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Reclaiming a Holy Desperation:
John Wesley, Recovery, and the Church Today

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Churches searching for renewal in the 21st century can take lessons from both the Protestant renewal movements of the 18th century and recovery groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). AA and the small group focus in early Methodism (exemplified by the band meetings) are both examples of an understanding of social holiness. Social holiness is the growth in holiness that occurs in a social, communal context. In this paper, I examine the theological and historical connections between early Methodism, the Oxford Group and AA. Underlying the social dynamic of salvation and healing in all these groups is the need to come together to work out one's salvation in the company of others. I seek to answer the question, "What if the church viewed sin itself as an addiction?" I believe this shift in perspective may open up space for a holy desperation, leading to renewal in both the pews and the world.

Keywords: recovery, addiction, alcoholism, John Wesley, sin, band meetings, social holiness, Alcoholics Anonymous

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**Reclaiming a Holy Desperation:
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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Candler School of Theology
In Candidacy for the Degree of
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Introduction

Recovery meetings today, especially Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meetings with a focus on the 12 steps, have much in common with the transformative small groups that lay at the foundation of the Methodist movement in the 18th century. Both movements share theological and organizational practices that highlight the need for people to come together in a consistent manner to begin and continue the arduous process of restoration and healing. John Wesley (1703-91) and the early Methodists looked back to earlier pioneers such as Philip Jacob Spener (1635-1705), Anthony Horneck (1641-97) and the Moravians as they moved to reclaim a path to holiness that stressed its social nature.

Bill Wilson (1895-1971) and Bob Smith (1879-1950), the founders of AA, found their inspiration from the Oxford Group. This group was founded in 1921 and renamed in 1931.¹ The Oxford group is an important connection between recovery groups and the earlier Protestant small groups found in Moravian pietism and Methodism. Linda Mercadante writes that “while the Group took addiction seriously and focused significant attention on alcoholics, they saw these problems as only one version of humans’ perennial tendency to turn away from God. In other words, sin.”² Much like Wesley, the group understood sin to be the sign of the broken relationship between humanity and God. Both Wesley and the founders of AA understood the importance of healing this relationship through the salvation that one finds in a social context.

¹ Linda Mercadante, “Sin and Addiction: Conceptual Enemies or Fellow Travelers?,” *Religions* 6, no. 2 (2015), p. 615.

² *Ibid.*

The church today is struggling with its call to transformational, heart-filled discipleship. Many people in the West are content with a certain level of cultural Christianity, seeking ways to fit “church” into otherwise busy lives. Sundays and, on occasion, Wednesday evenings are demarcated as times of worship or fellowship; outside of those times, there seems to be little awareness of the Triune God in the lives and communities of people that make up the church today. My contention is that many in the church today have moved away from a fundamental understanding of humanity’s relationship to God - a relationship based not on our own abilities to fix ourselves or our communities but on our desperate need for God’s grace in the work of salvation.

Many have lost the sense of holy desperation and separation that soon followed Creation. Speaking of the first man, John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, wrote “he openly declared that he would no longer have God to rule over him; that he would be governed by his own will, and not the will of him who created him.”³ This state of being “governed by his own will” has not left the human condition. A diminishing awareness of sin and its power in the lives of men and women has left many with a feeling of comfort and ease in their spiritual lives. As Wesley saw in his day, there are many in the church today who lack an awareness of sin and their need for God. In this paper, I propose that one can look at sin as an addiction and that working from this model one can see many connections between Wesley’s theology of salvation as it applies to all people and the experience of people in recovery as they become sober.

I will begin by exploring the historical and theological foundations of Wesleyan theology that point toward a need for a level of social holiness in the journey of a

³ John Wesley, “The New Birth,” in *Making All Things New*, ed. Andrew Thompson (Franklin, TN: Seedbed, 2016), I.2, 75.

believer. Social holiness is not, as many tend to define it today, something akin to social justice. From the earliest days of Methodism, John Wesley understood that growth in holiness was in a communal, social context. “The consistent conviction for Wesley was that holiness is social and most reliably formed through small group accountability structures.”⁴ Social holiness entails the work of God in the heart of an individual in a social context. It is from this work that a person can then go out into the world and share what God has placed within them. This is the working definition of social holiness that I will use throughout the paper.

I will then examine some of the historical and spiritual roots of AA and other recovery movements. Next, the paper will explore some of the thematic and theological similarities and differences between addiction and the sinful nature of humanity. I will close the paper with a look at a way forward for the church today - a new way to look at our need for salvation and God’s grace through the lens of holy desperation one finds most commonly among addicts and alcoholics. A question guiding this work is “What can Christians and church leaders learn from those in recovery in terms of desperation for healing and salvation?”

Historical/Theological Roots

Transformational small groups are not a new phenomena in the religious life. Many of the early Protestant reformers saw these groups as vital elements in the renewal of personal piety in the midst of an increasingly monolithic church. They also felt that small groups that focused on an increase in personal holiness and piety would, in turn, lead to a renewal in the church. An important early leader in these reform movements

⁴ Kevin Watson, *Pursuing Social Holiness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 44.

was Philip Jacob Spener (1635-1705). In the 17th century, Spener looked to the formation of *collegia pietatis* (schools of piety) to aid young believers in reclaiming a certain level of piety he saw as lacking in the institutional church.⁵ These meetings were early examples of the small groups within the larger church that were reflective of the Methodist band meetings of the 18th century. Kevin Watson writes, “The *collegia pietatis* are a key place to start in the search for forerunners of the early Methodist band meeting, because the *collegia* ... gave rise to the practice of gathering together committed disciples in order to provide further instruction and encouragement in their Christian discipleship.”⁶

There were differences in what occurred at each of these meetings. The biggest difference was the time of confession in the band meetings and its importance in the framework of social holiness. But the formation of the *collegia* within the structure of the larger church as a means of ushering in a time of personal and ecclesial renewal highlights the importance of these early meetings, especially as they relate to the later Moravian *Banden* meetings.

At almost the same time, Anthony Horneck began forming religious societies that owed much of their structure and theological framework to Spener (and, before him, Martin Bucer).⁷ Horneck had been raised and educated in what is now Germany during a time of both political and religious upheaval. He moved to London in 1661 and soon after converted to the Anglican Church. His background and beliefs which had been

⁵ Philip Jacob Spener, *Pia Desideria*, trans. Theodore Tappert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1964), 114.

⁶ Watson, *Pursuing Social Holiness*, 19.

⁷ Scott Kisker, *Foundation For Revival* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 68-69.

formed by Continental Pietism, however, were never far from his heart. It was in this space of theological tension that Horneck began to develop a form of “Anglican Pietism.”⁸ One expression of this hybridity was the religious societies begun by Horneck in London in 1678. These societies were formed and organized by Horneck, consisting “of some of the young men who heard him preach ...”⁹ with the expressed intent of helping them continue to cultivate a deepening piety within a social framework.

As the groups continued to form, Horneck drew up a set of rules to govern them. The rules both helped further define what these groups were in relation to the Anglican Church and give them direction and purpose. The first rule of the religious societies was clear about the aim and purpose of these meetings - “That the sole design of this Society being to promote real Holiness of Heart and Life: It is absolutely necessary that the persons who enter into it, do seriously resolve to apply themselves in good earnest to all means proper ‘to make them wise unto salvation.’”¹⁰ One can see the connection in this important foundational rule of the societies to both Wesley’s consistent call for people to seek holiness of heart and life and the theme of singleness of purpose within the traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA).¹¹

Just over a half century later, John Wesley would begin organizing small groups of believers who were aching for a more intimate relationship with others as a means of

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Kisker, 209. Kisker notes that the text of the rules are taken from the work of Josiah Woodward, specifically his 1698 book *Account of the Rise and Progress of the Religious Societies in the City of London*, pp. 131-134.

