

Addictions in Scriptural and Theological Perspective: A Rationale for Pastoral Ministry¹

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I. Introduction

Addiction has the power to destroy lives; recovery from addiction is a kind of rebirth. These powerful realities create, in those moved by compassion, a desire to assist addicted persons. The church, at its best, can be a refuge and a site of transformation.

However, well-intentioned people within the church, whether ordained or lay persons, often are tempted to assess situations, imagine possibilities or launch themselves into practical action without a clear sense of how the church's response proceeds from different premises than do those of secular institutions, though it may contribute toward the same goal. The church's mission is, above all, to bear witness to Jesus Christ. Approaches that are not grounded biblically and theologically in this truth run the risk of duplicating, in a weak fashion, the efforts of secular recovery work as experienced in counselling, psychotherapy, and other holistic modalities. In contrast, where the church stands on its sure foundation in Christ and proceeds where he leads, we are given a perceptive humility about the specific boundaries of our action, and the basis for a relationship that is in its own way sacramental, pointing the way to the relationship between God and humankind realized in Jesus.

This rationale sets out the theological **principles** and biblical **basis** of a Christian approach to addictions ministry. It is not a handbook for the practical implementation of such ministry; that is for someone else to write, and should follow a sincere engagement with what is explained here. The rationale concentrates on substance addiction (alcohol and other drugs) since that was the original mandate of the committee for which it was written, and because these are the forms of addiction whose mechanisms are at present best understood. Most of its

¹ This paper constitutes my contribution to the work of the Diocese of Algoma Addictions Committee, which was formed as the result of a motion passed by the Diocese of Algoma Synod in May 2017 and to which I was appointed by The Right Reverend Anne Germond, Bishop of Algoma [now the Most Reverend Anne Germond, Archbishop of Algoma] later that year. I wish to thank in particular The Rev'd Dr Timothy Perry and The Rev'd Leigh Silcox for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this document, as well as the other members of the Addictions Committee for their support, suggestions and affirmations.

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content is nonetheless applicable to other addictive or addiction-like behaviours currently being discussed.

The text does not assume any personal experience of substance addiction on the part of the reader, though it recognizes that there are many ordained and lay persons with such experience.

II. God's Purpose: Wholeness and Abundant Life

Theologically, the point of departure for ministry in the area of addictions is the recognition of God's completely loving purpose in creation, and of God as the source of all life.

God's purpose in creation is of a whole and balanced cosmos in which human beings, in perfect relationship to the rest of creation, enjoy dominion (responsible stewardship) without exploitation or danger. This is at the heart of the Creation stories in Genesis (Gen. 1.1–2.25). God's purpose is, therefore, life, and it is a life of wholeness and health.

An appreciation of creation, however, also requires an appreciation that the world as we know it, in the relationships between living things, is not according to God's intention. This is the truth dramatized in the stories of the Fall and its aftermath in Genesis (Gen. 3.1–24; also arguably 4.1–16). The disobedience of humankind, upsetting the relationship between humans and God, consequently throws all relationships between other living creatures out of balance. The exploitation and misuse of the natural world by humans for their own purposes is the furthest extreme of this disordered relationship, signified elsewhere in creation by hunger, predation, illness and suffering. These are not part of God's purpose.

As a consequence we live in a world where naturally occurring substances (such as the alkaloids in certain plants) exist for various adaptive purposes, including defense against predation. Alcohol comes from the chemical alteration of naturally occurring sugars. Humans, over millennia of culture, have learned to use these substances to alter their own perceptions, whether for comfort or in the pursuit of transcendent experience; such uses are traceable to the earliest records of human history. Yet these same chemical compounds may interact with the human physiology to produce powerful addictive effects. Both the existence of addictive substances, and the human propensity to seek them out, therefore need to be seen through the lens of the Fall. For that matter, the use of human ingenuity (one of God's gifts) to develop artificial means to synthesize or imitate such compounds for easier mass production

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(particularly with commercial intentions) can be understood as a further misuse of a part of creation—ourselves—and as a kind of idolatry of our own human potential.

