

“Since 1980, I have been turning to the teachings of Steve Brown for encouragement and direction. His words have inspired, encouraged, shocked, and entertained me. He’s never boring, always fresh, and most of all, he loves Jesus. This book is a delight and so is its author.”

Max Lucado, Pastor; bestselling author of *Glory Days*

“In a society wherein so many of us suffer estrangement from one another because we are prone to be con artists, Steve Brown calls us to become authentic people. With a special gift for saying things that are both profound and punchy, he provides us with a book that will challenge any reader to make a Spirit-filled presentation of self in everyday life that is real. I loved reading this book.”

Tony Campolo, Professor Emeritus, Eastern University

“Anxieties thrive when fear of failure and rejection gain a foothold in our hearts. And so we hide behind masks that prevent us from being known and loved just as we are. Steve Brown—one of the most big-hearted pastors I know—is determined to emancipate us from our masks and, in *Hidden Agendas*, guides us into the sanctuary and freedom of God’s lavish love and grace. Truly a liberating read!”

Carolyn Custis James, Author of *Malestrom: Manhood Swept into the Currents of a Changing World*

“Wearing the mask of a serious Christian journalist, I say: Here is a profound, engaging, and lived theology of grace that the church desperately needs. Taking off the mask, I say: Thank you, thank you, thank you—here is an invitation to freedom this sinner needs.”

Mark Galli, Editor, *Christianity Today*

“As with Lon Chaney in *Phantom of the Opera*, the mask’s been ripped off. He screamed when it came down. What will I do? Steve Brown teaches me to sigh with blessed relief. Will the church let me? Steve’s church will, and I believe him. This is a cheering, terrific book—every searing word of it.”

Paul Zahl, Author; retired Episcopal minister

“Steve Brown’s new book, *Hidden Agendas*, messes with us where we need to be messed with and encourages us to live and love with the freedom that Jesus intends for us. The gospel of God’s grace exposes and sabotages all posing and pretending, and Steve helps us understand what that disruptive and liberating process involves. As an adjunct faculty member of five seminaries around the country, this book has vaulted high on my recommended reading list for everybody preparing to serve in some form of vocational ministry, but it’s a must-read for all of us who care about making the gospel as beautiful and believable as we possibly can.”

Scotty Ward Smith, Teacher in Residence, West End
Community Church, Nashville, Tennessee

“Beloved, this book is a treasure. Steve, in his winsome, down-to-earth way frees you from the desire to remain hidden and gently leads you into the truth of who you really are. I found myself laughing one second and weeping for joy the next. Read, rejoice, rest.”

Jessica Thompson, Speaker; author of *Everyday Grace*

“Talk about crafty. Under the guise of exploring that scariest of topics, human motivation, Steve Brown has hidden a remarkably wide-ranging, uncommonly funny, and psychologically penetrating masterclass of practical theology. What’s more, he’s jam-packed it with the kind of stories you can only accumulate from a lifetime of full-blooded ministry, rooting the Good News right where it belongs—behind the masks we all wear. Here’s a not-so-hidden, kicker-free agenda for anyone interested in understanding themselves, loving other people, or knowing God. Digest this book, post-haste.”

David Zahl, Editor, *The Mockingbird Blog*; author of *A Mess of Help: From the Crucified Soul of Rock n Roll*

HIDDEN AGENDAS

D R O P P I N G T H E
M A S K S T H A T K E E P
U S A P A R T

Steve Brown

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Dedication

To my wife, family, the staff at Key Life Network,
and friends who know a lot more about me than you
do and still love me . . . even when it's hard.

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Without all of those people, this book would have been far worse . . .

. . . or maybe better.

Introduction

“You haven’t lived long enough or sinned big enough to even have an opinion on that!”

That’s what I sometimes say to seminary students who have a tendency to be overly critical of others and are terribly sure of their own ability to discern truth.

