

## An Analysis of Celebrate Recovery

By Eric Davis and Matt Mumma

Enslaving behaviors are as old, and common to humanity, as sin itself. Since our fall at the dawn of time, we have been naturally enslaved to every destructive behavior possible. In response, various efforts have been made to deal with the problem.

One such effort is a packaged addictions program called [Celebrate Recovery](#) (CR). John Baker and Rick Warren of Saddleback Church created the program in 1991 to help people with various addictions. Rick Warren writes, “[D]uring the ten-week series that I preached to kick off this program, our attendance grew by over 1500!” (John Baker, *Celebrate Recovery Leader’s Guide*, 12). During the past 25 years, some 20,000 churches in the United States have reportedly used CR, with some 2.5 million people having completed the program. Needless to say, CR has had a major influence on the church.

CR’s stated purpose is “to encourage fellowship and to celebrate God’s healing power in our lives as we work our way along the road to recovery” (21). Further, Warren claims that CR is “more effective in helping people change than anything else I’ve seen or heard of” (12).

Generally, the program runs on a one-year repeating schedule. Participants are taken through the material in 25 lessons and testimonies, meeting once per week for 52 weeks. Rick Warren writes that CR was born when “I began an intense study of the Scriptures to discover what God had to say about ‘recovery.’ To my amazement, I found the principles of recovery—in their logical order—given by Christ in His most famous message, the Sermon on the Mount” (12). More specifically, CR teaches that the Beatitudes ([Matt. 5:3-12](#)), which are said to be “eight ways to be happy,” contain the progressive path to addiction recovery.

The eight principles upon which CR is derived are as follows (the principle is stated, followed by the corresponding Beatitude):

The Road to Recovery

1. **Realize** I'm not God; I admit that I am powerless to control my tendency to do the wrong thing and that my life is unmanageable. (Step 1) "*Happy are those who know that they are spiritually poor*" (*Matt. 5:3*<sup>L</sup>), though the CR manual cites these verses as the NIV, they are all taken from the GNT).
2. **Earnestly** believe that God exists, that I matter to Him and that He has the power to help me recover. (Step 2) "*Happy are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted*" (*Matt. 5:4*<sup>L</sup>).
3. **Consciously** choose to commit all my life and will to Christ's care and control. (Step 3) "*Happy are the meek*" (*Matt. 5:5*<sup>L</sup>).
4. **Openly** examine and confess my faults to myself, to God, and to someone I trust. (Steps 4 and 5) "*Happy are the pure in heart*" (*Matt. 5:8*<sup>L</sup>).
5. **Voluntarily** submit to any and all changes God wants to make in my life and humbly ask Him to remove my character defects. (Steps 6 and 7) "*Happy are those whose greatest desire is to do what God requires*" (*Matt. 5:6*<sup>L</sup>).
6. **Evaluate** all my relationships. Offer forgiveness to those who have hurt me and make amends for harm I've done to others when possible, except when to do so would harm them or others. (Steps 8 and 9) "*Happy are the merciful*" (*Matt. 5:7*<sup>L</sup>). "*Happy are the peacemakers*" (*Matt. 5:9*<sup>L</sup>).
7. **Reserve** a 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. (Steps 10 and 11) (*no verse cited*).
8. **Yield** myself to God to be used to bring this Good News to others, both by my example and my words. (Step 12) "*Happy are those who are persecuted because they do what God requires*" (*Matt. 5:10*<sup>L</sup>).

Clever readers will notice that the first letter from each of the eight steps forms the acronym, "recovery." CR's approach takes each of the eight principles and expounds them with a few lessons, forming the 25 lessons in which participants are guided through how to deal with their "hurts, hang-ups, and habits" (the oft-used phrase in CR to describe our problems which need recovery).

Since CR claims to be Christian in nature, “biblical” (13), grounded in God’s word (12), and “[b]ased on the actual words of Jesus rather than on psychological theory” (12), it deserves to be evaluated as such. This review is based upon the program’s teaching as stated in the CR Leadership Guide only (pages cited are from this guide) and is not a critique of every person who has participated in the program. Further, the purpose of this review is not to question whether the 2.5 million participants have felt that they were assisted with enslaving behaviors, nor to doubt the sincerity of individuals seeking to help, but, instead, to examine CR’s claim to be biblically based.