It is true that some of these substances may have healing properties when used in particular amounts or according to specific regimens, and only become dangerous when used in excess or in the wrong ways. This, too, bears pondering. The twisting of an originally laudable intention is a reminder that humans after the Fall live according to a law of unintended consequences, a figure in itself for the very nature of the Fall.³

All this is to say that the existence of addiction, and the suffering it causes, are part of a broken relationship with God. However, there is good news!

The good news, to which we as Christians bear witness, is that God is active even in his fallen creation to call it back to himself, to redeem it. Within God's ultimate purpose of salvation is the cessation of suffering of body and mind, and the restoration, for all time, of the health and wholeness of his creation. Signs of this are evident in the renewed covenant made not only with humankind but all creation after the Flood narrative (Gen. 9.7–17). A fuller and more specific foretaste, however, comes in the shalom promise of the prophets, particularly Isaiah and Jeremiah (Is. 11.1–9; Is. 25.1–9; Is. 35.1–10; Is. 55.1–13; Jer. 23.5–6; Jer. 31.1–9). In addition, the servant prophecies of Isaiah promise that God's new time of restoration will come through God's anointed servant (Is 42.1–4; Is. 52.13–53.12).

The coming of Jesus fulfils these prophecies (in particular see Jesus' paraphrasing of Is. 61.1–2 and 58.6 in the Capernaum synagogue, Luke 4.16–21). It reveals that the servant who brings healing and restoration is the one who incarnates, literally, God's self-sacrificing love. Jesus' own statement that the kingdom of God is already "among you" (Lk. 17.21) places this kingdom not only in a distant hereafter, but alive and working amid the apparent surface of a suffering creation, which it ultimately will supersede. It is in Jesus that creation itself is healed; the physical and mental healing possible through human capacities on this earth are signs and foretastes of the total healing of all things in Christ, and at the same time a mere facsimile of it. Healing in Christ is the undergirding support of all holistic Christian healing ministry, a healing that does not divide the person into parts or problems but embraces the totality. Saying "I came so that they may have life and have it abundantly" (John 10.10), Jesus

³ St Augustine of Hippo expounded on this idea through his concept of evil as privation of the good (*Enchiridion*).

inaugurates the Kingdom in his own person. To know him is to know true healing. At the same time, to proclaim this truth is also to recognize that God's healing works in God's time; God's scope for healing is cosmic and does not operate according to human timetables (see also section VIII below).

III. Psychology and Physiology in Theological Perspective

An overview of the physical and psychological dimensions of addiction would, of course, fill whole books and is far beyond the scope of this piece. However, several aspects of the situation bear particular consideration through a theological lens.

1. **idolatry:** A true addict experiences the total grip of his or her addiction, in both physiological and psychological aspects, a hold that radically re-centres a life so that the addiction is at the centre. Other people or practices in the addict's life either are made to serve the addiction (including enabling it by covering up) or are neglected and marginalized. In effect, the addiction has become the addict's god, a cruel one. This false and cruel god is in the position of an idol. The fact that the addict did not consciously choose this arrangement, and now often would wish to end it, is beside the point; theologically, in terms of the addict's relationship to God, addiction is a form of idolatry, albeit a form in which the idolatrous practice has taken over and become the agent.

Interpretation of this theological dimension needs great caution. The many furious denunciations of idolatry in the Old Testament and their dire warnings of divine wrath, directed to an entire people in a specific historical context, tell only part of the story and are not to be simplistically transferred verbatim to individual human subjects. God's anger at idolatry is inseparable from his intense love for his people and his desire to get them back. In the same way God loves the addict and wishes above all to assume his place at the centre of the addict's existence.

2. **enslavement:** The addict's inability to escape addiction is due not only to a strong physiological dependency, but also a psychological trap in which the substance's effect provides pleasures that temporarily patch over psychological needs. Being in the grip of something that is known to be destructive, and at the same time is powerfully attractive and pleasurable, is a deep double bind. The addict becomes greatly demotivated to leave the addiction even as he or she knows it endangers life itself.

