

Understanding Addiction

Talk given by Tom Pridham at Flames of Fire Wales 2007

Just suppose you had an addiction issue, and you also had the courage (or recklessness) to tell your pastor about it....what do you suppose his reaction would be? Well - maybe - his reaction would reflect his theology: There are some pastors who might see this as an opportunity for deliverance ministry.....you know the sort of thing -"Spirit of alcohol or heroin or lighter-fuel ...I bind you and cast you out!" There'll be finger-wagging, head-pushing, and the inevitable "Loose him, and let him go!"....as you're propelled across the sanctuary. But will it really change anything? Well, you decide.

Perhaps, though, you attend one of the more 'traditional' churches. There's nothing wrong with a bit of tradition - provided it's a good one. But some of these churches don't seem to take their traditions from, say, Jerusalem, or Ephesus. Oh no. They take their tradition from their founding father - the grim, humourless Jeremiah Smith - or whoever - who started the Exclusive Pharisees (or whatever) because he fell out with the Anglicans. They should never have suggested that wives be treated differently to other livestock. You know the sort of place: The 'parchment edition' of the 'authorised version' is always on the lectern... and it's always open at Leviticus, isn't it? If you're an addict in a church like that, then don't expect a sympathetic hearing. They'll 'expel the immoral brother'(or sister) faster than you could shift a whisky chaser. But maybe, that's a helpful approach: They get rid a problem, and you get to look for a church where the love of Christ is more than just a theoretical proposition.

But more likely than either of these scenarios, is that your pastor will hear you out with compassion and bewilderment in equal measure - while desperately praying for guidance under his breath. Chances are, he won't have a clue. He's probably among the vast majority of people who wouldn't know what to do with an addict. But....how would you get on in his position? What would you do if an alcoholic or addict came to you for help?

We'll return to that - but it could easily happen. There's no evidence to suggest that chemical dependency occurs with less frequency in the church than elsewhere - though there is evidence that the additional stigma attached to it in church, makes it even harder for the sufferer to seek help.... and it can be quite hard enough without that.

Alcoholism - and there is no meaningful difference between that and other chemical dependencies - is often cited as "the only disease that tells you that you haven't got it". Addicts have a remarkable capacity for self-delusion. They can exhibit every symptom known to man - and still tell themselves it's just depression, or circumstances, or last night's curry. They could drink fermented pig's vomit, and convince themselves they only do it because they like the taste. Addicts will often only realise they have a serious problem years after their family and friends knew about it. And even when they get their heads round that, they'll typically spend several more years trying (and failing) to regain control of their habit...rather than giving it up. They never succeed - they can only hope for temporary respite.

Alcoholics Anonymous claims that it is the great obsession of abnormal drinkers

to 'drink normally'. It isn't. They're wrong. It is the great obsession of abnormal drinkers to drink alcoholically, but to somehow avoid the consequences of alcoholism. In truth, most alcoholics, most of the time, don't want to be sober....they merely want to drink with impunity. But even freedom from consequences just doesn't cut it as an incentive to give up. They have to come to a place where sobriety seems desirable of itself. At different times, I've personally told 2 alcoholics that if they went back drinking, they would certainly die within the next 3 months. I'm sure they believed me, but they went ahead and did it anyway. One lived 6 weeks and the other, 18 days...he was 27 years old. They just couldn't face sobriety.

Before the chemically dependent is ever ready to ask for help, he or she is likely to have gone through years of denial, years of trying to 'cut-down', and may well be an emotional, spiritual and physical wreck. Even so, they'd probably still prefer being seen leaving a clap-clinic than an AA meeting - addiction is a humiliating illness.

But how does it all start? There are a number of theories as to why some people become chemically dependent. I'll just run some by you...and I'll do my best to avoid too much technical jargon or long scientific names. These presumed causes relate specifically to alcoholism, but most of them apply to any addiction. But I'll start with one that doesn't. It is said that a percentage of alcoholics have a channel in the brain - a microscopic connection which allows ethanol to mix with natural brain chemicals.

The resulting cocktail is chemically identical to an opium derivative used briefly as a painkiller, in the first world war. It was so addictive, that people were hooked after a single shot. The evidence cited for this is post-mortem brain analysis, which sometimes show this chemical is present.

Repeated substance abuse is a more common explanation, alongside genetic predisposition towards addictions. Another popular one, is childhood trauma....pain. The Priory, for example, report 40% of their clients claim being traumatized at an early age. Of course, a significant percentage of the general population will have suffered trauma and pain anyway, and it would be rash indeed to suggest that it was solely responsible for anything like 40% of the Priory's admissions...and they certainly don't suggest that.

