

When **Bad**

**Christians**

Happen to

**Good** **People**

Where We Have **Failed Each Other**  
and How to **Reverse the Damage**

**Dave Burchett**

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P R E S S

WHEN BAD CHRISTIANS HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE

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# A Brief Disclaimer

When a man who accepts the Christian doctrine lives unworthily of it, it is much clearer to say he is a bad Christian than to say he is not a Christian.

—C. S. LEWIS, *MERE CHRISTIANITY*

I must begin with some words of disclosure. I am a hypocrite. I can be arrogant and selfish. I have been known to stretch, conceal, or slightly massage the truth. I am sometimes inconsiderate and insecure. I struggle with lust and impure thoughts. My ego often rages out of control, and I battle foolish pride. I can be lazy and foolhardy with my time. I get angry, petty, and ill-tempered. I am sarcastic and cynical.

I am a Christian.

That is how I began this book when it was first published in 2002. Today, as I look at those words nearly a decade later, I have a sad confession to make. Although I have made some progress, all of the disclaimers above are still in play. One of the dangers of writing is that your words go into your permanent record. If you write something that you later regret, you can't seek deferred adjudication or buy up all the copies in existence.

When I wrote the first edition of this book, I was a little angry. Okay, at times I was a lot angry. I had seen and experienced the damage done by those who claim the name of Christ while demonstrating virtually none

of His teachings. I wrote with passion and honesty. In retrospect, perhaps a little too much honesty came out of my passion. God has taught me a lot since the original version of this book arrived. This revised edition will reflect some of that journey, including additional painful experiences at the hands of the church—which further defined my walk with Christ. But one significant event has changed my relationship with Jesus, and it forms the basis of a brand-new chapter that I added to this edition of the book. (No peeking, if you are a repeat reader. You’ll know when you get to it.) No one knows better than I that I am a broken person who can be a bit of a jerk. It is also true that I am a Christian. Both are accurate descriptions. If there is one theme about our faith that should be communicated more freely, it is that we all fall short of the mark. That is why we need a Savior. In *Just Like Jesus*, author Max Lucado says, “God loves you just the way you are, but he refuses to leave you that way.” So all believers are somewhere on a continuum between the point where we started and the place where God wants us to be. It’s the truth, but it’s a realization that seems to penetrate our thinking only sporadically. In fact, there are those among us who would call me a counterfeit since I admit to such unflattering personal traits. They would tell me that if I had *their* brand of faith, I would now be above the brokenness and jerkiness I just admitted to. I believe they would be wrong.

When I was growing up, I frequently heard the phrase “a good Christian” used to describe a religious person. And when a person messed up, I often heard the deadly assessment, “And he’s supposed to be such a good Christian.” As a kid I wondered why they didn’t just say that the one who messed up was “a bad Christian,” like someone was “a bad student.” I guess they thought that “bad” and “Christian” were mutually exclusive terms. But when I read the Bible I find that isn’t always the case. The stories of the great women and men of the Bible include detailed descriptions of their bad moments, as well as the good. King David, described as

a man after God's own heart and the author of some of the most beautiful praise language in the Psalms, also was an adulterer and murderer. The apostle Peter went from being a coward who denied his faith to the rock upon which Christ would build His church.

Like David and Peter, Christians have both good and bad traits. I have displayed the latter far more often than I desire. There was a time when I criticized a Christian friend about his angry explosion over what seemed to be a trivial issue. I made some judgmental remarks about his faith. Then I found out that his mother had died the day before. For a couple of days, I felt like a world-class weasel, but then I succumbed to spiritual amnesia and forgot the lesson I'd learned.

Humorist Will Rogers once noted that before a Native American would criticize another man he would walk all the way around that man. He would look carefully to see what the view was from that person's perspective before condemning him. I have to admit I rarely exercise such restraint before donning my judge's robe. If there are others like me who commit such offenses—and worse—is it any wonder that unchurched people often think we Christians are the biggest source of phoniness outside of political campaigns?

I have to agree that the negative things non-Christians have heard and felt about Christians and the church are partially or even completely true. Many of the unchurched folks I talk to base their rejection of Christ on a bad experience with a Christian. In reality, that can be a lame excuse that disguises the real issues at hand: who is Jesus Christ and what does that mean?

On the other hand, I believe a disturbingly high percentage of *Christians* leave the church and even the faith because of a bad experience with an individual Christian, a Christian leader, or a group of Christians. Using that as an excuse for jumping ship can be a smoke screen for the real issues confronting believers: what should a real relationship with



Jesus Christ mean and what should our lives look like as a result of that relationship? If we can spend hours, days, and weeks finding the right retirement investment portfolio, dabbling in hobbies, or developing our bowling form, then we should be able to squeeze out a little time each morning to understand Christ's claims and what they mean—regardless of our experiences with other Christians.

