



'Porn Pastor' Offers Love to Gays, Gluttons, Outcasts

Pastor Craig Gross Says Traditional Churches Too Often Preach a Message of Intolerance

By **SUSAN DONALDSON JAMES**

Sept 7, 2009—

[Pastor Craig Gross](#) admits he has more porn stars in his Rolodex than Christian leaders.

For the last seven years, the 33-year-old former youth minister has been known as the "porn pastor," befriending Las Vegas [sex workers](#) and other social pariahs.

Conservative Christians were horrified when Gross moved there last year and declared, "[Jesus Loves Sin City](#)," establishing [The Strip Church](#), attending porn conventions and handing out mini-Bibles.

But today, Gross is expanding his message of Christian love to the glutton, the disconnected, the crook, the outcast -- and even the ultra religious who disagree with him.

Gross has joined forces with fellow activist pastor Jason Harper to promote their new book, [Jesus Loves You, This I Know](#)."

The authors have launched a six-stop tour across the country, including a gay rally and a maximum security prison, to reach out to those cast away by many conventional churches.

"The church looks at the rest of the world with a score card and chalk board, marking people off," said Gross. "Jesus is ready to sit down and dine with the sinner and the forgotten with no strings

The hip, young pastors are as comfortable with pop culture as they are with the latest Internet technology.

Just last week, while visiting the [Westboro Baptist Church](#) in Topeka, Kan., they had a Biblical [confrontation with evangelical picketers](#) carrying "God Hates Fags" posters at an [Adam Lambert](#) concert.

Gross and Harper carried their own posters, "Jesus Loves Gays." Using video feeds, tweets and photos, they countered the protesters using #JesusLovesYou.

Their anti-hate message resonated so much with "[American Idol](#)" fans that it sparked a Twitter movement, #GodHatesHate, which became the number one trending topic that day.

According to the authors, over the last 2,000 years, the traditional church has for its own agenda, "distorted, twisted, hijacked, tweaked, relabeled and distorted again" the teachings of Jesus.

Jesus Loves Everyone, Say Pastors

In 2002, Gross, 33, founded [Fireproof Ministries](#) and [XXXchurch.com](#), a web network for people struggling with pornography. Harper, 37, is the director of community outreach for [Capital Christian Center](#) in Sacramento, Calif., and founder of [The Extra Mile](#), an organization for inner city children.

"We've always gone where the church hasn't gone," Gross told ABCNews.com. "We aren't afraid of that. Where there is no competition, we have had our best success."

But for Gross and Harper, success doesn't mean crusading against sin, recruiting or even pushing book sales.

"I don't think I have ever converted one person," said Gross. "Even if I don't sell one book, all these stops are a significant part of this rebranding of Jesus's name."

But that doesn't sit well with some fundamentalist churches like Westboro Baptist, which the authors target as "hateful and notorious for offensive protests."

Westboro's automated telephone recording tells callers, "This ministry centers around obedience to the command of God, who promises to bless you if you obey, and curse you if you do not."

The church's own message -- "God Hates America" -- is directed not only at the gay culture and pornography, but even at President Barack Obama, whom they view as "the beast," the scriptural antichrist who arrives just before the Apocalypse.

The small, 79-member church calls the campaign of love "poison" and said in its review of the book that the authors, "offer this sappy-floppy-pretend-love for one reason only -- to make the bucks."

But, said Shirley Phelps Roper, mother of 11 and daughter of the church's pastor, Fred Phelps, their visit to the church was "awesome" because it highlighted the conflict due before the Biblical end of the world.

"The scripture calls it the quarrel of the covenant, the conflict that Cain and Abel had, and today it's alive and well and living on the earth," Phelps-Roper told ABCNews.com.

"It's a lying doctrine that God loves everyone and that you can live how you want and God will give over his will to you," she said. "There's not one word in the Bible that supports that lie. It's the doctrine of Satan in the Garden of Eden."

By her thinking, man has only two choices: "You either speak for God, or you speak for Satan, and there is no middle ground, only heaven and hell."

But Gross and Harper take the opposite tack. They want to "flip" the conventional "three-step approach to God."

According to their book, that starts with "belief."

"Essentially, if you believe the right things, it will lead to a change in behavior," they write. "When you have changed your behavior, you will be accepted by the church. Believe, behave, belong."

In their faith, "Jesus loves&now fill in the blank. Think of crooks and soccer moms, prostitutes and pastors, porn stars and CEOs. Jesus loves every single one of them.

"To Jesus we're all just people who need God to save us from the mess we are in and lead us to a better way."

Their tour reflects each chapter in the book: the Aug. 30 Westboro Baptist Church stop highlighted "God Loves the Religious."

On Sept. 30, they focus on "God Loves the Glutton" giving away 400 lunch buffets at a Las Vegas restaurant. On Oct. 7, Gross will engage in a friendly debate with friend and porn star Ron Jeremy at the University of Southern California.

In Detroit, home of the nation's highest unemployment rate, Gross and Harper will meet with the "disconnected," and help renovate a family home.

Demonstrating that "Jesus Loves the Crook," they will visit maximum-security Folsom State Prison in California to teach a chapel service.

The tour will wind up at the Atlanta Pride Festival in Georgia where they will apologize to gays for the way they have too often been treated by religious groups.

While they may not have found open converts, they say they have found friendship and rare moments of understanding.

"When Jesus reached out, it became contagious," said Harper. "People want to be around him."

As a result of Harper's pastoral work, he has become close to many with no religious leanings, including "Gay Joe."

"I have given this book to many of my friends who don't believe in Christ at all," said Harper. "'How does this sit with you?' I ask. They say, 'We like that you guys are addressing the core of our spirituality and not our sexuality.'"

As for Gross, he has become so comfortable with his friend, former porn star Ron Jeremy, that his two children, 4 and 6, call him, "Uncle Ron."

But does he ever worry that keeping company with porn stars might push him over to the dark side?

"Every day I see the devastation this causes," said Gross. "Marriages are destroyed and lives are wrecked at the consumer end. I tell Ron, 'You always get high-fives and standing ovations.' In my shoes, it's not as glamorous."

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