

# Out Where the Sinners Are

Recently while browsing through a Barnes & Noble bookstore with a friend, I struck up a conversation with the store manager. He seemed friendly and eager to know more about us, so halfway through our conversation I told him we were both pastors.

He was shocked—not because he doesn't like ministers, but because he'd never really had a decent conversation with a Christian. "I normally only hear from Christians when they are mad," he told me.

The three of us sat down at the coffee bar. The manager told tales about religious people who had called, written or walked in his store to inform him they would never do business with him because of objectionable books or Halloween displays.

The man thanked us for being different and then excused himself so he could get back to work. My thoughts were racing so fast I found it hard to finish my bagel. No best seller could have taught us what we learned from this honest man.

I asked myself, How can believers shine a light and promote the gospel in a sinful, wicked world? Maybe, just maybe, God wants people today to follow the example of Jesus. Time and technology have changed, but yesterday's techniques can still touch today's world.

Sitting idly as silent witnesses is not enough. Lumbering ahead to peddle words without the Spirit is too much. We need to reach the lost as Jesus did. He models a personal, realistic approach to speaking forth the good news.

Let's review a biblical story to discover the steps Jesus used to initiate conversation with the people He met and open the door for true evangelism.

## 1. Jesus broke the rules.

Alone and worn from His journey, Jesus sat by a well. His robe flashed no religious logo.

Then a woman approached to draw water.

The middle of the day was a strange time for her to undertake this task. People habitually took care of such business before the sun became their enemy. Gathering in the morning or evening hours made the climate work in their favor, as labor turned into an arena for conversation. They socialized as they worked.

Not this woman. She came during the heat of the day, revealing her standing with society. Enduring the relentless afternoon sun was better than suffering the silence of a condemning group gathered around a well.

Jesus was not put off by her presence. In fact, His choosing not to leave when the woman drew near underscored the first dynamic of evangelism illustrated by this story: Jesus broke the rules.

Devout Jews despised the people of Samaria, but not Jesus. He refused to allow man's religious rules to hinder His purpose.

Travel through a sinful city? Converse with a Samaritan who was not only a woman but also a person of ill-repute? Unheard of.

Not for Jesus. He came to do the will of His Father without concern for religious or social tradition. Children, sinners, prostitutes, thieves, poor and uneducated people—He touched all those ignored by religious rule-keepers.

The clean hands of strict legalists would not dare applaud His efforts. But He continued. And He reminded listeners of His purpose: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but

sinners, to repentance" (Luke 5:31-32, NKJV).

Jesus remained on course despite strong winds of pharisaical opposition that sought to blow Him in another direction. He broke rules; they judged Him guilty by association. Their muttering confirmed that He remained true to His agenda: "This Man receives sinners and eats with them" (Luke 15:2).

Eating with people during Christ's day carried social significance. Christ embraced people others avoided. He associated with the guilty to reach them, not to become like them. But in order to reach them, He first entered their world.

Let's not become more comfortable criticizing sinners than converting them. The color of a person's skin or the habits of a person's life must never prohibit us from reaching out to them. It is imperative that we welcome all.

Jesus allowed the woman to approach. Then He initiated conversation.

## 2. Jesus broke the ice.

We often wonder how to begin a discussion with an unbeliever or how to channel dialogue toward the gospel. It is awkward making the transition from career questions or weather expectations to spiritual realities. But the Holy Spirit possesses an amazing ability to steer conversations toward eternal matters if we flow with Him.

We say we believe that people without Christ lack what can help them the most. Yet many times we speak as salesmen not sold on our own product. Jesus talked, listened and observed. He found common ground.

Thirsty beside a well, He asked the woman for water. She had the power to give it. What a wonderful way to break the ice, guiding discussion in a good direction. The right words at the

right time can open doors of great opportunity.

Jesus did not use the same phrases every time He reached out to someone. He observed a situation and spoke words that moved toward truth. Now that task is our role, our calling.

Often, as we seek to reach out, our behavior will break the ice more than our conversation. Actions of love do speak louder than words.

Years ago a storm hit hard in southern Mexico. The dangerous weather washed out a bridge necessary for travel between two key cities. Hoping to quickly solve their problem, a large group gathered for a night of hurried repair.

Missionary Larry Myers had labored among these people but had struggled to build a good rapport with them. Though he had previously planted churches in hundreds of Mexican communities, at this place he found spiritual resistance.

He prayed, hoped and wondered how to reach the people. Then he saw that their problem provided an opportunity to break the ice.

As the men toiled, Myers purchased a truckload of tacos and drove to the work site. When he arrived, he provided food and assisted their labor. His act of kindness broke the ice in a town that now serves as a key location for his national outreach. As a result of his involvement, the city shifted in a positive spiritual direction.

3. Jesus broke the news.

What purpose would we serve by gaining friends and never telling them about Jesus? Lifestyle witnessing opens the door to evangelism, but eventually we must verbalize the story.

Jesus perceived that the Samaritan woman was thirsty for more than a drink of water. Her shifts from man to man indicated a craving for acceptance that eluded surface relationships.

Jesus did not preach—He probed.

Listening ears and warm hearts are wonderful. But we must not conclude with only hearing and caring. We must tell people about eternal hope. Jesus moved toward ultimate truth, informing the woman that He was the Messiah.

I learned during my teen-age years how important it is to bring the good news to others; an experience I had with a friend of mine convinced me I needed to be more aggressive in sharing my faith.

We were both point guards on our high school basketball team and were two years apart in age. My friend led the team; I hoped to take his place my junior year after he graduated.

