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## Is “12 Steps” Christian?

By K. Karacsony

The 12 Steps methodology is the basis for literally thousands of church recovery programs today. It began nearly a century ago with *Alcoholics Anonymous* (AA) and is now an integral part of the increasingly popular *Celebrate Recovery* program. 12 Steps is widely regarded as a “Christian” program and those who promote it in the church adamantly assert that it is Biblical, orthodox, and completely in-sync with Christ’s teachings. But is this really true?

There are three important facts to be aware of when considering the 12 Steps. 1) The name Jesus Christ is never mentioned in either the *Steps* or the *Traditions*; 2) the word sin is omitted altogether from the program; 3) and the Bible is not referenced directly. Can a program that fails to mention Jesus specifically by name, neglect talking about sin in a frank and honest manner, and never quote scripture really be biblical? This is surprisingly overlooked by many well-meaning Christian leaders who bring 12-Steps philosophy into the church and promote it as a Christ-centered program.

This alone should be enough to question the biblical basis for 12 Steps recovery programs. However, there is far more to be concerned with when you examine 12 Steps recovery in light of biblical truth. Let’s begin with the basic foundation of 12 Steps: Addiction is a disease.

12 Steps programs allow afflicted people a daily reprieve from their disease.  
(12Steps.org)

The addict, according to 12 Steps, suffers from a disease. They are afflicted by an illness much like a person who has cancer or diabetes. It is not their fault or responsibility because they were born with this particular condition. It is clear from the 12 Steps perspective that addiction is not the result of the sin nature and therefore not a sin. Rather, it is an involuntary behavior caused by a disease.

The view that addiction is a disease is completely untrue. The truth of the matter is that there is no scientific, medical, or other hard evidence to support the notion that addiction is a disease resulting in uncontrollable drinking or drug use.<sup>1</sup> Addiction is a behavior and human behavior, whether self-destructive or personally gratifying is a choice. Drinking alcohol in excess, binge eating, and injecting heroin are activities that one performs. Behaviors are not diseases but voluntary actions of free-will human beings.

Granted, addiction is a self-destructive behavior. However, that does not mean that it is a disease. The Bible very clearly teaches that self-destructive behavior is sinful and that each person who commits a sin is personally responsible before a Holy God: “So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God”

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<sup>1</sup> Trimpey, Jack. 1996. *Rational Recovery, The New Cure for Substance Addiction*. Pocket Books, a division of Simon & Schuster, Inc.

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(Rom 14:12 NIV). We will not be able to blame our sin on anyone (or anything) else. We did it; we own it. Blaming our addictions on a “disease” is merely an attempt to shift responsibility from the rightful owner.

The Bible teaches that we must repent of our sin if we ever hope to experience true, lasting freedom. Repentance, however, is not one of the steps of the 12 Steps program. Since addiction is a disease and not a sin, repentance is not required according to 12 Steps. What is required is that an addict decides to turn his or her will over to a god of one’s choosing as seen in Step 3 of the program:

3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of *God as we understood Him.* (12Steps.org)

The italics were not added but appear on the 12 Steps website as printed above. You see, god can literally be anyone or anything in 12 Steps theology. Some claim to worship Jesus and many others name a god of their own choosing and making (i.e. “as we understand Him”). Does this sound like the Biblical teaching of God? Is the God of the Bible anyone (or anything) we decide to worship?

*"You are my witnesses," declares the LORD, "and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor will there be one after me. I, even I, am the LORD, and apart from me there is no savior." (Isa 43:10 NIV)*

The God of 12 Steps is not the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He is not the immortal God who created the heavens and the earth; the eternal God who alone saves. The god of 12 Steps is foreign to the biblical teaching. That is why Step 2 refers to God as a “Power” rather than Jesus Christ because 12 Steps believes any god will do! While focusing on something other than one’s self can be motivating and even helpful for those in recovery, it is certainly not Christian.

The 12 Steps concept of recovery has little to do with sin and is not centered on Jesus Christ. It is also interesting to note that the program teaches that it is the “program” that really saves people from their addiction rather than God. Consider the following declaration from a 12 Steps website:

*Rarely have we seen a person fail who has thoroughly followed our path. Those who do not recover are people who cannot or will not completely give themselves to this simple program. (12Steps.org)*

The program is the key to success – not Jesus or the gospel – according to 12 Steps teaching. Those who never recover are those who simply fail to give themselves over “completely” to the program. This is almost cult-like and truly something that every Christian should be terribly concerned about. Additionally, every pastor should renounce this teaching from the pulpit because it is contrary to Biblical truth. I have actually spoken with people who have been told that they are in “denial” because they were not willing to submit completely to the group or the steps. That is because the “group” is far more important than the individual as seen below in the 12 Traditions:

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1. Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon A.A. unity. (12Steps.org)

Note here that the group must come first because a person's recovery depends on AA. What about Jesus? I thought personal recovery depended upon God Almighty and His Son? Not according to 12 Steps doctrine. The real power is in the program, steps, and meetings and anything less than allegiance to the "group" will lead to failure.