In frustration I have lamented that this Christianity thing would be *amazing* if Christians would just stop getting in the way. Even though we must learn to look past the actions of some Christians and focus on Christ, it is still impossible to justify the indefensible things many Christians do to one another. I've heard an amazing array of stories from Christians who have been victims of emotional drive-by shootings in the church. Most of us have been wounded by fire somewhere along our journey. Whether it was intentional or friendly fire, the scars are still real.

This book is written for the person who has been hurt by a judgmental or unfriendly church. For the woman who has been sexually or emotionally abused by a Christian man. For the guy ripped off by a businessman brandishing a Christian symbol on his sign or business cards. For the unmarried teenage girl rejected by the church for getting pregnant. For the person made to feel unwelcome because of color or position in life. For the man or woman made to feel less valuable because of appearance or dress. For all the people who felt uncomfortable in the place where they should feel most welcome. For the people rejected because they held a belief, political view, or philosophy that differed from the "accepted" view. This book is for everyone who has been disgusted by the hypocritical arrogance of a church congregation or its leadership.

It also is for Christians who inflict the wounds. Would it surprise you to learn that there is probably a significant overlap between the two audiences? It is human nature to respond in kind. If I am judged or rejected, my first instinct will be to judge and reject in return.

Bottom line, this book is for Christians living in frustration because of other Christians. It is for those who are frustrated by their own spiritual shortcomings, but especially the shortcomings of others. And it is for those who have divorced (or at least separated themselves from) the church because of that frustration. I have talked to numerous believers who are so obsessed with the weaknesses of others that they can't see anything else. And so this book is for those who have been frustrated by others for so many years that they have lost touch with their own relationship with Christ.

If Christians can't treat other Christians with mercy, kindness, and humility, how can we expect to do better with nonbelievers? Those of us who follow Christ will never achieve all that He desires for us until we open every nook and cranny of our own behavioral house for cleaning and remodeling. Only then will we begin to live the kind of lives that others will find intriguing and distinctive.

Perhaps you are so spiritually mature that you can't relate to any of this. That's cool. I have always said my ministry was to make other Christians feel superior. After forty-something years of sprinting, stumbling, falling, crawling, back-pedaling, jogging, and limping through my Christian experience, I am still trying to comprehend what the grace of God means. So I invite the rest of you, those who are still learning and growing toward maturity, to join me in taking real steps toward personal responsibility. In the chapters that follow we will examine ways to stop worrying about things over which we have no control (those being both circumstances and other people). And we will look at how to take charge of the things we *can* control (primarily, inviting Jesus to impact our lives and then stepping aside so He has free rein).

We also will spend time reevaluating the things we are doing as a church and why we are doing them. I advocate banning forever the principle "because we have always done it this way" and replacing it with the

prayerful inquiry, “Is this *still* the best way to do this?” A church that is not relevant will not change lives, and I must note that being relevant does not necessarily mean being culturally hip. It simply means being able and willing to address the big questions and concerns all of us have. Why am I here? Where do I find significance? Can marriage and family still work, even in this culture? What should I do with my life? What happens when I die? Why is there pain and suffering if God loves us, and if He is watching and involved? The questions go on, and they don’t get easier. Are we willing to counter doubt and weakness with patience and encouragement?

At the same time we must reevaluate church strategies and programs that we have changed and ask why we changed them. Recently my wife, Joni, and I decided our kitchen needed a facelift. Our twenty-five-year-old appliances were on life support. So we decided to replace the appliances and do some other updating. But we didn’t tear up the foundation to update the kitchen. We changed what needed to be changed and kept the rest. Yet I fear that many churches have torn out pretty solid foundations just to keep up with the latest trends. Was the change merely for the sake of change? Did we throw out the baby Jesus with the baptismal water? Have we gotten caught up in seeking a cozy relationship with God and lost sight of His majesty? In this book we will seek to balance old and new.

If we want to find that balance, we must be willing to undergo careful self-examination even if it hurts and forces us out of our comfort bunkers. We must be brutally honest with ourselves. During the 1992 presidential campaign, one slogan that was heard again and again was, “It’s the economy, stupid.” Challenger Bill Clinton did not want to lose the focus of what he needed to communicate to win. I really don’t mean to offend anyone (yet), but for Christians, “It’s the gospel, stupid.” Nothing else should take precedence over that priority. In our dealings with

one another and in our dealings with our culture, we should have that commission—the greatest commission—as our rudder. We must remain focused like a laser on what I believe is the only real hope for our culture, the transforming power of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Things must change within our church community if we hope to communicate more effectively the life-changing message of the gospel. We will have to model Christ more consistently. We will have to give up the smoke screen issues that are great for debating but don't amount to a hill of beans for eternity. We will have to be more thoughtful in discerning the difference, and I hope to provoke your thoughts in that area.



This book is the result of a very personal journey. After four decades of roller-coaster faith, I decided to examine nearly every aspect of my spiritual house. Some components needed just a little cleaning and polishing. Some had to be discarded. Some parts of my faith required a major remodeling that is far from over. These writings reflect some of that journey. As you will see in later chapters, the process is ongoing and often painfully slow.

