

ADDICTED TO 'LOVE' OR ENSLAVED TO LUST?

Steven Arterburn begins his introduction to *Addicted to 'Love'* with a pressing question: "Have we overdone it? Have we carried the addiction craze too far? No one questions that alcohol and drug use can become addictive. But what about romance? Destructive relationships? Even sex?"

The answer to his first question, in contrast to the viewpoint expressed in the remainder of the book, is a resounding **yes!** The "disease" model of sinful behaviors, the "addiction craze," is an idea whose time should have never arrived. Arterburn is wrong in asserting that "no one questions" the addictive qualities of alcohol and drugs. A few persons do remain convinced that such behaviors are not "addictions" or "diseases," but biblically defined sins for which Christ died:

"Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God." (1 Corinthians 6:9-11)

These first redefinitions of sin were serious enough. Now, however, there is hardly a sin that has not euphemistically been converted into "disease." This book's quoted interview with convicted killer Ted Bundy even suggests that murderous behavior might be rooted in some illusory "illness." Psychological counseling does an enormous disservice to those it claims to serve, by offering "treatment" for "disease" and thereby missing the eternally serious consequences of what the Bible still calls sin. This is nowhere more heartbreaking than in the area of sexual immorality, now termed "sexual addiction" and subjected to medical terminology and treatment. This is what the Bible says about the behaviors so graphically described in this book:

"So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance

that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more." (Ephesians 4:17-19)

"Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these the wrath of God is coming." (Colossians 3:5,6)

The "patients" served by Arterburn's expensive psychiatric program, and others similar to it, have a very serious need: to be delivered from the wrath of God. That need is shoved aside in favor of other perceived "needs," such as the "need" to develop a higher view of self, the "need" for genuine intimacy, the "need" to be in touch with one's feelings, and numerous others.

It would be helpful in reading this critique if you were also familiar with my review of Arterburn's earlier book, *Toxic Faith*. This lengthy paper gives a basic overview of the author's psychological orientation and his adamant defense of the term "addiction" as opposed to sin. While that book concerned "religious addiction," much of the material is very similar in examining supposed causes as well as psychological solutions.

Arterburn claims that "yesterday's textbooks lack insight into today's sex-saturated society, and into the behaviors that uniquely characterize a post-sexual-revolution generation." In looking at the pain of some of his clients, he hopes to "derive new understandings of old problems, new solutions to old predicaments." As concerned Christians, we must respectfully disagree. One "textbook" of "yesterday" lacks no essential insight whatsoever into today's society and its sinful behaviors. That book is the eternal, unchanging Word of God, which contains "**everything** we need for life and godliness" through our knowledge of Jesus Christ (2 Peter 1:3,4). Man's nature has not changed in the centuries since God first created the human race. The passage quoted from Ephesians 4 is identical in description to the "sexually addicted" persons described by Arterburn in this book. Through the Word of God, we have available **His** understanding of "old problems" and **His** solutions to "old predicaments." There are no "new" understandings or "new" solutions, because God's truth is eternal, unchanging, and unfailing. The solution remains in the cross of Jesus Christ. The author evidences a basic faith in the gospel, and there is no intent here to question either that or his compassionate desire to help those who struggle desperately with the problems of life. However, it is unfortunate that his

apparently devout faith does not hold a more prominent place in his counseling theories and methodologies.

Double Messages

In my critique of *Toxic Faith*, I commented on the frustration of seeing Biblical truth hopelessly intertwined and entangled with serious psychological errors. This is also the case in this book. There are a few sentences, paragraphs, even a section or two where Biblical truth is presented accurately. It is both sad and irritating to realize that the rest of the book contains messages that conflict with that truth. I will comment on several key issues where this problem occurs.

