



The Truth About Addiction

By Paul Stark

Dr. Herbert Fingarette makes this astonishing statement: “Almost everything the American public believes to be the scientific truth about alcoholism is false... And yet, *no* leading research authorities accept the classic disease concept.”¹ He wrote this in 1988.

A large, recent survey of alcohol treatment providers reported that 93% of the 450 facilities it surveyed utilized the 12-Step approach...all of the 450 facilities surveyed treated both alcohol and drug abuse.² Dr. Edward T. Welch states, “In the realm of addictions AA [Alcoholics Anonymous] controls the discussion, even within the church”.³

These facts pose two critical questions for the Christian: Do 12-Step programs work? If not, what are the options?

Read these shocking statistics:

- In 2004, 19.1 million Americans, or 7.9 percent of the population aged 12 or older, were current illicit drug users⁴
- 121 million Americans aged 12 or older were current drinkers of alcohol in 2004 (50.3 percent). 55 million (22.8 percent) participated in binge drinking, defined as five or more drinks on at least one occasion in the 30 days prior to the survey. 16.7 million (6.9 percent) were heavy drinkers, defined as binge drinking on 5 or more days in the past month⁵
- Approximately 40 million people in the United States are sexually involved with the Internet⁶
- 72 million Internet users visit pornography websites per year⁷
- Sex is the number 1 topic searched on the Internet⁸
- For every 10 men in church, 5 are struggling with pornography⁹
- In the United States, as many as 10 million females and 1 million males are fighting a life and death battle with an eating disorder such as anorexia or bulimia. Approximately 25 million more are struggling with binge eating disorder¹⁰

¹ Fingarette, Herbert, *Heavy Drinking: The Myth of Alcoholism as a Disease*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988, pp. 1 and 3.

² Bufo, Charles and Peele, Stanton. *Resisting 12-Step Coercion*. Tucson: See Sharp Press, 2000, chapter 1.

³ Welch, Edward T. *Addiction: A Banquet in the Grave: Finding Hope in the Power of the Gospel*. Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2001, p. 5.

⁴ Overview of Findings from the 2004 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, SAMSHA

⁵ Overview of Findings from the 2004 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, SAMSHA

⁶ *Exposing Porn: Science, Religion, and the New Addiction*, Paul Strand. Christian Broadcasting Network, 2004.

⁷ *Pornography Statistics 2003*. Internet Filter Review. www.internetfilterreview.com, 2003.

⁸ Overdosing on Porn, Rebecca Hagelin. www.worldandi.com, March, 2004.

⁹ *The Call to Biblical Manhood*. Man in the Mirror, 6 July, 2004.

- It has been shown that 80% of American women are dissatisfied with their appearance¹¹
- Over 70 percent of U.S. adults have reportedly gambled at least once in the past year. Approximately 1% of the U.S. adults (3 million) meet the criteria for pathological gambling. Another 2 to 3 percent have less significant, yet serious, problems with their gambling¹²

In today's culture, nearly every family has been touched either directly or indirectly by the nightmare of addiction. Marriages, families, and individual lives have been utterly decimated at the hands of alcohol, drugs, pornography, gambling, overeating, and even overspending. Most of us have heard or experienced story upon story about the anguish and suffering that have corrosively impacted not only the family nucleus, but also the very fabric of our society. There is both bad news and good news to report. The bad news is that 12-Step programs have a documented history of pervasive failure. The good news is that God hasn't overlooked addiction, and the biblical provisions are sufficient for both breaking free and remaining free.

Do 12-Step Programs Work?

Perhaps nothing has been more harmful to the church than the misleading, misguided, misinformation of the 12-Step recovery movement. A 10-billion-dollar-a-year industry, this movement has succeeded in betraying the trust of tens of millions with its assertions that addictions are a disease and can even be genetically inherited. Both these assertions are made without conclusive scientific evidence.

