

Living With Alcoholism

- Guidance for Christians

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Preface

It's time we faced up to the problem of alcohol in our community. Around 14 million Americans have alcohol problems ⁽¹⁾; 43% of American families have an alcoholic member ⁽²⁾. More Americans have been killed by alcohol than in all the wars America has ever fought. 10% of America's workforce have their performance affected by alcohol. And the figures are at least double this in Russia and other parts of Eastern Europe. If any other disease affected a nation as much as alcoholism does, a national emergency would be declared. The fact is, alcoholism is a huge and largely hidden problem. The fact we are committed Christians does not make us immune from these problems. This means that many Christians are struggling to live with alcoholics who are near and dear to them. This study is written for them, to help them in understanding alcoholics; it's not directed at curing alcoholism in itself.

I am in some ways totally unqualified to write this study. I have never been an alcoholic neither have I had any problems with alcohol. I grew up in a home where alcohol was available and used, but never abused. I live with a wife who also uses alcohol in moderation. I have spent my life living and preaching in the poorer societies of the world, and for most of my adult life have lived in the ex-USSR. Here we have the highest incidence of alcohol abuse in the world. In dealing with people- and the focus of my work has always been upon the individual- the problem of alcohol has repeatedly arisen. I feel heavily the burden of the Slavic world especially, and here as nowhere else alcohol is our greatest curse. I have seen more than many, albeit from an outsiders view, the shame, pain and human damage which

occurs in families which have to live with this problem. It was as a result of this that I decided back in 1990 that I would not drink alcohol. I had even then seen too much of the damage caused by setting an example to alcoholics of ‘drinking in moderation’. And it’s not been hard for me to keep that promise. Alcoholics can’t drink in moderation. They simply mustn’t drink. At all. I have so many fine Christian friends who are alcoholic. My act of love towards them, according to my conscience, has been to say: ‘Look. You *can* live without alcohol. Totally. I don’t drink; not at all. I don’t do it behind your back, when you can’t see, as I sit in some lonely roadside restaurant or when the girl brings the wine round on an airplane. I promise you, I don’t drink. I’m with you. So, never ever reason to yourself that you can do it ‘in moderation’ because I do. I don’t do it’. This is my personal understanding of Paul’s words about not doing things which are fine in our conscience, but may make others stumble. His reasoning in Romans and Corinthians seems to be that we shouldn’t do anything, privately or publicly, which may stimulate a believer to go back to former practices which were sinful. In the first century, it was idol worship etc. For us, or at least for me as I live my life out in Eastern Europe, it’s alcohol. So, better not to do anything that would encourage a believer “for whom Christ died” to turn back in this area. And it’s also my view of the Old Testament command not to put a stumbling block before the blind- i.e., don’t do anything that leads another into a fall. It takes “kindness...love unfeigned” to ‘give no cause of stumbling to others in any thing’ (2 Cor. 6:3,4). Even at my wedding, I was the only one there who didn’t drink alcohol- not even a sip of celebration. I say this not to in any way show off. It’s really been no sacrifice for me. I’m not arguing for total abstinence, even though that is my personal position ⁽³⁾. I’m telling you about it because I know that many alcohol-afflicted friends of mine (and their families) will read these words, and others too. And I want to remind you of where I am coming from. This study is, however, not so much for alcoholics as for their families and friends. I want you especially to understand that I have seen, I have seen...the afflictions you are in. And like you, I care, and this is why I haven’t tasted alcohol at all for 14 years [apart from the communion wine], and have prayerfully made this study.

I’d like to extend my thanks to the many brethren and sisters from various countries and backgrounds who have made major input into the revision of this manuscript, and who lift up the tragedy of alcoholism in fervent prayer. Especially am I grateful to Dr. Bob Korbela, Dr. Roy Boyd and Ms. Lindsey Mason for their extensive work on this document.

Duncan Heaster

Riga, Latvia

1. Understanding The Alcoholic

1.1 Introduction

Firstly, we need to define whether someone is alcoholic, or simply fails in self-control with it occasionally. One indicator that a person is alcoholic rather than just drinks too much occasionally is whether they experience blackouts. These are periods of memory loss, which may last only a few minutes, but can also last an entire evening. The alcoholic genuinely forgets what they did. By ‘blackout’ I don’t mean that he loses consciousness. The alcoholic

may speak and act normally, but nothing is written on his memory during this time. Another indication is what happens when the person goes without alcohol: "Tremors of the fingers and lips, slight twitchings, some motor restlessness, and sometimes delusions (not hallucinations). These symptoms are promptly relieved by more alcohol"⁽¹⁾.

All too often we focus merely on the symptoms of the problem. Your wife drinks. So the kids are uncared for, there are money problems, it's an embarrassment, she's focused on the bottle not on you nor anything else... But to save her, the husband has to attempt to understand her. Not necessarily to understand *why* she is an alcoholic- that's beyond the finest psychotherapists, and Scripture is largely silent about this issue. But rather, to understand what she is going through as an alcoholic. Prov. 20:1 says that "strong drink is a brawler" (RV). This is a metonymy- a drunk man is a brawler, not alcoholic drinks of themselves. But "strong drink" is put for 'a drunk man'. Alcohol is the alcoholic, and vice versa. This is some comfort for families of alcoholics who lament how alcohol so dominates their family member, and who marvel at the extent to which it is really so- that alcohol is the alcoholic, and the alcoholic lives for alcohol. At the very least, let's start by realizing that *God knows that*, and many centuries ago He reflected that knowledge in His word the Bible.

Notes

(1) R. Jellinek, *The Disease Concept Of Alcoholism* (New Haven, USA: College And University Press, 1960) pp. 145,146.

1.2 Denial

The fact that alcoholism is the only disease someone has and doesn't really know it is reflected in the way God says that "wine... strong drink" is a 'deceiver' (Prov. 20:1). God knows, He really does, all about the effects of alcohol, and the way it deceives people. Denial is the key to alcoholism. People in denial, alcoholics in denial, are all around us. It's always a disease that you don't realize, or won't realize, that you have. Denial is a common human response to adversity: therefore many people deny symptoms and disease whatever the cause. In the long path the alcoholic takes toward mental, physical and moral decline, usually the first thing to go is honesty. There are little lies at first. And first of all, they are lies the drinker makes to himself:

I only had two... I haven't had a drink in a week... I don't drink as much as...[Tom, Jose, Sergei, Svetlana, Sarah...]

This then progresses to lying to those who are around him. Any attempt to raise the issue with him is dismissed or met with a refusal to talk about it. Sin isn't faced up to. Now straight away we are up against a moral issue. Lying is a sin, in this context. And as we know from Scripture so well, the unregenerate heart is deceitful (Jer. 17:9). The 'devil' of our own self-talk is a deceiver; we deceive ourselves into sin. Rarely do we simply harden ourselves in revolt against God and His ways. We justify our actions, pleading to ourselves that we are a special case, that in our case, our behaviour is justified. So alcoholism starts with lying, to oneself, to God, and then to others. The alcoholic gets into this state of living a web of lies partly because those around him often end up supporting him. They lie about how much he drinks, cover up for him, make excuses. Unconsciously, he builds up a support network that enables him to continue drinking. This doesn't mean that those around him are guilty. They

have found themselves caught up in the frog syndrome- a frog will jump out of boiling water if thrown into it. But if he enters cool water and the temperature slowly rises, he remains in the boiling water, even though it is destroying him. Or her. What is needed by the sober members of the alcoholic's support group is recognition that this is indeed the situation. Reality has to be faced if there is to be progress and any return to a normal life, or at least life as God intended. Yet a particular danger of the disease of alcoholism is in that it works very hard not to let reality interfere with the problems it causes. The alcoholic will focus on specifics- "I didn't eat the children's food as you accused me of...I really didn't...you have some money in your purse right now...I was drinking beer not vodka..."; yet this is just a way of avoiding seeing the awful bigger picture, and fleeing reality. 'Coming to the truth' in the wider sense of the phrase is what cure is all about. Alcoholism is effectively a sickness of the soul, a breakdown of the personality; curing it is a reforming of the personality after God's image.

As the disease progresses, so do the lies, and more and more people are pulled in to that web of being untruthful. This is why alcoholism is the serious sin which the Bible makes it out to be. For untruth and deception are the very opposite of the way of thinking which the Father seeks. He sees us right through, and therefore if we believe this, we ought to be transparent before Him. The alcoholic is always scheming to ensure the cash and alcohol will be available, and the times and places to get drunk. Lies hide the schemes, and then more lies are needed to make those lies plausible. The lying lifestyle often results in them lying about things they don't even need to lie about- it becomes compulsive. It is all this peripheral behaviour that must be addressed in curing the alcoholic- it's not just a case of ingesting alcohol and needing to stop that.

A classic mistake amongst carers is to extract a promise from the alcoholic never to drink again. Alcoholism is about self-deception, lies, repeated failure. It's part of alcoholism that the alcoholic doesn't keep promises like that. Until he gets over the denial stage. Further, the result of the broken promise is that it feeds the alcoholic's guilt complex and self-loathing; and these are fundamental reasons why he or she drinks in the first place. It only prolongs the problem.

Alcoholism is hard to explain in terms of "why" it happens. The causes for it elude us. Yet we generally tend to be better equipped in dealing with problems if we know "why" something happened. The very 'mystery' of alcoholism is one factor in making it hard to accept one has the disease. This may need to be lovingly pointed out to the alcoholic. On one level, we must forget 'why'. On another level, if the causes of the alcoholism are at least partly known, such as unresolved childhood abuse issues, these also need to be tackled at the same time as the alcoholism - otherwise, where alcohol abuse is used as a coping mechanism, it could simply be replaced by a different one, equally as destructive. But the reality is, the alcoholic is an alcoholic. Accepting the unexplainable straight away throws the alcoholic onto faith in God, the vague 'higher power' which Alcoholics Anonymous speak of in their '12 steps'. The mystery of alcoholism forces one to turn to God; the unexplainable has to be accepted. This is surely why the atheistic psychiatrist Carl Jung admitted to being unable to treat alcoholism. It is beyond medication and beyond psychology. Experience of struggling with the sin / disease teaches that truly "the way of man is not in himself; it is not in man that walks to direct his steps" (Jer. 10:23). And this explains why even unbelieving alcoholics often appear to have some heightened spiritual awareness during their struggles. What we need to do is to harness God's truth to the task of taking these struggling men and women upwards and deeper in their confused sense of a need for God and His Truth.

As an endnote- remember that alcoholism knows no boundaries. It has affected from president to peasant in Russia [and all stages in between]. There is a stereotype that more men than women are affected, but this is increasingly becoming less true even in Russia. In the U.S.A., roughly 50% of alcoholics are female. And it has been observed that because women alcoholics face a greater social stigma than men, they find it far harder than men to get out of the 'denial' phase. Their families will need to be sensitive to this fact.

Deeper Study Box 1

Implications Of Believing That God Sees And Knows All Things

No Secret Sins

Job knew this, and therefore, he commented, it was impossible that, e.g., he would lust after a woman, if he really believed (as he claimed he did) that God was omniscient. "Why then should I think upon a maid [as the friends implied he had done]?...doth not he [God] see my ways, and count all my steps?" (Job 31:4). Likewise God had to remind Israel: "Can any hide himself in secret places that I shall not see him? Saith the Lord. Do not I fill heaven and earth?" (Jer. 23:24). The context is appealing to the people to quit their sins. We should labour to enter the Kingdom, *because* God knows absolutely every thought and action of ours and will ultimately judge them (Heb. 4:11-13). The Sermon on the Mount is really based around translating the knowledge that God sees and knows all things into practice. Our thoughts are equivalent to our actions; and yet often we think that the fact we are clever enough not to express them in action is somehow a lesser failure. And yet God sees our thought afar off. Realizing this will help us avoid the greatest danger in the religious life: to have an outward form of spirituality, when within we are dead. Fred Barling commented: "What God loves is the man who is genuine through and through; in whom the "without" and the "within" are really one; whose dominant persuasion is, "Thou God seest me"". Note how the Lord Jesus begins each of His letters to the ecclesias with the rubric: "I know..."; His omniscience of His people ought to motivate to appropriate behaviour. His criticisms of those ecclesias imply that they *didn't* appreciate the fact that He knew them and their ways. Hannah had reflected upon God's omniscience; and on this basis she tells Peninah not to be proud and not to use hard words against her, exactly because of this: "Talk no more so exceeding proudly; let not hardness [AVmg.] come out of your mouth: *for* the Lord is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed" here and now, *because* He sees and knows all things (1 Sam. 2:3).

The Hebrew language reflects certain realities about the nature of God's ways. The common Hebrew word for 'to see', especially when used about God's 'seeing', means also 'to provide'. Abraham comforted Isaac that "God will see for himself [AV 'provide'] the lamb" (Gen. 22:8 RVmg.); and thus the RVmg. interprets 'Jehovah Jireh' as meaning 'the Lord will see, or provide' (Gen. 22:14). The same word is used when Saul asks his servants to "provide" him a man (1 Sam. 16:17). When Hagar said "Thou God seest me" (Gen. 16:13) she was expressing her gratitude for His *provision* for her. What this means in practice is that the fact God sees and knows all things means that He can and will therefore and thereby provide for us in the circumstances of life; for He sees and knows all things.

Openness With God

The fact God sees and knows all means that we might as well open our lives up before Him in prayer and meditation. Jeremiah "revealed my cause" before the Lord because he knew that God "triest the reins and the heart" (Jer. 11:20). This may be why men like Jeremiah were somewhat 'rough' with God; whatever they felt about God, they told Him. They so knew that God knew their thoughts....there was and is no point in saying fine words to God in prayer, whilst feeling harder about Him in ones heart. the Psalmists talk to God in a far 'rougher' way than we do. They pour out their feelings, their anger and frustration with their enemies, their inability to understand how God is working...and they let it all hang down. They seem to have no reserve with God; they talk to Him as if He is their friend and acquaintance. David pleads with God to 'avenge my cause' (Ps. 35:23), he protests how he is in the right and how he longs for God to judge him. And so do the prophets, in the interjections they sometimes make in commentary on the prophecy they have just uttered. The emotion which David often seems to have felt was "Damn these people!", but he pours this out to God and asks *Him* to damn them. When we like David feel our enemies are unjust, we can:

1. Seek revenge. But this isn't a response we can make, Biblically.
2. Deny the feelings of hurt and anger. And yet, they surface somehow. And we join the ranks of the millions of hurt people in this world, who 'take it out' in some way on others.
3. Or we can do as David seems to have done. Take these feelings, absolutely as they are, with no rough edges smoothed off them...to God Himself. Pour them all out in prayer and leave Him to resolve the matter. In passing, this fits in with the conclusions of modern psychiatry-that we can't eliminate our feelings, so we must express them in an appropriate way.

This latter option is how I understand the imprecatory Psalms. Those outpourings of human emotion were read by God as prayers. The writer of Psalm 137, sitting angry and frustrated by a Babylonian riverside, with his harp hanging on a willow branch, being jeered ("tormented" Ps. 137:3 RVmg.) by the victorious Babylonian soldiers who had led him away captive...he felt *so* angry with them. Especially when they tried to make him sing one of the temple songs ("sing us one of the songs of Zion"). And, as a bitter man does, his mind went from one hurt to another. He remembered how when Babylon had invaded, the Edomites hadn't helped their Hebrew brethren (Obadiah 11,12). They had egged on the Babylonian soldiers in ripping down the temple, saying "Rase it, rase it, even to the foundation". And so in anger and bitterness this Jew prays with tears, as he remembered Zion, "O daughter of Babylon...happy shall he be, that rewardeth thee as thou hast served us. Happy shall he be that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the rock" (:8,9 RV). God read those angry words as a prayer, and in some sense they will have their fulfilment. For these words are picked up in Rev. 18:8,21 and applied to what will finally happen to Babylon. Her spiritual children will be dashed against the rock of Christ, the stone of Daniel 2:44, at His return. He will dash in pieces the Babylon-led people that oppose Him.

This makes these Psalms a challenge to us, in that they show how our earlier brethren poured out their souls, their anger, their doubts and fears, their joy and exuberance too...to the God who hears prayer, to the God who feels passionately for us, who feels for *our* feelings, *who sees and knows all things in the human heart*, even more so through our Lord Jesus Christ. And we must ask whether our prayers are of this quality, or whether we have slipped into the mire of mediocrity, the same standard phrases, the same old words and themes... and even worse, could it be that we perceive that God only sees and hears the words we say to Him in formal prayer, and disregards our other feelings and thoughts? Seeing He sees and knows all

things, let us therefore pour out all that is within us before Him. And we will find it wonderfully therapeutic when struggling against anger and hurt.

Our Words

Paul twice assures his readers that he speaks the truth because he is speaking in the sight / presence of God (2 Cor. 2:17; 12:19). The fact God is everywhere present through His Spirit, that He exists, should lead us at the very least to be truthful. In the day of judgment, a condemned Israel will know that God heard their every word; but if we accept that fact now then we will be influenced in our words now. And by our words we will be justified (Ez. 35:12). Reflection upon the omniscience of God leads us to marvel at His sensitivity to human behaviour. He noticed even the body language of the women in Is. 3:16- and condemned them for the way they walked. This is how closely He observes human behaviour. Hannah tells Peninah not to talk so proudly because “the Lord is a God of knowledge, though actions be not weighed”, i.e. they are not judged immediately, but, they surely will be (1 Sam. 2:3 RVmg.).