¹¹ Tradition 5 of AA states that “Each group has but one primary purpose - to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.” From *The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (New York: AA Publishing, 1981), 150.

growing in holiness. These bands were directly influenced by the Moravian *Banden* which began under the direction of Nicolas von Zinzendorf (1700-1760) in continental Europe at Herrnhut. Zinzendorf had initially allowed Austrian emigrants to relocate to his estate and among them were members of the Moravian Brethren.¹² Over the coming years, Zinzendorf took on the leadership of the community and continued to draw its focus towards a “religion of the heart” that focused on social experiences of God through group prayer, fasting and meeting in small groups to grow in piety and holiness.

For Zinzendorf, the purpose of the *Banden* was not to become dependent on one another; it was to ‘see the rightness of heart.’ Those who were involved in band meetings were transparent with one another so that they knew what was really going on in the depths of each other’s lives ... In the *Banden*, members held a mirror up to one another’s lives, helping each person more clearly see the true state of their own life with God.¹³

It was the experiential nature of Moravian pietism that had a strong early influence on Wesley. The impact of the Moravians on Wesleyan theology of social holiness and communal discipleship cannot be ignored. “On board the *Simmonds* late in 1735, bound from Gravesend, England, to the Georgia colony in North America, where the Moravians planned a new settlement, August Gottlieb Spangenberg (1704-92) and a company of Moravians encountered an idealistic band of young Anglican clergy from Oxford,”¹⁴ among whom were John and Charles Wesley.

After a relatively disastrous sojourn in the colonies, both brothers (at different times) limped back to England. They carried with them some of the conversations and

¹² Ted Campbell, *Religion of the Heart* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 92.

¹³ Watson, *Pursuing Social Holiness*, 24.

¹⁴ Campbell, 98.

experiences they had with the Moravians on the trip as they sought to reclaim a transformative level of piety and devotion in their lives. They had been meeting with others in Oxford as early as 1730, but it was after their return from Georgia that the Methodist movement (grounded in the model of transformative discipleship in small groups) began to take shape.

The bands proliferated as the societies grew. The bands, in this context, were somewhat more distinctively Wesleyan than the societies as a whole ... They were small groups of five to ten persons who voluntarily banded together for intense spiritual nurture and support. Their primary activities were confession and prayer; their goal was spiritual growth.¹⁵

Wesley understood the importance of these groups within the larger structure of the Church of England. The small group experience that started with the bands and then became more prevalent in the class meetings was of vital importance to the early revival spirit of the Methodist groups within the Church.

Much of this transformative dynamic that embodied these early examples of small groups in the 17th and 18th century has been lost over time. Today, many view the presence of *any* small group in the church as a sign that the church is reclaiming this important aspect of discipleship and social holiness. In 2010, the United Methodist Church (UMC) commissioned a report by Towers Watson, a “leading global advisory, broking and solutions company that helps clients around the world turn risk into a path for growth.”¹⁶ The report, entitled “UMC Call To Action: Vital Congregations Research

¹⁵ Richard Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 114.

¹⁶ “Willis Towers Watson: Overview,” [willistowerswatson.com](https://www.willistowerswatson.com/en-US/about-us/overview), accessed March 30, 2017, <https://www.willistowerswatson.com/en-US/about-us/overview>

Project,” lists small groups as a key marker of congregational vitality.¹⁷ One issue with the report is the fact that small groups are lumped together with children and youth programs. Additionally, “small groups include study, fellowship, and service. Programs include classes and other activities.”¹⁸ This is a wide definition of small group but one that seems to be the norm for many churches today. The study found that “60% of churches with high vitality have over 5 small groups.”¹⁹ The problem, of course, is the definition of “vital.” The authors state that “this research project will not attempt to define church vitality per se, but instead mine data in order to identify the specific, measurable factors that promote vitality.”²⁰ Small groups, according to the study, is simply one factor out of many to be mined for data in search of church vitality.

This view of small group points, I believe, to a larger cultural trend that looks to quantify growth and success in all areas. The small groups exemplified by the Moravian *Banden* and the class and band meetings of early Methodism were of a much different nature. Speaking about the class meeting, Kevin Watson writes, “These groups are primarily focused on living and not learning. They are especially focused on being made new by the grace of God, not only receiving new ideas about God.”²¹ Most small groups, however, do not fall into this category. They tend to lack the transformational nature of

¹⁷ Towers Watson, “UMC Call to Action: Vital Congregations Research Project,” published by Towers Watson, June 28, 2010, 28. The other markers of vitality are: worship service (contemporary, traditional or mix), pastor (“excellence in key attributes” and length of appointment) and lay leadership (effectiveness and involvement in specific programs).

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 106.

²¹ Kevin Watson, *The Class Meeting* (Wilmore, KY: Seedbed, 2014), 6.

class and band meetings; people generally find it easier to connect on a more superficial level than what is called for in these types of groups.

The Oxford Group and AA

The lack of connection on an honest and intimate level is one of the ways that the church in the 21st century is falling short of God's hope for our transformation, renewal and salvation. In Leviticus, we get an idea about how important connection and the social context is to growth in holiness. Leviticus 19 especially lays out many of the ways God calls the people to live that reflects a different kind of life. "The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: 'Speak to all the congregations of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy'" (Lev. 19:1-2). Later, vv. 17-18 highlight the key passages in this chapter - "You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

In Romans, Paul offers words of God's hope and love and what that love looks like among believers. "Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to the stranger" (Rom. 12:9-13). In these two passages, we see God's hope for creation. It is a hope shaped by the other, not a constant inward reflection on the self. Moses is entreated to speak "to all the congregations" and Paul calls the community to love one another with zeal and affection.

The Protestant leaders mentioned earlier saw the deep need for this type of connection among the people they led. There are small pockets within the church today that are indeed striving for this type of small group ministry, but they often find themselves groping for a way forward after the initial zeal of renewal. I believe that the church today can learn many lessons from the recovery communities that occupy many of their basements on weekday evenings all around the country. Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) is the most well-known and largest of these groups with a membership of just over 2 million people worldwide.²² The connection between AA and the church goes well beyond the smoky church basements that the groups often inhabit. The themes of sin, grace, salvation and good works as a fruit of a renewed relationship with God are found in the writings and experiences of people in both AA and the church.²³

From its inception, AA was deeply connected to an evangelical movement that began in the early 20th century called the Oxford Group. The connection between AA and the Oxford Group is one that is generally overlooked, but to ignore it would be to see only a portion of the history of AA and some of its foundational roots in an evangelical group that flourished in the early 1900's in America. The Oxford Group was founded by Frank Buchman (1878-1971), a Lutheran pastor. Buchman was concerned with the increase in focus on the liberal social gospel that seemed to be spreading in many of the mainline denominations at the time. He felt as though the church was

²² "Estimated Worldwide A.A. Individual and Group Membership," AA.org. Last modified 5/2015. http://www.aa.org/assets/en_US/smf-132_en.pdf

²³ For this paper, I will refer to the "Higher Power" in AA literature as God for the sake of continuity when discussing the two areas. There are reasons why the founders of AA chose the term higher power that lay beyond the scope of this study. Most AA's, even those of an agnostic bent, refer to God rather than "Higher Power."

leading people away from an awareness of their sins and shifting the focus to the systemic sins of the time.

Buchman stressed theological simplicity and showed little interest in the intellectual life. He summed up the group's philosophy in just a few central concepts: All people are sinners, all sinners can be changed, confession is a prerequisite to change, the changed can access God directly, miracles are again possible, and the changed must change others.²⁴

Buchman's theology of sin and conversion formed the basis for the Oxford group in its early days. There was a level of simplicity in Buchman's evangelical understanding of sin and his need for Christ to overcome it. But this simplicity shouldn't be misconstrued as shallowness. James Bezzant, writing at the time in which the Oxford Group was rising in prominence on the American religious landscape, describes Buchman's conversion experience:

One day, through a simple exposition of the meaning of the Cross by an unknown person, there was revealed to him the truth about himself. Therewith he felt the power of Christ. Doubts and hesitations fled. Thenceforward he has devoted himself to sharing his transforming experience with others.²⁵

Buchman had undergone a spiritual conversion and now sought to share his experience with others.

Buchman began to bring others together to share their common experience of God's transforming grace and the powerful work of the Holy Spirit in what he called "house parties."²⁶ At these gatherings, Buchman and "his trained helpers 'came alongside' invited guests. Their goal was to lead them to realize and then confess their

²⁴ Linda Mercadante, *Victims and Sinners* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 52.

