

RECOVERY AND ABSOLUTION

Confession Has Two Parts

*Alcoholics Anonymous, Celebrate Recovery, and the Word the Rooms
Cannot Speak*

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On a Thursday night in a church basement somewhere near you, a man will stand up, say his first name, and say the hardest true sentence he knows: *I'm an alcoholic*. The room will answer him by name. Nobody will flinch. Nobody will throw him out. For a lot of men, that room is the only place in the world where the truth can be said out loud without punishment, and some of them are alive tonight because of it.

I want to say that first, and I want to mean it, because what follows is a critique. I write as a man in recovery who has sat on those folding chairs and drunk that lukewarm coffee, and I speak only for myself, never for any fellowship or program. I had twenty years of sobriety once. Then I didn't. What I found at the bottom of that ditch is the reason for this essay, and for the book I wrote about it.

So this is not a hit piece. If a meeting is keeping you alive right now, keep going. Read this, argue with it, and then go to your meeting anyway.

But it has to be said plainly, because the church has largely stopped saying it: Alcoholics Anonymous and Celebrate Recovery, at their very best, can bring a man to the edge of the gospel. Neither one can give it to him. One of them was never designed to. The other believes it does, and that may be the more dangerous of the two.

Two Programs, One Shape

A little history helps.

Alcoholics Anonymous was founded in Akron, Ohio, in 1935 by Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob Smith. Its textbook, the book everyone calls the Big Book, appeared in 1939, and with it the Twelve Steps. Both founders had come up through the Oxford Group, an evangelical renewal movement of the 1920s and 1930s whose practices are all over the Steps: surrender, sharing one's sins with another person, restitution to those one has harmed, and a daily "quiet time" of listening for God's guidance. AA took that skeleton, deliberately widened the theology so that agnostics could join, and handed the result to the world. The famous phrase that did the widening is "*God as we understood Him*."

Celebrate Recovery began in 1991 at Saddleback Church in Southern California, founded by John Baker. It was built as a corrective. Where AA's higher power is left open, Celebrate Recovery names Him: Jesus Christ. It pairs the Twelve Steps with eight "recovery principles" drawn from the Beatitudes, and it widens the door in the other direction, welcoming anyone with "hurts, habits, and hang-ups," not only addicts. Today it meets in tens of thousands of churches, and a great many of them are not Baptist or nondenominational. Some of them are Lutheran.

Despite their differences, the two programs share the same basic shape. Each is a program: a sequence of things for the struggling person to admit, decide, examine, confess, ask, repair, maintain, and carry. Celebrate Recovery puts a better Name at the top of the page. It does not change the shape of the page. And the shape is the problem.

What They Get Right

Before I say a word about deficiencies, give the Steps their due, because they say several things the church has forgotten how to say.

They begin with a white flag. Step One has a man admit he is powerless and that his life has become unmanageable. That is nearer the truth about human beings than most of the confident religion I have sat through. You cannot fix what you will not first admit you cannot fix.

They insist on honesty in front of a witness. Step Five requires saying the exact nature of your wrongs to another human being. Most congregations are full of people performing being fine for each other in the parking lot. The rooms will not allow that.

They make you face the people you hurt. Steps Eight and Nine send you to the actual people, in person where possible, to own the actual harm. A lot of churchgoers have “made it right with God” and never once knocked on the door of anyone they wronged.

They know you never graduate. “Keep coming back” and “progress, not perfection” are hard-won realism. Triumphalist, victory-every-day Christianity has shamed a great many men into hiding; the rooms have kept a great many of them alive.

And they can genuinely get a man sober. A confessional Lutheran should have no trouble saying so. The Augsburg Confession teaches that “the human will has some freedom for producing civil righteousness and for choosing things subject to reason” (AC XVIII, Latin text). Outward discipline, accountability, structure, and the encouragement of other people can stop a man from drinking. That is a real good, a gift of God’s left hand, the same way a good doctor or a good law is a gift. Sobriety saves marriages, jobs, and lives. Nobody should sneer at it.

