

Craig & Amy Groeschel

—interview by Jackie Georgiou

What does it take to be named one of the most influential pastors in America (5th to be exact)? Or to be recognised as the most innovative church in modern times? As a ‘techno-junkie’ Craig Groeschel (pronounced Grow-SHELL) would know - he has 13 church campuses that plug in live every Sunday to the main hub; broadcasts a Sunday sermon to the Second Life virtual world and has created a website called mysecret.tv as a place for people to confess anonymously on the Internet.

In a media saturated world, where the Church is increasingly seen as irrelevant,

Craig and wife Amy are bringing the timeless message of the Gospel across in a modern, tech savvy way.

Craig, tell us about LifeChurch.tv?

LifeChurch is one church that meets in 13 locations and also has over 50 services online at <http://live.lifechurch.tv>. In 2000, Amy gave birth to our fourth child on a Sunday morning before church started. Since I couldn’t preach, we decided to show the message on video from the night before. It worked so well that we started adding services and eventually new locations using video teaching.

With a heart to reach out to people who might not (or could not) attend a physical church building, we started Church Online, which consists of worship, a message, live prayer and lots of online fellowship through chat (with translation available for 32 different languages). Thousands of people from over 140 countries participate each week.

What would you say to critics who feel that virtual church fosters unaccountability and lack of pastoral care?

Interestingly, worshipping at a physical church doesn’t guarantee accountability either, unless the right relationships are in place. Those who worship online can experience as much (and often) more accountability by sharing their lives with others. Some believe that people are more transparent and interact for longer periods of time online than they would in a physical church reception.

Just as many people connect through Facebook or Twitter, Church Online provides another opportunity for people to build ac-



Craig and Amy with Catie (16), Mandy (15), Anna (12), Sam (10), Stephen (7) and Joy (6)

countability and support relationships as they interact, disciple, enjoy fellowship and pray for each other.

How do you manage to preach, lead a church, be a husband and a father to six children?

Leading a large family and church is definitely challenging. I’ve always believed that if I reach many people in the world but lose my family, I’ve failed. From the beginning of the church,

we’ve designed our church activities around our family values instead of the other way around. For example, the only night I regularly work is Saturday night when I’m preaching. Instead of meeting with church leaders in the evenings, we do early morning or lunch meetings. Throughout the history of the church, I’ve explained to our people that I don’t want them at the church building several nights a week, but would rather them be in their homes with their families or serving in the

community. Without a doubt, we say “no” to many things that other people say “yes” to.

What are the challenges you face in ministry?

For several years, our biggest challenge was developing strong leaders to handle the growth. In recent years, God has enabled us to identify and equip leaders better and faster.»



Fact File

- Craig & Amy have been married for 20 years with six children aged between 6 and 16 years old!
- The couple met on a blind date. One of Craig’s friends was making fun of him for being, “Overboard for God” and suggested he meet a girl (Amy) who was just as fanatic. They started dating soon after
- They live in Oklahoma
- Craig has written seven books including ‘Weird’ (coming out in April 2011)
- Mentors who have impacted him include: Bill Hybels, Lyle Shaller, Billy Graham
- Craig’s life mission statement is: to lead people to become fully devoted followers of Christ
- Amy home-schools their children, but as they get older, she has become more involved in the women’s ministry and writes ladies’ Bible-based curriculums.



The family spend quality time together fishing and going to the movies



What advice can you offer to pastors who feel burnt out?

Pastors find it so easy to give but often difficult to receive. When a pastor is burning out, he or she needs to ask for help. A week away from ministry won't solve their burnout. I'd suggest asking for a sabbati-

and went to church, I did not know Him personally. I'm guessing there are countless people like that in the world today. I've noticed another large group of people in churches today that want all the blessings from God without conforming to the image of Christ. It seems many want enough of Christ to keep

At just 43 years of age, Craig is making headlines around the world for his tech-savvy approach to spreading the Gospel.

cal and seeking counselling immediately. Bill Hybels once said, "The way I was doing the work of God was destroying the work of God in me." If a pastor finds himself (or herself) in a similar place, it's time to drop the pride and ask others to help.