²⁵ James Stanley Bezzant, "'The Groups'," *Modern Churchman* 21, no. 10 (January 1932), 538.

²⁶ Mercadante, *Sin and Addiction*, 616.

personal failings and pray for God's help in restoring them to spiritual health."²⁷ One can see hints of the basic framework of Wesleyan soteriology in Buchman's view of salvation. The group "was interested in awakening a sense of sin, prompting a desire for conversion, and getting people to turn their lives over to God."²⁸ Awakening, desire for repentance and conversion and a drive to turn one's life over to God - these are representative of some of the hallmarks of both Wesley's understanding of salvation and AA's explanation of what happens as the drunk becomes sober and reconnects with God.

Samuel Shoemaker (1893-1963), an Episcopal priest, became a leading proponent of the Oxford Group in the United States in the 1930's. "Calvary Episcopal Church, in Gramercy Park, New York City, was the headquarters of the Oxford Group in the United States. Samuel Shoemaker was rector of that parish and, for a while, the principal spokesman" of the group.²⁹ Shoemaker was instrumental to the group's early successes in the U.S. His view of conversion and its work on the believer's heart is reminiscent of both Wesley and the early foundations of AA. Wesley often recorded instances of conversion and testimony in his journals. In a letter from a Mr. Flanders in December 1744, Wesley describes a young man's conversion in the midst of and soon after a battle.

The Lord pursued me with convictions, from my infancy; and I often made abundance of good resolutions: But finding, as often, that I could not keep them, (as being made wholly in my own strength,) I at length left off all striving, and gave myself over to all manner of lewdness and profaneness ... So I continued for

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ R. Michael Wyatt, "Experience and Community: Twelve-Step Program Theory, American Pragmatism and Christian Theology," PhD dissertation, Emory University Graduate School of Religion, 1985, 63.

some years, till the Battle of Dettingen. The balls the came very thick about me, and my comrades fell on every side. Yet I was preserved unhurt. A few days after this, the Lord was pleased to visit me again. ‘The pains of hell got hold upon me, the snares of death encompassed me.’ I durst no longer commit any outward sin; and I prayed God to be merciful to my soul.³⁰

Later, the same young man said that after “the Lord had at length opened my eyes and shown me that by grace we are saved through faith, I began immediately to declare it to others.”³¹ The declaration of salvation and faith by the young man exemplifies many experiences of those who came to faith under the influence of Methodism. The desire to share of one’s conversion either through testimony or exhortation is common among those who have radical experiences of God’s grace and was also a key part of conversion for Shoemaker. “He wholeheartedly believed that ‘the test of a man’s conversion is whether he has enough Christianity to get it over to other people. If he hasn’t, there is something wrong in it.’”³²

Shoemaker was a priest cut from a decidedly evangelical cloth. He stood as a bridge between Anglican piety, the revival movements that were occurring as a response to the social gospel tilt of mainline Protestantism in the early twentieth century, and this new spiritual direction taken by those who were searching for healing from alcoholism. “Shoemaker might have been speaking for both Wesley and [John Henry] Newman when he declared ‘all spiritual experience must begin *decisively* if it is going to begin at all.’ *Decisively* involved, as he put it, the deflation ‘of personal pride in some form, often

³⁰ Wesley, *Works*, i, 477.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 478.

³² John Woolverton, “Evangelical Protestantism and Alcoholism, 1933-1962: Episcopalian Samuel Shoemaker, The Oxford Group and Alcoholics Anonymous,” *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church*, Vol. 52, No. 1 (March, 1983), 65.

unrecognizable, usually masquerading under the guise of some virtue.”³³ After this deflation came some type of confession (either in a group or, after a time, in a one-on-one setting) and then a prayer for the assurance of God’s forgiveness in the life of the sinner.

The group as part of this dynamic of deflation, confession and forgiveness was always an important part of the work of God among the people gathered in the Oxford Group. Both Shoemaker and Buchman understood that this would not be nearly as effective if people were left to their own devices as they strove for restoration and healing. “Shoemaker spoke of the ‘crucible of laymen working it out among themselves, sharing experiences with one another.’”³⁴ Working “it” out among themselves is reminiscent of an important passage for Wesley from Philippians: “Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:12-13). This passage forms the basis for Wesley’s sermon “Working Out Our Own Salvation.” In it, Wesley writes that it is

in these comprehensive words we may observe, I. That grand truth, which ought never to be out of our remembrance: “It is God that worketh in us both to will and to do of his own good pleasure.” II. The improvement we ought to make of it: “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.” III. The connexion between them: “It is God that worketh in you;” therefore, “work out your own salvation.”³⁵

³³ Ibid., 58 (emphasis original).

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Wesley, *Works*, “Working Out Our Own Salvation,” vi, 508.

It is by God working within a person that they are able to work out their own salvation. Further, doing the hard work of repentance, confession, and praying for forgiveness is best done among others who have the same goal and this fact seems to be well understood by Wesley, Buchman, Shoemaker and the early leaders of AA.

The basis of a conversion-focused theology and the importance of working out salvation in a group in the Oxford group directly informed the founders of AA as they began to form their fellowship in 1935. Bill Wilson knew Shoemaker well; he had attended Calvary Church at the behest of Dr. William Silkworth (an early proponent of understanding alcoholism as a disease and not simply due to a weak will or lack of moral character). The idea that alcoholism (and, by extension, addiction) was as much a *spiritual* problem as a physical and mental one was new. Many people had been coming to Shoemaker at Calvary Church for help with their alcoholism and had found respite from drink. In his conversations with Shoemaker, Wilson began to understand the depths of spirituality in the treatment of addiction. He had worked through what was then called the “Five C’s” of the Oxford Group (confidence, conviction, confession, conversion and continuance) with someone and had seen how they helped with his struggle to abstain from drinking.³⁶ “Giving to God, listening for God’s direction, checking for guidance, experiencing restitution of one’s true self and the sharing of one’s sins and victories were all points held in common by Shoemaker, Buchman and

³⁶ Ibid., 59.

Wilson.”³⁷ These were expanded into the Twelve Steps of AA that quickly became the foundation for the group’s work among people in need in New York and elsewhere.³⁸

Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob Smith, the co-founders of AA, initially came together in Akron, Ohio out of desperation more than anything else. Bill had only been sober a few months and found himself at the losing end of a business deal while out of town. His past experiences with relapse had shown him that the only way he knew how to stay sober was working with another alcoholic. There was no way he was going to be able to will himself to stay sober. Out of ideas, he reached out to a local clergy member and asked them if they knew anyone that was “in the cups” that he could meet. This contact put Bill in touch with a prominent family that had deep connections to a local Oxford Group. They were able to guide Bill to the home of Dr. Bob. It was when the two men first met on that day that the initial AA meeting is thought to have occurred.³⁹

While both Bill and Bob were influenced by their involvement in the Oxford Group, they both saw the need to form a fellowship that focused exclusively on alcoholism. The Oxford Group had as its focus a conversion from a life controlled by sin in whatever forms that took in the lives of members. AA, of course, took drinking as its main focus. In doing so, they never sought to completely distance themselves from the

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ See Appendix I for the proper list of the Twelve Steps according to AA. Woolverton sums up the steps in a footnote on p. 59 of his article: “They are as follows: 1) admission of powerlessness and that as alcoholics ‘our lives had become unmanageable,’ 2) the possibility of ‘salvation’ that ‘a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity,’ 4) the necessity of making a ‘searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves,’ 5) confession, that is the admitting ‘to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs,’ 6) the desire ‘to have God remove these defects of character,’ 7) prayer, 8) healing broken relationships, 9) where possible making amends for past wrongs, 10) continuation of personal inventories, 11) continuing prayer and meditation, 12) evangelism and the carrying of the message of the steps to other alcoholics.”