This is a kind of enslavement which also has its Scriptural figures. The Exodus is a story of enslaved misery followed by a journey of liberation, but that arduous journey through a harsh wilderness involves deep conflict (the people's repeated suspicion and rejection and backsliding), even longing for the comparative comforts of slavery (see especially Numbers 11.5). This is a perfect analogy for an aspect of the addict's struggle.⁴ Both the journey itself and the destination have direct personal relevance.

Enslavement to addiction can also be understood through a properly thought-out concept of the demonic: a power that is outside the subject's control, whose spiritual influence is wholly destructive, and which is experienced as an alien entity yet also in an insidious and suffocating way entangled in the structures of the addict's own self. Here our figures come from Jesus' dealings with demons in the Gospel narratives—a responsibility that, importantly, he gives to his disciples (Mark 6.7, Matthew 10.8, Luke 9.1).

3. **despair:** The addict's perception that things will never get better leads to a sense of alienation from any source of hope; in other words, to despair. The breakdown of family structures and friendships often reinforces this conviction as it tends to the addict's isolation. Yet, no matter how much life-destroying forces tell the addict that this despair means she is worthless and unlovable by God, the exact opposite is true. Even within Scripture whose entire concern is the activity of God, there is a place for the profound sense of God's absence; it is the concern of various Psalms, and of Lamentations as well as the prophets of the years before and after the Exile.⁵ Indeed, God's presence cannot be fully grasped without a sense of the meaning of God's absence.⁶ This is a clue that the addict's experience is not an anomaly but a figure to be taken to the heart of all those who follow Christ, and pastorally approached, it can be a ground of hope.

⁴ Addiction expert Kenneth Blum, with his research group, has used the exact word "enslavement" to describe the addict's condition, an instance of correspondence between theological and secular uses; see "Genospirituality: Our Beliefs, Our Genomes, and Addictions," *Journal of Addiction Research and Therapy* 4(5) (2013): 162. I thank Omar Manejwala for his reference to this article.

⁵ Lamentations throughout, but especially Lam. 5; among the Psalms see especially 22, 28, 42, 44; Ezekiel 9–11

⁶ Henri Nouwen has written eloquently on this subject in *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (London: Penguin, 1986).

IV. Incarnation

In Jesus' birth and human life, God took on human nature. Jesus' full humanity means that he shared human suffering. In his Passion, though he was himself without sin he took on the full weight, the full impact, of the same human sinfulness that besets the addict, in its various forms. Jesus experienced rejection and abandonment, as well as temptation (by Satan in the wilderness) to distractions that promised control, relief, and false hope of purpose, meaning, and relationship (Mt 4.1-11; Mk 1.12-13; Lk 4.1-13).⁷ He even experienced a sense of God's absence in the depths of his suffering at the crucifixion (Mt 27.46, Mk 15.34). For these reasons, and not only because of his healing and embracing actions during his lifetime, Jesus is the figure who takes up into himself the addict's suffering (including the very suffering of the separation from God), to be redeemed along with all humanity.

V. Jesus the Healer

The stories of Jesus' healing actions in the Gospels (which are too many to list here) speak to addiction most obviously as examples of the coming into human life of God's purpose of restoration to full life; they embody hope for wholeness and health. Yet their significance is greater even than this. Jesus is the one whose healing mission we are called to live out, so understanding the nature of Jesus as healer is key to understanding our mission.

We may include in this category not only Jesus' healing of physical ailments, but also his exorcisms of persons tormented by demonic spirits. In both cases, Jesus' action has the effect of setting free, of liberation. Men and women in these Gospel narratives submitting themselves to trust in Jesus experience a recovery of agency over their own lives. They are freed not only from their physical or mental suffering, but from the stigma and prejudice that oppressed them as sufferers.

Jesus heals in order to return people to full life in community, accepted by others. Ministry that participates fully in this ministry of Christ, then, needs to embrace the social dimension by diminishing the barriers that keep addicts from the supportive relationships within a community, without seeking to control or direct an individual.