Because God sees and knows absolutely all, we must recognize that He realizes the unspoken implications of our words. Job’s words of repentance of Job 40:5 are seen by God as Job effectively condemning God, because presumably they were said merely as a mask over Job’s inner feelings that God had been unjust with him (Job 40:8). But when Job uses effectively the same words in Job 42:6, God accepts them. God’s ability to see to the core should therefore not only affect our words but elicit in us an honesty of heart behind the words which we use.

Mindful of God

There is perhaps a purposeful ambiguity in the Hebrew text of Is. 44:21: “O Israel thou shalt not be forgotten of me” is rendered in the RVmg: “thou shouldest not forget me”. The fact God never forgets us should be inspiration to not forget Him in the daily round of life. To act as if God doesn’t see all our ways is to effectively deny His existence. Babylon acted as she did because she reasoned that “None seeth me...I am, and there is none else beside me” (Is. 47:10 RV). They appropriated the language of God to themselves, they played God in that they thought their ways were unseen by any higher power. And we all have a terrible, frightening tendency to do this.

1.3 Some Medical Aspects of Alcoholism

Alcoholism leads to a vicious downward spiral, just as any indulgence in *any* sin does. It becomes both mentally and physically self-destructive. The liver metabolizes alcohol but is itself damaged by it, so that an alcoholic binge can produce illness and death through what is actually an acute hepatitis. Long term abuse of alcohol in large quantities results in cirrhosis of the liver- it is scarred and develops growths, leading to the possibility of cancer. The weak health of the alcoholic then leads to more depression and hopelessness, and therefore more drinking. Alcohol enters the bloodstream immediately and goes to the brain, where it affects the cortex of the brain- the location which has to do with memory, emotion, conscience and judgment. Straight away we see the moral issue which there is in alcoholism and being drunk. Alcohol is a depressant, so you need to be aware that it creates many other problems in the life of the alcoholic who is taking it regularly in large quantities. Because it is a depressant, the alcoholic will have problems sexually- impotence and difficulty in achieving orgasm. An alcohol-damaged liver causes hormonal changes, too. Testosterone is no longer broken down by the liver as it should be; and this can produce a 50% decrease in this male hormone. The testes wear away (testicular atrophy). For women, damaged livers result in an inability to adequately turn estrogen into estradiol, which interferes with vaginal lubrication and menstruation. The female hormones accumulate, causing enlargement of the breasts. Loss of periods is another feature of the disease. In both men and women, these conditions lead to sterility and even impotence. The associated mood changes lead the alcoholic to sometimes be physically or verbally abusive in ways they would never dream of while sober. Alcohol is soluble in both water and fat, and therefore it invades the nerve cells very easily. This is why it may cause nerve damage or brain syndromes. Alcohol harms in other ways- injuries, tuberculosis, heart attacks and strokes are some of these complications. "Because alcohol contains empty calories he feels warm and full and therefore neglects proper food. Malnutrition sets in" ⁽⁴⁾, and so the vicious cycle of health breakdown continues. Regular and nutritious meals for the alcoholic are one way of helping him or her- although of course this will not completely prevent cirrhosis.

Alcohol has major effects on behaviour. Although drinkers think it is a stimulant because it makes them feel good (as alcohol is absorbed into the blood stream and moves on to the brain very quickly), it is in fact a depressant. It particularly damps down social restraints so that drinkers say and do things that they would never dream of doing while they were sober. They may become emotionally unstable, quarrel easily, be verbally and physically abusive and lose sexual inhibitions. Memory loss can be particularly distressing, because the next day, drinkers may not remember what they have done. Who were they with? What did they do? Did they sleep with anybody, and, if so, who?

Thus bad behaviour resulting from alcohol means that families and relationships are damaged often irreparably. And of course money often becomes an issue. The alcoholic is spending large sums of money on drink but risks losing his or her employment because of it. This fear often comes to dominate the family of a male alcoholic. The alcoholic rationalizes the drinking by blaming family and friends, and comes to avoid them.

Shakespeare lamented: "That men should put an enemy into their mouths to steal away their brains". There is a physical component of the disease, often reflected in the craving response to a single drink, representing a metabolic reaction to the drug alcohol. Physical dependence develops. But we will keep emphasizing that alcoholism is largely a disease of the mind, in

that the alcoholic keeps drinking because of a mindset which they are in; and therefore the cure is related to the things of the spirit / mind. As Hos. 4:11 says “Wine and new wine take away the heart / mind”. The alcoholic cannot trust himself, their thoughts, feelings or best intentions. They persuade themselves they will really only have one drink; and invariably they end up drunk. The desire for alcohol and the need to survive as an active alcoholic makes them totally self-centred; people become [sub-consciously] merely things to be manipulated to allow the alcoholism to continue. It’s a disease the mind persuades them has to be continued in at all costs. The strange thing is, our culture has exalted worship of the self; to lie to clinch a business deal is seen as smart; excesses of food, clothing, material possessions, homes etc. are seen as signs of success. Obsession with money and workaholicism are felt to be part of the wonderful capitalist dream. To rely upon a higher power, knowing we ourselves are incapable...is seen as weakness. But lies, obsession with self, excessive behaviour etc. are all just as much part of alcoholism. To break from alcoholism is therefore to do something counter-cultural. The teaching of Jesus, properly understood, is radical, counter-cultural stuff. This again is where ‘the truth of the Gospel’ can be at the cutting edge in overcoming alcoholism.

When quizzed as to their behaviour and why they did what they did, the genuine response is that they “just don’t know what happened”. When the family fire questions like “Are you stupid?... don’t you care?...Why can’t you just say no?”, they see the truth of it all but the mind tricks them into rejecting it all. They become increasingly less available to those around them, e.g. their children. Their thoughts become obsessed with obtaining and using alcohol. Their work suffers; they may lose their job and family. And thus the cycle deepens. Their person is being destroyed as well as their body. But they develop such low self-esteem that this doesn’t matter any more. When they finally come out of denial and realize this, the Bible’s tremendous emphasis on the value of the human person must be allowed to hit the alcoholic with full force. This will usually happen after a period, however brief, of sobriety.

When you do a blood test on an alcoholic when they are sober, there are no disease agents present in the blood as there are, e.g., in the blood of some other drug abusers. But as with any drug, the more alcohol is experienced, the greater tolerance is developed by the body, and more is required to produce the previous effect of calmness, relaxation, positive feeling, etc. This is why it’s not macho at all to say ‘I can take a lot of beers without being affected!’. The man who says that has a problem, and is fast heading for a tragic, pitiable self-destruction. As the alcohol is continually taken in by the body, a deep craving for it develops that has to be satisfied. It’s a living parable of our response to regular sinning. The body comes to depend upon the regular ingestion of alcohol. Drinking ceases to just be social; the alcoholic starts to drink alone. Eventually the person becomes totally dependent upon alcohol to the point of being more often drunk than sober. When drug addicts quit most drugs, even heroin, there are severe withdrawal symptoms but they are usually not life threatening. With alcohol, it’s different. A hard-core alcoholic who quits suddenly needs to do so in a proper detoxification unit staffed by professionals. Between 8 and 24 % of such alcoholics who suddenly withdraw from alcohol die from doing so very quickly ⁽⁵⁾. They are killing themselves to live. I mention this because it’s therefore no use screaming at such a person ‘Stop drinking immediately, totally, right now!!!’- especially if they are located in rural areas far from medical help. Physically stopping such a person having access to alcohol at this level of addiction can therefore easily be tantamount to murder. If you really are going to force them to stop drinking, you really must ensure that professional detoxification help has been organized. It would do all who drink ‘socially’ a lot of good to be allowed into a detoxification ward. You will see men- men often once happily married or successful

businessmen- shaking so badly they can only walk by gripping on to a wall or rail, screaming from unknown fear as they do so; women crying out from vivid daydreams, convinced there is something crawling all over their skin... it might be enough to make you vow never to drink again, and certainly never to offer alcohol to someone whose background you don't know. And there's very little that can be done to stop this trauma. It has to be gone through. But this is what cleansing from alcohol requires. It's not just so easy, therefore, as insisting the alcoholic quit drinking once and for all, "immediately!!". If your hard-core alcoholic really did quit totally and immediately, the result on him or her would be so devastating and dramatic that you would likely be very scared and so wishing you had some medical help nearby. You simply wouldn't know how to cope. Be realistic about what you are expecting from the alcoholic. And seek some outside, professional help.

Drugs

Much has been made of alcohol-antagonistic drugs. These make the body undergo a very violent negative reaction if alcohol is drunk. These drugs do not actually reduce the desire to drink; rather do they merely create a choice between two punishments. A spiritual approach, involving prayer to God, and taking strength from others, is the only way that permanent abstinence can be achieved. Alcoholism is all about yielding to temptation; and this is essentially a spiritual matter, which can't be controlled by drugs.

Genetics

It has been observed that alcoholism tends to run in families. Where this observation can be dangerously misused is that the alcoholic justifies his or her sin with the notion that it's inevitable; they are a helpless victim. By its nature, the psychology of alcoholism [and it is essentially a disease of the mind] seeks for justification. So the alcoholic tends to latch on to this genetic argument. Russian alcoholics often tell me that it's something to do with what's in the Russian blood. The family of the alcoholic should of course be able to point out that they aren't alcoholics; and God will not so strongly condemn behaviour which is inevitable. There is no such thing as an inevitable sinner. We are not just mechanisms controlled by genes. We are each one uniquely created by the Father for Him to work out His specific glory in us. An effectively atheistic world has no sense or order or purpose. If alcoholism is simply genetic, some people ought to be able to drink and never become alcoholic. This is of course untrue. There seems to be a genetic predisposition; twin studies have indicated this. But it is not absolute. Some "nurture" element is also at play. This world has little concept of our connection with the far bigger plan of God, in which we each can have a vital and wonderful part. In Christ we are a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17). The alcoholic needs new life, a 'higher power' as Alcoholics Anonymous so [purposefully] vaguely expresses it; and this is only ultimately available in Christ. Thus Paul can triumph: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20,21).

We are in some sense taken out of Adam and baptized into Christ. We are removed from the "kingdom of this world," and translated into the "kingdom of the Son of God's love". "In Christ you were also circumcised, in the putting off of your sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ". The "flesh" of the believer is cut off by Christ, in a process which begins with baptism: "...buried with him and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead, and when you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful

nature, God made you alive in Christ" (Col. 2:12). To live the alcoholic life is to fight against what the Lord Jesus is seeking and intending to bring about. In the flesh, we cannot please God. It therefore was 'cut off' in the perfect sacrifice of Jesus, and we identify ourselves personally with that achievement through baptism. But these words of Paul are hardly saying that repeated, ongoing sinful behaviour is inevitable and can't be cured. In prospect, sin has been dealt with for the believing alcoholic. In prospect, the alcoholism has been cut off from him. We must "count ourselves dead to sin" if we are baptized (Rom. 6:11); and persistent drunkenness doesn't achieve this. By continuing in sin, he ruins his fellowship but not his essential relationship with the Father and Son. For once a brother in Christ, always a brother- at least, so far as we are allowed to judge. For all these reasons I heartily recommend the family of an unbelieving alcoholic to preach these things to him or her- yes, to make the time and space to explain these doctrines, the wonder of these things. For in the truth, in the reality of the real Christ, the concrete Hope of the Kingdom, the Hope of wayward Israel...in these things alone is there the ultimate 'higher power' to totally transform a life. And this is why I personally am not against the baptism of a confessed alcoholic. Indeed, if they have gotten to the stage of admitting their problems and desperately seeking for God's grace to help in their need, it would seem to me essential as part of their healing process. So many alcoholics admit to having thoughts about God in their afflictions. They nearly all say that they believe in God and are willing to rely upon Him. Yet all they have in their minds is an idea of God that lacks power. Who He is, His actual personal reality, needs to be taught or re-taught to them. He isn't an idea, a cultural artefact that lacks power. He is real. He is there. He is passionately interested in the lives and destinies of His children.

Deeper Study Box 2

Implications Of Believing Human Beings Were Created By God

Because we are created in God's image, the structure of our very bodies is an imperative to give ourselves totally to His cause (Mt. 22:19-21). Whatever bears God's image- i.e. our very bodies- must be given to Him. "It is he that hath made us, and [therefore] we are his" (Ps. 100:3 RV). We must be His in practice *because* He is our creator. So it is not that we merely believe in creation rather than evolution; more than this, such belief in creation must elicit a life given over to that creator. God created man in His own image; and therefore we shouldn't curse men (James 3:9). By reason of the image they bear, we are to act to all men as we would to God Himself; we are not to treat some men as we would animals, who are not in the image of God. Because we are made in God's image, we should therefore not kill other humans (Gen. 9:6). James says the same, in essence, in teaching that because we are in God's image, we shouldn't curse others. To curse a man is to kill him. That's the point of James' allusion to Genesis. Quite simply, respect for the person of others is inculcated by sustained reflection on the way that they too are created in God's image. It's one of the many implications of creationism.

Watch Our Behaviour

Ps. 94:8,9 tells the fools to be wise and watch their behaviour, because “He that planted the ear, shall he not hear? He that formed the eye, shall he not see?”. Reflection on the fact that God truly is our personal designer and creator will lead to an awareness that He therefore sees and knows all things. These first principles powerfully link up, to exhort us to live life and speak our words knowing we are in the very presence of our creator. And remember that it was reflection upon the extent and nature of God’s creative power which lead to Job’s repentance; it isn’t something we can passively reflect upon. Just because “Thy hands have made me and fashioned me: [therefore] give me understanding, that I may learn thy commandments” (Ps. 119:73). David realized that because he had been made in God’s physical image he had a duty to desire to be spiritually reformed in His moral image; and thus he sought strength to be obedient to God’s will.

Labour

It is often forgotten that work is a consequence of creation, not the fall. It is intended by God as a means to partnership with Him and self-fulfilment as He intended. This is what is so wrong with the spirit of laziness which is inculcated by alcohol culture. There is almost an ambition to obtain as much time as possible for ‘relaxation’ with the bottle; whereas labour in whatever form was intended by God from creation.

The Value Of Persons

Only those who believe that we were created by God and have the possibility of eternal redemption can truly perceive the value of persons. Only they can grasp the worth of human beings, that we are not mere animals, but there is a wonder to human life which inspires us to seek to save humans through the preaching of the Gospel. John Stott has powerfully commented: “When human beings are devalued, everything in society goes sour. Women and children are despised; the sick are regarded as a nuisance, and the elderly as a burden; ethnic minorities are discriminated against; capitalism displays its ugliest face; labour is exploited in the mines and factories; criminals are brutalized in prison; opposition opinions are stifled; Belsen is invented by the extreme right and Gulag by the extreme left; unbelievers are left to die in their lostness; there is no freedom, dignity, or carefree joy; human life seems not worth living, because it is scarcely human any longer. But when human beings are valued, because of their intrinsic worth, everything changes: women and children are honoured; the sick are cared for and the elderly allowed to live and die with dignity; dissidents are listened to; prisoners rehabilitated, and minorities protected; workers are given a fair wage, decent working conditions, and a measure of participation in the enterprise; and the gospel is taken to the ends of the earth. Why? Because people matter, because every man, woman, and child has significance as a human person made in the image of God”.

1.4 Guilt

Every alcoholic is really living out a life of failed attempts to quit. Alcoholism and guilt go together. Alcoholics frequently pass in and out of treatment ten times or more- but often each drunken bout is regretted and they promise themselves it won’t happen again. This builds up a deep sense of guilt and personal failure. In the conscience of most alcoholics,

they realize that their behaviour is wrong. Thus the alcoholic differs not only by an inordinate sense of guilt, but also by virtue of a disease characterized by an allergy of the body coupled with an obsession of the mind. In terms of Christian alcoholics, this is especially acute. The conflict between their beliefs and their behaviour becomes unbearable, and drunkenness is an easy way out. A survey discovered that “48% of the Baptist community use alcoholic beverages. But it is interesting to note that 18% of those got into [alcoholism]. The reason is probably guilt...because they suffer more guilt when they use alcohol” (6).

The guilt makes the alcoholic feel dirty and ugly. No matter how much the alcoholic woman cakes herself with makeup, she knows the haggardness of her own face. Guilt is part of a vicious downward spiral. The alcoholic knows he or she has violated the image of God in which they have been created; whether or not they can verbalize this isn't the point. At some level of the consciousness they know this- and all the more if they are Christians.

A Word Of Warning

It is possible for close family members to be hyper critical of each other. Someone who very occasionally gets drunk can be wrongly branded an “alcoholic” by unsympathetic family, leading them into a downward spiral of guilt which makes the cruel allegation “alcoholic” come true. Indicators of real alcoholism rather than occasional failure include these:

1. Regularly drinking alone or in secret
2. Having regular times and places to drink and becoming upset when these are disturbed or questioned
3. Feeling indifferent to life events that should have great meaning
4. Keeping alcohol in several places, e.g. home, car, office, yard
5. Drinking each drink very quickly
6. Needing to drink so as to have a clear mind
7. Preferring to drink rather than eat.