And as I ponder the book's title, I realize there is a very fine line between being thought-provoking and being a jerk. Perhaps you think I've already crossed it. I admit it; at times I can be harsh and confrontational. But I have no desire to send you on a guilt trip. Travel agencies for guilt trips would seem to be a saturated market anyway. Even so, I intend to be honest with myself and with you. As I was writing this book I saw how God was turning my words back on me. In many ways it has been like watching a Bugs Bunny cartoon. I am Elmer Fudd loading up my shotgun blast of criticism. Then God bends the gun barrel around and I am blasted with my own buckshot.

I hope we can have a laugh or two and open our minds to what “Christian” should mean when we claim the title. Let’s get real for a little while. Let’s be honest about our Christian appearance, warts and all. Let’s be introspective without being obsessive. Let’s take off the masks and take a look at what really is true about us. Let’s look at what we have wrought with a balance of candor and humor, since I have found that a little of both (along with a lot of humility and repentance) are necessary for change. Let’s ask God to show us our weaknesses and, in particular, our need for His strength.

Who am I to ask these hard questions and issue such personal challenges? I’m just a regular guy who wants to see people experience the freedom and joy that come only through a real relationship with Jesus Christ. I’m a guy who’s trying to live Christianity without the unimportant and phony excuses that lead to paralysis. I’m a person looking to live my faith without doing damage to those I encounter in the daily chaos. I want to be a man who does no harm to the wonderful name of Jesus or to my brothers and sisters in Christ.

All of that makes for a lofty target, and it is one I have already missed. I will no doubt miss it again and again. But it is a target that I believe you and I can hit with greater frequency—one we must aim for every day. I don’t possess a seminary degree. But experience and a clear look at reality are fine teachers. If I am swimming in the ocean and I spot a shark, I won’t need a marine biology degree to get my posterior out of the water.

As we explore important and often difficult issues, understand that my goal is to make you think and to challenge you to reexamine. I will probably offend you along the way. (That’s okay. You have a contractual obligation to forgive me.) And remember that in the book of Numbers (22:28) you will find this statement: “Then the LORD opened the donkey’s mouth...”

Hey, it can happen again!

PART I

# Silencing the Lambs

The **Indefensible Things**  
We Do to **One Another**

# The Unfriendliest Club in Town?

The greatest single cause of atheism in the world today is Christians who acknowledge Jesus with their lips then walk out the door and deny him by their lifestyle. That is what an unbelieving world simply finds unbelievable.

—BRENNAN MANNING

**A**uthor Flannery O'Connor once noted in a letter to a friend, "It seems to be a fact that you have to suffer as much from the church as for it." I believe her. The most painful experience of my marriage came courtesy of the church.

In 1985 my wife, Joni, gave birth to our daughter, Katie. We were thrilled, but our happiness dissolved into grief when we learned that Katie had a terminal neural tube birth defect. Her condition was known as anencephaly, meaning that in the womb her brain had not developed normally. She basically possessed just the brain stem and was not expected to live more than a few hours or days. The delivery-room doctor described her situation in physician-speak that I will never forget. "Her condition is not compatible with life," he said.

Our shock and grief were immediate because Katie would have no chance to enjoy a normal life. There would be no cure, no hope for even modest improvement. I went through the painful process of calling family and friends. And I had to tell our two sons about their sister.

But Kathryn Alice Burchett confounded the doctors and lived. She was never able to open her eyes, nor could she smile. Katie also lacked the ability to regulate her body temperature, so her room temperature had to be monitored. Part of Katie's deformity was an opening with exposed tissue at the back of her skull. It had to be covered regularly with a new dressing.

Joni loved and cared for Katie in a way I will always respect and never forget. She insisted that Katie come home with us. I worried about the effect that caring for Katie at home might have on the boys. Truthfully, I was probably more concerned about the effect bringing her home would have on me. But Joni would not have it any other way, and when she sets her mind to something she is scrappy. So I showed my spiritual wisdom by agreeing with her.

Katie found her place in our family's routines. She could drink from a bottle. Katie responded to her mother's touch and even grew a little. We took her on a camping trip with us, and she was a regular at the boys' ball games and other events.

Sometimes people would make hurtful or mean remarks. A kid at school taunted our oldest son because his sister didn't have a brain. (That was something the classmate had no doubt heard at home, and it reminds me that we should always be cautious about what we say in front of our children.) Once, when we wanted a family photo taken, we dressed up the troops and went to a photography studio. The photographer insisted that Katie needed to open her eyes. We explained patiently (for a while) that she physically could not open her eyes. He informed us that we couldn't get our picture taken because their lab would not develop a picture if any person in the group didn't have their eyes open. Katie totally upset their system, and



they would not flex. We finally left without the photos and ended up going to a private photographer. Still, all things considered, our life with Katie went about as well as it could.

Then the church entered in.

