

Recovering Christianity

by
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Introduction

Here lately we've had a lot of time to ponder. We've reexamined the way we shop, how we watch TV, what we value most in life, our personal quirks and wrinkles. Best guess is that we've also gone a couple of rounds with how we feel about our God-walk. Is everything “they” told us about God and what he's looking for in us true?

What about our document, the bible? It's a collection of writings by various authors that took thousands of years to assemble. A committee met to decide which writings were in and which were out. It's old. It's completely male dominated; authors and committee alike. Up until a few decades ago, it was preached from the pulpit and taught in the classroom almost exclusively by men. Is it scientifically accurate? Should we expect it to be? What does it mean to say it is “authoritative?” What do we do with its inconsistencies and contradictions?

Prayer? Is it a rule or a responsibility? Does it work like magic if we get it just right? Can we actually get God to do what we want him to; maybe even change his mind? Does it “work” best if the one praying is well-behaved? Is there a right and wrong way to pray: posture, words, time of day? Are there certain emotions that should accompany our prayers?

What about organized/corporate religion that involves everything from baptism to grave-side services. Baptists have strong feelings and traditions about both. But so do Methodists, Catholics, and Pentecostals. Music and worship, are these a matter of taste or does it go deeper? Structure/hierarchy? Traditions? Doctrinal distinctives? Etiquette and protocol? If you grew up in a church, you have your own story on all of this. Is all this personal preference or unhealthy disunity?

During the past few decades there has been a steady exodus from organized religion. In our most honest moments, those of us who have stayed admit that our pile of questions and misgivings is growing. We may not be leaving, but that doesn't mean we're not searching for deeper more authentic reasons to stay.

This series of sessions is structured around two distinctively different approaches to the whole God/human setup: religious Christianity vs relational Christianity. Our flow will be a move away from religion and toward relationship. But as we move along, let's be careful to avoid two things:

- 1 We are NOT designing an alternative, upgraded religion. And we're not trying

to renovate or revive an old version. Religion has historically been man's attempt to improve himself so as to gain God's favor. These sessions are written with the assumption that God already favors us. So our God-walk becomes us exploring the possibilities this presents.

2 We don't want to throw out the baby with the bath water. Jesus is not the same as religion. So, let's keep him. Love is not religion. Let's keep that too. There is depth and richness in the story of scripture. Granted, it's antique. We should question it and view it in its context. But let's never disrespect its story.

There will be variance of viewpoints as we move along through these sessions. Everybody has an opinion, flavored by their own story. Going into this, we have two choices. We either fight anything that challenges our version of truth, or we explore the possibilities of a broader truth and a deeper grace.

After nine weeks in this workbook, we may still have questions and residual ambivalence. But at least we'll know we're not alone. You and this group are among a growing number of people who are taking the risk to explore, to ask questions, to hear alternatives. This is a good thing.

Religious Christianity

(session one)

It is not infrequent to hear people say they are recovering from religious abuse. One's first reaction might be, "How can these two words even show up in the same phrase?" Abuse in the name of Jesus? You can't find a single incident when Jesus harmed anyone. That's why you'll never hear the term Jesus-abuse.

But, think about it. Religion has fought wars, supported slavery, burned witches, hung heretics and persecuted the unwanted. Given this longstanding history, we're not so shocked when someone cries out in pain due to religious abuse.

Religious Christianity is essentially about control. It doesn't openly say it, but the body language is all about controlling God; getting him to rubber-stamp the life we've come to prefer? We want him to like us, to favor us, to keep us safe and happy, to fulfill our grocery list. Forgiveness on demand. Blessings when I live according to the manual.

This isn't just about God. I use religion to control the person in front of me. God is on my side. I'm the one with the solutions. I know how to behave and what to believe. I bring God to you, not the other way around. I speak for him and have chapter and verse to back me up. The sun sets with me justifying my shortcomings, while indicting yours. I'm in control.

When I pray it is basically me telling God how to do his job, in detail. And if I want premium response from him, I ramp up my praying to new levels of intensity, investment and precision. Disingenuous, but it makes me feel like I'm calling the shots.

The bible is the operator's manual from which I design this controlled life; what I expect from God, how I behave, how I treat others. Due to its sheer volume, I can always find scattered verses to support whatever direction I want to go.

