers through CD's. I

know it sounds obvious now, but at the time I was blown away.

University works exactly the same way. Professors who are knowledgeable on particular subjects speak to a class for an hour or two. I remember my psychology professor, his name was Jordan and he had a very down to earth way of teaching human behavior. He would give his lectures three times a week and I learned at each lecture. The more knowledgeable I became on the subject, the more confidence I had that I was going to ace the exams. For me, knowledge = confidence.

As I was driving home that evening, I began to think of pastor Ty as my spiritual professor, and I would listen to his messages during the course of my week and increase my knowledge. With each lesson learned, my confidence grew. I strongly feel if you try the same thing, you will experience the same result.

The challenge though, is to find your ‘favorite’ preacher. When I was in University, I didn’t connect with ‘every’ professor, some of them would put me to sleep, literally. But the few I connected with, I was able to learn a great deal from. The preacher that you choose to listen to during the course of your week should be one that is able keep your attention and more importantly, keep you awake!

Step Seven:

INTERNALIZE THE GOSPEL

Some people were initially concerned that this was not listed as the first step. Let me explain; this book is about changing your behavior for the better. I do believe that this is an aspiration for Christians and non-Christians alike. I wanted to provide new and insightful ways to achieve this goal. I think reading The Bible is a given, to me it's one of those *obvious* things that do not need to be mentioned in a Christian book. I had read The Bible from cover to cover by the time I was ten years old; but I really didn't appreciate its lessons and wisdom until many years later.

Most of us learn by observation and imitation. This is the way we have been conditioned to learn since infancy. We learned to walk by observing and imitating others; additionally, this is how most of us learned how to talk, ride a bike, and play sports. Whenever a mistake was made, the mistake served as a catalyst to perfect whatever action we were trying to learn.

The information we read usually gives context to our actions and experiences. At first, when you read a driver's handbook, it will appear to be a bunch of rules that we have to memorize. But when you apply that information from behind the wheel, you see that these rules actually save your life and allow you to arrive at your destination. Many of us grew up in

households with a certain set of rules. My mother used to tell me that I should never touch the stove, as a child, I viewed that as a *rule*. When I disobeyed her and touched the stove, I burned myself. Now the information that she gave me had *context*. It was no longer perceived as a rule; it was now advice.

Many people fear Christianity because they think The Bible is a book of rules. Once you experience certain things in your life you will realize that it is a book full of priceless wisdom and advice that will help us to arrive at our spiritual destinations. I only realized this after I became a parent myself.

The first six steps of this book are steps of action. Actions that I believe will give you valuable experiences. If you have already read the gospel, when you read it again; it will have more meaning to you. If you have not already read the gospel, it will have more meaning to you. It won't just be a set of rules.

I believe in relationship over religion. Think about how you would process the information in The Bible if God referred to Himself as our 'Ruler' or 'Boss'. But he doesn't do that. Rather, He refers to himself as *Our Father*; that in itself gives context to the stories in The Bible.

A FINAL THOUGHT

A Christian living in a secular society is almost like an unknown rapper opening for a well known rock group. Let's break that down: Picture a superstar rock group coming to your city to put on a concert. Think about the *type* of people that will be attending this concert – they will probably be big fans of the group, and more so, bigger fans of the genre of music, in this case, rock music. Their expectations are to experience a group that they are familiar with in an environment that fosters rock music. Now, picture an unknown rapper as the opening act for this group. He's flying solo – no band – just him on a big stage in front of three thousand

screaming people who came to experience a rock concert. What does he do?

He remembers that at the end of the day, they all came to have a good time. So he shows them how to achieve that goal with a different method – the different method being rap music of course. Soon, the crowd forgets how much they dislike rap and begin to focus on having a good time.

Literally speaking, this was me on tour with the biggest Christian rock groups a couple of years ago. Figuratively speaking, this is you everyday as a Christian. This is us everyday as Christians. We are the opening acts in unfamiliar territory with all eyes on us. Be proud of you who are;

be confident of who you are in the body of Christ. Let's show the world how to have a good time with a different method. Amen.