In the 'Christian Atheist' you talk about people who believe in God, but live as if He doesn't exist. Why do you think there is such widespread discrepancy amongst Christians?

The term Christian Atheist describes my life growing up. Even though I believed in God

them out of hell and make their lives on earth better - but not so much that they live any differently. Although what I call 'Christian Atheism' has been a problem for decades, in recent years, I'm encouraged that the emerging generation appears to be taking Christ's teaching more seriously than those in my generation did.

What does 2011 look like for you?

We like to say, "We'll do anything short of sin to reach people who don't know Christ." Because of our passion for evangelism, we're planning two new LifeChurch.tv cam-

"I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me - the task of testifying to the Gospel of God's grace." Acts 20:24

pus and to move two of them into larger and permanent facilities. This past year we experienced explosive growth in our free Bible App known as YouVersion. In response, we are planning to make the app available in eight additional languages, offer more reading plans and translations, and continually provide ways to help people spend more time in God's Word. We also anticipate welcoming new churches into our Network part-

nerships with Craig - the hardships of ministry can sometimes be so difficult, but we count it as an honour to suffer together, and it brings us so much closer.

Any advice for couples who struggle to spend time together?

A lot of people will say that "we just don't have time to spend as a family". I try to remind them that you have time for what you

2 and Proverbs 31 woman's lifestyle is my heart's desire.

How do you cope with raising six kids? Any practical tips?

Some people ask, "How do I do it all?" The answer is, "I don't." I feel like a key to saying "yes" to my kids is saying, "no" to so many other things. For example, I love keeping our home nice. But several years ago, I made a conscious decision to put relationships with my family ahead of trying to keep the perfect house.

I'd rather have time with the kids than have my floors perfectly clean each day. I also have to make a point to be present and attentive when I am with the kids and my family. I'd advise wives and moms to fight against living for what culture says is important but live for what is eternal.

Any plans to visit SA?

Craig does two international trips each year. I know he hopes to visit soon. ■

For more info see Lifechurch.tv

"Just as many people connect through Facebook or Twitter, Church Online provides another opportunity for people to build accountability and relationships."

nerships and offering more resources to more church leaders through our resource-sharing site, <http://open.lifechurch.tv>.

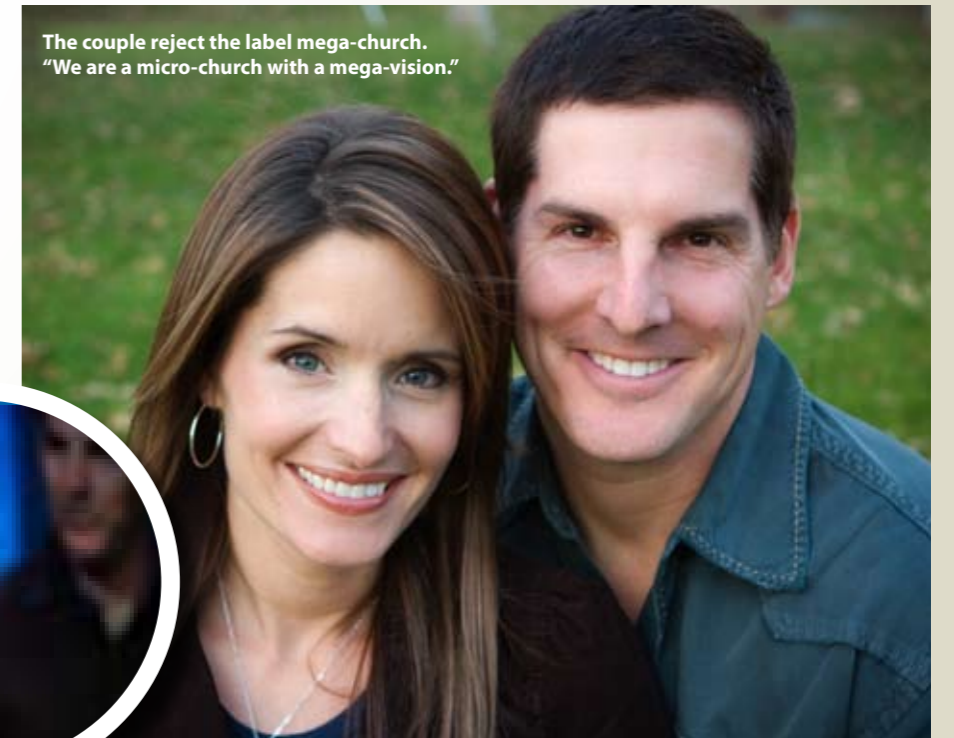
Amy, what is the most difficult part of being married to someone in the public eye?

