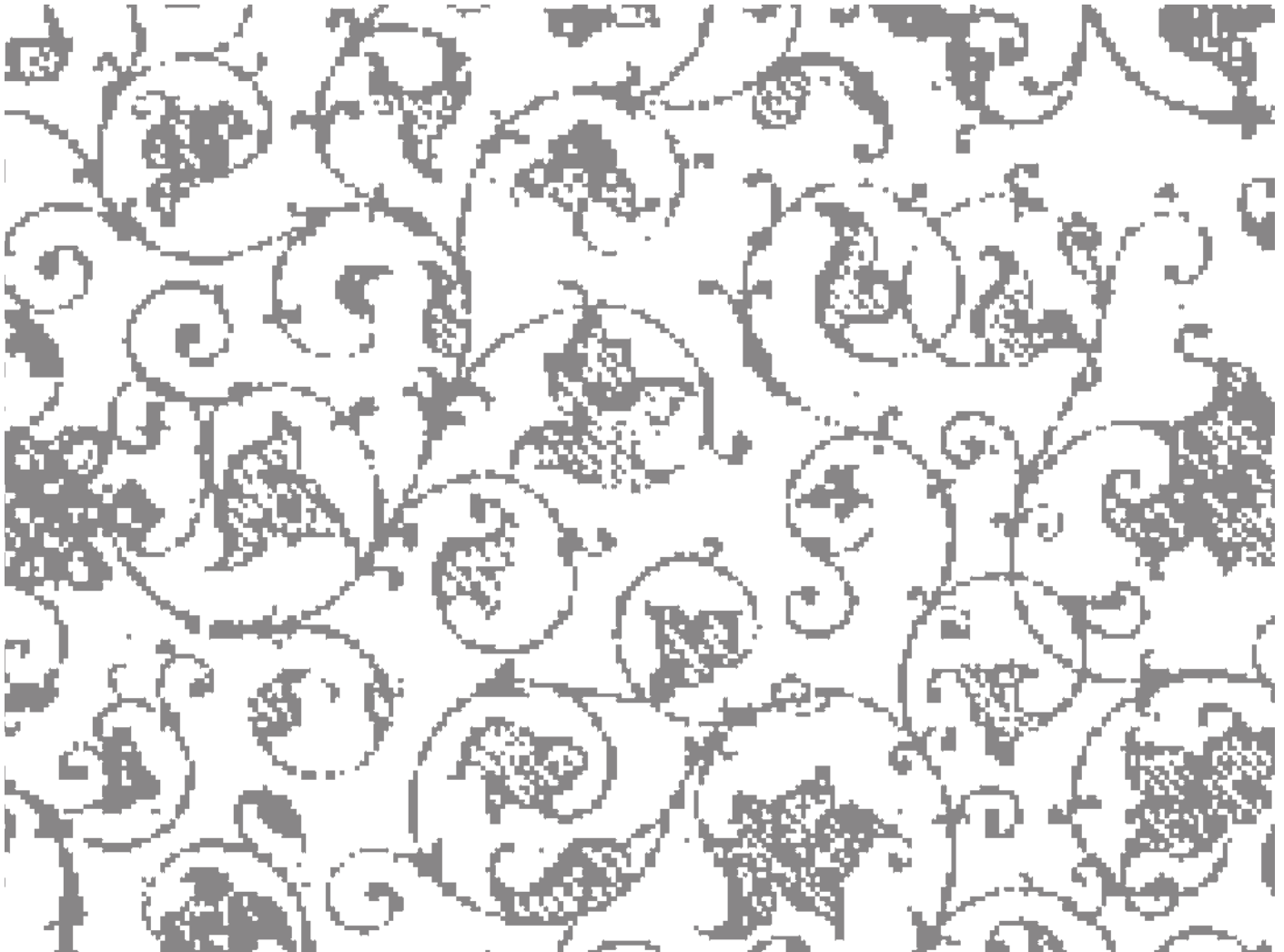


ishah

exploring issues for Christian women

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Wholly Single

NOT DEAD
YET!

Helen van Hulst

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Woman (Hebrew ishah). Woman, with man, was made in the image of God. 'Male and female he created them' (Genesis 1:27).

welcome...

Over the years, I have mentored many university aged girls and the issue of singleness ALWAYS comes up. In fact I have noticed that the topic of singleness and the 'difficulty of finding a suitable man' comes up in conversations among females of all ages, from 12 year old girls at a sleep-over party to elderly women sharing coffee and cake. This edition of ishah explores the issue of being 'wholly single'.