One Sunday morning before church, a friend called to tell us that Katie would no longer be welcome in the nursery. The moms had met and decided (without any input from us) that Katie might die in their care and traumatize some volunteer worker. They worried that the opening at the back of Katie's skull could generate a staph infection. In truth, however, the nursery workers did not have to deal with potential infection because the opening was covered with a sterile dressing and a bonnet, and it required no special attention during the brief time she was in the nursery each Sunday. And there was almost no danger of spreading infection because Katie did not interact with other babies. Clearly, a little caution would have eliminated any possible risk.

As to the possibility that she might die while in their care, we knew she was going to die. No one would have been to blame. Since we were in a church of only one hundred fifty people, I think they could have found us fairly quickly in an emergency. If they had come to us with their concerns, we might have been able to put the volunteers' fears to rest. But the decision was made without us. Katie was no longer welcome, and our church had done what I had not thought possible: they made our pain worse.

Joni was devastated, more hurt than I have ever seen her before or since. I am sure our church didn't intend to wound us as they did, but the hurt lingered for years. And the pain was multiplied by the method. We had no warning that there were concerns. We received no invitation to come and address concerns. Instead, a secret meeting was followed by a phone call to tell us what had already been decided. I'm not the only one with this kind of story.

I know a pastor in the Midwest who suffered the tragic loss of his wife to leukemia. Within a matter of weeks the board asked him to resign because they did not want the church to be led by an unmarried pastor! This grieving man had to change denominations in order to continue his ministry. It is a miracle and tribute to God's grace that he kept going at all.

In my hometown of Chillicothe, Ohio, an acquaintance finally decided it was time to get his family into a church. He loaded up the crew and visited one nearby. The church immediately showed a tremendous and heartfelt concern for his...grooming issues. You see, Roy had the audacity to show up in God's house with a full beard, not unlike Jesus' in the picture hanging in the foyer. A church leader met Roy on the way out.

"So are you going to start worshiping with us?" he asked.

"Why, yes," Roy replied. "We want to start coming to church."

The church leader looked at him and said, "Well, I hope you will have shaved by next Sunday." Because of that comment, it took another twenty years before Roy found a regular church home.

## STUCK IN LEGALISM: THE AIRING OF GRIEVANCES

And at the Festivus dinner, you gather your family around, and you tell them all the ways they have disappointed you over the past year!

—Frank Costanza, *Seinfeld* episode "The Strike"

Most of us chuckle over the invented holiday of Festivus. In the famous *Seinfeld* episode, Frank Costanza explains how he grew frustrated with the commercialism of Christmas:

**Frank Costanza:** Many Christmases ago, I went to buy a doll for my son. I reached for the last one they had, but so did another

man. As I rained blows upon him, I realized there had to be another way.

**Cosmo Kramer:** What happened to the doll?

**Frank Costanza:** It was destroyed. But out of that, a new holiday was born: a Festivus for the rest of us!

Part of the “tradition” of Festivus was the airing of grievances to all who came to dinner. Frank Costanza’s frustration with Christmas commercialism mirrors my angst over the odd brand of Christianity that we’ve too often foisted on our culture. I am borrowing Frank’s concept of the airing of grievances. Actually, churchgoers are pretty good at the airing of grievances, even without the Festivus excuse. In the *Seinfeld* episode, the airing of grievances is followed by the traditional “feats of strength.” The head of the household selects one person at the Festivus celebration and challenges that person to a wrestling match. Festivus is not over until the head of the household is pinned. Wouldn’t that be a fascinating addition to our church bylaws?

#### Section 7: Resolution of Conflict

The elders shall invite the congregation to an annual church potluck, followed by the airing of grievances. The potluck shall be followed by praise songs and then the feats of strength. The congregational meeting shall not be adjourned until an elder is pinned to the mat by a church member.

Perhaps the sight of a volunteer wrestling with an elder would be silly enough to help us understand that 98 percent of our grievances are

pointless in the context of the Great Commission and the Greatest Commandment. But there is a place for the airing of grievances, especially in reference to the way we do Christianity in this culture. But I pray that I will always come around to grace and truth that enable the real feats of strength to be our focus. I hope we will learn how to trust God to demonstrate truly amazing feats of strength, such as forgiveness, selflessness, serving, and unity.

### MY PERSONAL HISTORY WITH LEGALISM

My own grievances date back more than four decades (gulp) to a legalistic church in Chillicothe, Ohio. I have to start with my spiritual pedigree, since that figures prominently into my dysfunction. I was raised in a non-churchgoing family. At the age of fifteen, I started going to church for a very spiritual reason: a cute girl I knew attended that church. Unfortunately, my first church experience was with a congregation that was so legalistic it went out of business.

Seriously.

The denomination this church was part of is not even around anymore because they couldn't round up enough miserable people to keep it functioning. My nickname for our dysfunctional church body was "The First Church of Misery Loves Company...But We Probably Won't Love You." We sang "Amazing Grace" but wouldn't have recognized grace if it had snuck up and bit us on our self-righteous backsides.

