



Celebrate Recovery: A Review

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March 2004

Materials

Leader's guide, 20-minute Leader's Introductory Video, 8 audio cassettes of Rick Warren's "Road to Recovery" sermon series, Sermon Transcripts (in print and on 3.5" floppy diskette), Participant's Guides 1-4, Leader's Guide on 3.5" floppy diskette,

Leader's Guide

This is a well-done, professionally produced curriculum that covers preparation, implementation, and maintenance of the program. Content includes forwards by Rick Warren and primary curriculum author John Baker, the 8 recovery principles based upon the 8 beatitudes of Christ, a slightly customized/modified Twelve Steps and their biblical comparisons (according to Baker), i.e., scripture references, 8 chapters with 25 lessons for working the eight principles (designed to last 12 months), and a 23-page appendix containing numerous reproducible promotional materials. Every principle concludes with a testimony germane to the lesson content. The first letter of each word in each principle forms the acrostic, RECOVERY. Additionally, almost every lesson has its own acrostic. The introduction includes a detailed and helpful "90-day kickoff strategy", "seven keys to start your recovery ministry and keep it growing", and "meeting formats and materials". Meetings are designed to meet once weekly and last for two hours. Baker and Zondervan have done an admirable job with this guide. It is a comprehensive manual, well presented from start to finish, facilitating strategic implementation by any organized church, and well-guided direction for individual leaders throughout.

Participant's Guides

All four guides devote the first 13 pages to Warren and Baker's forwards, the eight principles, the Twelve Steps and their biblical comparisons, and Reinhold Niebuhr's serenity prayer. Every lesson in each of the four guides begins with the corresponding beatific principle and step.¹ Every lesson contains a *Think About It* section followed by a *Write About It* section. The *Think About It* section is didactic, replete with scripture, albeit almost exclusively from paraphrased translations. The *Write About It* section consists of a series of questions designed to reinforce the material covered in the *Think About It* section. Many lessons make use of acrostics to reinforce the lesson theme. Some early lessons contain evangelistic components for those not saved.

¹ The 25 lessons are distributed among the modified/customized Twelve Steps. The modified/customized Twelve Steps are distributed among the 8 principles. Hence, all twelve steps except one correspond to more than one lesson.

Following the completion of each principle [usually consisting of two or more lessons], a verse list corresponding to the material covered is provided, sometimes tabled against negative emotions. Each principle concludes with a “Principle Prayer”. Only one diagram is used, which occurs in the next to last lesson.

Introductory Video

Baker dominates this video with his testimony, apparently designed to motivate CR program leaders.

Audio Cassettes

Eight sermons from Rick Warren’s *Road to Recovery* series delivered at Saddleback Church. These sermons are delivered in typical Rick Warren conversational style. Paraphrased translations are used throughout. Sermons include testimonies with speakers identifying themselves as “in recovery”, alcoholics or addicts, and unabashedly confessing belief in the disease concept of addiction.

Sermon Transcripts [of the audio cassettes]

All eight sermons in both printed and digital form (floppy diskette), apparently designed for use by the senior pastor, of whom it is strongly urged to demonstrate strong pulpit support for the program.

25 Lessons on Diskette

The leader’s guide in MS Word format.

Content Evaluation:

Principle 1: **Denial and Powerlessness**

Realize I'm not God. I admit that I am powerless to control my tendency to do the wrong thing and my life is unmanageable. “*Happy are those who know they are spiritually poor*” (TEV), “*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*” (NIV)

Baker has accepted two tenets of the 12-step/disease concept of addiction, denial and powerlessness, and adapted them to Principle One.

First, denial. One problem with denial is it is unique in that it cannot be scientifically tested. Another problem is that it is inconsistent in its application. Although denial is often present in the beginning, it rarely exists after years in addiction. A great many alcoholics go to AA and 12-step treatment for help (in itself an admission of a problem), yet many of them continue to drink abusively, often while attending AA and working the steps. Are they in denial? Also, denial is useless as a diagnostic symptom, for even if everyone who is an alcoholic is in denial about their problem, those who are not alcoholic will also deny that they are. Nevertheless, if anyone attending CR meetings *is* in denial, this lesson would

be useful. But the presumption that every participant in CR is in denial is false, and it would be best not to unduly coerce participants into a belief that they are.