Reading the articles contributed for this edition left me with mixed emotions. However, from these sprang one clear thought. Nearly all of these women have come to realize that, contrary to the ideas propagated by the popular media of our day, true fulfillment comes from God, not men. Hard to believe, I know! Men and women are made whole through God, not each other.

You would be hard-pressed to pick up a magazine at the supermarket counter and not find at least one negative reference to being single. Sadly, within Christian circles it would seem that singleness has an even greater negative connotation. As someone who is engaged and soon to be married, I am probably not the best person to advocate singleness! I do, however, have many single friends whose love of the Lord and commitment to Him is a great inspiration. The articles in this edition further illustrated to me the awesome way in which God uses his people, single or married, to achieve his one purpose. They also reminded me of our responsibility as sisters in Christ to support one another and build the body of Christ together as a community, not a collection of cohorts.

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our aims

1. To value the Bible as God's inspired Word to us and the ultimate authority on matters of faith and practice, through thinking hard about how the Bible applies to our everyday lives.
2. To encourage women to grow in godliness and maturity in Christ.
3. To equip Christian women to be creative, confident and effective in communicating the gospel.
4. To give women in a variety of roles and situations the forum to think about contemporary issues from a framework of Biblical theology and to articulate their thinking in a manner that stimulates themselves and others to live lives that are more faithful to God's Word.

ISSUES TO COME...

ISSUE 17:

Father, Son and ...
who?

ISSUE 18:

Jealousy

Not Dead Yet!

BY HELEN VAN HULST

When I first met Sally, I was moving into her home as a temporary guest. I was twenty one. It became apparent that there had been a party there the previous evening. Sally confirmed it: "I had a bit of a gathering for my 30th". My reply, and I still shudder at the thought, was a vehement: "I'd die if I was thirty and not married!" Last September, I turned forty. The card from Sally simply read: "Dead yet?"

The reality of my journey as a single woman has sometimes come closer to death than I'd like. I've struggled with issues of loneliness, low self esteem, sin, guilt, codependence and depression. The most frightening aspect of sharing what I've learnt is the potential to hurt others as I claim a partial or present victory over something that is still being deeply felt by another. Being single currently, never having married and/or having no children are all separate states in which one is mindful of what is not there. The losses are sorely felt and it is not my desire to suggest otherwise. That said, my testimony is one of God slowly turning a stubborn head and helping me to see what I have, rather than what I don't. The head still has some way to go!

For me, the breakthrough came when I stopped asking God about His purpose in keeping me single and concentrated on being single with a purpose! The former mindset was unintentionally nurtured by insensitive comments from well-meaning Christian brothers and sisters. Throw-away comments like: "Our neighbour, Elizabeth is 34 and single too – hard to understand really; she's quite good looking and such a lovely girl," left me with a suspicion that singleness was reserved for those of us who were ugly and horrid!

Even though I'm a confident woman with a vivacious personality, it would be true to say that in my twenties, endless questions about 'Mr Right' and his delayed arrival left me dreading weddings and avoiding other church gatherings. When I hit thirty it seemed others had given up hope and the questions stopped. By then, the weddings had too; most of my friends had rings on their fingers and babies in their bellies! I soon realised that a key to my ongoing happiness was to maintain strong links with these families as well as my remaining single friends. I have become a surrogate auntie to many, and formed a realistic picture of marriage. It is all too easy to view matrimony as a cure-all solution, but staying close to couples helps me recognise that both paths have their pleasures and pitfalls and both require patience and perseverance. This does a lot to keep self pity at bay.

Holding babies and hugging one's own friends, however, only goes part way to satisfying my need for physical intimacy. In wrestling with this issue I have tried to be



creative, realistic, disciplined and pure. I have not always succeeded. I often ask God to hold me and I enjoy the opportunities afforded in worship for physical expression and connection with the 'Lover of my soul'. In addition, my adored cat, Winnie the Puss, was the best \$30 I have ever spent. When tactile deprivation sets in, I take myself off for a massage or a pedicure and after far too many years, I have concluded that it's wise to censor films and novels that send me to sleep weeping because there's no one's head on the pillow beside me.

What I miss most about marriage, though, is not merely what I don't receive; I'm terrified of becoming self-absorbed. Thanks be to God; he sets the lonely in families. Last year, I bought my first home with a thirty-something couple and their four daughters. I am happy! I have opportunities to give, share and serve, and I continue to learn about compromise, forgiveness and communication. It makes my heart glad beyond words, that the family who dwells just beyond my lounge room door values my input into their lives.