This church featured a lengthy altar call every Sunday to target the one or two unsaved folks who might have stumbled in. I was the target one memorable Sunday. They sang fifteen verses of "Just as I Am" and then the preacher told a tragic story about a man who rejected a moment like this and then was flattened by a steamroller on the way home. According to the preacher, the man was now being tormented in hell.

Meanwhile, my ADD brain was wondering why a steamroller was out on a Sunday. Then we shifted to singing “Softly and Tenderly” about a dozen times. Apparently, all of this was designed to give me a little taste of what eternity would be like.

One of the pillars of the church was a matronly lady who was—how can I say this kindly?—not underfed. In a scene that would have been hilarious if it hadn’t involved me, this substantial saint tried to drag me to the altar. I was like a Labrador retriever being pulled into the vet’s office with legs splayed out and fighting every inch of the way.

This church wasn’t acquainted with the role of the Holy Spirit in salvation. Getting sinners to the altar was the goal, whether that sinner wanted to be there or not. Their philosophy of ministry was simple: “You will get saved, and you will like it!”

I resisted this church pillar’s gentle headlock to heaven that Sunday in spite of the risk of being flattened by a steamroller on the way home. But a couple of days later I did pray the sinner’s prayer, without being dragged anywhere. And that began a journey of good, bad, and ugly that has lasted for more than forty years so far. While it is true that I heard and accepted the gospel message after attending that church, my early doctrinal exposure would prove to be an ongoing problem.

## HYPOCRITES OR HEALERS?

The word *hypocrite* comes from the Greek word *hyprokrites*, meaning one who plays a part, an actor. Probably no word is more destructively used in describing Christians than *hypocrite*. André Gide once defined a true hypocrite (an oxymoron?) as the “one who ceases to perceive his deception, the one who lies with sincerity.”

Inevitably, my first and natural reaction upon hearing the word is to think of people I consider guilty of hypocrisy. When it was revealed that

Reverend Ted Haggard had been engaged in inappropriate relationships, my first reaction was to smite him with my hypocrite hammer. But instead I should have asked God to shine a light in my own dark places to see if a similar lack of integrity lives in my own heart.

One of the most stinging rebukes Jesus ever issued concerned the hypocrisy of the Pharisees (see Matthew 6). These religious leaders liked to be seen and heard when praying, recognized when giving money, and pitied when fasting. Had the Jerusalem Broadcasting Network been on the air, you just know that slick-haired Pharisees would have hosted the prime-time programs.

Today, the church condemns those who drink and smoke and live immoral lives, while churchgoers freely engage in gluttony and gossip and selfishness and bigotry. The unchurched stand by in amazed, bemused, cynical, or angry observance of our hypocrisy. And they lose respect for our message.

As a young man, I sat through many sermons in which the preacher condemned tobacco and “devil alcohol.” Immediately following, the congregation would enjoy a potluck dinner where apparently the demon of calories was a welcome guest. It seems to me that morbid obesity is also a desecration of the temple (our body). Is that not also wrong? Overweight churchgoers often explain their extra pounds by citing low metabolism or thyroid disorders. I acknowledge that, for many, there could be a legitimate medical reason behind the weight gain. But if church members can fall back on metabolism as an excuse, shouldn't we allow for the possibility that someone else's addiction to nicotine might be similarly genetically predisposed? Or that someone with a weakness for alcohol or drugs could suffer from a brain-chemistry imbalance that exacerbates the problem?

We all are broken people, whether we are gluttons, gossips, smokers, drinkers, or hypocrites. I believe with all of my being in the life-changing

power of God. I know He can empower an alcoholic to become and stay dry. I have witnessed that truth. I believe God can give a smoker the strength to snuff out his last cigarette. I am convinced God can enable a person to flush pills and drugs down the drain once and for all.

Church members love to condemn addictions. But not *all* addictions. The uncomfortable flip side is that Christians too often overlook God's power to help us overcome certain of the "favored" addictions. Why don't more Christians acknowledge the truth that God can give us the power to walk away from the buffet table? That He can give me the strength to bridle my tongue when I am privy to gossip that would hurt another person? Should I not recognize that God might want me to keep driving my unsexy old car or keep watching a conventional, low-tech television instead of a giant screen 3-D HDTV in order to free up my resources to help someone in need?

I marvel at Christ's approach to sinners. Obviously He could not have condoned the lifestyles and actions of many who surrounded Him. Yet He was drawn to the spiritually needy—and they to Him. Prostitutes, lepers, and tax collectors all felt the need to hear what Jesus had to say. (Note to my IRS friends: In first-century culture, tax collectors were turncoats who unfairly extorted their own people for personal gain. Nothing at all like the honorable members of our fine government tax organization evaluating my home-office deductions on this year's tax return.)

