

PRAISE FOR *OPEN*

“I like Craig Gross because he keeps it real—no fake shallow stuff with him. He has a deep passion to see people experience freedom, and in *Open*, he will help you find the freedom you’ve been searching for.”

—Derwin L. Gray, lead pastor, Transformation Church; author, *Limitless Life*

“*Open* is one of the most relative and practical books on accountability I’ve ever read. Craig takes many routes, through stories from pop culture and his personal journey to help lead you to a life that’s *open*.”

—Josh McCown, NFL journeyman

“Craig Gross occupies a very, very important space in the Christian community and the culture at large. He calls men and women to not just fight addictive problems but gives them the tools, encouragement and community they need to actually get free and live free. But living free requires being *open* with your life, and Craig’s incredible book is both a clarion call to always live in the light and simple instruction guide for how to ensure you stay there.”

—Shaunti Feldhahn, social researcher; best-selling author, *For Women Only* and *For Men Only*

“Craig has been a friend and ministry partner for years. He has always been as helpful and hopeful as he is honest. This book comes to you in that spirit.”

—Ryan Meeks, founding pastor, EastLake Church

“I don’t say this often, but this book is a must-read. Every time I speak somewhere or get emails with people asking me how to find healing in particular areas, my response is always *community*. Craig does a beautiful job in articulating how the path to true joy is found in being real, honest, and accountable.”

—Jefferson Bethke, author, *Jesus > Religion*

“This book will challenge you. And with good reason, because isn’t that inherent to accountability? In a culture that grows increasingly autonomous, it is essential that we pursue one another with intentionality. From a man that has been blessed by the ministry of XXXChurch and the Gross family, I am thankful for Craig—his heart for and devotion to life lived together. I pray that this book will serve as a practical guide for openness and intimacy that reflects the communal nature of our Creator.”

—Levi (the Poet) Macallister, spoken word and performance artist

“In a time when many of us communicate through quick, abbreviated texts, and social media lends itself to the proclamation of ‘truth’ through a series of monologues, Craig Gross reminds us that life is about authentic relationships; relationships that seek truth through *true accountability!*”

—Michael Guido, road pastor, PR Ministries

“*Open* by Craig Gross gives us a simple yet fresh look at what it really takes to overcome the many things that can consume us and can keep us from experiencing sustainable freedom through Christ and community. This book is a true road map to living life openly, honestly and with genuine courage.”

—Judah Smith, pastor, City Church; *New York Times* best-selling author, *Jesus Is _____*

Open

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU GET REAL,
GET HONEST, AND GET ACCOUNTABLE

CRAIG GROSS
with ADAM PALMER



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

NASHVILLE DALLAS MEXICO CITY RIO DE JANEIRO

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Dad,

I know this past year has been tough on you and your health. I hope and pray you are the first one who is able to read the finished copy of this book. The last few years are ones I will never forget and always hold on to. A phone call you made to me over six years ago changed my life and will change our families' future for years to come. Thank you for everything you have done and provided. I look forward to watching another Super Bowl with you!

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If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far,
go together.

—African proverb

FOREWORD

It's fitting that my friend Craig would write a book called *Open*.

My friendship with him began in the summer of 2006. I had simply reached out with some questions about starting a nonprofit, and he ended up offering me a surprising invitation to come live with his family in their basement in Michigan. Craig added that he would be traveling to speak at a bunch of churches and schools during that time, but that I should come with him on those trips as well.

His life was open. And I was invited in.

At the time, I had just quit my job in order to focus on

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starting an organization to help people struggling with depression, addiction, self-injury, and suicide. The organization was born from the surprising response to a story I had written called “To Write Love on Her Arms,” about the pain and hope of my friend Renee. We started selling T-shirts as a way to pay for her drug treatment, and the story and the T-shirts began to make their way around the world. The issues I had written about seemed to be issues a lot of people were living with, but they also seemed to be things that very few people were talking about.

Craig seemed to be doing a similar work helping people who were caught up in pornography, breaking the silence and offering hope and recovery in a world mostly secret.

So I made my way from Orlando to Grand Rapids, knowing very little about basements, the season of Fall, or what it might look like to run a non-profit. During the four weeks that followed, I must have asked Craig a thousand questions. And he didn’t just answer the easy ones. He talked about the hard stuff too, the stuff that was tough within his job and within his life. And Craig had questions for me as well, about what made me tick and where I hoped to go with TWLOHA.

Our time together led to TWLOHA launching under the umbrella of Fireproof Ministries, which Craig leads and which XXXChurch falls under as well. It gave us a big brother we could go to with questions, someone to offer guidance and support and to help keep us accountable.

Over the last six years, we’ve been on our own as a non-profit, but Craig and I are still great friends. He is still someone

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I look up to and lean on with questions. We still swap stories and share struggles and celebrate each other's victories. When TWLOHA won the \$1,000,000 grant at the first-ever American Giving Awards in 2011, Craig was standing with me on stage. And while I am a huge fan of his work and how he goes about it, I am even more impressed by who he is as a husband, a father, and a friend.

Craig and I, along with our teams and our supporters, have learned that people all over the world can relate to pain, to questions, and to struggle. We've also learned that so many people feel alone and live alone when it comes to these things. It seems we're afraid of being labeled, afraid of being judged, misunderstood, abandoned. And it's easy to buy the lie that suggests our friends have enough on their plates—they have problems of their own and they don't need ours on top of them.

But the truth is that people need other people, that a good story requires more than one character. We were all made to be loved and made to be known, to find ourselves in honest relationships where those things can be reciprocated and exchanged. It's one thing to have hundreds of friends on Facebook or a phone overflowing with contacts. It's another to really let a few people know you, to have some friends who meet you in your questions, in your pain, and in your coping. We all deserve it—a community, a support system. It isn't easy, but it's worth it; for you were never meant to fake it or to hide. You were never meant to live this life alone.

