

# **Wineskins Magazine**

## **Recovery**

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## **“Salvation” or “Recovery”: Which Should You Choose?**

*by Rubel Shelly*

*September – October, 1993*

Church buildings are used for a variety of support-group meetings where people applying the 12-step methods of Alcoholics Anonymous explore addiction, sanity, and recovery. Pulpit vocabulary nowadays occasionally includes terms like “dysfunctional families,” “codependency,” and “acting out.” Literature from the recovery movement is in church foyers and sticking out of Christians’ Bibles. Some believers have opted out of Wednesday night Bible classes for support groups.

What’s going on here? What does all this terminology mean? What is the force that has spawned it? Is it dangerous to faith and pulling members away from the church? Should church leaders be alarmed?

Be very skeptical of anyone who offers a glib, one-size-fits-all assessment of today’s recovery movement, recovery vocabulary, or the relationship of recovery to salvation. In this issue of *Wineskins*, we hope to provide a variety of helpful insights that will assist you in understanding what is going on in this modern phenomenon and some of its implications.

Have some people abandoned the church for support groups? Yes. Does this mean that Christians who get involved in the recovery movement are likely to renounce the church? No. Are 12-step programs inherently dangerous? No. Are there potential abuses and harmful outcomes to the spiritual lives of people who participate in 12-step programs? Yes. Are there potential abuses and harmful outcomes to the spiritual lives of people who attend church regularly? Yes. Is there a foolproof way to know in advance which support groups and churches will be sources of harm to those who get involved with them? No.

The famous “12 steps” of Alcoholics Anonymous underlie a modern phenomenon in which millions of people are involved.<sup>1</sup> People dealing with substance abuse, poor parenting, incest, gambling, and yes, religion have come together to share experiences, offer non-judgmental acceptance of one another, and support each other in developing healthier coping skills. The one requirement of joining such a group is that one must truly want to overcome some enslaving, self-destructive behavior.

There is nothing about the 12 steps that is anti-Christian. As a matter of fact, they are very biblical in nature.<sup>2</sup> Beginning with honesty, repentance, and surrender to one’s “Higher Power” and moving through confession of specific wrongdoings and making restitution where possible all the way to pointing other strugglers to the prospect of breaking away from their enslaving behaviors, they resemble a sound theology of redemption, sanctification, and evangelism.

If its method resembles theology, then why were Alcoholics Anonymous and its sister movements founded? Because the church was failing to do its job!

Half a century ago, alcoholics weren't getting much that was practical or helpful from churches. They were getting harsh looks and ringing denunciations. If one confessed to drunkenness or was found out as an alcoholic, he or she would be stripped of church office or function and given no help. In subtle and not-so-subtle ways, such persons would be made to feel both unwelcome and unwanted by churches. At the end of some of the finger-shaking scoldings they got from incensed church leaders, many of them had to go immediately and have a drink!

In the absence of firm disapproval of an unhealthy behavior coupled with resolute acceptance of the person enmeshed in it from the church, these people had to establish a healing support system in "secular" form. Thus the 12-step movement came into being as a response to the failure of the church to deal with alcoholics, gamblers, and the like on the model of Jesus' treatment of them (cf. John 8:1ff). If the church had been behaving toward people enslaved by sinful habits in the manner Jesus did, there probably would never have been a need for AA, CoDA, GA, SA, and the dozens of other support groups that today aid millions of people in breaking free of sick habits and sinful deeds.

Our culture is using the word "recovery" in much the same way the Bible uses the term "salvation." As a secular goal, recovery means breaking certain self-destructive patterns of thinking and behaving, reestablishing (where possible) right relationships with others, and surrendering to a reality greater than self (i.e., a "Higher Power"). As a biblical goal, salvation means being redeemed from sin, reconciled to one's brothers and sisters, and taking up one's cross daily to follow Christ. The former is simply a less distinct version of the latter.

Many people give AA credit for turning their lives around and restoring meaning to their existence. Not for a moment would I discount the significance of the 12 steps to their recovery from alcoholism. As a Christian, though, I am forced to believe that their recovery has a "glass ceiling" without Jesus Christ. The 12 steps can get one sober, refocus one's attention on life's real priorities, and allow a person to resume a positive role in society. Without the blood of Christ and the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit, though, life in its fullest form remains elusive.

Without the blood of Christ, for example, forgiveness is only partial at best. Since all sin is against God, pardon must ultimately come from him. It is as impossible to forgive oneself of sin as it is to sit in one's own lap.

Without the power of the Holy Spirit, human willpower as buttressed by caring friends is the limit of one's capacity for doing good. The Holy Spirit, however, opens vistas beyond what is possible by human resolve and resources.

Although some will choose between the alternatives, it will be far wiser to see the compatibility of our culture's vigorous pursuit of "recovery" and the biblical concept of "salvation."

Most Christians could benefit from greater openness about ourselves and less censure of others, more passion for being authentically spiritual and less for being artificially religious. Most would grow stronger in the Lord by having a small group of trustworthy people by whom to be held accountable and with whom to be spiritually transparent without being judged. Most would

admit their need for the sort of loving support that comes from intimacy with others who share a common spiritual goal. These are things the church is supposed to provide its members but too often fails in because of formalism and caution born of experience.

All persons in recovery from what 12-step movements call “insane behavior” need Jesus, for it is only in him that one becomes a “new creation” (2 Corinthians 5:17) and ceases to be merely a victim of his or her own past.

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1 The “basic text” for AA that contains the Twelve Steps, the Twelve Traditions, and explains how the program works is *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 3rd ed. (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc., 1976). It is often referred to as The Big Book. It may be purchased by calling the telephone number for AA/Alcoholics Anonymous in one’s local telephone book. The same number provides information on times and locations for meetings in the area.

2Cf. Nan Robertson, *Getting Better: Inside Alcoholics Anonymous* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1988), pp. 56-85.

## John's Support Group

*by Debbie Runions*

*September – October, 1998*

From the time I was a child I loved the story of Job. I felt that the much-put-upon hero of the ancient play was a kindred spirit. Oh, I wasn't a king like Job was, nor was I rich, nor was I the greatest among my people. But Job's favorite question was mine: "Why?"

Job's questions were born after a series of personal disasters. In the span of a day Job lost his children, his servants, and his vast holdings of livestock. Shortly after that he was afflicted with a disease that was painful, contagious, and terminal. His wife suggested that he curse God and die. Job refused to sin. He did, however, demand that God come before him and give reasons for his suffering.

My questions came from a similar series of events. Job became my mentor as I tried to reconcile a holy God with a wounded world.

When my husband died in an automobile accident at age 32, I like Job said, "Do I have power to help myself... a despairing (wo)man should have the devotion of (her) friends..." (Job 6:13,14). I turned to the church that had been our religious home since we came together as a family.

However, my "support" was almost identical to Job's. As I began to "speak out in the anguish of my spirit and complain in the bitterness of my soul" (Job 7:11), my religious kinsmen began to give me the pat answers that Job's friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, had offered him. I was reprimanded for my questions, judged as one who was rebellious to God's will and told that we suffer as punishment for sin. The least offensive insight offered the suggestion of Job's youngest friend, Elihu: God sends suffering to keep you from sinning. My questions concerning the nature of God and good and evil were labeled blasphemy. I was warned that I was courting the Unforgivable Sin.

Like Job, I cried, "My brothers are as undependable as intermittent streams...(they) have proved to be of no help; (they) see something dreadful and are afraid" (Job 6:15-21).

Worse than being undependable, with the exception of a few bright and notable personal friends, church people were so abusive in their judgment, so harsh in their criticism, so unwilling to allow me to search for my own spiritual answers within their fellowship that, like Job, I pleaded, "How long will you torment me and crush me with words? Ten times now you have reproached me, shamelessly you attack me. Miserable comforters are you all! Will your long-winded speeches never end? You are worthless physicians, all of you!" (Job 16:2,3; 13:4). Then, in a straightening of my spirit's robes, like Job I said to my "support" group, "If it is true that I have gone astray, my error remains my concern alone" (Job 19:1-4). And I left the church in search of healing.

No matter how hard life became I continued to probe God, to search for the answers to unfathomable questions. Job continued to be my way-shower.

My public relations company failed. I lost my house. My son took an accidental fall from a three-story platform during military training. Irreparable damage to his spine abruptly ended his childhood dream to make the Marines his life's career. My daughter took a drug overdose and almost died. I became addicted to a man who so controlled my every moment of time, my every thought, and my every resource, that I was emotionally and financially bankrupt.