It seems the people who were the most uncomfortable around Jesus were the ones known to be the most religious—the churchgoers, as it were. Those who are most ill need the physician's time, and Jesus gravitated to the ER cases. I have friends who are physicians, and probably no patient annoys them more than a hypochondriac. These unfortunate people drain the resources and time of medical personnel that could be far better used healing the truly sick. It seems to me that Jesus dealt with the hypochondriacs of His day (the Pharisees and other religious people)

with that same attitude. Jesus had little patience with those who failed to recognize their true spiritual symptoms. But He was always willing to see the spiritually ill.

The church should be in the business of addressing spiritual illness. When you are deathly ill, you don't start thinking of going to the health club: "Well, this will be a lovely time to get in shape. I feel horrible, and I think I'm going to die, but at least I'll be a trim corpse." Yet many churches have communicated that only the spiritually healthy are welcome there. The result is that the spiritually needy think their lives are too far gone to be accepted at church, when in fact their brokenness makes them ready to receive God's amazing grace. But too many avoid the ER, thinking that going to church would make them uncomfortable or heighten their guilt. They sense they would be judged and treated with condescension.

Yes, some of these feelings are self-inflicted wounds. But many are not. We must face the possibility that we are doing things that make hurting people stay away from the church. Do you ever think your health is too messed up for you to go to the hospital? Does a hospital ever communicate that you are just a little too sick to come in? When did the church step away from its responsibility to heal emotional pain and meet physical, emotional, and spiritual needs? Steve Martin used to say, "Comedy isn't pretty." Sometimes ministry isn't either. Sometimes it requires us to pay a price.

Most of us don't much like to be around the truly spiritually ill because it makes us uncomfortable. Treating the spiritually ill is draining, and it comes with no guarantee of success. We would rather hire someone to clean up the mess and report back to us at a praise service. Yet how can we preach Christ's love and not care about those with HIV/AIDS? How can we talk about God's grace but ignore other people's physical needs? How can we talk about the importance of giving and then spend money on things we don't need, often to curry the approval of people we don't really care about? How can we minister to others when we don't first meet



the spiritual needs of our own families? How can we win the respect of the world when we cruise around in luxury vehicles and turn our faces away from hurting people?

Do we think that if we ignore the problems, perhaps God will not hold us accountable?

My family had a wonderful golden retriever for fourteen adventure-filled years. If Marley (of book and movie fame) was the “world’s worst dog,” then our dog, Charlie, would have been an honored runner-up. Charlie was an aficionado of used Kleenex and paper towels. He knew I disapproved of him running off with tissues, so each time he nabbed one, Charlie would dash to the family room and stick his head and front quarters under a Queen Anne chair. He didn’t realize that 75 percent of his body was sticking out, with his tail wagging wildly. He thought he was safe from retribution because his face was hidden.

Is it any less ridiculous to think that we Christians can avoid our responsibilities as Christ’s representatives on earth? Are Christians any smarter than Charlie when we avert our gaze from the needs of others and convince ourselves that God won’t notice? Somehow I don’t think God smiles and says, “Oh, that Dave, he was just too busy to notice his friend was in pain. But that’s okay.” No. Instead, my selfishness sticks out just as noticeably as Charlie’s rear end. (There is a certain symmetry in that comparison.) Adam’s first impulse was to hide when God held him accountable in the Garden of Eden, and not much has changed since then in people’s hearts. It was just as futile for Adam as it was for Charlie and me to try to hide from our sin.

## COUNTRY CLUB CHRISTIAN

The rules and regulations at the legalistic church I attended when I was young smothered the concept of grace. No jewelry for women. No mixed

bathing. (That one was a wild fantasy for my adolescent hormones, until I realized they meant *swimming*.) No musical instruments in the church, other than a piano or organ. I never did find the biblical basis for that one.

*“And thou shalt have no stringed instruments or percussive idols.”*

No long hair for men. No short hair for women. No shorts. No cussing. No makeup. No pants for women. No card playing. No movies. No dancing. No smoking. No drinking. I actually sat through a sermon in which the preacher spent sixty minutes trying to explain that the wine of the New Testament was actually grape juice. So Jesus turned the water into Welch’s? What a wedding feast that must have been, with great food and a fine vintage grape juice. “It’s a lovely little vintage. . . stomped just this morning.”

On and on the list went. If any activity involved an ounce of pleasure, you could be reasonably certain that it was forbidden. People in our church used to put a sheet over their television set when the preacher made a house call. As if the good reverend wouldn’t know that a “devil’s box” was hiding under the cover. Obviously God wouldn’t know either. I mean, how could the Creator of the universe possibly know that the big, box-shaped object under the oddly placed sheet was a TV set? The effect of the long list of prohibitions was predictable: We experienced no joy, no peace, no assurance of God’s forgiveness—and no interest from anyone outside our miserable little circle. And while we were told to never play cards, dance, or attend a movie, nothing was said against a long list of much more repulsive things. Things like pride, racism, and bigotry. There was not a stated policy, but you would never have seen a “colored” (our term for African Americans) in our church. Actually, only the more “open-minded” in our body called African Americans “coloreds.” The less enlightened used the term “darkies”—or worse. It was mentioned that black Christians had their own churches, and it was assumed that having separate churches was somehow God’s will. That memory still

hurts my heart. Members of our church also railed against Jews. I heard it stated from the pulpit that Jews were ruining our country, while the fact that the Savior happened to be a Jew was ignored. And don't even begin to mention "sodomites," as we so colorfully called the gay population.