It’s true about books too. There are certain kinds of books that one shouldn’t write until one has lived long enough and sinned big enough. I’ve lived long enough and I’ve sinned big enough to write this book, and so it’s time.

My friend John Frost, one of the most brilliant programmers of contemporary Christian music stations in the country, often consults with the ministry where I work. Not too long ago, he told me that he had finally figured me out. He said, “Steve, you don’t care.”

He was at least partially right. When you’re old, you really don’t care about some things (though you do find yourself caring more about others). I don’t care who Lady Gaga is sleeping with or what’s happening with Miley Cyrus. Facebook doesn’t keep me up at night, and I don’t give a rip about who’s tweeting on Twitter or posting stuff

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on Instagram. I honestly couldn't care less about what Brad Pitt thinks or how much weight Oprah Winfrey loses.

I've also found that, as I get older, I don't care much about what people think about me either. As I age, I've found that I'm harder to manipulate; that leverage doesn't work with me the way it once did. If you're "cramming for finals," you have a perspective that you don't have when you're young.

That means this book will be relatively honest.

Dr. House (of television fame) often says, "Everybody lies." That may be truer than any of us would like to admit. But when one gets as old as I am, one lies less and, more important for the purpose of this book, one doesn't feel as constrained to wear so many masks. It may or may not be true that everybody lies, but everybody wears a mask, everybody has an agenda, and almost everybody you know is different than you think.

Did you hear about the woman who went to the hospital for a fairly difficult surgery? While on the operating table, she had a near-death experience and encountered God. She asked him if it was her time to die. God said that it wasn't and she would, in fact, live for another forty-three years. Sure enough, she got through the surgery successfully. While still recovering in the hospital, since she now knew she was going to live a long time, the woman decided to have some cosmetic procedures done. She got a facelift and a tummy tuck and even brought in a stylist to give her a whole new hairstyle and color.

On the day she left the hospital, the woman felt like a million bucks. But as she crossed the street to the parking lot, she was struck by a truck and killed.

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When the woman stood before God, she was quite upset. “I thought you told me I would live for another forty-three years. How could you do this to me?”

“To be perfectly honest,” God said, “I didn’t recognize you.”

In reality, God always recognizes us. He sees behind the masks we wear and the hidden agendas that drive us. It does no good for you to tell God that you’re sick when you’re drunk, that you love him when you don’t, or that you didn’t steal and eat an apple . . . with apple juice dripping down your chin. So sometimes (not always) we’re reasonably honest with God, but it will be a cold day in a hot place before most of us will be fully honest with anybody else. God, of course, isn’t that safe, but his job description is love.

The rest of the world scares the spit out of us.

I have suggested in a number of places (books, broadcasts, sermons, and lectures) that all Christian authors should be required to confess their sins in the first chapter of their books. That way, it would lend credence and power to whatever else they wrote. Too often truth is obscured because the writer seems to speak from Sinai, though, of course, nobody but God does.

So before we go any further, I need to say something:

I’m sometimes so phony I can hardly stand myself.

I’m not proud of that; in fact, it embarrasses me to say it. I’m not even sure I would say it if it weren’t for a truth I learned from a whole lot of years of working with people:

You’re just as phony as I am.

So I’ve lived long enough and I’ve sinned big enough to write this book. Nobody is going to fire me, I have enough money to pay the mortgage and to take my wife out to

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dinner, and I'm not looking for anything from anybody. That means I'm going to tell you the truth about me (within certain limits of propriety) and about you.

Let's talk.

CHAPTER 1

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Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth, we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. (2 Corinthians 4:1-2)

A number of years ago I left the pastorate of a church I loved because the church almost killed me. (That may be a bit harsh, given that I did a lot of the killing of myself.) I was very close to an emotional meltdown and nobody knew it. If you have a deep and authoritative voice (and I do), degrees from academic institutions (and I do), a reputation for competence (and I did), and you write books (I still do), people figure you're okay and, in fact, come to you for help so they can be okay too.

