Biker faith: Pentecostals on motorcycles

by Tex Sample in the March 7, 2001 issue

Riders for God: The Story of a Christian Motorcycle Gang by Rich Remsberg

Our oldest son went cold turkey in an inner-city detox center. He had been an alcoholic and an abuser of other drugs for 14 years. After he had gone through some ten days of delirium tremens and withdrawal, the executive of the center, a charismatic and a recovering alcoholic, told him, “You’ve got to find a new playpen and a new set of playmates or you can’t stay sober.”

When Steve, a motorcycle expert who loved to ride, asked, “Yeah, and where would someone like me find such people?” she introduced him to an Alcoholics Anonymous motorcycle gang that had a genuine commitment to spiritual practices. With their support and counsel Steve never used alcohol or any other drug—except for the caffeine in lots of coffee—again. When he was killed in an accident seven months later, he died with a clear bloodstream. Though his life was cut short at age 29, he had obtained sobriety and radically changed his life. I will never forget the influence the Visions Motorcycle Club had on Steve or all they did for him, and later for us at his funeral and in its aftermath.

I brought this history to my reading of Rich Remsberg’s book on the Unchained Gang, a Christian motorcycle club. I love this book. The best parts are the transcribed interviews, which make up most of the text, and Remsberg’s sensitive photographs. In the transcriptions we meet Pastor Larry, Shalom, Chico, Nancy, Randy, Mary, Paul, Sparky, Gabby and Harley, all members of the Ellettsville House of Prayer, a Pentecostal congregation made up of Christian bikers and others near Bloomington, Indiana.

Wittgenstein says that people are not a riddle to be solved but a mystery to be astonished at. I can think of no better approach to this book. The worst mistake readers could make would be to dismiss the pious language of these people as slang bromides rather than see them as the reflection of serious practices.

Riders for God makes clear the sharp lines dividing the world of hard-core bikers, known in the biker universe as the “one-percent world,” from Christian groups like the Unchained Gang. The former is a world of anger, violence, intimidating resistance to conventional society, drug use, a desperate search to belong and the virtual enslavement of women—physically, psychologically, sexually and economically. The Christian world of the Unchained Gang, though not without its own problems—such as persistent sexism—constitutes a leaving of “the old ways.” It involves “walking the talk” (faithful living) and “talking the walk” (witnessing).

The faith of the Christian bikers is deeply felt. These men and women speak often of their lives before they found Jesus. They report their loss of feeling through extensive drug use, their profound sense of alienation, their rejection by the wider culture even before their biker days, and their radical resistance to convention. Feelings are a big issue. Shalom says that when she was in the biker world she had “an iron plate in my chest.” Paul had things “locked up down there.” Chico talks of his “hardened heart,” of the “shell that was around my heart” that kept him from ever crying. “And now . . . it’s like the Lord, he just squeezes on that heart, and when he does, then the tears.”

To begin to feel again; to experience tears; to acknowledge—even to display—vulnerability; to dissolve anger into an acknowledgment of the hurt and alienation of one’s life; to be able, in the case of the women, to redefine oneself as a competent and strong person, equal to all in Christ; and, in the case of the men, to express affection to other males and acknowledge own one’s vulnerability: all these are part of what it means to be in Jesus. Chico says: “I have never felt this good about anything or myself as I do now.”

For these Christian bikers, faith has come at a high price, but it has radically changed their lives. They testify to the ways God began working with them long before they knew it. God brought them through wrecks, violent episodes, abusive relationships, broken families and households and long-term and highly destructive drug use. They now live their lives in Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. Theirs is not a knowing about God, but a knowing *of* God. It is a faith of the heart. Mary calls it “a personal relation with God” versus “religion.” It is her “shield in the Spirit.” Paul describes it as a faith that is “walked, lived.”

The Christian bikers’ language, which might be dismissed as hackneyed, must be seen in the context of their lives and practices. When Paul says that “without faith

nothing works” and that “the Lord has been teaching me trust,” or when Mary, Nancy and Pastor Larry talk of the change in their desires, or when they testify to how they overcame the craving for alcohol and other drugs, or when Shalom tells of living “the old lifestyle” because “we didn’t know how to live the other one,” these are testimonies of people who have known a world where life is hard and vicious—even when “self-chosen.” They know what it means to have been lost—and to have been found. Their conviction that God actually does have a plan for their lives and that God will give them the strength and the energy to live it is based on hard experience.