⁷ For this insight about Jesus' temptations I am indebted to Leigh Silcox, whose words I have borrowed here.

VI. Jesus: Breaker of Boundaries and Critic of Hypocrites

Jesus' interactions with the poor and marginalized in his society indicate that he is always at one with those who are suffering and disregarded by others, including those suffering debilitating illness regarded as "unclean." His love of the abject is not diminished by social disapproval or even by religious authorities.

In addition, Jesus aims strong criticism at those who congratulate themselves on their own righteousness and place themselves above those they think are more sinful (Lk 11.37–12.1; Lk 16.1–15; Lk 18.9–14; Mt 23.1–36; Mk 12.37b–40; Lk 20.45–47). We need to take this very much to heart in our attitude toward those to whom we minister, particularly those whose addictions have led them to be rejected by society.

Popular discussions of addiction often circle around a question of responsibility: to what degree is the addict himself to "blame" for his addiction? How much is due to predisposition and social disadvantage, how much to deliberate choice? This is a stale and unhelpful, indeed often harmful, framing of the matter. Jesus does not ever seek out a source of blame for the suffering of others on the sufferer's part; the most vivid example is his reaction to the woman caught in the act of adultery, in which Jesus turns the accusers' desire for blame and judgment against them (John 7.53–8.11).⁸ Consider also the blind man cured in John's Gospel (Jn 9.1–34). The disciples ask who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind (Jn 9.2)? Jesus' response is that the man's condition is nobody's fault, that his purpose is to be a sign of God's glory (Jn 9.3). Addicts, whether we encounter them on the road to recovery or apart from it, have the same purpose to be signs of God's glory.

Abandoning our own sense of judgment in the face of others' troubles is a generally difficult and yet absolutely essential part of the Christian life; where addiction is concerned, no ministry can be life-giving unless it starts from this point. To walk with the addicted person is to step, however haltingly, forward; it is not to reach into the past to force confrontations with demons. That is the Holy Spirit's work; others can only facilitate it through a Christlike

⁸ This story, known to tradition as the *pericope adulterae*, does not appear in the oldest manuscripts of John's Gospel and is generally thought to have been added at a later point. It is handled with caution in both older and newer lectionaries, never being appointed for Sunday use. Nevertheless, its portrayal of Jesus is consistent with his character and ministry demonstrated throughout the rest of the canonical Gospels, and I have referred to it here in that same spirit.

embrace of the addict as he or she is. Further reasons for this are explained more fully in Section VII below.

VII. No Condescension: We Are All Addicted

Those who have never suffered from substance addictions have no reason to feel spiritually superior to those who do. **Our basic condition before God, as a consequence of the Fall, is in fact one of addiction—we are incapable of freeing ourselves through our own efforts from the power of sin.** The recovering addict's admission that he or she cannot quit on their own, the declaration that allows the famous Twelve Steps of recovery to proceed, is a declaration of our universal condition. St Paul expresses the frustrating cycle of attraction, repulsion, self-blaming and despair most powerfully, showing that addiction and recovery are together a figure of the spiritual reality we all face and embrace (Romans 7:14–25). It is worth adding that in the recent experience of this writer, at a conference specifically on addiction and faith, people who were actually in recovery displayed no hesitation to speak of sin as central to the addiction experience, in a frank and unembarrassed way.

Once we accept this theological truth, we are able to mobilize the language of sin usefully on the subject of addictions in a way that is now unaccustomed among most Anglicans, who since the mid-twentieth century have grown squeamish about the subject of sin and do not like to mention it. Some basic misunderstandings need to be cleared up. To speak of addiction as sin, first of all, is not a stigmatizing of substance addicts as individuals; addiction is sin in part because sin is an addiction. But also, we need to get over our tendency to think of discrete “sins” as bad deeds that we do. That common conception is, theologically, the least important dimension of sin. Sin is more usefully regarded both as a condition—the condition of being separated from God—and as a power that holds us in its grip.⁹ It prevents us from seeing or living into the goodness for which God created us. Thus it replicates, at every level from the most personal to the cosmic, the course and consequences of addiction. Only the sacrifice of Christ, and his resurrection, enable the power of sin and of its consequence, death, to be broken.