Before he left school, my friend heard the gospel. He shared his experience with me, concluding his testimony with a smile. But as I walked off with him, the expression on his face changed to real concern. He asked me to become a Christian.

When I told him I had been one for a few years, he stopped walking. Staring at me, he asked, “If you have been a Christian all this time, why did you never tell me I needed to become one?”

His question pricked me. If I truly believed what I thought I believed, why had I talked with him about everything—sports, music, school, family—except what mattered most?

My whole attitude changed. I began to witness to classmates, teammates and strangers. I spoke about the gospel, taught about it, wrote about it. God reminded me that we live on a planet covered with thirsty people.

Jesus knew the woman at the well needed more than a drink. She came there to draw water, yet she was thirsty for so much more. And she found something greater than what could come out of a well.

In the Messiah she found love. She found One who knew her more fully than anyone could know her, than she could know herself. After thirsting a long time, she finally found what she was looking for in Christ.

How many of our friends are thirsty for the Living Water the woman at the well encountered? What will we do to make sure they take a drink?

No, we should not become like the world. But neither should we hide from those Jesus died to save. Not if we care. Not if we long to fulfill His call.

So many more wait by the well. Let us pour out the drink of glory to give them life—today.

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**Chris Maxwell** was the pastor of Evangel Assembly of God in Orlando, Florida, when this article was published. He likes to hang out with sinners at bookstores, ball games and on the Internet.

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## **20 Ways to Reach the Lost**

*How can you demonstrate God's love in your community? Here are just a few things Jesus might do:*

??Pray fervently. If your church has an intercessory prayer group, participate in it. If not, start one, and encourage others to join you in interceding regularly for the lost in your city.

??Be an active school parent. Prayer may not be allowed in the classroom, but the government can't stop your light from shining in a school environment. Become friends with the principal, teachers and other parents.

??Celebrate holidays in style. Gather neighbors, co-workers or relatives for Christmas or Easter. Then tell the old, old

story of Jesus' birth or resurrection in a brand-new way.

??Join a club. Writers' groups, music clubs and other common-interest organizations can open doors for you to share the gospel. Don't avoid non-Christian gatherings.

??Coach a Little League team. Coaching or playing sports can initiate friendships and help you reach the younger generation.

??Build a cross-cultural bridge. Become friends with someone who looks different and has a different history.

??Adopt a child. We Christians admit that unwanted children need a home, but are we willing to play the role of parent to them?

??Become a pen pal. Prisoners have time to read mail. Who's going to write them?

??Get a workout partner. Your lost neighbor needs exercise, too. Ask him or her to join you for regular visits to the fitness center.

??Who says you can't visit a bar? Jesus didn't let religious people dictate where He could or couldn't go; neither should you.

??Bless your food server. Restaurant workers often complain that church people are more rude and tip less generously than others. Let's change our image! Be friendly, listen and don't just leave a gospel tract; leave a big tip.

??Feed the homeless. Local ministries in your area are touching these lonely people. Get involved.

??Share a meal and a movie. Invite an adult neighbor over for a home-cooked dinner or a backyard barbecue, then watch a wholesome video.

??Send a card. Surprise unbelievers in your office with an expression of kindness on birthdays, holidays or the anniversary of a painful memory.

??Help someone in crisis. Volunteer at a local hospital or with a meals-on-wheels program.

??Start an office Bible study. Get permission first, then have an informal time of sharing over a brown-bag lunch.

??Comfort someone dying of AIDS. Many cities need hospice

volunteers to minister to the terminally ill.

??Become a Big Brother or Sister. Scores of young children are raised in single-parent homes and need the influence of another adult to help them grow to maturity. Make one part of your life.

??Reach out to children in your neighborhood. Invite neighborhood children into your home (with their parents' permission, of course) for cookies, a story or a swim in your pool, and share the love of Jesus with them.

??Be a friend. Nowhere in the Bible are we told to shun contact with unbelievers.

We are called to love and serve the people we meet in school, at work and in our communities. Listen, offer encouragement and wait for opportunities to share Christ.

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## Developing Compassion for the Lost

### **The Tough Guys of Daytona**

*The burly motorcycle gang members I met at Bike Week in Daytona Beach are searching for freedom.*

By Billy Bruce

The oceanside streets of Daytona Beach, Florida, were swarming with thousands of bearded, tattooed men, many sporting braided pony tails, leather jackets and blue jeans and riding some of the loudest motorcycles on the planet. It was the last day of Bike Week, and nearly a half million people had passed through Volusia County during one week in March. It looked like an invasion.

Many of these bikers are motorcycle enthusiasts who dress the part and then go back to their jobs as doctors or lawyers when the fun in the sun concludes.



Others—who represent a small minority in this throng—are true hard-core bikers whose reckless lifestyles earn them fearful respect—and sometimes jail time.

The hard cores don't just dress the part. Their reputation for alcohol abuse, drug bingeing, crime and violence are well-earned, so much so that some bar owners have banned the wearing of club colors or club emblems.

No matter who the bikers are, every year Bike Week provides thousands of them a place for a ritual pilgrimage—where they can celebrate their religion of independence and hedonism.

I met up with members of the Christian Motorcyclists Association (CMA) one morning at their ministry headquarters in a Methodist church just two blocks from Main Street—the blacktop mecca of the Bike Week celebration.

Dressed in CMA club vests, the members planned out the day's strategy for taking the gospel into this dark environment. After joining them in a quick prayer service, I walked the two blocks to Main Street.

By late morning, thousands of motorcycles already were parked along both sides of Main Street, lending a surreal backdrop for their triumphal entry into town. With scantily clad female passengers clutching their waists, the bikers roared their engines as they cruised Main Street, curling their upper lips in tough-guy fashion as if to say "I have arrived; don't mess with me."