I typically develop my religious beliefs and expectations during my childhood as they are passed down from my seniors. There's usually a church involved wherein I'm taught which parts of scripture should be stressed and which get winked at. Favored passages become group rallying points.

All of this becomes abusive because it's cross-grained with reality. The bible will never consistently work well as a manual for formulaic or perfect living. And this

religious approach to prayer can't work, because God will never succumb to the leash. To force-fit the lie that one can control that which cannot be controlled creates the perfect storm for abusive behavior: confusion, disappointment, failure, fear, shame, frustration, anger and rage. Religious abuse, it's real.

Things to consider:

- 1 Talk about a person from your past with a loud religiously-toxic voice.

- 2 What is the most impossible demand unhealthy religion has made to you?

Relational Christianity

(session two)

If Religious Christianity is about control, Relational Christianity is about trust. I trust God is who he says he is: always good, present and loving toward us. I also trust that, for the most, part people are doing the best they can, including myself.

Prayer becomes me inviting God into my day. No more trying to manipulate him or twist his arm. No more performing to impress him. No more working to earn his good graces. Prayer becomes talking with him about whatever comes up. You don't do life for him as much as you do life with him.

The bible becomes the grandest story of the ages, of a God whose love and pursuit are relentless. Instead of grocery shopping for tidbits that enhance our position, we view the story from a distance and catch the hugeness and beauty of it. In time, we start finding our own God-story in the ancient accounts.

God is not a part of my life. He is my life. God is not a concept. He is my heartbeat. I don't add God to my agenda. He is the agenda.

Religious Christianity tells you who you are supposed to be to catch God's eye. Relational Christianity tells you who you already are in God's eyes; the focal point of his adoration and goodwill. He has wild unimaginable dreams for you. As you explore and live into those dreams, it takes you to places you never imagined ... personally and relationally.

Religious Christianity talks about creating and presenting to God the squeaky clean version of yourself: what you wear, how you act, what to say and don't say, where you go and don't go, with whom you associate and who to avoid. Relational Christianity says there is no preferred version to present to God. It's about returning to the garden where you walked with him naked and unashamed. God is not put off by your scars or blemishes. He actually has some of his own.

Martin Luther (dominant theology of our day) taught that the crucifixion is about being covered with the blood of Christ, so God can't see us. Essentially, the God of truth lies to himself. He's so put off by our true nature, he has to shield his eyes with blood. Really?

When God showed up, he was a naked baby. At his execution, he was stripped down and raised up for all to see. And when Jesus showed up post resurrection to his disciples, he made sure they saw his scars. God sets the tone. If this relationship is going to work, all parties show up minus fig leaves.

This explains the magic of relational Christianity. We all show up “naked and unashamed”. We feel the love and acceptance of each other, and in the process realize God feels the same. No pretense needed. We start with honesty and discover love. And once love starts its magic, there is no end to the possibilities.

Things to consider:

- 1 How do you feel about being “naked and unashamed” before God?
- 2 What's the difference between God as part of your life and God as your life?
- 3 How does God feel about you? (your honest response versus what you've been told by others)

What about the document?

(session three)

Religious Christianity uses the bible as a policy and procedure manual. If you want to stay in good standing with your church, don't make a move until you've heard their scriptural take on your decision.

Religion gives you an easy out if you want to judge or control someone. No need to reveal true motives. Just point to a verse that diminishes or forces them to where you want them. Don't search your heart. Check the manual.

What does Relational Christianity say about this? Let's get honest, words never fully capture or describe reality, especially when it comes to divine reality. The bible hints at the Trinity, but never explains it. We witness the incarnation (God made flesh in Jesus), but how divinity and humanity interact and impact each other in him remain a mystery. Religious people can't live with this, so they dumb down scripture to fit their understanding with cliches and simple math.

And what about trying to live a reasonably good life on this planet? It's not fair to expect the bible to answer every question that comes along. What the bible tells us about God and life is truth, but it doesn't include all truth. It doesn't teach how to train a mule or repair a lawnmower. It doesn't articulate how to raise an autistic child or process the diagnosis of cancer or reach a troubled teenager. The bible will never answer all our questions and we should stop expecting it to.