⁹ This has been thoroughly and usefully expounded by Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2015), 167–204.

This realization should shape the nature of our ministry. Addicted persons are not poor unfortunates to whom the non-addicted reach down. They are images of us all, bearing in their very persons both the misery and the hopeful yearning that is our lot in this life. In effect, in ministering to the addicted, we are also being ministered to, as we see through this figure ourselves being met by Christ.

VIII. Liberation in Christ

It is in Christ, who has broken the power of sin and death, that salvation comes for individuals, communities and humankind. The tremendous joy of this liberation is the reality to which points the joy of freedom from all enslaving powers, including substance addiction.

Please note that this does not mean that we think faith in Christ automatically leads, in a magical way, to freedom from substance addiction without any further difficulties. Too many faithful Christians have wrestled mightily, and not always successfully, with addiction for this to be true. We openly acknowledge that caring professionals (for example within social work, medicine, and psychology), and recovery communities, hold knowledge and experience that leads along a path to freedom. Our faith in Christ's power, rather, does mean that we believe recovery from addiction, in all of its struggle, ultimately has an immense spiritual significance and is not to be understood simply in terms of physical and mental health. For us, while secular knowledge and practice may provide means to advance along the path of recovery, the path itself has been mapped by God's providence and blazed by Jesus' own footsteps, and we walk humbly along that path because it runs parallel to our own.

Nor do we as Christians consider recovery in terms of making the recovering addict a "functioning" or "contributing" member of society." God's love is not contingent on people's contributions to society, and the angels rejoice at the freedom of a sufferer even if that person remains dependent on others for the rest of his or her life. Recovery in Christ restores the recovering person to an ability to receive and return self-giving love, as is manifested in a myriad of ways in ordinary human relationships of different kinds.

IX. Power Made Perfect in Weakness

Famous words of St Paul in 2 Corinthians 12 hold special meaning for the recovery community. Having asserted that he was given “a thorn in the flesh” (an affliction of some kind) “so that I would not become arrogant,” Paul continues:

I asked the Lord three times about this, that it would depart from me. But he said to me, ‘My grace is enough for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ So then, I will boast most gladly about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may reside in me (2 Cor 12.7-9).

Well-intentioned Christians, particularly those of a liberal orientation, whose lives have been free of substance addiction, may erroneously imagine this passage to be objectionable, both in its embrace of affliction as God’s work, and in its acceptance of suffering. They may rightly be concerned about the misapplication of Scripture to hound or humiliate a sufferer. But they may be surprised to learn that this passage is one of great comfort within specifically Christian circles of the recovery community. It removes utterly from the recovering addict any sense that their failures are a source of shame or must terminate in separation from God. Instead, as St Paul realized, human frailty is the medium through which God works, beginning with God’s assumption of human nature in the Incarnation; this is in fact the balm for the deep wounds of distance from God voiced so eloquently in the Old Testament.

X. The Difficulty of Our Ministry

While this document focusses on theological principles and is not an instruction manual, a few comments are appropriate at this point about some of the pastoral challenges implied by this theology.

Ministry in this area requires us to hold in balance:

I. *An open and non-hypocritical reception of sufferers.*

The true humility, and considerable patience, required to meet those in addiction runs deeply against the grain of much church culture, in which there is often a drawing apart from anything that is not nice or clean. A serious engagement with others’ addiction in the theological frame outlined here means also a very hard look in the mirror of our own consciences—an exercise that is very easy to avoid.

A separate point about hypocrisy: while using Scripture to bash others is a less characteristic Anglican tendency than is the gingerly avoidance of unpleasant Scripture, it is nonetheless worth remembering that Biblical injunctions against drunkenness, in both Old and New Testaments, are always embedded in a larger point and context. They need to be taken seriously for what they are, and used in preaching and teaching (like any Scripture) with the goal of revealing Christ.