Bikers mixed with tourists in long lines to enter local bars, especially the beer garden at the internationally famous Boot Hill Saloon. Before I reached the bar, I spotted three bikers walking in front of me; the matching colors of their vests revealed a Chicago-based club. I asked them to define for me what the biker lifestyle is all about.

"It's one of those things that, if you have to ask, you

wouldn't understand," said "Dawg" Palka, 40, of Chicago. "It's about freedom—being who you are inside, not who people want you to be." His answer, I found during my two days here, was a common response.

The Boot Hill is a typical bar with pool tables and a television—except for a few noticeable features. Wooden booths displayed thousands of knife-carved personal initials, names and dates. Hundreds of photos of posing female patrons were tacked on the walls, and dozens of bras had been hung from the rafters over the bar.

The bikers lined up to get seats in this place during Bike Week. They also trudged in and out of a temporary gate to a beer garden set up in the bar's parking lot. A well-known brewery reportedly worked months to supply enough beer for this 10-day event.

To enter the garden, patrons were required to pass by a large, bearded fellow wearing a bandana as a skull cap and dark sunglasses. At 6 feet 6 inches tall and 330 pounds, this bouncer was nicknamed "Tiny."

"What's your last name?" I asked him.

"Just 'Tiny' will do fine," he said. I explained I wanted to interview him for Charisma.

"Oh, you don't want to interview me," Tiny responded. "There are Christian bikers here." I assured him that I wanted his comments.

Tiny told me he wrecked his bike two years ago but hadn't bought a new one yet because he has two sons, ages 7 and 5, at home. "They're always first," he said of his boys. "I'll make sure the bills are paid and they have a roof over their heads, then I'll get back up on a ride when I can afford it."

My standard question about the biker lifestyle drew thoughtful responses from this gentle giant. Tiny said bikers too often are stereotyped as violent people. In fact, he said, the

kindest people he has met are men from the motorcycle crowd.

“People think we’re a bunch of criminals,” Tiny said. “But we’re not satanists or atheists. We just live our lives in total freedom. To me, as long as I can do what I want to do and go to bed with a clear conscience and don’t hurt anyone, I’m happy.”

Total freedom, to Tiny, means living independently from standards set up by society. “There are too many meaningless rules and regulations,” he added.

As I walked farther down Main Street, the blasts from Harley-Davidson exhaust pipes and slow-passing bikes were deafening. At one street corner, a fellow rolled up on a vintage Davidson. He was wearing a tie-dyed T-shirt, black metal army helmet, and black leather vest and pants. His girlfriend hopped off as he parked the bike in front of me.

They were Glen and Maria, and they immediately defended bikers from stereotypes when I told them I represented a Christian magazine. “Not every biker is a drunk or a druggie, which is how we’ve been stereotyped,” Glen said. “They come from all walks of life, and 98 percent work for a living.”

Glen, a carpet installer and veteran fan of the Grateful Dead, lauded bikers’ ability to come from so many backgrounds and yet be unified in their common bond—a passion for freedom and riding motorcycles on the open road.

“We may speak in a different tongue, but we’re all equal. We’re all on the same plane,” he said.

What about Glen’s own spiritual path? “We believe in God, but we don’t go to church. A lot of people put on a suit and tie and go to church and throw a buck in the basket and think they’re clean. We believe there’s more to it,” he said without elaborating.

I wandered over to Tom Kienast, a carpenter from Hannover, Germany, whose bike won “Best In Show” the day before. His leather vest, bandanna-topped head and sunglasses made him look like any other American biker—until he spoke. His German accent was heavy.

Kienast is a big fan of the rock band ZZ Top and once had the band’s lead guitarist and vocalist, Billy Gibbons, sign his car windshield. He still has the windshield, but not the car, and he nicknamed himself “ZZ Tom.” He became a biker at age 16 after seeing the movie Easy Rider.

“So what’s so great about the biker lifestyle?” I asked.

“Freedom from all chains,” ZZ Tom said. “Plus, you’ve got brothers you can trust. We help each other; we cover each other’s backs.”

Jeff Sielaff, 24, a chef who had just moved from Michigan to Daytona Beach, was sporting long hair and ring-pierced ears, eyebrows and nose and wearing a black leather vest and blue jeans. He said he was attracted to the women, the loud music, the bikes and the beer of the biker subculture.



*Jeff  
Sielaff, 24,  
found Jesus  
during Bike  
Week. He is  
shown with  
the man who  
led him to  
Christ, Bud  
Spencer.  
Photo by  
Billy Bruce.*

With only the clothes he was wearing, he had arrived in Daytona in mid-February just before the start of Bike Week. He had slept inside garbage bins, eating whatever he could find. During the day, he wandered down Main Street to experience the “benefits” of Bike Week.

On March 5, Sielaff decided to walk to the mainland to see what Daytona looked like on its west side. He wound up on U.S. 1, where he spotted the First Assembly of God.

“Something in me said, Go to church. But I kept on walking,” Sielaff told me. He returned to the Bike Week festivities, and on March 8, after having spent the night in the bushes, something reminded him about the church. He now knows it was the Holy Spirit.

Sielaff returned to First Assembly and, with his pierced nose, eyebrows and all, wandered into the sanctuary past glaring stares. He sat down on the second row and began crying.

“I hadn’t been to church since I was 12. I just gave up on it. Yet here I was, crying like a baby. I didn’t even know why,” he said.

“Brother Bud,” the guitarist on the praise team, approached Sielaff before the service started and led him to Christ.