Having said that, this review (completed largely with the help of Matthew Mumma) will demonstrate that CR contains two major problems: (1) Though claiming to be biblically based, its teachings are often constructed from a misuse of Scripture and an erroneous hermeneutic. (2) Though claiming to be Christian based, its theology often clashes with sound Christian theology.

### **1. Many of CR’s teachings are constructed from a misuse of Scripture and an erroneous hermeneutic.**

The clearest instance of this occurs in the principles upon which CR is founded. CR’s “Road to Recovery” begins with the “Eight Principles Based on the Beatitudes” (12), stated above. Thus, CR claims that the Beatitudes are principles for addiction recovery.

This interpretation, however, incorrectly understands the Beatitudes by removing them out of their context and interpreting them in an eisegetical manner. As such, CR imposes a meaning other than the authorial intent upon the text. When Christ preached the Beatitudes, he did not intend for them to be a protocol for recovery. Neither are they “ways to be happy” (12). Instead, the Beatitudes are descriptions of kingdom citizens; of individuals having been saved by God’s grace. Commentators agree that the Beatitudes describe the common characteristics of true believers (*e.g. John Blanchard, 54; James Boice, 74; D.A. Carson, 128, 132; D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, 1:24; Charles Quarles, 39*). Jesus begins this great sermon by turning the common understanding of those in God’s favor on its head. The Pharisees, who largely set the religious/spiritual tone of the day, would have propagated the photo-negative of the Beatitudes, and, thus, an incorrect understanding of the believer. For this reason, Jesus brings clarity to the scene with these corrections.

Specifically, “Blessed are the poor in spirit” ([Matt. 5:3](#)<sup>L</sup>) is not a recovery principle, teaching that “I’m not God...powerless to control my tendency to do the wrong thing and that my life is unmanageable” (9). Instead, Jesus teaches that one certain evidence of the

true believer is a poverty of spirit. The word “poor” was used to describe abject poverty and a raggedly covered (if covered at all) beggar, cowered over with head down and hand out (*TDNT*, 6:886), while “in spirit” refers to our moral/spiritual state. The idea is that the sinner has come to terms with God’s towering moral standards for humanity; absolute perfection (cf. [Matt. 5:48](#)<sup>L</sup>). Further, he understands that, having rebelliously and flagrantly violated God’s holy law, he deserves to endure the righteous wrath of God in hell for eternity. Thus, he comes to God, as nothing more than a head down, hand out, moral beggar, with zero moral/spiritual contribution to God except sin. Being morally filthy, the sinner depends entirely on God’s mercy if he is going to be acceptable to God. So, [Matthew 5:3](#)<sup>L</sup> does not teach a principle for recovering from addictions, but that true believers understand that they cannot earn God’s favor from their impressive moral wealth, but have only earned his wrath by their offensive moral filth.

Similar problems exist with CR’s other foundational principles. For example, [Matthew 5:4](#)<sup>L</sup> does not teach that one must “earnestly believe that God exists, that I matter to Him, and that He has the power to help me recover” (9). Instead, Jesus teaches that true believers are characterized as those who are shattered and sorrowful for having sinned against God (“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted”). [Matthew 5:8](#)<sup>L</sup> does not teach that, to recover, I must “[o]penly examine and confess my faults to myself, to God, and to someone I trust” (9). The verse teaches nothing about addiction recovery nor confessing faults to myself. Rather, Jesus is teaching that true believers are characterized by a measure of spiritual and moral purity even at the level of the will and worship. And, notwithstanding the GNT, [Matthew 5:6](#)<sup>L</sup> does not say, “Happy are those whose greatest desire is to do what God requires,” but, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.” Thus, in addition to an imposed meaning on the text, CR often uses inadequate translations of Scripture.

So, many of the principles upon which CR rests and from which the curriculum is expounded are constructed from a misuse of Scripture and erroneous hermeneutics. Consequently, if CR intends to find a protocol for recovery, they will need to look somewhere other than the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount.