God is very good! He has given me the grace to live much like He provided the manna to the Israelites. Eventually, it taught them to approach life's needs daily, remain thankful, trust God and prioritise the basics rather than demand, complain and second guess their Maker. Good lessons really! And speaking of food, if you're reading this and think you know just the chap for me, do invite us both to dinner!

■ *Helen van Hulst is single (obviously), although she does have about 160 kids in her life at the moment, mostly in the classroom. She worships at Bundoora Presbyterian.*

ON BEING CONTENT:

reflections from the single lane



The word 'singleness' is often used to label a person as if it defines who they are. Often the world, the church and, most dangerously, the person concerned act as if this is so. I want to shout "Lies! False! Not so!" God doesn't define us by our marital status and neither should we.

As a person who has not married, I recognize that there have been and will be times when I have to deal with a sense of loss, even of grief. Loss and grief for what I've not experienced; of not having the intimacy of being the beloved; and of not having children and grandchildren. As I have approached my 70s and 80s, there's the issue of "who will look after me when I'm frail?"

In all of our lives, no matter whether single or married, loss and grief is a part of living. However, it is never the whole of it and shouldn't possess, stunt and maim us so that we walk all our days with a limp.

Let me also affirm some of the positive aspects of singleness. I can read all night if I choose and no one complains if I snore! At a more serious level I could never have worked the hours I have or been available to as many people if I'd been married.

I am grateful for three ways in which my own experience has been shaped.

In my teen years in SU/ AFES I was taught the importance of living fully in God in the now, of not being a 'lady in waiting' nor of feeling "I'm a half needing a partner to be whole." I was grounded in the truth that ultimately,

and on a daily basis, only in Christ can my needs be met and my full personhood be realised. This is not a platitude nor a cop-out but a practical reality.

I realised I had a choice of response. I could rebel and feel God had cheated me by not giving me marriage. I could be resigned but hang on to a kernel of resentment, a sense of deprivation. Or I could accept that hard times and loneliness are there whether married or single and that in whichever condition I can trust God for who he is, who I am and celebrate his love and provision.

I also learned thankfulness for my friends who've made it easy for me to be single. Friends have shared their families, bringing their children up knowing that I'm part of them. They have included me in family celebrations, and made special celebrations for me. This has been crucial for someone who doesn't have milestones such as anniversaries and the births of children. They've been incredibly inclusive socially, taking me out for family dinners, holidays and even overseas. Such a gift.

Relationships with families do need to be reciprocal. Those of us who are single need to take initiatives, reach out, give time, support and care. We have a strong role in being there to pray for or with, read to, listen to and do special things with children and we have the privilege of mirroring that life is full and joyful. As my friends' children have grown to adulthood, I've learnt so much from them, been stimulated

mentally, challenged spiritually and have wonderful friendships with them - and in many cases now with their children.

I have experienced the richness of belonging and being included in Christian fellowships where single people are welcomed and affirmed. My experience, however, is not that of many others. I know many never-marrieds, single parents, separated, divorcees, widows, widowers and those whose partners don't share their faith, who feel there is no real place for them in their local fellowship. We need reminding that inclusion is not a matter of programmes, but of natural, genuine, practical inclusiveness into our lives.

The commentator Tertullian, quoting pagans, said of the early church "see how these Christians love each other". As we demonstrate love and care to those who are often marginalised both within and beyond our church communities, so may it be said of us.

■ *This article was edited by Fran Boydell, a member of the isha editorial team, from a talk given to an Anglican congregation in suburban Perth by a retired professional woman who did not wish to be named.*

Endings and Beginnings



BY CLAIRE LIVINGSTONE

I spoke with several women who have been married but are now single either through divorce or the death of their husband. Their stories are all different. Their ages are different. Some had young children, some had adult children and some had never had children. There were, though, some common experiences. For all the women there were a myriad of emotions and responses.

When they married they all had dreams of what life would hold, of the partnership they would have with their husband. They grieved over what could have been but wasn't. They grieved over the loss of a friendship as well as the loss of dreams. They had all spent time thinking "what if" and "if only".

One woman said: "I spent years wallowing in regrets, maintaining the feelings of guilt, anger and bitterness. I found it easier to place most of the blame on my husband's shoulders. As parents we needed to keep relating with one another but I saw everything he said or did through my grid of blame. I remained in a cycle of anger and bitterness. One day I was convicted of my own brokenness, of my need to receive God's forgiveness – and to begin the journey to let go of my anger. God is teaching me the depth of my own sin, as well as the depth of his grace. I don't want to be someone full of bitterness. I want to reflect the grace I'm beginning to experience from God. I'm still on the journey."