But the same article goes on to say that the will “does not have the power to produce the righteousness of God or spiritual righteousness without the Holy Spirit.” That is the line the programs cannot cross. They can produce a sober man. They cannot produce a forgiven one. And a man who is sober but unforgiven is still carrying the thing that sent him to the bottle in the first place.

Here is where each of them stops.

1. The Diagnosis Stops Short

Step One is the truest thing either program says, and it is not true enough.

Look at the wording. AA has you admit you are powerless *over alcohol*. The powerlessness is fenced in around a substance, out there, in the bottle. Then, almost in the same breath, you are told to make a decision, work the steps, and take charge of your recovery. Everywhere outside the fence, you are still the man in charge.

Celebrate Recovery comes closer. Its first principle has you realize you are not God and that you are powerless to control your “tendency” to do the wrong thing. That is nearer the bone, because now the problem is something in you. But it is still a *tendency*, a bad habit of a will that a stronger version of you might still get on top of someday.

Scripture says something much worse, and much more useful:

I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my flesh; for I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do. Instead, I keep on doing the evil I do not want to do. (Romans 7:18-19, BSB)

That is not a man with one weak spot. That is a bound will. Luther fought the fight of his life over this against Erasmus, and the Small Catechism puts it in words a child can memorize:

I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith. (SC II, 6)

Any man who has wanted to stop with everything in him and watched his own hand reach for the bottle anyway already knows this. He has met his bound will face to face. Why does it matter whether we call it “unmanageability” or “bondage”? Because the diagnosis writes the prescription. If the problem is a weak will, the cure is to strengthen it: try harder, work the program better than last time. If the will is bound, the rescue cannot come from inside at all. It has to come from outside. The programs, having walked a man up to the white flag, quietly hand him back the rifle.

2. A God You Design Cannot Forgive You

Step Two is right about the main thing: if you cannot save yourself, your only hope is a power greater than yourself. Then comes the qualifier. *God as we understood Him*. In the rooms, that has been stretched as wide as it will go. Your higher power can be the group. It can be the ocean. It can, as the old line goes, be the doorknob.

I understand why. The founders wanted to get burned and bitter people in the door, and a vague power you could half believe in seemed better than none. That was mercy, of a kind.

But notice what it does. You are told to find a power greater than yourself and then handed the pencil to draw him. A god you design is exactly the size of the mind that designed him. He can comfort you. He can keep you company. He cannot forgive you, because forgiveness is not a feeling you generate; it is a debt cancelled, and only the one who holds the note can cancel it. The debt a man carries at three in the morning is not owed to the ocean or the group. It is owed to the living God, whom he has really wronged.

There is a second problem, and the Large Catechism names it with surgical precision:

A “god” is the term for that to which we are to look for all good and in which we are to find refuge in all need. ... Anything on which your heart relies and depends, I say, that is really your God. (LC I, 2-3)

By that definition, the addict already had a god. He ran to it in every trouble. He sacrificed his money, his marriage, and his good name to it, and he returned to its altar no matter what it cost him last time. Jeremiah describes the whole thing in one verse:

For My people have committed two evils: They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living water, and they have dug their own cisterns (Jeremiah 2:13, BSB)

Broken cisterns, the prophet goes on, “that cannot hold water.” That is the whole story of addiction in a single verse: a man dying of thirst walks past the fountain to drink from a crack in the ground.

AA tells a man he is not God. It never tells him what he has been worshiping instead, and a heart that is told to stop worshiping does not stop; it simply finds a new altar. Plenty of “dry drunks” traded the bottle for a colder god (their willpower, their sobriety date, their superiority) and called it recovery. An idol is never defeated by willpower. It is only displaced, when the true God takes the seat. And a higher power “as you understand him” cannot displace anything, because he came out of the same heart that built the idol.