Second, powerlessness. There is a big question for the Christian regarding this confession: why should he say he is powerless when the Bible says he can do all things through Christ who strengthens him, that he is complete in Christ, that he is actually strong when he is weak, and that he has been given a spirit of power. Powerlessness, helplessness, and weakness may be characteristics of the unsaved, but the believer “overwhelmingly conquers” through Christ, and has been given everything he needs for life and godliness. However, this principle is used by CR to persuade certain individuals who are too self-reliant and egocentric to “stop playing God”.

Principle 2: Hope and Sanity

Earnestly believe that God exists, that I matter to Him, and that He has the power to help me recover. *“Happy are those who mourn”*. (TEV) *“For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to His good purpose”* (NIV).

Hope is discussed in this principle as a prerequisite for change. Sanity seems to be discussed as an attempt to teach participants that God restores, “wholeness of mind” and that this involves “making decisions based on the truth”. The mention of the importance of truth is commendable, but the acrostic used in this lesson, STRENGTH, does not sufficiently bring out its critical importance. The lesson concludes with the reassurance that, “if you complete the next principle, Principle 3, your future will be blessed and secure!”.

Principle 3: Turn and Action

Consciously choose to commit all my life and will to Christ's care and control. *“Happy are the meek”* (NIV). *“Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship”* (NIV).

The idea in this principle is surrender of life and will. The acrostic, TRUST, is used to help facilitate this. CR does a good job of conveying the importance of surrender, despite the use of numerous AA slogans. Lesson 6 contains an explicit evangelistic opportunity.

Principle 4: The “Moral Inventory”

Openly examine and confess my faults to myself, to God, and to someone I trust. *“Happy are the pure in heart”* (TEV). *“Let us examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the LORD”* (NIV).

This principle attempts to undertake the painful process of examining and confessing the past. This principle covers lessons 7-13, and involves engaging AA's famous “searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves”. Here, CR adheres rather faithfully to the AA paradigm for working the process, which

involves using a sponsor, writing an inventory of past “wrongs”, and confession to self, God, and a trusted friend.

Principle 5: **Willingness and Victory over “Character Defects”**

Voluntarily submit to every change God wants to make in my life and humbly ask Him to remove my character defects. *“Happy are those whose greatest desire is to do what God requires”* (TEV). *“Humble yourselves before the Lord and He will lift you up”* (TEV). *“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and will forgive our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness”*(Translation Unknown).

This principle emphasizes releasing control to allow God to remove personal “character defects” (AA phraseology). CR also calls these “hang-ups” and “habits”. This principle states that change is a choice that results in victory over the past. It offers answers to the question, “How can you have victory over your defects of character?”. 1 John 1:9, 2 Corinthians 5:17, Romans 12:2, James 4:6-8, 10, Matthew 6:34 & 11:28, and Philippians 1:6 are used to build the case for change and God’s power to accomplish it. This section is well done. However, using terms like, “character defects” instead of sin, “recovery” instead of sanctification, and other AA terminology such as, “faults” and shortcomings” could be confusing to Christians as they attempt to reconcile the vernacular of the church with that of CR. Concerns about the authors having adopted the minimalist language of AA are legitimate.

Baker makes the statement, “I’m an alcoholic!” in this principle. In the introductory video, Baker introduces himself as “a Christian who struggles with alcohol”. Why, after twenty years of sobriety, does Baker still struggle with alcohol? This would appear to be a component of the disease concept that insists that addictions are “chronic and progressive”, i.e., addicts are addicts for life. This is of concern since it is antithetical to a believer’s new identity in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17, Romans 6:4-7, 7:6, Ephesians 4:23-24) and raises questions about the self-image CR is conveying. The Romans 6 theology that the believer is free from the controlling power of sin, it is no longer his master, he no longer has to obey its lusts, is not contained in the CR curriculum.