CR errs elsewhere in its use of Scripture. Often words taken from the realm of psychology are used in place of God’s word to describe sin. For example, terms such as “co-dependent,” “addiction,” and “abusing” (167) of substances are not found in Scripture. One reason is because those terms are not God’s way of describing those behaviors.

Instead, Scripture describes addictions in terms of sinful enslavement to one's lusts and pleasures and lovers of pleasure (e.g. [Rom. 6:12-13](#), [Eph. 2:3](#), [2 Tim. 3:4](#)). One who is addicted to, or practices the abuse of, alcohol, for example, is best referred to as a drunkard or drunkenness (e.g. [1 Cor. 6:10](#), [Gal. 5:21](#)). God made no mistakes in the inspiration of his word (cf. [Prov. 30:5-6](#), [2 Tim. 3:16-17](#)). Therefore, it is best for us to use his Spirit-given terms when describing all things, whether sins or blessings.

CR misuses Scripture in its teaching of forgiveness. For example, the assertion is made that since we have been forgiven by God, we must forgive ourselves (193). [Matthew 22:39](#) (“You shall love your neighbor as yourself”) is used to support the assertion. The question is posed, “Now, how can you love or forgive your neighbor, if you can’t love or forgive yourself?” (193). Jesus is not implying, much less teaching, self-love or self-forgiveness there. On the contrary, much of our sinfulness is excessive self-love (more on this in tomorrow’s post). The idea is not that self-love and self-forgiveness is the gate to love others, but to love others as much as we effortlessly do ourselves.

Additionally, the idea of forgiving oneself is an unbiblical idea not found in Scripture, thus one that Christians must reject. Forgiveness is a transaction between parties when the offended releases the offender from an infraction. While we can sin against other people, all of our sin is against the One to whom we are culpable; God. Thus, forgiveness is needed from God, not ourselves.

Though claiming to be biblically based, many of CR’s teachings are constructed from a misuse of Scripture and an erroneous hermeneutic. Consequently, participants are not shepherded in an accurate handling of God’s word. One likely objection may be, “So many people have been helped by CR. How can one criticize something that works so well?” We do not doubt that people have received help from CR in curbing addictions. In some measure, that is a good thing. However, the objection hinges on the definition of “works well” and “people being helped.” Further, should something that misinterprets God’s word and errs theologically be so justified?

## **2. Much of CR’s theology clashes with sound Christian theology.**

Several examples will be examined here.

### **God**

CR generally teaches a view of God lower than that of Scripture. For example, according to CR, God seems to not be sovereign over the hurt we experience in our lives. “You need to understand and believe that the harm others did to you was from their free will. It was their choice, not God’s. It was *not* God’s will” (192). Certainly those who hurt others certainly make an active choice to do so, for which they are culpable. And, sin against others is not God’s prescribed will. However, the lack of clarity with respect to God’s decretive will is troubling. Though being sinned against can be painful, we must say with Scripture, “In the day of prosperity be happy, but in the day of adversity consider—God has made the one as well as the other” (Eccles. 7:14<sup>L</sup>). CR lacks clarity here, while failing to teach that we can trust the love and wisdom of God who is sovereign over all of our battles.

CR teaches that God is an unsovereign bystander in our salvation. Man’s salvation is up to his own will power. The sinner chooses God (11-13, 85, 90, 105-106, 167). “He loved us so much that He gave us a free will” (192). This clashes with Scripture, which teaches the sovereign grace of God in sinners’ salvation (e.g. John 3:3-8<sup>L</sup>, 6:44<sup>L</sup>; Rom. 8:29-30<sup>L</sup>, 9:15-16<sup>L</sup>; Eph. 1:4-5<sup>L</sup>).