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But “the wheels were coming off my wagon” and I didn’t even know it.

It was late at night and I was alone in my study. There was nobody to impress, nobody to convince, and nobody to encourage when, to my total surprise and for no apparent reason, I began to sob. I found myself saying out loud (also a surprise), “I don’t want to do this anymore. In fact, I can’t do this anymore.” The next day I resigned as the pastor of that church and started a very long journey (which still continues) to find out what was wrong with me. For the next year I talked to friends and counselors, read a pile of books, listened to hours of recorded lectures, and, in the quiet, I thought about me, about God, and about the life that had become such a burden.

There’s an old Sunday school song that children still sing (a play on the nursery rhyme, “If you’re happy and you know it . . .”): “If you’re saved and you know it, clap your hands. If you’re saved and you know it, then your life will surely show it. Clap your hands!”

Let me tweak that song a bit. “If you’re a sinner and you know it, then your life should really show it.” If you like singing those kinds of songs, you can even expand it: “If you’re needy, or afraid, or lonely, or confused, or ashamed, or depressed, or in pain, then your life should really show it. Clap your hands.”

For the rest of this book, we’re going to put legs on that song. A good place to begin is to define the questions, such as:

- What is a hidden agenda and why is it hidden?
- What are masks and why do we wear them?
- How do those masks and agendas hurt us and those we love?

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- Why are we so afraid that people will discover our agendas and look behind our masks?

Have you ever noticed what the neighbors of serial killers say to reporters? It's generally some form of surprise as in, "I just don't understand . . . he liked kittens and children. He seemed like such a nice man." I believe that, in a different context, almost all of our neighbors, friends, acquaintances, and fellow Christians would say the same thing. But I have a pastor friend who told his congregation, "If you knew me—I mean *really* knew me—you wouldn't want me to be your pastor." Then he smiled and said, "If I knew you—I mean *really* knew you—frankly, I wouldn't want you to be my congregation." In that mildly humorous comment there is profound wisdom.

I'm a religious professional, and because I have a media ministry, people who know about me generally only know the public image they hear on radio, see on television, and encounter on our website. Not only that, I write religious books. When I speak at a church, seminar, or conference, there is always a space between where I stand and the people who listen. (Someone has said, "In the church they put the pastors six feet above everybody else, shine a spotlight on them, give them a microphone, and tell them to be humble.")

You have no idea how often I've said, "If they only knew."

If you've ever said or thought, "If they only knew," what I'm going to show you will be helpful and freeing. It might even change your life. But we have miles to go before we get there. What follows in this chapter is a boring but necessary first step.

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What Is a Hidden Agenda and Why Is It Hidden?

An “agenda” is a plan designed to accomplish, change, fix, destroy, remedy, reward, punish, promote, or hinder. In other words, an agenda is what we do to get from where we are to where we want to be—from here to there. Further, a hidden agenda is either hidden intentionally to accomplish what we desire, or hidden unintentionally because we don’t even know we have an agenda in the first place.

For years I’ve taught ecclesiastical politics to seminary students. It started in a faculty meeting after a discussion of why so many of our students were being “chewed up” by some people in the church. Most of God’s people—some 90 percent—are kind, gentle, loving, and affirming. But the remaining 10 percent are some of the meanest, most condemning, and most destructive people you can imagine. Those 10 percent are the ones with “hidden agendas” geared, for whatever reason, to hurt the pastor. At the seminary we decided we had done well in biblical studies, theology, and counseling, but we had never taught our students survival techniques. Because that particular subject had not been taught, our graduates, now in ministry, were being drawn and quartered, and didn’t even know what was happening.

(As an aside, that 90/10 principle—90 percent normal, affirming, and kind; and 10 percent neurotic and mean as snakes—is applicable to almost any human institution. It’s not that the church is worse than any other institution. But even though the church is a lot more than an institution, it is an institution and operates under the same basic principles as any institution.)

