

AND CODEPENDENCY FOR ALL. . . .

Thousands of people are flocking to the bookstores to read about “codependency.” Most of them are women. They read books that describe the symptoms, join self-help groups, and seek therapy to find out if they are “codependent.” They enter an endless cycle in hopes of curing their newly discovered “disease,” and they find they are not alone. In fact, there seems to be an epidemic of self-diagnosed, group-diagnosed, and therapist-diagnosed “codependents.” The list of symptoms is so long and the possibilities so wide that everyone in any kind of unsatisfactory relationship may conceivably be labeled “codependent.”

The codependency/recovery movement is one of the newest and largest offshoots of the addiction treatment industry and the Alcoholics Anonymous Twelve-Step program. Every week 500,000 self-help meetings are held in this country. The fastest growing of these “free, confessional meetings” is Co-dependents Anonymous.¹ There are over 1800 Co-dependents Anonymous groups in this country, as well as other self-help groups, such as Adult Children of Alcoholics (ACOA) and Al-Anon.² There are also numerous workshops, conferences, treatment centers and therapists. And it must be admitted that the professionals are glad to have the business. One writer who contends that “the vicious cycle of co-dependency can only be stopped through intervention and professional care,” declared in 1984: “Happily, our profession is on the cutting edge of making co-dependency a national issue, both on the social level and on the health level.”³ Indeed, the awareness level has reached new heights of popularity and expanded revenues. And as the world goes, so goes the church in this newest rage of psychoheresy. Not to be outdone, many psychologists, psychiatrists, and treatment centers offer the same theories and therapies under the guise of being biblical. And churches are joining ranks with Twelve-Step addiction and codependency/recovery programs.

The estimated numbers of supposedly afflicted codependents range from tens of thousands⁴ to 40 million⁵ to 100 million⁶ and upwards to 96% of the population.⁷ That last estimate is a bit high when one considers that most of the people who are labeled “codependent” are women. But such numerical inconsistencies do not seem to bother the experts in the field. John Bradshaw, a leading recovery guru, claims that “Codependency is a plague upon the land.” He dramatically adds, “The Black Plague doesn’t even compare to the ravages of our compulsions caused by codependency.”⁸

Considering how many people are attempting to cope with unsatisfactory relationships and difficult situations, the potential market for self-help books and codependency/recovery treatment is astronomical. The list of books on codependency/recovery swells along with those dealing with addictions. They are popular best-sellers in Christian bookstores as well as in general bookstores. Evidently something is there. Something is wrong. People are looking for answers. Suggested remedies and supposed cures lie hidden in the books. But are those remedies the kind that Jesus offers? Are the so-called cures consistent with the Word of God?

Serious Problems with Problem Solutions.

People are attempting to address serious problems. Some are suffering in relationships that have little or no resemblance to the kind of love demonstrated and taught in the Bible. Numerous people are entangled in their own destructive sinful habits and in the life-dominating sins of those around them. Relationships that are supposed to reflect the love relationship of Christ and His church may indeed more resemble a macabre dance of death.

Yes, there are serious problems. However, we question the diagnoses, answers, formulas and systems that are being offered in the name of help, in the name of love, and even in the name of Christ. Beneath many programs that purport to be Christian lurk ideas, philosophies, psychologies, and religious notions that are antithetical to biblical Christianity. Codependency/recovery books, groups, programs, and therapists attempt to rescue people from what they believe to be unhealthy relationships. They give so-called codependents strategies to empower the self, build self-esteem, emotionally separate from others, and focus on their own feelings, ideas and desires.

Most systems of codependency and addiction recovery are based upon various psychological counseling theories and therapies and upon the religious and philosophical teachings of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). In short, such programs are based upon the wisdom of man and the worship of false gods. While the Bible may be used, it is not used in its fullness nor as solely sufficient for all matters of life and conduct. Instead, the Bible is placed in a subservient role to support popular psychological theories, therapies, and techniques. Furthermore, God is repeatedly redefined according to the limited understanding of human beings.

Besides serious theological problems inherent in the codependency and addiction recovery movement, there are many questions about the effectiveness of such programs and about the high rate of recidivism. We will be citing research which shows that faith in recovery programs is misplaced because of their lack of proven effectiveness. There is no scientific reason to add the philosophies and psychologies of the recovery movement to the principles and promises in the Bible. And there are strong theological reasons not to.