The genesis of the disease myth, although able to be traced back to concepts originally proffered by Dr. Benjamin Rush in the late 18th century, began to pick up steam in 1946 and 1952 with the publications of two landmark articles by Yale researcher E.M. Jellinek, and the eventual publication of his book, *The Disease Concept of Alcoholism*, in 1960. The articles and book provided the foundation and justification for AA's 12-Step treatment. Jellinek's influence on cultural views of recovery has been remarkable, but not because of his work's scientific value, but rather because of its distinctively unscientific form. Jellinek based his writings not on experimental studies with control groups and random assignment of subjects, not on epidemiological studies with matched comparison groups, not on longitudinal studies, not even on retrospective studies of a random sample of the population. Instead, he based his writings on one retrospective study of a small sample of self-selected Alcoholics Anonymous members, with no comparison group. Jellinek's data came from an AA-designed questionnaire. All of the replies Jellinek received came from self-selected AA members. Of the 158 questionnaires received, he discarded 60 because they were either completed by women, were incomplete, or had been completed by AA members who had pooled their answers. Jellinek went on to interpret the answers on the remaining 98 questionnaires at great length, producing impressive looking graphs and thousands upon thousands of words of analysis. His works remain a mainstay in the arsenal of 12-Step proponents. However, the truth is that Jellinek's work was a retrospective study based

¹⁰ Crowther et al., 1992; Fairburn et al., 1993; Gordon, 1990; Hoek, 1995; Shisslak et al., 1995.

¹¹ Smolak, 1996.

¹² National Council on Problem Gambling, March 2003.

on a small, exclusively male, self-selected sample of AA members. Naturally, the answers given reflected the prevailing view of alcoholism within AA.¹³

Claims that the 12-Step/Disease Concept of recovery is the most successful treatment ever devised are what we hear. The reality is that these treatment paradigms have consistently demonstrated outcomes ranked lowest among the various options studied.

Here's a summary of a few studies:

1. *The Ditman Study* provided evidence that AA is no more effective than no treatment at all.
2. AA itself conducts surveys. The *AA Monograph, Comments on AA's Triennial Surveys*, revealed this surprising result regarding new member dropout rates:

At one month, the "% of those . . . that have remained" is 19%; at 3 months, 10%; and at 12 months, 5%.

This is a 5% success rate at the one-year point if success is simply defined as continuing AA membership. Because AA considers addiction a chronic, progressive disease, these findings make it ironic that the 12-Step model is described as a "program for life".

3. The NIAAA (The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism) has conducted a study of alcohol dependent subjects. It is known as the *National Longitudinal Alcohol Epidemiologic Survey (NLAES)*. A longitudinal study involves repeated observation or examination of a set of subjects over time with respect to one or more study variables. Among the results are the following:
 - a. Of all alcoholics treated within five years of onset of alcohol dependence, 70% are still drinking alcoholically and 90% are drinking.
 - b. Of people diagnosed as alcohol dependent within the past five years who *do not* seek treatment, almost half stop drinking.¹⁴
 - c. Twenty years after a diagnosis of alcohol dependence, a solid majority, 60% of untreated alcoholics are drinking without an abuse/dependence diagnosis, twice as many as abstain, and only 10% continue to drink alcoholically for longer than 20 years.¹⁵
4. In *The Vaillant Study*, George Vaillant, in reporting on the results of his 12-Step study says, "not only had we failed to alter the natural history of alcoholism, but our death rate

¹³ Most of the information in this paragraph can be found in greater detail in Peele's and Bufe's previously noted book, *Resisting 12-Step Coercion*. For an interesting, accurate, yet concise history of addiction, see Dr. Herbert Fingarette's *Heavy Drinking: The Myth of Alcoholism as a Disease*, Chapter 1.

¹⁴ Only about 10% of treated alcoholics abstain.

¹⁵ This group, comprising the solid majority of alcoholics, shows just how self-limiting (as opposed to progressive) addiction is.

of three percent a year was appalling...our results were no better than the natural history of the disorder”.