³⁹ Mercadante, *Victims and Sinners*, 52.

conversion experience that was the foundation of renewal espoused by the Oxford Group. “It [AA] focused on awakening one’s recognition of individual sin to the point of despair, a process which was believed to open the way to regeneration.”⁴⁰ In the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* (often referred to as the Big Book), the writers express a similar reflection on the importance of a spiritual experience in the life of the renewed alcoholic-

The great fact is just this and nothing less: That we have had deep and effective spiritual experiences which have revolutionized our whole attitude towards life, towards our fellow and towards God’s universe. The central fact of our lives today is the absolute certainty that our Creator has entered into our hearts and lives in such a way which is indeed miraculous. He has commenced to accomplish those things for us which we could never to by ourselves.⁴¹

One can easily see the implicit influence of pietism that informed the theology of the Oxford Group and, by connection, AA itself. The “absolute certainty” that God has entered into the “hearts and lives” of AAs is very similar to the assurance that believers experience at the moment of justification and new birth in Wesleyan soteriology. Both justification and new birth are connected to God’s active grace in our lives and the foundational transformations that take place when the soul responds to God’s grace. “The former [justification] relating to the great work which God does *for us*, in forgiving our sins; the latter [new birth] to the great work which God does *in us*, in renewing our fallen natures.”⁴² Both Wesley’s *via salutis* and the spiritual experiences people have as

⁴⁰ Mercadante, 60.

⁴¹ *Alcoholics Anonymous* (New York: AA World Services, 1976), 11.

⁴² John Wesley, “The New Birth,” Introduction, 1.

they work the steps of AA are intricately connected to God's grace and his power to do for those who are suffering what they cannot do for themselves.

So what is the connection between the Wesleyan emphasis on the small group in growth in holiness and discipleship and the dynamics of the modern-day recovery movement as exemplified by AA? Andrew Thompson speaks to some connective themes in his article "From Societies to Society: The Shift from Holiness to Justice in the Wesleyan Tradition." The article is a rebuke of the late-20th century tendency to conflate the Wesleyan idea of "social holiness" with "social justice." His basic argument is that

social holiness should be *neither* treated as synonymous with social justice *nor* paired with personal holiness. Indeed, social holiness should be properly understood as the key Wesleyan concept that names the environmental context in which sanctification is manifest among a community of believers.⁴³

The social aspect of holiness in Wesley's theology lies in the coming together in disciplined fellowship to more fully experience the radical and holy love and grace of God. It is a breaking down of the walls of isolation that many people experience in both their lives of faith and the struggles that come from the basic human condition of sin. Thompson writes,

Wesley's sense of social holiness is of a certain reality of graced fellowship, where men and women come to a fuller knowledge of God-in-Christ together via the change effected when grace is actively received. This use of the adjective is in its original Latin sense of *socialis*, describing those allied together for a common purpose.⁴⁴

⁴³ Andrew C. Thompson, "From societies to society: the shift from holiness to justice in the Wesleyan tradition." *Methodist Review (Online)* 3, (2011): 144-145 (emphasis original).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 162.

In the early band meetings, this common purpose was to support growth in holiness among a small group through confession and prayer. In recovery today, the common purpose is similar - it is to help the suffering alcoholic begin and continue the path of recovery from the disease of addiction. This common purpose Thompson highlights points to a connection between sin and addiction that may be easily overlooked.

Sin and Addiction

The spiritual nature of alcoholism was key in the early AA understanding of the struggle people had in getting and staying sober. In this struggle we see the group wrestling with its understanding of sin as it relates to alcoholism. The presence and power of sin in the world and in the hearts of people is a topic that is often avoided in both churches and the rooms of recovery. Today, there is a high level of discomfort in the rooms of AA when anyone shares on the topic of sin. Sin is generally viewed as a moralistic judgement leveled against someone rather than an integral part of human existence. The early groups of AA were more comfortable with the term and the idea of sin as being part of their struggle with alcohol.

The early 'alcoholic squadron' of the Oxford Group were all very familiar with the word 'sin.' Of course, the word 'sin' is only rarely used in the Big Book and is today often anathema in meetings. But that is only the surface story. For if anything, early AA was more focused on sin's hold than the Oxford Group, for they had found that alcoholism was more intransigent than many realized.⁴⁵

The early members of AA seem to be much more comfortable with the idea of sin being at least a component of the problem of alcoholism. This idea was, of course, influenced by the group's connection to the Oxford Group. But there were other influences at play

⁴⁵ Mercadante, "Sin and Addiction," 617.

in this understanding. The struggle for sobriety and against death was a truly desperate one in the early 20th century. People who had “weak wills” and couldn’t sober up were left in sanatoriums without any meaningful treatment. It was out of this desperation (and the deep influence of the Oxford Group and its theology concerning the power of sin, the importance of conversion and the necessity for groups to help one walk the path of holiness) that the early members of AA formed their understanding of alcoholism and what recovery looked like in their lives.

Christopher Cook looks at two theological frameworks of sin and how these perspectives may show a relation between addiction and sin. He examines the theologies of both Paul the apostle and St. Augustine, considering the ways in which their broad theologies and their specific views on sin and the will may be helpful when trying to construct an understanding of sin and addiction. Importantly, Cook highlights the ways in which “both Paul and Augustine wrote about the subjective experience of inner conflict, or struggle, in relation to willed action.”⁴⁶ This interior conflict is an important concept when one looks at the relationship between sin and addiction. The fact that many people continue to sin and possibly harm those closest to them in a number of ways attests to the fact that this dynamic of “inner conflict” and “willed action” is complex and deeply embedded in the human experience and “would appear to be especially relevant to the understanding of a pathology which essentially involves habitual behavior that people find difficult to control despite the pain and harm that it causes.”⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Christopher Cook, *Alcohol, Addiction and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge Press, 2006), 131.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

Paul's theology of sin seems to partially focus on the theme of bondage to sin's power. "Paul understood sin as a power over human beings which has a tendency to enslave, and to cause them to forget their creaturely dependence on God."⁴⁸ Cook points out that Paul doesn't dwell on the source of this power; instead, "he was concerned much more with its reality in human experience."⁴⁹ In himself and in the communities he planted, Paul probably saw this dynamic acted out again and again. In Galatians, Paul implores the community to live for the freedom gained in Christ and to not "submit again to a yoke of slavery" (Gal. 5:1). He goes on to call them to not live according to the flesh, gratifying its desires, but to live by the Spirit (5:16).

Paul also addresses the issue of what Cook and others call "the divided self" and the drive that many seem to have to do that which is contrary to what they know is right. In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes,

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. (Romans 7:15-20, NRSV).

In Paul's cry we hear the tension inherent in humanity. We so often do that which we know is wrong while at the same time not wanting to do so. It is the "sin that dwells within" that pushes us to walk away from God, to change our orientation from the path of holiness and righteousness to one of brokenness and sin. Creation is ultimately

⁴⁸ Cook, 136.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

relational; God created humanity out of love, seeking relationship with the first man and woman. It is the broken relationship that most affects our relation to God. Mercadante writes that “Sin is first about orientation. One’s *telos*, direction, primary attachment—rather than beliefs or behavior—is what is most radically affected by sin. One continually has the choice to turn toward or away from God, the source of our being.”⁵⁰ While this definition is different than Paul’s focus on sin as bondage, it still encapsulates another layer of sin that isn’t far-removed from the idea of bondage. If one is enslaved to a power that draws them away from God, they can’t reorient themselves back to God on their own. It is only by God’s grace that humanity can begin to make that move.

Augustine’s views on sin are wide-ranging and robust; a cursory look at one aspect of them may lead to a fuller understanding of the power of sin and its nature as it relates to addiction. Augustine does not fully believe in the existence of evil *by nature*. He believes that evil is a perversion of the good or a “striving or desire for a lesser good”⁵¹ and that this continuous striving is the seedbed of sin, the place in which it grows and flourishes. Ultimately, though, sin can be traced back to the fall in the perfection of the Garden. Sin is an original desertion of good, not a longing for evil.

Likewise because sin, or unrighteousness, is not the striving after evil nature but the desertion of better, it is thus found written in the Scriptures: “Every creature of God is good.” And accordingly every tree also which God planted in Paradise is assuredly good. Man did not therefore strive after an evil nature when he touched the forbidden tree; but by deserting what was better, he committed an evil deed.⁵²

⁵⁰ Mercadante, *Victims*, 28.