1.5 The Nature Of Sin And Temptation

We can bring into play here the true Christian understanding of the devil and temptation. There is no dragon or person out there called the devil who is responsible for your temptations, no Angel that fell down from the 99th floor waiting to pounce on you in weak moments. We ourselves have the source of temptation within our own psyche, our own self-talk, our own ‘heart’ as the Bible calls it. And this fountain of wrong suggestion is the real and essential ‘satan’ or adversary. There is nothing from outside a person that can enter in and defile them- be it alcohol or heroin. Sin proceeds from within, “out of the heart of man” (Mk. 7:15,21-23). The human mind is the arena for the essential spiritual struggle.

Sin by its very nature gets a grip on human life. The more it is practiced, the firmer becomes its grip. You must have experienced this yourself. You commit a sin for the first time. You are deeply shocked with yourself afterwards and very urgently repentant before the Lord. The next time you do it, the feelings of shock and remorse are far weaker. If you do it again, and again, and again... it becomes a way of being, and conscience becomes largely numbed. With alcoholism and narcotics abuse, this fact is manifested physically. The addict needs more and more alcohol. It is a progressive disease, just as sin itself is progressive. The body

metabolism of the alcoholic changes, just as the spiritual makeup likewise becomes numb, in denial, and demanding of ever more gratification of the flesh.

Alcoholism: The Epitome Of Sin?

The well known slide into alcoholism which every society has witnessed in some of its members is perhaps the epitome of sin. Is. 28:1,4 speak of “the drunkards of Ephraim” as a “fading flower”, and yet Is. 40:6-8 describe all of humanity with the very same language. In spiritual terms, alcoholics are the epitome of us all in our unredeemed state. Wine is a symbol of several things, but in the final book of the Bible it appears to be a definite symbol of evil (Rev. 14:8,10; 16:19; 17:2; 18:3). For the alcoholic, “it bites like a snake and poisons like a viper” (Prov. 23:29-32 NIV). The snake is the epitome of sin; and this is what alcoholism is like, Solomon says. The cunning of the snake is revealed in how the alcoholic manipulates all things to achieve his goals of drunkenness. Wine and drunkenness are used as a figure for God’s judgment (Jer. 13:9-14; 48:26). Perhaps this is because drunkenness of itself becomes the punishment- the person physically and mentally becomes alcoholic because this is God’s confirmation of them in their sin. Likewise if a person knowingly refuses to accept Bible truth, God sends them a strong delusion that they may not be able to find the true way (2 Thess. 2:10). Indeed, Hab. 2:5 RV describes the coming antichrist as a person identified with wine: "Wine is a treacherous dealer, a haughty man, and that keepeth not at home; who enlargeth his desire as hell". Wine is personified as a man- because the alcoholic is so identified with alcohol. His desire for it is ever enlarging, and it leads him to the grave. The same passage goes on to speak of how God's condemnation of the antichrist will be in terms of giving him a cup of wine to drink, and making him drunk, resulting in his glory turning to shame. Again and again, drunkenness is associated with God's condemnation.

Misquoting Scripture

The record of the Lord’s wilderness temptations gives an insight into the nature of how the ‘satan’ of the human mind works. We can even quote Scripture to ourselves in order to justify sin. In discussion with Christian alcoholics, if they are being honest, it is likely that there will be an admission to having misused Biblical texts in order to justify their drinking. If the discussions which you are involved in lead to a discussion of how the Bible speaks of wine in a positive way, the following points may be helpful:

- In Bible times, alcoholic drinks had a different context to what they have today. Distillation techniques were fairly limited; there was no refrigeration, porous containers were used allowing air to contact the fermenting wine, and stoppers were rarely airtight. Alcohol can only be distilled in any strength under ‘anaerobic’ conditions, i.e. where no air at all has contact with the liquid. It has been estimated that nothing could be fermented beyond 10% alcohol without it turning into vinegar. Most alcoholic drinks probably had a strength of about 2% alcohol ⁽⁷⁾. Wines were often made by boiling the ‘wine’- which evaporates the alcohol- and adding water to them, to make a kind of cordial. They were therefore pleasant drinks but only very large scale usage could lead to abuse. Wines also weren’t available in large quantities- when the wine ran out at Cana, there was a real problem getting any more. Wine making was a cottage industry. Thus whilst wines were

alcoholic, they were generally weak compared to modern wines of 20% alcohol content, and spirits like vodka with 40% or more.

- The effects of wine are used in some Bible passages as a figure or illustration / word picture; but this doesn't justify drunkenness.

- Ps. 104:14,15 speaks of the blessing of "wine that maketh glad the heart of man". This phrase and those surrounding it are not talking about the effect of crops on the bodies of people, but rather the effect of a good harvest on the emotions of those gathering them.

2. Understanding Your Response

2.1 Introduction

In the same way as the alcoholic cannot understand him or herself, the mystery of alcoholism makes the family and friends sucked in to his or her alcoholism likewise confused. Responding to alcoholism is difficult. Alcoholics do not understand what is happening to them, why it has happened, what their response is supposed to be. They inwardly struggle with the question of whether they personally are guilty for what has happened. They are often embarrassed and with few they feel they can confide in. Self-understanding is needed, to see themselves as part of a bigger picture...rather than the woman who lives in apartment number 42 in the block called 98 Nevsky Prospekt...who has a seriously alcoholic husband and no money for the bills this month and no clothes for the kids and who might soon lose her job too and who gets beaten up regularly and and and and... She has to see herself from outside of herself. Anger with the alcoholic and with the situation generally is a common feature of those who live with them. Lev. 19:17 says: "Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thine heart: thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbour, and not suffer sin upon him". The implication is that if we don't have transparency with our neighbour, if we don't rebuke them openly and specifically, then we will end up hating them. Just saying nothing about the alcoholic relative will only drive you to hate them in the end.

Take some comfort from a sister who has lived with an alcoholic: "It is painful to watch the alcoholic, before the 'bout' (as they get into a state, emotions are all over the place but generally heading down, as they get more and more cut off emotionally and depression hits), when you can see the harm they are doing themselves, and afterwards, when the feelings of failure, shame and wretchedness hit them. And feeling helpless to stop the downward spiral at that point in time. It is painful to watch the constant struggle".

2.2 Denial

Let's begin with a well known story. There was a mother and her son who lived in a single room with a huge elephant. The elephant was so big, he took up most of the space, and they moved around between his feet with difficulty. Whenever the phone rang, the elephant snorted so loud they were embarrassed and couldn't hear what the other person was saying. All their money went on feeding the elephant. They were scared that the elephant might get up one day and push the ceiling in, so that the neighbours upstairs would come crashing down on them. It was hard to have guests in the home. Sometimes the elephant slept and

things were sort of OK. Down the years, the mother always told her son: ‘don’t you dare ever tell anyone about the elephant we have, OK?’. And he enthusiastically agreed. He didn’t tell anyone. When his friends came round while the elephant was asleep, he covered the elephant with sheets to try to hide him, and acted like it wasn’t there. He and his mother became obsessed with fear, that someone might find out about the elephant and think they were both crazy. They pulled the curtains carefully at night, hung up the phone when the elephant was snorting. Worrying about the elephant, fearing what ever he might do next, drove them to a life filled with worry. They were dominated in every decision by fear of the elephant and how embarrassing it would be if anyone found out about him. But everyone knew the elephant was there! But it took years for the mother and son to realize this. It took a really long time for them to realize the most obvious fact- everybody knew they had a huge elephant in the room! Now this is rather what living with an alcoholic can be like. Nobody must know. It must be covered up. Obsession with the alcoholic makes the family blind to obvious realities, and distorts their relationships with others. Coping with the alcoholic comes to dominate the lives of those he or she lives with. The whole situation can’t go on. It’s damaging for all involved. There has to be a facing up to the nature of the problem, and a realistic effort made to do something about it. Acknowledging that the elephant is there, big, massive and real, beyond your personal power to cope with, is the start of resolving the problem in the families of alcoholics.

2.3 Helping Or Enabling?

Alcoholics need help. But help in this context is doing something for somebody which they cannot do themselves. Many who live with alcoholics become as obsessed about the alcoholic and coping with life as the alcoholic is with the booze. They can easily allow their ‘help’ to become mere enabling of the alcoholic to continue their drinking. Thus the families end up enabling alcoholism.

The following questions might help determine the difference between helping and enabling an alcoholic in your life:

1. Have you ever made out that the alcoholic is just not feeling well, e.g. ‘calling in sick’ to their employer, lying about his or her symptoms?
2. Have you accepted part of the blame for his (or her) drinking or behavior?
3. Have you avoided talking about his / her drinking out of fear of his / her response?
4. Have you bailed him /her out of jail or paid for his / her legal fees?
5. Have you paid bills that he / her was supposed to have paid?
6. Have you loaned him / her money?
7. Have you tried drinking with her / him in hopes of strengthening the relationship?
8. Have you given him / her "one more chance" and then another and another? In this case your credibility with him / her gets progressively weaker.
9. Have you threatened to leave or ‘detach’ in some other way and didn’t?
10. Have you finished a job or project that the alcoholic failed to complete himself?

In the end, all these things are enabling the alcoholic continue, rather than helping him or her quit. This is why it is estimated that over 90% of alcoholics are either employed or employable ⁽⁸⁾. They are cushioned from hitting rock bottom by family and friends, and thus they stumble on in their desperate, truth-less existences.

Love protects; we know that from 1 Cor. 13. And true love never seeks to humiliate publicly. Yet on the other hand, in chronic alcoholism, there is no point in covering up. Like the elephant in the home we spoke of earlier, the secret is likely 'out' anyway. You yourself will get caught up in a compulsive web of untruth, to the extent that the you become affected by the disease of alcoholism. We have emphasized that a leading feature of this disease is self-deception; part of the disease, a crucial part of it, is thinking that you haven't got it. The lies that have to go on both publicly and within the alcoholic's own self-talk will eventually become part of your psyche. To live "the truth" in Christ we cannot weave a continual web of lies and deception. You need to confront the alcoholic with this simple fact. God dealt with Israel's sin by detaching from them- He had to let them hit rock bottom, despite it hurting them. Cushioning the fall will not achieve this. The alcoholic in the end has to face him or herself, alone with their maker. One suggestion is to leave a loving note explaining why you are leaving, but to spend a night away from home when the alcoholic returns drunk. In passing, it should be recognized by all of us that those who have to live with alcoholics are often in just as much need of support, just as locked into an obsession, as the alcoholic themselves.

The family of the alcoholic often go through the feelings of 'he/she needs me'. But they have to face up to what that 'need' really is. We are not just enabling the alcoholic by covering for them, but we are also denying them their responsibility by doing so - possibly to fill a hole within ourselves (being needed as opposed to being loved) which ought to be filled by the Father and Son. Their real 'need' is not just to be covered up for, but to be healed.

God deals with His rebellious people in a way that is consistent and yet features the abrupt changes of plan which true grace and mercy require. Those living with alcoholics often display very widely fluctuating behaviour which isn't consistent. One minute they are screaming at the alcoholic, threatening everything from death to divorce; the next they are compassionately rescuing them from the consequences of the latest drinking, making excuses to others, etc. They willingly listen to yet another promise to change and take it seriously, despite so many such promises having been broken. This isn't how God deals with the issues of repeated sin. He acts, in the end, decisively. I emphasize that I am talking here about hard core alcoholism and not occasional drunkenness. In the end, in love, God detaches from the hardened sinner. This is what we will now consider in detail.

2.4 Detachment

To bring the alcoholic out of denial and to subsequently help them to victory, intervention is required. In the same way, God intervened in our hopeless lives to bring us to Himself. The cross is likened to God tearing open the skies and coming down. Yet that radical intervention in the life of the alcoholic often has to be in terms of detachment from them. Yet in doing this we are manifesting the love of God showed to us in the cross. He didn't give His Son in anger or irritation or because He was plain fed up with us. He did it in a calculated, supremely self-sacrificing way. And this is the model for the Christian family who have to detach from an alcoholic member. Choosing the option of detachment from the alcoholic needs to be made prayerfully and carefully.

Alcoholism is a sin. Let's get that straight. The world around has sought to lessen this simple fact over the past 100 years. Alcoholism has progressed from being a sin to being a

psychological problem, a disease, and now [to some] merely a mental health disorder. It may be all those things, but it is a sin, no matter what psychological disorders may have been created by it. Perceiving that will help the Christian alcoholic see the matter in a perspective which the unbeliever cannot share. But how does God deal with habitual sin? He had plenty of experience of this in His relationship with Israel His wayward, adulterous people. And tragically, He has plenty more experience of it with us, too. When Israel blindly sold themselves to sin, they were likened to alcoholics- drunk and numb to their responsibilities before their God. So what did God do in response? He didn't say 'Well Israel that's the end of you and me, I want nothing more to do with you, go away and never see me again'. Did God cast away His people? By no means (Rom. 11:1,2). He felt like destroying the lot of them and starting over (Ex. 33,34)- but He never did. According to Hosea, He felt like a jilted lover, a man who had married a woman who liked being a prostitute. And so He grieved over what they were doing. He loved them, so deeply. He sent His servants and then His Son to call them back to Him (Mt. 21:33-38), knowing they would do His beloved Son to death. Manifesting the Father, Jesus wept over Jerusalem, earnestly wishing for them to return to the Father: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem..." (Mt. 22:37). The parable of the prodigal son speaks in the first instance of the Father waiting earnestly for wayward Israel to return to Him from their dispersion in the Gentile world.

Yet other Biblical evidence speaks of how God distanced Himself from Israel, detaching Himself from them. He did this not so that they would not contaminate Him, nor because He was irritated with them or embarrassed by them. They continued to embarrass God by bringing His Name into dishonour amongst the Gentiles. Yet His love for them takes Him beyond that. He sticks out the shame for the sake of His love for them. And He will never ever finish with Israel. So why, then, has He so detached Himself from them? Only, therefore, for their benefit. Look at the Biblical evidence:

- God left Israel in order to purge them; it was part of the fire which would purify them of their dross (Ez. 22:20-22). There was a clear purpose and aim in His detachment.

- God left them so that the nakedness of their sin would be revealed- He would no longer cover up for them in the eyes of the Gentile world (Ez. 23:29).

- Isaiah uses the fact God has forsaken Israel as the very basis of his appeal for them to return to Him (Is. 2:5,6). He left so that they might return to Him with their whole heart. But He was of course ever eager to have them back.

- God tells Israel that because He has forsaken them, therefore they should seek Him (Am. 5:2,4).

- God would forsake His people *until they realized* that their problems were because He was not with them (Dt. 31:17).

- In 2 Chron. 12:5,6 we read of how God forsook Israel, leaving them in the hand of Shishak; but because of this they humbled themselves and He returned to them.

- He forsook Hezekiah, to reveal perhaps *to Hezekiah himself* what was in his heart- for God already knew, surely, without any experimentation (2 Chron. 32:31).

- Neh. 9:28,31 use the same Hebrew word for forsake / abandon in two senses. "You abandoned them to the hand of their enemies...but in your great mercy you did not abandon them" (N.I.V.). God forsook Israel, but heard them when they cried and came back to them; but in the ultimate sense He did not forsake them because of His grace and mercy. Thus Zion feels forsaken by God, but ultimately realizes this was never the case (Is. 49:14). It will then seem as just for a small moment that God forsook her (Is. 54:6,7).

All this perhaps is a pattern for us. It's frightfully difficult to make detachment from an alcoholic with the same purity of motives which God has. For you have been hurt, abused, used... but here is where love and true God-likeness is tested to the extreme. We may be forced to abandon (separate), but we must take care to NEVER remove hope for recovery as a possibility; for God likewise never gives up. The lost sheep is searched for until it is found. We cannot totally forsake a family member lost in alcoholism. But we can detach / forsake to some extent. There was plan and purpose in His detachment; it wasn't mere wrath, irritation and tiredness with human weakness. If God had continued an active relationship with Israel, going through the endless cycle of sin, judgment, vague repentance, promises to do better, forgiveness, sin, judgment... then the real issues aren't tackled. His detachment from them leaves them alone enough to face themselves and come to the real repentance which He seeks. But it's terribly and tragically hard for God to make this detachment.

Hosea has some descriptions of God's anguish of heart in doing this which are, I find, some of the Bible's most gripping words: "How shall I give thee up, Ephraim? *how* shall I cast thee off, Israel? how shall I make thee as Admah? *how* shall I set thee as Zeboiim? my heart is turned within me, my compassions are kindled together. I will not execute the fierceness of mine anger, I will not return to destroy Ephraim: for I am God, and not man; the Holy One in the midst of thee; and I will not come in wrath" (Hos. 11:8,9 ASV). Here God Almighty struggles with Himself. He has promised to execute His fierce anger against them, to destroy them with Sodom's judgment because they had behaved even worse. But He would not let Himself totally do this. Because He loved them. Or again: "I have forsaken mine house, I have left mine heritage; I have given the dearly beloved of my soul into the hand of her enemies" (Jer. 12:7; 2 Kings 21:14; Ps. 78:60). Note that God had earlier promised [using the same Hebrew word] never to leave / forsake His people (1 Sam. 12:22; Ps. 94:14). Yet He was driven to it by the needs of Israel. So don't feel trapped by earlier promises, made at an earlier stage of the alcoholism, to always support and stick with the sin. But of course, detachment must only be as a total last resort.