5. *The Edwards Study* revealed that a treatment group introduced to AA and then given a year of outpatient treatment, including psychiatric and social worker appointments, had no better success than a comparison group given a single counseling session in which “they were told that responsibility for attainment of the stated goals (abstinence, employment, and marital improvement) lay in their own hands”.
6. *The Higgins Studies* compared standard 12-Step outpatient treatment to a form of behavioral treatment (community reinforcement approach). Of significance was the fact that the behavioral group had been using almost three times more cocaine than the 12-Step group. In the first study, 85% of the behavioral group completed the full 12 weeks of treatment, compared with only 42% in the 12-Step group. In the second study, 58% of the behavioral group completed the full 24 weeks of treatment, compared with only 11% of the 12-Step group.
7. *The Wells Study* involved comparing 12-Step drug outpatient treatment to cognitive-behavioral outpatient relapse prevention treatment. Although the cognitive-behavioral group was using cocaine, alcohol, and marijuana slightly over 25% more often than the 12-Step group, it had better results, especially with alcohol. Wells stated, “With its emphasis on anticipating and coping with future high-risk situations, relapse prevention [treatment] would be expected to be superior [to 12-Step treatment] in helping clients maintain reductions in drug usage over time”.
8. *The Texas Prison Study* evaluated the effects of 12-Step treatment on recidivism. The recidivism rate three years after treatment was precisely the same for those prisoners who had undergone treatment as for those in the no-treatment comparison groups.

These studies are samplings that clearly show the 12-Step/Disease Concept of recovery to be far less successful than we have been led to believe. More people recover without any treatment at all. Furthermore, passage of a relatively long period of time appears to result in eventual discontinuance of alcohol abuse for 80-90% of those previously addicted. Since almost all 12-Step/Disease Concept treatment facilities treat alcohol and drugs together, i.e., there is no segregation of the two groups; they receive the same treatment program, it is obvious that the poor success of treatment for drug addicts mirrors the poor treatment results for alcoholics. It is likely that other addictions that use the 12-Steps experience similar disappointing results.

Correlation between resolving issues of the past and drinking habits

Following are quotes from the book, *Heavy Drinking: The Myth of Alcoholism as a Disease*, by Dr. Herbert Fingarette, distinguished professor at the University of California, who has been a consultant on alcoholism and addiction to the World Health Organization and a Fellow of the Stanford Center for Advanced Studies in the Behavioral Sciences. His work has had a significant influence on the US Supreme Court, state supreme courts, and current national policy makers on substance abuse:

...there is no scientific evidence that heavy drinking is caused by a specific psychiatric condition.

Numerous attempts have been made to explain the alcoholic's patterns of drinking by reference to psychological constructs: personality, inner conflict, anxiety, poor self-image, and so on. ... all these theories, none of which has earned general acceptance in the scientific community.

He quotes the major, influential study of Vaillant and Milofsky ...the etiological hypotheses that view alcoholism primarily as a symptom of psychological instability may be illusions.

Fingarette discusses this at considerably greater length. He does make an interesting observation in his reference to what is often called *learning theory*. Here it is posited that *people persistently drink heavily because they have "learned" to handle certain of life's challenges this way*. He concludes, *While some drinkers may be helped by this approach, it is worth noting that we do not have a science of how to teach imprudent people to change and live prudently*. But the Christian has the Bible. So if this theory has any validity, it is resolved in the sanctification process.

I can summarize his research in this context with these quotes:

Research to date has shown that no one causal formula explains why people become heavy drinkers.

Studies of the personality of alcoholics have consistently led to a rejection of an "alcoholic personality"

...most alcoholics do not have alcoholic parents (75-80%).

There are, in short, many kinds of heavy drinking that arise from many different causes and produce many different patterns of associated problems.

Heavy drinkers are people who have made a long and complex series of decisions, judgments, and choices of commission and omission that have coalesced into a central activity.

Since this research matches the consensus of the scholarly research I've studied, I have come to the point where I define addiction as a spiritual stronghold within which sin predominates (John 8:34, Rom. 6:12). I don't as much care how the individual got there as much as I desire to see them break the stronghold(s). Following that, it's a matter of progressive sanctification, as it is, of course, for us all.

Theological Problems with the 12-Step/Disease Concept

The Powerlessness Problem. 12-Step doctrinaires are told they are powerless over alcohol and drugs.¹⁶ This poses a conflict for the Christian, for why should a Christian say he is powerless when the Bible says he can do all things through Christ who strengthens him (Philippians 4:13)? Why should he say he is powerless when the Bible says God's divine power has granted to him

¹⁶ Step One

everything pertaining to life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3)? This initial step in the 12-Step program, if believed, robs the Christian of his power connection to God right at the outset.