Additionally, CR teaches that God must be forgiven by the addict. Baker writes, “[O]n your list of ‘others to forgive,’ you might have forgotten about someone you may need to forgive; God. Yes, you heard me right. God” (192). No such thing can be found anywhere in Scripture. Now, CR teaches that God cannot and does not sin. However, elsewhere, forgiveness is described as a letting go and that “forgiving your enemy sets you one above him” (192). So, where does forgiving God place us in relation to him? Such teaching suggests that God is somehow accountable to man, thus dethroning him from his glorious position of Sovereign Lord and King (cf. Ps. 93:1-2<sup>L</sup>).

Finally, in an inappropriate AA parallel, CR repeatedly refers to Christ as the sinner’s “Higher Power.” While it is a good start to mention him as the “only Higher Power” (41), the terminology does not go far enough in capturing Scripture’s teaching on Christ. Worse, the phrase too closely parallels AA’s reference to a subjective god of man’s making. Christ is not a power that is higher, but the omnipotent, uncreated, eternally-existing I AM, God, Creator, and sustainer of all things who. Incredibly, he loved sinners, demonstrated by absorbing the righteous anger of God due them (John 1:1-3<sup>L</sup>, 8:58<sup>L</sup>; Col. 1:16-17<sup>L</sup>; Heb. 1:3<sup>L</sup>; 1 John 4:10<sup>L</sup>).

Even more, CR’s view of Christ is parochial: far more than the “Higher Power” who helps me in my recovery, he is the King of kings whom I am to worship (Phil. 2:10<sup>L</sup>)

and the only Savior through whom man can be acceptable before holy God ([John 14:6](#)<sup>L</sup>, [1 Tim. 2:5-6](#)<sup>L</sup>). Yet, in the brief references to Christ now and then, CR does not speak of him in these terms.

## **Humanity and the Problem**

In CR, man is reduced to an addicted creature with “hurts, hang-ups, and habits.” However, Scripture teaches that every person is a worshipping creature, made in the image of God for the glory of God. In CR, what defines man is his addictions and culpability to his self-actualization. In Scripture, what defines man is his image bearing and culpability to God ([Gen. 1:26-27](#)<sup>L</sup>).

CR teaches that humanity is not entirely dead in sin, but capable, by his will, of choosing God in salvation (11-13, 85, 90, 105-6, 167, 192). Humanity’s problem is often described as a low self-esteem, low self-love, and the need for self-forgiveness (167-8). For example, Baker writes that the root of his enslavement to alcohol was low self-esteem (14) and a “lack of positive self-image” (167). This lack of self-esteem is taught to be the root of all sin from which other negative behaviors arise (167). Such lack of positive self-image is what causes an individual to engage in addictive behaviors. Therefore, CR teaches that humanity’s deepest problem from which all sin springs has to do with self-image and self-esteem.

The problems with CR’s understanding of man and his problems are numerous. First, man is fundamentally an image-bearer of God, created to worship him ([Gen. 1:26-27](#)<sup>L</sup>, [Isa. 43:7](#)<sup>L</sup>). However, all humanity since the Fall of Adam and Eve are conceived with a sinful nature, which is incessantly hostile towards the true God ([Rom. 3:10-18](#)<sup>L</sup>). Consequently, with the full capacity and desire to worship remaining, our hearts (the seat of our will) rebelliously cling to and crave created things in worship over and above God ([Rom. 1:18-23](#)<sup>L</sup>). The product is as bad as it gets: man is both relentlessly religious and entirely sinful. Thus, in our natural state, we are relentless idolaters, in constant violation of our great obligation, privilege, and purpose to worship God with the full capacity of our hearts. To be sure, it is not simply the drunkard or drug user (as I once was) who are addicts. All humanity are addicts: motivated by love for self and enmity towards God, we are rebelliously enslaved to give loyalty to anything except God. Consequently, some worship alcohol and its effects; others, food; still others, things like body image, sex, money, reputation, kids’ performances, comfort, exercise, approval, and moral performance.

However, underneath all idolatry is not low self-love, but the contrary: we worship idols out of an extreme devotion to self. Thus, self-esteem is not the answer. As somewhat of a case study to prove the point, God has recorded for us a tragic-comical moment in history, displaying the product of man's high self-esteem. At the Tower of Babel, man's self-esteem drove him to build praise for himself by attempting to construct a tower so high that, perhaps, he could not only avoid another flood, but look God in the eye so as to self-cure his proud inferiority complex (cf. [Gen. 11:4](#)). We know how that ended.