But I never lost touch with my source. He never took his eyes from me. And through his servant, Job, God began to teach me what a real support group would be like:

- 1) Taking cue from the dialogue of Elihu (the only friend of Job who was not directly reprimanded by God), the perfect support group would be all inclusive, recognizing that all people are the children of God by virtue of the common Spirit within them. "The Spirit of God has made me; the breath of the Almighty gives me life" (Job 33:4). "If it were his intention and he withdrew his breath, all mankind would perish together and man would return to the dust" (Job 34:14, 15). "But it is the spirit in a man, the breath of the Almighty, that gives him understanding" (Job 32:8).
- 2) A truly healing circle of encouragers would cast out fear with perfect love by recognizing that there is only one power. "He destroys both the blameless and the wicked.... If it is not he, then who is it?" (Job 9:22/24). By trusting that our sovereign loves us and wishes us well, we lay the foundation upon which we may surrender our will to his guidance. "You gave me life and showed me kindness and in your providence watched over my spirit" (Job 10:12). "You (God) will call and I will answer you; you will long for the creature your hands have made. Surely then you will count my steps but not keep track of my sin. My offenses will be sealed up in a bag; you will cover my sin" (Job 14:14-17).
- 3) The entry fee for the consummate support group would be an awareness of mutual suffering. "Men at ease have contempt for misfortune as the fate of those whose feet are slipping" (Job 12:5).
- 4) The goal of the group would be grace. Participants would be able to examine personal pain, explore the nature of God and discover the relationship between the two in an atmosphere of non-judgmental acceptance. "Have pity on me, my friends, have pity, for the hand of God has struck me" (Job 19:21).
- 5) Listen quietly. When the one who needs support and encouragement tells his story the ones who have the healing role of listening would do just that. "If only you would be altogether silent! For you, that would be wisdom" (Job 13:5). "Keep silent and let me speak; then let come to me what may.... Indeed, this might turn out for my deliverance" (Job 13:13, 16).
- 6) Those listening would encourage the healing of secrets by demanding rigorous honesty and strenuous personal integrity. In return, they would listen in humility and respond in trustworthiness. "As surely as God lives.... As long as I have life with me, the breath of God in my nostrils, my lips will not speak wickedness and my tongue will utter no deceit.... I will not deny my integrity. I will maintain my righteousness and never let go of it..." (Job 27:3-6).
- 7) There would be a time and place to confess one's sins without condemnation, for carrying something inside makes it darker and heavier. Speaking it into the light automatically removes some of the fear, shame, or guilt attached. "If I have concealed my sin as men do, by hiding my

guilt in my heart because I so feared the crowd and so dreaded the contempt of the clans that I kept silent and would not go outside. Oh, that I had someone to hear me!” (Job 31:33-35).

8) The perfect sanctuary of healing would be a safe place in which we could question God and demand an accounting of our suffering. “But where can wisdom be found? Where does understanding dwell?” (Job 28:12). And when God speaks, when the spiritual physicians of the group perfect their practice of listening, accepting, allowing and loving, the place of healing will hear from the recovered soul, “Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know.... My ears had heard, but now my eyes have seen...therefore...I repent”(Job 42:3,5,6).

The Book of Job ends with God granting Job’s request by personally appearing before him. With great eloquence he answers all of Job’s questions because, “These are my mysteries.” Then the Almighty chastises Job’s friends and exalts his servant. God says to Eliphaz and his two buddies that he is angry with the “support” they gave their friend and will not even allow them to sacrifice for their own sins, but demands that Job do it for them. God then multiplies Job’s blessings until they are greater than they were at the beginning of his tests.

The message that God delivers to mankind through the story of Job is that he is not threatened by examination. He is not angered by our questions. He will not visit his wrath upon those who dare to stand in his face and demand answers. Indeed, the opposite is true. God admires one willing to strap on the armor of a spiritual warrior and rewards the individual upon whom he heaps sorrows with wisdom and blessings.

Man has a dual nature. His body, mind, and emotions are human, but the spirit within him is divine. If he cannot find a place within the church to feed his spirit, to accept his humanity, and heal the wounds created by the chafing of the two pressing against each other, he will seek or create such a place for himself outside. That’s how the 12-step recovery programs started. And that’s where I found my healing.

## I Work for the Lord

*by Mike Cope*

*September – October, 1993*

***...while judgments about me swirl all around me, I must remember that only one judgment counts.***

Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy. But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself. I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive commendation from God.

(1 Corinthians 4:1-5)

I work for the Lord.

I love it when some of my brothers and sisters at church express their appreciation for my ministry. A note of encouragement in the mail is worth more than a year's salary. An arm around the shoulder with an affirming nod by an elder is a rescuing arm. A smile from the pew when I make eye contact is a vaccination that protects me from the despair and discouragement that so easily seep into my life. I love my brothers and sisters. But I work for the Lord.

It hurts when some can only find fault, when they question my motives, when they belittle my attempts to lead, when they gossip about me behind my back. That kind of treatment is a third-degree burn. But I work for the Lord.

Sometimes my conscience is clear: I feel like my motives are noble; I know that my preparation has been thorough; I remember that I have ministered not only to the people but with the people. A clear conscience is a vacation that can be enjoyed any week! But I work for the Lord.

At other times my conscience isn't so clear. It's a bit murky. I know that my motives are mixed, that my mind wants to be fully devoted to the Lord while my life lags behind by about half a lap. I feel a deep sense of inadequacy. I think the people deserve better. Someone more genuine. But I work for the Lord.

So while judgments about me swirl all around me, I must remember that only one judgment counts. And while every day my feelings soar or sink based upon the evaluations of people, I must remember that there is a Great Day coming. Ultimately, it is the only day that counts.

Because I work for the Lord.

## Where Does Satan Fit In?

by Don Umphrey

September – October, 1993

“It looks good, Don, but where does Satan fit into the picture?”

“Nowhere,” I answered inwardly. Outwardly, though, I tried to put on a polite smile and said something like, “That’s an interesting question, and I really hadn’t thought of it.” It was a Sunday night after church, and I was sitting in the living room of Dr. John and Sandy Bell, friends of mine in Dallas. They had just read the first draft of my book manuscript, *Twelve Steps to a Closer Walk with God*, and I was there to get their feedback.

As I pondered their question, quite honestly it didn’t set too well. Didn’t they know I was there only to receive praise for my writing? It was clear to me that Satan did not have anything to do with the 12-step model. If the father of lies was included, surely I would have already thought of it, wouldn’t I?

I had been brought up, as we often say, “in the church” and graduated from a Christian college. But soon thereafter I was involved in daily drunkenness and quit going to church. I professed to being either an atheist or agnostic because there was no way I could justify my lifestyle with the Word of God. I grew increasingly miserable and was near the end of my rope – and probably my life – in 1973. After a stay in the hospital, I joined a 12-step group. I soon came to see that my “Higher Power” was the God I knew about from the Bible and his Son, Jesus Christ. I returned to church in 1974 and rededicated my life to the Lord.

As I attended both church and the 12-step group over the years, I marveled in the growing realization that the principles helping to keep me sober were straight from the Bible. Usually, the more practical approach taken at the 12-step group made these things easier to understand. For example, there was a strong emphasis on “just don’t pick up a drink today” and on living one day at a time as Jesus taught in Matthew 6:34. Concerning judging one another, people at the group meeting would say, “If you’ve got a finger pointed at someone else, you’ve got three fingers pointing back at yourself.” A similar lesson is taught in Matthew 7:1-5.

Since 12-step groups are “spiritual” in nature but not religious, people leave their respective religious beliefs at the door and usually no one actually quotes Scriptures. This way we focus on our common goal of sobriety and avoid many of the divisive issues that have plagued the church. But with the obvious parallels between the Bible and recovery program principles, I began using them in the Bible classes I taught. People seemed to appreciate this very practical approach to the Bible studies. As a result, I wrote the first draft of the book with the idea that all Christians could benefit from studying the steps and their biblical basis.

Shortly after I sobered up, an old-time lawyer said our 12-step group was like an adjustable wrench – it would fit any size nut. I laughed at the time, but over the years I could see there was a great deal of truth in what he said. The steps written by early members of Alcoholics

Anonymous in the 1930s had been adopted by some 200 groups aimed at a wide variety of problems, such as addictions to food, sex, gambling, controlling others, drugs, child abuse, and the list goes on. The only difference in the steps between these groups is the thing they name in the first step over which they are powerless and in the twelfth step as to whom they attempt to carry the message. So, for example, the first step of Alcoholics Anonymous is, “We admitted we were powerless over alcohol, that our lives had become unmanageable.” Rather than alcohol, a sex addict would name sex, a drug addict, drugs, etc.

Why would these same 12 steps work for such diverse problems? What was the common link? The answer proved to be the premise for my book: The steps are designed to take one from being self-centered to being God-centered.

This self-centered behavior might manifest itself in any number of ways, including alcoholism, compulsive spending, gossip, etc. Since we are made in the likeness of God, we will know peace and happiness if we are like him. But there are any number of false gods that might take over our lives. When this happens, we are in a crash course with reality. It’s like trying to defy the law of gravity by attempting to fly and landing on your face. The same thing is true for spiritual laws, only the ramifications are eternal. I landed on my face and nearly killed myself when alcohol became my false god. For many people I’ve known, this fall has been fatal.

With many years of sobriety and while teaching both Sunday morning and Wednesday night classes at church, I nearly landed on my face again. This time work became my false god. And it was only when I became quite miserable (i.e. dizzy spells, waking up at night gasping for breath) that it began to dawn on me that I had become a full-blown workaholic. Once again, another manifestation of self-centeredness brought me to my knees. I had thought I was pretty close to the Lord when this occurred.