Blame-shifting is described as one of the primary problems of the "addict," who would more accurately be described as an idolater or sexually immoral person. However, the author moves right along to go into extensive descriptions of childhood abuse and "dysfunctional" families and "major unmet needs" during childhood...as the root causes of later "sexual addiction." There are a few legitimate, biblical reasons for reviewing a person's background. One is to discover specifically *what* unbiblical patterns and sinful responses have developed. Another is to reveal the sinful condition of a person's heart. A third is to disclose actions that must be taken to ask forgiveness, make restitution, or seek reconciliation. The author does say that "we need to learn to respond redemptively to what has happened to us." However, his psychological orientation, which is so unfortunately typical in counseling, gives at least a subtle encouragement to dissolve oneself from blame for having developed a sinful lifestyle. It is a confusing message, but the discrepancy is rarely acknowledged by those involved in psychological counseling either as counselor or as counselee.

The area of self-image is another grave concern, as it usually is in psychological writings. Arterburn does see self-obsession as being at the heart of "sexual addiction," and he admits that "the lie of our culture--and the dynamic that drives addiction is... the belief that focus on self is the *answer* to our problem" (emphasis his). The book includes an excellent section on "sacrifice" (pages 256-257), even using the phrase "death to self" (almost *never* seen in psychological literature), and expressing the biblical truth that we are to put the needs and desires of others ahead of our own. At the same time, he claims that his sexually obsessed counselees are "truly wonderful people," "not 'bad' people," but "just very *wounded* people" (emphasis his). He sees self-loathing, and a foundation of low

self-esteem in childhood, as one of the major contributing factors in the development of "addiction." This view can be readily refuted from an examination of Scripture, which repeatedly pinpoints a *high* view of self as one of the chief culprits in sinful behavior while pointing to a lower, realistic image of self as essential to repentance and change. Arterburn's message is confused and basically unbiblical.

A further confusion resides in the author's perspective that his clients are fundamentally victims, as noted above, coupled with his stress on personal responsibility. Some of his counselees have indeed been terribly sinned against. However, along with other psychologists, he is reluctant to describe their responses as also being sinful. Again, there is psychological double-talk that fails to provide godly counsel.

Probably the most serious double message is revealed in Arterburn's statement that we must "guard against philosophies that run counter to the word of God." How true that is, but the entire message of his book is based on just such philosophies--psychology, a system alien to Christianity and developed by atheists, and the increasingly popular "spiritual" movement of the 12-step programs that is a deceptive counterfeit of biblical principles.

Addiction or Idolatry?

My critique of *Toxic Faith* devotes much space to this issue of whether the term "addiction" is even legitimate. What we are really encountering is *sin*, and more specifically, *idolatry*. Arterburn *briefly* mentions the term "idol," and *occasionally* implies that the "addictive" behaviors he describes are actually sinful. His overall focus, however, is on "addiction" as a "disease" over which the person has no control. This unfortunate perspective fails to pave a straight path to Jesus Christ as the *only* One who holds the power over sin and death.

Arterburn lists a progression of events that represents the "cycle" of "addiction:" obsession, the hunt, recruitment, gratification, return to normal, justification, blame, shame, despair, and promises. A better description of at least the first part of this cycle is given in Scripture:

"But each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death." (James 1:14, 15)

Justification and blame-shifting have been a part of man's nature ever since the fall:

"The man said, 'The woman You put here with me--she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.'" (Genesis 3:12)

"The woman said, 'The serpent deceived me, and I ate.'" (Genesis 3:13b)

Arterburn claims that the "very nature of shame is that it be repressed," and "thus are sown deep seeds of self-loathing." Much could be said about shame, a concept psychologists prefer over guilt that is defined by disobedience to God's commands. (See *A Way That Seems Right*, a critique of John Bradshaw's teachings.) However, "self-loathing" is *not* the bad fruit that grows out of this shame, and it is not the source of the individual's subsequent problems. Indeed, the very opposite is true; genuine "self-loathing," rather than a high view of self, characterizes true repentance. Note God's words to His disobedient people, spoken along with His promises to bring restoration:

"'But I will spare some, for some of you will escape the sword when you are scattered among the lands and nations. Then in the nations where they have been carried captive, those who escape will remember Me--how I have been grieved by their adulterous hearts, which have turned away from Me, and by their eyes, which have lusted after their idols. They will loathe themselves for the evil they have done and for all their detestable practices. And they will know that I am the Lord; I did not threaten in vain to bring this calamity upon them.'" (Ezekiel 6:8-10)

