

“The Church: Everybody’s AA Group”

Illust. Joseph Habedank is a relatively new Christian singer who has quite a testimony. He became addicted to pain killing drugs, and found release through a relationship with Christ, and involvement in a recovery group. Thinking of how often AA and other recovery groups meet in church basements, he wrote a song about that. It’s called “The Basement”. It’s a beautiful song, pointing out how, while God is present and amazing things happen during worship in the sanctuary, down in the basement, often through the week, God is working miracles and changing lives through support and recovery groups.

Almost every day in just about every community, men and women gather in Alcohol Anonymous groups. AA’s 12 Step Program is a remarkable story. It has helped countless people get free of their alcohol addiction – often when psychology or medical science or even prayer has not been able to help. Over the years the 12 Step Program has become a staple in addiction treatment. It’s used in drug rehab programs, Gambler’s Anonymous, Sex Addicts Anonymous, and is useful in recovering from *any type* of addiction. Maybe someone you know, or you yourself, have benefitted from AA or some other recovery group.

An AA group is a place where you can come and honestly share your struggle with people who’ve been down that same road and are on their way to recovery. There is that first introduction: “My name is Harry, and I’m an alcoholic.” In this kind of atmosphere, where pretending is pretty much laid aside, and one is accepted as they are, literally hundreds of thousands of people have been able to turn from their addiction and find emotional and spiritual health.

Someone suggests that the AA group and the 12 Step Recovery Program is a model for the church, that the church should be everybody’s AA group! *I like that!* Now you may be thinking, “Yeah, but that’s for *alcoholics, drug addicts, sex addicts*, not for *normal* people like me....or us!” Or “We’re Christians, we’re religious people, who don’t have any addictions.”

Well, one addiction we all have is an addiction to sin. We cannot not sin! If I promise God that I will never sin again, that I’m done sinning, do you think I can keep that promise?

I believe we have more addictions and compulsions than we may think! Some years ago a counselor and educator, John Bradshaw, hosted a series of popular TV shows on PBS, where he talked about the massive problem of addiction in our American society. He talked about family systems in a time when I was being trained in family systems theory. Bradshaw was a champion for mental and emotional health, and he helped many people. The definition of compulsive/addictive behavior he used was: “a pathological relationship to any mood-altering experience that has life damaging consequences.” This definition moves us away from the stereotype we have of an addicted person as someone in a slum area shooting cocaine into their veins with a dirty needle, or a drunk staggering out of a seedy neighborhood bar. Nice, respectable people, good citizens, even church people, can have addictions!

What are some of the addictions that are part of our American scene today? Yes, *alcoholism*. It’s still a major health problem in the U.S. I just heard a report that 11% of adults in the U.S. have a

problem with alcohol AUD – Alcohol Use Disorder. *Violence* is an addiction. Domestic violence, especially against women and children. *Rage* – some people are “rage-aholics”. *Sexual addiction*. Has been escalating exponentially, with the ready availability of all kinds of sexual material on the internet. *Addiction to drugs other than hard drugs*. Sleeping pills, over the counter meds like Advil or Tylenol, post-surgical pain killers like Vicodin, OxyContin. Now I’m certainly not saying we shouldn’t take these medications, but we can become overly reliant on these.

We can have *eating compulsions*. We overeat (the Bible calls it “gluttony”!). Some are driven to half-starve themselves. Or we have a fixation on sweets or chocolate. I once found myself anxiously checking every cupboard to find a candy bar. And I had to stop and think, “Good grief! I think you’re addicted to chocolate!”

Nicotine. Smoking. *Caffeine*. Coffee, sodas. *Gambling*. I think of the mixed message you get with the gambling ads, urging you to gamble, then at the bottom says, If you are a problem gambler, call this number. *Entertainment*. Some of us are compulsive about sports. Some are addicted to the TV. (If you don’t think this is so, try turning off the TV for 3 days). Many people today are addicted to our cell phones. How many times do you see a group of people sitting around, not talking to each other, but each person having their head in their cell phone!

Physical fitness can become a compulsion. Some of us can be addicted to *work, our jobs*. Or we have an unhealthy need to *make money*. We can be addicted to *shopping, charging on the credit card*. There are people who are addicted to *religion, church work*. If we love God in a healthy way, we can never love Him too much. But if we do church work compulsively, or are so rigid and demanding in our beliefs that we try to impose it on everyone else, we can be more *sick* than we are *spiritual*. John Bradshaw maintained that addiction has become our national lifestyle.

So, what am I getting at in all of this? Many more of us than we may think are hooked on something that is unhealthy, or destructive to ourselves and others.