Since I teach practical theology, the faculty decided I should address the problem. So I designed several lectures

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designed to prepare students on how, as Jesus put it, to be “as wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Matthew 10:16). Those lectures included such subjects as identifying “pockets of power” and how to deal with them, how to develop a godly “mean” streak, how to win battles without losing one’s salvation, how to count votes, how to deal with criticism, how to be sensitive and aware of trends in the church, when to confront and when to remain silent, etc.

Students didn’t like those lectures and complained loudly about them. They called what I taught “manipulative” and “unchristian.” My response was always, “I don’t care what you think. You will listen and you will be tested on this material. I’m teaching you stuff that will save your ministry. One day you will ‘rise up and call me blessed.’”

You would be surprised by how often those students do “rise up and call me blessed.” So often I’ll get a call, email, or letter from a former student who says, “Steve, I want to ask you to forgive me. I repent of what I said about your teaching on church politics. What you taught me saved my ministry [generally they say “butt” . . . however, that isn’t appropriate for a Christian book] and I wanted to say thank you.”

What was I doing in those lectures? I taught students to have an agenda and, for the most part, it was a hidden agenda. For those of you who are shocked at what I just wrote, I also taught them to do it for the glory of Christ, and the peace and unity of the church.

However, there is more. The 90 percent (the kind and gentle ones in the church) have an agenda too. It’s just not as destructive as the other 10 percent. Nevertheless, agendas are a part of us all. When I went through the emotional meltdown I described earlier, I found that almost all

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of the pain I went through was due to my own agendas, and those agendas had become the “stuff” out of which I made masks—professional, religious, personal, relational, and so on. In the pages that follow I’ll reference my own agendas (mostly hidden, and probably not dissimilar to yours) and look at finding a road to make those agendas less destructive, more authentic, and incredibly freeing.

What Are Masks and Why Do We Wear Them?

Masks are designed to hide, conceal, or disguise the reality behind them. In other words, the masks are created to further an agenda. Like any agenda, the masks are sometimes intentional, but more often than not, the wearers are unaware of their masks.

Someone has said that the definition of “diplomacy” is saying “Nice dog . . . nice dog” until you get a stick. The “nice dog” part is the mask.

Christians are masters at hidden agendas and masks. We’ll talk a lot more about that later, but for now, let’s acknowledge that, depending on your definition of the Christian faith, a mask may seem necessary. The church, properly defined, is a hospital, among other things. When people join the church, they have made a public statement that they are needy, sinful, and desperate. And the Bible teaches that while we generally do get better, the need, sin, and desperation are ongoing realities.

The problem occurs when church people redefine the church as a gathering of “fixed” people who are good, together, and better than the cretins who aren’t in the church. Because that is not the biblical reality, those who define the church that way must create an “image” of what is not the reality. That “image” is the mask. If we wear the

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mask long enough, we begin to think that the mask is the reality.

My pastor recently read us the welcome message from Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Church in Daytona Beach, Florida:

We extend a special welcome to those who are single, married, divorced, filthy rich, dirt poor, *y no habla Ingles*. We extend a special welcome to those who are crying newborns, skinny as a rail, or could afford to lose a few pounds. We welcome you if you can sing like Andrea Bocelli, or like our pastor, who can't carry a note in a bucket. You're welcome here if you're "just browsing," just woke up, or just got out of jail. . . . We extend a special welcome to those who are over sixty but not grown up yet, and to teenagers who are growing up too fast. We welcome soccer moms, NASCAR dads, starving artists, tree-huggers, latte-sippers, vegetarians, junk-food eaters. We welcome those who are in recovery or are still addicted. We welcome you if you're having problems, or you're down in the dumps, or if you don't like "organized religion" (we've been there, too). If you blew all your offering money at the dog track, you're welcome here. . . . We welcome those who are inked, pierced, or both. We offer a special welcome to those who could use a prayer right now, had religion shoved down your throat as a kid, or got lost in traffic and wound up here by mistake. . . . We welcome tourists, seekers, doubters, bleeding hearts . . . and you.¹

In other words, you're welcome here to take off your masks and come as you are. The problem is that taking

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off our masks is not as easy as accepting an invitation to church. It can be quite dangerous.