But there is rich and essential truth in scripture. We know God is good. We know God will always love us. We know God will always pursue us. We know we start to die every time we turn our face from God (our source of life). We know that short of violating our free will, God will do what it takes to keep us from turning away. We know God is greater than our attempts to comprehend him. We know God is not put off or confounded by our flawed humanity.

Face it, the bible is a long, old, fragmented document written to a different people in an ancient time. How can we moderns approach it in a beneficial way?

1 The story of the bible is best understood from a distance. The ancient cultural details can shed some light when examined under the microscope. But few have the education for that kind of study. So read a large chunk and read it quickly. Wait two days and read it again ... then repeat. Catch the widespread flavor and ambiance and the little stuff starts to make sense.

2 The bible is best understood with help from an open-minded NON-legalistic mentor. Find a truth seeker, not a truth defender. Are they willing to ask the hard questions. Do they want to discover truth or win an argument?

3 Decide up front that no question is illegal. Curiosity is a good thing. To the best of your ability, rid yourself of presuppositions. Take nothing for granted, almost like you're back in spiritual first grade.

This is about catching God being God and humans being human. This isn't about establishing a new set of rules or a new strategy for doing religion better. We're discovering (recovering) relational Christianity. Every time I find myself and God in the story, I get a better idea how this relationship works.

Things to consider:

1 To you, what is THE most important truth in the bible? Why?

2 Describe your bible study technique. Are you open to alternative approaches?

3 In your opinion, is truth something to defend, something to explore or some other option?

How do I connect with God?

(session four)

Religious Christianity has even figured out how to make prayer abusive. According to them, if you're going to connect with God, it is up to you. Since he's put off by your imperfections, make sure you bring your best performance before his holy throne; the obviously humble, repentant, sincere version of yourself. Never the actual version.

Religion's prayer is a discipline, an "ought-should." Work at it, refine it, carefully choose words and craft sentences. It's best to get out of bed extra early or stay up extra late to do your praying. Inconveniencing yourself goes a long way in getting God's attention and approval. Kneeling, especially on arthritic knees, garners even more points. Oh, it's always good to pray louder and longer.

In the relational story, God is the one trying to connect with you. Check his track record. Eden is not a place we designed to be with God. It's a place he created so he could walk with us. Jesus was God coming to us ... extreme connection! Pentecost was God's Spirit given to us 24/7. God has always been the conversation starter: Adam, Eve, Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, the disciples, Paul etc. Religion is man's pursuit of God. Relational Christianity is God's pursuit of us.

Religion says it believes in the power of prayer, which keeps us focused on process and expectation. The power is not in the process. The power is the person on the other end of the conversation.

When Jesus' disciples got curious about the way he prayed, they started asking questions. He shared this:

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed by thy name. (OR) Dad, there's nobody like you. Conversations with God should be ridiculously impossible. How can insignificant, flawed me talk with an enormous and perfect Creator? Well, he happens to be my Dad.

Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. (OR) We want the life you've envisioned for us. Jesus offered us peace, joy, love and freedom. Part of the conversation declares we run wide open with his dreams for us.

Give us this day our daily bread. (OR) Give us life in this moment. This is not

about using God as a cosmic vending machine. This is our ready acceptance that we are powerless to produce or maintain life on our own ... even for a day. Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. (OR) Heal the wounds we inflict on each other. Relational Christianity doesn't white-wash sin. It graces it instead of judging it. Grace; receive it and give it, always.

And lead us not into temptation. Deliver us from evil. (OR) Keep us where the light is. Temptation always goes to accentuating who we are and diminishing who God is. It happened in Eden's garden and Jesus' desert. This needs to be verbalized: we are good with who we are - we are good with who God is.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen. (OR) God, this is all about you. We are part of something greater than ourselves. It doesn't matter what mood we're in, what others think about us, where we are on the food chain or when we took our last drink. We are part of what God is doing. It's his kingdom, his power and his glory forever. And we're invited to the party.

Things to consider:

1 When do you feel most connected (intimate) with God?

2 What typically hinders, threatens or disrupts your connection with God?

3 Is there a "right" and "wrong" way to pray?

A New View of Grace

(session five)

Some of us don't like grace. It provides no handles out of which to fashion a weapon. To grace someone means we relinquish our right to revenge, nag, correct, or set things right. We completely surrender every fragment of control.