Once again, my friend Craig is talking about some things that people tend not to. And he isn't just talking about this

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stuff, or saying that we need to talk about it. He's showing the way forward. And like the thousands of stories and pieces of stories I've had the privilege of hearing in recent years, Craig is not suggesting that any of this will be easy. But I believe he's saying that it will be worth it. Friendship is this incredible miracle gift that says we don't have to carry everything ourselves.

In Florida, we're afraid of basements because we imagine that they're ugly. We assume they must be dark and dirty and full of things from the past. Mostly, we're afraid because it's a place we've never been. I hope your experience with this book is like my experience with Craig and that basement in Grand Rapids. It's a different sort of life, and it's one we have to choose. It will involve some phone calls and surprising invitations. It will mean leaving your comfort zone and it may require airplanes. It will take some showing up and some letting people in.

I hope you're pleasantly surprised.

Jamie Tworkowski
Founder, To Write Love on Her Arms
April 24, 2013, New York City

Introduction

GETTING OPEN

Aren't you Craig Gross?" the man next to me on the airplane asked.

"Yes," I replied.

"You're the x3Watch guy!"

"Yep."

We were on a flight from Las Vegas.

Now, Las Vegas bills itself as the Entertainment Capital of the World. Packed with casinos, bars, strip clubs, as well as the availability of legal prostitution less than sixty miles away, Las Vegas is a type of mecca for people who want to "have a little fun." I don't consider much of what Las Vegas has to offer as

my type of fun, but a lot of people seem to feel that indulging in outlandish behavior and losing far more dollars than they win are “fun.” After all, as the city famously declared in the early 2000s, “What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas.”

Since I do many speaking engagements, I travel a lot, which means I often find myself on planes flying to and from Vegas. When I lived in Vegas, I often sat next to people who had visited with the hope that the city would live up to its famous catchphrase (though it seldom did). Usually I wound up sitting next to someone who was heading home after a Vegas vacation, winging away from a pile of crazy acts he or she planned not to bring back home.

Which brings me back to the man in his twenties who happened to be sitting next to me and did a double take as he took his seat and adjusted his seat belt. He had recognized me from x3Watch.

What Is XXXchurch?

Let me pause for a moment to explain what the young man was talking about.

Back in 2002, I founded a website called XXXchurch.com. The point of this site was to address the repercussions of pornography—both in the people who used porn and became addicted to it, and in the people who made it. We wanted to offer help to anyone who had become enslaved to the pornography machine, whether they were in the industry and wanted

to get out or were end users and wanted to clear it out of their lives.

Shortly after we started, and with those end users in mind, one of the ways we offered help was through an accountability software we called x3Watch. This is a program you download onto your computer or smartphone or Internet-enabled music player that keeps track of your Internet history, flags anything that looks suspicious, and e-mails a report to one or two people you trust. Since its introduction, x3Watch has become a major help to people who don't trust themselves to browse the Internet with integrity and who want support in staying away from the ever-lurking specter of porn.

Apparently my new airplane friend was a fan. At least I assumed so when he called out to another man a few rows ahead of us, "Hey! Craig Gross is back here! The x3Watch guy!"

Then he turned back to me. "That's my cousin. We both use your software. We're porn-free!"

"Great," I said, smiling enthusiastically. I always enjoy meeting people who've been helped by XXXchurch. "Glad it's helping," I said. While he nodded vigorously, I gestured toward his carry-on bag. "What were you guys up to in Las Vegas?"

He gave a coarse laugh, and his eyes went mischievous. "We were up to no good, man! Just spent the weekend hitting up the casinos and strip clubs!"

My smile went from authentic to worried. I don't think this man was aware of the bucket of irony he'd just put his foot into.

"You use x3Watch?" I said.

“Yeah, man!”

“So who’s your accountability partner?” I asked.

“Just a buddy of mine.”

“Does he know you came to Vegas? Does he know you and your cousin came out here to live it up like you did?”

He let out a matter-of-fact snort. “No,” he said in a tone that indicated he thought I’d asked a ridiculous question. “We don’t talk about that stuff.”

A Peek into x3Watch

x3Watch exists because I sometimes let my mouth run ahead of my brain. In late 2001, I spoke at a pastors’ conference about XXXchurch.com—a site that hadn’t even been invented yet. We had stickers, some T-shirts, and a few blow-up dolls (to this day I still don’t know why we had blow-up dolls), but we had no website.

Nevertheless, as I talked to more and more of the conference attendees, I managed to convince them that the site was going to be amazing. I even convinced myself! And then, to sweeten the deal, I told them that one day we would have free software that would help keep people accountable online.

People loved it.

We did manage to launch the website, and it was a big hit and still remains one to this day, blending the seedy with the sacred and helping people on both sides of the porn industry find freedom. But when it came to the accountability software,

I wasn't sure exactly how to make it happen. In fact, I naively thought we could just tell people the software was tracking their moves and that knowledge alone would keep them honest. I figured the very thought of having someone else see where you went online would work.

Of course, that isn't the case; so we decided we needed accountability software that actually worked as advertised. Unfortunately, we didn't have much money, so I had to find someone who could make a good product with the monetary equivalent of a matchstick, a paper clip, some duct tape, and a Magic Marker.

Enter Chris Huff. I met this programming genius through a mutual friend and told him our vision. He assured me he could design the software at minimal cost. A few months and a roll of nickels later (okay, maybe we paid him with a roll of quarters and a signed photo of actor LeVar Burton), he followed through and we had x3Watch.

This was huge.

This was a game-changer.

In total, as I write this sentence, x3Watch is in use on over one million computers and mobile devices, and that number grows daily.

Why?