You need to detach from the alcoholic, perhaps even by physically leaving them. But it will be heart wrenching, no matter how angry you feel with the person. Yet God knows your pain, and He will be close to you. For He goes through it all the time with His wayward children. This detachment is necessary for your own well-being as well as their repentance. Otherwise you will become co-dependent, with a personality wrapped up in the weakness of another, rather than an independent child of God, growing upright as a palm tree, planted by the rivers of waters of God's word (Ps. 1:3). How to show this detachment is going to be hard, and will vary from case to case. Physical separation is not automatically nor necessarily the answer, unless the alcoholic is abusive towards you. Seek to show love and yet not the sympathy which confirms the alcoholic in their wrong way. Never ever make your detachment from motives of anger, but rather of love. Explain what you are doing and why. Explain that you will no longer cover up for the alcoholic in making excuses to others. You will not aid the drinking by giving money, buying alcohol, altering arrangements to cover up for his or her likely drunkenness. Explain that you are pursuing your service to God

in other ways than simply being totally enmeshed in the alcoholic's life. But comfort them that detachment doesn't mean abandonment. You love them. God loves us and our sins never affect our standing before Him in Christ, but rather they affect our practical fellowship with Him. Explain to the alcoholic that you are trying to act sincerely on the Biblical basis of how God treated Israel. Assure them that your detachment from them is not a statement of judgment upon them by you. We must not confuse in our own minds forgiveness with tolerance. Point out that you too are a habitual sinner in other ways, and be careful to not feel you are more righteous than them, or of better standing before God than them, just because your sins aren't so open. Remind them of the verse that says that some men's sins are open beforehand, going before them to judgment [and that applies to the alcoholic], whereas others have sins which will only be apparent then (1 Tim. 5:24). And this latter category, you can truly say from the heart, applies to you. And you're worried about it.

Let Go And Let God

In the end, it has to be a case of "Let go and let God". But this of course is not the same as merely walking away from the problem. I appreciate the very real fear of the loved alcoholic coming to harm if one lets go and does not stay to 'protect' them from themselves. It is hard turning away during a drinking binge knowing they may inadvertently kill themselves. To quote again from a sister with much experience in this area: "It takes a lot of prayer and faith that all things are in God's hands to keep to those boundaries". We cannot ultimately change nor control others- even though we all have something of the 'Christ complex', the playing of God, whereby we think that it is [or ought to be] solely within our power to change someone else. And we tend to feel bad about ourselves when we can't achieve this. True love does not "seek its own" (1 Cor. 13:5); our love for the alcoholic must be pure and not part of our own self-love. The self-confidence of Jesus was not affected by how few really responded to His work. He had an agenda, but He never once imposed it. Our boundaries need to be established firmly, so that we don't become co-dependent on the addicted person, obsessed with them to an extent that it harms our own person and relationship with God. The large turnover among counsellors of alcoholics shows how easy it is even for professionals to fail in this. We can in the end only manage ourselves and our response to situations. Try to set a regular routine for things in the home. This is good not only for any children involved but it sets you up as the controller of an otherwise chaotic domestic situation. There will be regular meal times. There will be regular Bible readings. Bed time is regular. Those things will not be interfered with, so far as you are physically able, by the alcoholic. Read and re-read Psalm 37, underlining how many times we are told to "fret not" in any circumstance- because of our own personal relationship with the Lord and our personal hope of the life eternal in the Kingdom. Fretting is one of the defining characteristics of many families with alcoholics amongst them.

Yet once the alcoholic has been brought out of denial, there are a range of realistic options open to you. There are expert counsellors available, both Christian and secular, and Alcoholics Anonymous has many branches throughout the world. My advice would definitely be to try to get a qualified Christian, Bible-based counsellor involved as soon as the alcoholic is willing. The 'disease' really *is* curable, with God's help! Only 15% of American alcoholics go into treatment of their own free will. The majority are gotten there by others who care for them.

Welcoming The Prodigal

One major factor in many peoples' alcoholism is the company which they keep. Alcoholics somehow seem to seek each other out and empower each other to continue in their self-destruction. The usual pattern is that the alcoholic desperately wants to quit, acknowledges the problem, but can't seem to stay sober because others are jealous of their progress and tempt them with more drink. Albeit unconsciously, it becomes vital to alcoholics to keep their friends drinking. At this stage, the recovering alcoholic needs a new set of friends. And it is here that the set of family and friends who have previously detached from her or him can be vital. It's also where the recovering brother or sister needs desperately to have good friends within the ecclesia. The parable of the good Samaritan features Jesus, the Samaritan, taking the wounded man [each of us] to an inn, where He enables him to be cared for until He returns. The inn is surely the ecclesia. The body of Jesus, made up of us its many parts, "makes increase *of itself*", it builds itself up in love. One source of our strength and spiritual dynamism is undoubtedly from others within the ecclesia. This is why open, supportive contact with each other is so vital.

2.5 Patience And Forgiveness

There is no quick cure to alcoholism. Expecting quick results makes many care givers frustrated. In itself this is a challenge to faith in the God who appears to men to 'never be in a hurry' as John Thomas was fond of saying. "Rest in the Lord and wait patiently for him" (Ps. 37:7), David said. This must be possible to achieve, whatever situation we are in. The family of the alcoholic play a part in the amount of shame which they allow the victim to feel. Paul wrote to his wayward Corinthians that he did not seek to shame them (1 Cor. 4:14); and yet he writes in other places to them "in order to shame them" (1 Cor. 6:15; 15:34). The alcoholic needs to be allowed to feel the shame of their sin, they need to be ashamed of it, and yet not in a harmful way; they need to realize that we are not seeking to shame them, although we recognize and realize their shame. Alcoholics need a place to go where they can return without harmful shame after a relapse, so that they might begin again. This 'place' may be the kitchen table and chatting with their daughter or wife; but that 'place' must not be a place where failure is hidden over or the true import of their behaviour in any way minimized. Shame and guilt tripping will only confirm the alcoholic in their situation. This 'place' must most importantly be a place of trust and confidence and honesty. You really must not break those confidences of the alcoholic by gossiping them to others, especially at times of frustration. You will need your own support group, your own place to talk with others in your position, e.g. AlAnon. Those kitchen conferences, or whatever or wherever they are, must be places of reality where the alcoholic without being shamed can find the courage again to look at themselves and resolve again. They need accurate feedback, giving them a clear picture of the realities they have avoided and create. They need to have it spelt out to them: there is a total contradiction between their words, principles and actions.

Prayer

Prayer for alcoholism is powerful. It really does change things. God is willing to do things in the life of a third party for the sake of the prayers and efforts of others. Thus when the Lord saw the faith of the friends, He forgave and cured the paralytic (Mk. 2:5). After each discussion with the alcoholic, lead a brief prayer. Samuel said that to cease to pray for sinful

Israel would be to sin against the Lord (1 Sam. 12:23). The need is in itself the call to prayer. It doesn't need the wailing call to prayer from a Mosque tower; the tragic need of the alcoholic is the call to prayer. The family of the alcoholic- the "co-alcoholics" as they have been called- will face the temptation of allowing prayer to become routine and to descend into a mere going through of the motions, with no real belief that God will hear. This is why real prayer is imaged in Scripture as a struggle, a wrestling both with oneself and with a Father willing to do some things only if there is a suitable amount of the incense of prayer rising before Him. When we pray "Thy Kingdom come" we are asking for the will of God to be done by us and by Him in our lives. We are asking that He becomes the final authority in our lives, leading us towards an entrance into that Kingdom which is to surely come. Daily in prayer we are to surrender our wills to God's will.

The sheer desperation of alcoholism, the way it is such a mystery and non soluble apart from recourse to the 'higher power', is a powerful motivation for prayer. You are in the position of Jeremiah as he lived amongst an apostate Judah cursed by drought for their sins: "What heathen god can give us rain? Who but you alone, O Lord our God, can do such things as this? Therefore we will wait for you to help us" (Jer. 14:22 TLB). And prayer is hopeful. Hopelessness is obviously a major emotion amongst the carers for alcoholics. If our own boundaries are secure, we ourselves can genuinely rejoice in the concrete Hope of the life eternal which awaits us. But if we have faith, there is also grounds for hope even for our alcoholic friend. Picture in your mind the Father watching eagerly for the prodigal son to return; He hadn't heard he might be coming back. He was daily waiting and hoping (Lk. 15:20). The hopefulness of God is really an amazing inspiration- if we let it be. "The Lord is nigh unto all them that call upon him, to all that call upon him in truth. He will fulfil the desire of them that fear him: he also will hear their cry, and will save them" (Ps. 145:18,19).

You should be aware that Alcoholics Anonymous has meetings for the families of alcoholics, too (AlAnon). And there are support groups operating amongst Christians, too, which I would highly recommend.

Deeper Study Box 3

Repentance And Forgiveness

The Failure Fellowship

Mt. 5:48 defines the standard: "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in Heaven is perfect". Unless God will tolerate our achievement of a lower standard than His own righteousness as revealed in His word, none will be saved. We each expect God to tolerate our failure to reach up to this ultimate standard. In the context of marriage, for example, every committed Christian couple fails to love each other *as* Christ loved the church. As we judge, we really will be judged. Doesn't that just frighten us? We should be so careful to show tolerance to those who fail to attain the standard.

Ability To Pay

Our fellowship of failure should be bound close together by our common experience of God's forgiveness. What we owe to God can never be repaid. Just one sin brings eternal death; after sinning, we cannot go back and re-live those minutes, hours, days or years when it was committed. All we can do is trust in God's grace and believe that God will negate the just results of that sin. Because we are forgiven debts which we can never repay, we are asked to liberally forgive our brethren for their far smaller debts. It appeared that the man who owed a small amount was better able to repay it than he who owed much. But the *ability* of our brethren to repay the debt of their sin is not something we should consider. Surely this is what the parable teaches. The *ability* of people to repent is something we should not *consider*. God does not consider *our* ability to repay Him- for we are utterly unable to do so.

Frank Forgiveness

We must forgive our brethren as God forgives us (Eph. 4:32). God expunges the spiritual record of the sin, and will not feed it into some equation which determines whether we can be forgiven. Christ "frankly" forgave the debtors in the parable. The frankness of that forgiveness does not suggest a process of careful calculation before it could be granted. God's frank forgiveness is seen too in Ps. 130:3: "If thou, Lord, shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord who shall stand?". God does not "mark" sin, as our love for our brethren should keep no record of their past sins (1 Cor. 13:5-7 N.I.V.). If we refuse to fellowship people because of the *effect* of past sins for which they have repented, then we *are* 'marking' iniquity. God does not deal with us in a manner which is *proportional* to the type or amount of sin we commit (Ps. 103:7-12).

You will probably encounter brethren who will seek to persuade you that we must make a difference between certain categories of sin, concluding that some sin must be repented of openly, and other sin (e.g. a fit of anger) can be repented of privately. But you must really consider what Biblical proof there is for this?

Degrees Of Sin?

Peter found it hard to grapple with the idea that the degree or amount of sin was irrelevant. But "seventy times seven" indicated how far out he was. Even when a brother's repentance seems humanly unlikely (the 490th time in the day takes some believing!), we must still have that covenant mercy for him. Note that only a verbal repentance was required- and the Lord said that the forgiver was to just accept this, rather than demand evidence of 'forsaking' in physical terms. The Greek word for repentance is a compound meaning 'to think differently after'. Repentance is essentially a changed *attitude of mind*. This is why it's difficult to judge whether it exists within the heart of another person. Because our very natures are sinful, we live constantly in need and receipt of mercy, every second of our existence. The New Covenant is often spoken of in the Old Testament as "mercy" and/or "truth". If we are *in* that Covenant, we are permanently living *in* grace/mercy. Mercy is not something which we just receive in the few moments while we pray for forgiveness. It is something constantly ongoing. We live *in* it. If we appreciated this, we would not see our

forgiveness of others as something we occasionally 'grant'; we will extend mercy to them constantly, as God does to us.

Some seem to think that we only occasionally sin, and then we repent and receive mercy. This disregards the level of our sinfulness, and the nature of covenant relationship with God. We are still in covenant with God even in the midst of our sins, as Israel were until the covenant was broken. Likewise, Mrs. (Sis.!) Bloggs is still Mrs. Bloggs at the height of her screaming argument with Mr. Bloggs. It is not for us to eject others from God's covenant. All we can do is to insist on adherence to certain basic doctrines which comprise that covenant. Any who reject the doctrines which form that covenant must be ejected from fellowship, because they refuse to accept the nuts and bolts of the framework which makes up the covenant. But for someone who is in covenant with God, we must show them the covenant of constant mercy which God does to us.

Strict Schoolteacher?

God is not the strict schoolteacher with a soft heart who says: 'Well I'll let you off this time but don't let me catch you doing it again'. He knows He will catch us again, and we know it too. His mercy is constant, but if we are to experience it in future, there must be a *confession* of sin, and a *recognition* that we are living in His mercy. When we are baptized, we enter into Christ. God counts us *as if* we are as perfect as Christ. God imputes His very own righteousness to us through Christ, even though we are not perfect on account of our own obedience to commands. This is the basis of justification by faith, rather than by obedience and forsaking of sins *alone*. In *prospect* we have already been saved, all our future sins were in prospect forgiven at baptism. We are here and now in the heavenly places with Christ. How God treats us is how we should treat each other; we too must look at each other *as if* we are perfect: "Forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake *hath* forgiven you" (Eph. 4:32). Paul does not say we should forgive as Christ *is forgiving* us. Our forgiveness was granted at baptism; the power of sin in our lives was overcome by baptism into Christ's death, which destroyed the devil. Therefore anyone baptized into Christ is not a servant of sin, unless they leave Christ. Of course, we know that in practice we all keep on sinning. But our spiritual man is in Christ, God looks upon *that* side of us, not upon the devil within us. We cannot destroy the devil within us- his destruction is in death (Rom. 6:23). That natural man cannot be made subject to God's word (Rom. 8:7; Gal. 5:17,18; James 3:8). What God requires is a growth in the spiritual man, living in a way of life which on balance shows that the new man is more fundamentally 'us' than the old man. As God eagerly looks upon that new man within us, so we too should perceive the new man in our brethren. Note that the unworthy in Mt. 25:42-45 are condemned for what they *omitted* rather than for what they *committed*.

Repentance: When And Whether

If we are intended to grant forgiveness for specific things rather than showing a covenant of mercy, it follows that we must be able to know *when* someone has repented. We need to carefully consider the question: '*Can we know when someone has repented?*'. If the answer is 'Yes', then we are judging by the outward appearance. We are saying that our assessment of another's spiritual strivings is ultimately correct. The more reasonable Christian would say '*Sometimes*'. But if that is true, we presuppose that we do have some criteria to decide whether someone has repented. But what Biblical evidence is there to define these criteria in crystal clarity? It is therefore difficult to avoid concluding: '*No, we don't know when*

someone has repented'. Repentance must precede baptism, indeed baptism may not be valid without it; but how can we *know* when and whether repentance has actually occurred in the candidate? Most interviewing brethren accept that they cannot know when or whether the candidate has repented- and therefore it is rare to ask '*Have you repented?*' in the discussion before baptism. The Lord's command to forgive 490 times per day (Mt. 18:22) is surely teaching that we have no ability to judge the sincerity of repentance; all we can do is forgive.

Repent + Forsake = Forgive?

It is often argued: 'We can only forgive you if you repent *and* forsake your sin'. This sounds very convenient when dealing with some more public sins. But if we are going to make this equation a general principle governing fellowship, then we must consistently apply it. We would then only be 'permitted' to forgive a brother if we see him forsaking his sin. If this principle were applied to every sin, then we would have a community which could not "forbear one another in love" to the slightest extent; a community where everyone holds a gun at his brother's head unless there is forsaking of the weakness.

To 'sins' like occasional drunkenness, loss of temper, married couples deciding to permanently separate etc., Christians (generally) have never said: 'We can't forgive you unless you forsake that behaviour'. Instead, there has always been a spirit of forbearance and overlooking, as God overlooks our own more hidden failings. So, why apply this principle of 'No forgiveness without forsaking' to some areas of life and not others? We all sin, repent- and go on doing the same thing! We all strive against the same recurring failures- and fail. Is there really such a difference between private sins and public ones? We must ever reflect the overwhelming *zeal* of God to patiently bring about repentance. Luke 15 contains two parables concerning repentance, where the restored sinner is in fact not repentant: the lost sheep and the lost coin. The Lord searches for them *until* He finds them; neither of them actually repent and seek to come back. Indeed, the coin is inanimate, it can't repent. It was actually the woman's fault that it got lost in the first place. Now all these are surely examples of hyperbole- a gross exaggeration to make a point. It isn't the Lord's fault that we stray. But He speaks *as if it is* in this parable, in order to make the point that He *so* strenuously seeks our return to Him. Likewise Yahweh likens Himself to a worthless husband who forsook His sweet wife of Israel in her youth (Is. 54:6). Of course we must use our freewill and repent, but the Lord likens us to things which *cannot* repent and are not repentant, and yet all the same are brought back by the Lord's endless searching and pastoral care. By all means compare this with Peter's comment that the Lord's exaltation was in order to give *repentance*, not just forgiveness, to God's people (Acts 5:31; 11:18 cp. 2 Tim. 2:25). This is the extent of His atonement for men; not only to enable forgiveness, but to show His matchless grace yet further in even granting *repentance* to men. In the light of this it remains open to question how much credit we can personally take for our repentance. Not all lost sinners will come back, but the Lord speaks as if He will search always, in every case, *until* they do. These hyperboles are all to teach the vast extent of His desire to win back the lost. In the light of this, who are we to start questioning whether or not a brother has actually repented, if he says he has and shows this to some extent?