Grace means we no longer judicially check the manual and issue a citation. It means we listen to someone's story and then search our heart. Thank God he's not a manual checker. We'd all be toast. With every mess-up God knows our story, and out of his heart chooses grace.

If grace is to be grace, it has to be wild and reckless. It can't be calculated, budgeted or fairly divided. It has to apply to everybody, all the time. If it's not without measure, it's not grace. As soon as we start giving it based on what is deserved, it becomes a business transaction.

Grace doesn't work for me. It works in and through me. For centuries religion has overemphasized the forgiveness aspect of grace, which has done great damage. I mess up. I feel really bad inside. I don't like to feel bad. So I go over to the faucet marked forgiveness and pour a glass full. Now I feel better. Keep this pattern up, and before long I assume grace is under my management.

Either God is gracing me 24/7 or he's not gracing me at all. It has to work this way or it's not grace. Think of the prodigal son in Luke's gospel. He was not good with parental grace. So he took an early withdrawal of his inheritance and tried to take over the job of gracing himself. But he ran out of money. No money - no more good (gracious) life. That is when his mind turned to home, the only place he'd ever experienced grace.

If his dad was gracious as a parent, surely he could squeeze out some grace as an employer. So he returned home to hire on. Dad was waiting. Grace never stops watching for its chance. And even as the son made overtures to repay, Dad was planning a party. This is grace.

Dad's grace was rich and abundant to both sons. The prodigal eventually leaned into it. The other son, acted as if it was in short supply and conditional. Same grace, two viewpoints. In the end, one son partied while the other pouted. How we respond to grace predetermines almost every aspect of our life.

In John's gospel Jesus promised peace, joy, love and truth that sets us free. The truth that we are loved by our Father frees us to receive peace during turmoil and joy in the darkness. Intentional grace-reception is called faith, and is often the size of a seed. Once grace gets in, marinate in it until it soaks into the marrow of our bones. We don't work for it or on it. We can't manage or control it. It happens at the whim of the Father, which places us in a pretty good place.

If we're not good with grace, we'll always be crossways with God. Grace isn't complicated and technical. It's neither heavy nor laborious. Grace isn't some serious interaction that calls for reverence. This is more like a family cookout on the back deck. God supplies the meat, potato salad and baked beans. Maybe, if we're lucky, he'll let us bring the buns and a 2 liter.

Things to consider:

1 If you're not good with grace, why?

2 How would you describe grace if you couldn't talk about its forgiveness aspect?

3 Where would you be in six months if you completely plunged into grace?

The Cross

(session six)

Back at the beginning of our story God told Adam and Eve if they ate the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil, they would die. Religion says dying was their punishment. If you're relational, you see dying more as a result.

In his gospel, John talks about vines and branches. To turn or pull away from the vine means certain death for the branch. Adam and Eve started to die in every sense of the word when they turned their face from the Father. This dynamic has never changed.

We need graphics, so God in the Old Testament provided a sacrificial system that drove home the point. When Mr. Hebrew messed up he went out into his flock and picked out a lamb (grade "A", no scrubs) and took it to the tabernacle for the priest to sacrifice (kill). Hebrew Jr. watched. Mrs. Hebrew watched. The family lost part of their life because they turned their face away from the Father.

Jesus became one of us in every way. He was formed in a womb and passed through the painful birth canal. He got sick, fell down and didn't always get his way. When he grew up and entered his ministry, he readily sacrificed his own comfort and convenience for the sake of others. He suffered injustice and ridicule. He was spit upon by those he tried to help.

In the end he paid the price for our sin. If you're religious, this goes a judicial direction ... God was so mad at us for sinning, he had to take out his wrath on someone. But at the last minute, instead of killing us, God unleashed his rage on his son. Really? God needs anger management?

What if in becoming one of us, really becoming, Jesus said, I will take this all the way to the end. I will be the one who absorbs the death humanity has been dealing out on itself all these years. I will take the outcome of face-turning to it's inevitable conclusion. I will be the precious family lamb. When I'm lifted up, I will draw humanity back to the heart of the Father. They will never get the image of a dying God out of their mind. From here on out it will be burned into their psyche ... this is what happens when we turn our face away from God.

