

In recent years I have had the opportunity to speak at conferences and workshops for various groups usually described as *Christians in recovery*. Typically, those who attend these events are recovering from various addictions. Many have been abused, both physically and sexually. Some have spent time in prison. Most have been divorced, often more than once.

At one conference in Missouri, I met a man who once lived in a cardboard box on the sidewalks of Kansas City. His addiction to heroin had cost him his marriage, his family, his home and his job. In Seattle, I met a woman who fell into prostitution in order to support her addiction to cocaine. In Los Angeles, I met another man who had struggled for years with a sexual addiction.

Despite the fact that these *Christians in recovery* have histories that many church-goers might regard as shameful or disgraceful, they exhibit an openness and honesty that I have not encountered in ordinary church settings. It is extraordinary to meet a complete stranger who, within thirty seconds of shaking your hand, feels free to admit his ongoing struggle with sexual addiction or her continuing problems with over-eating and bingeing.

What is the reason these *Christians in recovery* are able to be completely open and honest about their shortcomings, failures and character defects? Most have taken what they call "a searching and fearless moral inventory" of themselves. They have admitted their faults and shortcomings, not only to themselves, but also to God and to at least one other human being. Because they have admitted



BY MARTIN M. DAVIS

and accepted their failures and mistakes, they no longer feel the need to hide the fact that they are sinful, broken human beings who have fallen short of the glory of God.

Moreover, *Christians in recovery* can risk openness and honesty because they know they are *accepted* by their peers *just as they are*. They have no need to wear the *church face* that is the usual accompaniment to Sunday morning attire. They need no one to remind them of the mess they once made of their lives. They have no stones to throw.

Prodigal Sons and Daughters

More importantly, *Christians in recovery* are able to accept one another *without reservation* because they know they have been accepted by their heavenly Father without reservation. They have come face to face with their innate egocentricity, duplicity and self-protective sin. They have claimed their shortcomings, owned them and laid them at the foot of the Cross. More

importantly, they have made a conscious, committed decision to turn their wills and their lives over to the care of God. They are prodigal sons and daughters who have returned to their loving Father and have felt the warmth of his compassionate embrace and ecstatic welcome.

While many *Christians in recovery* tend to avoid established churches, they are attracted to Jesus Christ. Not only do they identify with him—they realize that he identifies with them! Jesus had a reputation for keeping company with sinners. They were drawn to him because they knew that he loved them. Even a woman caught *red-handed* in the act of adultery was not condemned by Jesus, although assuredly he

1 her to leave her life of sin (John 8:11).

Because he refused to condemn sinners, but rather loved them, Jesus was snubbed and maligned by the religious establishment of the day. Jesus constantly aroused the ire of the hyper-religious Pharisees, the experts in obeying rules and regulations, because he not only failed to keep their man-made rules, but also because he did not hesitate to enjoy table fellowship with tax collectors, sinners and other undesirables who were ostracized by the religious elite of the day.

Like the sinners of Jesus' day, *Christians in recovery* know they are loved and accepted by our Lord Jesus Christ. Thus, they exhibit a freedom and joy that is contagious. At the conferences I have attended, I have been struck by the happiness and laughter that characterize these prodigals returned home to the Father. Though they have lost much, including families and fortunes, they exhibit an almost childlike joy in the company of one another. Their joy can only come from the assurance that be-



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longs to those who know they are loved and accepted *just as they are*. I have returned home from these events with a renewed prayer life, a new sense of purpose and a contagious enthusiasm for the blessings that belong to the whole world in Jesus Christ.

Meanwhile, Back at the Local Church

Unfortunately, the openness, honesty, enthusiasm and joy that characterize gatherings of *Christians in recovery* are often sadly lacking in the Sunday gatherings at the local church on the corner or the megachurch in the suburbs. Unlike the prodigals in recovery, too many Christians are *afraid* to admit our (post-conversion) failures and shortcomings. Instead, we spend enormous amounts of emotional energy trying to maintain



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For many years, I worked as a Family Therapist at the largest church in my state, counseling Christians from all denominations. Among the many things I learned is that most of us think that “everyone has their act together but me.” Many Christians commonly think they are the only ones who struggle with marital, parenting, financial, behavioral and spiritual problems.

