

Addiction and Theology For Christian Congregations

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What does addiction have to do with Christian theology? What could the Church of Jesus Christ have to add to the conversation about this explosive crisis in this country? Why should Christians lend a voice and chime in with their knowledge of possible cures or remedies or ways to recovery from drug abuse and its plague on society?

Isn't the addict so far removed from the typical church community that it is difficult to see any reason for the two groups to be dialoguing? Or at the most, the connection between the two would be based solely on a sense of sympathy of the one to the other, charity from the righteous to the needy.

Stereotypes on either side create great damage. Those who may assume church members might live closer to God and the divine realm of grace because they look better, are regulars in worship, have their personal lives in order and do good works for others, should stop, turn back, and reread the Gospel message. Those who assume the person so enslaved to the bottle or the needle or the smoke who has lost all sense of dignity is the more distant from our God and divine mercy should repent of their ignorance of the Christian story. The fact is the drug addict of today might demonstrate to us most clearly the power of God's love and the surest path to comfort and peace.

Those who appear successful in their careers, secure in their families, and healthy in mind and body may have a more difficult time not because God loves them any less, but because they see less need. Self-reliant individuals can be fooled into believing that their own skills and abilities, perhaps their acts of service and charities will earn them a special right to rewards in eternity. This sentiment is often rationalized by the loved ones of one recently deceased. "Harry was such a kind man." Then the family works to itemize a list of reasons they can use to convince themselves that "Harry" has gotten a nod from St. Peter and has passed successfully through the Golden Gates.

This, of course is nonsense. Yet it is commonly believed. The truth is no one, absolutely no one earns for him or herself a place by God's side. Every one falls short of God's glory. Everyone sins (sacrifices relationships for selfish reasons). Everyone fails eventually and becomes incapable of undoing the damage. Every human being will either disintegrate completely or need to be saved.

The drug addict can be far advanced in recognizing this reality. For those so enslaved to the chemical craving that have taken over their bodies know self help is a myth and a fantasy. They have nothing left to give. Self esteem is but a distant memory. Days are occupied by panic and shame.

Though it might appear counterintuitive, thus begins the Christian path to recovery. Only when we stop trying to save ourselves, deny all claims to goodness, all hope of being worthy, will we be capable of recognizing that we are not alone in our struggle and we do not need to be. Once the ego is lost, we can begin to see that there has been something, someone, surrounding us all along waiting to pull us out of harms way.

It is not hard to see why, of all the Biblical characters, the addict might relate to the Apostle Paul most immediately. Enshrined in the 7th chapter of the Letter to the Romans, Paul confesses the turmoil at play within his psyche. "I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. I do not understand my own

actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate...I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right but I can not do it. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (Romans7:14b-15,18,24)

Paul goes on to describe what felt like to him a civil war going on inside his very being. Caught in the cross fire of a battle between the needs of his flesh and the will of his spirit, Paul fears he may surrender to the bad. For the cravings of the body are overwhelming.

Now we do not know the details of Paul's physical needs. This is a blessing. For all people can relate to the struggle he records without being hindered by the specifics. Twenty first century American drug addicts can especially relate. If asked if they can understand Paul's speech about an internal civil war, they will commonly affirm they know that very feeling.

What brings a war to an end? One way is to defeat the enemy. Addicts try but relapse repeatedly. Another way is to try to compromise, seeking to find a balance between the substance of choice and the life style he or she wishes to keep. This usually fails because the compulsion of the flesh is always more demanding. The third way to bring a war to an end is to surrender completely. The only question is what or who does the embattled soul surrender to? Will that act lead to lasting peace?

As noted above, only when our ego no longer stands in the way can we begin to recognize the power of the presence of the Savior waiting to move in and take our place. With the coming of God in human form, in the person of Jesus Christ, the universe has changed. No longer must we mortals (like Adam and Eve) feel as though we must struggle alone from the cradle to the grave. No longer are we responsible for sticking to the program (God's Law) designed to help us to live free. For even though we know better, we cannot always resist temptation to surrender to quick fixes and false remedies. God knows that!

The Creator understands our inability to exist outside the realm of grace. God made us because God is love. God's love doesn't have a limit, a condition, or an expiration date. God does not practice such a thing as tough love, holding back forgiveness and mercy until the offender repents, suffers consequences, pays a penalty. Instead, God united himself with our kind, our species utterly, completely, and eternally. He did this so that we can not get lost to perdition, or whatever demons we may meet.

God, in Jesus Christ, knew the temptation, knew the pain, endured the humiliation, suffered the shame, felt the judgement, faced the guilty verdict and died under the criminal death penalty. This was not just so God would "know how it feels," (how absurd to think God needs to be taught anything.) But so that we could know that God is willing and able and sure to be with us NO Matter What we may be enduring. Not even hell is beyond God's reach. The addict might identify with Jesus Christ much more readily than those successful, healthy, and happy.

Before the coming of Christ our flesh, the Law, our sin and human mortality kept us apart. Since God came in human form and suffered and died for our sake, nothing needs keep us from having a full and perfect recovery. Christ is our open highway to our heavenly home: a high that will last forever with, no chance of coming down or crashing!

He was here for us long before we even knew we needed to be saved. This is what Paul discovered as he wrestled with his own shame. He knew all along that a battle between flesh and spirit was going on

in his psyche. What he came to realize over time was that his spirit was not fighting all alone. With him, in him and beyond him was a Spirit so awesome and so great, so loving and full of mercy, so loyal and life giving, that with this Spirit the war would end in only one possible way: With Peace, Joy, and Love. The Wretch would be saved! Paul grew to know that Spirit is one and the same as the Spirit of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God Almighty.

He exclaimed: There is therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death. (Romans 8:1,2) So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh- for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received a spirit of adoption. When we cry "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ-if, in fact, we suffer with him, so that we may also be glorified with him. (Romans 8:12-17)

A drug addict, a child of God? A drug addict, an heir to all God's riches and deserving a share in God's glory? Absolutely! For there is no condemnation coming from God. God, in Christ loves and accepts: no strings. Some might object, saying experience shows that addiction causes break downs in relationships. Those in the throes of the disease appear to lose their ability to communicate honestly, to be caring of other people's needs, or be compassionate within their own families. Those is the throws of the disease may even curse God. It is not rare to know that many an addict ends up in prison or homeless, alienated from neighbors, friends, family and faith. True enough. However, the depth of his or her despair can only help illustrate the greatness of God's desire that all be redeemed.

Paul wrote: What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him, also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Jesus Christ who died, yes who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us? Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword (Romans 8: 31-35)

What can separate the addict from the saving love of Jesus? Will heroin, cocaine, alcohol, anger, shame, or anything else in all creation hinder God from loving? NO! The Spirit of Christ must win in the end. The addict can be saved.

Some lose hope for this life. Some die by over dosing. Some expire tragically before they can embrace this message. God dwells among those who grieve. But here's the thing: Death is no barrier to God. Christ forever blew away death's finality. God is not constrained by timing. By dying Christ removed the last great item dividing the heavenly host from earthly humanity. If in that great existential battle between the addicts' spirit and flesh, a person succumbs as so many have, no Christian may conclude that that is the end. Once the body is destroyed the flesh remains forever silent but not the God given spirit. Once the body is destroyed the spirit is finally free of bondage. The war is over. The spirit will take on a new body which is fully healthy and whole again.

Paul was rightly convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, or powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.(Romans 8:38-39)

Let us stand with our sisters and brothers in addition who may well teach us to shout a hardy AMEN!