Another woman spoke in a different way. "Directly after becoming

separated, even though my existence in my marriage had been a very lonely time, I was acutely aware that I was on my own. I felt needy and not quite whole. Yet mixed with this was a heady reality that the pain of my marriage was in some ways over. The chance for new beginnings was on its way in. I have a deep opportunity to get to know myself, rather than filling every 'single' space in my adult life with a 'mate' of some description. I find myself looking forward to the future. I'm excited by all the options I have."

A widow of twenty years said: "I still have times where I miss my husband deeply. He was my best friend. We talked about everything, but we also had wonderful times of sitting in silence over a meal, simply resting in each other's company. I felt adrift after he died. He'd been my security. I'm very thankful for the years we had together, but God has taught me that only my Creator can be my rock. He alone is unchanging."

One woman was incredibly frank: "You know one thing I miss? Sex: the physical intimacy and pleasure. But no one at church wants to talk about that. They don't know what to say."

Most of the women I spoke with had experienced isolation within their Christian communities at one time or another. Much of church life is focused around couples and families.

Those without a partner or without children have found it difficult to feel they belong within their church family. They commented that even describing

a service as a "family service" meant they felt excluded.

At social events there were times women found themselves seated at a table with other single mothers – as though their common experience meant they were a particular group within the church. Yet, as well as supporting one another, they wanted people to recognize their life stage didn't define their whole being.

Some women had experienced hurtful, judgmental comments from other Christians. They were condemned for their marriage breakup, without people even knowing their circumstances. There were unthinking platitudes offered, or simplistic answers to deep struggles.

For other women, their Christian community has been nurturing & accepting. One woman says, "Sometimes, consumed with the busyness of life as a single mother of two, I forget I am single due to rich, close, intimate friends (nearly all female) which, mixed with coffee and cake, make for much more than my life as a couple ever was! The truth is that I am far from single as I discover the wealth of love that surrounds me in family and friends that I believe is God's expression of his steadfast love for me through his people."

■ *Claire is a member of the ishah editorial team. She enjoys being a member of God's people at All Saints' Greensborough with her husband, Andrew, and two teenage sons.*

BY SUSAN PIEROTTI

Shortly after my thirtieth birthday (many years ago!), I was the recipient of comments such as, “You’ve obviously made a choice for a career”, and “Prince Charming won’t just appear; you’ve got to start looking”. I was startled by this. Was I now an inferior being because I was over thirty and, gasp, unattached? Yet I felt that I was following my appointed path. I was in a God-given profession that demanded many focussed and undisturbed hours alone, and the men that I met were either unsympathetic or unsuitable. So, why marry the wrong person just to be married?

I became aware of expectations from family, society and sadly, even the church. From my mother who knitted booties and dreamed of grandchildren to the movies which portrayed women as: young and attractive (to be dated); married with husband, two kids and a dog (to be congratulated); divorced but available (to be berated...but then dated); elderly widow (to be celebrated, or medicated); psychopath (to be eradicated). There was always a pointed reminder that single women who remained single didn’t fit in (unrelated?).

Even in church one was made to feel not quite complete. Single women were useful for minding the Sunday school, taking up the offering, working in the office, but leading a home group, leading a prayer meeting, leading anything? She would need a helpmate, preferably a husband. It seemed single women were in the “too hard” basket and that married women were easier to deal with. Is that because churches, like most human organisations, prefer to think in “group” mentality? But Jesus called the church to be an organism, not an organisation; a community, not a corporation. More specifically, “God setteth the solitary in families” (KJV, Psalm 68: 6), and as God’s children, single women are an integral part of His family, the church.

So, what is the Christian response to women who may never marry? Is it God’s will that some always be single? Are single women complete persons or do we need a “life partner” to be considered whole? Statistically, there are more women than men reaching adulthood in certain parts of the world. Not everyone therefore will marry. Does the Bible have any reassuring words about this? Actually, very few! It’s as if one’s marital status is irrelevant. None of us is born married and Jesus Himself said that “at the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage.”

(Matthew 22:30, Mark 12:25, Luke 20:35). It seems that God wants to relate to us as individuals whose wedded state is not a prior condition of that relationship.

