

Accept the Individual, Not the Behavior

Shane had remarried and had other children, but still felt a sense of obligation to the children from his first marriage. Tobacco smoke was his odour of choice. But Shane had a heart of gold and spoke gently and carefully in all his interactions. This was his first interaction with his daughter, Karen, since a baby and he wanted her enrolled into our Year 8 class.

Karen was one of my more regular guests at the office. Her natural inclination to react, her volatility and her language choices gave us a lot of concern. Slowly she became used to Dad's consistent home rules. She became more accountable and realised that throwing tantrums was not going to alter either Dad's resolve or ours.

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She even began to enjoy school and acknowledged that she could see a difference in her own life. A difference she was actually beginning to appreciate. All the way through our numerous interactions, we were careful as a staff to separate any discussion on her behaviour from her own value as a daughter of God.

She had no Christian background at all, and initially found the “God stuff” a bit challenging. Over time she began to see that it was the “God stuff” that made the real difference to how she was treated and dealt with at our school.

Her choice of friends outside of school troubled Dad immensely. He also noticed that when she spent time with Mum, we all had to undo the damage for the

next few days. Yet whenever I heard Dad interact with Karen, be it in my office or out in the play yard as he picked her up after school, it was always gentle and affirming. Shane and I had chatted early in the year about the importance of Karen feeling accepted regardless of any choices she made. He was doing his best to honour that, as were we.

I vividly remember the day when Dad and Karen came into the office for the last time. Dad sat down heavily and looked at me with a sad, despairing look. “Karen has decided she is going to change schools. I am not happy about it but she is now 15.” We chatted and I said to Karen that while we respected her decision, I felt, like Dad, it was not the best decision for her. She was adamant and left. I have seen Shane since, but not Karen.

Sometimes we do not end up with the outcome that we can see would be for the best. But we still have to respect personal choice. We also have to make sure we separate the inappropriate behaviour from the value of the person. Each of us makes mistakes but regardless, we are still sons and daughters of God.

Interestingly, as Ellen White reflects on the story of Mary Magdalene, she notes the direct contrast between how humans and God react. “Men hate the sinner, while they love the sin. Christ hates the sin but loves the sinner. This will be the spirit of all who follow Him. Christian love is slow to censure, quick to discern penitence, ready to forgive, to encourage, to set the wanderer in the path of holiness, and to stay his feet therein.” Ellen White, *Desire of Ages*, p 462. I am sure we can all reflect on people who have rubbed us the wrong way. The outcome really depends on how we choose to respond. The only person we can control is ourselves. That puts the onus back on us as the adults in the student/ teacher or child/ parent relationship to be responsible for how that interaction unfolds. Do we love enough for that?



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