It's not as hard as some would think. I'm thankful that God has given us a strong marriage. We try to remember that we can't control what people think - only what we do. If we live with integrity, we trust God to take care of our reputations.

choose to have time for. When Craig and I got married, we put a saying up in our house that said, "Neglect the rest of the world if you have to but never neglect each other." Guard your time together. If you don't prioritise time with your spouse, ministry will devour all your time. A healthy ministry is usually an overflow of a healthy home. Living a Titus

What are some highlights of your marriage and ministry together?

Being married to Craig who is so loving and committed to me is absolutely a highlight. We've always been best friends and want to spend time together as much as we can. Our marriage is a blessing to both of us, as it should be. A highlight in ministry is getting to meet and greet people and share in the rewards and fruit of God's work in our church. Seeing the fruit of our labour early in our ministry come to maturity is such a unique blessing. Also, sharing the hard-



The couple reject the label mega-church. "We are a micro-church with a mega-vision."



theChristianatheist

by Craig Groeschel

Sitting next to total strangers on airplanes provides limitless entertainment and surprises – especially if you’re a pastor. Before some unsuspecting traveller finds out what I do for a living, our exchanges are usually effortless and fun. But as soon as they uncover my profession, the conversation takes a turn. Sometimes our discussion becomes more meaningful, drawing on a common spiritual bond. Other times it grows heated, as the person unloads their doubts, confusion, or spiritual hurts. Sometimes plugged-in headphones and closed eyes leave no doubt that talk is over.

People’s perceptions

On a recent trip, I had two flights before reaching my destination. On my first flight, I

top of the world, routinely cutting deals in several markets. Now he couldn’t negotiate prices at a yard sale. The weakened economy and a smaller income had forced him to make significant lifestyle changes, but Travis expressed quiet hope that things would return to normal soon.

After openly sharing some of his professional challenges, Travis asked me what kind of business I was in. Sticking with business language, I explained that I’m in the spiritual business – the pastor of a church.

A misinformed view of God

That’s when Travis pounced: “So you’re a minister?” Doing his best to remain cordial, he asked in an obviously sarcastic tone, “I guess that means you believe in a literal seven-day

next to on my second flight, is an entirely different kind of atheist – a Christian Atheist.

The qualities of a Christian Atheist

Christian Atheists are everywhere. They attend Catholic churches, Baptist churches, Pentecostal churches, nondenominational churches, and even churches where the pastor says, “GAW-duh!” when he’s preaching. They attend seminars, they are every age and race and occupation – and some even read their Bibles everyday. Christian Atheists look like Christians, but they live like Travis.

Before our plane took off, Michelle struck up a conversation. Somewhat nervous about flying, she seemed eager to talk. After describing her divorced parents and her live-in boyfriend - who’s scared to death of marriage – she asked me about my life.

Creating a diversion from my “I’m a pastor” answer, I explained that I am married and have six children. After some more small talk, Michelle asked me what I do for a living. No longer able to dodge the inevitable, I said, “Well, as a matter of fact, I am a pastor.”

Living a compromised life

This revelation gave Michelle permission to unleash a stream of Christian words and stories. Dropping the occasional “God told me” and “God is good,” she smiled softly as she described how she “gave her life to Jesus” at the age of 15 at a Christian youth camp. After praying sincerely, she was eager to get back to school to share her faith and live a life of integrity. Michelle held on to her new belief in God but soon slipped back into her old ways.