⁵¹ Cook, 148.

⁵² Augustine, “Concerning the Nature of Good, Against the Manichaeans,” [orthodoxchurchfathers.com](http://orthodoxchurchfathers.com/fathers/npnf104/npnf1056.htm#P2701_1590887), accessed March 30, 2017, http://orthodoxchurchfathers.com/fathers/npnf104/npnf1056.htm#P2701_1590887

It is this turning and walking away from God, this desertion, that leads to deep and profound alienation. “Alienated from the knowledge and love of God, encased in isolation, men and women immediately engage in a species of idolatry by worshiping themselves as the center of meaning in life.”⁵³ The sinner (and, more acutely, the addict) finds themselves walking further into the darkness of isolation and separation from God and neighbor. While sin is not strictly a moral or behavioral issue, one cannot say that behavior and choice do not enter into the picture. A person’s behavior and moral inclinations can, and do, shift as the result of this continual walk away from God.

The sinner, like the addict, becomes less and less free, more compulsive and less integral ... For the notion of addiction underscores the paralyzing loss of freedom endemic to sin. Having cooperated in sin the ‘addict’ is now in another place, a place from which return is not so simple as entry had been.⁵⁴

The sinner as addict now finds themselves in profound isolation from God, not knowing which way leads back to the light of God’s presence.

The connection between sin and addiction becomes more nuanced when one looks at it from the disease model perspective. AA had held, from its inception, that alcoholism does not originate from a “weak will” or moral failure on the part of the alcoholic. Rather, the alcoholic suffers from a disease that affect them both physically, mentally and spiritually. Dr. William Silkworth, in the chapter of the Big Book of AA entitled “The Doctor’s Opinion,” writes that he believes “that the action of alcohol on these chronic alcoholics is a manifestation of an allergy; that the phenomenon of craving

⁵³ Kenneth Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), 69.

⁵⁴ Patrick McCormick, *Sin as Addiction* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 171-72.

is limited to this class and never occurs in the average temperate drinker.”⁵⁵ The disease of addiction is based on an allergy, a negative reaction in the body and brain to the substance being taken. It is a reaction to the substance that often takes away the freedom of choice in the user. It is seen as progressive and powerful; the longer one uses a substance, the stronger the addiction becomes until (like sin) the addict finds themselves deep in the woods of separation with no way out.

McCormick makes a similar argument about sin as a disease and posits that this perspective may be an important way to look at recovery from both sin and addiction. He points out that the ministries of Christ are very often speaking to the kind of brokenness and sickness that we equate with disease. He writes that Jesus’s “life and ministry is a constant struggle with the crippling and disintegrating power of sin, a power from which he has come to save a humanity (personal and communal) which cannot save itself.”⁵⁶ Sin as a disease and the sinner as someone who is ill continually comes up in the Gospel teachings and ministries of Christ. In a back and forth with Pharisees over who he chooses to eat with, Jesus says, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance” (Luke 5:31-32). Just before this encounter, Jesus reinforces his work of forgiveness and healing in his healing of the paralytic (Luke 5:18-26). It is the sinners who are forgiven through repentance, not those who are “well.” “Sin as a state, a chronic reality persisting through the story of the person, and sin as power, a disintegrating

⁵⁵ *Alcoholics Anonymous*, xxvi.

⁵⁶ McCormick, 130.

experience threatening the core freedom of the person, represent fundamental biblical insights into the experience of human sinfulness.”⁵⁷

McCormick goes further as he explores the ways in which sin can itself be seen as an addiction. He begins by offering various definitions of addiction provided by others who work in the field.⁵⁸ From these, McCormick comes up with a general definition of addiction as a “pathological relationship with a mood altering substance or process.”⁵⁹ He also (importantly) points out the tendency of a person to build up “a belief system ... around the user’s relationship to his/her addiction and its increasing importance.”⁶⁰

This is key when looking at sin as an addiction. The cyclical nature of addiction is similar to the nature of a life ruled by sin. There is often a healthy amount of justification of the behaviors or thoughts that draw a person away from God. This justification and continual walk away from the presence of God’s love can fundamentally change the heart of a person. Wesley recognizes this particular power of sin well. “For all this time he is the servant of sin. He commits sin, more or less, day by day. Yet he is not troubled: He is ‘in no bondage,’ as some speak: he feels no condemnation ... He contends himself with, ‘Man is frail. We are all weak. Every man has his infirmity.’”⁶¹

⁵⁷ Ibid., 131.

⁵⁸ McCormick, 149-50. Patrick Carnes describes addiction “as ‘a pathological relationship with a mood altering substance’” that leads the addict to believe “that he/she has found a constant, repeatable and ultimately dependable substance which is capable of relieving pain...” David Smith, who worked at the Haight-Asbury Clinic in San Francisco, “describes an addiction as the compulsive use of a substance or involvement in a process in spite of its painful and unreasonable consequences.” Anne Wilson Shaef “defines an addiction as ‘any process over which we are powerless. It takes control of us, causing us to do and think things that are inconsistent with our personal values and leading us to become progressively more compulsive and obsessive.’”

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Wesley, *Works*, “The Spirit of Bondage and of Adoption,” v., 101, I.7.

This justification of sin as simply being part of who we are is similar to the alcoholic's attempt to write off their drinking as "who they are" or being unable to see what they are doing is damaging and dangerous. In the story from the Big Book entitled "The Career Officer," the writer recounts a painful journey out of the Army and into mental hospitals because of his drinking. "I couldn't understand myself. I was intensely unhappy the whole time, but I didn't seem to be able to do anything about it ... My only hope was to try and get through what was left of life as best I could, but I could never visualize doing that without drinking."⁶² This story is common among the rooms of recovery. While this part of the story does seem to point to a recognition of a problem, there is no attempt yet to move past the bondage of alcoholism. The man seems to throw his hands up and resign himself to his fate of dying as a drunk.

McCormick outlines some ways in which sin can be thought of as an addiction and it is in these correlations that we can see how Wesley's *via salutis* and its hope for restoration from the fallen, broken nature of humanity is similar to what one experiences in recovery from chemical dependency. The framework of sin as it relates to humanity begins with a "core element of both sin and addiction" which "is the refusal to accept our own limitations, our own imperfections, our own creatureliness."⁶³ Next is what he calls "a conversion to some part of creation,"⁶⁴ an attempt to find something other than God to be God. This takes the person into the realm of idolatry which can itself turn into an addiction to things with which we choose to replace God. These things

⁶² *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 522.

⁶³ McCormick, 161.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

(drugs, sex, consumerism, etc.) may offer a brief respite from the emptiness of idolatry, but this hole will continue to grow as the path one takes leads further from God.

Sin then creates a dynamic of bondage and loss of freedom as one continues to replace God with things that are not God. “With the growth of sin’s power the sinner becomes less able to change, grow or repent.”⁶⁵ As the addict takes more and more of a drug, the bondage to the substance becomes progressively stronger. So also with one wrapped in the bondage of sin. The “freedom” that one perceives in a life disconnected from God is actually indicative of a crippling lack of freedom. There is a hardening of the heart that begins to take place. Wesley’s understanding of the power of sin is striking. He writes that the believer will quickly find that “sin is mightier than he. He would fain escape; but he is so fast in prison that he cannot get forth ... He sees the snare, and abhors, and runs into it.”⁶⁶ The power and draw of sin can take over a person just as the addict seems to have no power to turn away from the drug. “The more he strives, wishes, labors to be free, the more does he feel his chains, the grievous chains of sin, wherewith Satan binds and ‘leads him captive at his will.’”⁶⁷

After a time, the destructive nature of sin leads to a high level of alienation - from God and the world. “It systematically undermines and distorts all significant relationships.”⁶⁸ Sin, like addiction, twists all meaningful relationships into ones based on self-centered fear and isolation. Again and again, the testimonies in *Alcoholics Anonymous* point to relationships that are destroyed by drinking. Wives, husbands,

⁶⁵ Ibid., 162.