With the approach to the steps that they take people from self-centered to God-centered, it was obvious that Christians with various kinds of problems could come together in recovery groups at churches. Though their problems might differ, their common malady would be the bondage of self.

This idea of self-centered and God-centered is parallel to the opposing directions of the flesh and the spirit pointed out by the Apostle Paul (Galatians 5:16-25; Romans 8:1-7). Further, Paul seems to have had his own experience with personal powerlessness. In Romans 7:18-19 he relates how he wanted to do the right thing but kept returning to the sin he wished to avoid. How bad a problem was it for Paul? He knew his problem was terminal. In Romans 6:24 he said, “O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” His answer, of course, is in the next verse: Jesus Christ.

I also could see that the prodigal son went through a process that was similar to the 12 steps. He was full of himself when he left home, took the first four steps in a pig pen and journeyed home with the heart of a servant, a part of Step 12.

With this kind of grasp of the biblical basis of the steps, can't you now understand why John and Sandy's question about Satan's role seemed so irrelevant to me? But if that was true, why did I keep on thinking about it in the weeks and months that followed?

In the spring and summer of 1990, I was a Wednesday night speaker at numerous Dallas-area churches on the topic of both my personal experience with alcoholism and the 12 steps. Then that fall, I started Christian recovery groups at two churches and used my unpublished manuscript as the text. Through the speaking engagements and the recovery groups, I believe positive contributions were made in the lives of some people. I know I learned a lot.

First, I was astounded at some churches when approached by a Christian who would say something like this: "I used to have a problem with booze, but I licked it on my own." This, to me, was nothing less than blasphemy. In years of going to 12-step group meetings, I had heard literally thousands of people say, "It is only through the grace of God that I've been sober since..." and the person would name the date. I'd also seen members of 12-step groups point to filthy-looking, homeless drunks and say: "But for the grace of God, there go I." I wondered, then, how it was possible for Christians not to give God the glory. Didn't they understand that they could accomplish nothing for good except for the grace of God?

I also ran into some individuals who objected to the disease concept of alcoholism, sex addiction, etc. In their minds, calling alcoholism a disease negates the fact that the Bible calls drunkenness a sin. Further, this conceptualization seems to relieve alcoholics of being responsible for their own actions. Neither of these things is true, and what it boils down to is a misunderstanding of what the word "alcoholic" means. In the minds of some people, an alcoholic is synonymous with a drunk, but this is not the way 12-step programs view diseases such as alcoholism. For example, I haven't had a drink containing alcohol since November 6, 1973, but I still consider myself an alcoholic. Thus, it is a matter of whether someone is a sober alcoholic or a wet one. Wet alcoholics are committing the sin of drunkenness. Through the grace of God, that is a sin I haven't committed in some 20 years.

As for the disease, it is defined by the American Medical Association as being mental, physical, and spiritual. And what else is spiritual sickness but sin? Further, alcoholism is viewed as a terminal disease; there is no cure for it, because once you cross the line into alcoholism, you can never go back to "normal" drinking. It is sort of like every pickle was once a cucumber, but no pickle can ever return to being a cucumber. Thankfully, alcoholics can keep their disease in a state of arrest by not picking up the first drink.

I'll admit that I've heard people on television talk about the disease concept and make it sound as if they were not responsible for their own actions. But these people were either not a part of or not working a 12-step program. Take a look at Steps 4, 5, 8, and 9, and you'll see where the personal responsibility comes in.

Another hang-up between some Christians and 12-step groups is with the "Higher Power" concept and the mention of "God as we understood Him" in Steps 3 and 11. Eddy Ketchersid, minister of the church where I am a member, told me he bristled when he first saw the 12 steps. "I wanted people to understand God as I did, not as they wished to," Eddy said. "But then I came

to understand that where else could God start with people but exactly where they are.” As far as the “Higher Power,” a lot of people entering 12-step groups have strong resentments against organized religion, and they wouldn’t think of visiting a church. Their starting point is simply a realization that there is something in the universe bigger than themselves. Later, they may grow in their understanding of God.

“But,” some people have said, “These 12-step groups keep people from going to church.” This is probably true in some cases. But if, for example, a black homosexual man with AIDS and also addicted to crack cocaine, showed up at your congregation, would he receive the help he needed? Are there a lot of people at your church who would openly share their own brokenness with this person? Would he identify with the members at your church? Would he feel comfortable in your worship services? What if the person was a white welfare grandmother whose arms and body were covered with tattoos and who was on the verge of delirium tremens due to alcohol abuse? I’ll let you answer those questions. I do know there are 12-step groups where these people would identify and feel comfortable.

While it is true that I have seen some people use the 12-step group as a church, the literature in the anonymous group of which I am a member encourages church membership. I have also seen numerous people in the early stages of recovery in a 12-step group who claimed to be agnostics or atheists and who later returned to church. One of them was me.

When I set up the Christian recovery groups at the two congregations in the fall of 1990, I learned that not all Christians fit into a Christian recovery group, as I had originally thought. One of the groups we established that fall included some Christians who had already admitted powerlessness over food, alcohol, and marijuana. Others in that same group were good Christian people who had not been brought to their knees by an addictive behavior. As we covered one step each week, it was clear that the non-addicted Christians did not identify. They could see how the steps might be beneficial for the rest of us, but some of the terminology bothered them, such as the word “insanity” in Step Two. As I thought about it, I could see that if someone could not take Step One, Step Two would be impossible. This lack of identification with the steps caused the addicted individuals in the group to feel self-conscious about sharing their own experiences. By the time we got to Step 12, just a few people were showing up, and the group then disbanded.

A requirement for attendance at the second congregation was that everyone had to take Step One by admitting powerlessness over some substance, behavior or pattern of thinking. At the beginning we had Christians who were powerless over alcohol, food, sex, resentments, and rage. Because we all recognized our powerlessness, we had a common bond. After more than three years, that group still meets every Thursday night. Of course, not all of the current members are the original members, but I can think of three non-believers who first entered the church via the recovery group who were subsequently baptized; one of those went on to head the congregation’s ministry to the homeless. Others attend the group regularly who are members of other religious organizations.

As a result of these experiences, I changed the book to recommend that only those who can take Step One should attend Christian recovery groups. I still believe it is helpful for other Christians

to study the steps and their biblical basis, but in a format such as a Bible class, where participants are not required to share first-person experiences. Something about this still bothers me, though. Since anyone who commits a sin is a slave to sin (John 8:34), aren't we all powerless over sin? If we aren't, why did Jesus die for us? Is it just that most Christians don't realize their own powerlessness? If this is true, no wonder we have a hard time understanding the concept of grace.

As you might expect, I was not able to forget John and Sandy's question about the role of Satan. After all, who else was responsible for sin but Satan? But where did the father of all lies fit? A book in the theology library where I teach pointed me to an eye-opening scripture. The verses come in the midst of a discussion about the king of Babylon, but most theologians say the quotation could not apply to any human being. In this scripture, God talks about Satan and then quotes Satan:

*How you are fallen from heaven,  
Lucifer, son of the morning!  
How you are cut down to the ground,  
You who weakened the nations!  
For you have said in your heart:  
"I will ascend into heaven,  
I will exalt my throne above the stars of God;  
I will also sit on the mount of the congregation,  
On the farthest sides of the north;  
I will ascend above the heights of the clouds,  
I will be like the Most High."  
(Isaiah 14:12-14)*

From this brief quotation you can count five times where Satan, originally an angel, was centered on "I will..." rather than God's will. He was the first one with self-centeredness, with the big "I," with pride. Satan said he was going to take over for God. As a result, he was kicked out of heaven. He wants to drag us down with him to the place prepared for him and his followers.

I remember people in my 12-step group saying: "There's something really important you've got to remember: There is a God, and you ain't him." I originally thought this was a pointless cliché, but it now took on meaning. It means that not only do drunks worship the idol of alcohol, but the more they indulge themselves, the more their egos get out of whack and the more they "play God." When anyone ignores God's law and starts "playing God," he or she is doing exactly what Satan did. And it is the biggest lie in the world.

I could then understand that Satan was the author of the New Age movement with its emphasis on each person being his own god. It was Satan who inspired the Third Reich with its desire to restructure humanity and breed a "god-man" who would rule the world. And we all know who said to Eve, "You will be like God..." (Genesis 3:5).

But I also could bring it much closer to home. When I judge people, it is a form of “playing God” because only God can read their minds to know their motives. When I start thinking I am always right, it is “playing God” because only he is right all the time.

It was Satan who told me the lie that booze would make me sexy and popular. As I followed Satan’s advice, I denied the existence of God. By doing this I was the ultimate arbiter of right and wrong in my life, a law unto myself, thus “playing God.” Rather than sexy and popular, the belief in Satan’s lie turned me into an undesirable, neurotic, slob on the verge of suicide.