Once an addict, always an addict. Disease Concept partisans advocate the theory that addiction is a chronic and progressive disease. First of all, I have not been able to discover a single iota of valid scientific evidence that addiction is a disease. That's why it continues to be referred to as "The Disease *Concept*" more than 45 years after Jellinek's book. Secondly, I have been unable to discover a single iota of valid scientific evidence that there is a genetic component to addiction, i.e., it is inherited. So, the premises upon which the disease model is based are flawed. Nevertheless, the recovery industry (10 billion dollars annually) boldly declares this imaginary disease as one that never goes away (chronic) and continually worsens (progressive). This poses an enormous conflict for the Christian, for why should he [forever] declare his identity as an addict, when the Bible says he is a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17), *free* (Rom. 6:7, Gal. 5:1), God's workmanship (Eph. 2:10), and complete in Christ (Col. 2:10)? The disease concept has the debilitating effect of robbing a Christian of his identity in Christ. Understanding and believing who we are in Christ is foundational to living a life free from the enslaving nature of sin.

The Higher Power Problem. Steps two, three, and eleven of the 12-Step program of recovery refer to an undefined "power greater than ourselves", aka, "The Higher Power", and "God as we understand him". These steps, of course, pose possibly the greatest danger of all for Christians, for to open ourselves to an ambiguous power is to invite the presence and activity of demonic forces. There is not more than one way to God (John 14:6), and we cannot reach God by first defining our own amorphous deities and presuming God will fill the void.

These beliefs are antithetical to biblical doctrines. To embrace the 12-Step/Disease Concept of addiction and recovery is to embrace syncretism and pantheism.

The Biblical Solution

While Christians have the "Good Book", 12-Step disciples have their own "Bible", *The Big Book*. But the doctrines espoused in *The Big Book* are not the inspired, inerrant, infallible Word of God. So, what does the Bible have to say about addiction? Everything you need to know!

Addiction defined. Addiction is a spiritual stronghold within which sin predominates. It is spiritual because of sin. It is a stronghold because it controls prepotently. And to the extent one ritualizes the use of a substance it is idolatry.

It is vital to define addiction at the outset. If we do not have a definition, how else are we to deal with it, specifically under the scrutiny of biblical revelation, and more particularly within the theology encapsulated in the Pauline corpus? As the Cheshire Cat in *Alice in Wonderland* said, "If you don't know where you're going, any road will take you there". This is especially important because Christians are more familiar with the secular worldview of addiction and recovery than they are with the biblical treatment of it.

Perhaps nowhere in Scripture is God's will for us more clearly stated than in 1 Thessalonians 4:3, which says, "For this is the will of God, your sanctification". Sanctification means holiness and holiness means Christlikeness. It should be obvious that we are well served by occupying

ourselves in consonance with God's will for us. It is nothing beyond simple wisdom and reasonable logic that to place ourselves in harmony with God's overarching purpose for us is to experience outcomes that correspond to God's infinite resources.

Most people who struggle with addiction engage in a struggle of abstinence. All their effort is put into not indulging. But abstinence is the wrong goal. The correct goal is Christlikeness because it represents placing ourselves in alignment with God's paramount will for our lives.

There are only three ways to be like Christ: thought, word and deed. Many have mastered thoughts and words through Bible study, prayer and worship. The area in which we lack is in the performing of good deeds. Please don't misunderstand what I am saying here. Spiritual disciplines like Bible study and prayer are essential to spiritual formation. But failure to obey God in the command to serve precludes the possibility of sanctification being fully accomplished in us. Therefore, this approach to freedom from addiction begins with a fundamental thesis: *The more like Christ we are, the more power over temptation and sin we have.* It's that simple.

I am not endorsing a covenant of works theology, that is, a belief that we can do something that contributes to our salvation and its application in our lives. God alone is the Sanctifier. However, I *am* saying that the Bible clearly calls for living a Christian life characterized by good deeds (Eph. 2:10, Titus 2:14, Gal. 5:13, John 15:16, 1 Pet. 2:16). Since deeds are an essential component of sanctification, serving God contributes directly to remaining free from addiction.