⁶⁶ Wesley, *Works*, “The Spirit of Bondage and of Adoption,” 104, I.7.

⁶⁷ Ibid., I.8.

⁶⁸ McCormick, 162.

children, employers - everyone who happens to live in the wide periphery of the alcoholic or addict is effected in a negative manner by the persons actions. Ultimately, it is the restoration of these relationships (first with God and then with neighbor) that is the hope of both recovery and the *via salutis*.

McCormick comes to a concluding synopsis of the relationship between addiction and sin that highlights how interconnected they are (and how one can easily see sin as an addiction).

It would seem therefore that structurally sin operates as an addiction in a number of ways. The sinner is like an addict—denying his/her creatureliness, refusing to let God be God, creating a delusional world through deception, denial and projection, becoming alienated from all others and destroying the self in a spiral of disintegration ending in death.⁶⁹

In his sermon “The Wilderness State,” Wesley attests to this understanding of sin and how easy it can be for a person to walk into the wilderness of sin and stay there. He compares those who wander from God by their own free will to the Israelites wandering in the desert, slowly filling with fear and doubt about God’s providence and presence. Throughout the sermon, Wesley returns to the theme of what is lost as a person is overtaken by inward darkness. There is “the loss of that faith which God once wrought in their heart. They that are *in the wilderness* ... have not now that inward demonstration of the Spirit ... darkness is again on the face of their souls, and blindness on the eyes of their understanding.”⁷⁰ Following this loss of faith, as one continues to walk the path of sin, is the loss of love, joy in the Holy Ghost and, ultimately, “the loss of

⁶⁹ Ibid., 162-3.

⁷⁰ Wesley, *Works*, “The Wilderness State,” vi, 78, 2 (emphasis original).

that peace that surpasses all understanding.”⁷¹ Separation and loss are intricately connected to a life controlled by sin.

Wesley held a view of original sin that was foundational to his understanding of the human condition. Sin is part of who we are as humans; to try and embark on the way of salvation without this understanding will lead to a somewhat fruitless journey. Wesley recognizes that the idea of original sin being a powerful component of humankind’s natural state is not one that most people are comfortable with - “For who is not easily persuaded to think favorably of himself? ... So that it is now quite unfashionable to talk otherwise, to say anything to the disparagement of human nature.”⁷² For Wesley, this natural state of humanity is unavoidable if one reads Scripture carefully. “These accounts, however pleasing to flesh and blood, are utterly irreconcilable with the scriptural.”⁷³ The state of original sin begins with Adam and it is from this originating loss of the *imago dei* that the natural state was twisted into one defined by brokenness and separation from God. Wesley continues through the state of humanity before the flood and shows that “‘God saw all the imaginations of the thoughts of his heart;’—of his soul, his inward man, the spirit within him, the principle of all his inward and outward motions”⁷⁴ and in his seeing, God saw that the nature of humanity was stained by original sin.

This state still exists to this day, imprinted on the soul of all; in humanity’s natural state, people are blind to their real nature. “So long as a man born blind

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, I.1-4.

⁷² Wesley, *Works*, “Original Sin,” vi, 55, 3.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 56, I.2.

continues so, he is scarce sensible of the want of it. In like manner, so long as men remain in their natural blindness of understanding, they are not sensible in their spiritual wants..."⁷⁵ This "spiritual blindness" is indicative of the natural state of humanity. Before any type of awakening, the blindness is all one knows.

Original sin relates to addiction in a nuanced way. Mercadante writes that "original sin is our inherited predilection for disorder and our emergence into a world already bent by sin. Actual sin is our response to this predicament."⁷⁶ Looking at sin within the framework of these two typologies is one way to connect original sin and addiction. The natural state of sin does make it more difficult for someone to respond to the brokenness with grace and obedience. There is a certain level of "inherited vulnerabilities"⁷⁷ that makes a faithful response to God's grace difficult and it is this difficulty that often frames the addict's inability to become sober. Addiction is itself wrapped within this larger struggle of original sin, its power and pervasiveness and humanity's struggle to respond to God's call to healing and restoration in the midst of a broken state.

Recovery

If sin and humanity's addiction to it is part of our natural state, where then do we find healing? What is the "one thing needful" that humanity longs for but is unable to reach by its own work? Wesley rightly points out that "this great work, this one thing needful, is the renewal of our fallen nature."⁷⁸ The whole work of salvation is pointed

⁷⁵ Ibid., 58, II.3.

⁷⁶ Mercadante, *Victims and Sinners*, 126.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 127.

⁷⁸ Wesley, "The One Thing Needful," I.2.

towards the renewal of the *imago dei* in the soul of the fallen. It was in this image that humanity was created but quickly rebelled against. “In the image of God was man made, but a little lower than angels ... But sin has now effaced the image of God ... His soul is not only earthly and sensual, but devilish. Thus is the mighty fallen! The glory is departed from him! His brightness is swallowed up in utter darkness!”⁷⁹ This restoration begins almost immediately after the fall. While the consequence for disobedience is death (Gen. 3:3), God’s grace ultimately shines through. Instead of death, Adam and Eve are banished from the garden (Gen. 3:24). There is, from the beginning, a chance for restoration (even though the consequences given may seem severe).

This renewal is spoken of by prophets such as Isaiah when he tells the people of Israel, “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through the fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you” (Isa. 43:1-2). In Jesus, God reveals the ultimate restorer; in the Incarnation, the salvific powers of God are fully revealed. “For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10). Augustine finds restoration for humanity in the place of rest with God, when the soul can calm its restless spirit and find peace - “You arouse us so that praising you may bring us joy, because you have made us and drawn us to yourself, and our heart is unquiet until it rests in you.”⁸⁰

We know from scripture that our healing ultimately comes from Jesus, but there are concrete and ongoing ways in which we experience the grace of God on the path of

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Augustine, *Confessions*, I.1.

recovery. Both Wesleyan soteriology and recovery from addiction begin from a moment of awakening followed by repentance. In his sermon “The Spirit of Bondage and Adoption,” Wesley recognizes the lack of freedom (bondage) that our sinful natures put us in and where true freedom originates. Referencing Romans 8:15 (“For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’”), Wesley writes that “the spirit of bondage and fear is widely distant from this loving Spirit of adoption.”⁸¹ This bondage, this lack of freedom that Wesley diagnoses in the “natural man” comes from a state of sleep that a person cannot relieve on their own. “For his soul is in a deep sleep: His spiritual senses are not awake: They discern neither spiritual good nor evil.”⁸² There is safety and security in this state; the sinner knows nothing outside of themselves.

As stated previously, this may seem like a certain type of freedom, but it is actually a deepening state of bondage. The sinner continues to walk the way of death without even knowing it. Wesley himself makes a connection between addiction and sin in this sermon - “It is not surprising, if one in such circumstances as these, dosed with the opiates of flattery and sin, should imagine, among his other waking dreams, that he walks in great *liberty*.”⁸³ The freedom one feels in this state is completely false; the sinner/addict is so wrapped up in this state that they believe they are free when in fact they are held captive. Many alcoholics experience the same captivity in a false sense of freedom. One story in the Big Book relates the case of a newspaper reporter who

⁸¹ Wesley, *Works*, “The Spirit of Bondage and of Adoption,” v, I.2.

⁸² *Ibid.*, I.1.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, I.6.

continuously travels around the country, chasing job after job, running from his familial responsibilities and couching his spiral into alcoholism as freedom.⁸⁴

Then comes the awakening, which can be quite upsetting and painful. “By some awful providence, or by his word applied with the demonstration of his Spirit, God touches the heart of him that lay asleep in darkness and in the shadow of death.”⁸⁵ This awakening fits perfectly with the larger structure of Wesleyan soteriology as well as the path many addicts travel on the road of recovery. “Perhaps in a moment, perhaps by degrees, the eyes of his understanding are opened and now first...discern the real state he is in.”⁸⁶ This is similar to the addict waking up from a serious bender and realizing, somewhere deep within, that this life cannot continue. *Alcoholics Anonymous* highlights this struggle and its necessity as part of the process of awakening.

