

Jay Bakker Tells the World His Story

His new autobiography reveals the highs and lows he's lived as the son of a famous minister.

Jay Bakker's fondness for tattoos and body piercing has made him a target of criticism by a number of Christians. His new book, *Son of a Preacher Man* (Harper San Francisco), describes how he learned to see God's grace in difficult times. Reading critical letters to the editor in past issues of *Charisma* has been difficult, Bakker said, but he sees it as an opportunity to educate the church.

"I would like to get their addresses and send them all a free copy of the book so they could know what I've been through and why this generation needs that unconditional love of Christ," he said of the letter writers.

Bakker told *Charisma* he's intrigued by the fact that letters, which started out critical of him but turned supportive, continued to appear several months after an article ran on his ministry. The criticism centered primarily on his tattoos, which now extend from his shoulders to his wrists on both arms. His main concern about the criticism is not for himself, he said, but for tattooed and pierced youth who believe they won't be accepted by the church.

"Jesus probably would have been hanging out with these people. If there had been a story about Jesus in *Charisma*, there'd probably be letters saying, 'I can't believe you've got a

story about this guy who hangs out with prostitutes and tax collectors, notorious even eats with them,'" Bakker said, noting that he's not comparing himself to Jesus but making a point about judgmental attitudes in the church.

The critical letters were the inspiration behind a new tattoo that features a smiling punk kid with a Bible and the phrase "Kids Love Jesus." All of Bakker's tattoos have Christian themes.

Bakker said he's read some of the letters to the 50 or so inner-city kids who regularly attend his Tuesday night Bible study at Revolution, his youth ministry that operates out of Safehouse, a ministry located in a downtown Atlanta street next to several bars. He's trying to help the kids see that there are Christians who are angry about tattoos and piercings but that the proper response to them is not more anger.

"We really have to be extra unconditional lovers of people, extra givers of grace," he said.

Some who criticize Bakker point to Leviticus 19:28 as a verse forbidding tattoos. But Bakker notes that the verse prior to it regulates the length of sideburns, and another verse in that chapter restricts what fabric a person can wear. "If you're going to take one piece of the law you have to take the whole law," he noted.

Bakker said he has tattoos, not necessarily to gain credibility with punks and other disenfranchised youth, but because he likes them and has friends who are tattoo artists. Tattoos or not, he and his wife, Amanda, have certainly gained

credibility by being friends with the kids and accepting them despite their appearance or shortcomings, at all times striving to be genuine and honest.

One man who regularly attends the Bible study is an avowed atheist with an anti-Christian tattoo. Despite his lack of faith, he's become a friend of Jay and Amanda's. They believe he'll one day find Jesus as a friend.

"When they see the love and acceptance that we give them, hopefully they'll see that God is much more accepting and loves them much more," he said. "These kids are saying, 'We want to have a relationship with Christ because He loves, because He accepts us.' To me, that just blows me away."

Bakker's father told CNN's Larry King that although he personally does not like tattoos he respects his son's position.

"I love my son, and I love him so much that I look beyond what I see as something I don't necessarily agree with. But I'm not really into tattoos."

Tammy Faye Messner, Jay's mother, told King of the tattoos: "I think they're kind of colorful and pretty."

Jay Bakker's commitment to unconditional love crosses another controversial boundary. If a young woman says she wants an abortion, they do all they can to talk her out of it, and they refer her to a crisis-pregnancy ministry in Safehouse. If she chooses the abortion nonetheless, they will accompany her to the clinic, he said.

"If a girl made that decision and is going to do that, we're going to be there because Jesus would be there," he said.

Although his book communicates the message of grace, Bakker takes some well-known ministers to task for what they did during the fall of PTL.

"When I first got the book I told Amanda: 'I'm a hypocrite. I preach grace to all these people, but look at all these people I nailed.' But I wanted to be honest," he said, noting that the first draft of the book was actually even harsher until he made edits.

"Each incident I wrote about was coming from how I was feeling at that time, at that age, and what was happening," he said. "It's a book about grace, it's a book about unconditional love, but it's also a book about what happened in the church."

One constant in Bakker's life has been his love for his parents, Jim and Tammy Faye. When his father got out of prison, Jay was struggling with a drinking and drug problem.

"I was partying with my friends every all [Dad] wanted to do was keep me from killing myself drinking," Jay told King. "Fortunately, my dad didn't want me to just be an alcoholic and a drug addict my whole life."

He's still involved in a 12-step recovery program today but hasn't had a drink in five years.

"Bakker and his father have always been close and remain so now. Although the elder Bakker is not crazy about his son's

tattoos, the letters of criticism have only made him laugh.

"He's happy I'm in the ministry," the younger Bakker said. "He's glad I'm reaching people he could never reach."

Bakker denies writing the book to capitalize on his family's controversial history as fallen televangelists. "I wrote it to help people, to make people see what's happening in the church and what you can go through and come out on top and still realize that Jesus loves you."