In voicing our concerns we are not minimizing the problems being addressed. Instead, we believe the problems are even more serious than any of the propagators of popular programs and systems of help realize. While such programs aim at helping a person solve certain problems and unsatisfactory patterns of living, we must remember that there are eternal consequences.

In this book we will look at relationships in dire need of repair, at habitual attitudes and behaviors that characterize those who are now calling themselves “codependent,” and at the remedies and religious ideas offered through Twelve-Step recovery programs, therapy, and self-help books. And we will contrast them with what the Bible says. The purpose of this book is to point out the dangers of popular codependency and addiction recovery programs in order to encourage both Christians and nonChristians to turn to the Word of God and the work of the Holy Spirit in the midst of problems. Our hope is that those caught in the riptide of habitual, life-dominating sin might find Jesus Himself sufficient for overcoming the power of sin. Jesus said, “I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly” (John 10:10).

Our Concern

As in our previous books, our concern is with the opinions of men which take precedence over the Word of God in explaining why people are the way they are and how they change. Authors of books on codependency/recovery base their ideas on unproven psychological theories and subjective observations which are based on neither the rigors of scientific investigation nor the rigors of exegetical Bible study. The field of addiction and codependency treatment is filled with human opinions on the nature of man, how he is to live, and how he changes. Christian treatment centers, recovery programs, and books on addiction and codependency are also based upon the same flimsy foundation of psychological opinion rather than on science or the Bible.

Jesus came to give life and liberty to all who are in bondage. He said:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord (Luke 4:18).

Jesus preached the gospel to those who were poor in spirit, who were cast down, who were discouraged, who had exhausted their means of coping with life, and who realized they were destitute. He came “to heal the brokenhearted,” those whose dreams have turned to despair and whose love has been fused with pain and disappointment. Jesus came to preach deliverance to those in bondage to sin, to themselves, to other people, and to life-crippling habits. He came to give sight to those blinded by the wisdom of men and the enemy of their souls. Jesus came to set at liberty those who have been bruised by the world, the flesh and the devil.

Who is not included among those who are in desperate need of the Savior? Indeed, all who find themselves caught in the wreckage of their lives and who are now turning to addiction and codependency/recovery programs need Jesus more than anything or anyone else. Therefore the question must be asked: If Jesus is truly the answer to life’s problems and indeed the very source of life, why are both nonChristians and Christians looking for answers elsewhere?

If Jesus Is the Answer, Why Look Elsewhere?

NonChristians turn to the vast recovery movement because the programs offer hope, help, and promises of recovery. And there is no encouragement to believe in the God of the Bible, whom they have never understood or known. They don’t turn to Christ because they have accumulated plenty of reasons not to. They remind themselves of Christians who have failed. Some have heard pastors say what they didn’t want to hear. Furthermore, they cannot understand a God who might condemn anyone or offer such a narrow way. However, beyond all of the human excuses, the actual reason nonChristians do not turn to Christ is because their eyes and ears are closed to the merciful grace of God.

But why do Christians look for answers outside the Bible and their relationship with Jesus Christ? Paul wrestled with this problem in his letter to the Galatians. The Galatians had started out well in the Christian walk, but then, under the influence of the Judaizers, they lost confidence in the sufficiency of the gospel. In his salutation Paul reminds them of what Jesus had already accomplished for them:

Grace be to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins, that he might deliver us from this present evil world, according to the will of God and our Father: to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. (Galatians 1:3-5.)

Then Paul presents his concern:

I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel: Which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ (Galatians 1:6-7).

The Galatians were attempting to be justified by the works of the law rather than by faith in what Jesus had accomplished for them by dying in their place and giving them new life through His resurrection. And this is true today.

Paul admonishes them and all who fall into this error:

O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you, that ye should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ hath been evidently set forth, crucified among you? This only would I learn of you, received ye the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are ye so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect by the flesh? (Galatians 3:1-3.)

In adding requirements, they entered into bondage. They evidently did not understand that just as they were saved through faith in the finished work of Christ, they were to live by faith in the finished and ongoing work of Christ in them. Therefore Paul reminds them and us: “But that no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, it is evident: for, the just shall live by faith” (Galatians 3:11).

People confuse the works of the law with the works of faith. Works of the law undermine a person’s ability to please God, because they are limited to self-effort. Works of faith, however, are the fruit of faith that grow from the Holy Spirit who indwells and empowers believers to obey and please God. Trying to keep the law by way of the flesh leads to bondage and death, because no one can keep the law. The way of the Spirit is freedom to please God and leads to life eternal.