It is little wonder that so many of us feel guilty because of the

mess we have made of our lives. We have been told that our financial problems are the result of a lack of faith, that our marriage problems occur because we have not been submissive enough—or we have not loved our spouses as Christ loved the church—and that our teenagers’ rebellion is the result of our failure to set a godly example. In short, we have been told that our problems stem from our unbelief and our failure to live a disciplined Christian life.

Because we fear that we will be pilloried with shame and guilt by our fellow church-goers because of our shortcomings and failures, many Christians wear a mask to hide their true selves from the prying eyes of the modern Pharisees among us. We arrive at Sunday services with our *church face* firmly attached. We are afraid to let down our

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We are susceptible to judgment and criticism because we do not fully understand the immeasurable riches of God’s goodness and graciousness toward all humanity. Many continue to labor under the soul-killing delusion that we must earn our approval and good standing in the sight of God.

The Guilt and Shame of Trying to Make Yourself Acceptable to God

As a therapist, I have heard many clients, tormented by their faults, failures and shortcomings, say that God could never accept them as they are. Because they are burdened with shame and guilt and a felt-sense of their own inadequacy, they believe they must clean them-

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selves up before they can be accepted by our heavenly Father. Though we say we believe in salvation by grace alone, for many that belief has not penetrated to the gut-level that would allow them to live in the spacious freedom and joy that is ours in Christ.

Unlike Christians in recovery, in failing to accept our own shortcomings, we have at the same time failed to understand the level of acceptance that is *already* ours in Jesus Christ. We have forgotten that, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8).

We have failed to understand that Jesus Christ is the Lamb of God who *has taken away* the sin of the world (John 1:29)—not *might* take it away *if*, but has taken it away *already!* Because we have such difficulty comprehending the love and grace that is ours in Christ, we fall prey to the exhausting belief that we must make ourselves acceptable to God (and to each other!) by becoming faithful, money-giving church-goers, perfect parents, financial successes and untiring prayer warriors.

It would be far better for us if we would follow the example of *Christians in recovery* by letting down our masks and admitting that we are all sinners. We have failed to love God with all our hearts, souls and minds, and we have failed to love our neighbor as ourselves. Yet, even in the face of our abysmal failures, our Father in heaven graciously pours out his love upon us

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A Jesus Kind

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and all mankind, with a steadfast determination to bless us with abundant and eternal life in Jesus Christ.

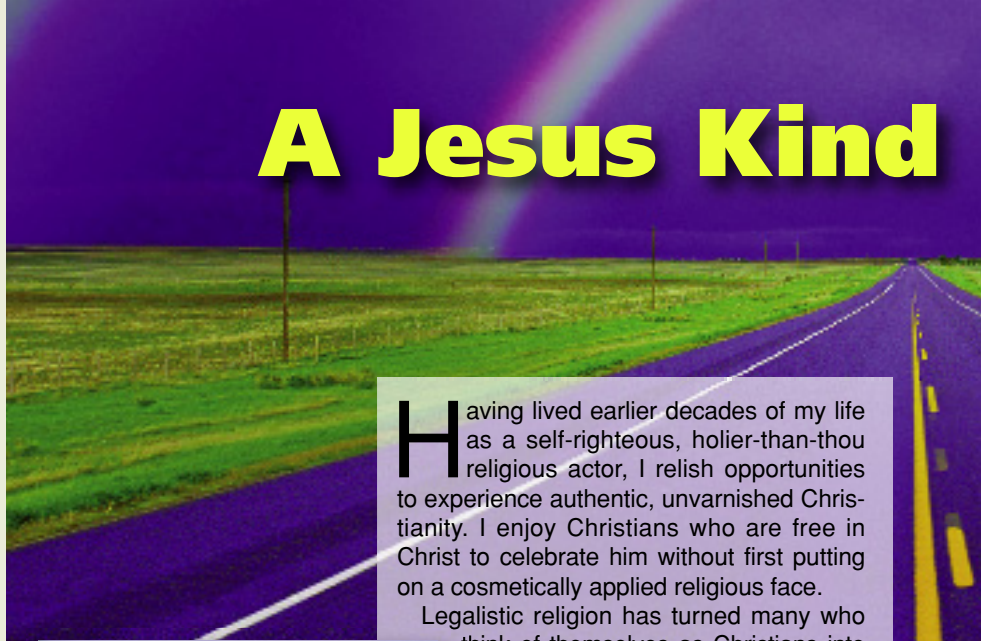
Perhaps we could actually experience the peace that transcends all understanding if we could let down our masks and admit that nobody has it all together, especially us. If we could break the chains of legalism and “shouldism” that hold us in bondage, by truly realizing that we are *already loved and accepted by our heavenly Father, just as we are*, then perhaps we would be free to love and accept others just as they are, not as we think they should be.