Against God And Men

There is surely a difference between a weak brother sinning against the ecclesia, and sinning against God. Lk. 15:18,21 implies that there is a difference here. We are expected to forgive each other as God has forgiven us- but this does not mean that when we forgive each other,

this is on God's behalf. If so, then our decisions are dictating to God what His response should be. Instead, the reverse must operate- God's response to us should determine our response to our erring brother. It may or may not be ultimately true that God will only forgive us if we repent *and* forsake our sins. But there seems no Biblical evidence to show that *our* forgiveness of others must be on this basis. We forgive others on the basis of how He has forgiven us, and is merciful to our continual failures. But the basis of God's forgiveness of our brethren is different- it is centred around a person's faith in the blood of Christ. We do not ask our weak brother whether he believes in the victory of Calvary's cross before we forgive him.

Forgiveness Without Repentance?

The sensitive brother or sister will recognize that we are often forgiven *without* specific forsaking of sin- and therefore this *must* feature in our reaction to the sins of others. The following are proofs of this:

- David prayed for cleansing from "secret faults" (Ps. 19:12)- things which we do not specifically repent of, and yet which are still sinful in God's sight. All sin is sin- sin is not definable according to our awareness of it (as witness the Mosaic trespass offerings). If we disagree that we are forgiven for sins which we do not specifically repent of and forsake, then we must conclude that we actually *know* every one of our sins; and that just one sin, unrepented of, will keep us from salvation. None of us has the self knowledge, nor the appreciation of God's righteousness, to be confident that we do know each of our sins. It is only the self-righteous who claim that they have confessed every one of their sins. So we are driven to rely on salvation by grace- believing that we will be forgiven for sins we commit, which we do not recognize. If we hope for any amount of forgiveness without specific repentance, then we ought not to make it a principle that we will *never* forgive our brother unless he outwardly shows his repentance.
- The Father offered forgiveness to the prodigal son before there was any direct evidence of repentance- just a sign of general regret. Indeed, it would seem that the very fact the son *wanted* to return to the Father's house was quite enough to warrant his acceptance there- and the killing of the fatted calf.
- We must bless / forgive those who persecute us (Rom. 12:14; blessing and forgiveness are closely linked in Scripture). This is clearly to be done without waiting for the persecutor to stop or repent.
- The Lord saw a connection between the way the sinful woman kissed Him much, and the way she "loved much" (Lk. 7:45,47 RVmg.). He then told a parable about her and Simon the Pharisee. His point was that they both owed Him money and He had forgiven the debt, but He was looking for an appropriate response from them. Yet there is no evidence that Simon had repented before receiving that forgiveness.
- We are to forgive the person who 'repents' 490 times / day for the same sin. Clearly enough, their repentance wasn't sincere. Yet we are still to forgive.
- The Lord prayed that the soldiers would be forgiven because "they know not what they do". The fact He asked for their forgiveness shows that they were guilty of sin, although they were ignorant of it- and had therefore not repented. How could they repent of crucifying

Christ while they were actually doing it? They may well have regretted doing what they were forced to do by reason of the circumstances in which they found themselves. Thus Christ knew that forgiveness was possible without specific repentance and forsaking. The reply 'But that only applies to sins of ignorance!' is irrelevant- Christ's attitude still disproves the hypothesis that forgiveness can *only* be granted if there is a forsaking of sin.

- God forgives men on the basis of their *faith* in the blood of Christ, and association with it by baptism; "*not* by works of righteousness, which we have done" (Tit. 3:4-8). God's basis of salvation is *not* works. We must be careful not to insist on 'forsaking' sins in physical terms to the extent that we too preach justification by works. Just one sin- any sin- deserves death. No amount of forsaking that sin can change that sentence. God's way of escape is for us to be in Christ, so that He looks upon us *as if* we are Christ, imputing Christ's perfect character to us. Therefore forsaking sin is not in itself the basis of salvation; rather is it faith in Christ. Of course, true faith shows itself in works. But none of us has the degree of faith which we ought to have, and therefore none of us does the amount or type of works which we should. To insist that someone shows their faith by specific works, e.g. certain changes in their marital status, is to insist that there is a direct, definable relationship between faith and the precise type of works which that faith leads to. Yet we are not so strict with ourselves. The faith and works of each of us are far from complete. Surely one of the greatest expressions of faith in the work of Christ is to desire to break bread. Yet this is what has been refused to those who profess themselves to have a struggling faith in their redeemer.

- The man of Mt. 18:26 was forgiven his debt due to his *desire* to repay it, even though in fact he couldn't repay it. Sin can, in a sense, never be put right, it can only be covered over. And the man was expected to reflect his experience of forgiveness in how he dealt with his brother.

- "Sin is the transgression of the law". Each of us, therefore, lives in sin to a certain extent. We require cleansing from our very nature- which is something we cannot forsake. A brother may smoke; he may feel that each smoke is a sin, because his conscience condemns him. But this does not affect whether we overlook his weakness, and tolerate him in fellowship. Again, it is inconsistent to tolerate a brother who admits he is living a way of life which is in one aspect 'sinful', and yet not to tolerate a brother with an ongoing spiritual problem in another area. Can we prove that *we* are supposed to recognize degrees of sin in each other? And how can we prove that e.g. loss of temper is better or worse than any other area of failure?

From the above points it should be evident that the equation 'Forgiveness= repentance + forsaking' is just incorrect as it stands. It is not true across the board. Even if this is true of God's forgiveness of us, does it hold true for our forgiveness of others? And where is the proof that we must withhold fellowship from someone whom we cannot forgive?

Two Standards?

We need to recognize that God sets an ultimately high standard, but is prepared to accept our achievement of a lower standard. We all disobey the same commandments of Christ day by day and hour by hour. Yet we have a firm hope in salvation. Therefore obedience to commandments is not the only necessity for salvation. "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in Heaven is perfect" (Mt. 5:48) goes unfulfilled by each of us- as far as our

own obedience is concerned. It is possible to disobey Christ's commandments every day and be saved. If this statement is false, then salvation is only possible if we attain God's moral perfection, which is impossible.

If disobedience to Christ's commands is tolerable by God (on account of our faith in the atonement), how can *we* decide *which* of those commandments we will tolerate being broken by our brethren, and which of them we will disfellowship for? If we cannot recognize degrees of sin, it is difficult to pronounce some commands to be more important than others.

Throughout the Spirit's teaching concerning marriage in 1 Cor. 7, there is constantly this feature of setting an ideal standard, but accepting a lower one. This is demonstrated by the several occurrences of the word "But..." in the passage:

- It is better not to marry: "*But and if thou marry, thou hast not sinned*" (v.28).
- The same "but and if" occurs in vv. 10,11: "Let not the wife depart from her husband: *but and if she depart...*". Separation is, therefore, tolerated by God as a concession to human weakness, even though it is a way of life which inevitably involves an ongoing breach of commandments.
- It is better for widows not to remarry; but if they do, this is acceptable (1 Cor. 7:39,40; 1 Tim. 5:11)
- This same 'two standards' principle is seen elsewhere within 1 Cor. Meat offered to idols was just ordinary meat, but Paul makes concessions for those with a weak conscience concerning this (1 Cor. 8).
- Likewise in 1 Cor. 9:12 Paul says he could have asked the Corinth ecclesia to support him financially, but he chose not to. Thus he chose the higher of two options.
- Those who had the gift of tongues should only have used it to edify others, speaking intelligible words publicly; but Paul was prepared to allow the Corinthians to speak in tongues to themselves (1 Cor. 14:28), although this seems to go against the tenor of his previous explanation of the *ideal* use of that gift.
- 1 Cor. 12:31-13:12 implies that Paul was faced with the higher choice of the ministry of love and the written word, compared to the lower choice of exercising the Spirit gifts. By all means compare this with the choice which he had in Phil. 1:21-26: to exit this life was made possible to him, but he chose the higher, more difficult and more spiritually risky option of living for a few more years, in order to strengthen his brethren.

That there are concessions to weakness, and that we should reflect these in our dealings with each other, does not mean of course that ultimately we never 'draw the line' as far as fellowship is concerned in our ecclesial decisions.

Spiritual Ambition

All this is not to say that God does not value principles. The fact that God will tolerate a lower standard should inspire us not to constantly depend upon it; rather should it make us ambitious to attain that higher standard which is more pleasing to Him. 1 Cor. 7 shows that

God will tolerate a less than ideal standard in marital relations, which is the area of ecclesial life which usually provokes the most bitter division. This also has Old Testament precedent. Abraham was living under the standards of Eden, rather than those of the Mosaic law. The Edenic standard was that of Christ concerning marriage. Yet Abraham had relationships with Hagar, Jacob had two wives- and God tolerated this departure from the one man: one woman ideal.

It is irrelevant to reason that such 'inconsistencies' were tolerated before the new covenant came into operation. God's moral principles did not change the moment Christ died on the cross, and the new covenant came into full operation. It is possible for us to see the changeover between the two covenants as more dramatic than it was. They express the same principles in different ways. God's greatest principle is His mercy, and willingness to make concessions to human weakness, whilst still upholding His righteousness. That remains constant in both covenants.

Seeking God

We are frequently reminded in the prophets that the spiritual way of life is one which *seeks* God. We are to seek His face (Ps. 24:6; 27:8)- which it is impossible to behold (Ex. 33:20). Actually finding God in the ultimate sense is therefore unattainable in this life; but our whole mortal life must be lived in this spirit of *seeking* ultimate perfection. Seeking God is often defined in the prophets as forsaking our sins and desiring to be righteous (Amos 5:5,8,14,15). None of us are completely successful in our seeking of God, and therefore it follows that none of us *completely* forsakes all our sinfulness.

What unites us in fellowship is that we are all *seeking* the same God, the realization of the same righteousness in our lives (Zeph. 2:3). We are united by this rather than by all being righteous. It is those who *seek* evil with whom we find we have no fellowship; those whose direction in life is towards evil, who fail to appreciate God's righteousness. There are many with marriage problems whose turmoils have led them to value and seek true righteousness more than many of us. Again, there seems no reason to single out one particular aspect of seeking righteousness, and make this an indicator of the general direction of a believer's life. Because a couple are, e.g. separated, or because a brother occasionally drinks to excess, does not entitle us to proclaim them to be seeking *evil* rather than righteousness.

There seems no reason to think that we should break fellowship with someone for not seeking the Lord *enough*, if we admit that they are not seeking *evil*. Repentance and seeking God are related; thus Israel's restoration came when they sought God and (i.e.) repented (Jer. 29:12-14). However, there is good reason to think that Israel at this time were still spiritually weak; some of them had a *desire* to seek righteousness, and God accepted this. The connection between repentance and seeking God means that to withdraw fellowship from someone for not repenting enough, is to disfellowship them for not seeking God enough. The implication is that the rest of us have sought God enough- and therefore found Him. This is pure self-righteousness. In conclusion, God wants us to *seek* Him, but this *seeking* does not imply *complete* repentance and forsaking of sin.

3. The Biblical Answer

3.1 Introduction

Living with alcoholism nurtures a spirit of hopelessness. It's a statement that God is not able. But here faith in God is tested. We can have realistic hope for the better. Prayer changes things. Alcoholism isn't an incurable disease. The example and inspiration of the person of Jesus changes things. And God changes things, miraculously. He does do wonders in radically transforming human lives⁽⁹⁾. We believe He did wonders in the past, for we claim to believe that the Bible is the word of God. We must perceive the connection between what He did in the past, and what He is capable of doing today. This is why the Psalms often ramble on about what God did, e.g. at the Red Sea, and then go on to powerfully plead with God to intervene *right now* in the life of the Psalmist. Biblical history is not bunk. It is not dead history of mere background interest. Those events are alive with power and relevance- for this God is our God. His arm is not too short that it cannot save nor provide (Num. 11:23).

It is universally accepted that the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous [see Appendix 1] and attendance at their meetings is by far the most successful method of overcoming alcoholism. But it's a shame for us to have to admit this undeniable fact. Because that organization is not even Christian, even if some of the philosophy behind it overlaps with Christianity in the wider sense. True Christianity, skillfully and sensitively ministered by other recovering alcoholics, ought to be far more powerful than the '12 steps' of A.A. A form of Christian Alcoholics Anonymous is what we're outlining in this study. We ought to be sought out from far and near for our success in intervening in and identifying this problem. But we have barely begun to even recognize the problem as a community, let alone do anything about it. With the undoubted truth which we are blessed with, we ought to be the cutting edge for the world of this generation; and our harnessing of Bible truth to the alcohol issue is just one of many areas where we ought to be out there proving it. The real issues of alcoholism revolve around truth and recognizing the true nature of sin, temptation, the Biblical 'devil', God and His power to save. In these areas, the Christian community has been blessed with great and true insight into what the Scriptures really teach. Yet that truth must not remain merely theoretical, propositional, theological truth. We need to take it out on the streets and show the power of that truth in practice; not only in the changing of lives, but in a quality of transformation unseen in any other system of therapy. You see, curing alcoholism is all about coming to truth. The set of doctrines we believe is 'truer' or more Biblically accurate than anything else I have come across. Yet those doctrines are designed to elicit a way of life; the true doctrine leads to the true life. And it is a true life, not mere knowledge of doctrinal propositions, which is the cure for alcoholism. This is what makes our potential as a community in this world so exciting, especially in the context of battling alcoholism.

3.2 Transparency And Conviction

Conviction Of Sin

The alcoholic needs to realize that what he is doing is wrong- not merely harmful to himself, but wrong before God. Alcoholics will generally lack the self-respect and have such a poor self-image that to merely argue with them that 'You're hurting yourself' won't make much headway. They need to be convicted before God of the simple fact that they are offending God their creator and moment by moment sustainer. So, what's wrong with alcoholism? It's

a rather limited argument to reply: 'Just because the Bible says it's wrong'. Yes, the Bible does outlaw it. But there is a reason for God's principles, they're not arbitrary; and the alcoholic will unlikely be open to any argument that says 'do this and don't do that just because the higher power says so'.

- Alcoholism is based around an ongoing psychosis of lying. To oneself, to those around them. It's not an occasional lie. It's a situation where untruth is what fires a person's life. The God of Truth requires us to be truthful with Him and to 'live the truth' in order to be His children.

- We are to live the life of the spirit, not the life of the flesh. In the flesh we cannot please God. Therefore we must make no provision for the flesh so that it can gratify itself (Rom. 13:14). Having alcohol around, the rural farmer consciously brewing it etc- this is doing exactly what God says not to do. It is planning and providing for our flesh to fulfil its lusts. Advanced alcoholism is a carefully planned piece of behaviour- the alcoholic cunningly plans to manipulate everything so that he or she can get access to alcohol and continue abusing it.

- Even though in a sense "all things are lawful" they are *not* permitted by God if they bring us under their power (1 Cor. 6:12; 10:23). Alcoholism is clearly a situation where the person has been enslaved. God wants us to serve Him in freedom; for freedom Christ set us free through the cross (Gal. 5:1 N.I.V.). Therefore we shouldn't as it were undo the work of the cross by resigning that freedom for slavery back to sin.

- Alcoholism is a studied and persistent refusal to love. The 'don't care' attitude to oneself and to others is incompatible with the basic teaching and example of Jesus. [The 'don't care' attitude is only apparent; not real. The alcoholic cares very much- but feels he *must* drink]. If we do not have anything of His spirit / way of life and thinking, then we are none of His. This is not to say, of course, that every alcoholic is "none of His". Alcohol inevitably ruins families; and if a man doesn't try to care for his family, he is "worse than an infidel" (1 Tim. 5:8).

- We are to be open before God. Alcoholism disables us from knowing ourselves, knowing our patterns, our bodies, our pain, our relationships....when according to God's word, we are to face up to them, by His grace.

Responsibility

The Bible teaches, and it is a first principle amongst true Christians, that knowledge is related to responsibility. I am not in the least bit interested in this context in how this affects the question of who will be resurrected and judged. Simply, if we know, then we have responsibility to act according to that knowledge. Alcoholics need help to take greater responsibility for their behaviour; this sense of responsibility is replaced in them by a self-defeating self-pity. One strategy with the Christian alcoholic, or even the unbeliever who has some knowledge of the Gospel, is to remind or teach them the basic knowledge of God. That they are His children, made in His image to reflect His glory, vitally important to Him; that His Son was of their nature but never once sinned, and gave His life as their representative, thus demanding a response from us to Him. This is where I believe that preaching the Gospel can go hand in hand with counselling and care for alcoholics. The more they know

of the 'higher power', the more responsible they are to Him; and a sense of responsibility towards the 'higher power' is crucial in providing the motivation to quit.