“The Lord just took my life, broke it into pieces, picked up the pieces and put them back together the way He wanted them,” Sielaff testifies today.

After discovering Sielaff was a certified chef, a family in the church who owns a restaurant in nearby New Smyrna Beach gave him a job and a place to stay. He now attends First Assembly regularly. His parents in Michigan were so enamored with their son’s turnaround that they also turned their lives over to the Lord.

Today Sielaff says: "The lifestyle is dead. I don't want nothing to do with it. Bike Week for me was just a divine appointment." Sielaff now wants to return to the 1999 Bike Week to share his testimony with others.

As Sielaff's conversion indicates, spiritual rebirth isn't just for clean-shaven, upright, voter-registered citizens. That's the message spread by Mike Duke, 49, senior pastor of the 150-member Churchman Chapel, an independent charismatic church in Louisville, Kentucky, that has been reaching bikers for 15 years.

Duke understands God's nondiscriminating love and His power to save. A former hard-core biker himself, he was a member of The Reapers gang and president of a local chapter of The Outlaws.

The members of hard-core biker-gangs usually are living out the stereotypes, committing crimes to earn their living, Duke explained. But he insists that the church can do more to reach the impossibly lost hard cores, and he cites his own life as proof.

"If I hadn't met the Lord, I would probably be doing weekends in jail or eternity in hell," he told Charisma. "Neither option looked very good."

The church can relate to bikers when they understand that God classifies us all as sinners until we come to repentance and salvation, Duke preaches.

"Paul said he was the worst of sinners. It doesn't matter if you are a straight sinner or you are a biker. Jesus is the only way to heaven—for any of us," he said.

Duke's motto for keeping his church doors open to everyone is "Whosoever will, let them come."

And that's the motto all churches in this country will need to adopt if God's people expect to reach the tough guys of

Daytona.

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Developing Compassion for the Lost

## **Risky Living Among**

### *Atlanta's Drug Lords*

By Chandler D. Owens II

When I visited some destitute families in a decaying Atlanta neighborhood, I learned why drug dealing and gang violence have become so attractive.

Let me take you to a world far removed from the tree-lined streets of America's quiet suburbs. It's a world made of asphalt and concrete, where the streets are filled with broken glass from smashed windows and spent drug vials. It's a place where police sirens provide the only lullabies and where gunfire keeps most people hiding like prisoners behind locked doors.

It's a lonely Thursday night in this southwest Atlanta neighborhood. People pass by without noticing each other but are aware that danger lurks around every corner. The flickering street lamp makes a loud electrical buzz, as if it, too, is trying to send a warning signal.

A man on the corner offers \$10 bags of marijuana to passers-by. Some refuse; some linger to talk. I enter a two-family house, climbing the rickety staircase that leads to a torn screen and a thin, battered door.

Inside, I see a large-screen TV playing scenes from a violent video game. This serves as the primary light source in a room about the size of a large kitchen. Wires from the Nintendo clutter the floor, and two worn, brown couches line the wall; their tweed-like material is sunken with use.

Seven people—six men and a woman—are laughing while two of them play the Nintendo. When I explain my mission—to gather interviews for a story on gang life—the large man sitting on the couch says he doesn't want to reveal too much.

He requests that I call him "Taz." It's not his real name, but it will do.

Taz is a former gang member and drug dealer. His eyes are dark and reflective, mirroring the lights on the TV screen. The other gang members sit motionless as he talks, and I realize that Taz carries weight in this crowd.

The other men won't give their names. The woman simply admits that she is 17 and doesn't have much time to talk since she has to be at work in two hours. She is an exotic dancer at one of the more raunchy strip clubs in Atlanta, The Blue Flame. She works there to make extra money to help support her baby while her 17-year-old husband is under house arrest.

"The appeal of the thug life is money, cars and excitement," Taz explains. The other men in the room laugh to show their approval. "It's survival of the fittest—you know what I'm saying? I'm an entrepreneur soldier. That's my motto," Taz continues.

In their bravado I sensed an uneasiness in these young men. I assured them they could speak freely and wouldn't be judged for anything they said.

They tell me that the lure of the world is strong, especially for those who are disillusioned by poverty. Illegal activities provide plenty of fast cash. Gangs provide a security structure and sense of belonging.



But this money and security come with a high price.

"I had five cars when I was 18, but I was scared to get pulled over because I ain't got no insurance, and I didn't have any papers," one young man says, noting that he bought his cars from a "chop shop"—where stolen cars are repainted, reassembled and otherwise disguised for selling.

In gang life, I am told, trust is a rare commodity. "I didn't know that if I left the room someone would steal my stash [of drugs], and then I would have to kill them over something like \$50," he continues.

Taz talked about how fleeting his money was. "There was a lot of money," he says, "but I couldn't tell anybody how I got it. I couldn't save it, either."

Young people here in southwest Atlanta have seen things that average children wouldn't understand. The young mother described how her father sold drugs from her house and how she had seen a member of her family shot to death in front of her eyes. Her father, she says, made mistakes that still haunt the family to this day.

"My father used to sell drugs from my house until one day the cops busted in and threw him in jail," she says. "He ruined everything because he took the easy way out. I was brought up around drugs. I know what they do, but this life is all I know."

Some of the men in the room said they had young children. The girl admitted that her life was harder because of her sexual choices, but she says she was following her mother's example.

"I respect my mother because she was a strong, black, single mother," the girl said.

I asked if she would like to do something else with her life. She nodded, but she had no idea what else she could do.