Because when it comes to the Internet, there are many, many of us who want to be accountable.

So then, what do we do with my airplane seatmate? Here was a guy who was, quite literally, one in a million—he had downloaded x3Watch and was currently using it on his computer.

It wasn't some archaic thing he'd gotten awhile ago and never activated, nor was he some ironic hipster who laughed cynically at the concept. He was a believer in x3Watch; he actually thanked me for it during the course of our conversation; and after our flight was over, he introduced me to his cousin, who thanked me for it too. These weren't bad guys—they were just two men who recognized their need for accountability when they went online.

What they possibly failed to recognize, however, was their need for accountability everywhere else.

If they're trying to stay pure online, then why did they head to strip clubs while in Las Vegas?

And what about the casinos? Did either of them struggle with an addiction to the rush of gambling? Or were they about to form one?

And then there are the finances. Did these guys just get into a deep hole of soul-sucking debt simply for a chance to pull a couple of levers a few more times?

What did they eat while on their trip? Some people—a lot of people, actually—have a very hard time sticking to a healthy, balanced diet; and Las Vegas is a place of excess everywhere, not just on the sex and money fronts. Were these guys at risk for indulging in literally unhealthy appetites?

What about their relationships with their spouses, families, or friends? Did they need to be spending more time working on those instead of spending time on the Las Vegas strip?

Did they have any other unhealthy habits to discard, like tobacco use, alcohol, or harder drugs?

Why were they so keen on staying accountable in the online part of their lives but not in any of the other parts?

Now let me make one thing clear: I actually like Las Vegas. I like visiting there, and I liked living there. There is a lot about the city that is worthwhile, but it is the type of city that celebrates excess and wasteful living. Extravagance is a way of life there.

I don't think these guys were crazy for going to Las Vegas, but I do think they were crazy to go without telling anyone. They weren't telling anyone why they were going, where they were staying, or what their plans were while they were in town.

They were essentially going in secret—and when you start doing things in secret, you can start doing them to excess, and they can spiral out of control. That's when you have a problem.

They'd already dealt, or at least started to deal, with their porn problem by installing x3Watch on their computers. But there was a whole list of other possible problems they were walking right into, eyes wide open, with no one to get their backs.

Look, I'm not telling you all this as a commercial for x3Watch or to make myself feel important or famous. I'm telling you about these men because their compartmentalization of the different facets of their lives indicates a problem in our society . . . along with a deep desire.

That problem and that desire both have the same name:
Accountability.

Time to Get Accountable

I strongly believe this world is filled with people who are seeking something broader, something deeper, something more intricate and complex. Our society has made it easier than ever to keep our relationships at a surface level—we can just click the “like” option on someone’s Facebook status and then pat ourselves on the back for being “involved” in their life. We don’t need to have a face-to-face conversation—we can just follow each other on Twitter. A simple tap and we just made an Instagram photo a “favorite,” complete with an icon of a heart to represent our so-called love.

We are connected to more people than ever before, able to give and receive instantaneous updates on the minutiae of our lives . . . yet we remain curiously unsatisfied and isolated.

This life is meant to go far, far deeper than anything online. And while Internet accountability is a great thing (obviously I’m a champion of it), it’s time to go further, deeper, and wider.

The time has come to carry accountability forward, to take it offline and into the real world. To share our lives with just a few people we really, truly, honestly trust.

My hope is that someday, someone—maybe even you—will sit next to me on a plane and start telling me how rewarding your life is now that you are accountable, living entirely free of secrets, walking in the self-confidence that comes from not having to look over your shoulder, worried about hidden flaws being discovered. That you are living a life full of grace extended and received, with stronger, healthier, and deeper relationships.

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In the long run, that is what accountability is really about. It's about living a richer, more fulfilled, more satisfying life. Shelves and shelves of books have been written encouraging self-help, but the time has come to go beyond self-help.

It's time to get accountable.

It's time to get open.

Part 1

WHY

Why do we need accountability?
For every reason in the world . . .

Chapter 1

ACCOUNTABILITY IS GOOD

It was a brisk morning in September 2011 when about a thousand people descended on Zuccotti Park in the Wall Street area of New York City. They came together to protest the ever-widening gap between who is considered rich and who is considered poor in the United States. Fed by the fires of social media and the general outrage of the average American, the gathering took on the name Occupy Wall Street and blazed into a full-on protest with thousands of participants.

If you want to know how the world feels about something, you turn to Twitter, where news breaks fast and where activist cries get picked up and repeated. At any given moment, the

social media network sparks to life with quick-fire conversations about news as meaningful as the death of Osama bin Laden or as banal as the latest Justin Bieber video. Usually the most newsworthy items float to the top, however, and a movement like Occupy Wall Street was destined to do just that.

For those not familiar with the Twitterverse, one of the user-created functions is called the “hashtag.” You create a hashtag by putting the hash mark (also known as the pound sign, “#”) in front of a word or set of initials. Someone else sees the hashtag and starts using it. The more people who use a specific hashtag, the more popular the topic attached to that hashtag becomes.

The Occupy Wall Street protestors immediately began using the hashtag “#OWS,” increasing the publicity of their movement and initiating a global response. Within a few weeks, similar protests began forming in cities across the United States and then across the world, and “#OWS” became one of the most popular hashtags on Twitter, being used once in about every five hundred hashtags. (For context, Twitter has about 175 million registered users, though many of those are people who don’t necessarily make the most of the service.¹)

Now, whether you agree with the Occupy Wall Street movement or not, it is impossible to ignore that it became a worldwide symbol, a judgment on the rampant and unchecked greed in our financial system.

In other words, at its core, it was a call for accountability.

I'm just glad there was no Occupy Craig's Front Lawn in protest of all my misdeeds. But even if that ever happens, we should all be held accountable.

