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Real People Standing in Grace

BY KATIE TURNER

Carm had not attended church for several years when she decided to return to the church of her young adult years.¹ As a former minister's wife, she knew all too well how much safer it would be to stay away and not have to explain or revisit her private life. She had tried to stay away, but she couldn't manage the inner turmoil she felt. She needed peace, and so she returned.

She brought with her a broken heart and a life literally crippled by guilt. Her face revealed her suffering. Having lived through the pain of a broken marriage, she also bore a tremendous burden of guilt and shame for choices she had made following her divorce. Those choices had led her into a volatile, unstable relationship, which had produced a precious child.

One of the most troubling things to me, personally, was Carm's view of herself. She saw herself as second-class compared with other Christians. She felt that her mistakes somehow disqualified her from being a full kingdom partner.

Carm was invited to a group we called Relationship Recovery. The group was intended to function as a grace group. Our goal was to live more fully in the grace extended on the cross, to learn together, to stand in grace, and to experience the power of God's righteousness in us. We were committed to taking the time to hear stories of brokenness. We absolutely refused to speak superficially to each other. We also

refused to allow the clock to dictate what was accomplished.

The grace group loved Carm. We provided friendship and compassion. We prayed over her and for her. We listened to her story. We cried. We studied the scriptures together. We stayed in touch during the week.

Slowly, week by week, a noticeable change became obvious. Carm's face softened. She began to report personal victory over her almost paralyzing fear. She took control of negative thinking and doubt. She smiled. She gained confidence and took out a restraining order to protect herself and her child. She stayed focused on the Word. She began to shed the burden she had been carrying. She began to stand in grace.

People like Carm who have debilitating problems are not unfamiliar to us. The church is full of broken people. The apostle Paul spoke of this brokenness in the early church, as well. According to Romans 1-2, the early Christians lived lives derailed by sin and its harsh consequences as much as we do today. I am no theologian, but in Romans I see a gospel extended to all broken people. (Which, by the way, includes all of us.) Paul begins Romans by painting a grim picture of the reality of living life on our own terms; then, in vivid contrast, he depicts the work of the Justifier, who freely extends grace.

Therefore having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God. (Rom 5:1-2)²

Our God is the initiator of this grace. He is by nature a savior. His heart is set on pursuing the ones he loves, even though . . . we are sinners! The sinner who deserves to die . . . lives! The sinner experiences good things. The sinner loves and laughs and gives birth; the sinner experiences prosperity and fulfilling relationships. The sinner experiences peace and hope. The sinner does not die, but rather is forgiven, is justified, and lives in the mercies of God. The sinner is empowered to become the righteousness of God! The justified sinner has access to God by faith into this grace in which we stand. Standing in grace is an incredible concept to me. I know I don't know all that it means, but I have some idea of what it does not mean.

Here is where my struggle begins. Real people with real problems fill our churches. Some of our members have multiple challenges with which they consistently live. Some live in the brokenness of decisions imposed on them by others. Some live in the realities of their own choices. Their hurt is often deep; their pain, raw and often unhealed. It seems to me that our instincts in dealing with these people are somehow not fully formed.

As I look at the body and see some of my brethren who are involved in corporate worship and Bible classes, who are connected to the body but continue to walk around with empty, hurting eyes, I wonder . . . are we helping them? They seem to be more dead than alive, more feeble than strong, more groveling in grace than standing in it or confident of it. Ministering to the broken perhaps deserves a closer look.

I have identified two models between which churches seem to move back and forth. The first is what I refer to as a "homeless shelter" model. This model fosters a come-and-go, quick-fix, meet-temporary-needs kind of experience. Physical, spiritual, and social needs are met by corporate worship, Bible classes, and other activities. But there are few ex-

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pectations for change, and there is limited ongoing support for the depth of the human struggle.

I think this model is most often used because of the pace of life, time constraints, and our multiple contacts with people who are in need. Corporate worship and Bible classes are, by their very structure, largely governed by time constraints and therefore operate to meet more temporary needs.

The other model I identify is the "healing community" model. This model requires one-to-one, personal contact with people. Individuals are engaged on a more personal level. Hope is offered and comfort is given. There are no quick fixes offered or promised; rather, there is an opportunity for real-life issues to be discussed. This model requires time—much time, effort, and transparency. It requires more than a "Hi, how are you?" "I'm fine, thank you!" kind of function.

As I see it, it is much easier to conduct most activities of the church as a "homeless shelter" than a "healing community." The "homeless shelter" model requires less time and demands much less personal involvement. Its lesser demand for transparency is also emotionally and psychologically safer for most of us. (I have been in full-time ministry for twenty years; I know of what I speak.)

I am not advocating that all Bible classes become twelve-step recovery programs. I am wondering, however, how often we implement the "homeless shelter" model in the hope that it will somehow cure all. In my experience, it is helpful for some people to become involved in a process that is designed to dig deeper and provide ongoing, loving support.

Our grace group held no magic; we simply proclaimed Paul's gospel to real people with real problems.

For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life. (Rom 5:6-10)

Here is another story from our grace group. Dave and I had attended church together for years, but I didn't really know him. I noticed that his countenance had changed, and I became concerned that he seemed isolated and no longer as involved. When he came to the grace group, he shared the fact that his wife had recently left him. She had taken with her their two preschool children. Dave's loss was unbearable. His psychiatrist prescribed multiple medications to help relieve his depression and anxiety. Dave decompensated so much that, despite a long and stable work history, he was on disability leave. Physically, he was experiencing pain in his extremities. The doctors were running various tests and even looking for the possibility of a brain tumor. Dave was a broken man.

During the early days of his group attendance, we smothered him in prayer. We offered no quick fixes. We read the Word together. We listened and listened. We gave him time. We accepted him as an equal kingdom partner. Slowly, Dave began to heal. Over the months, his transformation was amazing

to us all. This depressed, anxious man began to get his bearings. He began to find his footing . . . in grace. He began to stand.

Dave simply connected with other broken people who could be real with him. This support seemed to redirect him. Over time, he returned to work. His depression lifted. His physical symptoms were relieved. Dave's life is still very difficult. He daily tackles the harsh realities of his divorce—the financial challenges and the separation from his children. But Dave is a different man.

Dave's and Carm's are but two stories I could share. How does the "homeless shelter" model address needs like theirs? Dave and Carm both came and went each Sunday. They came hurting and left hurting. They needed a grace-filled community to give them time and support to heal. They also needed to know that they were not alone.

For them, these biblical truths are reality: they have hope (Rom 5:2) and perspective on their trials (5:3). They smile and even find humor now in the ongoing struggle. They are experiencing the benefits of trials: perspective, proven character, and a hope that does not disappoint (5:4-5). Imagine that—justified sinners, living in the mercies of God! Real people with real problems . . . standing in grace.

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Notes

¹ Stories are used by permission from the Relationship Recovery grace group at the Central Church of Christ in Bakersfield, California.

² Scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Bible (NASB).