I'm a retired alcoholic myself. I could make a case for all of those things causing my own alcoholism. I was instantly addicted - suggesting the channel in the brain. I repeatedly abused drink, there is alcoholism in my family and I wasn't short of pain and trauma while growing up.

Tell you what's important about establishing the cause of addiction: Absolutely nothing. It doesn't matter - it's completely irrelevant. It only matters what the addict does about it. If you break your leg, you don't sit around pondering the precise circumstances of the accident...you call an ambulance. If your ship's sinking, doesn't matter if it was struck by a torpedo, hit an iceberg...or even because someone called Jonah's on board. It's only important how you respond to the emergency. If you've got an addiction issue - that is the pertinent fact which needs addressing...not how you may have come by it. None of these supposed causes have a role to play in recovery.

Matter of fact, some addicts fixate on why they've got a problem. If they can prove to themselves that they drink because Aunt Mabel threw them off the balcony, or they use Coke because they share Uncle Norm's gene pool... then they feel justified in carrying on.

It isn't productive to speculate on causes, and it can be a serious hindrance. But for those who simply must have an explanation for addiction, I offer the following: All addiction is ultimately the result of partial or complete alienation from God...evidenced by the fact that it can neither occur - nor continue - in fullness of relationship with him. It is merely one possible outcome of the idolatry of self. That is the root, on which various other factors may act to produce the specific problem.

Alcoholism is defined by the World Health Organization as a progressive and incurable illness. It is always relentlessly progressive - like other chemical addictions - though that progression is rarely gentle or predictable. It is incurable, in the sense that no alcoholic will ever become a normal drinker again. The only long-term study of alcoholics trying to be social drinkers, produced alarming results. Of more than 1200 tested a few years after the experiment started - excluding those that it killed - 98.3% were again drinking alcoholically. The remaining 1.7% - on closer examination, were deemed to have been misdiagnosed. I'm sure other drugs would produce similar results.

So here's the odds: For those considered to be alcoholics - there is roughly a one in sixty chance that they actually have some other problem. You wouldn't bet on it. If they are alcoholics, they have exactly zero percent chance of ever becoming normal drinkers. That simple fact seems lost on those organisations which preach moderation to problem drinkers, who can't possibly comply for any length of time. Alcoholics just don't become social drinkers, even if they started that way. These people may as well try turning bluebottles back into maggots.

But is it an illness? It has quantifiable physical symptoms. On the mental health front, no sane person would subject themselves to that lifestyle on a daily basis, though I doubt it would meet a legal definition of insanity. But here's a less formal one, which suits all addicts well. Insanity is repeating an action, while expecting a different result.

And it can happen to anybody. A friend of mine slid into it almost imperceptibly. He had no childhood trauma, no pain, no alcoholics in the family...and only drank socially for years. Very happy, man and boy. Highly educated - extremely wealthy - he became Britain's second youngest crown court judge... ever. I met him just after he'd been wrestled to the ground on Clifton suspension bridge, when it became apparent that he was going to jump. Male alcoholics are thirteen times more likely to kill themselves than other people.

Another guy was a worship leader. Again, not a care in the world. 15 years of drinking occasionally with friends, 3 years of drinking rather too much...six months of drinking every day. Completely lost it. Then he set a new record for blood/alcohol level, but that was at his autopsy. His wife had asked him to come and see me, but he didn't think he had a problem...he was in denial.

Tell you how bad denial gets: There was a guy in his mid-twenties who tipped up at an alcoholic unit. While waiting to be seen, he picked up a leaflet, entitled "20 things that happen to alcoholics". After carefully reading it, he left – convinced he didn't have a problem. He'd only experienced 18 of those 20 things. So he must be OK. The two he hadn't experienced, were "serious brain damage", and "death"... either of which would have made it rather difficult to read the leaflet. That guy was me.

Denial is a universal symptom of this progressive and incurable illness....which can happen to anybody. So are self-delusion, dishonesty and self-loathing. In fact, there is a wide range of symptoms which characterise addiction. Many physical, many in the mind...like paranoia and panic attacks.