It would appear that 12 Steps recovery is a religion. In fact, the 12 Steps create a type of "spiritual awakening" that are a direct result of the steps:

Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs. (12Steps.org)

The spiritual awakening is not the result of God working in a person's life through the power of the Holy Spirit but is a product of the steps. That is precisely why members of the group are exhorted to "carry this [12 Steps] message" to others. Therefore, 12 Steps is evangelistic in nature. The goal of the program is to bring struggling addicts to the meetings so they will commit to the steps, much like a religion attempts to convert non-believers.

It is interesting to note that 12 Steps is also very fluid. By that I mean that it is constantly changing as pastors adopt the basics of the methodology and attempt to put their own personal spin on the program. The latest incarnation of 12 Steps is *Celebrate Recovery (CR)* introduced by Pastor Rick Warren of Saddleback church in Southern California. Pastor Rick adamantly asserts that CR is completely different than 12 Steps or anything else he has ever seen or heard of before.<sup>2</sup>

Although Pastor Warren claims *Celebrate Recovery* is nothing like 12 Steps, this is simply not true. Celebrate recovery is based principally on 12 Steps and program administrators make this point absolutely clear:

*The Celebrate Recovery Program uses the traditional 12 Steps and they are accompanied by 12 Biblical comparisons for each step. (soberliving.com)*

By all appearances 12 Steps program and CR are inseparable. To demonstrate how closely aligned *Celebrate Recovery* is with the 12 Steps philosophy, one can purchase a bronze coin directly from Saddleback Church referred to as the "Celebrate Recovery – 12 Steps Specialty Coin."<sup>3</sup> The coin has both the inscription of Celebrate Recovery and 12 Steps intertwined. If the CR program is not based on 12 Steps, why does the coin show the connection? The reason why they are inscribed on the same coin

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.soberliving.com/specprograms/a-closer-look-at-celebrate-recovery>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.saddlebackresources.com/Celebrate-Recovery-Coin-12-Step-Specialty-Coin-English-1-Bronze-Chip-P8501.aspx>

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is to affirm that they are inseparable. CR cannot exist apart from 12 Steps because it is the foundation of the program.

In a letter from Rick Warren he admits that he is personally “uncomfortable with the program’s [12 steps] vagueness about the nature of God, the saving power of Jesus Christ, and the ministry of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>4</sup> Pastor Warren has good reason to feel uncomfortable about these things. After all, Christianity is centered on God, the saving power of Jesus Christ, and the ministry of the Holy Spirit! So the obvious question to Pastor Rick Warren is, “Then why do you promote 12 Steps when you admittedly have such strong, legitimate concerns?” Evidently Pastor Rick is not “uncomfortable” to the point that it is necessary to separate completely from 12 Steps.

Defending and upholding the truth is not a matter of feeling comfortable. It often requires that we make very difficult decisions and speak truthfully in a loving and kind way. Yes, we must demonstrate love in everything we do. However, the Bible makes it absolutely clear that a Christian should have absolutely nothing to do with darkness (i.e. false religion):

*Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?  
(2 Cor 6:14 NIV)*

I do not believe that CR should be “yoked” with 12 Steps because it is heretical. I also believe that Pastor Warren recognizes that this is true, which is why he has attempted to insert “Jesus” into the 12 Steps program and applied biblical verses to the steps. What exactly is the point of starting with a program that is decidedly unbiblical and try to “Christianize” it with Biblical jargon? Why not simply teach directly from the Bible and tell people about the transformational power of the gospel (What the Church has done for thousands of years). Yes, the gospel liberated people from their sin before 12 Steps and it will continue to do so until Christ’s return.

It is my firm conviction that programs, like 12 Steps and Celebrate Recovery, add to the gospel. The gospel of Jesus Christ is not based on steps, meetings, or principles but belief in God and obedience to His word. This is the true message that needs to be part of recovery from habitual sin, like those practiced by people living with an addiction. Yes, administrators of 12 Steps programs sincerely desire to help those in the programs they facilitate. And yes, I believe that Pastor Warren loves people and desires that attendees of CR experience victory over addiction. However, true freedom is only found in Jesus Christ and is not the product of steps, meetings, and programs.

It is time for God’s Church to take stalk of her teachings to ensure that what is preached from the pulpit is truly centered on God and His inerrant word. There is only one TRUE God who saves and one TRUE gospel that brings freedom. There are no required steps to live free of addiction other than to repent of your sin and turn to God through Christ’s sacrifice. Offering anything beyond this is adding to the finished work of the Cross of Christ and is contrary to the following Biblical truths:

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<sup>4</sup> <http://crosscreekcr.com/RickWarren.aspx>



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*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! (2 Cor 5:17 NIV)*

*For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin... (Rom 6:6 NIV)*

*His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. (2 Pet 1:3 NIV)*

Those in Christ have been crucified with Him and raised to new life. We are new creations! Living a life of freedom and happiness is not a matter of steps, meetings, or books and curriculum. The Freedom God provides is immediate, permanent, and sufficient. He has given us everything we require for life and godliness. That is why the gospel of Jesus Christ is truly "Good News!"