In one old *Barney Miller* TV episode, the police commissioner required the detectives to wear uniforms most of the week. One of the detectives complained to his sergeant, “If we start wearing uniforms, people will start thinking we know what we’re doing and, even worse, *we’ll* start thinking we know what we are doing. That could be dangerous.”

There are a great variety of masks—religious masks, power masks, protective masks, professional masks, and political masks. Some are designed to promote a political agenda or to hide fear. Other masks are designed to create fear. Some masks garner power or money. Some masks are created to solicit from others compassion and mercy, or to fake compassion and mercy. There are “coping” masks that enable us to function. And of course there are piles of religious masks that fake a walk with God . . . not the reality. The list goes on and on; but for now, it is sufficient to understand the basic nature of the mask.

There is one other thing. I mentioned in the introduction that Dr. House said that everybody lies. I’m not sure I totally agree with Dr. House . . . but close. At any rate, I know that I have been known to lie and everybody I know has the same problem. (No, I’m not advocating lying.) I’m not proud of that and repent of it when I see it in myself, but the truth—the whole truth and nothing but the truth—is a hard thing to come by. But even if everybody doesn’t lie, everybody does wear a mask that is, by its definition, something not true. (And by the way, masks are sometimes necessary. I’ll address that subject in another chapter.)

1. Why are we so afraid that people will discover our agendas and look behind our masks?

Because we are ashamed, dummy.

There are, I'm told, four great adult fears: fear of rejection, fear of failure, fear of punishment, and fear of shame. We wear masks because of one form or another of those fears. If I take off my mask and show you the way I really am, I'm afraid you won't like (love) me. Behind the mask is the reality that sometimes I don't have the foggiest idea of what I'm doing. If you see behind the mask, you will know that I'm a failure and I will fail. I'm not a good person and certainly not as good as my mask would suggest, so removing the mask will exact a price. My shame defines me—what I've done, where I've gone, what I think, who I am—and I just don't think I can stand more shame once you know what's behind the mask.

You've heard of Maslow's four levels of learning: (1) unconscious incompetency, (2) conscious incompetency, (3) conscious competency, and (4) unconscious competency. In other words, (1) we don't know that we don't know, (2) then we know we don't know, (3) then we know, and (4) finally we know and don't even think about it.

It's the same way with masks. At a certain point in our lives, we are unaware that the world is an unsafe place where we can be rejected, fail, be punished, and be shamed. When the reality of an unsafe world begins to emerge in the socialization process of "growing up," we create ways to deal with the danger. We do that with masks, and there is a degree of intentionality involved. Then, as we become more and more socialized, we don't even know who we are anymore. And, of course, the danger is that we become, in fact, the very masks we wear.

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So we're afraid of taking off the masks not just because of what's under them, but because we instinctively know that our masks have become so much a part of us that to exorcise them would go to the core of who we are. That scares the spit out of us.

In Dave Eggers's novel, *The Circle*, Mae Holland is hired to work for The Circle, which has become (or is becoming) the most powerful internet company in the world. The Circle is on a wonderful, very large campus in California, where every aspect of their employees' lives is affirmed, encouraged, supported, lavishly compensated . . . and public. Mae is discovered to have stolen (rationalized as "borrowed") a kayak out for an evening trip on the ocean. It's a long scene but eventually she is shamed into confessing her sins and her "individual" indulgence. Slowly and surely she "sells her soul to the company store." At first she is aware of what is happening, but eventually she becomes a model company employee, even (and I don't want to spoil the story for you) betraying others in the most brutal and destructive way. The scary part is that, all the while, Mae really believes she is making a positive contribution to the company and the world.²

That's what happens with the masks we wear. They slowly become what we think is the reality of who we are. It's hard to see that, in fact, we're hiding behind a mask.