Held Accountable

With alarming frequency, we get news story after news story where someone in a position of power—say, some tyrannical dictator, toothy politician, or cynically underachieving CEO—abuses that power for his or her own good. And inevitably, as was the case with the Occupy Wall Street movement, the response is a clarion call from the media or from random people on the street that such a person be “held accountable” for the wrongdoing.

They oppressed or massacred thousands of people? They should be held accountable.

They bilked taxpayers out of millions of dollars? They should be held accountable.

They knowingly sold faulty mortgages destined for collapse in order to line their own pockets? They should be held accountable.

Obviously, such examples are legion, and in each case, I couldn't agree more—people who willfully hurt others for their own personal gain should be held accountable. That goes without saying.

But I suggest we take it further: we should all be held accountable.

Because accountability is a good thing.

Isn't Accountability a Little "Big Brother"?

I travel a lot talking about pornography, specifically Internet pornography, and the detrimental effects it has on people—both the people who use pornography and the people who make it. And because I talk about it a lot, I also wind up talking about the need for accountability on the Internet.

If you have a problem with—and by “problem with” I mean “insatiable, life-derailing thirst for”—pornography, one of the best ways you can help yourself manage that problem is by inviting someone else into it. Not to share the problem with you and get themselves addicted, but to keep tabs on you. As I mentioned in the introduction, a few years ago our ministry created free accountability software called x3Watch to help you do just that—you install it on your computer or your smartphone or your Internet-enabled music player and set it up so someone you trust, like your spouse or good friend (or both), can see a record of your online activity.²

The mere knowledge that someone else will be seeing where you go online—will be virtually looking over your shoulder as you browse the Internet—is a huge deterrent to leaping down the rabbit hole of porn. It just works.

But whenever I talk about Internet accountability, inevitably I run up against this charge: “Isn't that a little too 'Big Brother'?”

And it isn't just from regular opinionated Joes on the street either—I heard this phrase directly out of the mouth

of none other than Dr. Phil himself. He had a couple on his show who uses x3Watch, and as they were describing it to him, he asked that exact question, invoking the terrifying term *Big Brother*. That phrase is on the lips of a lot of people who don't understand accountability—maybe even yours. Maybe you think, *Accountability? Isn't that a little "Big Brother"?*

You know what? In a lot of cases, the answer is yes.

What Is Accountability?

Before we go any further, we should probably push Pause for a moment and talk about what exactly I mean when I use the word *accountability*. There are a good number of possible definitions you could have in mind, so let's establish our definition while we're still in the early goings of this book.

When I say we all need to “get accountable,” I mean we need to live our lives out in the open, simply and easily, with no fine print or legal jargon.

Perhaps you hear me tell you to get accountable and you think that just like corporate finances should have an overseer to help eliminate funny business or an out-of-control dictator is held in check by the United Nations Security Council, accountability provides you with an outside source of authority to help keep your life in line.

However, those are imperfect analogies, because those are more like policing people or installing a bunch of rules to follow.

That's not what I'm talking about.

We'll get into this more later, but the kind of accountability I mean isn't a police force or even a strict teacher who threatens to crack your knuckles with a ruler if you step out of line. What I'm talking about is a deep relationship, a support system.

Think about diving. Not like diving off a board and into a swimming pool, but diving into the ocean to explore. Now think about how far you can get if you just hold your breath. Even if you're a champion breath-holder, you can only give yourself a few minutes underwater before you have to come up for air. That means you have to stay pretty near the surface, doesn't it?

So on your own, you can't go very far.

Now think of accountability not as a policeman who tells you to get out of the water or as a boundary line that barricades where you can go, but as the scuba apparatus you wear on your back. It's the air you breathe underwater, allowing you to go farther and deeper and explore more than you ever would be able to on your own.

That's what I mean by accountability. It's a support system.

But all metaphors and analogies ultimately break down, and such is the case with this one. I don't want you to think of yourself as all alone down under the water, in the big, cold, lonely ocean, with no one around but a few schools of fish and the occasional life-threatening shark.

How about this? What if, instead of imagining yourself diving in the ocean with your own scuba gear strapped to your back, you picture yourself down there with a close friend, a relative, or your spouse? Now that you have that picture in your

mind, imagine that the people diving with you are the ones with the air tanks strapped to their backs, and anytime you need a puff of air, they offer you their mouthpiece and let you breathe in that life-giving oxygen.

In other words, without that person or those people around you, you would drown.

That's accountability.

One more example, and this time I'll borrow a classic word picture about heaven and hell. The story goes that some fellow was given glimpses of the afterlife. The first stop was hell, where, instead of a lake of fire and poor souls being tormented by red underwear-clad demons with pitchforks, our observer saw a lush banquet table, full of delicious and appetizing foods of all kinds. It was a long, straight table, with chairs on either side, and seated in those chairs were all the people who'd been sent to hell. The obvious intent was that they were to eat their fill.

However, there was a catch. The food could only be eaten with the silverware provided—no hands or face-plants like you see in pie-eating contests at fairs. Ordinarily, this would not be a problem, right? Just pick up your knife and fork and go to town. Except the forks and knives and spoons all had extremely long handles, making it impossible for the banquet participants to feed themselves. Their arms were not long enough, and no matter how much they twisted and turned and contorted their necks and heads, they couldn't get the food into their mouths.

Anticipation quickly turned to frustration, and frustration was followed by anger as all these revelers in hell had to deal with squashed hopes and the realization that food and satisfaction would always be out of reach for them. Forever.

Then our observer was transported to heaven, and you know what he saw there?

The exact same setup.

Same table, same food, same chairs, same forks, same knives, same spoons.

Everything was the same, with one small, crucial, critical difference: everyone was feeding the person across from them.