Most of us have been unwilling to admit we were real alcoholics. No person likes to think he is bodily and mentally different from his fellows ... We learned that we had to fully concede to our innermost selves that we were alcoholics. This is the first step in recovery.⁸⁷

This concession is akin to a person fully understanding that they are a sinner and in need of God’s forgiveness and grace during this time of reckoning.

The idea of a spiritual death is now embodied in the distance possibility of a physical death. This awakening is loosely connected to the First Step of AA - “We admitted we were powerless over alcohol, that our lives had become unmanageable.” This is the first part of the discernment that Wesley discusses in “The Spirit of Bondage

⁸⁴ “The News Hawk,” in *AA*, 251-260.

⁸⁵ Wesley, *Works*, “The Spirit of Bondage and of Adoption,” v. II.1.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 30.

and Adoption.” The first move that we cannot save ourselves and that salvation *must* come from outside is the most fundamental part of a program of recovery. The same can be said about the first action of God on the soul in conversion. Surrender to God plays a pivotal role in both the sinner and the addict. This admittance of powerlessness is another reminder that salvation and restoration is, ultimately, the work of God within the person.

This glimpse of light that dawns at the beginning of the 12 steps becomes brighter and brighter as one continues to do the work necessary to respond to God’s gift of grace. Steps 2 and 3 continue to break down the barrier of selfishness and radical isolation. The person comes “to believe that a power greater than ourselves can restore us to sanity” which leads to the ability to make “a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God.”⁸⁸ Again, it is only by God’s grace that these steps can be taken with a full heart. In Wesleyan terms, this is the beginnings of the new birth. “But as soon as he is born of God, there is a total change in these particulars. The ‘eyes of his understanding are opened’ ... His ears are being opened, he is now capable of hearing the inward voice of God saying, ‘Be of good cheer; thy sins are forgiven thee.’”⁸⁹ The voice of God begins to draw the sinner back to a place of restoration just as the early steps draws the alcoholic out of their isolation and back to God.

The remainder of the steps (4-12) are similar to the ongoing process of sanctification, or growing in holiness. A person begins (with the help of a sponsor, or a person who guides them through the steps) to take account of their past sins and

⁸⁸ Ibid., 59.

⁸⁹ Wesley, *Works*, “The New Birth,” vi., II.4, 70.

patterns of alienation and then ask God to remove these shortcomings (steps 4-7). The alcoholic then makes a list of the people in their life they have harmed with their past behaviors and reaches out to them to make amends and, if by God's grace, begin new relationships (steps 8 and 9).

Steps 10, 11 and 12 are all part of the continuing practice of what Wesley would call growing in holiness. There is a continual "personal inventory" taken to keep temptations to revert back to the previous ways of dealing with God and neighbor at bay (step 10), followed by step 11 which is a continual seeking "through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God *as we understood Him*, praying only for knowledge of His will and the power to carry that out."⁹⁰ Finally, step 12 highlights the awakening of the spirit and the call of God to bring the message and presence of healing and restoration to other who are still hurting. "Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs."⁹¹ Note that there is a bridge between carrying the message to alcoholics and allowing the work of God's grace to carry over to the totality of a person's life. A life transformed for the alcoholic doesn't only mean the person won't drink; there is a total renewal of that person's soul that hopefully affects every part of their life.

This is the point in which the social aspect of discipleship and holiness is brought back into the discussion. Repentance, or the turning back to God by the sinner/addict, cannot happen wholly in isolation. Thompson points out that the only place Wesley uses

⁹⁰ *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 59.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 60.

the term “social holiness” in his writings is in his *Preface* to his *Hymns and Sacred Poems*. In it, Wesley writes against the solitary religion of the “mystics” —“Directly opposite to this is the gospel of Christ. Solitary religion is not to be found there. ‘Holy solitaires’ is a phrase no more consistent with the gospel than holy adulterers. The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness.”⁹² One cannot work out one’s salvation in isolation; the environment for growth in holiness and the recovery of the *imago dei*, the holy love of God is fundamentally social.

This makes sense if we understand sin as partially relational. The breaking of the relationship between the sinner and God creates isolation. Sin cripples the sinner, affecting their whole life and progressively taking them over. So if sin is (in part) relational, then recovery from the fundamental state of brokenness will be most meaningful if it takes place in a social/relation-based environment. This marks one place in which the realization of God’s grace in the journey becomes more apparent. God’s grace is most fully realized, especially for people who have cut themselves off from it for so long, in the company of others who have come together in grace-filled fellowship. Andrew Thompson calls these meetings “prudential means of grace” or ways in which our experiences are formed and informed by Biblical witness in the current context.⁹³ It is in the experiences people have when experiencing these means of grace that they are transformed and renewed. The three key components to true discipleship, according to Thompson, are community, discipline and transformation.⁹⁴ All three are present in some way in the Wesleyan small group model, especially the band meeting.

⁹² Wesley, *Works*, “Preface to Hymns and Sacred Poems,” xiv., 321.

⁹³ Andrew Thompson, *The Means of Grace* (Franklin, TN: Seedbed, 2015), xxi.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, xvii.

Both the class and band meeting afforded early Methodists with a place to come together in small groups in prayer, testimony and (in the band meeting) confession of sins. They were often places of intense spiritual experiences with support and prayer for people who were new or growing in faith.

Recovery meetings often serve the same purpose. There is a sense of community in the singleness of purpose that one hears in the rooms of AA. Tradition five of AA states, “Each group has but one primary purpose—to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.”⁹⁵ The steps are read at every meeting so someone new to the program and possibly still “asleep” in the spiritual sense will begin to gain an understanding of what is expected in the program of AA. There is a sense of mutuality, of holding on to the same life raft, that one experiences in recovery. The people one meets have all been where the newcomer is, spiritually. They have been at the bottom of a well, looking for a way out and maybe seeing none for a time. This is where many people meet God for the first time and this encounter can be life-changing if allowed to work within the heart and mind.

The importance of social holiness and the Pietist influence on transformation of the heart through transparency and dependence on the grace of God are just as important in recovery as they were to the early Methodists and still hold a key place in the renewal of the church today. Many people who experience relapse in their recovery speak first of pulling away from meetings and regular groups as the beginning of their slide out of sobriety. Time and again, addicts and alcoholics have spoken of the trap of feeling as though they were better and no longer needed to go to as many meetings as

⁹⁵ *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, (New York: AA World Services, 1999), 150.

before. The farther away from the last drink they got, they somehow began to forget where they had come from. The loss of the social support (and relationships based on honesty and accountability) that they had from regular attendance at AA meetings led them to a backsliding that could not be corrected on their own. They have, in a way, “taken back” the first step and their utter dependence on the grace of God to provide them the way of salvation.

This comfortability that is sometimes provided by transformation is also recognized by Wesley as a danger as one travels the way of salvation. “How naturally do those who experience such a change imagine that all sin is gone; that it is utterly rooted out of their heart, and has no more place therein!”⁹⁶ The transformed heart needs others to continue the work of renewal or the isolation and separation will return. “But it is seldom long before they are undeceived, finding sin was only suspended, not destroyed. Temptations return, and sin revives; showing it was but stunned before, not dead.”⁹⁷ It is the return of temptation and the re-awakening of sin that the social context of growth in holiness guards against. Just as the alcoholic is dependent on others to receive the gift of God’s grace through sobriety, the sinner is reliant on others to continue to grow in holiness of heart and life.