Principle 6: **Making Amends**

Evaluate all my relationships. Offer forgiveness to those who have hurt me and make amends for harm I’ve done to others, except when to do so would harm them or others. *“Happy are the merciful”* and *“Happy are the peacemakers”*. *“Do to others as you would have them do to you.”*

Lessons 16-18 are dedicated to AA’s steps eight and nine, which deal with listing people harmed as a result of addiction and making direct amends to them. Amends are compensation for a loss or injury.² The “Golden Rule” is invoked to support this principle, as well as Matthew 5:23-24. Resentment, anger, and hurt are said to be dealt with by “working” these steps.

²Merriam-Webster, I. *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*. 10th ed. Springfield, Mass., U.S.A.: Merriam-Webster, 1996, c1993.

The lessons deal with the process of making a list of those harmed, and the appropriation of forgiveness and grace. After being taken through the methodical process of making the list, participants are told that taking the steps of forgiveness³ with release residual guilt and shame. Finally, a basic teaching on grace is given: it's free, received by faith, characterized by God's love, paid for by Christ, and lasts forever.

Principle 7: Journaling, Daily Inventories, Relapse, Gratitude

Reserve a daily time with God for self-examination, Bible reading, and prayer in order to know God and His will for my life and to gain the power to follow His will. *No beatitude given for this principle.*

A footnote early in lesson 19 states that the Step⁴ will be emphasized more than the Principle, and so it is. Practical advice is offered for monitoring "good and bad behavior", primarily through the use of a journal. Participants are told to look for negative patterns in their journal entries, share them with their sponsor, and erect action plans to overcome them, with God's help. Principle 4's moral inventory is augmented by the stated need for "an ongoing inventory", "a daily inventory", "a periodic inventory"⁵, and a daily action plan.

Lesson 21 covers the important issue of relapse. The deterrents given are, daily prayer and Bible reading, attending recovery meetings regularly, spending time with family, and getting involved in service⁶. Although this lesson correctly exposes relapse as preceded by temptation, the tools offered are far from practical. Temptation is not explicated, and the usual suggestions to pray and read the Bible are given. I would have preferred a full discussion of what the Bible says about *why* Christians stumble⁷ and what it says about preventing it.

Lesson 22 closes the principle with the suggestion that participants remember the things they have to be thankful for. "Using your gratitude list, going to your recovery meetings...getting involved in service in your church are the best way I know to prevent relapse....", Baker concludes.

Principle 8: Sharing and Serving

Yield myself to God to be used to bring this Good News to others, both by my example and by my words. "*Happy are those who are persecuted because they do what God requires*"(TEV). *Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted.* (NIV).

Lesson 23 is characterized as, "giving back". It corresponds to AA's Step 12, "carrying the message". This bold statement is given in the lesson: "The Lord

³ The three steps of forgiveness given by CR are actually three types of forgiveness: God's forgiveness of us, our forgiveness of others, and our forgiveness of ourselves.

⁴ The corresponding step is, "We continued to take a personal inventory and when we were wrong, promptly admitted it".

⁵ Lesson 20 contains more inventories than some businesses conduct in a year.

⁶ A critical component, service is covered specifically in Principle 8.

⁷ Or, in some translations, "fall", Gr.: proskopto.

spreads His message through the eight principles and the 12 Steps”. The emphasis of this lesson is on the importance of our public character and conduct, especially as lived out through helping others with *their* addictions. This lesson contains a significant editorial error in the leader’s guide. It states, “In the New Testament, the word ‘give’ has seventeen different Hebrew words with seventeen different meanings”.

The focus of lesson 24 is service. This component of sanctification deserves considerably more attention than is given in CR. They do, however, offer specific suggestions for serving in the CR program. Although they also urge serving in the church, no specific suggestions are made for this. Baker concludes this lesson with the words, “The road to recovery leads to service”. In fact, it is service that results in sanctification (Romans 6:19).

Lesson 25: The Seven Reasons We Get Stuck

This lesson seems to fit uncomfortably with the rest of the curriculum. Baker never explains what “getting stuck” is, although he does elaborate on the term by rephrasing it as, “getting bogged down”. All seven reasons are failure statements. They begin, “You have not...” (5x), “You are not...”, and “You are afraid...”. This lesson appears to be targeted toward avoiding relapse, but I had to wonder why it was not included in the relapse lesson.