Instead of being focused on themselves and finding frustration at the ends of their eating utensils, the people in heaven were focused on those around them and, in meeting the needs of others, found their own needs met. They were taking turns and taking care of one another.

When I talk about accountability, that's the mind-set I'm talking about.

What's Wrong with That?

Now that we're moving forward with a clearer idea of this concept of accountability, let me add a little bit to our previous discussion about accountability seeming to be like "Big Brother." I'll answer that question by asking another one: what, exactly, is wrong with letting someone else—someone you love and trust—know what you're doing and where you're

going? I'm not talking about the kind of accountability that gets its own hashtag and is broadcast to the world, or the kind of accountability that is performed by some shadow government lurking in the dark corners of your web browser. I'm talking about letting in someone who has a vested interest in seeing you live the full, honest life you want to live. I'm talking about incorporating an accountability partner into your world to help keep you pointed in the right direction.

That's a great thing!

Accountability has nothing to do with exposing all your privacy to the entire world. In fact, it's the other way around. When you get accountable, you let just a few people into your personal world, and then you have the opportunity to be as open with everyone else as you care to be.

By the way, I hate to spoil this for you if you don't already know, but nothing you do on the Internet is private. Your computer's network card has a unique number assigned to it, your Internet connection has a unique address, and everything you do very well may be logged and cataloged by the company that provides your online access. If you visit a website, the owner of that website can find out your physical location, exactly what time you visited, how long you spent at the site, and all the different pages you went to on that site. If you clicked a link to get to their page, they know where that link was located, and if you clicked a link to leave their page, they know where you went.

Just so you know: plenty of people, almost all of them complete and total strangers, know what you're doing online. And if that's the case, what's wrong with opening up your

online world a bit and letting a couple more people into the loop? Except these aren't anonymous people on the other side of your computer; these are people you know, love, and trust. How can that possibly be bad?

But this whole topic covers so much more territory than just the Internet and is about far, far more than pornography. That's a starting point, but it isn't the whole point. The whole point is this: if accountability works online, it will work even better in the real world.

Accountability isn't about embracing Big Brother—it's about seeking a holistic life, removing the boundaries of compartmentalization, and engaging every part of your lifestyle with every available part of the world around you. You may not struggle with pornography in the slightest, but I know you have some sort of weight that holds you down, something in your life you wish could be either removed or improved, and accountability will only assist you in that goal.

How does it help? You may be surprised.

My Road to Accountability

My own experience with accountability started in my teenage years, the summer after my sophomore year in high school, when my youth pastor, Tom, sought me out and asked me if I wanted to start meeting with him at McDonald's before school on Wednesdays. I initially balked at the six o'clock meeting time—any time before noon is early for an adolescent

male—but after thinking it through I began to see how this could be beneficial for me and agreed.

See, as an outgoing, fun-loving fellow, I had plenty of friends at the time, but they were just pals and acquaintances, the types of guys I could talk about girls with or go see a movie with or just hang out with. Do all those normal teenage shenanigans with.

What I was lacking was a person I could really open up to. But not only that—I was also lacking the ability to open up. I didn't know how to do it or how to even go about doing it, and sometimes I didn't even know I needed to do it.

Then Tom came along with this opportunity to start meeting with him. I took him up on his offer, and not long after that, we started our weekly meetings under the golden arches. Finally, at long last, I had a person in my life I felt I could share real stuff with—stuff about my faith, about my doubts and fears, about my dreams for life and what those looked like. About the struggles and temptations I had as I stepped into adulthood, and how well or poorly I wrestled with those struggles and temptations.

Even better, though, was that I now had the opportunity to listen as Tom shared with me some of the challenges he had in his own life. Maybe it sounds weird, but I didn't feel like he was unloading on me or using me as an ear to vent into—he was just trusting me with a small part of his inner world, a part that I was old enough and mature enough to hear about. He was showing me the flip side of accountability—it's not all about talking; it's just as much about listening.

There I was, a teenage kid, awed and amazed at Tom's ability

to listen to me as I poured out my heart and his willingness to share a little bit of his heart with me. I couldn't believe it. I had mistakenly thought adults had it all together. You can imagine the paradigm shift I underwent the first time I heard Tom talk about some of the challenges he faced in his own life. Here was a guy who had progressed much further in life than I had, who had his career and life plan figured out, and he still had struggles.

It was liberating.

From Accountability Partners to Group

Tom and I continued to meet together, one-on-one, through my entire junior year. The following summer, though, he suggested an addition, mentioning the possibility of bringing in my friend Jake and turning our weekly meeting into a full-fledged accountability group. Jake and I knew each other really well, and though we'd had some deep talks before, we'd never dived as deeply into each other's stuff as we probably should have or could have. But now we had a great opportunity to be intentional about just that—all our normal small talk and goofing around could come at another time; now we had a guaranteed hour, once a week, to get down to business.

Senior year began, and Tom started mentoring Jake and me in how to keep each other accountable. He taught us what accountability should look like. He taught us about treating each other's struggles with love, respect, and grace.

He taught us that accountability is not about sitting across from someone as a judge, but about sitting next to him as an advocate.

And you know what? It worked. Jake and I graduated and went on to college. We became roommates. We eventually got into ministry together. We met a couple of girls, fell in love with them, and then married them and started our own families.

Tom was in both our wedding parties.

And now, twenty years later, Jake and I are still doing this, still hanging out once a week (though now on the phone) and getting into each other's worlds. We've been at it for twenty years, and our lives have been irrevocably changed for the better because of it.

Accountability is not easy, and it doesn't come naturally. But in the long run it's incredibly necessary, and when you do it right, it's nothing but good.

The Benefits of Accountability

There are far more benefits to accountability than we can list here. But one of the greatest benefits that comes from being accountable is the ability to live a life unencumbered by many of the unnecessary weights we add to it.

