

Addicts in the Church?

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Some time ago I read a book authored by Carol Cannon entitled *Never Good Enough*. Among many challenging realities, the book explored the concept of 'clean addictions,' which include nonchemical dependencies like workaholism, perfectionism, churchaholism, care giving, and the need for control. While we frown upon the various forms of chemical addiction, these 'clean addictions' are not only often considered acceptable within the church, but are often encouraged and celebrated.

I was particularly disturbed by the idea of 'clean addictions' because the book suggested that these subtle dependencies in ourselves may lay the foundations for more overt forms of addiction in our children and our children's children. Apparently, children of workaholics are just as likely to develop crippling addictive disorders as children of alcoholics.

More often than not, children learn addictive traits from their parents, but may exhibit their own additions in different ways. I find that frightening, because I wonder about what I am modelling to my own children.

An addiction is any practice in which we wilfully engage as a priority, which robs other more important priorities of time and attention; and which creates negative consequences that we ignore in order to continue engaging in the behaviour. If I spend every available moment in front of a computer screen week in, week out preparing the next sermon, seminar, counselling session etc., to the detriment of family time and my own self-care, does that make me an addict? What makes this potential addiction even more dangerous is that it is easy to justify because I may reason that, "I am about my Father's business."

Addictions are not just about what we do, but more importantly, why we do it. For example, the difference between normal compassionate care giving and addictive care giving, is the extent to which we help others and our reason for doing it. We should feel good when we help others, but if we help others in order to feel good, we need to question our motives. Ellen White stated that "It is carrying that which is lawful to excess that makes it a grievous sin" (The Adventist Home, 122).

In one sense we are all addicts. If we define addiction as a compulsive behaviour in which we willingly engage in spite of the negative effects upon us and those around us, then sin itself may be seen as a form of addiction (see Romans 6:16). We can all identify with the apostle Paul when he laments, "For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do . . . ¹⁸For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. ¹⁹For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice (Romans 7:15, 18-19). More appropriate words to sum up the addict's condition would be hard to find.

Paul acknowledged his struggle and we need to acknowledge our own, because denial will keep us enslaved. When Jesus confronted the Pharisees with their spiritual bondage, they claimed, "We are Abraham's descendants, and have never been in bondage to anyone. How can you say, 'You will be made free?'" (John 8:33). Not only does denial perpetuate bondage, but it also limits our capacity to relate to others with understanding and compassion. It can be easy for us to look down on the heroin addict or the alcoholic because they make us look good; like the Pharisee's view of the Publican in Luke 18:10-14. As long as we measure ourselves by those we consider to be beneath us, we will fail to do the healthy introspection necessary to confront our own frailties. Maybe if we can acknowledge the reality of our own addictions we will develop empathy with those who exhibit more explicit forms.

Our religion can provide an appealing cocktail of pleasures, none of which are a problem in and of themselves such as exhilaration, prestige, power, relationships etc. However, when our religious practices become an end in themselves, they can become a detriment to true devotion, personal growth and healthy relationships. Ellen White commented that, "A religion of externals is attractive to the unrenewed heart" (Great Controversy, 567).

In the absence of healthy mechanisms to deal with the stresses of life, addictions serve a similar purpose to anaesthetics in medical treatments - pain relief. Addictions distance us from our true feelings. Our 'drug' of choice may vary depending on our circumstance, but whether they take the form of alcohol, drugs, pornography or more subtle forms like perfectionism and workaholism, addictions are a way to escape painful reality.

Paul encourages us to examine ourselves to see whether we are living the truth (2 Corinthians 13:5). Freedom from addiction necessitates that we cultivate the kind of ruthless honesty David displayed when he invited the Lord to, "Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." Psalm 139:23.

It has been said that the longest journey we will ever take is the journey within. Are we ready for that degree of openness? Are we willing to see what He might reveal? 'Clean addictions' can be very hard to identify because they can look very much like genuine virtues. Very rarely do addicts experience freedom without help. That includes divine intervention but also assistance from a supportive community, including professional help. The sad reality is that like the Prodigal Son, addicts often have to hit rock bottom before they are ready to make the journey home. The joyful reality, however, is that there is a loving Father who is waiting to receive us and rejoice over us with singing (Luke 15:11-24; Zephaniah 3:17).

Whatever our addictions may be, chemical, psychological or even the 'clean' ones, Jesus promises that if we embrace His truth we will experience freedom (John 8:32). The Apostle reiterates this truth when he assures us that, "creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God" (Romans 8:21).