I was attending a church for people who looked like all the others, talked like all the others, dressed alike, believed the same things, and even shared the same prejudices. No wonder so many people feel excluded. If you don't look or sound or dress like a promising candidate for club membership, of course you'll feel alienated. Even some who are already members feel alienated.

Jesus' church is not a highbrow country club. And believers who hang around with a homogeneous group of carbon-copy Christians limit their growth. The church should exclude no one. The church should welcome those who are unwelcome in other places. And yet most churches are not places where people feel comfortable, especially if they are found to be in open violation of any of the proscribed activities. In fact, a person could be living a completely normal life and still feel uncomfortable in church.

## PASSING THE TEST

Outsiders have good reason to be wary, but so do insiders. Christians often accept (and enforce) a hierarchy within the church. Have you ever wished that certain people would remain on the sidelines, or even completely out of sight, in your congregation? You would be more comfortable bringing unchurched friends if the slightly embarrassing brothers and sisters weren't out in the open.

How amazing that our prideful minds can even think like that. My own family reunion—as much as I love my relatives—would look much better if attendance were by invitation only. Let's face it, when

you include the entire family, there are some embarrassing, even tense, moments.

So it is with any church family, and it shouldn't come as a surprise. After all, consider what we are dealing with: sinners. The "acceptable" members as well as the ones who sometimes cause embarrassment—and even the ones behind the pulpit—are all sinners. And that invites problems. I recall dating a girl long before I met my beloved Joni. I asked her to go to church with me. Since she wasn't a Christian, she was unaware of the official rules. She arrived at church wearing a dress that didn't completely cover her shoulders. She had simply worn her best outfit; she had no idea she was doing anything wrong. (Of course, she wasn't doing anything wrong, but you get the point.) From the moment we walked in, the two of us felt the saints' reproachful, laser-beam stares of righteousness drilling into us. Instead of asking God to make her heart receptive to His Word, I spent the service worrying about what the pea-brained congregation thought of me. (I could almost hear their thoughts: *How could Dave bring a hussy like that to church?*) There were a handful of gracious people who welcomed us, but most folks were too busy being appalled.

This would not happen in a sinner-sensitive church. The sinner-sensitive church (SSC) is my proposal for a new church movement committed to making everyone feel welcomed and loved. The SSC would model nonjudgmental attitudes. Issues such as having tattoos, body piercings, weird hair, or ugly shoes would not be equated with demon possession. The SSC would pledge not to gossip, because we would realize that it's only by the grace of God that we are not the current targets. The sinner-sensitive church would value every spiritual, physical, and financial gift, no matter how big or small. This church would appreciate but not elevate the person who made possible the new multipurpose wing through his or her enormous financial gift.

The SSC would make it a practice to reach out and care for one

another sacrificially because we know that we all fall down in life. At the SSC we would have corporate executives holding hands in prayer with laborers and not thinking twice about it. Blacks and whites and Hispanics and others would break bread together because we all are sinners in the eyes of a color-blind God.

The sinner-sensitive church would give freely out of profound gratitude to a God who somehow saw fit to give us an undeserved chance. The sinner-sensitive church would practice the prodigal-son ministry, running to welcome those who are returning home from mistakes and bad decisions and sin. Our members would get involved in other people's lives. We would lovingly hold our brothers and sisters accountable to godly standards. Marriage would be cherished and taken seriously as a body of believers. Families would have a community of support during problems and trials.

Congregation members would not be so self-centered that they would demand the undivided attention of the pastor at every little crisis. Other believers would help meet many of the needs that Christians often prefer to leave to the "professionals" on staff. The people of this church would come on Sunday with hearts ready to be fed but also realizing that God has provided resources beyond any available in history to meet their spiritual hunger. Should they walk out the church doors still feeling needy, they would know they can draw from the marvelous resources of Christian books, music, radio, video, digital downloads, and studies to meet their needs.

The sinner-sensitive church would also delight in the company of other spiritual travelers and make it a priority that no one would ever feel alone. We would make each other feel valuable but, on occasion, a little uncomfortable. Being comfortable in church is not the primary goal. I am not always comfortable at the dentist's office. I often arrive in pain because I have neglected to do what I should have done. The staff always

makes me feel welcome and even cared for. Then the dentist confronts me with the truth: “You have let this go too long, and I must hurt you (a little) in order to heal you. You will have to pay a financial price and spend time recovering before you are completely well.” Those are the facts of my dental-hygiene sin.

Likewise, the sinner-sensitive church would not back off the truth, but we would seek God’s love to communicate that truth with grace so healing could take place. Decay, whether it appears in tooth enamel or the soul, must be addressed. We will tell one another the truth and explain that the process might be painful. We would participate in ongoing preventative maintenance and help one another deal with problems as soon as possible, before they become even more painful and expensive to fix.