Years later, it was Satan who whispered this lie in my ear: “If you do one more article for an academic journal, you will be number one in the U. S. in your research field.” I slavishly followed his advice and found there was no end to the lure of “one more article.” In the process I became a selfish, miserable workaholic, again with thoughts of suicide.

It’s quite clear that Satan wants the destruction of my body, mind, and soul. And he will lure me into believing his lie by appealing to my ego, my pride, by telling me I will be rich, famous, and that I’ll “feel good.”

I still believe my premise about the 12-steps is correct: they are designed to take people from self-centered to God-centered. But thanks to John and Sandy, I now understand the source of this self-centeredness. The premise of the steps may also be summarized in this way: Am I going to follow Satan or Jesus? It gets us back to a pretty basic question, doesn’t it?

What bothers me, though, is that millions of people around us believe Satan’s lies. You can see the results as these people self-destruct, bringing our society down with them. How can we reach these non-believers? And what about my brothers and sisters in Christ who think they can solve their own problems or who don’t understand they are powerless over sin? I wonder who’s whispering what in their ears?

## Jesus Challenges Culture

*by Dan Anders*

*September – October, 1993*

The opening chapters of Mark's Gospel picture an authoritative Jesus. In a series of dramatic vignettes, Mark shows us that Jesus is in control. He rapidly faces down the Devil and chases out demons. He calls disciples to follow him, and they follow without a word. He gives teaching that is fresh, clear, distinctive. He heals all kinds of diseases and sets his own daily schedule. He even claims God's exclusive prerogative of forgiving sins.

The section contains several other decisive pictures of Jesus' authority. Some of them relate to his challenge of traditional rules and behavior among God's people.

### **JESUS CHALLENGES TRADITIONAL RULES**

A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, "If you are willing, you can make me clean."

Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured. (Mark 1:40-42).

In this simple story Jesus clearly stepped across the cultural and religious norms of his day. The Law of Moses gave clear instructions as to how leprosy was to be diagnosed and treated. Almost the entire thirteenth chapter of Leviticus is taken up with these detailed regulations.

Basic to all the rules was the requirement that lepers were to be isolated from the rest of Israelite society. "The person with such an infectious disease must wear torn clothes, let his hair be unkempt, cover the lower part of his face and cry out, 'Unclean! Unclean!' As long as he has the infection he remains unclean. He must live alone; he must live outside the camp." (Leviticus 13:45,46).

This isolation was not so much for fear of contagion, or because of hygienic concerns. The "uncleanness" of a leper was ceremonial, like that resulting from touching a dead body or a woman's menstrual period.

The Law required that such defiled people could not fellowship with the rest of society. They could not share in corporate worship. Until the term of their uncleanness passed and certain rituals were completed, they had to stay away from undefiled persons.

The leper in Mark's story threw away the book of rules. His desperate plight drove him close to Jesus. He did not shout out the horrible warning cry "Unclean!" Instead he begged Jesus to heal him.

Jesus' reaction, according to this text, was not gross revulsion. Rather he was "filled with compassion" – a word that is often used in the Synoptic Gospels almost exclusively to describe Jesus' own emotions.

"Compassion" is a strong word. Our English word is from Latin, meaning "to suffer with." The Greek word *splagchnidzomai* indicates a sharp pain in the intestines, which to ancient cultures was the center of the emotions. We reflect that same understanding when we speak of "feeling something in our gut."

Do not miss the point of this simple statement. Jesus' compassion for a leper is powerful. A Jewish scholar, C. G. Montefiore wrote, "Here we begin to catch the new note in the ministry of Jesus; his intense compassion for the outcast, the sufferer, who, by his sin, or by his suffering... had put himself outside respectable Jewish society."<sup>1</sup>

Jesus, filled with inner pain at a sufferer's plight, did the unthinkable! He "reached out his hand and touched the man." He simply stepped over the rules of acceptable behavior.

There are some strong implications that follow from Jesus' action. For one thing, he clearly cared more for people than he did for cautious legalisms.

Make no mistake about it: Jesus' actions violated a ceremonial rule. His behavior ritually defiled him. Here is the clear rule: "Or if he touches human uncleanness – anything that would make him unclean – even though he is unaware of it, he has become unclean and is guilty" (Leviticus 5:3).

Jesus was more concerned about a suffering human being than he was about some ceremonial regulation. Which receives our greatest attention: meticulous keeping of traditional rules, or genuine helpfulness to others?

I know a Christian woman who disapproves of homosexual behavior. But her rejection of gay lifestyles does not stifle her human compassion. She works regularly to care for AIDS patients in a variety of helpful ways. She does not let cultural norms keep her from touching the untouchable.

Change the figure a bit. It is a good thing to oppose abortion as a means of birth control. But do we merely object to wrong? Or do we practice right? How many abortion protesters adopt a child from a minority racial group? Who will take a child who is born HIV-positive or drug dependent?

Following Jesus means more than keeping careful rules to maintain our purity. To follow Jesus involves doing good, even when we must go against society's taboos.

Another implication of Jesus' action here is that he was not specially concerned with what people thought of him. Undoubtedly some who saw him touch a leper thought he had broken the Torah.

Now there is no specific rule that forbids such contact – just the clear consequence of becoming ceremonially unclean. That act alone was enough to turn off some people. Jesus simply didn't care about such jaundiced opinions. Whatever people thought of him, he did what was right for people.

If we dare to become Christ-like, we will reach over barriers of class or gender or nationality or acceptability. Regardless of how others may condemn us, we will determinedly do what we believe to be right.

Another implication from Jesus' touch is his own strong sense of right. He knew the right thing to do. And he took it on himself to do it. His authority and integrity would not let him back down, in spite of negative press. Being judged in the wrong was not very important compared with doing what was right.

“His touching the leper does not imply disrespect for the Law, but rather reflects his consciousness of being the Son,” Jesus knew who he was and what he had to do. No rule or ritual could derail his firm commitment to behave as he knew he should.

## **JESUS CHALLENGES TRADITIONAL FELLOWSHIP**

Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them. As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth. “Follow me,” Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him. (Mark 2:13-14).

Anyone who reads the Gospels has met the Pharisees. These were the “Segregationists” or “Puritans” of their day. They insisted on the absolute distinctiveness of Israel and its religion. They demanded a sharp demarcation from the world.

It is certainly true that the old covenant Scriptures warned Israel not to mix with pagans and idolaters. There was real risk that God's people could be led away to serve other gods.

But the Pharisees had gone a step farther to keep themselves pure. They simply wrote off all who contacted pagans, and also any who failed to keep all the proper purity rules. Such careless Israelites were considered “sinners” by true puritans.

The tax collectors were a despised group because they worked for and associated with heathen Romans. To fellowship with such riffraff could defile a really conscientious Jew. The best thing to do, a Pharisee would argue, was to avoid any contact with people who failed their purity tests. Such scumbags were simply below the level of Pharisaic fellowship.

Needless to say, Jesus had a very different view of life. He wanted to welcome every needy person. His only requirement was that people recognize their own need of salvation.

So instead of rejecting a tax collector, Jesus called Levi to be one of his closest followers. And then he compounded the situation by going to a party in Levi's home, eating with "many tax collectors and 'sinners.'"

It made Jewish religious leaders gag that a supposed rabbi had such poor taste in company. They began to write Jesus off. He couldn't be a real teacher if he had such faulty spiritual discrimination.

But their hyper-critical judgments could not sway Jesus from helping people who needed help, regardless of what the separatists thought of him or his companions.

Some people need help, know that they do, and so want help. Others don't know that they need help and therefore do not welcome it. Jesus always focused his main attention on those who knew that they were sinners needing salvation.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit...those who mourn...those who hunger and thirst for righteousness" (Matthew 5:3,4,6). These are the people Jesus applauds, the ones that God accepts. Jesus can only save and bless those who turn to him, because they have no other place to turn.

Quite often, these needy folks will not be the "rich and famous." They may be unattractive and uncouth. Usually they will be different from our social group. They could be distasteful to our preferences. They may not be "our kind of people."

Who in our day are these lepers? These tax collectors? These "sinners"? They may be the unwed mother, the undocumented alien, gays or lesbians, the handicapped, the gang banger, the divorced person, the woman who's had an abortion, the alcoholic. You fill out your own list.

The plain truth is, almost any time we feel repelled by a person's behavior, Jesus would be right there. Whenever someone sees his or her spiritual sickness, Jesus will be their physician.

Heedless of his own reputation, Dr. Jesus always makes house calls. Maybe we who claim to follow him should do more of the same.

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1 Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark*, p. 187

2 C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St. Mark*, p. 93.

## To Honey

by John McRay

September – October, 1993

*I wrote this for Annette (“Honey” to the family and me) on May 29, 1989, just 10 days before my quadruple bypass surgery on June 9, our 32nd wedding anniversary, when I was not at all sure about the outcome. Through God’s gracious mercy, I made it through the surgery and have been able to continue my work, but not without the realization that such heartfelt emotions need to be expressed.*

Honey, my Darling, my Beloved, my Life:

As I write this, my mind crowded with a million memories of our life together, all of them wonderful and precious, I want you to know how very much I love you, how very much I have always loved you. You have been everything to me that I could ever have wanted, more than I could ever have dared to dream, all that God would expect a wife to be.