Scripture leaves no room for a generic higher power:

Salvation exists in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved. (Acts 4:12, BSB)

To its real credit, Celebrate Recovery writes that Name in the blank. That is an enormous improvement, and I will not pretend otherwise. But the next deficiency survives the change of name.

3. The Arrows Still Point Up

Step Three has you make a decision to turn your will and your life over to God. Celebrate Recovery’s third principle has you “consciously choose” to commit your life and will to Christ’s care and control. In both, the decisive act is yours: a decision you reach up and make, a will you hand over.

That is decision theology, and it puts the whole weight of salvation back on the one thing we just said cannot bear it: the will of the man in the chair. So the man who has been asking “am I trying hard enough to stay sober?” now gets to ask “did I commit hard enough to

be saved? Did I really mean it? Was my decision sincere enough to count?” It is the same exhausting question in better clothes. And a man who relapses after his “decision” will draw the obvious conclusion: it must not have taken.

The Augsburg Confession teaches the opposite direction:

Likewise, they teach that human beings cannot be justified before God by their own powers, merits, or works. But they are justified as a gift on account of Christ through faith when they believe that they are received into grace and that their sins are forgiven on account of Christ, who by his death made satisfaction for our sins. (AC IV, Latin text)

And it says exactly how that faith comes to be:

So that we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the gospel and administering the sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and the sacraments as through instruments the Holy Spirit is given, who produces faith, where and when it pleases God, in those who hear the gospel. (AC V, 1-2, Latin text)

Faith is not a decision a man works up. It is the empty hand the Holy Spirit creates by speaking to him. Paul puts the whole gospel in one sentence:

However, to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness. (Romans 4:5, BSB)

God justifies the *ungodly*. Not the committed, not the sincere, not the ones who chose well. The ungodly. That is the only category a man in a ditch can honestly claim, and it is the only one God has promised to justify.

4. Law Without Gospel, Forever

Read the Twelve Steps and the eight principles straight through and ask one question of every line: who is doing the verb? Admitted. Came to believe. Made a decision. Made a searching inventory. Admitted. Were entirely ready. Humbly asked. Made a list. Made direct amends. Continued to take inventory. Sought. Tried to carry. Every step is something you do. Every principle is something you realize, choose, examine, submit, evaluate, reserve, or yield.

In Lutheran terms, that is law. The law is good. It tells the truth about how a human being was made to live. But it has one limit, and the limit is absolute: it can tell you what to do, and it cannot give you the power to do it. The law is a mirror. Nobody has ever been changed by a mirror, and trying harder is just staring into the same mirror harder.

Steps Six and Seven come startlingly close to the gospel. They do not tell you to fix your defects; they have you become ready for God to remove them, and ask Him to. For a moment the arrows point the right direction. But in the actual living of it, it becomes a renov-

ation project: a list of character defects you and God will work on together, you holding the chisel and Him supervising. Celebrate Recovery's fifth principle, voluntarily submitting to every change God wants to make, goes the same way. Paul asked the Galatians the question that fits it exactly:

Are you so foolish? After starting in the Spirit, are you now finishing in the flesh?
(Galatians 3:3, BSB)

The deepest deficiency here is not that the programs ask a man to do things. The Christian life is full of things to do. It is that nowhere in twelve steps or eight principles is there a *finished* verdict: no moment when Someone who was not you stepped in and declared the debt paid. There is a program to work for the rest of your life and no place ever to set the ledger down.

The gospel has that place. It is a hill outside Jerusalem, where the dying Christ spoke a single Greek word, *tetelestai*, which our Bibles render "It is finished" (John 19:30, BSB). The Small Catechism tells the man in the chair what was finished there: Christ "has redeemed me, a lost and condemned human being. He has purchased and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death" (SC II, 4).

Your sobriety is rightly "one day at a time." Your standing before God is not. That was settled in the past tense, and it does not reset to zero when you pick up a drink.