As if in a confessional, Michelle continued pouring out her life’s darker details. She looked down as she admitted that she was doing things with her live-in boyfriend that she knew she shouldn’t. She told me she wanted to go to church but was simply too busy working and studying. She did pray many nights

“They claim to know God, but by their actions they deny Him...” Titus 1:16

– mostly that her boyfriend would become a Christian like she was. “If only he believed in Jesus, then he might want to marry me,” she said, wiping her tears. At last, Michelle expressed one final confession: “I know my life doesn’t look like a Christian’s life should look, but I do believe in God.”

We all struggle

Welcome to Christian Atheism, where people believe in God but live as if He doesn’t exist. As much as I don’t want to admit it, I see this kind of atheism in myself. People might assume that a pastor wouldn’t struggle with any form of atheism, but I certainly do. Sadly, Christian Atheism is everywhere. Sin is fun – at least for a while. But it never fails to come back to haunt you, usually when you least expect it.

There has to be a better way to live. And if you’re honest before God- as I am trying to be – perhaps together we can shed some of our hypocrisy and live a life that truly brings glory to Christ.

A recovering Christian Atheist

Christian Atheism is a fast-spreading spiritual pandemic which can poison, sicken and even kill eternally. Yet Christian Atheism is extremely difficult to recognise – especially by those who are infected.

For as long as I remember, I’ve believed in God, but I haven’t always lived like He exists. Today my Christian Atheism isn’t as large of a problem as it once was, but I still struggle with it. Like a recovering alcoholic, careful never to take sobriety for granted, I have to take life one day at a time.

Several years ago, I increasingly recognised inconsistencies between what I claimed to believe and the way I actually lived. I preached that people without Christ would go to hell, but my life showed I wasn’t equally passionate to reach them. I preached

that prayer is critical, but my prayer life was virtually non-existent. God’s Word said my treasure shouldn’t be this world, yet material things continued to grab me. Jesus said “Don’t worry about tomorrow”, but worry came to me as naturally as breathing. The more honest I became, the more I hated living faithlessly and the more I craved intimacy with God. “Whatever it takes” became my heart’s cry.

The drift from passion to apathy

Was there a time in your life that you were closer to God than you are today? If you’re like me, your spiritual drift didn’t happen on purpose. Like a tiny leak in a tyre,

vider, but you find it so hard to actually do. Possibly you believe in Heaven and hell, but sharing your faith with others is still foreign or simply way too intimidating for you - or you may believe in God but don’t see much need for the Church.

Is believing in Jesus enough? Although God is the only true judge, I’m not sure simply believing in Christ makes a person a

Believing in Christ enough to benefit from Him is at best shallow Christianity. At worst, it’s empty religion, leading many down the path of destruction.

slowly but surely, your spiritual passion slipped away.

Instead of a fully devoted follower of Christ, you’ve unintentionally become a full-time mom or a full-time student or a full-time accountant – and a part-time follower of Christ. Maybe like so many, you’re a member of a church, but you’re secretly still ashamed of your past. Perhaps you’ve heard about the love of God, but you’re still not convinced that God totally loves you. Or though you’re convinced God exists, your prayer life isn’t what you know it should be.

You know it, but don’t do it...

Perhaps like many other well-meaning Christians, you know what God wants you to do, but you still do whatever you want. Or you genuinely want to trust God as your pro-

Christian. Even demons believe in Christ. I worry how many people might be deceived. Instead of truly living as followers of Christ, many lull themselves into a sense of false comfort. What if they’re really ‘cultural’ Christians, false believers? Are you willing to lose your life?

“For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for Me will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his own soul?” Matt 16:25-26.

Instead of believing you can never change, let God’s unlimited power transform you and lead you out of a life of fear and worry. ■

This article is extracted from ‘The Christian Atheist’ by Craig Groeschel, available at Christian bookstores. See www.christianatheist.com for more