Realizing Our Limitations

Recognizing human limitations is the key to the 12 steps programme of A.A. The carer needs to truly grasp that he or she cannot be the Saviour of the alcoholic. Change cannot be forced. And this throws us back onto a most basic question. Do we believe that Jesus means 'Saviour'? do we believe in Him? Only the Father and Son can ultimately transform human life. We can pray for them to do this, and fervent prayer is something which arises from a correct response to the alcohol tragedy. But we of ourselves are powerless. The alcoholic himself also has to recognize this. Romans 7:15-25 needs to be read to the alcoholic repeatedly. For here one almost has the verbalization of the inner struggle of every alcoholic:

"I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (R.S.V.).

When we seek to do good, evil is present with us. Oh wretched people that we are. But those words are not specifically about alcohol, grippingly relevant to it as they are. They are about sin generally. We are all gripped in essence in the psychosis of the alcoholic. And yet Paul goes on to triumph throughout Romans 8 that thank God, through Jesus Christ our Lord we have a way of escape. The vague 'higher power' of A.A. is here defined specifically. It is only pride that makes all of us, be we alcoholics or carers for them, refuse to accept fully the need for the greatness of the Father and Son. We tend to think that in our own strength we will get through this problem.

Humility and love for others are so vital. The most tragic cases are alcoholics who went dry for some years and then returned- often because they have ceased working with others. In almost every case they drank again because of pride and refusing to realize their limitations. Truly pride comes before a fall (Prov. 16:18). I also note a definite pride in men who have only been sober say for a month. They are proud of the fact. Yet this pride leads them to forget their limitations, their need for God, and again they plunge into sin.

In God's judgment of men it will be made apparent that it was so inappropriate for man who is made of dust to oppress his fellows (Ps. 10:18 RV). Respect of others is sorely lacking in our selfish natures. But the more we reflect upon our own insignificance, as creatures of dust, the more we will see that abuse of others in any form is inappropriate. And we don't have to wait till judgment day to perceive this- for we know the mortality and constitution of man from basic Bible teaching. This link between our mortality and humility is brought out

in Paul's description of our present state as being "the body of our humiliation" (Phil. 3:21 RV). Believing we are mortal ought to be a humbling thing.

Our faith in God is mitigated against by our misplaced faith in humanity. We would rather trust a doctor, a repair man, a kind neighbour, ourselves... before throwing ourselves upon God as a last resort. "Cease ye from man, whose breath is in his nostrils: for wherein is he to be accounted of" (Is. 2:22) compared to the great God of Israel? Job 27:9,10 seems to be saying [although the Hebrew text is rather obscure] that every man on his deathbed cries to God in some kind of prayer; but a belief in the mortality of man will result in the righteous man having lived a life of prayerful crying to the Father, which will be in context with his final cry to God in his time of dying. A true sense of our mortality will lead to our prayerful, urgent contact with the Father all our days. Thus destruction and death give insight into the true wisdom (Job 28:22). The alcoholic and his family are facing these things. The only, only way ahead is to recognize our weaknesses as humans, and the greatness and power of the Father and Son who have loved us more than we will ever understand.

Deeper Study Box 4

"The Truth": A Biblical Definition And Analysis

We all seek for someone with whom we can be completely honest and vulnerable, who will relate to us with mercy, integrity, confidentiality and loving understanding. Every time we think we have found such a person and they fail us, we are driven further into ourselves. In this lies the sin of gossiping, breaking promised confidences and betrayal; and as a community we need to urgently give a long hard look at ourselves to see if the way we treat each other is leading us closer to the Father and each other, or deeper into ourselves. Because of our repeated bad experiences with people, we drift so easily into surface-level, false relationships. We talk about safe subjects, not disclosing the really private parts of our hearts. Failures aren't shared, frustrations aren't aired. Hurts are covered up. We sacrifice truth on the altar of peace-keeping and pleasant sociality. And it leads us to the lives of quiet desperation and loneliness-in-the-crowd which so many experience. Yet we in Christ have "the truth". And seek to live it. What does this mean?

The phrase "the truth" is used in Scripture as a summary of the Godly life; for truth telling, and being truthful with oneself and God, is the epitome of the life which God intends. I want to demonstrate this; for all too often it has been assumed that because we know and believe true propositions about the Gospel, therefore we are somehow automatically 'of the truth'. The following passages make clear enough that "the truth" refers not so much to intellectual purity of understanding as to a righteous way of life. If someone understands a matter of Biblical interpretation differently to how we do, e.g. over matters of prophecy, this doesn't mean they have 'left the truth'. Yet if we [e.g.] lie, then we have 'left the truth' despite holding a correct understanding of the doctrines of the Gospel:

- Sinners turn away from truth (2 Tim. 4:4; Tit. 1:14). They are bereft of the truth (1 Tim. 6:5). God has revealed the truth, indeed has sent his Son to live it and to proclaim it, but sinful people have refused to listen.

- English does not have a verb “to truth,” but Paul uses such a Greek verb when he urges the Ephesians that “‘truthing’ in love” they should grow in Christ in all things (Eph 4:15). We might understand this as “speaking the truth in love,” but more probably we should see truth as a quality of action as well as of speech. Paul wants his converts to live the truth as well as to speak it. Real spiritual growth is only possible by a way of life that ‘truths it’.

- Paul calls on the Corinthians to keep the feast “with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth,” which he contrasts with “malice and evil” (1 Cor. 5:8). Truth is set up against evil- not against wrong interpretations of Bible passages.

- In Ps. 15:2 working righteousness paralleled with speaking the truth in our hearts.

- Ps. 69:13; 117:2 use “truth” to refer to God’s mercy and salvation. To shew mercy and salvation to others is to be ‘truthful’ in the Biblical sense.

- In Jer. 5:1 any who “seek the truth” will be forgiven- i.e. seek repentance and forgiveness. This is what truth is about in this sense. It is not simply those who search for correct understanding of Bible verses who will be forgiven.

- In Jer. 9:3, to be “valiant for the truth” is not to lie and deceive our brethren; it’s not referring to being cantankerous with others about their interpretation of Scripture. It’s a tragedy that such individuals are held up by some as “valiant for the truth”- but that’s just not Jeremiah’s context at all.

The True Life

Yet “the truth” is clearly related to the Gospel. It does, of course, matter crucially what we believe. Paul can speak of “the word of the truth of the gospel” (Col. 1:5) and again of “the truth of the gospel” (Gal. 2:5). He refers to “the word of truth, the gospel of our salvation” (Eph. 1:13). It’s quite Biblical that we refer to our faith as “the truth”. But truth is clearly a way of describing or summing up the way of life which the doctrines of the truth should elicit in us. Thus “the new man...is created in righteousness and holiness of truth” (Eph. 4:24). We obey the truth in unfeigned love of our brethren (1 Pet. 1:22), not just by intellectual assent at a baptismal interview; we ‘do the truth’ in loving our brother (1 Jn. 1:6); if truth is in us then we walk in it (3 Jn. 3). We are to walk uprightly according to the truth of the Gospel (Gal. 2:14); the truth is an upright walk. The truthfulness of the doctrines we believe is intended to issue in a truthful way of life. Thus Eph. 4:17-21 says that living a vain, greedy life is being disobedient to the truth which is in Jesus. And 2 Thess. 2:12 teaches that to not believe the truth is to take pleasure in unrighteousness. There is a moral link between any falsehood and an unspiritual life. And so repentance is an acknowledgment of the truth (2 Tim. 2:25). A person can learn the theory of God’s truth but never come to acknowledge it- i.e. to repent and live the life of the truth (2 Tim. 3:7), i.e. being transparent before God and brutally honest with oneself.

The Truth Of Christ

In Jn. 18:37 Jesus told Pilate in the context of His upcoming death that He had come into this world to bear witness to the truth- the cross was the supreme witness and exhibition of the truth. There was no doctrine preached there, but rather the way of life which those

doctrines ultimately lead to. Gal. 3:1 admonishes the Galatians as to how they could not obey the truth when the crucified Christ had been so clearly displayed to them; clearly Paul saw obedience to the truth as obedience to the implications of the cross. There is a powerful parallel in Gal. 4:16: I am your enemy because I tell you the truth... you are enemies of the cross of Christ. Thus the parallel is made between the cross and the truth. We are sanctified by the truth (Jn. 17:19); but our sanctification is through cleansing in the Lord's blood. The same word is used of our sanctification through that blood (Heb. 9:13; 10:29; 13:12). Perhaps this is why Dan. 8:11,12 seems to describe the altar as "the truth". The cross of Jesus is the ultimate truth. There we see humanity for what we really are; there we see the real effect of sin. Yet above all, there we see the glorious reality of the fact that a Man with our nature overcame sin, and through His sacrifice we really can be forgiven the untruth of all our sin; and thus have a real, concrete, definite hope of the life eternal.

Jesus told the truth to this world in the sense that He was sinless (Jn. 8:47). Likewise in Jn. 17:19 He says that He sanctifies Himself, so that "the truth", i.e. His perfect life and death, might sanctify us. This was His telling of truth to men. By continuing in the word of Jesus we will know the truth (Jn. 8:31,32)- not so much that we will attain greater doctrinal knowledge, but that our lives will reflect our knowledge of Jesus who is "the truth". The truth sets us free; the Son sets us free (Jn. 8:32, 36). "The truth" is therefore a title for Jesus. Mere academic knowledge alone cannot set anyone free from sin; but the living presence and example and spirit of life of another Man can, and does. And so in Jn. 14:6 the way, truth and life are all parallel- truth is a way of life; "truth is in Jesus" (Eph. 4:21 RV). The spirit of life in Christ sets us free from sin (Rom. 8:2); but Gal. 5:1 simply says that "Christ" has set us free [the same Greek phrase] from sin. The Man Christ Jesus is His "spirit of life"; the man and His way of life were in perfect congruence. They always were; for in Him the word was made flesh. There was 'truth' in His very person, in that the principles of the God of Truth were perfectly and totally lived out in His person and being.

Self-Talk

So what can all this mean in practice? We all talk to ourselves. There's a steady stream of self-talk going on within us, whether or not we quietly mouth the words to ourselves at times. Some people have a stream of self-talk going on that denigrates their self-worth day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year. Others have thoughts of anger and bad imaginations against the evil which they imagine others are doing. Yet others have thoughts of utter vanity, of grandeur, of lust, of various fantasies...and these all influence our words, actions and ambitions in the very end. From the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks. So "guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life" (Prov. 4:23). This is why we are told to speak the truth *in our hearts*. David definitely has in mind our self-talk. Our self-talk has a high likelihood of being untrue, fantasy, imagination. Be aware, keenly aware, of the private conversations you're having with yourself. Ensure that all you are saying to yourself, even if it's not about spiritual things, is at least truthful. This is where this great theme of truth starts and ends. Ideally, our self-talk should be of Jesus, of the Father, of the things of His Kingdom. Of anything that is just, true, of good report... Yet our self-talk is closely linked to what Scripture would call the devil- the constant fountain of wrong suggestions and unspiritual perspectives that seem to bubble up so constantly within us. The devil- the Biblical one- is "the father of lies" (Jn. 8:44). And untruthfulness seems to begin within our own self-talk. I would even go so far as to almost define the devil as our own self-talk. And it's likened to a roaring, dangerous lion; a cunning snake. And it's there within each of us. The control of self-talk is vital. And the Biblical guidance is to make sure

it is truthful; for lack of truthfulness is the root of all sin. Sin is normally committed by believers not as an act of conscious rebellion, but rather through a complex process of self-justification; which on repentance we recognize was the mere sophistry of our own self-talk. This is why truthfulness is the epitome of the spiritual life. To deny ever being untruthful is to deny ever sinning. We all have this problem. It's why the assertion of Jesus that He was "the truth" was tantamount to saying that He was sinless. Only thus is He thereby the way to eternal life.

3.3 Repentance

Here again the believer has a lot of advantages over the unbeliever. Stuck in an airline lounge for a while, I skim read George Best's autobiography *The Good, The Bad And The Bubbly*. In it he chronicles his battles with alcohol, frequently making the point that despite wealth and fame, or perhaps exactly because of them, he had no real motivation to quit the bottle. This lack of motivation is what stops so many alcoholics from quitting. Their fear of the consequences of their last drunken bout may motivate some alcoholics, but only for a limited time. For us, the motivation is not merely selfish- that we wish for a happier family or economic life, etc.- but we have a duty towards God. We recognize that alcoholism is a sin. It is not God's will. Disease it may be, definable it may be in physical and psychological terms, even understandable as it may be given a person's path in life...but all the same, it's a sin. And we love God; for He loves us, loves us and loved us more than we will ever perceive, even throughout the ages of eternity that surely await us. We therefore want to live as He would have us live; we seek to live the Kingdom life right now. We earnestly seek to be like the One who loved us to the end, who laid down His life for us His friends. For the alcoholic believer, this involves quitting alcohol. We want to be like Him, to live and be and perceive as He did and does.

Repenting of alcoholism is vital for the alcoholic. Drunkards will not inherit the Kingdom; so say 1 Cor. 6:10 and Gal. 5:21. Does this mean that no alcoholic who can't quit will be there? No. On what basis, then, will they be there? Because they are repentant. They have a state of mind that turns back time and again from what they have done. It's easy to point the finger at alcoholics. Theirs is a sin that is open and goes before them to judgment. But we are all, sadly, habitual sinners. We sin, repent, and do the same again. We despair. We hate the sin. We cling on to Paul's words in Romans 7:15-25 and take comfort, that this is us. Yet we read further into Romans 8 and see that the spirit of new life in Jesus has set us free from the apparently inevitable law of sin within us. We wonder yet further at our repeated failures. And we cling on to grace and a genuine, totally genuine, hatred of the sin we commit and a fervent desire to overcome. And we look forward with joy to the salvation of the Kingdom. And little by little, we succeed in changing. Now this is what God is asking of the alcoholic brother or sister, as a bare minimum. For those living with alcoholics, you have the same tendency which we all have- to max out on the more public sins of others, within a smug complacency with ourselves whose sins are not so open, and yet just as habitual. Realize your tendency to self-righteousness, write down and analyze your habitual sins. And recognize that your alcoholic family member will be very sensitive to any self-righteous or perceived hypocrisy in you. You want to love them, with a Biblical love, into the better way. Hypocritical condemnation isn't the way to do this. Point out to the alcoholic that drunkenness is listed along with idolatry, strife, wrath, jealousy, factionism, over eating as a sin that will exclude from the Kingdom (Gal. 5:19-21)- and you too are sometimes factious,

wrathful, self-indulgent, jealous, idolatrous, covetous etc. It's as well to admit this up front, because alcoholics are well known for being penetratingly critical of those around them.

The difference with alcoholism as opposed to occasional drunkenness is that it is a sinful way of life, continually repeated as part of life. But you, too (and many others in the brotherhood) are committing sins which the more you commit them, are on the brink of leading you into a similarly sinful way of life. This is where living with an alcoholic is used by the Lord to inspire a true humility and self-knowledge in the lives of those around him. What's sinful about alcoholism is not simply that we are ingesting chemicals [ethyl alcohol] in volumes which the Bible proscribes. What's wrong with it is the lying, the damage to self and others, harm to the body by a selfish habit, the distortion of the image of God, the failure to even try to live up to the wonderful intention God has for us, the studied lack of love to oneself and one's neighbour. Yet every one of those sins is habitually repeated in the lives of many Christians. This doesn't justify alcoholism, but I submit this point needs to be conceded to the alcoholic. We're not ganging up on the alcoholic. We're all battlers against sin. Nobody is too far from God to be helped. This needs stressing time and again. The Lord Jesus took pleasure in addressing Himself to the very lowest of society in first century Palestine.

The Only Judge

We must not come over to the alcoholic as judges, eagerly waiting to punish. Love must evidently be our motive. And we seek to inspire the life of love in the alcoholic; for what is essentially wrong with alcoholism is not merely breaking commandments but most fundamentally, a lack of love. When facing the woman taken in adultery, the Lord points out to her accusers that they too are sinners, to the point that they cannot condemn her. They leave the scene, one by one. And then the Lord tells her to sin no more (Jn. 8:3-11). He perhaps did this entirely for her benefit rather than theirs. Maybe He sensed her deep feeling of unfairness, injustice, and awareness of the hypocrisy of others. Perhaps she had slept with every one of those self-righteous accusers; or at least, she was aware of their own moral failures. But the Lord didn't want that to hinder her from repenting. The other point of that incident is that the Lord alone has the power to condemn. He didn't have to say any words; His self-evident perfection convicted her of her sin. If the family of the alcoholic start condemning, they inevitably run the risk of the alcoholic seething with resentment at their hypocrisy. There needs to be an openness about our own serious failings when counselling the alcoholic. There needs to be real confrontation – with real consequences, if no change is forthcoming. And a deep, prayerful resort to what Alcoholics Anonymous would call 'a higher power'- known to us as the peerless, matchless example of the human, perfect Jesus. The Lord told the accusing men to let he that was without sin condemn her- and He clearly had in mind Himself, the only One without sin. He was asking them to leave all judgment in the sense of condemnation to Him- and He did not condemn her. He forgave her and exhorted her to sin no more.