2. Where did we learn to create hidden agendas and to wear masks?

That question presupposes what I believe to be a very naïve view of human nature. That naïveté is the source of an almost universal (but spurious) belief about human goodness. It comes from the same place as the lieutenant's song in *South Pacific*. He is facing devastating prejudice and sings

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that human beings have to be “carefully taught to hate.” No, actually, they don’t. Biblical anthropology teaches that you don’t have to be taught to hate or, for that matter, to be phony or to use a mask to pursue a hidden and mostly selfish agenda. It’s normal, natural, and quite scary.

Of course, all of us watch and learn. We learn from those who manipulate us for their own agenda and who themselves have been manipulated by others to further their agendas. It is as old as mankind and goes back to a man by the name of Adam who wore the first mask when he “covered himself” with fig leaves. You remember the incident. It’s in the Bible (Genesis 3) where Adam’s disobedience led to awareness, his awareness led to shame, and his shame led to the fig leaf mask. When God showed up, he called out to Adam, “Where are you?” Adam hid . . . and we’ve been hiding ever since.

You’re bent. I’m bent. The world is bent. And so we hide.

Once we start to understand the nature of hidden agendas and the masks we wear to cover them, we sometimes begin to think that if there were a pristine goodness, purity, and unselfishness in us, the “true self” would be that. I’ve read a number of books in preparation for writing this one and many of them make that assumption. They say that underneath the mask and behind the hidden agenda is a really nice and loving person who is the “real you” or, as one writer puts it, “the true self.” That’s a seductive message but it is one that can kill you if you let it because it simply isn’t true. More than that, the process of getting to the “true you” isn’t pleasant, because the “true you” is often no better than the “false you.” Sometimes it is far worse.

“He seems to be a really nasty man,” someone said of a mutual acquaintance, “but underneath it, he is worse than he seems.” That could be, believe it or not, true to one degree

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or another of all of us. The myth that children start out good and become bad is just that—a myth. A friend recently sent me the definition of a “toddler”: “Noun. Emotionally unstable, pint-sized dictator with the uncanny ability to know exactly how far to push you into utter insanity before reverting to a lovable child.” It starts that way and it never stops. The difference is that socialization teaches us to hide it. That’s the true source of most masks.

While that may be cynical (I am, after all, an old, cynical preacher), I don’t think so. In fact, it is both good news and bad news, and we’ll talk more about it later.

3. Then why even bother to get rid of the masks or to reveal the agendas in the first place?

That’s a good question. If things are the way I’ve described them—if masks are our protection, and if revealing what’s behind our masks is so painful—why even go to the trouble?

Let me tell you why. There is so much more to life than hiding, pretending, and never being loved. There’s also the horrible loneliness of shame, and it’s killing us. In fact, that’s what the Christian faith is all about—sinful, lonely, and needy people meeting and loving other sinful, lonely, and needy people. And when we do so, it changes the narrative . . . and thus changes the world.

Take the time sometime to read through the Bible. If you never have, you’re going to discover things you wouldn’t believe would be in any holy book. You’ll find murderers and whores, liars and thieves, con artists and hypocrites, whiners and manipulators, power-hungry tyrants and dishonest, selfish, and arrogant leaders. The most stunning thing is that, in almost all these cases, they are the leaders of

God's people, the first recipients of the covenant with God, and the preachers and teachers of the message of Christ.

What's going on? They are ripping off their masks (or maybe God is doing it for them) for one reason: a message from God, telling his creation that the only way to get to a life worth living, to experience love worth having, and to be free to laugh, sing, and dance is to get rid of the masks and to be honest about the agendas. You see, God has this proclivity—this strong inclination—when it comes to those he loves. His proclivity is to rip off the masks in direct proportion to our proclivity to wear them.