Gang life revolves around drugs and crafty schemes to hide from the police. "The drug game ain't easy, and if you aren't a drug dealer, don't get involved because it will kill you," Taz warns. "You gotta worry about the cops or the addicts or the other dealers. It's a question of who is gonna get you, not if you're gonna get caught."

Taz tells me no one in this game expects to live long. "So don't call this the easy way out, 'cause it ain't easy!" he says, appealing for respect.

I learned during my mission to inner-city Atlanta that there is no set profile for those involved in gangs. They don't all listen to "gangsta" rap music. The people I interviewed loved jazz, rhythm and blues and even gospel.

Some of the young

men had been brought up in church and attended Sunday school. Their parents are still involved in the church and have no idea their children are involved in anything illegal.

"My grandfather is the pastor of my church," one man says. "He doesn't know anything I'm doing. Sometimes I still go to church to play the drums."

Why, I ask, would these guys go to church—knowing they are doing things the church doesn't approve of?

"Because we don't want to go to hell," some of them say.

But I know there are other reasons. I soon learned that these drug dealers all view ministers as hustlers who use religion to get ahead.

"Why does the church need so much money? And why does the pastor drive in the best cars?" one gang member asks. "God doesn't need all that money."

Another man was honest about his doubts about God and the church, saying he thinks too many Christians are looking for a

“convenient” religion. “When something good happens, they say it’s because of God, and when something bad happens it’s because of the devil or because you did something bad,” he says with frustration.

Most people in this troubled household say they believe in God. But they aren’t ready to give their lives to Him.

“I don’t want to profess that I’m holier-than-thou and go to church—and not change the way I’m living,” one man says. “When I’m ready, I’ll change. But I’m not ready yet.”

As I prepare to leave this place, I ponder what I can do to help these people.

We can’t run from them, and we can’t just lock them up and throw away the key. They need love. They need respect. And they need the pure gospel of Jesus, free of hypocrisy, lived out in the church.

Gang members understand well that they are in a life-and-death struggle. The street-wise ministers who reach out to them with the gospel know that gang members and dealers need to be confronted with God’s love, His power to transform their lives and His challenge for them to live for a higher purpose.

“Gang members understand commitment—and what it means to die for something,” says Sonny Arguinzoni, a former heroin addict who directs a ministry to Los Angeles gangs called Victory Outreach International.

“When these people get saved, they don’t want a lukewarm gospel,” Arguinzoni says. “They want to come into a Christianity that has a purpose and a vision.”

Steve Nawojczyk, a former county coroner in Little Rock, Arkansas, who now devotes himself to educating the public about gangs, notes that “gangs are about a sense of belonging. ‘Just say no’ doesn’t work unless you give them something to say yes to.”

To youth pastor Timothy Arguinzoni at the La Puente Victory Outreach in La Puente, California, a lot of people in gangs “are really looking for something and not finding it. We find that they give the same level of commitment they gave to the gangs to the things of God,” he says. “The more hard-core they are, the more dedicated they become to God.”

For Nicky Cruz, an ex-gang leader whose street life in New York was dramatized in *The Cross and the Switchblade*, the gang scene has undergone frightening changes since his years with the violent Mau Maus. The shock first hit him a few years ago.

“In my time there were ethics—we cared,” he says. “We fought, but we also protected the neighborhood and had respect for the old people.

“Not today. They are coldhearted, cold-blooded. I saw that my country needed missionaries for the street.”

Some legislators believe the solution to gang problems in the United States is more police officers, more prisons

or longer incarceration periods for offenders. But those of us who know about life on the streets realize this is not the solution.

Until the church begins to hunger for the power of God to flood America’s inner cities, the broken glass, spent vials and distant sirens of our streets will continue to reflect the broken, spent and hurting lives found among today’s gangs and drug dealers.

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## Developing Compassion for the Lost

### Looking For Love Among Chicago's Punks

*They're tattooed, shaved and pierced so you'll notice they've created their own value system. But I found that street punks just need someone to love them.*

By Jimmy Stewart

Seth is waiting for me in the lobby of the former Chelsea House Hotel on the lower north side of Chicago. Four blocks east of here, the high rises along Lakeshore Drive stretch farther north like a grand industrial cliff braced against the shores of Lake Michigan.

It's lunchtime at the old hotel, and the scene is loud and busy inside. Known now as Friendly Towers, the mid-century brick building is home to the 500-member Jesus People USA community (JPUSA) and to 100 senior citizens. The cafeteria off the lobby is abuzz with adults and children.

Although we have never met, I know Seth when I see him.

He is 17, a slender 6 feet tall, and dressed in black, white and gray except for what looks to be a Celtic cape he carries that is purplish-blue. His hair is dyed silver and flushed with hints of purple and red.

A crescent-shaped deer bone, about 1-1/2 inches long and sharpened at each end, pierces his nose. There is a deer-bone spacer, round and hollow, about one-half inch diameter through his left ear lobe. Around his neck are two thick, black, spike-studded chokers.

Seth is a "gutter punk," a label (though he eschews them) that identifies him within the broader punk culture. Today he will be my guide into the punk underground of Chicago, into a

community of anarchists, nihilists, “squatters” and “train-hoppers”—the very people I have traveled 1,200 miles to meet.

I approach Seth and introduce myself. He knows why I’m here, but in my nervousness I remind him.

“I’d like to interview you and some of your friends for an article on the punk culture that will appear in a Christian magazine. I came up from Florida.”

“I can tell,” he replies, as if not sure what to make of this guy dressed so suburban in a flannel shirt, jeans and Doc Marten boots. But he listens attentively as I ask for his help, then suggests I try talking with his homeless punk friends in south Chicago.