We come into this world with nothing in the way of material things—just our own skin and internal organs and the factors of the environment we are born into. A mom and

a dad, or just one of them, or none. Brothers and sisters, or just a brother and a sister, or just one of them, or none. A lot of money, or a middle-class upbringing, or extreme poverty.

You get the idea. There are many intangible factors that contribute to who we are and who we become. And as we get older and more mature, we tend to start adding things to our lives to help us deal with those contributing factors. Maybe you grew up without money, so you add an unhealthy pursuit of material wealth in adulthood. Or maybe the converse is true; maybe you grew up wanting for nothing, and as a result you have experienced a form of emptiness and have since rejected material wealth, adding simplicity to your worldview.

Sometimes we add these things because we think they'll make life better; sometimes we add them to cope with a current situation; sometimes we add them in order to make it through the day.

The problem is that we often add these things to our lives, learn to live with them, and then find ourselves at a point where we can't live without them, even if they are no longer healthy (or never were in the first place). The problem then becomes this: instead of contributing positively to life, all our little additions grow to the point where they become obstacles and weights that detract from life.

When you get accountable, you get to figure out which of these things you need and which ones you can get rid of. So let's take a quick look at some of the unnecessary weights that accountability lets you leave behind.

No Secrets

There are plenty of things in this world that you should keep secret—the PIN for your debit card, for example, or the guest list for your best friend’s surprise birthday party—but if a secret is starting to destroy you from the inside out, it has stopped being worthwhile and has instead become a weight you need to get rid of through accountability.

Maybe you are trying to eat better but are finding it difficult to say no to those midnight runs to Taco Bell. Maybe you’re spending more time at work playing online games than you are doing your actual job. Maybe you find yourself stopping by casinos that aren’t on the way home. Maybe you just feel stagnant and need to get organized or learn something new to help you enjoy life more.

Jon Kitna is a former quarterback who played for many years in the National Football League and is also a friend who works with XXXchurch to help us get out our message of accountability. This guy is serious when it comes to staying accountable.

Jon started his NFL career with the Seattle Seahawks, spending three years in the Pacific Northwest before becoming a free agent and signing with the Cincinnati Bengals. He was a new guy in a new city in a new part of the country, with all of his old friends thousands of miles away. He had no support system and suddenly realized he had a major opportunity to live a secret lifestyle. Pornography, gluttony, habit-forming substances, even an adulterous relationship—all of them were within arm’s reach, and all he had to do was take them.

No one would have to know.

This was not a road Jon wanted to go down, so he started seeking out someone to be accountable to. Eventually he crossed paths with another player on the team who was having the same struggles, and the two of them began leaning on each other to stay strong and to support each other. Their two-man group has now grown into a four-person group that keeps each member accountable and living a life free of secrets.

These guys take their accountability seriously, to the point where they talk with one another almost every day. “We don’t meet once every two weeks,” Jon says. “We do life together. If we don’t hear from someone in the group for a couple of days, we all know something’s up.”

Here’s how open Jon is with his group: though he is no longer in the NFL, he still travels quite a bit doing speaking engagements. When he goes on the road, Jon gives his accountability group his itinerary so they know what time he is scheduled to show up in his hotel room. As soon as he arrives, he uses his smartphone to take a video of himself disconnecting the adult channels from the television, then he e-mails that video to the other three members of his group. If they haven’t received a video from him within an hour of the time he was supposed to have arrived at his hotel, they start sending text messages checking in on him.

“Without these guys,” Jon says, “I would be failing. Left to myself, my thoughts are wretched.”

Though Jon is an outspoken proponent of x3Watch and one of those million people who use it every time he goes online,

he has taken his accountability much deeper than our software could ever go. He is a good example of someone using accountability to enrich every facet of his life. And he isn't ashamed of his need for accountability; on the contrary, he flaunts it.

In fact, Jon doesn't call his group an "accountability" group. He says it is so strong and has had such a positive, life-changing effect on each of the guys in it that they refer to it as their "covenant group."

Jon, along with all the other men in their covenant group, knows what I know: accountability is good.

And as long as we're talking about the x3Watch software . . . while most of our users are very pleased with the way it works, some of them don't like the icon the mobile app has: a steel-gray box with a big "X3" stamped in the center of it and the word "watch" in smaller letters underneath.

"Craig," people say to me, "why does this thing have to have that big X on it? Why can't it be more discreet?"

To that I always say, "Why don't you want people to know that you're keeping yourself accountable?"

No matter what you're keeping yourself accountable for, you have to put yourself in the mind-set that this is a good thing. It's not that you're in trouble or that you're trying to keep yourself from doing something wrong. Instead, you're using every possible tool you have at your disposal to live a stronger, richer, more rewarding life.

When you keep secrets—even the secret that you're keeping yourself accountable—they eventually will eat at you until there's nothing left. By letting other people into your life and

sharing those secrets with them, you get the horrible weight off your shoulders and out into the open, where you can start to find healing. Sometimes all you need to do to feel better is to let your secret out. Simply verbalizing a secret can be a tremendous relief from the stress of keeping it.

Organizations like Alcoholics Anonymous, Sexaholics Anonymous, and even Weight Watchers know this concept well, understanding that there is no benefit to absolute secrecy in the areas where you have struggles. Take Weight Watchers, for example: Is that organization seeing positive results because of the food and diet programs it offers, because of its point system to eating, or because of its encouragement to exercise?

Surely those things are contributing factors, but eating smarter and exercising is a no-brainer for people who seek to lose weight and keep it off. You can do those things on your own. Weight Watchers has succeeded in large part because of its emphasis on support and accountability. When you have accountability, you don't have secrets, and you are able to lose weight.