5. Confession Without Absolution

This is the heart of it, and it is the reason for the title.

Step Five has you admit the exact nature of your wrongs to God, to yourself, and to another human being. Celebrate Recovery's fourth principle does the same: confess your faults to God, to yourself, and to someone you trust. Both are right. Both are good. Something happens when sins are spoken out loud in front of a witness who does not look away; they shrink back to their actual size.

I did my fifth step in treatment, in a small room that smelled like burnt coffee, and I walked out lighter than I had been in years. By the next morning the whole weight was back on my shoulders.

It took me a long time to understand why. The man across the table did everything one sinner can do for another. He listened. He did not flinch. He said, "Thank you for trusting me with that." He could not forgive me. He had no standing to. He could hear the debt; he could not cancel it. So what I had done was a confession and only a confession: the truth about the wound, accurately named, and nothing to close it.

Luther's Small Catechism says something the Steps have never heard of:

Confession consists of two parts. One is that we confess our sins. The other is that we receive the absolution, that is, forgiveness, from the confessor as from God himself and by no means doubt but firmly believe that our sins are thereby forgiven before God in heaven. (SC V, 16)

Two parts. The Steps know about the first one. They walk a man right up to its edge and leave him sitting there, because as far as they know that is the whole thing. Celebrate Recovery, coming out of a tradition that has no practice of private absolution, leaves him in exactly the same chair. Both programs set a man down at the human ear. Neither one puts a word of forgiveness into the other person's mouth, because neither one believes there is a mouth on earth that has been given the right to speak it.

There is one. The risen Lord gave it on Easter evening:

Again Jesus said to them, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent Me, so also I am sending you." When He had said this, He breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld." (John 20:21-23, BSB)

That is why the Augsburg Confession insists that "private absolution should be retained in the churches" (AC XI). And here is why it matters for an addict in particular. His feelings are the least reliable instrument he owns. The addiction did not only hijack his behavior; it warped the very gauge he would use to tell whether he is forgiven. If his forgiveness depends on feeling forgiven, he will never have it. Absolution does not ask him to feel anything. It comes from outside him, in a human voice, on Christ's authority, and it is just as true the morning after when he feels nothing at all. Over years he can learn to lean his whole weight on the word instead of the feeling. The word holds. The feeling never could.

A sponsor can say "me too." Only a called servant of the Word can say "your sins are forgiven" and have it be God's own verdict. A man in recovery needs both. The rooms can only give him the first.

6. Inward Instead of Outward

Step Eleven has you seek, through prayer and meditation, to improve your conscious contact with God as you understand Him, praying for knowledge of His will. That is the Oxford Group's quiet time, listening inwardly for guidance. Celebrate Recovery's seventh principle keeps a daily time with God for self-examination, Bible reading, and prayer, which is better, because it at least sends you to the Scriptures.

But notice the direction. Where does the program send a man to find God? Inward. Into his own head, his own impressions, his own sense of guidance. And his own head, as every addict knows, is the most dangerous neighborhood he has.

The Smalcald Articles call this enthusiasm, and they do not mince words:

In these matters, which concern the spoken, external Word, it must be held firmly that God gives no one his Spirit or grace apart from the external Word which goes before. (SA III, 8, 3)

God has not promised to meet anyone in their own interior. He has promised to meet them in particular places: the preached Word, the water, the spoken absolution, the bread and the cup. And this is where the deficiency becomes stark. AA has no sacraments by design; it is not a church and never claimed to be. Celebrate Recovery, though it lives inside churches, was born in a Baptist-rooted evangelical tradition that treats baptism as the believer's public testimony and the Lord's Supper as a memorial, acts of our obedience and remembrance rather than God's gifts. So even when it meets in a Lutheran building, its framework has nowhere to put the means of grace. It can mention them. It cannot hand them out, and it does not teach a man that he needs to go and receive them.

What it leaves out is everything God has promised to do *to* a man rather than ask *from* him.