Repentance In Practice

I submit that repentance needs to be verbalized- it must be "confessed" (1 Jn. 1:9), which implies a verbal or written statement of the issues. It's like praying or Bible reading out loud; it makes our minds think not quite so fast. We need to get to grips with all the aspects of our sin. We must face it, in all the ugliness of what we have done. The alcoholic who wants to quit needs to sit down sober, and write out a list of all the people he or she has

sinned against, and all the ways and occasions that he or she can remember where alcohol has led them into sin. They should write out how much they have spent on alcohol. And encourage them to carry these jottings with them, in a shirt of trouser pocket, along with a list of all the reasons they want to quit alcohol. And encourage them to read it throughout the day. They'll be helped in doing this by someone close to them shocking them by showing them the list they have drawn up about themselves, perhaps relating to weaknesses other than alcohol. Especially does the alcoholic need to write at the top of the piece of paper, in large, carefully and slowly written letters: "I am a liar". This is so crucial to their recovery [cf. Steps 4-9 in the AA recovery program].

Believing that we have been forgiven is perhaps the greatest challenge to the faith of any of us; and it's especially hard for the alcoholic believer, whose faith is at low ebb anyway. The frankness of the forgiveness available (Lk. 7:42), the utter purity and totality of God's grace (Eph. 2:8,9)- these things need to be discussed with the alcoholic. Perhaps try to get over to them the amazing logic of Romans 8- if God justifies us, then nobody can bring anything against us. If so much was achieved by the Lord's death, how much more by His resurrection and new life, which He wishes to share with us? If God did not spare even His own Son, how much more is He willing to give us literally anything else? Where sin has increased, grace increases the more, and God is yet more glorified (Rom. 5:20). He turns the Valley of Achor, symbol of Israel's shameful departure from God, into a door of hope, where one day Israel shall sing as in the days when she came up out of Egypt (Hos. 2:14,15). The promise to clean us from all unrighteousness is real and meaningful (1 Jn. 1:9).

Repentance is inspired by what we could loosely call fellowship. It is the example of others that inspires in practice, no matter how finely we grasp the issues that have come between God and ourselves. There are many Christians who have fought and won against alcohol; and many families who can bear testimony in a way which will be helpful to the person who is really and sincerely striving for mastery. And there are many others still fighting the battle. You can get in touch with such by sending an e-mail to christianalcoholics@carelinks.net. We assure you of total, utter confidentiality. A.A. teaches that one access to a power outside of yourself is through meeting with others fighting the same battle, and taking strength from them. And for some, this works. But think of the even greater power which there ought to be in taking strength from the body of Christ! Meaningful fellowship with the alcoholic is required. Notice how the Lord fellowshiped with sinners in order to bring them to Him. Contrary to what we might expect, they didn't reason that the fact He was willing to share table fellowship with them meant they were OK in His books. His very grace and the insistent, intrusive effect of His personal holiness and gracious acceptance inspired them to change. Sadly many Christian groups have been tainted with the "guilt by association" complex, whereby someone like an alcoholic is not to be associated with lest we be defiled. But this is not the pattern of the Lord's dealings with us. The wounded man rescued by the Samaritan is so like all of us, stricken by sin and left half dead and naked on the street. Yet the image of the man lying there is very much reminiscent of the alcoholic, stripped and robbed by the 'robbers' of social drinking, alcohol advertisements etc. Yet the Samaritan [= Jesus] took him to the inn, and arranged for his care until He returned. The inn is surely the ecclesia; there we find spiritual strengthening and healing of our condition. And this will go on until the Lord returns.

Each member of the body, be they alcoholic or not, contributes to the overall strength and health of the body. No member can say they do not need the others. The body "makes increase of itself" and builds itself up in love, strengthened by the nourishment mediated by

the other members (Eph. 4:16). There *is* therefore strength and power from outside of ourselves within the body of Christ. Tragically, the body of believers is perceived by many alcoholics and their carers to be judgmental, shaming, not understanding etc. Yet the Scriptures are in the end true; there is, yes there really *is*, strength, power and health to be taken from the body of Christ. This is where *if total confidentiality is observed*, there is great strength to be found in sharing one's alcohol-related problems with others within the body. What we all need is a mighty tough rollicking about the sin of gossip, and the sin of being judgmental. These two communal sins of the Christian church stop us from being the power of good, even the cutting edge in this generation, which we so easily could be.

3.4 The New Life For Alcoholics

Several times, Paul makes the point that we changed status at baptism. We were once lost and hopelessly entwined in the world of sin. Now, we are set free by being in Christ. But we still have strong tendencies to live the old life in practice, despite the fact that we are in the new life by status. He describes the characteristics of the old life and urges his converts to quit living like they were still out there in a lost and floundering world. So here are some examples:

- The Galatians had to be told to walk in the Spirit, to be led by the Spirit, so that they developed the fruits of the spirit rather than the works of the flesh (Gal. 5:16-25). For Paul, the flesh is the life before baptism; the Spirit is the way of life afterwards. But the Galatians, having made the transition of status, were still living in the flesh.

- In baptism, the Ephesians had put off the old man and put on / clothed themselves with the new man (Eph. 4:22,23 = Rom. 6:6). But therefore they still needed to put off the things of the old man- wrath, lying etc. (Eph. 4:25-28).

- Indeed, this is the whole context of Romans 6, the classic baptism chapter. It's not part of a preaching address by Paul to unbelievers, explaining to them what baptism is. He's writing to weak, baptized believers, telling them to quit the old life because of the change in status that occurred at their baptism.

- Before baptism we were in the darkness; "but now you are light [by being baptized] in the Lord: walk as children of light...in all goodness and righteousness and truth" (Eph. 5:8,9).

- The Colossians still had to "put to death" things like fornication, even though they had put them to death in baptism (Col. 3:5 = Rom. 6:6). Yet they are described as having formerly lived in those things, as if now, they don't do them (Col. 3:7). Yet clearly they did still do those things. Again, Paul is saying that they don't do those things by status, in God's eyes, therefore they shouldn't do them in practice.

- We obeyed the truth "unto unfeigned love of the brethren...[therefore] see that ye love one another" (1 Pet. 1:22). Our obedience to the truth of Christ placed us in the status of those who unfeignedly love their brethren; but this means, Peter is saying, that we'd better get on and love them in practice.

- We must believe in the light of Christ, so that we might become "children of light" (Jn. 12:36 Gk.); yet by status, we are the light of the world (Mt. 5:14), because we are baptized

into Jesus who is the light of the world (Jn. 12:46). All that is true of Him becomes true of us by status; but we must exercise effort to realize this in practice.

- Titus was to teach the Cretian brethren that because they had been washed and regenerated in baptism, therefore they were not to speak evil of others, because it was *in the past* that they used to be like that (Tit. 3:2-6). But they still *were* acting like that, even after baptism! Yet again- they are called upon to remember the implications of their baptism, and live out the status they thus attained before God.

- Having warned that unrepentant fornicators and drunkards will not be in the Kingdom of God, Paul goes on: "And such were some of you: but you are washed, you are sanctified, you are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor. 6:11). References to washing, the name, Jesus, the Spirit, God...all inevitably make this an allusion to our baptism into the Name. Because they had been justified, counted as sinless due to their baptism into Christ, therefore they should:

- a) recognize their bodies were temples of the Holy Spirit, and therefore to glorify God in spirit and body
- b) realize that they are not their own, to live their lives just as they wish
- c) act as if they are indeed joined to Christ
- d) let the power of Christ's resurrection and new life work in them

Clearly enough, the Corinthians were *still* fornicating and getting drunk. Yet, Paul says that this is how they used to be. Evidently he means that they have changed status- and they should live that out in practice. But Paul delves deeper into the psychology of sin's self-justification. They were saying that "Meats for the belly, and the belly for meats". In other words, we have basic human desires and there are ways to satisfy them. Paul's response is basically that if we are in Christ, then we have vowed to put to death those desires, and to fulfil them is to act as if they are still alive and well. Further, in baptism we are counted to have died to them; and we seek to live the new life, empowered by the resurrection life which is now in the Lord, whose body we belong to. The comfort and challenge comes to Christian alcoholics today: You are washed, you are sanctified, you are justified, counted as righteous. Think back to your baptism. That's what happened then. Now, try to live out that life. Act, or at least try to act, how God perceives you. The alcoholic needs to remember, as the Romans also needed to, the colossal significance of the fact they have been baptized. They have a responsibility and also tremendous, boundless possibility because of this. Remind them of it. Leave some photos or reminders of their early days in the Lord around the house. Talk about it...

The fruit of the Spirit includes attitudes of mind which will help pave the way for true victory against alcohol. Direct confrontation of our deepest fears- e.g. that the alcoholic will never stop drinking- can sometimes produce the very opposite reaction in us; the confrontation reinforces the very thing we fear. If an alcoholic is confronted directly and point blank over the issue by another brother or sister, they will likely hit the bottle straight away. Once the problem has been recognized and the victim is out of the denial stage, it is unwise to push ahead too fast too quickly. Those living with them need to prepare the

ground a bit, by encouraging [by example more than admonition] the victim to consciously develop some of the following spiritual characteristics:

Positive Thinking

The alcoholic and his / her family is easily caught up in the fight-or-flight syndrome. To conquer the problem seems to great; the only option appears to flee deeper into it. A belief in God's truth, however faltering, enables us to achieve at least some measure of simple positive thinking. In Philippians 4:8 the Bible stresses in the plainest language: "And now, my friends, all that is *true*, all that is *noble*, all that is *just and pure*, all that is *lovable and gracious*, whatever is *excellent and admirable*—*fill all your thoughts with these things*" (N.E.B). Try to be positive about issues unrelated to the alcohol problem; seek involvement in the Lord's work in ways which will help you overcome your understandable obsession with the alcohol problem which is around you.

Control of Emotions And Actions

"A person without self-control is as defenseless as a city with broken-down walls" (Proverbs 25:28, N.L.T.). This person will be vulnerable and driven frequently by negative emotions. His outcome is described in Galatians 5:19-21- the accompanying problems can include adultery, sexual immorality, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, envy and drunkenness. To control emotions, the alcoholic needs to learn again to be able to recognize them and identify them- after perhaps years of obsession with alcohol, personal emotions become irrelevant. The alcoholic loses touch with himself. Discuss with the alcoholic how they feel, and you will get simplistic answers like "I don't feel good"; but beyond that they are unable to explain. Patient talking with them must lead them to define those feelings more closely.

Focus Upon Jesus

A clear focus upon the person of Jesus needs to be encouraged in us all. "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2:5); "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:13). The life in Christ is all about developing new mental habits: "For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind" (2 Tim. 1:7).

Intimacy With Others

Alcoholics are essentially lonely people. "... Woe to him who is alone when he falls, for he has no one to help him up," says Ecc. 4:10. The 17th-century poet John Donne had a related thought: "No man is an island". Fellowship, meaningful fellowship, with others is designed by the Father. It's His way for us. God designed us to need other people: "*It is not good that the man should be alone*" (Gen. 2:18). It may be that the emotionally supporting family and friends aren't the ones to fill the alcoholic's need. But there can be no doubt that there is tremendous therapeutic value in confessing our faults one to another (James 5:17)- the power and possibility of which is diluted if a community succumbs to gossip and trustlessness. Our need for others is not only Biblically validated: "What happens if we have no close relationships? The message that emerges loud and clear from scientific evidence accumulated since the mid 1970's is that having a reasonable quantity and quality of social

relationships is essential for mental and physical wellbeing”⁽¹⁰⁾. It is hard at times for the family of the alcoholic to accept that he or she could possibly be lonely- for they provide support at such cost to themselves, and are ‘always there’ to clear up the messes. But recognizing the alcoholic’s need is not in any way an admission that you have failed; it’s just a realistic recognition of need. To re-focus the victim on others will of itself lead them out from the self-centredness which is alcoholism. The best friends, of course, would be brethren or sisters who have fought and overcome the same battle. 2 Cor. 1:6 says that if we suffer anything, it is so that we can comfort others who have the same afflictions. Likewise strong bonds need to be built between suffering families; and this will only be possible by a degree of openness. But this is of course militated against if we let others down by gossiping their disclosures to us around the brotherhood.

At this point, the following testimony from a fine sister may be helpful:

“To re-focus the victim on others can be a very difficult situation/step for the (co-dependent) family. It can be frightening trusting a third person not to further hurt the already hurting and bruised alcoholic. A counsellor will build a very close and intimate relationship with the alcoholic out of necessity, and that can leave the partner feeling threatened ... the secrets, trials and dependency issues within the relationship can build a strong, if dysfunctional and spiritually destructive bond between alcoholic and co-dependent partner and the relationship with a counsellor or other support person will threaten that dysfunctional bond. Hence the co-dependent will also feel out of control and can easily hamper any recovery, especially if the alcoholic draws emotionally away during counselling. I know I was surprised at my own feelings of fear and lack of control when my partner started counselling for childhood sexual abuse and alcohol abuse. I spoke to the counsellor to reassure myself that he knew what he was doing and would take good care of my loved one. I explained that I felt as though in many ways - when he was in a state - he was the child and I the mother, I felt protective and was frightened that he would be hurt by this stranger whom he trusted so intimately. I also - though I don't like to admit it (!) - felt that if his emotional dependency on me decreased, that his love for me would too. I needed to have reassurance that the counsellor would not give up on him, that he would care for him and love him through it. But I had to give up my supposed 'control' to him and trust him, and that was/is difficult!”.

Forms of conduct promote and enforce each other. If only the alcoholic can be led into an upward spiral, preferably within the nourishing of the body of Christ, then victory is assured. Just one false move with alcohol, and the downward spiral can so easily be slipped into, far easier than it is to get into the upward spiral. This will involve moving in life with those who are not alcoholic. We must make no provision for the flesh (Rom. 13:14)- the alcoholic needs to avoid people and places which will restimulate the desire for alcohol. With strengthening recovery, the number of these people and places diminish in number. One study found that “there is a straight line relationship between mortality from alcohol-related diseases and the liberality of the law governing the availability in counties...the availability of alcoholic beverages increases the amount of alcoholism in a given area”⁽¹¹⁾. Keeping away from availability clearly strengthens the chances of overcoming alcoholism or a relapse into it. We are involved in a spiritual warfare, a battle for the mind, in which the presence of the word of God hidden in our hearts strengthens us against sin (Ps. 119:11).

4. After The Victory

As and when your loved one quits the bottle for good, your problems may not be over. Consider this strange but true statistical phenomena: A relatively large number of partners welcome back their ex-alcoholic partner into family life. He or she remains sober. But they... leave the dried out partner and marry...another alcoholic. Why and how ever could this be? During the period of alcoholism, the partner [especially a woman] takes total authority. They have to make decisions with no reference to the alcoholic. They know best. They are in an extraordinary position of power in the relationship. On drying out, the family or relationship must return to what it was before- a bonding of equals, with no manipulation, superiority, despising of the other. And this is actually incredibly hard. The implications of forgiving the alcoholic practically have to be thought through. It really is hard, very hard. And again, fellowship with others who have been through the same will be of great help.

The parable of the elder brother needs to be thought through. Perhaps this was the essential message of the parable. The elder brother was basically jealous and full of self-pity. He felt that his years of patient obedience [and surely he over-rated his own righteousness!] had all been forgotten just because the prodigal had returned. He forgave nothing- he ran on about how the prodigal had spent his father's livelihood on whores. His brother's former sins were utmost in his mind even after his brother had so clearly reformed. And the result was tragic- he no longer wanted to be part of his Father's fellowship. All because he would not *truly* forgive.

5. Conclusions

In the end, the question will arise for all involved with the tragedy of alcoholism: Why me? Why am I an alcoholic...why was my destiny to live with an alcoholic? Without an acceptance that God not only really exists but has a serious, powerful plan to manifest Himself in us, and that all aspects of our lives are guided to ultimately enable this, these questions remain tragically unanswered in many unbelieving minds. I am convinced that a just God will not ultimately try any of His children more than others. We must each take up the cross. No matter how many times we stumble and fall whilst bearing it- and even our Lord did this in His final walk to Golgotha- we are to be dominated by the image of cross-carrying discipleship after Him. The way, the path, the channel which each of us is given by our Lord will vary. For some it will be alcohol; for others, living with marital unfaithfulness, narcotics, physical or mental disability. And so the list goes on, as and if we could survey the private struggles of each of God's children. We each have our path to the cross, to the attempted imitation of Christ to which we are each undeniably, unavoidably called.

As my friend Steve Johnson put it to me once as mystified by events we drove through the snowy fields of Latvia: "It's the process, not the product". Or as another dear friend John Stibbs put it to me in the heat of a personal tragedy in suburban Australia, sitting together on a steamy Brisbane veranda: "It's the ride, not the destination". As Gregory of Nyssa put it in his *Life of Moses* : "Virtue is discovered not so much in the attaining as in the trying, the struggling, the running of the race". Whether or not your family member quits their alcoholism isn't quite the point, ultimately. It's your reaction to it, which prepares you for the ultimate destination of the Kingdom. And this is the only end point which *is* of ultimate consequence, hard as it is to grasp as we live out our lives in a world bent on personal happiness in the here and now. I know how it seems that God is so unfairly distant from you in these crises. Try to grasp the spirit of Manoah, who so wanted God to intervene directly, to send an Angel and tell him what he was to do with his son Samson. "The angel of the

Lord did no more appear to Manoah and to his wife. *Then Manoah knew that he was the Angel of the Lord*” (Jud. 13:21). It was the very absence of God’s direct appearance in his life that in the end persuaded Manoah that truly, he did have a fully valid relationship with Him. May you know this to be true for you, as so many others have. The Lord Jesus had a way of gently turning comments and questions back on the person who made them, and of redefining the terms used. A man told Him once that he would follow him “whithersoever thou goest”, i.e. to whatever end point the road may lead to. The Lord replied that He had nowhere to lay His head. In other words, it’s the following of Him that we need to focus on, rather than the hardness of some possible great future sacrifice that may lie ahead. It’s the road, and not the destination, that are important (Mt. 8:19-21).