So then, what precisely does the Bible prescribe for those caught in the spiritual stronghold of addiction? Consider the following *Biblical Provisions for Addiction*:

Freedom from Addiction

Christians need to understand the theology Romans 6, that the believer is free from the controlling power of sin. This understanding is prerequisite to breaking free from addiction. Individuals who apprehend this truth are on their way to true and lasting freedom from addiction.

The Thought Life

For the Christian, the spiritual battle is a battle for the mind. Since addiction is a spiritual stronghold, and since the locus of a stronghold is in the mind, a great deal of attention must be given to this critical area of study, especially regarding the process of taking thoughts captive. Rom. 13:14, 2 Cor. 2:11, 10:3-5, Eph. 4:27, 6:10-12, 1 Chron. 21:1, John 13:2, Acts 5:1-5, 1 Kings 22:21-22, Phil. 4:8, Col. 3:2.

Walking by the Spirit

One of the most difficult challenges facing the Christian is what to do about the neutral disposition of the flesh. Walking by the Spirit does not have to do with a spiritual state; it has to do with physical activity. Scripture demonstrates that freedom must be acted upon. How we occupy our time determines if we will live in freedom. Gal. 5:16, Titus 2:14, Eph. 5:15-18, 1 Pet. 2:16, Heb. 12:1.

Sanctification and the Command to Serve

The single biggest reason Christians relapse is because they dry up spiritually. But actively serving God precludes a stale and impotent Christian life. Sanctification is incomplete without the essential component of service. None of us become what God created us to be without doing what He created us to do. Gal. 5:13, John 15:1-17, Rom. 6:19, Eph. 4:11-16, Pr. 11:25, James 2:22.

Purpose, Meaning, and Fulfillment

Dr. Charles Stanley says, "Life at its very, very, very best, is discovering God's will and walking in it". God has a "prepared beforehand" purpose for every one of His children. Living out this purpose brings meaning and fulfillment to life that never disappoints. The absence of purpose and meaning is conducive to fulfilling the desire to gratify the addictive craving. Eph. 2:10, Ps. 37:4, John 15:11, 16, Pr. 13:12, 19, Is. 58:6-11.

The Way of Escape

Is the "way of escape" a course of escape or a means of escape? This section is a deep and thorough discussion of temptation, its characteristics, and the biblical instruction for responding to it. 1 Cor. 10:13, James 1, and various other scriptures.

Suffering and Peace

There are times when a Christian must suffer through it in order to be set free from it. A full discussion of the role of suffering in the Christian life, its purposes, and its results must be undertaken. 1 Pet. 4:1-3, 5:6-10. Heb. 13:4-14.

Reasons for Stumbling

What the secular recovery industry calls, "relapse", the Bible calls stumbling (or falling). Passages covering such topics as disobedience to the Word, not abiding in the Light, arrogance, double-mindedness, the nature of sin, free will in choices, ungodly relationships, and demonic strategies of deception need to be examined. 1 Pet. 2:8, 1 John 2:10-11, Jer. 50:32, James 4:1-10, Rom. 7:14-25, Eph. 4:27, 1 Cor. 10:20-21.

Antidotes to Stumbling

This is the important area of spiritual formation. Scriptural, devotional, and worship disciplines need to be emphasized. Elements of prayer should be studied. And an examination of the heart conditions necessary for personal holiness and spiritual power are essential. Exodus 20:20, Pr. 16:6, Psalm 119:11, Joshua 1:8, James 5:13, Luke 21:34-36, Ps. 37:23-24, 145:14, Pr. 24:16, Ps. 15:2, 5, Matt. 7:24-27.

The truth is that God hasn't overlooked this area of great need in the church. The biblical provisions for addiction are sufficient for finding true and lasting freedom.

Paul Stark is Executive Director of [Provision House](#), a non-residential addictions ministry located in Charlotte, North Carolina. *The Biblical Provisions for Addiction* is the title of his curriculum.