No Hiding

If you're keeping your actions a secret, then most likely you're doing more than just zipping your lip—you probably also have evidence you need to dispose of: a web browser history that needs to be cleared, a candy bar wrapper that needs to be thrust to the bottom of the trash can, a few dollars missing from the company's petty cash drawer that need an explanation.

One of the most prevalent examples of this type of behavior

can be seen online, and not just with pornography. Social media has opened up the world in many beneficial ways, but it also has removed barriers between us and our baser impulses. Now, if we're not feeling especially loved at home, unconditional acceptance is only a chat window away.

I'm talking about cheating.

More and more people are turning to social media sites like Facebook—especially Facebook—to pursue relationships outside the one they're in. From the casual fling to the high school hookup to torrid confessions of love in a Facebook message, people are using the connectivity of social sites to indulge their lusts and passions. In fact, the word *Facebook* is now cited in one out of every three divorces.³

Social media users are hiding their online lives.

I've seen story after story after story of jilted boyfriends or disillusioned wives who have discovered that the person they love has been carrying on a secret relationship through Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, and plenty of other social media hubs, including some dating sites. In fact, our ministry now runs a website called FacebookCheating.com to help tell those stories as cautionary tales. With each one I read, I see that the discovery of an affair wrecks the discoverer emotionally, and often the person who has been cheating expresses an exhausted relief that he or she has been found out.

There are hundreds of stories on that site, and almost all of them feature the same sort of pattern: a spouse or significant other signs up for Facebook, often with the help of their committed partner, and things go fine for a little while before

suddenly the spouse or significant other begins acting suspicious and starts hiding something. Maybe an old high school flame has sent a friend request, or maybe the new Facebook user is the one sending the request. The secrecy and hiding continue until the cheated-on spouse or significant other gets wise and does some detective work to uncover the truth of cheating.

In one of the stories on FacebookCheating.com, the cheating spouse simply began playing Words with Friends with random strangers and became so secretive that it aroused her husband's suspicions. Months later he found out she'd been meeting one of her Words with Friends partners for sex once a month, and she soon moved out to live with him.

So much hiding. So much deceit and suspicion.

Hiding your true behavior is no way to live. Cheating is reprehensible, and if you're struggling with it, you need to start seeing a professional counselor to get at the root causes of why. But if you're even struggling with thoughts of cheating or if you have an ulterior motive for sending that friend request to the attractive person from your past, you don't need to manage those thoughts and feelings on your own.

By getting accountable, you're discussing these things in the open with someone you trust, often discovering patterns or behaviors you didn't even know were there. What a joy to be able to let go of some of these load-bearing practices. We often don't deal with any of this stuff in our lives until there's been an affair or some transgression, but accountability gives us a platform not just to prevent the behavior or deal with the

impulses for that behavior but to examine why we feel the way we do. To uncover why we might be seeking out other partners.

In this way, accountability can be preventative and squash potential missteps (or worse) right away. It can be a proactive means of living out in the open instead of a reactive life of secrets and hiding.

No Worry or Guilt

When you have secrets and hide behaviors, you live in a constant state of worry, a continual fear that you will be discovered. You're restless, always looking over your shoulder, waiting for the inevitable moment when you will be found out, whether it's in the next thirty seconds or thirty years from now. You can't relax and you can't enjoy life because of that gnawing, looming dread that all those secrets you work so hard to keep hidden will eventually bubble to the surface.

Your mind becomes a sounding chamber for worry. *Did I clear my browser history? Did I throw away that cheeseburger wrapper, or did I accidentally leave it in the car? I can't detect any smoke on my coat, but is that just because all those cigarettes have wrecked my sense of smell?*

We can get a dramatic, behind-the-scenes view of the widespread effects of worry and guilt in, of all places, William Shakespeare's masterpiece *Macbeth*. This time-honored play depicts the tragedy of a greedy husband and wife who murder their way to the throne of Scotland, only to be undone by their worry and guilt.

Now, I'm more of a TMZ guy than a classical literature

guy, but I can't ignore the parallels between this classic story and the types of secrets we all tend to keep if left to our own devices. In the play, Lady Macbeth convinces her husband to murder the existing king of Scotland and take over his throne. But once the deed is done, both husband and wife immediately begin to worry that their cunning will be discovered. They are terrified they will be found out, so they continue on their murderous path. The body count grows, eventually engulfing entire castles full of innocent people.

Lady Macbeth is the main mouthpiece for this worry and guilt; she is given a memorable moment in the play where she sleepwalks, dreaming of bloodstains on her hands that won't wash off (the immortal phrase "Out, damned spot!" comes from this scene). Eventually, Lady Macbeth is so plagued with remorse, worry, and guilt that she takes her own life in order to be at peace.

This is no way to live. And when you get accountable, you don't have to. There is no liberation quite like the feeling of being able to focus fully on the world around you without the constant, nagging distraction of making sure you've covered your tracks and then worrying about whether you've done it well enough to avoid detection. If you're living a life free of secrets, you'll never have to worry about being exposed. And that is a wonderful feeling.

No Isolation

The poet and priest John Donne famously wrote, "No man is an island," meaning that we, as human beings, cannot exist

totally isolated from others. We crave relationship at a basic level. Yes, there are those who seek relationship more than others, and those who seek it less than others, and some of us are more extroverted while others are more introverted; but on the whole, we all want to have a little interaction from time to time with someone else.

But beyond surface-level, this-is-some-weather-we're-having kinds of conversations, I believe we each have an innate desire to share a life with someone else. Call it community, call it tribalism, call it what you want—we need others.

Here's the kicker, though: we don't just need to be heard; we also need to listen. That makes accountability perfect. It isn't a one-way arrangement where you get to unload all your stuff on someone else and let them do what they want with it. Instead, you also get to hear from them what kind of stuff they're dealing with, and you get to offer support to them in their difficulties.

