



Alex Kettles — Leading men's ministry for over 35 years, Alex brings the intensity and passion of his years as an inside linebacker at Boise State to men's discipleship. Next Step Ministries is the "Next Step" for Alex after his 3 years with DNA, 32 year staff member of Campus Crusade for Christ and is the former chaplain for the Oregon State Football team, Alex understands the battles men face and what makes men tick.

Next Step Ministries

Confusion

Step One

"I had nothing to offer anybody except my own confusion." ~ Jack Kerouac



My mother told me that when I was five years old I often stood peering out a picture window in our living room for about an hour, watching and hoping for my father to come home from work. He never came home. He had died earlier that year, 1959, from pancreatic cancer at age 41. I knew he was gone, but I suppose something inside me refused to remember that he had died.



I've heard about soldiers who have lost a leg in war but still feel the "phantom limb" and fall over trying to stand on it. Nerve endings heal slowly and the mind struggles to accept this new reality.

Emotional memories are even more stubborn. Heart attachments linger long after a break-up and longer after death. Like one-legged soldiers, I've seen men standing and falling, knowing and yet not knowing that something has died in their heart.



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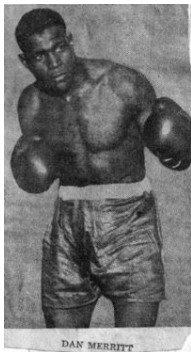
Knowing and yet not knowing that they can't trust their own senses. Knowing and yet not knowing that they have lost their true point of reference. Knowing and yet not knowing who or where they are.

"Dad Was a Champ"

Next Step Two

As a five-year-old, my dad was my rock, and fifty years later he still stands solid in my memory. Alex "Art" Kettles came one fight away from fighting Joe Louis for the heavyweight championship of the world.

Fighting in Chicago's Marigold Gardens on October 23, 1939 at age 21, he quickly scored a knockdown against his opponent, National AAU and Golden Gloves Champion Dan Merritt. [My dad was a three-time Indiana AAU champ](#). Maybe my dad got cocky when he dropped him so fast, but when



"Big Dan" got to his feet, my dad's jaw got caught in the trajectory of a furious right hand and he went down for the count, knowing and yet not knowing who or where he was.



After he came to, he left the ring and he never fought again.



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“Down for the Count”

Next Step Three

Every man's been down for the count -- knowing and yet not knowing. Every man has a phantom limb. And every man knows why a five-year-old boy lingers by a window waiting for his daddy to come home.



Like Big Dan's right hand landing on my dad's jaw, confusion hits hardest when it comes from out of nowhere. Or so it seems. Life doesn't always make sense,

but every man must learn to fight confusion. So how does a man fight confusion? With his guard up and with his eyes wide open, because confusion never fights fair.

Confusion hits people of all ages and comes from all directions. For young children, confusion can stem from an unstable home life. For the elderly, it may be a sign of a medical problem.



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But the kind of confusion I am concerned with here arises from an unanswered question. It's a core question every man is asking, if not his in own words, then by his behavior. Every man is asking if he has what it takes to be a man. The answer he comes up with depends on who he asks. And the answer he gets will decide whether or not he gets back up on his feet when he is knocked down, how well he heals when he loses a piece of his heart, and how long he will linger at life's window waiting for his daddy to come home.

My father was knocked out only once in his boxing career. And apparently once was enough. He quit the ring after going 23-6-2 as a pro. Thankfully, he had other options. He went to night school and became an aeronautical engineer. Meanwhile, Big Dan fought on. He won 15, lost 34 and drew three times. He decked twelve of his 52 opponents, but he hit the canvas 14 times himself. Like my dad, he lost his last fight by KO. He took off his gloves at age 29 and he died 33 years later from a stroke related to "pugilist's dementia," which basically means he'd been punched in the head about a thousand times too many. I never met Big Dan, but I want to believe he was a good man. It's sad to think he spent more than half his life "punch drunk," living in a state of confusion until the day he died, all because he couldn't keep himself away from the cause of his confusion.