Baptism. The man who introduces himself every week as an alcoholic is telling the truth about his struggle. But he was named before he was ever an addict:

Or aren't you aware that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? We were therefore buried with Him through baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may walk in newness of life. (Romans 6:3-4, BSB)

Baptism gives him a name that is not his disease, and a belonging he did not join but was claimed into. And it gives him the daily shape of the whole Christian life. Baptism "signifies that the old creature in us with all sins and evil desires is to be drowned and die through daily contrition and repentance, and on the other hand that daily a new person is to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever" (SC IV, 12). That is a better answer to relapse than a reset sobriety date: not starting over from zero, but returning to a name that never came off. When the accuser comes in the night, the old Lutheran answer is not "I feel saved" or "I've been doing well." It is three words pointing outside the self: *I am baptized*.

The Supper. "Keep coming back" may be the wisest thing the program ever said. A man in recovery must return, regularly, for life, to something outside himself. But the program sends him back to a meeting, which is a real gift and is still, in the end, more of us. The church sends him back to a table:

And He took the bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, “This is My body, given for you; do this in remembrance of Me.” In the same way, after supper He took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is poured out for you.” (Luke 22:19-20, BSB)

The addict’s instinct is to stay away from the table after a bad week, until he has cleaned himself up enough to deserve it. That is exactly backwards. The Small Catechism says a person “who has faith in these words, ‘given for you’ and ‘shed for you for the forgiveness of sins,’ is really worthy and well prepared” (SC VI, 10). It is medicine, not a trophy:

On hearing this, Jesus said, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” (Matthew 9:12-13, BSB)

A word about the cup, because a man in recovery is right to think about it. Many congregations offer grape juice or a dealcoholized cup, or individual cups so that each communicant can take the one he can safely take. Talk to your pastor before you go. It is his office and his joy to see that Christ’s gift actually reaches you. Do not solve the question by staying in the pew.

7. Amends as Payment

Steps Eight and Nine are some of the bravest things the program asks. Do them. But they are handed to a man as part of the work that makes him well: clearing his side of the street, getting the weight off his chest. The moment amends become payment, three things happen. They curve back toward the man making them, so that even his apology is about his own relief. They put him back on the treadmill of earning. And the amends he cannot make (the dead, the unreachable, the ones it would only wound to contact, the years that cannot be given back) become unpaid debts he will carry to his grave.

The Augsburg Confession puts good works in their proper place: faith “is bound to yield good fruits,” and a Christian ought to do good works “on account of God’s will and not so that we may trust in these works to merit justification before God” (AC VI, Latin text). Amends are fruit, not payment. Look at the order in Zacchaeus’s story. Jesus invites Himself to the cheat’s house first: “Zacchaeus, hurry down, for I must stay at your house today” (Luke 19:5, BSB). Only then, having been received while still a cheat, does Zacchaeus stand up and say, “Look, Lord, half of my possessions I give to the poor, and if I have cheated anyone, I will repay it fourfold” (Luke 19:8, BSB). The restitution did not buy his place at the table. It poured out of a man who had already been given one. And the amends a man cannot make are not left hanging over his soul. He carries them to the cross, where the only debt that could ever damn him was already paid.

8. The Sinner Without the Saint

The program is more honest about the ongoing fight than most of the church has the nerve to be. You are never cured, always one drink away, always recovering. That is true. But it is only half of the truth. The program has the sinner without the saint. It can tell a man, accurately, that he remains a sinner, and it has nothing to set on the other side of the scale. So its realism, for all its mercy, can never rise higher than “hang on.”