When you get accountable, you get the opportunity to look someone in the eyes and tell them exactly what you've been up to. The good, the bad, the exciting, the bland . . . everything. And they tell you. You are sharing in the very act of living, and all the while you get to deepen your relationship with that person. When temptation comes, you aren't facing it alone—even if you're by yourself, you, in a sense, have your accountability partner with you. They're with you because you have the anticipation of how they'll feel when you inevitably tell them the way you reacted to that temptation, whether that's a story of gloriously deflecting it or regretfully embracing it. And you know they're going to be on your side, no matter what.

But there's more to it than that, because you also get the opportunity to have someone else look you in the eye and tell you what they've been up to. And for some people—certainly not you, right?—this can be a challenge. It can be difficult to be a good listener, the type of person who can sit with a sympathetic ear and a quiet tongue and allow someone to unload their troubles on them. Listening is definitely an art that must be cultivated in an accountability relationship, but one that is well worth doing. When you learn to listen without jumping in or judging, you are being the kind of listener you would want to talk to, and isn't that really the best for everyone involved?

With accountability, you listen and you're listened to. This is extremely empowering for both of you, adding to your self-worth and self-confidence and freeing you even further to live a fearless life.

Accountability in the Real World

Now that you've seen the benefits, let's move this out of the realm of the theoretical and take a moment to imagine how something like accountability can provide help in your specific situation, in your actual life. The benefits of accountability in the real world are practically limitless.

Career

No matter your job or how principled you are, there are always temptations to cut corners or shirk duties, especially if

you don't have a manager or boss hovering over your shoulder at every moment to make sure you do everything just right. From small things like tacking ten extra minutes onto your lunch hour each day to big things like cooking the books, accountability and oversight go a long way.

Another one of the main areas where people in general feel a need to improve is organization. As a society, we tend to be a disorganized mess in some parts of our lives, and one of those parts tends to be the workplace. Accountability can help you nail down your world and get your stuff together and in order, with everything in its right place. How much would that help you during your workday?

Health

Maintaining a healthy lifestyle in our current culture is simultaneously one of the easiest and most difficult things to do. On one hand, a healthy meal is fairly easy to procure, and exercise is widely accepted as a wholesome, necessary thing. On the other hand, poor meal choices are even easier to find (and tend to cost less money), and unless you're one of those people who get a tremendous kick from endorphins, exercise is just hard. Being healthy is one of those things that we all seem to want to do, and we can even get started fairly easily—but maintaining a healthy lifestyle with any amount of longevity seems to be difficult.

Have you heard of CrossFit? This is a relatively new craze in personal fitness that has taken off like a rocket. But unlike a lot of exercise crazes that burn brightly for a moment and

then flame out (can you say “NordicTrack?”), CrossFit seems to be here to stay. It has grown from the garages and warehouses of the world to a full-fledged movement with its own annual games and an official partnership with Reebok for an entire line of CrossFit-themed shoes. I make fun of my friends who wear the shoes, and they give me a hard time for quitting CrossFit after only two weeks.

Certainly part of the cachet of the program is that it is used by many police officers, military personnel, and elite athletes. There’s a certain feeling you get using the same workout as exceptionally healthy people that makes you want to pat yourself on the back. Plus, the program’s workouts are tough enough to be effective but varied enough to be engaging mentally. I’ve dabbled with CrossFit enough to know that it’s pretty good (though I have a difficult time keeping up any kind of exercise regimen).

Aside from those features, one of the great benefits of CrossFit, and the main reason I think it’s becoming so popular, is the program’s emphasis on community and, as an offshoot of that, accountability. Most people who participate in the program do so with others, challenging and supporting and pushing one another to give their all to finish the workout of the day. There is a genuine sense of camaraderie around those who do these workouts, and that accountability has helped many a CrossFit athlete finish a particularly tough round of rope ascents or the hellacious up-and-down exercise they innocuously call “burpees.”

But even if we’re just trying to eat better or take more

walks, having someone keep us accountable can help us make health goals and stick with them, even when they become difficult to maintain.

Relationships

Want to be a better friend? A better coworker? A better family member?

Want to spend more time with your spouse or your kids but find yourself wasting it on stupid, inconsequential stuff? Believe it or not, accountability is a perfect way to help you in this area, providing real-world (but loving) consequences for the ways you waste your time or inject detrimental things into your various relationships. (By “detrimental things,” I mean the selfishness and relational apathy that all of us struggle with from time to time.)

So, if you want to see advancement in *all* the relational areas of your life, you can start by getting accountable.

Marriage

Accountability will work wonders in any marriage because it allows a husband and wife to live at peace with each other, knowing that there are no secrets between them. It creates a marvelous sense of openness, in that there is nothing hindering you from loving your spouse to the fullest. In fact, I’d like to reclaim the phrase *open marriage* and redefine it. Instead of using it to label acknowledged cheating, I want it to describe the perfect kind of marriage—the kind built on accountability, honesty, and transparency.

You and your spouse don't necessarily need to be accountable with each other (though that in itself can be a wonderful experience—more on that later in the book), but the mere fact that you are seeking accountability with a trusted friend of the same gender adds immensely to the trust and peace that a marriage relationship requires.

Other Addictions or Struggles

While porn is the big one, accountability can help with any other addiction or even just a bad habit. Anywhere from gambling to overeating, from alcoholism to drug addiction—knowing that you will have to give an account for where you've been and what you've done helps you deter your behavior and make better choices.

Wherever you have struggles, be they internal or external, in your mind or in your body, there's a way to add some accountability and openness in order to help you move forward and gain traction.

Now that we've taken a broad-brush look at the benefits of accountability, let's start digging deeper into some of the specific outcomes we get when we get accountable. One of those key benefits to getting accountable is a tremendous feeling of safety. That's something we'll look at more deeply in the next chapter.