"Big Dan"

Next Step Four



Why would Big Dan keep climbing back into the ring only to be knocked senseless time after time? Perhaps he knew no other way to make a living. Or maybe he *wanted* no other options. The crazy thing about confusion is that it often comes to us by our own desires and choices. Einstein's definition of insanity could also fit confusion: *"doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results."*

And like Big Dan, a man will repeatedly climb back in the ring with his bad habits and with his bad relationships only to get clobbered over and over again, and always expecting different results. Same old question, same old answer.



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How many knock-out punches does a man need before he starts looking for other options? Sadly, a punch-drunk man may not even want other options.

With one wrong move, my dad fell at [Marigold Gardens in Chicago](#). With one wrong move, Adam, the progenitor of confusion, fell in another garden called Eden. When my dad hit the canvas I went with him because I was still in his seed. When Adam fell every man since then fell with him because he is the father of us all. His confusion has become our own confusion passed down the family line.

When you are confused the first thing you need to do is get oriented, which means literally to “face the east,” where the sun rises and each new day dawns. So let’s go back to the beginning of confusion and replay the first knock-out punch. If we can remember how we fell we may remember how to get back up.

“Adam Had It Good”

Step Five



“And the Lord God planted a garden toward the east, in Eden, and there He placed the man whom He had formed.” (Genesis 2:8)

Adam had it good and yet not-so-good in the Garden until God fixed him up with a very good-looking woman. Then things suddenly got very good for him. To use a scientific term, there was *fusion* everywhere in the Garden. *Fusion* means things were in harmony, in unison, blended together real nicely.



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Life was easy because there was only one rule to remember:

"The Lord God commanded the man, saying, 'From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die.'"

Right was right, wrong was wrong, God was good, and life was simple.



But then things got complicated. The serpent showed up and threw some con at the fusion. *"Now the serpent was craftier than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made. And he said to the woman, 'Indeed, has God said, 'You shall not eat from any tree of the garden?'"*

Eve knew her orders and she quoted verbatim what she'd been told. But like crafty old Harry Truman used to say, "If you can't convince them, confuse them." So the serpent conned her into thinking that God was withholding better options from them. Maybe God wasn't playing fair and square with them,

and so maybe God isn't really so good after all. *"For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."*



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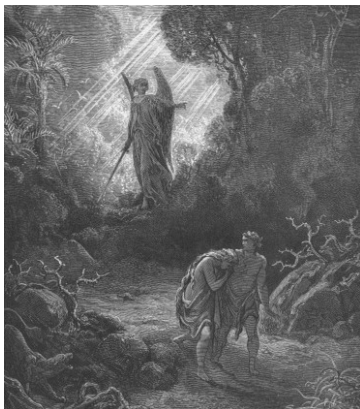


The beautiful tree had a strong allure to the senses. And after all, God had not ruled out *looking* at the tree. But it wasn't just its beauty that attracted Eve to it; it was also its possibilities that caught her imagination.

When the woman saw that *"the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate."*

"Right from Wrong"

Next Step Six



When Adam and Eve ate the fruit, their sensory perception overpowered their spiritual sense. Their frame of reference for discerning right from wrong suddenly turned inward and personal rather than God-ward and eternal. With their eyes wide open, they were suddenly blinded by a vicious punch. They never saw it coming. They'd been set up. With one wrong choice and with one false move they walked right into the knockout punch and crumpled from fusion into confusion.



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Like a one-legged soldier, Adam knew instinctively that something inside him was missing, that a vital part of his being had been ripped away from him. He had never realized the value of his identity until it was stolen. He and his bride had never known they were naked until they had been shed of their dignity.



Then God came into the Garden asking some serious questions, and Adam and Eve tried to hide in plain sight. Hiding from God is always more obvious than we think.

"Where are you?" God shouted. He wasn't asking Adam where he was hiding, but where he was in relation to Himself. With His own voice, God gave Adam an audible reference point for realizing his "lost-ness." It's the kind of question you ask of someone who is dazed or confused: *"Do you know where you are? Do you know your name? Do you know what day it is?"*

It's also the kind of question my hardworking, widowed mother used to ask me with fearful, pleading eyes when I defiantly made life harder for her than she needed. It was a love-question, but it was also a question that a confused teenage boy couldn't answer.