Meetings

Meeting protocol consists primarily of opening worship songs, reading of the eight principles, and a teaching or testimony time. At the completion of this hour-long general session, the participants divide into various small groups for an hour of sharing. The evening concludes with an invitation to fellowship in what Saddleback calls *The Hard Rock Cafe*.

I attended a Celebrate Recovery meeting at a local church. The program had been in effect for ten months. A brochure was provided plus a study guide on “Step 3” (substituted for CR’s use of the term, “Principle 3”). All references in the step guide were from the NLT. Curiously, the participant guides were never used throughout the evening.

The leader introduced herself as a Christian who struggles with codependency. The opening worship time was led by two women, one on guitar and one on piano. It lasted approximately fifteen minutes. The musical quality was rather poor. This was followed by four minutes of announcements. The group then stood to read aloud, in unison, all eight principles and their corresponding scripture.

The featured speaker was a participant/leader in the CR program who introduced himself as a “recovering alcoholic”. He used the word “step” instead of “principle” throughout his presentation. Step 3 was said to be the “true

foundation of ALL solid recovery”. He blamed his alcoholic past on reckless use of free will. He asserted freedom is not available unless great desire is present, and only if for the right reasons. He used the term “addicted personality”. Reference was made to the value of AA’s Big Book. A film clip from the Hollywood production, *Bruce Almighty*, was shown [showing Jim Carrey expressing a willingness to surrender to God’s will – then immediately run over by a tractor trailer truck]. Principle 3 includes an evangelism opportunity, and the speaker gave one. There were several references to the validity of the Big Book. The Prodigal Son was called a man with a “classic addictive personality”.

Closing announcements followed the speaker. More use of AA slogans occurred. Reinhold Niebuhr’s full serenity prayer was recited, in unison, while standing.

The program then transitioned to small groups. I attended the group for “Chemically Dependent Men”. The literature advertises that a trained facilitator leads each group. The training actually consists only of having successfully completed the CR program. Four men, including the leader, attended the group. They all used the classic AA style of introduction, introducing themselves by first name only, then stating that they were both Christians and addicts. The group discussed only their 12-step progress. Two of four had been drug free for only 30 days. One stated he had been stuck on Step One for several years. Another stated it took him 2-1/2 years to reach 30 days of sobriety. All monologues were in 12-step recovery language. The AA rule of no crosstalk was enforced. The Bible and Jesus were only alluded to. One man presented another with a Narcotics Anonymous 30-day keychain (honoring 30 days of sobriety). Neither the CR Leaders’ Guide nor the Participant’s Guide was used during the evening.

Observations

This curriculum is characterized by uncanny resemblance to secular 12-Step programs. Big Book quotations, AA slogans (behaviorally based), and use of secular 12-step terminology such as, sponsor, powerlessness, character defects, etc., permeate its pages. In a footnote on page 15 of the leaders’ guide, Baker offers his justification for use of the secular Twelve Steps:

Throughout this material, you will notice several references to the Christ-centered 12 Steps⁸. Our prayer is that Celebrate Recovery will create a bridge to the millions of people who are familiar with the 12 Steps and in so doing, introduce them to the one and only true Higher Power, Jesus Christ. Once they begin that relationship, ask Christ into their hearts as Lord and Savior, true healing and recovery can begin!

⁸ These are Baker’s slightly modified/customized version of the secular 12 Steps.

This is a noble strategy, albeit not a traditional means of proclaiming the gospel. Baker offers no commentary on the degree to which conversions have occurred as a result of this strategy.

One particularly troubling practice is the curriculum's pervasive use of Bible paraphrases. Occasionally, the paraphrase grossly misinterprets the correct meaning. For example, Mark 1:15 is quoted, "Turn from your sins and act on this glorious news" (TLB). The NASB translates this *entire* verse as, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel⁹". The context in the curriculum is a discussion of repentance. The NIV, a dynamic equivalent, is the only reputable translation used. Otherwise, paraphrases such as The Living Bible, The Good News Bible (TEV), J.B. Phillips, The Message, and the New Century Version are used. Persons considering using this curriculum are urged to reflect carefully on the use of these paraphrases.