Together we have climbed the hilltops, felt his presence, and known the joys of worshipping him in the beauty of his creation in so many places. The hilltops belong to us. Every time you see one, think of me, because, God willing, I will be thinking of you.

From the first time I saw you in the hallway at Lipscomb, with those blue eyes dancing, I have loved you. You are the most wonderful person, the finest Christian, I have ever known. It has been a privilege that few men have ever known to share 32 years of marriage to a woman who never once entertained a selfish thought or did a selfish deed. I don’t really know how to tell you how much you have meant to me every day I have lived, how I look forward every day to your footsteps in the house, your wonderful smile and radiant joy. Without it, life would have lost its meaning for me.

We have been best friends, loving parents, and doting grandparents. We have shared our love in a depth that most people could only envy. If God allows us to have memories of only the good things in life, I will spend eternity thinking of every moment I lived with you. I have loved you, perhaps not perfectly, but as completely as God has granted me the power to love. There has never been a day in my life since we married on June 9, 1957, that you were not in my thoughts. I have never wished for a moment that we were not married. I have tried to imagine what life would be like without you and the pain is so intense that I cannot bear it. I wonder if any man has ever loved his wife more than I love you, and if God be willing, I shall love you more deeply, even after death.

How do I love you? Let me count the ways. I love you for helping me make of the lumber of my life, not a tavern, but a temple. I love you for seeing in me something to love in spite of my selfish and arrogant ways. I love you for being the mother of the three finest sons in the world. They are the products of your love and sacrifice, not mine. I love you for the pain and total

selflessness you experienced to bring them into the world and to give yourself to them during very difficult years when they were young and so close together.

I love you for supporting me and encouraging me when I tried to preach, for making me feel that I was a great preacher. I have always known that I was only mediocre but somehow it didn't really matter when I saw you in the audience looking at me with such love and joy in your face. I guess that is why I never really like to go away from home and preach. I have always needed you by my side.

I don't know whether I have told you how very proud I have always been to have you standing by my side. You make me feel 10 feet tall, and I have always felt like I had the wife everyone envied. I am sure that was true and still is.

Darling, I leave you very little of this world's goods. I know you will rely on God, however, as we always have, and he will not fail you. Our boys will be a blessing to you. They love you, as do the girls, and will want you near them. They have been our investment for the future.

Please tell my precious grandchildren, when they are old enough to understand, how deeply Poobah loved them all. I only regret that I will not be able to see Barry and Sydney's children. I know they will have one just like the one at the Jordan House in Jerusalem, with dark hair and eyes and a special smile for Pooh and Honey.

Tell my wonderful sons how much you know their father has always loved them and how very, very proud I have always been of them. Their achievements are remarkable and have only just begun. Please impress on them how much I love each one and how pleased I have been over the women they chose for their wives. Tell Judy, Joanie, and Sydney that I have loved them deeply and pray that they will have affectionate memories of Poohbah.

Well, Honey, I must finally say goodbye. You brought into my life a joy that can only be described as divine. King Lemuel had you in mind when he wrote: "Her children rise up and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her" (Proverbs 31:28). I honor you and praise you as that "Worthy Woman." I truly found the one of whom he wrote. Thank you for filling my life with His love, as well as your own.

I have had more joy than any one man deserves to experience in a lifetime. Such happiness is never easy to leave, but if it is His will that it not continue, I will say goodbye to you with the promise that your face will be the last thing I remember, and the confident hope that we will meet again at the eastern gate.

I love you beyond reason, beyond hope, and, God willing, beyond death.

John

## **12 Step Explosion: A Christian Response to the Recovery Movement**

*by C. Jefferson Hood*

*September – October, 1993*

At the time it didn't seem like much of a meeting. One man, desperately attempting to stay sober, met another man who had been unable to stop drinking. The two hit it off in a remarkable way. After a month of late-night talks and with the help of a conservative religious meeting they had found, the second man joined the first in a vow of sobriety. The place was Akron, Ohio, the date was June 10, 1935, and the group which was founded would five years later become known as Alcoholics Anonymous.

Psychiatrist Scott Peck has called the founding of AA the greatest event of the twentieth century. Author Keith Miller has referred to the 12 steps as "a way of spiritual healing and growth that may well be the most important spiritual model of any age for many contemporary Christians." What began with the efforts to help two men struggling to stay sober has grown into a recovery movement which has worked the miracle of change in the lives of millions of people. Today there is a growing number of groups which use the 12 steps as a guide to overcoming problems and addictions in their lives. Narcotics Anonymous, Codependents Anonymous, Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous, Debtors Anonymous, and Alanon are just some of the recovery groups AA has spawned.

Yet with all the accolades AA and the assorted recovery groups have received, many Christians are at best ambivalent and at worst hostile toward the movement. The 12 steps focus on a "Higher Power" and the reference to "God as we understood Him" make some followers of Jesus uncomfortable. The language may sound too soft, accepting too much and excluding nothing in the religious arena. Some may fear that recovery groups will become a substitute for involvement in a local church. Also, the disease concept of addiction, a central part of AA philosophy, seems to some to release an addict from responsibility for his or her actions.

In order to know how to respond to this exploding phenomenon, some more information is needed. Understanding how the 12 steps were developed and how they are used to facilitate the recovery process can help believers know how to respond to the recovery movement and the men and women who are attempting to change their lives using this model.

### **BIBLE ROOTS**

Bill Wilson was unquestionably the most influential person in the development of Alcoholics Anonymous. In 1934 he was a grandiose, loud-talking alcoholic living in New York City. He had attempted to stop drinking a number of times, but without success. One day an old drinking friend of his, Ebby Thacher, paid him a visit. He told Wilson that he had been able to get sober through a religious experience. He had been taught by members of the Oxford Group, a group founded in the early 1900s as an evangelistic movement dedicated to reclaiming first-century Christianity. They had visited him in jail, encouraging him to surrender his life to God and when he did so, his desire to drink was gone. His life was changed.

Wilson was at first hesitant to accept his friend's testimony. He did go to a meeting sponsored by Calvary Episcopal Church, local headquarters of the Oxford Group. It took another drinking binge and hospitalization for him to recognize the seriousness of his problem. He was advised to "turn your life over to the care of God" and this time was willing to do so. From that day on, he never took another drink.

Once sober, he joined the local Oxford Group, which was led by Sam Shoemaker. Wilson would later refer to Shoemaker as the man who revealed the spiritual keys by which he and other alcoholics were liberated from prison. Those early members of what would become AA got their ideas of self-examination, acknowledgment of character defects, restitution for harm done, and working with others directly from the Oxford Group and the teaching of Sam Shoemaker.

It was during the next spring that Bill Wilson traveled to Akron, Ohio on business. His deal fell through, and he found himself depressed and broke and tempted to drink. He contacted a local member of the Oxford Group who introduced him to Dr. Bob Smith, the man who would become co-founder of AA. Together they found the support they needed to stay with their vow of sobriety.

At first they continued their work within the confines of the group, but later broke away because they saw the Oxford Group's approach as being too religious. Oxford Group meetings were small, informal gatherings. They stressed prayer, mutual confessions, the importance of making restitution when you had wronged anyone and the importance of telling your personal story. Most of these concepts and practices later found their way into AA. The publication of Alcoholics Anonymous in 1939 gave the group their name, codified the 12 steps and publicized to others the ideas of this fledgling group. The "big book" as it is called in AA circles has sold over 10 million copies.

Even from this brief history, it is easy to see that the roots of Alcoholics Anonymous, its teaching and practice, grew out of the meetings of the Oxford Groups. In addition, the core concepts of the 12 steps were also cultivated from the precepts emphasized by this restoration-minded group. The biblical influence on the wording and content of the steps is difficult to miss.

## **THE 12 STEPS**

You may have heard about them for years, but never seen a copy of the 12 steps in their entirety. For this reason, it seems important to include them here:

- 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.*

With a change in wording in the first step from “alcohol” to the particular issue or addiction being addressed, these 12 steps are used in the wide range of recovery groups available. At a typical meeting, these steps are recited as the meeting begins. The experience of repetition plants them firmly in the minds of those who attend. The real process of sobriety doesn’t come simply from attending the meetings, but from “working the steps.” The support of the group and the direction of a sponsor, usually a mentor of the same sex who has some experience in working the steps, are vital to the recovery process.

In forging these steps, the pioneers of AA rejected many of the religious concepts of the Oxford Group, but kept the spiritual dimensions. Notice the powerful force of the program. The first three are steps of surrender. Change begins in the life of a recovering person only when the problem in all its severity is admitted and God is acknowledged as the only avenue of deliverance. These three steps are a summary of the credo of every Christian who wishes to turn his life over to God and are very much in line with Paul’s teaching in Romans: “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God... I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.... Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – which is your spiritual act of worship” (Romans 3:34; 7:18; 12:1).