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“When My Son Grew”

Next Step Seven



When my son, Jacob, grew into his teen years, I remember looking at him and asking myself the question every father fears to ask himself. *Am I raising my son well enough for manhood?* I didn't know how to answer that question. I didn't know where to look for an answer. I only sensed that something vital was missing inside of me.

I felt confused and panicked. A fledgling young counselor named John Eldredge helped me to find my answer from a confused little boy waiting at the window for his daddy to come home.

I have the proud distinction of being named after my father. His identity is my identity. My story is rooted in his story. When he got sick a surgeon cut him open and then sewed him right back up. Pancreatic cancer. There was nothing they could do for him. He was allergic to morphine, so he just gutted out the pain. Kids couldn't go into hospital rooms in those days,



so my brother Bob and I would peer through the metal blinds at the window of his ground-level room and watch while my mom visited with him. In eight weeks he was dead. He died as he had lived – still fighting to get back up until the last count.

That's what confused me. He'd always gotten back up. He was always there for me. At six-foot, four inches and 220 pounds, he was a Herculean figure in any man's book, especially in mine.



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I remember him wailing on a punching bag in the garage at night, making that thing sing and dance. Then he'd pick me up with those thundering, velvet hands of his and tenderly wrap his rock-hard arms around me. He'd wrestle me on the living room floor and let me climb all over his massive shoulders.

As powerful as he was, I felt as safe as a lion cub pawing the face of a lion king.



As I came to realize in raising my own son, my longing for my dad's safety had stuck with me. I missed that sense of safety and I didn't know where to find it. But I knew I had to find it for the sake of my own son. I faintly remembered what safety had felt like in my father's arms,



but I had **forgotten that safety also has a voice.**



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“The Voice of a Father”

Next Step Eight



There is no other voice like the voice of a father. Some men I know have been so deeply hurt by their fathers that they still wince at the sound of his voice. But the faint echo I can now hear of my father's voice still comforts me. Because he died when I was so young, I can't recall much of what he said to me, but I can still remember the confidence I felt just in hearing his voice filling our home. I didn't need for him to be talking specifically to me.



He could have been speaking with my mom or with my sisters. It was his voice alone that assured me he was there and that I was safe. But after he died, the house felt empty and I felt unprotected. That vacant feeling lingered with me into my own manhood, and it kept me running to the window of my heart, hoping to hear my father's voice again. I'd had given my right thumb to hear my dad shouting the same question to me that Adam heard from the Father in the Garden – *“Where are you, Alex?”*

When God called out in the Garden, Adam knew his voice. And yet he didn't know it in the same way as he did before. He listened now to the voice of God through a filter of shame and fear.

Until then, Adam was familiar with only three voices – the Father's, his wife's and his own. Then he heard the strange voice of the serpent, casting doubts about how safe it is to listen only to the voice of his Father.



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And so he made that fatal error. For the first time, Adam trembled at the sound of his Father's voice, and it sounded to him more like the voice of a stranger than the safe voice he had known before. So he scurried away confused, seeking to hide and cover up, vulnerable and feeling nakedly exposed. Then God asked him,

"Who told you that you are naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?"

"Who Have You Been?"

Next Step Nine

Once again, God didn't ask these questions for His own understanding. They were intended for Adam's benefit. The first question – *Who have you been listening to?* -- precedes the next question – *What have you done?* *Who* they were listening to determined *what* they had done wrong. It's probably how you've questioned your child when listening to peers has gotten him or her into trouble





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It's important for them to see the link between wrong voices and wrong choices. It's the way to get to the root of bad behavior. Listening to the right voice prevents bad choices and clears up confusion. In fact, every choice we make in life starts with whom we have been listening to.



Looking again through that window, I began to see that God had placed other good men around me to speak into my life.



I realized that when my father's voice went silent, he still had been speaking to me through those familiar voices - my confusion began when I started listening instead to strangers.

What Is Your Next Step?