In the Sponsorship lesson ("*Having a sponsor or accountability partner is a key part of your recovery program*"), four keys to success are given: (1) an honest view of reality; (2) make meetings (CR's) a priority; (3) maintain a spiritual program; (4) service. While these all appear valid at first glance, one wonders why the church does not provide them. The Bible is the church's way of obtaining and maintaining an honest view of reality (Rom. 12:2), especially since it gives considerable attention to the thought life based upon objective truth. It is not clear why CR insists that attending their meetings is the way to maintain sobriety and grow spiritually instead of suggesting that participants become fully integrated into normal church life with the rest of the congregation [with whatever problems they have overcome or are dealing with]. The church is God's ordained locus for experiencing the body life, indeed, the vehicle through which spiritual formation occurs (Eph. 4:11-16). Of course, CR is a church program operated within the church itself. But a separate program of indefinite duration risks believer differentiation and segregation from the body, with the group replacing the larger body.

Do CR groups have mature believers to mentor the newer participants in discipleship? The inference is that they do not. Principles containing terms such as, *earnestly, consciously, openly, voluntarily* (adverbs) to *choose, believe, examine, submit, evaluate, and yield* (verbs) could be construed as condescending or even insulting, treating program participants as helpless children who require clear and simple instructions under parental supervision. All participants are viewed identically, as helpless children, all with the same relational, personality, and spiritual problems. Supporting this concern is the CR rule, "No Cross-Talk" during meetings. This is adopted directly from the secular 12 Steps. If someone is

⁹Repentance and faith (belief) are bound together in one piece (not tempo rally successive acts). To "repent" (metanoēō; cf. Mark 1:4) is to turn away from an existing object of trust (e.g., oneself). To "believe" (pisteuō, here *pisteuete en*, the only NT appearance of this combination) is to commit oneself wholeheartedly to an object of faith. Walvoord, J. F., R. B. Zuck, & Dallas Theological Seminary. *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983-c1985.

sharing a matter with which another is familiar, and may indeed have overcome, they are prohibited from offering their knowledge and experience. Janice Haaken comments on this rule:

While seeming to offer a reparative experience for many [of their previous familial] injurious relationships, many key principles and processes...are a reenactment of the very pathology which the groups purportedly overcome. As in the dysfunctional home, meaningful interaction is prevented within the group by the ban on “crosstalk” and an indiscriminate openness is cultivated, in which the members are encouraged to express very private experiences within a group where other people often come and go as strangers. This undermines any potential for learning, through experiences with others, what makes situations or other people emotionally safe or trustworthy. Also, a pseudo-mutuality is cultivated...whereby group members are assumed to share a common personality disorder...intended to explain the life difficulties of group members.¹⁰

For example, many children are brought up having been told by their parents, “Children should be seen and not heard”, or “Don’t speak unless spoken to”. This is the idea behind Haaken’s comments.

Commenting on the concept of AA style group meetings, seminary professor Linda Mercadante says,

Although we must all acknowledge our common and our particular weaknesses, it is risky to place one’s primary identity in a group bound by a shared pathology...Focus on individual weakness, even if common characteristics are believed shared, can eventually further an alienating individualism, rather than a creative individuality within community...There are serious difficulties in making human weakness a significant common bond...The church should recognize both the need and the theological mandate to provide, with firmer grounding, what many seek from recovery groups¹¹

CR includes codependency as one of the “hurts, hang-ups, or habits” its program addresses. There are serious problems with the notion of codependency,

¹⁰ Janice Haaken, *Beyond Addiction: Recovery Groups and “Women Who Love Too Much”*, Free Associations 3, 1992, pp. 102-104.

¹¹ Linda Mercadante, *Victims and Sinners: Spiritual Roots of Addiction and Recovery*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1996, pp.162-163.

also called co-addiction. It pertains almost exclusively to women, and is generally described as inordinate, compulsive, and harmful dependence on another. The experience of a wife suffering emotionally from the consequences of her husband's addiction, but attempting to fulfill her divinely sanctioned role, is now said to be suffering in a "disease process".