The SSC would worship with enthusiasm, whether singing hymns or praise choruses, because God is worthy of that praise. The sinner-sensitive fellowship would have a sense of profound reverence because we have received God’s grace, the most amazing gift ever offered. The sinner-sensitive church would be so excited about this grace that the incredible news of the gospel would be as much a part of who we are as our jobs and our families.

Our Lord’s ministry style was sinner sensitive. He made Himself available to people who realized their need. Merely being a seeker did not necessarily merit His time. The wealthy young man came to Jesus to find out what he still needed to do to receive eternal life. However, the jarring truth of Christ’s answer—telling the man to sell his possessions and give the money to the poor—revealed that he was not ready to follow Christ (see Matthew 19:16–22). But when sinners came with a humble confession of need and a willingness to obey God, Jesus never turned them away. The church of Acts was sinner sensitive and functioned much in the way I have described above.

Frankly, sometimes we try a little too hard to attract the unchurched.

A church that functioned like the one described above would be such a societal miracle that you couldn't keep people away if you locked the doors. And while the majority of my idealism has been beaten out of me, I still believe that such a church will be possible when we finally get tired of faking it as a church. The needed change will not come until we are willing to pay the price for a sinner-sensitive church. Receiving grace is easy, but giving grace is costly.

The harsh reality is that most of us are afraid to commit to this radical type of fellowship because we aren't sure what it would require of us. My own natural reaction is, "Praise the Lord, but keep the Lexus!" I'll hazard a guess that you are the same. When the rich young man in Matthew heard Jesus' words to him, "he went away sad, because he had great wealth" (19:22).

## GOVERNED BY GRACE

Author Philip Yancey shared a compelling illustration about a recovering alcoholic friend who attends Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. His friend said, "When I'm late to church, people turn around and stare at me with frowns of disapproval. I get the clear message that I'm not as responsible as they are. When I'm late to AA, the meeting comes to a halt and everyone jumps up to hug and welcome me. They realize that my lateness may be a sign that I almost didn't make it."<sup>1</sup>

Twelve-step support groups have become what the body of Christ could and, in fact, *should* be. And while the roots of Alcoholics Anonymous are firmly planted in Christian grace, why did the movement have to be launched in the first place? Shouldn't the church be the place that welcomes hurting men and women so that they would instinctively be drawn to receive the help they need? Shouldn't the church be a place of abundant grace where people have your back because they realize their

own condition? Shouldn't followers of Christ understand that at any moment they could need that same grace?

Even a cursory study of the life of Christ will reveal that any of us could have quite comfortably walked into His "twelve-guy" program and announced our status as sinners. In fact, that little confession would have moved us to the head of the class and could very well have made us Teacher's pet. So why has the church repelled so many of those who have the needs Christ has equipped us to address? I realize that it is not entirely the fault of the church that the spiritually ill stay away. But it seems to me that we had better examine the part of the problem we're responsible for.

When I was a kid, the spread of tuberculosis was a big concern. Those with the disease were isolated in a hospital-like dormitory with the scary name "sanatorium." Whenever I'd pass the sanatorium in our town, I would look fearfully at the building. I knew the people inside had something I did not want to come into contact with. Knowing that many people today drive by a church with the resolve to avoid contact with Christians at all costs gives me a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach.

Every person should find the most level playing field of all in the church. In Jesus' eyes, the soul of a Fortune 500 CEO is no more valuable than the soul of a meth addict. That sort of thinking is scandalous to most of us because it contradicts our culture's values. We honor looks, money, power, and fame. Jesus cared about none of those. In Luke 16:14–15, the gospel writer talked about "the Pharisees, who loved money, [and] heard all this [Jesus talking about the parable of the shrewd manager] and were sneering at Jesus. [That is a phrase that I hope to never see next to my name.] He said to them, 'You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts. What is *highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight.*'" I am constantly amazed that the words of Jesus apply just as accurately to the stories that



appear in *USA Today* as they did to stories in the *Galilee Gazette* two thousand years ago.

Through the years I have thought about what would have happened if Jesus had walked into the nursery where our daughter, Katie, was unwelcome. I am convinced of several things based on my study of His life. He likely would have been drawn straight to her. He might have chosen to heal her. He probably would have shed a tear, because the suffering of children always touched His heart. And I am absolutely sure that He would not have rejected her. I believe that He would have comforted Joni and me with the reassurance that Katie's affliction was not the result of our sin.

The once-popular saying "What Would Jesus Do?" has the ability to confront us with an important and necessary spiritual question. Sadly, the church Joni and I used to attend never asked that question concerning little Katie Burchett. In order for our family to worship together at the same church, we had to find a different congregation. Christians, like physicians, should vow to do no harm. But forgive us, Lord, because too often we do inflict harm.

Note: In honor of the late, great Paul Harvey, I will tell you the "rest of the story" about little Katie in chapter 16.