Steps four through nine are steps of preparation and action. Self is examined. The damage our actions have inflicted on others is acknowledged. Amends are made. These steps reflect the Bible’s entreaties to examine ourselves, confess our sins, walk humbly before the Lord and follow the golden rule (2 Corinthians 13:5; James 5:16a; 4:10; Matthew 7:12).

The final three steps focus on maintaining the changes made. People in recovery programs sustain their “sobriety” by focusing on doing a “daily 10th step,” as well as deepening their spiritual connection with God and sharing the message with others. Once again, the Bible influence on the development of these steps is easy to see. Christians are cautioned to “be careful that you don’t fall” (1 Corinthians 10:12). Paul suggests that letting “the word of Christ dwell in you richly” is an avenue to spiritual growth (Colossians 3:16). Sharing the message is a hallmark of the Christian faith (Matthew 18:18-20).

The openness of the language with respect to God only adds to the energy of the 12 steps. Since many people have been hurt by their religious ties, the use of the concept of “a power greater than ourselves” and “God as we understood Him” allows a person to receive the benefit of the steps without having to confront the religious issues in the beginning of the recovery process. As he or she grows stronger spiritually, the nature of his or her relationship with God can be examined further.

The content of these steps also makes it clear that people in recovery programs do take responsibility for their issues and addictions. The disease concept leaves no room for excuses and blaming. Those in 12-step programs are engaged in a soul-searching process which explores the depths of one's life.

## **RECOVERY PROGRAMS ARE NOT THE CHURCH**

Even though the 12 steps grew out of a church setting, working the steps isn't the same as being involved in a local church. Many addicts have testified to the life-transforming power in the program, but having a life-changing experience and having a salvation experience are two different things. While there is an encounter with God inherent in the 12-step process, this is not the same as being delivered from sin and accepting Jesus as Savior and Lord. However, to say that recovering is not the same as being saved does not diminish in any way the experience of deliverance from the prison of addiction and abuse. The steps leading to that sobriety are indeed life-giving and life-saving steps.

Recovery support groups are in no way a substitute for a local church. Churches can supply what the groups cannot: involvement with a group of believers who share a common allegiance to Jesus, the fellowship of redeemed sinners, and joining together in joyful worship to God. Having said that, many church members have noted that they experience a level of honesty at 12-step meetings that is missing in classes at their local church. Participants often feel a greater level of freedom to speak their minds in 12-step groups than in Sunday School. This implies that while support groups are not a substitute for the local church, the local church (at least as it currently exists in many places) is no substitute for the support groups.

Many people in the recovery community are open to a salvation experience with Jesus. Others are not. This means that churches can reach many, but not all those who are involved in support groups. Facing one's addiction and beginning the recovery process through the 12 steps can be the first awareness some people have of the destructive presence of sin in their lives. When a person recognizes his weakness and sees the need for a power beyond his own to rescue him from death, he becomes open to the message of the gospel. For the first time in their lives, some people may be ready to move toward a saving relationship with God as the result of their experience in a recovery group.

This use of progressive intensity in dealing with people seems to be very similar to Jesus' use of healing to touch the lives of those he contacted who were socially rejected, sick, or needy. When Jesus healed a man born blind, the man had a face-to-face encounter with God which led to the healing of his sightless eyes. This change in his life altered everything about his world, even to the point of straining his relationship with his parents and the religious leaders of his community. As he struggled with those changes, Jesus came to him again. He asked him if he believed, and with further teaching, he accepted Jesus as Lord (John 9).

Just as Jesus would heal the lame and blind, then wait until later to confront the issue of salvation, so the 12 steps speak to those who feel broken or infirm. First, the need for wholeness and sobriety is met. Then further contact with the message of the gospel can bring the recovering person to a place of making a choice about his relationship with Jesus.

## CONCLUSION

Those who are involved in 12-step programs need our love and concern, not our judgment. Jesus was patient with those who were learning to follow him; in the same way we need to be patient with recovering persons who are in the process of healing. Using the concept of “God as we understood Him” allows the recovering person to meet with God in whatever way he or she can at that point in time.

Not all recovering persons will feel the need to seek a conversion experience through Jesus. That does not argue against the value of the 12-step programs. On one occasion, Jesus healed 10 lepers of their ghastly disease. Only one of them returned to express gratitude. The failure of the nine to praise God for the healing doesn't mean that their physical recovery was not real (Luke 17:11-19). Just as some of the lepers Jesus healed failed to return to him and say thanks, so some who have been delivered from an addiction may forget to acknowledge the sovereignty of Jehovah God in the healing process and fail to make a commitment to him which leads to salvation. That failure doesn't argue against the recovery programs any more than the failure of the nine to express gratitude at their healing implies that Jesus should not have performed his miracle.

We have nothing to fear from the 12-step programs. Even to their very core these programs are based on solid, biblical concepts. Many hurting people are being helped by the life-enhancing power of these groups. They are not the church and don't try to be. They can, however, be a funnel to bring people with intense needs into contact with Jesus and into the fellowship of a concerned and compassionate body of believers.

## Worship in a Quiet Place

*by Jeff Nelson*

*September – October, 1993*

Pine Lake — Middle of Nowhere, Tennessee. After having surgery on my vocal cords I have been able to talk and sing for some time now, but I came here to be quiet. I didn't speak a word for some time this morning, but I heard a symphony. Pine Lake is just about my favorite spot to "withdraw to a quiet place." This A-frame cabin with a wall of glass facing the lake writes the definition of serenity deep in my soul. I have been here in the winter and the summer but never in the fall. It is the middle of October and I am amazed by the array of fall colors surrounding the lake. I slept till 8 o'clock this morning (which was wonderful), and noticed the sounds of silence as I pondered getting out of bed. The temperature was about 60 degrees. The windows were open and I heard the wind blowing through the tall oaks and pines. I heard two sounds hitting the ground. One was the falling leaves and the other was soft drops of rain falling on the leaves. There were no phones, televisions, radios, cars, etc. No reminder of city noise, just a sweet symphony of silence, save that of God's voice whispered through nature.

I had a cup of coffee from a real coffee pot, perked on a stove (no instant or auto drip at Pine Lake) and sat down with a stack of books to begin a journey of reading, writing, and listening – a much-needed break from the past few months' hectic activities.

My schedule recently has been a lot of leading and giving. I am blessed whenever I lead worship or help in some kind of seminar because I believe God is honored, people's lives are transformed, and the body of Christ is awakened to a renewal of worship unparalleled by any period of my spiritual journey. It takes a lot of physical, emotional, and spiritual energy to go from one energizing yet draining event to the next. Most of you know what I'm talking about because you're in the same arena. I've been told by a mentor (and I believe a Mentor even greater than mine said the same thing), "You must retreat to a quiet place on a regular basis and renew your spirit." I know this wonderful advice but we all face the frustration of finding the time and protecting it. I've had these dates on my calendar for months and have guarded them like a watch-dog. Funny I should be away on the Sunday Lynn is preaching on "Busyness, Muchness, and Manyness." I found people to give their testimonies dealing with these issues and then I left town as if I didn't need to hear this one (I will get the tape as soon as I get back). Next Sunday the theme is "Spiritual Dryness" and I will probably be giving my own testimony after this experience. I have been making a lot of noise lately (some Godly) but now it's time to worship in a different way, listening and absorbing.

I began my time with God this morning with a devotional book titled just that, Time With God. It is a wonderful book. As I dove into its contents I began jotting down thoughts of worship. (I asked our worship planning team to each begin a journal of worship, and I'm probably the last one to start.) I was reading in Psalm 34, "I will praise the Lord at all times. Your praise will continually be on my lips." I noted that verse and then wrote:

*Remind me Lord to always praise You!*  
*Nothing in life is more fulfilling.*  
*I want to sing Your praises.*  
*I want to shout Your praises.*  
*I want to breathe Your praises.*  
*I want to dance Your praises.*  
*I want to share Your praises.*

I kind of smiled when I wrote “dance” but I shrugged my shoulders and thought if David could do it maybe I should too. I’m reading the book *Prayer – Finding the Heart’s True Home* by Richard Foster, which I wholeheartedly recommend. I was reading the chapter on Covenant Prayer concerning Holy Obedience. I was convicted by what I was reading about the disappointment that follows a broken commitment to disciplined prayer. Foster encourages the reader to continue in the privilege of the duty of prayer because “Freedom is the product of discipline and commitment.” True freedom comes from disciplined prayer. Foster mentions Peter and John going to the temple at the regularly appointed hour of prayer, not because they had to, but because it was a joy. And the lame man whom they healed certainly didn’t go about the temple “walking and leaping and praising God” with clenched teeth.

Now, there’s the word “leaping.” I just got stuck on dancing. What is it with these words describing physical activity in communicating with God? I wrote in the margin of the book, “Has God not done enough for us to have the same response?” “Food for thought,” I thought, and went on with my study.

As I read further in this revealing chapter I underlined “We can cultivate the habit of a Godward-directed mind and heart. As we carry on the business of the day, inwardly we keep pressing toward the Divine Center. At every opportunity we place our mind before God with inward confessions and petitions. Even more, we descend with the mind into the heart and live in quiet wonder and adoration and praise.” I thought, “I am descending with my mind into the heart now to live these few days in quiet wonder and adoration and praise.” Then I noted in the margin that this is exactly why I’ve been tempted to live in a monastery.