The cross wasn't so much about justice. Jesus wasn't just paying off our bill. Jesus was showing us the love of the Father, pulling our hearts back to him. His death didn't change the way God feels about us. Jesus' death changes the way

we feel about God.

Remember, two hugely important events took place immediately after the cross: the exploding tomb and the Spirit's outpouring. Centuries of stumbling humanity and rare appearances of divinity suddenly invaded by three in-your-face events.

The piles and piles of hatred, sin and death humanity had produced down through the centuries were blown to bits Easter weekend. And with the demise of sin and death, God had a wide open door through which to pour his Spirit into the battered and bruised few who waited, 'cause they had no other option.

Makes you wonder what God might do next.

Things to consider:

1 What is your gut level response to what you just read?

2 Why would an all powerful God submit to unjust execution?

3 What tends to cause you to turn your face away from God?

What does God expect of us?

(session seven)

Religion would tell us God wants us to get busy. Do something. You should be ... You ought to ... You're already skating on thin ice with God. At the very least skate faster; maybe throw in a few impressive spins.

One of the first expectations God taught humanity was to live as if he exists. We have hope as long as God IS. And he is not just a better version of us. When he had the bush-talk with Moses, God said to tell Pharaoh that "I AM" had sent him. In Egypt, Pharaoh was viewed as the god who controlled the sun that rose without exception and the Nile that flooded and receded like clockwork. Nobody questioned the part he played in these essentials to their survival.

When the real God showed up, the sun was blackened by swarms of insects and the Nile was turned to blood. Pharaoh's oldest son (the next god in line) died in his sleep. Nothing Egypt held sacred was left untouched once the real God showed up. Jesus talked about what we treasure in our heart; our little gods. What will happen in you and me if the God who actually IS shows up?

God expects us to trust him to do what he says he'll do. God didn't lead his children down Main Street on their way to the Promised Land. They went through the desert; scarce water, no shade, no grocery stores, no motels. If they were to make it, they'd have to take him at his word. Instead, they begged to go back into slavery. Familiar bondage over risky freedom. Sound familiar?

If God's grace is what we're discovering it to be, risk is always our best option. Allowing him to love us on his terms and in his time casts out fear. Fear scrambles to control. Love opens us to trust. Life shoves both options across the table. We choose one or the other every day.

God expects us to be watchful for and open to his spontaneity. It's hard to pattern this Guy. One day he's standing guard over the camp in a pillar of smoke and fire. The next he's being born in a barn to an unwed teenager.

The Pharisees had a hard time with this. The Messiah was supposed to ride in on a steed and put the sword to oppressive Rome. But look at him. He's hugging babies and sliding around on the floor washing the feet of the same guys who would deny, betray and doubt him.

These days he's in us through his Spirit who he promised would lead us into truth. Who knows what else God has up his sleeve? Be watchful and open. But seriously, what does God expect of me? Is there nothing I can do? Yes. It all goes back to the garden. First, take off your fig leaves and be real. Empty your closet of your favorite versions of yourself. Find the essential you and be that.

Second, love the person in front of you. If all we've said about God is true, by now you're on the brink of overflowing. Grace was never meant to be hoarded or placed on the mantle for display. Give it away. It won't run out; only multiply.

If this sounds too easy and good to be true, well so be it. Life with the God of grace is more like a party than a vocation. Sure, time's get tough, but God always gives us reason to celebrate. If you don't like parties, heaven's going to be an adjustment.

Things to consider:

- 1 At this point, do you feel God is a boss or a dad?
- 2 Why do you think we maintain alternative versions of ourselves?
- 3 Why do we tend to NOT show love to the person in front of us?

Why do we do what we do?

(session eight)

Motivation ... we are either love driven or we're fear driven. These two are mutually exclusive. Like oil and water, they won't mix. John talked about it in the fifth chapter of his first epistle: perfect love casts out fear.

Historically Religious Christianity has relied on fear and shame. It's all about control. If you make people fear God and hell and rejection, you can keep them in lock step with wherever you want to take them. Add to this a heavy load of shame and regret, and you've got yourself a cattle prod you can pull out any time things get out of hand.