At no time does God's word instruct us to better love ourselves. In fact, quite the opposite. Paul warns Timothy that one symptom of increasingly unchecked human depravity is that "men will be lovers of self" ([2 Tim. 3:2](#)). Our problem is not that we are poor self-lovers with "hurts, hang-ups, and habits that didn't work" (74), but, being lords of self, we feed ourselves with whatever idol will soothe, exalt, please, praise, comfort, venerate, and prefer self. Man is naturally a colossal lover of self, adoring and worshipping himself. Sons of Adam naturally loathe and resent any threat to his self-rule and self-exaltation.

Contrary to CR's teaching, character defects are the consequence of our sinful self-devotion ([Prov. 4:23](#), [Jer. 17:9](#), [Mark 7:14-23](#), [Gal. 5:19-21](#), [James 1:14-15](#)). We are dead to God, unwilling and unable to please him in this state ([Eph. 2:1-3](#)). Without ever having to be taught or conditioned, every human being is born in extraordinary religious devotion to the ante-[Luke 10:27-28](#), loving the lord himself, with all his heart, and all his soul, and all his strength, and all his mind, and hating his neighbor as much as he loves himself.

Therefore, man is in gross violation of God's good and holy moral requirements ([Rom. 3:23](#)). Our due punishment corresponds to the greatness of the One whom he has violated. As such, we deserve to endure the righteous wrath of God for eternity ([2 Thess. 1:8-9](#), [Rev. 20:11-15](#)). A boost in self-esteem will only compound the problem. We may feel better, but we remain incessant self-worshippers, facing eternity in hell. Tragically, CR omits virtually all of these truths on the nature and standing of humanity, thus, harming its participants and setting itself up for an anemic gospel.

## Salvation

In CR, salvation is recovery from addictive behavior. CR's process of salvation could be captured as follows: man is an addicted being beset with hurts, hang-ups, and habits. Through CR, he learns to manage his hurts, hang-ups, and habits through forgiving God, others, and himself, belief in the Higher Power, Jesus Christ, and improved self-love and



self-esteem. The curbing of the addictions and enthusiastic involvement in CR demonstrates his healing. He continues involvement in CR, as a “believer who struggles with [insert addiction].”

When CR describes the event of salvation, man is in charge as he chooses God. God must be permitted to act (166, 170). The word repentance is mentioned, being described as taking God’s point of view on our lives over our own, while turning away from our sins and turning towards God (107). This was one of the high-points of the book. However, the event of salvation can be triggered by the sinner praying a formulaic prayer to accept Christ.

In all of the testimonies in the book, few, if any, contained the true gospel. They go back to the moment in time they prayed a prayer, walked an aisle, sat in CR for the first time, or experienced healing from addiction. CR’s gospel is addiction recovery.

The problems here are significant. Our needs are more serious than CR teaches.

First, our need is not to recover from an addiction, but to be forgiven our infinite sin debt (Rom. 4:7-8<sup>L</sup>). God’s law brings focus to our condemnation before God (Rom. 3:19-20<sup>L</sup>). Our only hope is that he might respond to our cry of mercy by forgiving our infinite debt so as to remove the hell we deserve.

Second, our need is reconciliation to God (Isa. 59:2<sup>L</sup>). By nature and deed, we are his sworn enemies (Rom. 5:10<sup>L</sup>). In our incessant idolatry, we are in perpetual rebellion against him. To remain there would mean eternal hell.

Third, our need is a righteousness with which we can stand acceptable to our Creator, not a few principles to assist with addictions (Phil. 3:9<sup>L</sup>). Man’s problem of the ages is not addictions but a woefully inadequate righteousness before God.

Fourth, our need is an entire change of nature (John 3:3<sup>L</sup>, 5<sup>L</sup>). More than recovery from poor behavior, we are in desperate need of a new heart that worships Christ, not cravings (2 Cor. 5:17<sup>L</sup>). Since our problem stems from worship, we need to be repaired at that deepest level so as to be willing and able to please God.