For some, the latter stages are characterised by the twin evils of behavioural problems and blackouts. That's when the brain's disengaged but the body's still doing things...stupid things, mostly. When the crystal ball grows cloudy, the guessing begins....Guessing what they did last night....waking up in the cells and guessing what the charge is this time; waking up in a strange bed and guessing who is sleeping next to them - worse, trying to guess the gender of the lump under the duvet (this one will make even hardened atheists pray - "please God, don't let it be a man!") And then, there is that early morning guessing game familiar to so many alcoholics....usually played around four in the morning. Staggering out of bed with nausea and the imminent 'trots', they have to guess which end to hang over the toilet bowl first. Let me tell you.....if they guess wrong - either way - it's going to be a bad start to the day.

Inevitably – unless recovery or death intervenes – the alcoholic comes to a point where there are only two issues in his or her life. Procurement and consumption. Some of them will do anything to get a drink, and they'll do anything when they've had one. They become deeply depressed, as the Serotonin and other receptors in the brain become clogged. They are overcome with weariness, because they no longer have REM sleep – just periodic unconsciousness. Despite the harshness of life, many of them can't imagine getting sober...and dread the rigours of withdrawal. With good reason: the shock to the system of withdrawals without medication can kill.

But what if – in a moment of lucidity – they can imagine getting sober, or free from drugs? What help is there? Well, they can go and see a doctor. He might put them on a waiting list for a detox bed. After that, he might recommend them for funding, so they can eventually go to a rehab. But addicts aren't very good at waiting – and the majority will just keep drinking or using. Or they can ask the doctor for medication to withdraw at home, and start going to A.A., or Narcotics Anonymous. I'd like to say a bit about A.A. I guess I've been to a couple of hundred meetings, which perhaps qualifies me to have an opinion. They're generally sincere people, who try their best to help themselves and others. They have a great programme, but – by and large – they haven't a clue how to use it.

Specifically, they have taken a powerful, God-given formula – the twelve steps – and have removed the active ingredient, which should be (and originally was) Christianity. They've watered it down. It's now God as you understand him or her...not God as he is. But you can't blame them...you get that in churches, too! When it was first conceived, the A.A. programme was very successful. People

came into a relationship with God, and got well. You can read of the initial success in the full version of what's known as the big book. But now, anything can be your God...or your higher power....and it shows. AA now has much wider appeal, but is much less effective.

In my experience, really comfortable sobriety is the exception rather than the rule at AA. Of those people I know who enjoy quality sobriety in AA, most of them are Christians, anyway. But I've met many who are hanging on to sobriety by a thread, and the quality of what they have is so poor, one wonders how they manage from day-to-day. Their attitude to alcohol, puts me in mind of Gollum and the ring: It's destroyed their families, it's turned them into monsters...but it's calling them – and one day they'll go looking for it.

Our little rehab was called "Livingstones". We hope to re-open it – it was, after all, roughly 16 times more effective than the average secular treatment centre. But we have funding issues: we may be cheaper and vastly more successful than secular models...but Christianity will never be politically correct. At Livingstones we used the first five steps of the AA programme. We did it for all chemical dependencies, we did it in great depth, and we did it in a strictly Christian context. We took people who at least believe in God... however ineffective that belief had been in their lives. Church people....or more often, people who used to go to church. In so many of our churches, addiction is the problem that dare not speak its name. When it gets embarrassing, they'll leave.

This is the tragedy. We have in Christianity, the answer to the problem. It really is as simple as that. I'm not talking about the 12 steps, useful though they are. Doing the twelve steps can be very helpful – it's a good place to start. But even fully explained and enhanced – they can only take people so far. At Livingstones we wanted for our clients far more than sustainable sobriety and freedom from drugs...we wanted them to achieve their full potential in Christ. So we disciplined them. We showed them how they can have the authentic Christian life, and especially - how that really works in practice. You know why most churches can't do that for alcoholics? Because they can't do it for their own congregations! More of that later.

So far, we've looked at the perceived causes of addiction. We've examined some of the physical and mental symptoms....and the problem of denial, and we've touched on the difficulties of overcoming. I've offered some thoughts on the general lack of appropriate help, the insufficient understanding of many health-care professionals and some organisations that offer poor advice. Looked at A.A, and considered the folly of diluting the Christian distinctive of it's programme. And we've thought about the inadequacy of some church responses to addiction.

At Livingstones, as I've mentioned, we used some of the A.A. steps. We also used industry standard secular DVD's, to convey background information about addiction. But most of our work at Livingstones was about taking people thru a comprehensive discipleship programme, called 'Stepping Out'. That's a 12 step programme as well, but it takes them well beyond sobriety. Matter of fact, it works in church or house-group too - even where there are no addiction problems. It's a step by step guide to how authentic Christianity really happens, and it changes lives, because it's a user friendly version of the key scriptural principals.