Traditional religious motivation takes on various forms, but never completely abandons the fear/shame component. Some people are driven to fit in. They will compromise their personality, their hopes and dreams and their sexual identity because they fear rejection. Some people are motivated by the need to succeed or excel. On top looking down on others, they get a temporary break from fear and shame (emphasis on "temporary"). Some people find deep gratification in being right. They pick out favorite parts of the bible to practice with all their might. At the core, this is all about me, me, me.

Relational Christianity is motivated by love and trust. The core truth that we are adored by our Father drives out fear and shame. We relax in this. He is for us, not against us. Everything changes when this hits home in our hearts.

Letting God love us negates the need to perform. We don't even have to be experts at loving God and others. At the end of the day we don't judge ourselves on how well we did at loving. Instead we celebrate how God loved us and others.

And in the morning ... "So, what am I going to do today? I'm going to let God love me anyway he wants to." Check out how this transforms a day:

1) I now have something substantial to share with you. I don't need to convert, fix or correct you. I simply share in the love God already has for you. What he values and adores in you, I value and adore. If you're hungry, I feed you ... lonely, I sit with you. I love you because you and I are God's beloved. No strings.

2) I now have nothing to prove. God's love for me gives me all the value and self-respect I need. I can uninvest my ego. I'm okay with not always being liked

or appreciated. God loves me. That is all I need.

3) I now have peace, joy and freedom. I didn't earn any of it. I don't have to figure any of it out. It just happens when I realize where I stand with God. The world may fall apart, but the God who made the world is gaga over me.

This is a relaxed, celebrative life. Some accuse it of being lazy or apathetic. But, letting God love you is the most challenging adventure you'll ever undertake.

Things to consider:

1 God loves you. Does this confuse you? Move you? Arouse curiosity? Free you? Something altogether different?

2 To uninvest your ego ... what does this idea mean to you?

3 Of what/whom are you most fearful?

Recovering Community

(session nine)

God said way back at the beginning that it was not good for Adam (man) to be alone. God has never been alone: Father, Son and Spirit. God is pro community.

Religious community is based on arranging a set of rules and regulations from scripture, then demanding conformity from those who wish to sign up. The measure of a person's worth to the group is often based on how much of their identity they surrender to fit in.

Relational community is based on the belief that God is actively interacting with all people all the time. I don't bring God to a godless you. You don't bring him to a godless me. We find him in each other. A person's worth to any group is based on them being who God designed them to be.

Religious community is based on the assumption that we are wicked and getting wicked(er). People are to be controlled by rules, and never trusted. Nobody is doing their best. Be on your guard.

Relational community knows we are flawed and wounded, but not despicable. The way to healing and hope is through authentic confession and then gracious acceptance. Relational community doesn't fix the wounded, it allows the divine embrace that already surrounds and infiltrates the group to work its magic where it will.

Religious community protects itself at all costs. Unique individuals are permitted only as far as they remain benign to the group. Nobody who challenges the status-quo is tolerated. Rich churches don't welcome poor people. Legalistic churches don't accept free thinkers. Straight churches won't allow gays and lesbians. Etc.

Relational community celebrates diversity, as it enriches gatherings and provides depth and diversity to life and the exploration of what it means to follow Jesus.

There is still order and leadership in relational community, as well as core values. But it's never about control or fear of losing control. Those with gifts of leadership are encouraged to play their role. Order is not so much conformity as it is a naturally occurring respect for others that is not rude, or seeking of

attention at the expense of another. Its core values are authenticity and grace. Be real. Be loved.

Personality conflicts are inevitable. But the primal lizard brain's instinct toward fight or flight is seen for what it is ... primal. Instead both sides exchange stories, not to convince the opposition, but to provide context and clarity. Healthy relationships don't fight or run away once they've heard each others story.

Swapping stories builds respect. We can agree to disagree. I respect your person-hood as much as I do my own. As we find common ground the strength, wisdom and depth of our community matures.

The most transformational gift Relational Christianity has to offer our broken world is not a new twist on theology or ethics. It is authentic, gracious community. The world has grown tired of the former. Let God love you and then pass it along. The world will never be the same.

Things to consider:

1 What's your first instinct when you face a personality conflict?

2 Why does magic happen in authentic gracious community? Or is this a silly notion?

3 What do you think heals the heart of a broken person?