"There you will remember your conduct and all the actions by which you have defiled yourselves, and you will loathe yourselves for all the evil you have done." (Ezekiel 20:43)

"Then you will remember your evil ways and wicked deeds, and you will loathe yourselves for your sins and detestable practices." (Ezekiel 36:31)

Next Arterburn lists "despair," which ought to be compared with the biblical view:

"Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death."
(2 Corinthians 7:10)

Perhaps he is speaking of the "worldly sorrow" that leads to death. However, nowhere does he advocate the godly sorrow that precedes repentance and leaves no regret, nor does he distinguish such proper sorrow from the deadly variety.

Finally there are broken promises made to self and others, a form of striving in the flesh rather than the power of God. Such promises may be well-intentioned yet consistently be followed by more failure. Still, Arterburn fails to see the whole matter in Scriptural terms. The Bible teaches us that sin is a form of slavery:

"Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey--whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness?" (Romans 6:16)

"Jesus replied, 'I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin.'" (John 8:34)

Arterburn supposes a "crucial distinction" between the "addict" and others who sin sexually. The "addict," he says is controlled by his actions, while others are in control of similar actions. This is not the distinction made by Scripture. It is the unbeliever who is spiritually dead and has no power to overcome sin or to please God:

"Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God." (Romans 8:8)

"As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath." (Ephesians 2:1-3)

The *Christian*, however, does have the power of Jesus Christ--the power of the only One who has overcome sin and the resultant spiritual death:

"You, however, are not controlled by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone

does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ." (Romans 8:9)

"But because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ when we were dead in transgressions--it is by grace you have been saved."
(Ephesians 2:4,5)

While psychology distinguishes between the "addict" and all others who sin, the Bible distinguishes between the unbeliever, who is truly powerless, and the believer, who has all power in Christ. In Arterburn's examples of "addiction," he fails to indicate the point of conversion or how that experience of salvation impacts the "addictive" behavior. In most cases, we have clues that the pattern of habitual immorality developed during the individual's life *as an unbeliever, before conversion to Christ*. In some cases, it is unclear as to whether the person ever accepted Christ at all. This crucial factor--the **most** crucial factor in overcoming sin--is overlooked by this Christian counselor/author. We must therefore reject his definition of "addiction" and return to the biblical view of sin.

"Need" or Desire?

This is a vital area, and one where psychologists go far astray of God's Word. The author admits, in describing the "cycle of addiction," that "first there is desire, leading to perceived need." He is correct in noting that desire has been converted to "need." However, psychologists make a similar error, though more subtle, in their definition of "need." Throughout this book, one can highlight the word "need," where Arterburn perceives one that is legitimate, and gain a better understanding by substituting the word "desire." The Bible shows our genuine needs to be *few*, a radical departure from the theories of psychologists:

"But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that." (1 Timothy 6:8)

"Jesus answered, 'It is written: "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"
(Matthew 4:4)

"For the pagans run after all these things, and your Heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." (Matthew 6:32,33) ("these things" refers to physical needs for food, water, clothing)

"Martha, Martha,' the Lord answered, 'You are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken from her.'" (Luke 10:41,41)

This misperception of "need," no matter how seemingly legitimate, too easily distracts from the real, essential need of man for the Word of God and deliverance from His wrath that is available only through Christ. Stacking up lists of perceived psychological "needs" only builds an obstacle course for the person caught in sexual or other sin, feeding him the lie that his "needs" must be met *before* he will be able to obey God.

"Recovery" or Righteousness?

Arterburn's proposed solution to the problems he describes is centered in the 12-step "recovery" program. He says that the "principles of recovery are based on sound principles of spiritual growth, psychology, and therapy." One wonders about his source of "sound principles of spiritual growth," because he doesn't even indicate that the Bible is that source--and the **only** reliable source. Even if it were, we must note here that psychology and therapy are **not** compatible with Scripture, which is fully sufficient to equip man for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16, 17).