Genuine wholeness is a function of a quality relationship with God. Our programme is about leading people to that place, and getting them excited about going even deeper. God's love is unconditional, but a life-changing relationship with him isn't. We need to respond to him, and keep responding.

Like all our other relationships, this one thrives on communication...which for us is prayer, praise, worship and the bible. There's obedience issues, like repentance, and forgiveness. There's concepts like holiness, service, ministry, discipling others, and being a mother or a father in the faith. And how to effectively share your faith. These things and more, are the keys to experiencing authentic and dynamic Christianity.

People who do the course can expect to be truly free of their addictions, to experience the joy of walking with Jesus, and to know the power of his Spirit working in their lives and touching others. That quality of relationship is transforming of itself. Completeness is found in the relationship they were designed to have. Nothing else is needed....Christ is more than sufficient.

What any chemical dependent needs – above all else – is a vibrant relationship with his or her creator. That can overcome the worse addictions known to man...and it doesn't even have to be a struggle. But what do you need, if you're going to help them? I'll start with what can be useful. It's handy to have a good understanding of the issues. The physical ramifications of addiction. The psychological implications of the problem. Relapse prevention. Some people think relapse happens when the addict starts using again. Actually, it's a process of increasing mental and spiritual discomfort, of which using is merely an inescapable bi-product if the process isn't halted. Might last minutes – or months. For the Christian, it is characterised by progressive alienation from God..

It's helpful to know all that kind of stuff, as it is to know about a wide range of abused drugs and their effects. And of course, additional manifestations of what is sometimes known as the addictive personality.

That could be anything from sex and gambling addictions... to perfectionism and obsessive cleaning. Why should you know about those? Because an alcoholic with, say, an active sex addiction is not going to be able to get right with God or get sober. In effect, his indulgence of one will lead him directly back to the other. Obsessive cleaning (and the like) is obviously less harmful, and the client I had with that manifestation was a very welcome change.

It's very useful to know how the alcoholic mind works, though its pretty much impenetrable to those who haven't been there....unless they've really studied it, or lived with it. I went to see a rehab manager years ago who was struggling. He said, "They're running rings round me". I said, "Well of course they are, you've never been one". He was so naïve in this area, he even asked me why alcoholics walk around in heavy coats on hot days. Do they have circulatory problems? No – they have problems concealing bottles in T shirts.

I was paid to write a programme for that rehab., which they never actually used

...on the grounds that it was “too Christian”, and would involve employing someone who knew what they were talking about. One of their trustees told me that they hadn’t got a single person truly sober or free from drugs in their entire 25 years....a fact which has never stopped local government throwing large amounts of cash at them.

I found my previous experience is a great advantage at Livingstones. Aside from helping me spot signs of impending relapse – it encouraged clients to be honest if you could tell them exactly what they’re thinking.... Though they did find it unnerving. It also helped them identify with me...and to know real sobriety is possible. They couldn’t say I didn’t know what its like. You can get books that’ll tell you all about the medical consequences of addiction...you might even be able to find one that discusses the weird world of the alcoholic mind – but neither of those things are absolutely indispensable. Just a word of warning, though – be careful what you read. The addiction therapy field attracts its fair share of quacks and cranks. There’s people who take on board whatever this week’s pet theory is - cobble together a few quotes – and recycle it as a groundbreaking approach. And there’s rather a lot of self-styled experts, who’ve neither been there themselves - nor successfully treated anyone.

Genuine knowledge is extremely useful stuff...though not as useful as wisdom. But what’s absolutely indispensable, if we’re really going to help these people? Three things. The first is a sense of calling. Do we feel God is calling us to work with such people...to really commit to it? That’s more than that they just appear in church, and nobody knows how to help them. It’s a sense that God specifically wants us to do something....something more than just finding out where they could get effective help. I think churches should all be able to do that much anyway, but some will be called to work with these guys themselves.

The second thing we need is love. We need to see these people thru the eyes of Christ. And we need to have his patience, and his passion. When we look at them, do we just see a smelly aggressive mess... or do we see a person who Christ himself thought was worth going to the cross for? And if he thought that – what should we think? These people are unimaginable precious to Christ, and we have to share his point of view.

Last time I ran a course, I did it for just one guy... because that’s how God worked it out. He had my undivided attention for five months...I gave him 5 months of life. He was a mess, but before he was even half way thru the course, he was put in charge of the youth at his church – because he was the only guy equipped to disciple them. Couple of points there: If we’re called, and if we have love, no sacrifice is too great. It wasn’t for Jesus – it shouldn’t be for us. And the other point is – this guy is doing great, but even if he wasn’t – it wouldn’t have been a waste of time. It is never a waste of time to obey God and act out of love, whatever the outcome.