There is the oft-quoted passage from 1 Corinthians 7 about it being better to be single than married. I believe Paul wasn’t advocating celibacy (as elsewhere he extols the married state), but he was addressing a specific congregation that beneath its Christian veneer was still basically immoral. The fact that one could live a wonderful fulfilling life without sexual activity was probably a revelation to many in the Corinthian church (and to many today!). Paul was showing them that it is possible, and even better, to be single than to be indulging in sexual gratification or being married just for the sake of it.

The sort of Bible verses I find encouraging as a single woman are found for instance in 1 Timothy 6:6 – “Godliness with contentment is great gain”. Not a mention of marital status but simply aiming for that “peace that passes all understanding” (Philippians 4:7). Another is in Psalm 37:3-4. Many read it and desire that God will grant them the husband of their dreams. Maybe, but more important is that we have trusted in Him, reached out of our aloneness to others, been content with what we have in abundance so far, and worshipped Him in true joy and delight. By then our dreams should have changed so much that our desires are His desires for us, and that may not include a husband!

God doesn’t treat us as second-class family members just because we’re not married. He made us in His image (Genesis 1:27) and always does His work perfectly, never by halves. Find your place in God’s family – missionary, intercessor, teacher, small group leader, encourager, adopted aunt – and enjoy it! Blessed are the single, for after a rich and marvellous life, we too shall see God!

All Bible references are from the NIV unless stated. (KJV = King James Version)

Susan is an aunt to two lively nephews and adopted aunt to several other children. She is a full-time musician and has been a Christian for over forty years. She belongs to a house church in Balwyn with a healthy supportive mix of singles and couples.



BLESSED ARE THE SINGLE?

READING THE DA VINCI CODE

BY KAREN MORRIS

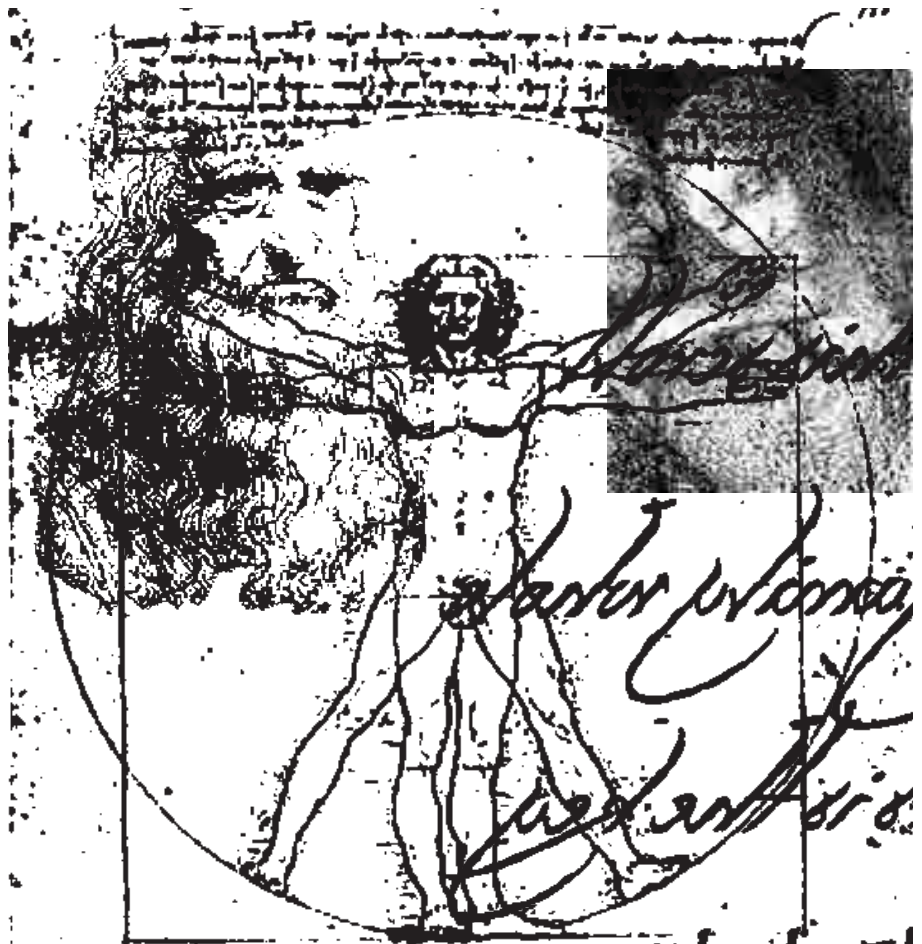
Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* is a compelling novel and I acknowledge that I really liked it. I enjoyed the pace, the imagination and its distinctive plot, and I read it in just a few days (in spite of 2 small children). That said, I picked up a pencil to mark questionable facts and gave up after a few chapters because there were too many.