Another confirmation of the need for this quietness was the quote: “One way we make the heart ready to enter the awesome Presence is by disciplining the tongue. How much more fitting to come in absolute silence before the Holy One of eternity than to rush into his presence with hearts and minds askew and tongues full of words.” Yes, I need to take this quiet approach but I’m one that normally feels like I’m wasting time when I’m quiet and doing nothing. Ready for the next paragraph? “The trysting prayer is our special date with God. Our Eternal Lover lures us back regularly into his presence with anticipation and delight. It is not hard to honor this regular time of meeting, for the language of lovers is the language of waste. We are glad to waste time with God; for we are pleased with the company.” Wow! What a thought! I can waste this time with God because he’s the best company I could have. “So, God, what’s in store for us?”

I spent some specific time in prayer and then decided to go for a run. It had stopped raining but just as I began running it started again. I wasn’t worried about getting wet, so I set my watch and down the lane I ran. Remember, I wondered what was in store? I had no idea, but God did. I’ve

become enamored by Zephaniah 3:17 which says that God will rejoice over me with singing. Many days I begin by asking God what he's going to sing to me today. Well, today he had lots of songs for me. The raindrops hitting my face and eventually soaking my whole body sang the song of cleansing forgiveness, all sin washed away. I ran past a horse farm with the friendliest animals. They ran over to the fence as if to say hello and followed me with their gaze as I ran past them. On the other side of the road was a beautiful rolling meadow with cows grazing on the hills. This was the song of nature and life in its simplicity.

All along the run I noticed the beautiful colors of turning leaves. As I ran through an area of tall oak trees a little wind came up and the leaves began to fall. What a beautiful sight! It was like a ticker tape parade; all those beautiful leaves falling from the sky. I broke into a grin realizing this was my parade. God planned a parade just for me. What a God! What a parade! I ran with my hands stretched to him while the leaves and rain fell all around me. Guess what thought came to my mind? The dancing and leaping! Now I know why they did it. God rejoiced over them with singing and they rejoiced back. No longer was I running for exercise. I was running because I was loving God's singing. He didn't have to sing one word as we know words. I heard his words in every sight, sound, breath, and step I took. Needless to say, I smiled all the way back to the cabin.

What's in this for you? I'm not sure except I know God has songs he's wanting to sing over you. But he may be waiting for you to get still and quiet enough to hear them.

I came to Pine Lake to let my body relax. My voice teacher says my voice will work like it's supposed to if I can keep my body relaxed. I've noticed something at Pine Lake: When my spirit is relaxed my physical body seems to follow suit.

Take a deep breath, sit down in a quiet place with a real cup of coffee, and wait for the songs God has in store for you, his special one. And ponder these scriptures about listening to the voice of God:

"Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth" (Psalm 46:10).

"The Lord said, 'Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.' Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper" (1 Kings 19:11,12).

"The watchman opens the gate for him, and sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name, and leads them out. My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me" (John 10:3,27).

"Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the Lord is your life, and he will give you

many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob”  
(Deuteronomy 30:19,20).

“Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him and he with me” (Revelation 3:20).

## Getting Change Into Your System – Part 1

*by Lynn Anderson and Carey Garrett  
September – October, 1993*

The Scottish poet Robert Burns wrote these lines:

*The best laid schemes o' mice and men  
Gang aft a' gley.  
An' lea'e us naught but grief and pain.  
For promised joy.<sup>1</sup>*

Now, if you don't believe Burns, ask Uzzah! Or Edsel Ford, or Saddam Hussein. Or, the last guy who decided he was going to make all those fancy changes in his church!

### FOOLS RUSH IN

Change is not an option in today's church. It is a given. Change Happens! But change how? "Fools rush in where angels fear to tread," creating backlash in far too many churches.

In 1992, Jeff Nelson and I led a conference called "A Church That Connects." We were stunned by the level of brotherhood interest. We expected fewer than 150 participants, but more than 600 people showed up from over 200 congregations and 19 states. We explored key changes needed in today's urban congregations. People got fired up, charged out of the seminar, and hit their home congregations broadside with the most out-on-the-edge new things they heard at the conference. Consequently we have been getting phone calls all year. Some good people had inadvertently contributed more to problems than to solutions. In fact, one or two ministers may be seeking new employment by now. Many good intentions backfired because of naivete about the complexity of managing change.

### BACK TO THE DRAWING BOARD

Knowing what to change and why is only part of the equation. How to change is a key factor! In these days of transition, the most important tools for church leaders may be skills in the art of change management. As Lyle Schaller puts it,

After more than three decades spent working with thousands of congregational, denominational, seminary, and para-church leaders from more than five dozen traditions, this observer places a one-sentence issue at the top of that list: The need to initiate and implement planned change from within an organization.... Reversing a period of numerical decline requires changes. Numerical growth also produces change. That means the key to the effective implementation of a church growth strategy is skill as an agent of planned change.... It may mean a change in the criteria for recruiting and training a new generation of leaders.<sup>2</sup>

Thank you, Lyle. My corner of the room erupts with a rousing “Amen!” Unfortunately, in most congregations you can find a few people with enough clout to cause serious disruption, but not enough discipline and maturity to become informed on the skills of effective change management.

Overzealous and under-informed change agents meet with backlash for several reasons. First, some try to change the wrong things. Some try to copycat “effective” churches like Saddleback Valley Community Church in Los Angeles or the Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago which are growing at phenomenal rates. We can (in fact, we ought to) learn a great deal from effective community churches, but copy-cattng is dangerous. While basic growth principles may be transferable to any community, the specific methods and strategies used to apply these principles in one setting will seldom transfer to another. For example, a principle is: Outreach events must be expressed in the musical heart-language of your culture. In making application of that principle, consider that in Chicago or Los Angeles, contemporary “pop” musical idiom may connect. But is that the right musical idiom for Fort Worth, Texas? Or Lepanto, Arkansas? Or Nashville? Or Watts? Effective churches extensively research their communities. They know exactly who their target group is and have tailored their strategies to their target people, not for the folks in your community. It may be helpful to apply principles from “effective” churches but not to copy their strategies.

Second, inexperienced change agents often attempt changes for the wrong reasons. “I like this better,” or sometimes even, “Let’s show those other folks who is in charge.” Quite often, the “changer” would “shift things around to his own liking,” rather than considering the likings of the people that church should be trying to serve.

Third, sometimes change is implemented with the wrong style, heavy handedly. Or manipulatively. Or, by “executive decision,” otherwise known as the “spray and pray” style – all ineffective.

Fourth, a most common “wrong style” is to change things at the wrong pace.. “If next year would help, immediately will cure everything.” Sometimes the urgency of the “convinced” ignores the feelings of the “unconvinced.” This is both unloving and counterproductive. Small wonder that Lyle Schaller would say that change management skill is the key leadership quality for today’s church leaders.

Our agreement with Schaller’s assessment made our 1993 “Church That Connects Seminar” distinctly different from the one in 1992. Rather than headlining our 1992 theme of the need for change, in 1993 we majored on theory and skills for the art of change agency —how to change, not just why and what to change! This article and the following installments summarize the gist of the 1993 seminar.

A disclaimer and warning: The major motivations for change, and the specific items needing renovation must be approached theologically, not merely sociologically, culturally, or therapeutically. In fact, these human change management skills alone will do only harm if not preceded by a solid theological rationale and undergirded by biblical theological foundations. Good theology can free people from fear of change. For example, what happens if our security

rests in the church rather than in the Christ? We may assume our goal is to reproduce a carbon copy of a first-century church blueprint. For some, their very salvation rests on the accuracy and completeness with which they duplicate that blueprint. Add the fact that some feel the “blueprint” has already been “restored,” so they see no reason for change. In fact, they fear that change puts their salvation at risk.

Tragically, these actually are assumptions in some quarters. This is one reason theology must precede strategy. How different our feelings about change will be if we see Jesus (not the first-century church) as the blueprint for all people in all times, and that the church is a community of believers seeking to restore men and women into the image of Christ, driven by gratitude to our gracious God. Then we will not fear change, but eagerly pursue any change that enables us to more effectively give him glory and restore people to him.

Clinging to a past church model or method, however wonderful it may have been in its heyday, is not a sign of “faithfulness.” Rather, faithfulness to Jesus’ mission requires us to explore every possible model and create new methods to restore people to God.

These pages, however, are not about theology, but about effective strategy in upreach and outreach. To explore foundational theological assumptions behind these methods, you might read *The Second Incarnation* by Shelly and Harris, *The Church in Transition* by Jim Woodroof, and *The Cruciform Church* by Leonard Allen.

Now, to broad principles in the art of change management, I interweave my experience with current change literature.