Is everything going to be fixed once we take off our masks? Are you crazy? That's just plain utopian (and truth be told, more damage has been done by utopians than you can imagine). But things have got to be better than they are, at least within the household of God. The world desperately needs to hear the "laughter of the redeemed." That will never happen until the redeemed risk everything and discover they are free. "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, I'm free at last."

4. Why do the masks and hidden agendas hurt us and those we love?

We hurt ourselves and those we love because love isn't love until it's love that takes place within the context of the unlovely. If you're not a drunk, you'll never know the fellowship—honest, free, and joyful—of drunks who know it but find themselves loved. If you don't think you're a sinner, you'll never dance before the throne of the Redeemer. If you don't see how needy you are, you'll never know the absolute and pure joy of being free with others who admit it and are free.

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Mother Teresa once wrote, “The greatest disease in the West today is not TB or leprosy; it is being unwanted, unloved, and uncared for. We can cure physical diseases with medicine, but the only cure for loneliness, despair, and hopelessness is love. There are many in the world who are dying for a piece of bread but there are many more dying for a little love. The poverty in the West is a different kind of poverty—it is not only a poverty of loneliness but also of spirituality. There’s a hunger for love, as there is a hunger for God. . . . ‘We must be loved by God first, and only then can we give it to others. For us to want to give love to others we must be full of love to give.’”³

We live in a reward-based culture. Do it right and it will come out right. Other than the fact that it’s not true, it really does sound good. After all, if we studied hard, we got good grades. If we worked hard, we got a promotion. If we were nice, people were nice to us. Never mind that sometimes our friend cheated and got good grades, or we worked hard and had a teacher who was a twit and didn’t understand how profound our answers to the test really were. Maybe we discovered that there were a whole lot of people who were simply mean to the bone and, no matter how nice we were, they would never return the favor. But even if that’s true (and it is), we still believe that if you do it right, it will turn out right. So we work hard, live pure, and are nice. When it turns out that we can’t work that hard, live that pure, or be that nice, we create a mask. The mask reflects our shame and the horrible fear that others will see. Then we become “islands” unto ourselves, lonely, fearful, and guilty.

But what if we said, “I’m not playing that game anymore, even if nothing turns out right”? Let me tell you what would happen: love would happen. We would discover that

God hugs dirty kids. Then love would happen to us from God and from us to others. It wouldn't be the phony love that is given in response to being good, pure, successful, nice, and strong. That's not love; that's reward. In fact, you can't know love until you know you don't deserve it. In other words, you can't know love until you are willing to risk getting it by taking off the mask. And within the context of that kind of love, the list of gifts God gives to those who are unmasked is incredibly long. We'll be talking about that list.

5. So how do we deal with our masks?

You die! That's what you do.

I know, I know. That's not very good news. It really isn't but it becomes the good news—incredibly good news—as it's lived. If I had an alternative title to this book, I guess it would be *How to Die and Have Fun Doing It*.

But before we go there, I feel constrained to say some positive things about masks. The road we are going to take over the next few chapters will make you weird if you don't read the next chapter. So do that and then we'll get back to the subject at hand.

Behind the Mask

1. What is the purpose of masks and hidden agendas?
2. Why are masks and hidden agendas so common in the church?
3. Do you think you have a hidden agenda and wear a mask (or masks)? While you may be unaware of them, make a guess.
4. Describe a situation in which you were hurt by a friend's mask or hidden agenda. How did you feel?

HIDDEN AGENDAS

5. What would happen if your masks and hidden agendas were stripped away? What would be left? What are you afraid of?

Background Scriptures: 2 Corinthians 4:1–2; Genesis 3

Note to small group leaders: Refer to these Scriptures as needed during your discussion, along with Scripture passages in this chapter.