2. *An equally open and unembarrassed (indeed, steadfast) witness to the fact that life in Christ means transformation.*

For many Anglicans, clergy and lay alike, this fundamental truth runs against the grain of the very “churchianity” that, among other things, keeps substance addicts out of churches. As Nadia Bolz-Weber has asserted, if lives are being transformed in the church basement at an Alcoholics Anonymous group, and not in the sanctuary of the church one floor up where Christ is ostensibly proclaimed, the church is not carrying out its mission.¹⁰ **We can only bear witness to what we actually believe.**

3. *Knowing our limits: what are we ourselves qualified for?*

A fuller appreciation of the theological basis of our ministry helps to place in perspective what our actual role as lay and ordained ministers is. It clarifies the terms and limits of our intervention, which is not to imitate (much less compete with) the work of secular caring professionals but to place their practices within the Christian frame that we recognize and proclaim—**by our own attitudes and actions.**

4. *Taking appropriate pastoral responsibility in our communities.*

Even the most heartfelt, prayerful and humble ministry in this area, as in any area, can be rendered ineffective by bullying and gossip within a congregation or other community. Both lay and ordained ministers have a sacred duty, often uncomfortable, to act to end such behaviour using whatever charitable yet firm and unambiguous means of persuasion lie within their competence and function, and to seek help if necessary. This is a point that should

¹⁰ In her address “Some Thoughts about Six of the Twelve Steps”, Addiction and Faith Conference, Minneapolis, Minnesota, September 28, 2018.

not need making (the danger of destructive dynamics within churches is the subject of several of St Paul's letters) yet it is very easy for those with pastoral responsibility to feel intimidated. To take the consequences for protecting the weak and confronting the strong is an inescapable part of Christlike self-sacrifice.

XI. Last Things: The Hope Held Out

It needs to be stated bluntly: Christian ministry to addicted persons cannot proceed on the expectation that it will result, in a manner easily and satisfyingly visible to the ministers, in a person's complete and final recovery from addiction. That would be to ignore both well-documented patterns in the difficulty of recovery, and core truths about God and God's action in the world. God is sovereign and God's healing takes place in God's time; ministry is not magic, invoking and manipulating divine power to an end. Rather, those in addictions ministry need to understand that they are participants in a drama that God writes and directs. They may never see the final scene in the way they expect and hope. The addict's liberation may come during his or her lifetime, or it may come only at the final liberation from all pain, suffering and enslavement in the new creation over which Christ will reign.

We remember, however, that as St Paul writes, "When anyone is in Christ, that person is a new creation" (2 Cor 5.17). In that sense there are two kinds of new creations to consider: the recovering addict, and those who minister to that person. Ministers, walking in patience and humility alongside the sufferer, are re-created, transformed through our heightened awareness of God's grace in liberating us from the guilt of addictive sin. We proceed within the consciousness of our new life in Christ.

The person to whom we minister may or may not recognize Jesus Christ as the Word made flesh; she may have a strong or weak or entirely unrecognized relationship to Christ. If our prayer and hope is for the total redemption of our suffering friend, our hope is also that he will share our experience of Christ. But we cannot *make* this happen, and to set up goals for someone else, such as an explicit "decision for Christ," is to court distraction and error by framing the matter in our terms rather than God's. Rather, we pray and trust that, in God's time, the love in Christ that binds us to the addicted person may awaken, nourish and bring to flower in that person the knowledge of their worth as a beloved child of God. We therefore hand over to the Holy Spirit and to the person the agency of decision.

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This may involve what seems unbearable patience. Yet the uncertainty in which we walk in such a relationship is simply a parallel to the uncertainty in which a life of faith is lived. That is only one way in which such a ministry is sacramental; the time of suffering, frustration, delay, backsliding, that alternates with detectible healing reminds us of the human suffering into which Christ fully entered in order to defeat the power of death itself. As we participate in the yearning for the liberation of our addicted friend, we also move more deeply into the yearning of the entire creation for its full redemption, and our hope conducts a glimpse of that greatest hope.

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