William Bridges, who wrote *Managing Transitions*, says that “the real problem is not in bringing about change, but to keep too much change from happening too fast.”<sup>3</sup> The chill winds of change are blowing across the culture and the church with irresistible velocity. Either we change or we fail, but change must not be merely for change’s sake. Following are some legitimate reasons to change things in a church:

- To encourage authentic and free worship in the heart-language of today’s people.
- To connect with the unchurched world for outreach and effective assimilation of new Christians into the body.
- To intentionally nurture spiritual life development in the people God sends our way.
- To do everything with the excellence that honors and glorifies God.
- To be faithful to God. God never changes, but he has designed his church so that it can continually reshape to connect with all cultures of an ever-changing world. Even in New Testament days, the churches “show a different look” from one city to the next as the gospel crossed cultural barriers.

A good deal of what we know about the art of change management grows out of current marriage and family therapy: The Systems Approach. The Systems school holds that a family is not a collection of individuals, but an intertwined organism. An individual will likely not change significantly without disturbing the ecology of that family. Conversely, frequently a psychotic person treated solo will show remarkable recovery, until he goes back home. Then, in a few weeks the therapy comes unraveled because the individual returns to a troubled family system.

Dr Royce Money says “a church is more like a family than anything else.” So, when we talk about changing a church, we are not dealing with a mere collection of independent units, but an organism, an extended family system. Only a church is infinitely more complex than a nuclear family unit.

Rabbi Edwin Friedmann was among the first to apply systems theory to church and synagogue life in his must-read book *Generation to Generation* (1986). Many since Friedmann have applied systems theory to all types of organizations. Among these is Peter Senge who wrote *The Fifth Discipline*, in which he calls the flexible, healthy organizational system a “learning organization”; not in the sense that it gathers information, but in that it is constantly adapting its structure, management style, strategy, and so on. I believe Jesus designed the church this way, so that it can flex to connect with any cultural setting.

Senge thumbnails the complexity of changing a “system” in his “laws of organizational change”:<sup>4</sup>

- Today’s problems come from yesterday’s solutions. Example: Twenty new babies a year called for expanded nursery space at our church. Yesterday’s solution: The nursery took over adult classroom 201. Today’s problem: Adult class #2 (mostly made up of parents of nursery children) was left without a room. Yesterday’s solution – the nursery – became today’s problem for the adult class.
- The harder you push, the harder the system pushes back. For those who have tried to push a change in your congregation, no elaboration on this point is needed.
- Behavior grows better before it grows worse. People may appear to go along with a change at first, but just wait!
- The easy way out usually leads back in. Watch for the “gotcha!”
- The cure can be worse than the disease. Research indicates that some 50% of changes introduced in businesses are toxic to the organization’s future. I’d guess that goes for churches, too.
- Faster is slower. An attempt to move a church from a 1 to a 10 in a single fell swoop may backlash you to a hardened minus 7!
- Cause and effect are not usually closely related to each other in time and space. Physically this happened to Dizzy Dean when his compensation for a broken toe shifted his form just enough to

torque his arm and eventually destroy his professional baseball career. In a church it may go like this: Add needed staff now, by borrowing money, which may be fine for two years. Then the resulting growth calls for building expansion. But the money won't go around, and you already owe the bank.

–You can have your cake and eat it too, but not all at once. We may be able to have both innovative, contemporary worship styles, and the financial support of traditional thinking members, but not usually all at once. However, given time and wise change strategies, we may have both.

Now, here's my favorite...

– Dividing an elephant in half does not produce two small elephants. A doctor doesn't keep your sore arm at his office for treatment, and tell you to pick it up next week after he works on it a while. No, it is part of a system. Nor can we fix a church by pulling a piece aside and tinkering with it as if it were an autonomous unit. No, a church is a system.

To change a church is to change a system and Senge's "laws" apply. But guidance from skilled change agents is available and can save worlds of grief. Companies like EDS and American Express are hiring and training leaders to be change agents. Carey Garrett, a sister in our congregation and co-author of this article, helps companies undergoing radical transformation. Think about this: If fast-moving, successful corporate giants have difficulty in managing change, how much more important are change management skills in old, slow-paced, traditional organizations, like churches. But even though the task is challenging, there are things change agents can do as change strategies.

## **CHANGE VS. TRANSITION**

William Bridges helpfully distinguishes between change and transition: Change is what happens "out there." Change is moving into a new house or to a new church building. Change is dropping Sunday night services at the church building in favor of small groups in homes. It is introducing four worship leaders, singing parts, in place of the traditional single leader. Or switching from the traditional hymns in the book to new songs projected on the screen. External changes.

Transition, on the other hand, for Bridges, is the internal process triggered by the external change; the psychological re-orientation to the new arrangement.

Most of us have experienced this difference. Wham! The company moves us. Or the elders change the hour of worship. Or the preacher resigns. And we have no time to adjust psychologically, even though things have changed. "Problems over change" in a church are not usually over change! The problems are over lack of transition, when leaders keep introducing one change on the heels of another without allowing people to make internal transitions.

William Bridges observes that healthy transitions need endings, neutral zones, and new beginnings.

# HOW ORGANIZATIONAL SYSTEMS (CONGREGATIONS) RESPOND TO CHANGE

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## Model by William Bridges<sup>5</sup>

New Beginning

Neutral Zone

Ending

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Bridges likens internal transition to the biblical Exodus story. Phase One is “Leaving Egypt,” ending the familiar way of life. He insists that people need “endings” to the “way it was,” to old routines, roles and relationships – or comfortable traditions. He further insists that “You cannot steal second without leaving first base.”

The second phase of transition is the “Wilderness Wanderings,” or the neutral zone. This in-between time is chaotic, with a potent mixture of possibility and threat. But the wilderness can also be a time of reflection, assessment, and mid-course correction. It is absolutely imperative that the neutral zone be managed well, or people may retreat to the old way. And once people retrench, mounting a second change effort will be infinitely more difficult than launching the first.

Bridges’ third phase of transition is the “Promised Land,” or the new beginning. New terrain. New identity. New roles. No longer slaves or wanderers, but land-holders.

The healthy new beginning can also be an exciting time for fresh commitments. Thus during new beginnings, a church may experience a burst of energy. A side caveat: Change management is much more nearly an art than it is a science. Bridges’ model is only a “way of seeing,” a paradigm. It is not intended to be scientifically precise, much less etched in stone. However, as one ponders the parallels between the exodus and organizational change, practical implications keep popping out. Some of those implications will be discussed in the next installment.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Burns, “To a Mouse,” Burns’ Poems and Songs London: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 69.

<sup>2</sup> Lyle Schaller, *Strategies for Change* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), pp. 10-11.

3 William Bridges, "Handling Transition Successfully," Cassette tape, 1993 Church in the 21st Century Conference, Orlando. Call Convention Cassettes, 1-800-776-5454.

4 Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), pp. 57-66.

5 William Bridges, *Managing Transitions* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1980), p. 70.

## AfterGlow: The Difference Between Recovery and Salvation

by Phillip Morrison

September – October, 1993

The phone call came at a most inconvenient time, but I paused long enough to talk with the recovering alcoholic. It didn't take long; he just wanted me to know he'd been sober for 10 days. As I shared the excitement of his victory, I remembered another alcoholic I had met a few days before. "My name is Bill, and I'm an alcoholic," he began. "I haven't had a drink since July 5, 1978." One had been sober just 10 days, the other more than 15 years, but both were still alcoholics, still in recovery.

That's the big difference between recovery and salvation: recovery programs treat, but salvation heals. Yet, although the blood of Jesus takes away sin in a definable salvation experience, it is no one-shot miracle potion which never needs renewing. We have been saved by the blood of Jesus, and it continues to cleanse us, continuously washing our sins away (1 John 1:5-7).

People in recovery need to stay in close touch with their fellow-victims, leaning on one another, remembering the goals they have set, drawing strength from a power higher than themselves. Likewise, people who are saved need to stay in close touch with their fellow sinners, sharing Christian fellowship, looking forward to their heavenly destiny, trusting their Lord and Savior for constant cleansing (1 John 1:9-11).

It would be great if we could say that we have been sinless for 15 years...or even for 10 days. If we could make such a claim we would likely be praised as super-righteous. Even such saintly behavior, however, would not exempt us from the need of Jesus' cleansing.

By God's grace I may have been spared addiction to alcohol or drugs. But I have not been spared addiction to sin. Like every person who has ever lived, I have forsaken my Creator and I must, for the sake of my soul, turn back to him and accept his gift of grace (1 John 1:8-10). I may not need recovery (though that's debatable), but I do need salvation (and that's not debatable).

Recovery and salvation are sometimes seen as separate and unrelated, but the truth is that they are inseparably linked. Salvation is the logical end result of biblical recovery. And continuing recovery is the daily commitment of one who has come to know God's salvation.

The recognition that salvation and recovery are linked has led to the publication of *The Life Recovery Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1992). The biblical text is supplemented with a variety of helpful notes, devotionals, and other recovery-based materials. As the Preface correctly notes, "Without God, there is no recovery, only disappointing substitutions and repeated failure." We must better understand "who God is and how he wants to heal our brokenness and set us on the path toward wholeness." That's the recovery that results in salvation.