I was surprised to discover such little discussion of temptation in the curriculum. This is understandable if CR indeed sees addiction as a disease, a purely physiological context.¹² Instead, participants are urged to continue taking personal inventories on an "ongoing, daily, and periodic" basis.

In his testimony early in the leader's guide, Baker states, "I had finally hit *my* bottom". "Hitting bottom" is the recovery industry's big bang theory. It is the suggestion that something comes out of nothing. The idea that the further one plunges into oblivion the greater the likelihood of discovering a resource to break free is naïve. Bottom for many is death. Also, if someone has the mistaken idea that they must hit bottom before they can break free, there is the risk that they will accelerate the plunge in an attempt to reach this point sooner, thereby greatly increasing the risk of death. I found Baker's repeated use of AA vernacular perplexing.

The primary problem with the twelve-step model, and to a large degree, the CR model, is that a preponderance of attention is directed toward changing the will. Christians who are addicted are not in spiritual bondage (Romans 6). Rather, they are caught in a spiritual stronghold. The locus of a spiritual stronghold is in the mind. Hence, battling the will is fruitless for the believer since he is no longer held in bondage. In bondage, choices are ultimately controlled by Satan (2 Tim. 2:26). Once saved, the Spirit opposes Satan and the desire of the flesh. In bondage (unsaved), the think-feel-act process is corrupted. Since one's thinking emanates from faulty reasoning, flawed logic, pretensions, human philosophy, and empty deception, feelings are necessarily contaminated. Considerable behavioral control belongs to the enemy. Once one's thinking is illuminated in redemption, Satan must abandon manipulating and coercing at the level of the will and focus his efforts toward operating at the level of thinking. Since the spiritual battle is taking place in the mind, a good curriculum must give considerable attention to this.

Conclusion

Freedom from addiction is explicitly stated to be solely contingent upon proper and effective use of the CR program. "By working the principles...the foundation of your life has been rebuilt", one participant's guide reads. Although reference is made to following Christ's directions, the principles appear to be the priority, and it is within these that it is intended the participant discover Christ's

¹² Several attempts were made to contact Saddleback's CR staff in an attempt to ascertain their definition of addiction, and if they had any indication of CR success (aka, "treatment outcomes" in clinical settings). No response was ever received.

directions. The only inference that can be drawn is that relapse will occur unless the principles and steps of the CR curriculum are followed precisely. Hence, the responsibility for failure rests exclusively on an individual's inability to "work the program" to perfection. Legalism?

Baker apparently believes the disease concept. Participants are considered "in recovery", rather than "in Christ", thereby perpetuating the disease myth and lifelong enslavement to the pretension that addiction is chronic. The unrelenting use of AA terminology and practices betray the true nature of this curriculum. It is a Christianized twelve-step program. Combining cultural paradigms with biblical principles risks syncretism, for they are antithetical. Churches must consider to what extent they believe "a little leaven leavens the whole lump" in evaluating this curriculum.

To his credit, Baker occasionally corrects the secular 12 steps. For example, Step 3 of the secular programs states, "Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood him*". Baker correctly states that life surrender to God precedes turning over our wills.

Baker also suggests something curious. In his "Closing Thoughts" on page 215, he quotes [another paraphrase] Romans 12:13: "Bring strangers in need into your home" (NCV). In other words, practice hospitality. The idea that strong Christian families within the body can play a significant role in ministering to those caught in the stronghold of addiction is novel and worth serious consideration.

This is the strongest support group curriculum I have seen. The team of Warren, Baker, and Zondervan has produced a very professional product. It's potential is significant, but its foundational adaptation of the twelve-step/disease model will impede its success. Because nothing else of its caliber exists, especially with the support and endorsement of Rick Warren, and because of the conspicuous paucity of scholarly commentary on the nature of addiction, many churches will use it.

However, the distinguishing character of CR is determined by 12-step partisans who foist the AA model upon the program and its participants. Had I not attended a CR event, I never would have discovered that most, if not all, participants are 12-step disciples. It is these 12-step doctrinaires who define the ethos of the program. This warrants heightened concern. I am not sure CR leaders are aware that their program is vulnerable to ceding control to the guiding beliefs of 12-step adherents.