Through his work Brown has raised numerous issues about Jesus, the church and its history, and the sacred feminine. He has struck a blow at the idea that Jesus was divine and provoked a huge response in both Christians and non-Christians.

And yet, it is a novel. The author makes no claim that it is anything other than a novel. The fact sheet which states: "All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents and secret rituals in this novel are accurate" is also part of the novel – that sheet appears after the title page of the novel rather than alongside the credits and acknowledgements. It is much the same as a map of a fantasyland or a fictitious family tree: it aids in reading the novel but that doesn't make it a reliable source of factual information.

As a Christian, I need to be intelligent about how I respond to the novel. Darrell Bock, in *Breaking The Da Vinci Code*, carefully explains what is fact and what is fabrication. As a Professor of New Testament Studies he has researched the ancient texts that Brown refers to and outlines some of the more serious problems.

As an example, Brown posits that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married and had children. The primary ancient text he uses to establish this is the Gospel of Philip 63.32-64.10. This gospel was written 200 years after the time of Jesus and possibly describes Mary as a companion of Jesus. Brown fails to acknowledge that the manuscript is unclear. In fact it says "And the companion of the (...) Mary Magdalene (...loved) her more than



(all) the disciples (and used to) kiss her (often) on her (...)." Bock states that the brackets indicate broken locations in the manuscript where there is no reading because the manuscript is damaged. In spite of this, Brown's conclusion from this text is that Jesus was married to Mary and kissed her often on the mouth!

As a second example, the relationship between Mary and Jesus is further established through Leonardo da Vinci's 'Last Supper'. In reality the painting is in very bad condition and the conclusions Brown reaches are difficult to see.

While it is a good page turner, *The Da Vinci Code* is not an historical treatise. It is clever, challenging and requires discerning reading. To help our friends who have read it we could start by suggesting they read a gospel with us, enabling them to work out some of the issues for themselves. We also need to read *Breaking The Da Vinci Code* or its equivalents to make up our own minds about some of the more obscure documents.

■ *Karen Morris is passionate about uni students hearing about Jesus. To that end, she and her husband Rod were missionaries in Spain and Belgium with CMS. They now live at Ridley College for the same purpose. They have 2 small children... and she is perpetually tired.*

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It's been exciting to make copies of *ishah* available at various conferences around Australia. Recently the Perth Women's Convention reprinted 500 backcopies to distribute to participants. We've also had requests to reprint articles in newsheets and other publications. If you have an upcoming event and you'd like to reprint any issues or a single article please contact us at ishahmag@hotmail.com

Starting Point is a regular column that aims to encourage readers to engage with a contemporary issue in the media.



Image from opening titles sequence of *Desperate Housewives*

Desperate for . . .

It's Monday night after dinner; I watch the clock tick by. Finally it's 8:30. I run to the television and turn on to my weekly dose of *Desperate Housewives*. Apparently I'm not the only person who undertakes this ritual every single week. According to the *Herald Sun*, *Desperate Housewives* is the most watched show in the country.

It's easy to see why this show is so appealing: it's visually pleasing, the houses in the street are pastel coloured, the housewives are gorgeous (don't we all wish we had figures like theirs at the age of 40). The storylines are trashy and light-hearted (though they deal with heavy issues such as suicide, murder, and drug addiction) and overall the cheerful soundtrack and storytelling voiceover gives *Desperate Housewives* a dreamlike quality and the feel of an urban fairytale.

Despite *Desperate Housewives*' sugar-coated appearance, part of the real attraction is seeing into the lives of 5 women. These women have the appearance of perfection; they live a luxurious life behind a white picket fence. They don't have to work, so they can spend their time on hobbies, maintaining their houses, their looks and caring for their families. They are living the life that many women dream about. But behind these ideal lives are many secrets and personal problems. These housewives are perfectly flawed. Their 'perfect' lifestyle is a farce. In order to satisfy the chasms in their lives, they become desperate for attention, control, approval and love through inadequate means.

Desperate Housewives vividly illustrates the fallen human state. We seek perfection and fulfilment through material things, love and self-esteem, but ultimately these things do not satisfy. In the end, only a relationship with Jesus Christ and living according to His will can provide the satisfaction that we truly crave.

■ *Esther Tse is married to William, working as a public servant, serving at the Chinese Christian Church of Victoria and likes to eat for a hobby.*