Just as the Moravians at Herrnhut depended on the transparency of the *Banden* to help them let go of any self-deception that may impede them from living in the purity of God’s love, and Wesley and the early Methodists relied on the social contexts of the band and class meetings to grow in holiness, so the alcoholic depends on the AA group

⁹⁶ Wesley, *Making All Things New*, “The Scripture Way of Salvation,” I.5, 16.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, II.6.

to help them live a life of sobriety. In many ways, to be separated from the social dynamic of the AA group is to separate oneself from the grace and power of God. The relationships, the honesty and accountability to others and to God are all part and parcel of the transformative nature of the AA meeting. It is disconnection, a turning away from God that is the hallmark of addiction. Richard Rohr writes, “What humanity needs is an honest exposure of the truth, and true accountability and responsibility for what has happened. Only then can human beings move ahead with dignity.”⁹⁸

What lessons can the church take from the experiences of the early Methodists and the people who often meet in their basements throughout the week? What would our churches look like if our view of sin was one of addiction, with recovery being a process of accepting God’s grace in social, small-group contexts? Many in our churches in the 21st century have drifted away from this foundational dependence on God’s grace and recognition of our fallenness and need for that grace. This orientation, turning towards or away from God, connects the disorientation of addiction to one who, according to Wesley, doesn’t tend to their state of salvation - “But it is seldom long before they are undeceived, finding sin was only suspended, not destroyed. Temptations return and sin revives, showing it was stunned before, not dead.”⁹⁹ Just as with the addict, those caught in the cycle of sin and death will find that the temptations will return and keeping an orientation towards the love of our Creator can be a difficult task.

This orientation towards holiness can be tended to most authentically in a social context and it is this dependence on transformational small group experiences that

⁹⁸ Richard Rohr, *Breathing Under Water*, (Cincinnati: Franciscan Media, 2011), 47.

⁹⁹ John Wesley, “The Scripture Way of Salvation” in *John Wesley’s Sermons*, Albert Outler and Richard Heitzenrater, eds. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), I.6, 373.

many in the church today are lacking. What if, as this paper suggests, the church began looking at sin as an addiction? Patrick McCormick sees meaningful correlations between sin and addiction as he writes,

In sin we struggle to supplant God, aspiring, as the addict does, to an impossible perfection and driven by delusions of grandiosity. A core element of both sin and addiction is the refusal to accept our own limitations, our own imperfections, our own creatureliness.¹⁰⁰

As with addiction, McCormick sees the spiraling nature of sin as being one of the challenges to living a transformed life. Once a person has begun to allow sin to rule a part of their life, the cycle of sin that leads to death (either spiritual or actual) becomes harder and harder to escape. Judgement, self-righteous anger, consumerism, pornography, drug and alcohol addiction, greed - the list of sins could take up pages.

Wesley thought of sin and the temptation of sin as a presence that the believer would always struggle against. In his sermon “On Sin and Believers,” Wesley showed a full understanding of the power of temptation in the life of the believer - “... every babe in Christ is holy, and yet not altogether so. He is saved from sin; yet not entirely: it *remains*, though it does not *reign*.”¹⁰¹ In those newly reborn after justification, sin remains; the temptation to backslide will always be present. In his insistence on the social context of holiness and sanctification, Wesley felt deeply the need for believers to meet in small groups to examine their hearts, confess their sins and hold themselves accountable for what sins they committed. In doing so, the members of these groups

¹⁰⁰ McCormick, 161.

¹⁰¹ Wesley, Outler and Heitzenrater, eds., “On Sin and Believers,” IV.3, 365-66.

were able to work out their salvation with the help of others. In community, they found it possible to keep sin from reigning in their hearts as it had before.

Conclusion

This is where the church today can take some valuable lessons from AA and other recovery groups. These groups have historical and theological connections to pietism and Wesleyan theology, and it is these shared elements the church should look to as it seeks to reclaim the importance of shared vulnerability in the addiction to sin. Dependence on God for the addict often comes when one finds themselves in a place of absolute darkness and despair. This is usually referred to as the moment when a person “hits rock bottom.” How far down is “rock bottom” for the church today? At what point will believers become desperate (just as the addict is desperate) for a reprieve from the life of disorientation and self-sufficiency and admit that they are powerless over sin? Philip Yancey, in his article “Lessons From Rock Bottom,” tells of a letter Bill Wilson wrote to fellow alcoholics that addressed the blessings of weakness -

Wilson wrote his fellow strugglers, “How privileged we are to understand so well the divine paradox that strength rises from weakness, that humiliation goes before resurrection: that pain is not only the price but the very touchstone of spiritual rebirth.” The Apostle Paul could not have phrased it better.¹⁰²

It is only from the bottom that one can begin to walk the path of resurrection and restoration. Those “dark nights of the soul” are often the jumping off points for transformation that often defy explanation.

The penitential bands in early Methodism were an expression of a need for those who had fallen away from faith after joining a normal band meeting. These bands were

¹⁰² Philip Yancey, “Lessons From Rock Bottom,” *Christianity Today* 44, no. 8 (2000), 72.

more intense and addressed the specific needs of those who found themselves stuck on a track of backsliding. They received more direct instruction and prayer, “being wholly suited to those who did see God, but have now lost sight of the light of his countenance.”¹⁰³ Oftentimes, the experience of people in these meetings reflected the dynamic of “hitting bottom” in recovery. Wesley writes,

Many of these soon recovered the ground they had lost. Yea, they rose higher than before; being more watchful than ever, and more meek and lowly, as well as stronger in the faith that worketh by love. They now outran the greater part of their brethren, continually walking in the light of God, and having fellowship with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ.¹⁰⁴

Wesley understood the power of God’s grace in the lives of those who were desperate and hungry for the forgiveness and transformative nature of salvation. This was, and is, especially true for those who have a distinct, real experience of their brokenness and are searching for a way back to the light of God.

When people begin to recognize (just as Wesley and the founders of the Oxford Group and AA did) that it is ultimately the grace of God that will allow those struggling under the weight of sin and addiction to begin growing in holiness, then true restoration will begin. Restoration not just on a personal level but a corporate one as well. When our churches are comprised of people that feel the grace of God moving in their hearts and see the importance of meeting together in small groups to share of their struggles and ask for help in walking the path of God - this is the work of the Holy Spirit. This is the embodiment of community that God wants us to experience as God himself is manifest. As the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, God offers an eternal template for life with Him and

¹⁰³ Wesley, *Works*, “A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists,” viii, VII.2, 260.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, VIII.1.

in Him. It is a template of community, of connectedness, of “watching over one another in love.” Humanity will always wrestle with the presence and power of original sin. Kenneth Collins writes, “the effects of the fall are so devastating that response-ability along the way of salvation is not a possibility at all *unless* God first of all sovereignly restores humanity through prevenient grace to some measure of the relation previously enjoyed.”¹⁰⁵ It is the dynamic grace of God that meets, forgives, and makes holy those who repent and reorient themselves towards the light of God’s love. By God’s grace, the fallen move further away from the reign of sin in their hearts.

This thesis has demonstrated that growth in holiness is best supported in a social context. Furthermore, a fundamental theme found in both Wesley’s theology of salvation and in the rooms of recovery is that the grace and presence of God we experience in the company of others will lead us and help us grow along the way of salvation. Jean Vanier, founder of the L’Arche community for the disabled, developed an understanding of community and mutuality that speaks to the fundamental need for growing and working with others along the journey of recovery. In working with the disabled, he found that “the handicapped person needs not only to receive love but also to give love in return. And second, the weak and the broken do have much to give - they can heal us because they tap the well of our own brokenness.”¹⁰⁶ In our brokenness, we always have something to offer others beyond what we may feel we possess. The offering of our stories, our hope and belief in God’s grace and the power of transformation

¹⁰⁵ Collins, 73.

¹⁰⁶ Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham, *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, (New York: Bantam Books, 2002), 85.

wrought by that grace is to dive into the social holiness offered by Wesley in the band meetings of early Methodism.

Appendix I

The Twelve Steps of AA

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. 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 awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

Appendix II

The Twelve Traditions of AA

1. Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon A.A. unity.
2. For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority — a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern.
3. The only requirement for A.A. membership is a desire to stop drinking.
4. Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or A.A. as a whole.
5. Each group has but one primary purpose — to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.
6. An A.A. group ought never endorse, finance, or lend the A.A. name to any related facility or outside enterprise, lest problems of money, property, and prestige divert us from our primary purpose.
7. Every A.A. group ought to be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions.
8. Alcoholics Anonymous should remain forever non-professional, but our service centers may employ special workers.
9. A.A., as such, ought never be organized; but we may create service boards or committees directly responsible to those they serve.
10. Alcoholics Anonymous has no opinion on outside issues; hence the A.A. name ought never be drawn into public controversy.
11. Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio, and films.
12. Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities.

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