

THEOLOGY AND RECOVERY

Recovery is fundamentally a spiritual journey. Every step of the journey raises new spiritual questions. For Christians, theology can be very helpful, but it can also be part of the problem. This can make the journey confusing. Theology can get in the way of our recovery by supporting our denial, by increasing our resistance to change, and by reinforcing our shame. Sometimes I think it is easier to help a person new to recovery who is not a Christian! They don't seem to have to deal with all the issues of guilt and shame. When non-Christians have a "spiritual awakening" they are more than happy to share their experience with others. They know they are a miracle and are very grateful that they have found a loving God to replace the emptiness in their life. Many Christians new to recovery struggle with spiritual pride which can be a block to the humility they need to seek and find the power of Christ to overcome their addictions.

We all know how easy it is to believe that God is love but to have no practical access to this love in our daily lives. It is as if God is, for some of us at least, only "theoretically" a loving God. I was raised in a legalistic church; I had many fears about God, I thought he loved everyone else except me. Even though we believe that "love keeps no record of wrongs", we may serve a God who seems to spend his days keeping a list of our mistakes, impure thoughts and unkind deeds and even though we may believe that God is patient. We may feel that God has abandoned us because we continue to struggle with the same old problems.

I have been a Christian all of my life, I accepted Christ when I was eight years old, I thought "God and me" were enough, all I ever needed. As I grew up and had to face more and more of life's challenges, the more I felt alone and abandoned. I've realized that we need each other, we need help from one another. In recovery we need a community of faith, hope and love. Some Christians feel they can't get help in their church because they are not sure the church is a safe place to be vulnerable. The churches that have the most successful recovery programs are the churches where the pastor will make announcements about the recovery meetings and allow recovery testimonies from the pulpit. When the pastor is supportive of the recovery program it gives the church members permission to attend, also gives the message that we don't have to be perfect, that we all struggle in this life.

One pastor said, "It is a challenge to us as a church to examine the atmosphere of grace that is sometimes found more easily in an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting than in the body of Christ. There are people who would find more safety in a secular group, and more grace there than they would in a church. And that's not what the body of Christ is meant to be."

Dale Ryan, CEO of Christian Recovery International and a member of the faculty at Fuller Theological Seminary, talks about the theological emphasis that are most helpful for people in recovery: grace, process, and self-worth. The first and perhaps the most obvious emphasis is that people in recovery need a huge dose of grace-focused theology. Grace is, of course, not a minor theological theme. It is arguably the theme of the Bible. Part of the theological work of recovery is the struggle not to allow ourselves to be "burdened again by a yoke of slavery" Galatians 5:1. The slavery of shame is the root of performance-based spirituality, and it is a soul killer. Recovery is the struggle to let grace be at the heart of everything in our lives. May God grant us the grace we need today to let go of the heavy burdens of performance-based spirituality and to receive the grace, the serenity, and rest that God longs to give us.

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The second theological emphasis that is critically important for people in recovery is an emphasis on process. Recovery takes time. I think it is helpful to remember that an emphasis on speed in theology is not really new. The mainstream of Christian theological reflection throughout American history has always been decisionist in its orientation. That's the belief that the most important aspect of our relationship with God is the human capacity to make decisions – to choose. What is it about people in recovery that is most broken? It is our capacity to choose. Every addict I have ever known has chosen not to be an addict. Usually many times, always unsuccessfully, choosing the thing that is the most broken in us.

The twelve steps is a perfect example of the kind of supportive and empowering process that can make choosing a meaningful experience. There is a place in the twelve steps for deciding: "We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God." This is not an isolated choice. It is part of a process – a process that helps us to become the kind of people whose choices are meaningful and empowered. Most Christians understand that some things like discipleship and sanctification take a lifetime. Recovery is a word in the same category. It's about a life-long journey, a spiritual journey worthy of a lifetime's attention.

A third common theological issue that is part of the struggle for Christians in recovery is how we think about ourselves. This is not an easy one. Not for addicts, not for survivors of abuse, not for any of us. Our thoughts and feelings about ourselves can get twisted. What tends to come naturally and instinctively to us are extremes. Either we are completely worthless, or we are grandiose and narcissistic. Both extremes are born in shame. The root of the problem is the persistent sense that we are not good enough, not important enough, not valuable enough, just not enough no matter what we do. This results in distortions in how we think and feel about ourselves.

In Christian Recovery support groups we do not discuss doctrinal issues because many times they are divisive. We have enough in common that we need to spend our meeting time concentrating upon our mutual needs. We stick to the basics of the Gospel and the love of our Savior, Jesus Christ, and leave doctrinal issues to theologians.