The Reformation’s old phrase holds both halves at full strength: *simul iustus et peccator*, at the same time righteous and sinner. Not forty percent saint and sixty percent sinner, with the needle moving every time he slips. One hundred percent righteous, by the verdict that does not move, and one hundred percent sinner, the old Adam fully alive, all the way to the grave. Paul cries out in the middle of exactly that tension, and does not wait to be finished before he gives thanks:

What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord! (Romans 7:24-25, BSB)

This is not a theological fine point for a man in recovery. It is the difference between a relapse and a spiral. The accuser’s whole strategy after a fall is to say: *that’s your proof; you were never really His; you’ve lost it now, so you may as well keep going*. The despair is not the consequence of the relapse. It is the engine of the next one. The simul cuts it off. He sinned, really, and it matters, and he should grieve it. But he never stood before God on the strength of his sobriety, so his standing did not fall when he did. He can get up the same day and go back to the water, the word, and the table, not after he has punished himself into feeling worthy, but now.

And if the thorn is never removed, if he fights this until the day he dies, that is not proof that God failed him:

But He said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is perfected in weakness.” (2 Corinthians 12:9, BSB)

What This Does Not Mean

None of this is a reason to quit your meeting, your sponsor, your counselor, your doctor, or your medication. Those are among the hands God uses to keep people alive, and a confessional Lutheran has every reason to thank Him for them. The fellowship can be a real gift of God’s left hand for the sake of sobriety. It simply is not the place where God has promised to hand out forgiveness, and it should not be asked to be.

And if you are still drinking and thinking about stopping, do not do it alone and do not do it cold. Alcohol withdrawal can be dangerous, even fatal. Get a doctor involved. If you are in danger right now, call or text 988 (the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline), call the SAMHSA National Helpline at 1-800-662-4357, or call 911.

To the man in recovery: keep the meeting, and go get what the meeting cannot give you. Ask a pastor to hear your confession and speak absolution to your face. If you were never baptized, ask for it, and do not clean yourself up first. Go to the table because you failed, not after you feel you have earned it.

To pastors: most men in your pews who are fighting this have never once been told that private confession and absolution exist, let alone offered it. Offer it. Announce it from the pulpit. Many of them will come with tears in their eyes, because it is the thing they have been missing for years.

To congregations hosting Celebrate Recovery: do not hand the care of struggling souls over to a curriculum whose theology of conversion, baptism, and the Supper is not your own. Hospitality toward people in recovery is a good thing. But the most important things your church has to give them are not in any program binder. They are in the font, the pulpit, the confessional, and at the rail.

Where This Comes From: KEPT

Everything in this essay is drawn from my book, *KEPT: Sobriety, Grace, and the Hand That Won't Let Go* (Ordinary Means, 2026).

KEPT is written man to man, to men fighting addiction and to the people who love them. It is not a program. There are no steps in it to work and no chips to earn. Each chapter honors what the Twelve Steps and Celebrate Recovery get right, then shows, in a closing section called “The step underneath,” exactly where they stop, and hands the reader the confessional Lutheran answer: the bound will, the false god at the center of addiction, law and gospel, the theology of the cross, justification, Baptism, absolution, the Supper, saint and sinner at the same time, amends as fruit, and the ordinary callings God has already set a man in. Each chapter ends with a practice for the week (“From the chair”), a direct word of gospel (“A word for you”), and an anchor in Scripture and the Catechism. There is a closing word to the wife, mother, or friend who loves the man in the chair, and a page mapping every Step and principle to the chapter where it is treated.

It begins with twenty years of sobriety and a ditch. It ends with a blessing. And the whole thing comes down to two short sentences I wish someone had said to me long before I needed it:

You are not holding on. You are being held.

[Find KEPT here.](#)

Scripture quotations are from the Berean Standard Bible (BSB). Quotations from the Lutheran Confessions are from The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Fortress Press, 2000). The Twelve Steps and the principles of Celebrate Recovery are summarized and paraphrased here, with only brief phrases quoted for the purpose of discussion. This essay is not affiliated with, reviewed, or endorsed by Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc., Celebrate Recovery, or Saddleback Church, and the author speaks for no fellowship or program. Nothing here is medical or psychological advice.

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