We could learn much from our *prodigal brothers and sisters in recovery* who

have acknowledged and accepted their own failures and shortcomings while, at the same time, have learned to live in the loving embrace of our Father in heaven who loves us just as we are. These *Christians in recovery* show us that it is possible to relate to other Christians with honesty, openness and a willing acceptance of our own failures and short-comings, as well as those of others.

All that is required is an honest willingness to admit that we have all sinned and fallen (and continue to fall!) short of the glory of God. Because we are all God’s “ragamuffins” (to use author Brennan Manning’s term), we have nothing to hide, everything to be grateful for—and no stones to throw. □

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Having lived earlier decades of my life as a self-righteous, holier-than-thou religious actor, I relish opportunities to experience authentic, unvarnished Christianity. I enjoy Christians who are free in Christ to celebrate him without first putting on a cosmetically applied religious face.

Legalistic religion has turned many who think of themselves as Christians into judgmental, hyper-critical, wizened prunes. Big-business religion, in an attempt to manipulate and control its followers, insists that its followers do their best to make everyone else just as miserable as they are. The life and teachings of Jesus clearly reveal that religiosity, with all of its artificial affectations and hypocrisy, gets up God’s nose.

Some time ago Jim Smith, pastor of the Hardriders Biker Church in Cabot, Arkansas (just north of Little Rock), and I started to talk about our mutual faith in Christ via e-mail. After Jim read my first book, *Bad News Religion*, he invited his congregation to read it, and he invited me to visit his church.

Earlier this year I traveled to Arkansas for a never-to-be-forgotten trip, to be with brothers and sisters in the Lord, whose “church clothes” (see photo) would immediately make them the object of stares at many churches.

When Jim (affectionately known as “Tattoo Jim”) invited me, and when I found out the group he pastors gathers



of Church

on Sunday mornings in a building that serves as a biker bar the rest of the week, wild horses (or Hell's Angels) could not have stopped me from being with them.

Christians at Hardriders are not any different than any other group of Christians who are free in Christ. They have been, or they are in the process of being, rescued from all kinds of addictions. What makes this a refreshing place is that these brothers and sisters in the Lord come together without religious pretense. Ironically, some religious institutions would judge Hardriders, on the basis of appearance alone, to be a den of iniquity. On the contrary, there are no apologies for or compromises with God's amazing grace, and the new life that flows from it at Hardriders.

Hardriders is a Jesus kind of church. North American churches are overflowing with those who are intent on judging and convicting sinners—while we need more of God's outrageous, unqualified love. More Jesus, less religion.

I experienced God's love flowing freely, without reservation. I was welcomed and accepted, and I wasn't even wearing biker patches! No one felt constrained to wear a mask to meet some arbitrary religious dress code. Here, by God's grace are honest, real, unpretentious Christians. This is a place where people know exactly who they were, and who they now are, by God's grace. Here is a spiritual environment where those who realize the futility of attempting to impress others by externalism come together as part of the body of Christ.

Hardriders is a place for those who hunger and thirst for God's grace. Hardriders doesn't throw stones—these are Christians who have been the target of harsh religious judgment in their own lives. Hardriders is one of those Jesus churches where the only stone that matters is the Rock of Ages. □

—Greg Albrecht