Fifth, man’s need is not to love himself, but loathe himself. Christ presented self-hate as necessary for following him (Luke 14:26<sup>L</sup>, cf. 2 Cor. 7:10-11<sup>L</sup>). In fact, in a passage which describes the future salvation of Israel, God describes the consequence of receiving his grace of regeneration by the Holy Spirit as follows: “...you will remember

your evil ways and your deeds that were not good, and you will loathe yourselves in our own sight for your iniquities and your abominations” (Ezek. 36:31<sup>L</sup>). So, a recovery to spiritual health (if we might put it in such terms) will not look like a greater self-love, but self-loathing. By nature, we so crave our own lordship, that it takes nothing less than the power of Almighty God in regeneration to pry our self-venerating claws off the throne of our hearts and place himself there.

Of course, the problem with these needs is that we are incapable of providing them for ourselves. If God does not act, we are hopelessly lost. We may be able to rotate idols so as to appear more socially acceptable, but we would remain condemned idolaters before God, headed for a miserable eternity. CR attempts to present a system of salvation-recovery, while, tragically, failing to address these greatest of man’s needs. A possible consequence of self-esteem theology is he externally assures himself with Bible verses and Christian principles, but remains an incessant self-worshiper under the banner of Christianity. He remains his own lord, but has recruited an unbiblical Jesus to assist in his self-centered agenda.

Unlike CR’s teaching, it is with self-denial, not self-love, that we come to the Lord Jesus Christ in repentance, and not for mere behavioral recovery, but reconciliation to God (Luke 9:23<sup>L</sup>). Salvation is more than belief in Jesus for addiction therapy. Christ, being fully God, stepped out of heaven, became a man, and lived a perfect life in full obedience in thought, word, and deed, to the requirements of God’s law (Gal. 4:4-5<sup>L</sup>). At no time was he sinfully enslaved to idols. Instead, he worshiped God perfectly (Heb. 4:15<sup>L</sup>). Motivated by his own mercy, he willingly went to the cross where he suffered and died, bowing under the righteous wrath of God due us, so as to eliminate our condemnation (John 10:17-18<sup>L</sup>; 1 John 4:10<sup>L</sup>; 1 Pet. 2:24<sup>L</sup>). He was then raised for our justification and ascended to heaven as exalted Lord (Rom. 4:25<sup>L</sup>, Heb. 12:2<sup>L</sup>). Man is called then to repent of his sin and surrender to Christ as Lord (Acts 17:30-31<sup>L</sup>). By faith in Christ, God counts the penalty for all our sin to have been served in the death of Christ, while simultaneously counting us righteous in Christ, so as to be at peace with him (Rom. 5:1<sup>L</sup>, 2 Cor. 5:21<sup>L</sup>).

Contrary to CR’s teaching, salvation occurs, not by man’s permission, but God’s sovereign act of grace on the dead sinner (John 6:44<sup>L</sup>, 65<sup>L</sup>). By his mercy, he causes the supernatural work of regeneration by the Holy Spirit, in which a new nature is given (John 3:3-7<sup>L</sup>, Titus 3:5<sup>L</sup>). It is instantaneous and accomplished by the power of the Spirit through the instrumentality of the word of God (John 5:24<sup>L</sup>), when the repentant

sinner, as enabled by the Spirit, responds in faith to the gospel (Eph. 1:13-14<sup>L</sup>). That is the good news of God's grace in Christ, which meets humanity's greatest need.

### *The Risk of Promoting False Assurance*

But CR risks promoting false assurance of salvation. A few pages into the CR Leader's Guide, an unbiblical view of salvation is purported in the author's testimony. He writes, "I asked Christ into my heart at age thirteen" (14), then describes nearly two decades of no fruit bearing. However, the writer asserts, "I knew that if I died I was saved, but my Christianity was not reflected in my lifestyle, business practices, and priorities" (15).