Just as the Galatians, some Christians start out well and then shift into works. They lose confidence in the efficacy of the gospel and the Holy Spirit. When they sin, they may admonish themselves and try to change through trying harder, rather than responding through faith (1 John 1:9). Or, when they sin, they may not think it really matters that much since they already have the righteousness of Christ. One slips off course by trying to do it on his own, and another doesn’t bother to obey. Both responses lead to disaster and bondage; both are bondage to the world, the flesh, and the devil. Therefore Paul presents the solution to both errors:

Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage. . . . For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another. . . This I say then, walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh. (Galatians 5:1, 13, 16.)

Just as Christians are saved by grace through faith, they are to walk by grace through faith. The very source of walking in the Spirit comes through the profound relationship of the believer to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Another reason why some who call themselves Christians may be looking for some program in place of (or in addition to) Christ is that they have misunderstood the gospel and what it entails. The gospel might not have been presented clearly. Rather than recognizing their need for a savior to save them from their own sins, they may have been looking for a savior who would save them from their circumstances and/or who would make life easy and pleasant. They may have misunderstood the need to die to self and thought that Jesus was there to make them feel better about themselves, build their self-esteem, and cater to their desires. While Jesus meets every true need for the believer, and while life in Him holds a marvelous new dimension of peace with God and the hope of eternal life, all problems do not simply vanish. Jesus being the answer to problems of living does not mean that He necessarily takes them away. He gives strength and purpose, and He even uses problems to make a believer more like Himself. Three well-known sections of Scripture speak to this issue: Romans 5:1-5; Romans 8:28-29; and 1 Corinthians 10:13.

Christians who expect God to take away problems and change circumstances may begin to think poorly of God and even begin to blame Him for allowing bad things to happen. They may resent God for letting them down. Those feelings come from a misunderstanding of the character of God, the sinful condition of man, and the influence of “the prince of the power of the air” on the circumstances of this world. Rather than getting angry with God or forgiving Him, which some wrongfully teach, Christians who have an erroneous view of God need to have their vision restored by the Word of God and the work of the Holy Spirit. God is holy, pure, righteous, and full of compassion and mercy. He has provided salvation for the lost through the death of His only begotten Son. And He fulfills all His promises.

The Psychological Way or the Spiritual Way?

Another fundamental reason why Christians are turning to recovery programs is that they believe psychological theories about the nature of man. The encroachment of the psychological way into Christianity

has been a subtle, gradual movement which began in the world and moved into seminaries and pastoral counseling classes. Liberal denominations became psychologized much earlier than conservative ones. Pastors were concerned about their parishioners seeking help outside the fold and turned to the wisdom of men to minister to souls.⁹ Unfortunately many learned just enough to be intimidated and to think themselves incapable of ministering to people with “psychological” problems. Also, a number of evangelical Christians who had become psychologists worked to convince church leaders that psychological theories and therapies are necessary for helping Christians.

It is disheartening to see conservative churches, denominations, and fellowships running after psychological theories and therapies and acting as if Jesus Christ is not enough, as if the Holy Spirit indwelling a believer is impotent, or nearly so, and treating the Word of God as only useful for minor problems or theological questions. Instead of searching the Scriptures and warning their sheep, too many pastors believe two lies: (1) that they can only deal with spiritual matters (with a very limited definition) and (2) that only those who are psychologically trained are equipped to deal with psychological matters (which virtually includes everything about understanding the nature of man and how to help him change).

The church increasingly reflects a society which is saturated with the kind of psychology that seeks to understand why people are the way they are and how they change. Psychological language is part of everyday language and psychological solutions are accepted as life’s solutions. Concerning the codependency/recovery movement, Dr. Robert Coles says, “You don’t know whether to laugh or cry over some of this stuff.” He says this movement is a “typical example of how anything packaged as psychology in this culture seems to have an all too gullible audience.”¹⁰

Dr. John MacArthur, in his book *Our Sufficiency In Christ*, warns:

Human therapies are embraced most eagerly by the spiritually weak—those who are shallow or ignorant of biblical truth and who are unwilling to accept the path of suffering that leads to spiritual maturity and deeper communion with God. The unfortunate effect is that these people remain immature, held back by a self-imposed dependence on some pseudo-Christian method or psychoquackery that actually stifles real growth.¹¹

Many Christians do not realize that the psychological theories, therapies, and techniques used by Christians were created by nonChristians, many of whom repudiated and opposed Christianity. MacArthur says that even though the word psychology means “the study of the soul,” psychology “cannot really study the soul.” He says:

Outside the Word and the Spirit there are no solutions to any of the problems of the human soul. Only God knows the soul and only God can change it. Yet the widely accepted ideas of modern psychology are theories originally developed by atheists on the assumption that there is no God and the individual alone has the power to change himself into a better person through certain techniques.¹²

Christians use the same theories, therapies, and techniques as secular psychological counselors and psychotherapists. Many Christians mistakenly believe that such theories are science, when in fact they are simply unproven, unscientific notions of men. The part of psychology which deals with the nature of man, how he should live, and how he should change is filled with contradictions and deceptions. Moreover, because those theories deal with the nonphysical aspects of the person, they intrude upon the very essence of biblical doctrines of man, including his fallen condition, salvation, sanctification, and relationship of love and obedience to God. Christians who embrace the psychological opinions of the world have moved from absolute confidence in the Word of God for all matters of life and conduct to faith in the unproven, unscientific

psychological opinions of men. And this move in faith has led many into the popular recovery movement with its numerous psychologically-based treatment programs.

The Gospel or Twelve Steps?

What is the answer to the vast problems that are being addressed by the addiction and codependency recovery movement? Is it the good news of Jesus Christ or is it some version of Twelve-Step recovery and/or psychological treatment programs? The biblical answer is Jesus Christ and Him crucified:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, the just shall live by faith. (Romans 1:16-17.)

Jesus Christ enables people to be free to please and serve God. Jesus said: "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me" (John 14:6). Twelve-Step recovery programs and psychological treatment programs are based upon the wisdom of men. Most promise the ability to please and serve self and others. But they cannot please God, because they are not of Him (Romans 8:8). While they may free a person from one kind of bondage, they lead into another: bondage to self and even bondage to the "prince of this world."

This book is written for those who are suffering from the trials of life and for those who want to help. This book is for all who are thinking about joining a recovery group or entering a treatment center for addiction or codependency. It is for those who have tried Twelve-Step programs and recovery treatment centers and found them lacking. It is also for those who are currently in such programs. And, finally, it is to encourage those professing Christians who offer such programs to return to the faith once delivered to the saints.

A New Religion?

Through the language of addiction and recovery, Christians are being enticed into a totally different belief system based on psychological foundations. MacArthur warns:

There may be no more serious threat to the life of the church today than the stampede to embrace the doctrines of secular psychology. They are a mass of human ideas that Satan has placed in the church as if they were powerful, life-changing truths from God.¹³

Instead of following the Great Commission to "teach all nations. . . to observe all things whatsoever I [Jesus] have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20), Christians are teaching and embracing a psychological religion of recovery. The shift is subtle but swift. Throughout this book we attempt to shed light on the differences between the popular teachings of the recovery movement and "the faith which was once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3). Because these faith systems are antithetical to each other, the attempt to merge the psychological, codependency/recovery teachings with the Bible and Christianity results in one big psychoheresy.

Notes

1. Elizabeth Taylor, "Taking Care of Herself." *Time*, 10 December 1990, p. 106.
2. David Treadway, "Codependency: Disease, Metaphor, or Fad?" *Networker*, January, February 1990, p. 40.
3. Sharon Webscheider-Cruse, "Co-dependency: The Therapeutic Void." *Codependency: An Emerging Issue*. Hollywood, FL: Health Communications, 1984, p. 3.
4. Elizabeth Kristol, "Declarations of Codependence." *The American Spectator*, June 1990, p. 21.

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5. Melinda Blau, "No Life to Live." *American Health*, May 1990, p. 58.
 6. Robert Hemfelt, Frank Minirth, and Paul Meier. *Love Is a Choice*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989, p. 11.
 7. Lynette Lamb, "Is Everyone Codependent?" *Utne Reader*, May/June 1990, p. 26.
 8. John Bradshaw quoted by Lynette Lamb, "Is Everyone Codependent?" *Utne Reader*, May/June, 1990, p.26.
 9. E. Brooks Holifield. *A History of Pastoral Care in America: From Salvation to Self-Realization*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983, pp. 231ff.
 10. Robert Coles quoted by Wendy Kaminer, "Chances Are You're Codependent Too." *New York Times Book Review*, 11 February 1990, p. 1.
 11. John MacArthur. *Our Sufficiency In Christ*. Dallas: Word Publishing, 1991, p.67.
 12. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
 13. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

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