“It’s 25 miles or so,” he says, “and I can’t guarantee that they will want to talk with you, but I’ll take you to them—if I can find them.”

Secretly, I stuff my concern about searching through unfamiliar neighborhoods south of the huge city.

“It’s worth a try,” I answer optimistically.

As we drive, Seth explains that gutter punks, who make up only one part of the international punk scene, are nihilists who believe in anarchy—violent or nonviolent—as a solution for social ills and that many of them are young. I find him to be friendly and circumspect with a social conscience beyond his years.

All over America, he tells me, gutter punks live in abandoned buildings they call “squats.” They change their names, and they live homeless by choice.

They panhandle for cash and seek food in trash bins when necessary. They risk injury or death to hop trains to points nationwide, ducking the “bulls”—the rail-yard police—who could beat them, rape them or even murder them.

Rejected and bullied by society, these gutter punks have become an alternative society unto themselves. Later tonight, I will inwardly groan for my alien friends with a conviction that the punk generation is lost to the church at large—but still within reach of God's great love.

Gutter punks, in addition to "cow punks" (who live in rural areas) or "house punks" (who own or rent their homes) believe staunchly in doing away with social systems that have failed. In his book *Please Kill Me*, punk writer Legs McNeil captured the embryonic soul of punk in the early 1970s:

"Compared to what was going on in the real world, decadence seemed kind of quaint. Punk was about the apocalypse. Punk was about annihilation. Nothing that's how we behaved."

I will hear that echoed today.

When we arrive at the squat some 40 minutes later, I wait in the car while Seth goes inside to speak for me. He emerges with two friends, Hobie and John.

I am privileged that they have invited me into their company, and I thank them. We all get comfortable on rough wooden benches in the front yard.

"What does it mean to be a punk?" I ask. Hobie sits on the bench with his knees under his chin, wearing a stocking hat and an army-green jacket.

"Punk is about being who you are. It's living life like you wanna live," he says. "It's rebellion as a way of life."

Hobie is 25 and originally from Oklahoma, but he has lived in Chicago off and on for four years. His father was a bounty hunter for a while and an alcoholic. His dad—and later his stepdad—beat his mother regularly.

"I grew up in a Baptist home, and my mom is very religious," he says. "She tells me she's praying for me, and she sends me

‘Jesus loves you’ stuff sometimes.”

My heart leaps. Have I been sent too to remind to him that Jesus loves him? I ask him what he thinks about Christians.

“There’s too much judging,” he says. “Too many churches ask for money. Isn’t Christianity supposed to be about forgiveness?”

Nearby, John is gently sucker-punching his happy Rottweiler puppy named Give It To Me—who keeps coming back for more. “We refuse to be a part of the country,” John says about being a gutter punk. “The truth is so far gone in America. Hell is right here.”

Originally from Aurora, Illinois, John is 28 now and has been on the road since he was 16, mostly playing with bands. Since 1988, he has played in a band with Hobie called PEN, which stands for Peace and Equality Through Nihilism.

John never read a Bible growing up. “My parents didn’t teach it,” he says. “My parents were religious, but they still got burned by Reaganomics. I have a hard time believing in God because of what happened to them.”

I ask John about the two tattoos on his face. They are identical black outlines of pistols. The grips start on his chin, and the barrels end near his Adam’s apple.

“Do they symbolize your belief in anarchy?”

“Nah, I did that because I love Willie Nelson’s Red Headed Stranger album! It was a great album!” he exclaims. Laughter goes around, and from somewhere a half-gallon bottle of whiskey comes out, and two of the guys sip from it.

“The media wants you to believe punk is nothing more than rebellion by kids against their parents and a fashion scene,” Seth says. “That’s an absurd misconception.”



From inside the house where she has been drying clothes, Khris appears. She laughs at the sight of her dog, Susio, sprinting circles in the yard, and I ask her about God.

"My dad gave me my religious upbringing. He was like an archaeologist," she says with a friendly smile. "He studied ancient Egyptian gods and taught me what the Egyptians said about the origins of life."

Like John and Hobie, Khris is a squatter here. "Squatting" to the gutter punk means using a building as a temporary shelter. The squatters' universal symbol—a horizontal Z, tipped by an arrowhead that cuts through a circle with the words "Squatters Rights Are Human Rights" on the circumference—is "painted on sidewalks

or on buildings," Khris explains. "It's like a tag to let you know the neighborhood is safe for punks."

At 21, Khris has been a fearless train-hopper for five years. Train-hopping is primarily how gutter punks travel.

"It's fun to hop," Khris says, "but it's risky. I've known about people who fell under the train and didn't make it."

"Yeah, it's dangerous," John agrees, "because the bulls can throw you under the cars—and who knows or cares?"

"Traveling or not, how do you pay for things like food?" I ask.

"I haven't held a job since 1991," John says. "Mostly, we panhandle—just ask people on the street for money."

Sometimes they get food from trash bins. They say "lots of food" is thrown out at the nearby McDonald's.

"The corporate food chain won't give food away, but they'll throw it away," Seth says with conviction.

"The Salvation Army and soup kitchens have fed us or given us clothes," Khris says. None of them, however, could recall any churches ever offering them help—no food lines, no secondhand clothing, nothing practical to meet their day-to-day needs.

Seth tells me he has lived in Chicago with his parents for all but two of his 17 years and that he was born and raised in JPUSA. He does not profess to be a Christian. He respects JPUSA and his Christian friends there, but he steers clear of churches.

"Christians have ignored me, stared at me and told others that I was a satanist, which I'm not. It's not my job to judge anybody, but you don't need to be around people who put you down," he says.