Though perhaps unintentionally, this immediately sets the stage in CR for a view of salvation that does not square with Scripture. Jesus taught, "Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit... I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing" (John 15:2<sup>L</sup>, 5<sup>L</sup>). "The one who says, 'I have come to know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him" (1 John 2:4<sup>L</sup>). Contrary to the author's testimony, Scripture gives no assurance to individuals who persist in a life without fruit bearing (cf. Eph. 2:10<sup>L</sup>, 1 John 2:3-6<sup>L</sup>).

Additional false assurance is risked with addiction-recovery akin to salvation in CR. With little to no teaching on man's incessant idolatry and violation of God's holy law, the consequent punishment of hell, and the need for justification, CR endangers its participants. If a CR participant says a prayer, affirms belief in Jesus, and experiences behavioral improvement, assurance is given. However, it's possible to have swept the soul clean, leaving it unoccupied by the Spirit (Luke 11:24-26<sup>L</sup>).

### **Sanctification**

CR teaches that the path to change is to "let go and let God" (17, 95, 166). By embracing the eight foundation principles, change is expected to occur (142). Growth and lasting change seem to be centered on perpetual CR attendance. Cessation of attendance and working through the 8 Principles and 12 Steps is not suggested (167).

Scripture offers a more comprehensive, promising transformation in the process of sanctification (Rom. 8:29-30<sup>L</sup>). God's work is not limited to perpetual addiction recovery, but conforming the whole soul into christlikeness (2 Cor. 3:18<sup>L</sup>). And, contrary to CR, enslavements no longer affix to the identity of God's children. Such

things *were* we (1 Cor. 6:11<sup>L</sup>). But, by the regenerating and sanctifying work of the Spirit, we are not merely getting help with hurts, hang-ups, and habits, but putting our entire sin nature to death (Rom. 8:13-14<sup>L</sup>, Col. 3:5<sup>L</sup>). Through regular immersion in the means of grace (e.g. biblical preaching, Scripture reading, prayer, repentance, one another), the Spirit ministers transforming love to the soul. However, the means of grace are not mentioned in CR. Instead, the CR program is the means of grace. But, with incorrect interpretations of Scripture and erroneous theology, both salvation and sanctification are hindered.

## **The Church**

In psychology's teaching, deep-seated problems can be solved only by the professional counselor's therapy. In AA, enslavement is treated through perpetual AA involvement. CR parallels both, in that the enslavement is treated through perpetual recovery in the CR system of therapy.

Participants are functionally taught to put faith in the CR system. Christ is mentioned as the "Higher Power," but only in name. Little is said about his attributes, deity, righteousness, and sin-bearing work. Instead, CR participants are, perhaps inadvertently, conditioned to depend on the packaged methods and ideas of the program. In reality, then, since individuals are addicts in perpetual recovery, they cannot survive apart from the CR system. Thus, CR replaces Christ's institution, the church.

Furthermore, the goal is to feel "safe at Celebrate Recovery" (73). I am guessing that CR's creators are not attempting to replace Christ's church, but, with this approach, they risk doing so. It's as if CR says, "Well, for those battling with addictions, Christ's church is not quite adequate for you. You need something more. What you need is what we have created; Celebrate Recovery." Shepherding is through perpetual CR attendance (29, 37, 59, 167-8). One's choice of a local church is irrelevant (59, 167-8). While attending a church is mentioned as good idea, it is not promoted as necessary (242). Baker writes, "If you aren't ready to get involved in your church, that's your decision" (146). So, CR participants need not come under the shepherding and accountability of biblically qualified elders for God's best kind of care. Instead, they may perpetually remain in CR and assured that all is well. Even so, CR claims that "[Jesus] is the rock, the foundation, of the Celebrate Recovery program" (29).

Consequently, it cannot be concluded that Christ is the head or foundation of CR. As a program which misuses Scripture, whose theology is erroneous, and replaces the church, it brings itself under another head.