The Christian bikers’ spiritual lives cannot be reduced only to believing and feeling, however. The Unchained Gang is clearly a practice-based community. Worship, prayer, witnessing, Bible reading, altar calls, healing, prison ministry and especially ministry to those still in the one-percent biker world are only a part of a wider ministry of practice. They anoint bikes. Mary maintains that she does ministry through her bike, that “from the time she put the fish and the dove on the back of that trunk it has just started to attract people. I can take it anywhere and it finds me somebody to minister to.” She also speaks in tongues and sings as she rides the bike. “It’s wonderful, it’s just awesome.”

The Unchained Gang members know they are not perfect and are in deep need of God’s ongoing work in their lives. The group practices “correction,” as in the case of Shalom who had a relationship with Gabby (not yet a member of the gang) while she was still married to another man. They took away her patch—a symbol of membership—for a time and kept her on a kind of probation. She later admitted that she “was wrong in what I was doing.” She acknowledges that the church was “exactly biblical” in its action. But she adds that she did not appreciate the gossip and the falsehoods that circulated about her, and she did question whether the group would have done to a man what they did to her.

Sexism is an ongoing problem with the gang, according to Nancy and Shalom, though they believe there is a lot less of it in the gang than in the one-percent biker world. Still it is there. Some men use the ministry of the Unchained Gang to “shirk responsibility” to their wives and children. A double standard still holds. For example, men go to minister at meetings of the one-percent biker world, but the club does not allow women to attend those meetings. One member of the Unchained Gang was especially manipulative of women, but still “glued himself to the club” and “got a patch.” His later ejection from the gang for his treatment of women came

much too slowly for Shalom and Nancy. Their critique of sexism sparkles with a concrete wisdom. Nancy: “What I need is a wife.” Or Shalom: “Men are wimpy when it comes to dealing with other men.”

An interesting conversation occurs between Nancy and Shalom about the biblical teaching that the man is the head of the family. They are quite clear that this does not mean that the husband is the boss. They understand it, rather, to mean that the husband is responsible for the household. They both believe that the Bible is their rule book, but they emphasize that “the Bible says that the man should love his wife like his church.” Both indicate that if a decision had to be made that a husband and wife couldn’t work out, then the husband would make the final decision. But both state that this has never happened in their marriages, that they just “don’t go there.” Not only that, they “can’t see it really happening.”

Such views are radically different from those of the one-percent world. There, in situations of imminent violence, such as when one gang may be at war with another, shootings do occur. In such cases a different relationship between the men and women takes hold. “If you stand to question him, you could probably have a bullet through you [*sic*] head before the question’s over,” says Shalom. “So that’s not a real iffy, debatable kind of thing. That’s the way it is out there in the one-percent world. It was then, and it is today. There are wars going on. They are very serious—people are getting killed. Clubs are being taken over.” Nancy adds: “And the men are usually informed, because they have their little meetings that the women don’t get to go to. So that’s why you learn to do whatever he says. If I were at that meeting, I wouldn’t need him to tell me what to do.” I like Nancy’s comment, but I cannot help wondering how many times violence—both in and outside of the biker world—is a means for oppressing women.

Remsberg’s use of transcription is exactly right. Merely summarizing or analyzing the bikers’ words would be far less effective.

But the book does have its failings. A serious one is the very limited attention it gives to what these Christian bikers do for a living. The world of work is too central to people’s lives to be given such short shrift. Remsberg candidly tells us that he is not a believer, and for the most part he stays away from judgments about the gang’s religious commitments. The most glaring exception to this occurs in his postscript, where he writes, “Christian bikers, for all of their controversial beliefs, dramatic worship, and uncommon aesthetics, are searching for fulfillment of the

most basic human needs: love, structure, and spirituality, the same as anyone else. These are things that give meaning to a life.”

Here Remsberg wrenches the bikers out of the rich particularity of their lives and plops them down in a generalized pop Enlightenment framework. I wonder how, after living with these women and men for two years, he could come to such a gutted understanding of their lives.

The transcriptions themselves reveal people who claim Jesus as their Savior who redeems them from Satan and the sin of the world they know. Jesus is also their Lord who is now reshaping and transforming their lives, protecting them from the continual temptations of Satan and his grip on the world and providing them with the strength and power to walk with the Holy Spirit. These are people who have lived violent lives and now see themselves as “warriors” for Christ. They have given up their former violence in order to engage in “spiritual warfare.” To reduce the rich particularity of their lives to the bland categories of fulfillment, love, structure and spirituality is a violation and distortion.

I would not make so much of this if it weren’t an example of how the church so often deals with class divisions—inappropriately applying middle-class language and practices to working-class people. By conveying the rich faith language of the biker Christians, Remsberg shows us we have much to learn.