But on the subject of outcomes – you might still think 5 months is a bit excessive to save one guy’s bacon. But that’s not what I was doing. I was investing in all the other people’s bacon he can now save... I was investing in his potential for ministry. We expect to turn out people capable of taking their church to the next level. Fully submitted to God, and fully equipped to serve him. Doesn’t matter what state they’re in when they turn up.

The final thing you need, is the capacity to take them thru to Christian maturity...to disciple them. To teach them the practicalities of authentic Christianity. I'll give you an example, which happens to be very pertinent to addiction: The bible tells us that 'no temptation has seized you, except that which is common to man, and God is faithful, he will provide a way out'. An alcoholic will instinctively know that isn't true. In his mind, he'll flip thru all the times he desperately wanted to get sober, and cried out to God. He'd have sat there, many times, staring at a bottle, begging God to help him. And every time... he ended up drinking it. The addict will experience that exact same process with their drug of choice – there's no difference. But whatever that bible says, his temptation is not common at all. It is so strong, no man can endure it, and God never provides a way out.

But he's wrong. The temptation for the addict is never a big deal...well, not at first. It's no stronger, initially, than any other temptation. The problem, is what he does with it! He gives it house room, he entertains it. And then it overwhelms him. Temptation is very much like resentment. It takes no effort to maintain...and only a little thought to make it flourish and grow.

I bet you look at me, and wonder why I'm not wearing a pair of pink tights, and strutting my stuff at Covent Garden, with Darcy Bussel. No? You don't wonder that? I'll tell you anyway. She's retired... but there's another reason: It's because I wouldn't even consider it. You cannot be tempted to do something you wouldn't even consider. And that fact is also very pertinent to those who are bound by addiction.

For our addict, in this example, there's 3 things he needs to know: The first is something I think of as almost a spiritual law. It is this: "The power of temptation increases in direct proportion to one's willingness to entertain it". Temptation needs to be strangled at birth, not struggled with. Number 2. You cannot be tempted to do something you wouldn't even consider. That's why I'm not into ballet. And thirdly, the addict will need to know how to rule it out – to ensure it's never an option. Back to the bible. Here's a snippet from Job. 'I made a covenant with my eyes not to look on a young woman'. What was Job doing? He was ruling out temptation in advance – he wasn't even going to think about it.

The alcoholic or addict can make a covenant with God himself, that he's not going to entertain it for a moment....that it's not an option. Does it work? Of course it does. You don't even think about it, you won't do it.

But... It only works in the context of an on-going relationship with God. That relationship has always to be maintained and developed. The recovering addicted Christian may never experience temptation again...as long as he walks with God. But if he lets that relationship slide, he's already in the process of relapse. Even then, it's unlikely to be a direct temptation. It's more likely, he'll start picking up the other pieces of his worldly life...and that'll lead him gently but firmly back to the addiction that was the defining factor of his worldliness. I know a Christian who was sober for a year, until he thought it would be nice to spend a little time with his old friends in the rugby club. Effectively, he'd restarted the process of

alienation from God. Didn't drink at first.but it got him in the end.

You know the great advantage of being an addicted Christian? We can't treat God as a lifestyle accessory, or a lucky charm. We can't treat him as an insurance policy, to be renewed every Sunday on payment of 2 quid into the pot. We've got an additional incentive to take God seriously – we don't, and our problem will kill us. If we choose to share the opinion of those who think Christianity is a weekend social event... we'll not just share their eternal destination - we're likely to get there well ahead of them.

It is on-going and deepening intimacy with God, which ultimately saves the addict. A relationship in which he or she is excited by God, and experiences his intervention in their lives....and keeps on experiencing it. If you're to help them get there, you need those three things: divine calling, Christ-like love...and the capacity to take them thru to a fulfilling, life-changing relationship with God....you need to be able to disciple them, and to do it well.

But for those who don't feel called specifically to work with alcoholics and addicts, a closing thought: Unless you're members of some teetotal, non-evangelistic, monastic order... sooner or later you'll come across addiction in the church. When you do, I hope you won't be staring at someone with a mixture of compassion and bewilderment. I hope you will know enough to help them, that you'll be able to tell them where effective assistance can be found. All of us need to be able to do that much for our brothers and sisters.

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