More than "put down," gutter punks are bullied, too, I learn.

"I have been beaten by five cops at one time," John continues. "Held down and kicked between the legs—stun-gunned between the legs."

"I try to avoid confrontations," Hobie says, "but I'm a gutter punk who lives on the street. I have to fight back or get beat by those who hate me for what I am."

The light wanes in the late afternoon, and we say our goodbyes. I thank them for sharing their lives in print and reassure them there are Christians who care about them and will pray for them.

They invite me to meet them late tonight in a north-side punk district at a Dunkin' Donuts, or "Punk 'n' Donuts," as they call it. I promise to be there.

I keep my promise, but I never see them again.

In downtown Chicago, elevated trains lumber and clack, and the marauding taxis are still at work, though it's well after midnight.

John told me this afternoon: "If I could die today to start the revolution, I would—just to get it going."

From my hotel window on the 19th floor, I stand looking south past warehouse walls, factory stacks and rail yards to where I left my friends seven hours ago, and I pray quietly for them.

Jesus, You did die—for John, Khris, Seth, Hobie and every other gutter punk. You hurt for them every time they dig in trash for food or are beaten in a dark place by hateful people. Handpick and send those You can trust to take Your love to the punks.

I sense a holy burden as I step from the window and draw the drapes. Jesus wants to start His revolution among these revolutionaries. And I understand now why I came to write about them—because He was already here.

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**Jimmy Stewart** is the managing editor of Charisma. A local punk community is based near his home in south Orlando.

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Developing Compassion for the Lost

## **Inside San Francisco's Gay Underworld**

*Would Jesus hang out with homosexuals in San Francisco?  
When I visited the city recently, the Holy Spirit went with me  
into several gay bars.*

By J. Lee Grady

What would Jesus do and say if He ventured into San Francisco's gay district? I asked myself that question as I parked my car a block from Polk Street. I looked nervously to the back seat where

my friend Scott—a pastor from the Sacramento area—was praying

under his breath. His brother-in-law Mike, who had volunteered to accompany us on this mission, prayed aloud as we pooled coins for the parking meter.

“Lord, You love these people,” Mike said. “Show us who You want us to talk to.”

We had come to San Francisco to learn, not to judge. We wanted God to melt our prejudices and give us compassion for the men who walked these streets.

So there we were, three men in our 30s, strolling through the infamous Polk district where male prostitution is the primary business and where a lingering glance is an understood sexual invitation. We quickly learned that people in this part of town communicate silently, with lots of body language.

Sex was in the air. It hovered over the city like smog; it throbbed with a pulsating disco beat inside dimly lit bars; it quietly beckoned from dozens of curbside newspaper stands, each offering free gay tabloids full of X-rated personal ads.

Along a stretch of gray buildings we spotted nine young men wearing jeans and white T-shirts. They stayed about 100 feet apart, pacing back and forth on the sidewalk while smoking cigarettes. They weren't wearing price tags, but it was obvious they were selling themselves.

We learned a lot about Polk Street from Daniel, an 18-year-old hustler who seemed intrigued that we actually wanted to talk with him rather than use him for sex. When he learned we were Christians, he informed us that he was “a textbook lost soul” who serviced as many as five men per night.

About 20 young prostitutes work the area, Daniel told us as we sat together in a neighborhood coffee shop. Most of their clients are older men who either prefer to pay for sex or can't find willing partners in the more fashionable Castro district. Polk Street's hustlers make from \$80 to \$100 an

hour, but Daniel says he wouldn't wish his lifestyle on anyone.

"I tell every kid I see, 'Get out of here,'" he said. "This place is the hellhole of the western United States."

Daniel talked about his loneliness and about how four of his buddies had died of drug overdoses since he arrived here four years ago. He fidgeted with a napkin as he told us how his adoptive father—a professing Christian in Oregon—had abused him when he was only seven years old. Anger turned his face red when he described how off-duty police officers, priests and businessmen have taken him to nice hotels and then treated him like a piece of meat.

"These guys tell me they love me, but it only boils down to one thing—my body," Daniel explained. "Once they're through with me it's over."

We were relieved to learn that some women from a Youth With a Mission outreach nearby had befriended Daniel. After Scott and I pleaded with him to check into a Christian rehab center, we laid our hands on his shoulder and prayed as he stared at the floor. His eyes moistened when we told him that God doesn't abuse His sons.

When we looked up we realized Mike had brought someone else into the coffee shop. Her name was Stephanie, but she was, in fact, a man who was in the process of having a complete sex-change operation. Stephanie had already paid \$2,300 for silicone breast-implants; now he was saving money for the most complicated procedure, which would cost at least \$10,000.

Stephanie displayed a hollow sadness I'd never seen on any human face. It was as if some invisible California vampire had sucked his life from him.

His long, coarse hair was bleached blond, and he wore thick blue eye shadow and lipstick the color of dried blood. But the

cosmetics were a poor mask; the hormone pills he'd been taking for years couldn't soften his square jaw or shrink his thick hands, which were decorated with long purple nails. He was only 38, but he looked like a woman of 50.

"I feel kind of lost sometimes," Stephanie admitted after I bought him some coffee.

Raised in a trailer park near Pittsburgh, Stephanie attended a Baptist church as a teen-ager and then entered the Navy. He decided to get the sex change after a brief marriage to a Filipino woman. After years on San Francisco's streets, his income as a transgender prostitute has declined so much that he now survives on a disability check.

Because so many of his "best girlfriends" have died of AIDS, Stephanie's fears about the future have driven him to attempt suicide more than once.