Jeremiah saw his beloved people consumed by the results of their own actions and attitudes. He realized that there but for God’s grace would have gone all of them. Jeremiah thanked God: “It is of the Lord’s mercies that *we* [this is where the emphasis is] are not consumed [i.e., as they have been], because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness. The Lord is my portion, saith my soul; therefore will I hope in him. The Lord is good unto them that wait for him, to the soul that seeketh him” (Lam. 3:22-25).

Appendix 1: The Twelve Steps

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol- that our lives had become unmanageable
2. We came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity
3. We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him
4. We made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves
5. We admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs
6. We were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character
7. We humbly asked Him to remove all our shortcomings
8. We made a list of all persons we have harmed and became willing to make amends to them all
9. We made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others
10. We continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong, promptly admitted it

11. We sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out

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

Appendix 2: Some Christian resources

Anonymous e-mail contact with other Christian alcoholics and their families:

christianalcoholics@carelinks.net

Eastern Europe / Russian speaking counselling: a. d. 1903, Vilnius 2012 LITHUANIA; a.k. 97, Riga 1007 LATVIA

The Caring Network, North America

The Queensland Caring Network, Australia

Notes

(1) Caroline Knapp, "The Glass Half Empty", *The New York Times Magazine* (9 May 1999), p. 19.

(2) Jean Kinney & Gwen Leaton, *Loosening The Grip: A Handbook Of Alcohol Information* (St Louis: Mosby, 1995) p. 21. This is an invaluable source of statistics and facts relating to alcoholism.

(3) The most Biblical attempt to justify total abstinence which I have come across is in Peter Masters, *Should Christians Drink? The Case For Total Abstinence* (London: Wakeman, 2001). But even this, in my opinion, fails to conclusively clinch the case Biblically. I have to leave it at the level of a personal conscience decision.

(4) Jorge Valles, *Social Drinking And Alcoholism* (Texas Alcohol And Narcotics Educations Council, 1965) p. 14.

(5) Darryl Inaba & William Cohen, *Physical And Mental Effects Of Psychoactive Drugs* (Ashland, OR: C.N.S., 1993), p. 135.

(6) Roy Hatfield, "Closet Alcoholics In The Church", *Christianity Today*, 18 August 1981 p. 28.

(7) This is discussed and documented in some detail in Andre Bustanoby, *The Wrath Of Grapes* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987).

(8) Jean Kinney & Gwen Leaton, *Loosening The Grip: A Handbook Of Alcohol Information* (St Louis: Mosby, 1995) p. 21.

(9) For a fine and moving account of a Christian's deliverance from alcohol abuse, see the thrilling, chilling testimony of Peter Bayliss in *The Perils Of Drug And Alcohol Abuse* (Birmingham: Care Group Publications, 1999).

(10) Paul Martin, *The Healing Mind*, 1997, p. 157.

(11) K.M. Magruder, "The Association Of Alcoholism Mortality With Legal Availability Of Alcoholic Beverages", *Alcohol And Drug Education*, 1976.

Appendix: The Alcoholic Family

Alcoholism is a disease which affects not only the alcoholic. In most cases, the alcoholic lives in a family, and one or more people in that family enable him or her. They lie for him [we'll call the alcoholic 'him' and the enabler 'her' to make things easier, but that's by no means a typical situation]. The other family members learn to cope with the situation in their own ways. The whole family gets caught up in the denial and untruth, the lives of secrecy and deception. They sometimes deny that the family woes are really all because of alcohol, and tend to be untruthful about the extent to which they enable the alcoholic's behaviour and 'getting away with it' time and again. Although it's often impossible, counselling of the individual alcoholic is often not enough- the entire immediate family need counselling. Sharon Wegscheider⁽¹⁾ has powerfully explained how the feelings of the alcoholic become transferred to the family members, through their wrong responses to his manipulative behaviour:

Alcoholic's feeling	Alcoholic's behaviour	Feelings of the alcoholic's family members
Guilt, self-hatred	Self-righteousness, blaming	Guilt, self-hatred
Fear	Aggression, anger	Fear
Helplessness	Controlling of others	Helplessness
Hurt	Abusiveness	Hurt
Loneliness, rejection	Rejecting	Loneliness, rejection
Low self-worth	Grandiosity, criticalness	Low self-worth

Because alcoholism is in this sense a disease which affects the whole family, it tends to recur even after the death of the alcoholic. This is my explanation for why alcoholism appears to repeat throughout the generations of some families. This is nothing to do with genes- no alcoholic gene has ever been isolated. It's to do with family dysfunction affecting the next generation.

The various family members will react in different ways to the alcoholic, whilst sharing the same basic feelings as explained above. And yet the family find it very

hard to express their true feelings; they soon learnt that spontaneous expression of feelings gets them into trouble, and so they don't do it. And of course they remain out of touch not only with their own feelings but those of the others in the family network. We are seeking to reveal to those people involved that love, freedom, risk, choice, surrender to God and His Son... are to be our true dreams. Not success, money, power, comfort, dwelling on old hurts. To expose our feelings and our real selves is of course to risk... but alcoholic families have no choice but to take that risk, or face destruction. It was Einstein who said: "The minute you begin to live your life according to your choices, it's really a new kind of life". It can help in therapy to get the family to role play each other. This is a very powerful and instructive thing for them... although the problem is usually in getting the family as a family into therapy together. Some members will perceive themselves as the hero / heroine, much praised by those outside the family, feeling that the family depends upon them alone... others will become the scapegoat, or develop a sense of humour, constant joking, lack of seriousness... others retreat into themselves, occupying themselves with computer games, the internet, addiction to study or chemical addictions, including alcohol. Withdrawal within oneself, being a 'lost person', is often observable in children born after the parent has become alcoholic. They as it were missed out on the earlier part of the plot; they were born into a situation where denial and all the other alcoholic-family feelings and behaviours were already well established, and bewildered, took up their part in the plot. And yet again and again I can't help but comment... that inner solitude, that withdrawal from the world, that isolation from others is fertile ground for personal spirituality to develop. The alcoholic family is just waiting for Christ to enter. But so many stumble at the second of the 12 steps: "To believe that a Power greater than ourselves can restore us to sanity". Sadly people confuse their need for Christ with their recollections and perceptions of religion; so often they confuse spirituality with mere church-going. So often, religion and churches have brought with them the same feelings of guilt, hurt, shame, delusion, anger etc. from which they need to escape. Too often, what passes for Christianity has been about compulsive behaviour, whereas the true call of Christ is to embrace the ultimate freedom of choice... Which is why I counsel people to learn the Gospel of grace and be baptized into the Lord Jesus, rather than 'getting religion' in a more formal way.

Whatever role the individual family members adopt, they come to see them as essential to survival, and they act out those roles with the same denial, compulsion and self-delusion which characterize the alcoholic. The role of the closest partner, e.g. the alcoholic's wife, is often crucial. She has to be father as well as mother to the family, take charge of finances and purchases, takes charge of the family affairs, and regularly berates and criticizes the alcoholic for drinking- whilst actually enabling him to continue. She lives in constant fear of what the future may hold [will the alcoholic lose his job, will the family survive, will he do physical damage to the children or herself whilst drunk...]. And above all, the enabler becomes characterized by anger and an inability to express her own feelings. Survival becomes the one value, the one aim. The myriad unseen things she does for the suffering family often become seen by her as some kind of works of righteousness, some kind of virtue which is its own reward. Caring for others' needs to ones' own detriment is the classic lead up to burnout syndrome. The grace based

believer will know that works cannot save... it is an acceptance of God's free gift which takes away all valuing of our own hard work.

If she's a Christian, she may take refuge in the hope that somehow God will work a miracle and change things. And yet this is often merely an excuse for not facing up to her role as an enabler. We have written here from the assumption that the alcoholic is a male, and a husband. So often this isn't the case. In the case of an alcoholic or drug addicted child, the parent will feel even stronger self-blame and shame- for society tends to hold parents as responsible for their children. All these feelings which we have discussed can become transformed by an acceptance of grace; and by allowing the Bible to convict us of true guilt for our actual sins, and releasing us from all the false guilt which society and the alcoholic place upon us. And yet so obsessive is the whole alcohol problem that the family members, especially the enabler, find no time or energy to develop their social, mental or spiritual potentials. Good, solid advice for such people is to encourage them to focus upon regular Bible reading, even study, personal prayer, some course of secular study, and deeper social interaction e.g. in the church setting. These things will begin to free them from the web of control and obsession which the alcoholic is dragging them into. And above all, they should provide the enabler with the motivation and ability to themselves go for counselling. The alcoholic himself is usually so self-absorbed, so in denial and deluded, that he rarely goes to seek help alone. He needs, desperately, the help of his family to get into that counselling room. The family members, especially the one playing the enabling role for the alcoholic, have to realize *their* helplessness. Those who have grown up with a works-based theology find this so hard. It's so hard for the family to accept that *they* have a part in the alcoholic's problem. The anger, self-righteousness and self-pity which the enabler and other family members feel is often one of the biggest barriers to healing the alcoholic family; and yet these are the *very* characteristics which the Spirit of God, through His word, can remove and replace.

It often happens that an alcoholic may quit drinking, but he moves from one addiction to another, anything from gambling to aggressive and fanatic religious behaviour, and the family members remain playing out the roles which his addictive behaviour decrees. It's even been stated that quitting drinking is only 10% of the way towards full recovery. The fact the whole family are locked into their positions, their roles, the scripts they have to live out, explains why up to 80% of partners of alcoholics re-marry alcoholics, when their partner either quits drinking, dies, or they divorce. Therefore the goal of alcoholism counselling is not to restore the family to where it was at before alcoholism set in. This is not only impossible, but it is not the way to true healing. When the alcoholic stops drinking, a whole range of feelings come online- fear, fear that the alcoholic will start drinking again, fear of loss of control of the family; hurt and anger; loss of focus and loss of roles; resentment at having to open ranks and accept the alcoholic back, and to grant them the respect and even authority which they may now deserve. So very often, this isn't achieved, feelings still can't be expressed, truth and transparency still

don't flourish, and the negative feelings unleashed lead to the destruction of the family unit. Therapy needs to empower the family members to get in touch with what they are really feeling, to identify and name the feelings, and replace them with healthy ones. This is why AA so rightly speak of a 'dry' alcoholic as a *recovering* alcoholic rather than a recovered one. For the process of healing and growth continues for a lifetime.

Biblical Answer

A key weapon in the battle against alcohol in the family is the concept of grace. That God will forgive us and cleanse us and save us as a pure gift, with no demand nor manipulation... and if we believe this, we won't be passive, we will actively respond in lives of gratitude and kindness and truthfulness to others. The death of the Lord Jesus is portrayed as a guilt offering. The cross is therefore the place to take our guilt. We are not to deal with our guilt by attacking others, repressing it and feeling awful about ourselves... but to believe that our personal guilt is real and actual, but has been taken away in Christ. Think of the classic behaviours of the alcoholic:

He blames ["If you cared about me, I wouldn't have to drink"]

Threatens ["Don't raise it with me again or else..."]

Alibis ["I didn't drink too much, just some guy spiked my drinks"]

Boasts ["I work harder than all the other guys. Why can't I relax?"]

Avoids ["If you're so righteous you can't let a guy have a drink, I think you're just a hypocrite"].

All of these attitudes and behaviours can be affected by grasping the reality of God's grace. Alcoholics deal with their guilt by repressing it, numbing their feelings; and also by projecting their guilt onto others by blaming and accusing them. The ultimate way to deal with guilt is through the guilt offering of the Lord Jesus. There, all guilt was dealt with in the only way which has ultimate power and meaning. A valid experience of Christ will lead to the ability to express feelings, or at least to get in touch with them without repressing them. All the behaviours of the alcoholic-alibis, threats, boasts, avoiding etc, all have their effect upon his family. He threatens, the family feel afraid; he blames, they feel hurt or guilty; he uses alibis, and they feel distrust. But for them too, serious acceptance of God's grace empowers them to feel their own feelings, to not take false guilt, to assess situations and relationships realistically. And they too will be empowered to have genuine feelings again, feelings of their own, feelings guided by God's spirit, rather than by the manipulative web of the family alcoholic. In dysfunctional families, the person who holds the power makes the rules. He produces a family system after his own dysfunctional image. Dysfunction means that the system functions, it doesn't stop operating, but it operates in a deformed and harmful way. By being filled with God's Spirit and an acceptance of His grace, the family become formed after *God's* image and not that of the alcoholic. Because for them, God is the ultimate power

broker, and not the alcoholic. Dysfunctional alcoholic families are based around rules- unconsciously, of course. These include:

Alcohol isn't the real cause of the family's problems

The alcoholic isn't ultimately responsible

The status quo must be maintained at all costs

Nobody must discuss with anyone within nor outside the family what is going on

No body must say what they are really feeling.

These rules have to be broken and replaced.

The ultimate effect of knowing Christ is to know our freedom of choice, to chose life or death by choosing to accept or reject Him, the only ultimate source of life and freedom. And yet as alcoholism progresses, less and less of life is a matter of choice. Everything comes down to the choice of continuing to drink or quitting. This ends up a choice between life and death. Yet the choice of accepting Christ is one between life and death- and there are very few people who perceive the life: death choice that clearly. The alcoholic stands at the ideal point from which to decide for Christ. This is why I encourage alcoholics to study the Gospel and be baptized, having perceived the choice they face. Deciding what does or doesn't have value is essentially a spiritual function- and this is why only the acceptance of a "higher power", for me, the Christ in 'Christianity', can lead to ultimate healing of the alcoholic family. Likewise a focus upon the real person of Jesus, a 'man', a person, now in Heaven, who was once here on earth and shall surely come again... this is the answer to the egocentric mindset of the alcoholic, a mindset which leads to him becoming 'touchy' with people, taking offence at the slightest provocation, and indulging in unreasonable self-pity.

Alcoholics are thus actually nearer to God than many of us. Jellinek's classic study of alcoholism found that "In many addicts, approximately 60%, some vague religious desires develop as the rationalizations become weaker"(2). What we seek to do is to make use of this by putting the alcoholic in touch with the 'religious' message of grace which there is in the Lord Jesus. In my extensive experience of preaching Christ in Europe, it's rationality which keeps at least the European mind from coming to Him. And likely this is true in other cultures in our modern world. Yet in the alcoholic this passion for rationalizing everything becomes diminished- and the Christian counsellor and family need to plug into this fact. True Christianity convicts us all of sin, of our guilt before God. It was once thought that alcoholics could only be helped if they were allowed to 'hit rock bottom'. But the conviction of sin and the urgency of our position which an encounter with Christ should bring can create a crisis, a "high bottom" as AA call it, which demands radical change *before* the alcoholic has actually hit rock bottom, with all the damage this will entail.

Some Advice For Family Counsellors Of Alcoholics

- Don't be overly concerned with "success". You too are powerless in this- only faith in the "higher Power" and acceptance of His ways can bring healing.
- Don't seek to win the alcoholic's approval. The alcoholic, often unconsciously, will seek to pull you 'onside' and bring you within his web of manipulation.
- Try not to counsel the alcoholic alone. Try by all means to get his family members or at least another alcoholic involved.
- Try to understand the real feelings of the alcoholic and their family- otherwise you are only dealing with and relating to their defences.
- Only total honesty from you can hope to elicit the honesty you seek from the alcoholic. Any lack of congruence between your words and actions will lead to the alcoholic feeling justified in living a life which does the same. You have to be a model of authenticity.
- Don't give in to the demands for easy answers.
- Have regular sessions; don't allow the family or the alcoholic to just call you at any hour of the night.
- Don't be drawn into being a judge or referee of the endless family arguments that go on within alcoholic families.
- Don't end up playing the role of an enabler by bailing the alcoholic out of the consequences of his or her actions.
- Don't hide behind false professionalism, jargon etc. It's not a case of 'us and them'- many alcoholics and their families are not ignorant people, and are often surprisingly aware of many principles of psychotherapy. You too will learn by the counselling experience, and you should be humble enough to say so.
- Remember that the alcoholic and their at times impossible family are all wonderful, unique persons. Each of them is uniquely created by God, and will never ever be replicated anywhere, any time, in this entire cosmos. Treat them as they are, people in the image of God your creator.

Notes

(1) Sharon Wegscheider, *Another Chance* (Palo Alto, CA: Science & Behaviour Books, 1989) p. 83.

(2) R. Jellinek, *The Disease Concept Of Alcoholism* (New Haven, USA: College And University Press, 1960) p.130.