The author recognizes that the "higher power" concept developed by AA is a problem to some Christians, and that "this flexible wording has sometimes enabled recovery groups to adopt unbiblical concepts of who God is and what He is like." Sometimes? More likely would be "all times," because apart from God's revelation, man has no possibility of understanding Him. His image is distorted by man's sinful nature. And the 12 steps never recognize either God's Word or the necessity of eternal salvation. The "higher power" is the idol of anyone's imagination.

Arterburn *assumes* the 12 steps were written by "fervent Christians." A small amount of research into the history of AA (and the facts are readily available to the seeker) reveals that the 12 steps were written by Bill Wilson, who made no confession of faith in Christ, but was involved in occultic activities and LSD. There was no attempt to base the 12 step principles on the Bible. Instead, what we are faced with is a clever counterfeit. This has been written about elsewhere at great length (see recommended reading), so we will only do a brief survey of the

specific errors that appear in this book in its discussion of "recovery."

First is the concept that one must admit to being "powerless." As indicated earlier, the *unbeliever* is truly powerless. Therefore, such an admission would be wonderful if accompanied by repentance and acknowledgement of disobedience to God's commands, then followed by salvation. The *Christian*, however, must make no such statement, but must affirm his position of power in the strength of Jesus Christ. To do otherwise destroys what God has already given him.

The 12-step idea of confession is unbiblical in purpose, because it is selfishly motivated, and in form, because it is made before uninvolved parties for the sake of "relief."

Forgiveness is greatly distorted, particularly in recommendations to forgive self and to forgive God that are implied in such statements as this: "They must learn to forgive, to release themselves and others, and even God, from the prison of resentment." (As if man could "imprison" God!) Anger toward God is sin, and the height of arrogance is displayed in any attempt to "forgive" Him, because such an action assumes that He could do wrong and that we might judge His actions. Also disturbing is the proposition that prior to forgiveness it is necessary to "walk through the hurt in order to heal the emotions." Forgiveness is not a "feeling," but an act of the will that can be performed in obedience to God aside from feelings to the contrary. Another unbiblical recommendation is that role-playing, or psychodrama, facilitates forgiveness because those who engage in it "are able to explore the thoughts and motives of the person who hurt them." There is no way a human can make such judgment of another's heart. Only God can do so--not the person who was hurt, and certainly not uninvolved parties engaged in such role-playing. Other dangers of this technique include the tendency to gossip, slander, or ventilate anger, all in strict violation of Scripture.

There are numerous other dangers in the 12-step program. Sponsorship replaces Christian discipleship. The "message" to be carried is the wrong one, and we find a counterfeit form of evangelism--the "message" of "recovery" instead of the message of the gospel. "Support groups," which provide open confession and accountability, supplant the God-given role and responsibility of the Church. The 12-step movement ought to be of grave concern to the Church today (along with psychology). It is a false religion that masquerades as being compatible with all religious faiths. It is compatible--with all faiths except Christianity.

Conclusions

The author indicates that those "addicted" to romance, relationships, or sex cannot succeed in a "healthy" relationship because of the threat of abandonment. How is the concerned Christian to respond? Certainly not by abandoning such persons or refraining from involvement, but by leading those caught in such sinful lifestyles to the real truth that will set them free--the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Sexual immorality is not a "disease" that requires "treatment." Such an idea is as foreign to the Bible as the most bizarre cult. Instead, those caught in this despairing web, enslaved to sin and Satan, need a message of repentance, forgiveness, salvation, and sanctification. The author briefly admits that "*whatever* we may have done is covered by the atoning blood of Christ" (emphasis his). This is not the fundamental message of his book, but it is the true message of salvation. It is my prayer that those who are truly concerned about helping the sexually immoral, and others entangled in sinful patterns, will heed the truth before it is too late. Just as Paul warned Timothy:

"Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to your care. Turn away from godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge, which some have professed and in so doing have wandered from the faith. Grace be with you."
(1 Timothy 6:20,21)