We saw the skin grafts on his arm, evidence of an infection he contracted after he slit his wrist. He admitted that he once tried to castrate himself but stopped halfway.

He never smiled or frowned; his emotions were buried under layers of scars. It didn't even seem to bother him when he described how his parents disowned him after the sex change: "My stepmother told me, 'If you ever commit suicide, don't leave a note to us because we don't want anyone to know we're related to you.'"

Scott urged Stephanie to visit a nearby church, yet I wondered if the Christians there would reject him, too. We need a miracle, Lord, I said to myself. Then Mike pulled a vial from his pocket and poured some anointing oil on Stephanie's head.

As we prayed, I struggled with whether to call Stephanie "him" or "her." But finally I realized that God isn't concerned about pronouns when a life is teetering on the edge of eternity. "We know You love Stephanie, Jesus," Mike said. "Heal this body and show Stephanie how much You want to help."

After we made sure Stephanie had some groceries to take home, we returned to our car and drove to Castro, the bustling hub of San Francisco's gay community. No one there needs a handout; most men in Castro are executives or computer programmers who pay as much as \$1,200 for a one-bedroom apartment.

They shop at gay-owned businesses and read gay-owned newspapers; in the evening they stroll arm-in-arm with each other along the sidewalks, gazing inside bars with names like The Pendulum, The Midnight Sun and Moby Dick.

Unlike on Polk Street, sex here is free. The men in Castro are mostly young professionals who find partners by reading newspaper ads or exchanging pickup lines over a beer.

They hang out in gay bookstores or theaters or enroll at a gay institute that offers more than 70 sex-related courses each semester. They congregate according to their particular sexual preferences: with those who like to dress in leather bondage-outfits, for example, or with those who prefer Asian or Hispanic men.

Castro was once an Irish-Catholic neighborhood; today it is the vortex of American homosexual decadence. As we walked slowly past the bars, looking for an opportunity to share the gospel, we realized we were invading the stronghold of the gay rights movement. Silently we claimed the ground for God.

I approached three men who were chatting at a sidewalk cafe and asked if I could interview them about life in Castro. When I told them I worked for Charisma, two of the men, both white, hurriedly excused themselves, leaving me with Thomas, a 35-year-old African American photographer who was eager to talk.

"You need to understand why they didn't want to stay," Thomas said. "One of those guys used to be a Catholic priest. He doesn't like to talk about religious things."

Thomas, on the other hand, wasn't ashamed to talk about his religious upbringing (he was raised as a Baptist in Indiana) or to discuss his feelings about God ("It never entered my mind that I would go to hell because I'm gay.") or to admit that his current lover was once a Dominican priest.

"Everybody makes up their own rules here," Thomas informed us.

That was obvious as we observed two men engaging in open-mouth kissing while seated inside the cafe. I wondered how many of the middle-aged men here had left wives and children to pursue this lifestyle.

I wondered if they felt guilty at night after the sexual flings had ended.

Thomas, who insisted that he "isn't hurting anybody," certainly didn't register any guilt. When I raised the question of AIDS, he laughed and said everyone in Castro was careful to practice safe sex. And, he said, more gay men today are in monogamous relationships. "But we define monogamy in different ways," he added.

I had expected that these men would be hostile toward the gospel, but that wasn't the case. Many of them, like Thomas, believe God exists. What they don't accept is the idea that God opposes homosexuality.

"Jesus isn't that concerned about whether I'm gay," Thomas declared flippantly.

I knew Jesus was concerned about the state of Thomas' soul, but it was almost midnight, and I didn't know what else to say. As we left his table I breathed a silent prayer: Lord, show Thomas that he needs to repent.

We made our way to another bar called Reflections, where Jim, a 33-year-old bartender, greeted us at the door and immediately figured out that we weren't there to find dates. He ushered us



inside, offered us a drink and promised to guard us from the sexual advances of his clients—one of whom was already whispering lewd comments to Scott.

We ignored the distraction and focused our attention on Jim. An athletic guy who had been a wrestler in high school, he seemed out of place in this environment.

He explained to us that after two failed marriages in North Carolina he landed a job in San Francisco as a stripper. Later he took the bar job because he could make \$56,000 a year working four nights a week.

It wasn't typical for three straight guys to be hanging out at Reflections, and this made Jim almost apologetic about the perversion we saw there. By his own admission, San Francisco is "a make-it-or-break-it city" that can be awfully depressing no matter how much money you make.

"I don't read the obituaries anymore," he admitted. "I've lost 15 friends to AIDS this year. Two of the guys in here right now won't make it until next Christmas."

We told Jim that Jesus loves him, and there was a spark of hope in his eyes—as if he'd never realized that he could have a life anywhere else. I wanted to

grab him by the arm and drag him out of the place, but Reflections didn't close for another two hours.

As we got up to leave, I found myself wanting to drag everyone out of Castro and Polk. All the men we met there seemed trapped, as if some strange magnetic force was forbidding them from escaping the lies and the lust that make the gay lifestyle attractive.

Our mission was accomplished. I knew my next assignment was to pray—and perhaps weep—for four men who would probably never have heard about Jesus' love if we hadn't entered this

forbidden zone. As we drove out of the city, I determined that I wouldn't let Daniel, Stephanie, Thomas or Jim run from God's mercy without a fight.

I'm still praying for them today.

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**J. Lee Grady** is the former editor of Charisma. He conducted his interviews in San Francisco with Scott Hagan, former pastor of Harvest Church in Elk Grove, California, and Mike Tate, who moved to Miami to launch an urban ministry with evangelist Rich Wilkerson not long after this article was published.