However, if Christ is a sufficient God, then that one organism which he builds must also be the sufficient organism to shepherd broken and enslaved people. Christ taught that he builds and blesses one institution; the church ([Matt. 16:18](#)<sup>L</sup>). CR, however, suggests that one can be devoted to Christ yet detached from the church. We would be hard pressed to suggest saving union with Christ while indifferent union with his Bride ([Eph. 5:25-27](#)<sup>L</sup>, [Rev. 19:7](#)<sup>L</sup>), Body ([Eph. 1:22-23](#)<sup>L</sup>), and flock ([John 21:15-17](#)<sup>L</sup>). The individual with indifferent involvement in the local church should probably not be encouraged to be a better Christian, but evangelized to become one.

Those in CR who are not actively involved (or encouraged to be) in a sound, New Testament local church, are deprived of God's kind of care. They risk missing out on the joy, security, and privilege of relationship with and submission to biblically qualified elders ([Heb. 13:17](#)<sup>L</sup>, [1 Pet. 5:2-3](#)<sup>L</sup>). They miss out on frequent, meaty feeding through expository preaching ([1 Tim. 4:13](#)<sup>L</sup>, [2 Tim. 4:2](#)<sup>L</sup>). They miss out on sanctification and cultivating their Spirit gifts in the context of people much different than them in the body of Christ ([1 Cor. 12:7](#)<sup>L</sup>, [12](#)<sup>L</sup>).

Finally, we might ask, "Was there a people in biblical times who struggled with various enslavements to whom writers of Scripture ministered? If so, what did they do without CR?" Take Corinth for example. From Paul's writings, we know people were enslaved to things like alcohol, drugs, stealing, homosexual and heterosexual sin, and other destructive behaviors (cf. [1 Cor. 6:9-11](#)<sup>L</sup>). What was the solution? Create a special program? Christ's local church with all her normal, often-unexciting means of grace sufficed. Go to church. Sit under Christ-crucified preaching and teaching. Get shepherded by elders. Repent of sin. Read Scripture. Take communion. Love people. Practice the one another. Pray. Repeat. For Paul, that was enough. Addictions are not a special set of sins requiring something more than Christ's church.

## **Conclusion**

When it comes to packaging an organized program, CR has done a fantastic job. Potential participants and leaders have everything they need to jump in. The program is well-structured, creative, and contains an incredible amount of ingenious acronyms in each lesson. CR's creators certainly have put much work and thought into the program.

However, as far as a Christ-centered, biblically-based program, CR falls significantly short. Though claiming to be biblically based, its teachings are often constructed from a misuse of Scripture and an erroneous hermeneutic. Though claiming to be Christian based, its theology often clashes with sound Christian theology. Therefore, a Christian

church looking to shepherd people struggling with enslaving sins should rethink using Celebrate Recovery.

### **Superior Alternatives to Celebrate Recovery**

Those who have turned to CR in attempt to bring Christ's love to souls ought to be commended for their desire to care. The church must do something to minister to such needs. However, there are several superior alternatives.

First, church leaders ought to equip themselves and members to counsel people biblically. No substitution exists for unrushed, rigorous training in how to accurately handle and minister the Scriptures (2 Tim. 2:15<sup>L</sup>). It is the church's high, exalted calling from her Lord to give herself fully to raising up mature men and women, competent in God's word (2 Tim. 2:2<sup>L</sup>). No shortcuts exists here, nor should they be sought (1 Tim. 5:22<sup>L</sup>).

Churches can seek outside help for such training, for example, from the [Association of Certified Biblical Counselors](#). Once a leader or two are certified, then they can train others in the church and even work towards becoming an ACBC-certified training center. Churches will not be able to construct something as quick as a CR program. But that is not a bad thing. The goal is not to get something going that appears to work, but that is biblical.

Second, several resources exist as biblical alternatives to CR. For example, the book, *Addictions: A Banquet in the Grave*, by Ed Welch, is a must read. Welch also created a workbook called, *Crossroads*, which is designed for either one-on-one counseling or a group study. Mark Shaw has a handful of resources targeted at multiple issues from a biblical perspective at [theadictionconnection.com](http://theadictionconnection.com). His books, *The Heart of Addiction*, and, *Relapse*, are great resources, as well.

Finally, let God's people trust that giving ourselves to the correct, biblically-prescribed means of grace will prove abundantly sufficient to effectively minister to the greatest of needs. May our Lord give us grace in these privileged labors.