So, the big question is: How do we get unhooked? The church can help! “The church ought to be everybody’s AA group.” Some people see the church as being just for “good people”, religious people. “I can only join if I’m good enough...”. “This is where good people gather, not people with all sorts of hurts, hangups.” *Not true!* The church is for *sick people who want to be in recovery!* As someone has said, “The church is not a showcase for saints, but a hospital for sinners.”

Something Jesus said, I think, relates to this. “While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew’s house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, ‘Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?’ On hearing this, Jesus said, ‘It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick’ (Matthew 9:10-12). Jesus was criticized for hanging out with people who didn’t keep all the religious rules and regulations that some Jews did, for associating with hated tax collectors (traitors, who worked for Rome). People who the very religious Jews shunned. Jesus’ response:

Those who aren't sick don't need a doctor. He came for those who are morally and spiritually sick, and know it! You know, in many ways, we're no different here this morning from people who don't go to church! So pretend to be? *And by the way, that's true of us clergy, too!*

I'm thinking of some other Scriptures that fit in here: Psalm 51, that great psalm of penitence, where King David, after being confronted by the prophet Nathan, confesses his sin of adultery with Bathsheba. "Have mercy upon me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; according to the multitude of Your tender mercies, blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions, and my sin is always before me" (Psalm 51:1-3). Then verse 6: "You desire truth in the inward being." God wants us to be honest and truthful about ourselves, to quit pretending and wearing masks to disguise our real selves. How often in the church do we pretend! We pretend that we're better than we are...that we don't have problems and struggles...and hangups and addictions.

Another Scripture passage applies here: Ephesians 4:14-15. "We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ." This is a word to the *church, to believers*. We're not to be spiritual children, unsteady, immature. Rather, we are to *speak the truth in love*, that we may grow into maturity in Christ.

"Speaking the truth in love". Can we just be real? Honest with each other? Accepting each other in love? Sometimes confronting one another in love? I love the story of the pastor talking to a group of children in the church. He asked them, "What's brown, has a bushy tail, climbs trees and eats nuts?" There's silence. The pastor waited a little longer, and finally said, "C'mon! You must know! Finally, one youngster said, "Well, it sounds very much like a squirrel, but I guess the answer has to be 'Jesus'". So often in the church we act so religious, where we have to give the right "religious answers" to everything, when we just ought to be human and real!

The 12 Step Recovery Program can be a powerful model for the church.

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood Him*.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory, and when we were wrong, promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God *as we understood Him*, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

Notice, the first step is to *get out of denial!* “We admitted we were powerless over alcohol, that our lives had become unmanageable.” “Oh, I can handle my liquor.” “I can quit smoking if I want to. In fact, I’ve quit 5 times over the last year!” “I’m not addicted to spending and charging things, these are things I need.” “I know what I’m doing. I’m not hurting anyone. Lay off!” The Apostle Paul admitted the unmanageable pieces of his life: “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate...I can will what is right, but I can’t do it...for I do not do the good that I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do” (Romans 7:15, 18-19).

I got on an elevator once, and after I got on, someone in a clown costume got on after me. What do you do? Laugh? Say something? Me, I just kept quiet and pretended nothing was out of the ordinary – I mean, you see clowns on elevators all the time!” *Denial.*

Notice, also, in the 12 steps, the spiritual tone: see steps 2,3,5,6,7,11.

There is a Christian based recovery program called “Celebrate Recovery”. It uses the 12 steps approach. It was developed out of Saddleback Church, in California. We took a group from a church I was serving out to California for a Celebrate Recovery convocation. It was a great experience. We instituted that program in the congregation. Unfortunately, it was short-lived (for a number of reasons). But some churches successfully host Celebrate Recovery meetings.

Every church could benefit from the lessons presented in AA’s 12 steps! Where in one way or other, we can say, “My name is Harry (or Bill, or Suzy). I’m a Christian, but I also struggle with being a workaholic...a TV addict...a compulsive spender...I struggle with resentment and an unforgiving spirit.”

I remember talking once to a person whose family had become active in church – they were a delight to know. But then, they just kind of dropped out of sight. I had the feeling that something was going on, something they weren’t being up front about. Finally, I called the wife and mother. She thanked me for calling and showing concern, but she said, “Right now, I’m getting my spiritual support from an Al-anon group.” (This is a group for those trying to relate to an alcoholic). I was happy that she was getting help. But sad that they had dropped out of church. Sad that our church was not providing the honest, caring, accepting support community that this person and her family needed.

With God’s help, the church, this church, can be everybody’s recovery group!

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