

## **Adult Children of Alcoholics And Alcoholics Anonymous**

(The following is excerpted from the book *Prophets of PsychoHeresy II* by Martin and Deidre Bobgan, which is now out-of-print.)

Dobson introduces the topic of Adult Children of Alcoholics by saying:

I'm told that in the last several months the number of requests for this particular topic has equaled all the requests for all other topics.<sup>1</sup>

This suggests that many of the individuals who listen to Dobson are in tune with the latest psychological fads. Dobson's treatment of the subject reveals his support for the secular psychological opinions undergirding the movement and demonstrates his lack of discernment about the fallacies involved.

Dobson's programs on Adult Children of Alcoholics (ACA) were done with a panel of four people. Three of the individuals use pseudonyms. The fourth person is identified by name and is running a program for ACA's at Charles Swindoll's Evangelical Free Church of Fullerton.

Throughout the broadcasts the secular psychological terminology and methodology ooze from all participants. They talk about the support group, recovery, use of the past (childhood), expressing anger, subconscious thinking, thirteen characteristics of ACA's, addiction, and disease, to name a few. While these words in themselves are not restricted to the psychological arena, they have special psychological significance when used in conjunction with treatment programs designed for heavy drinkers and their families. Hopefully we do not need to demonstrate that much of the above terminology and methodology are psychological in both expression and application. We have covered a number of the above topics in previous books.

### **Alcoholics Anonymous.**

The central issues that we want to discuss here are two assumptions made by Dobson during the interviews. The first is the idea of someone finding Christ through A.A. (Alcoholics Anonymous) and the second is the effectiveness of A.A. During the program all participants praise A.A. and its sister organization, Al-Anon, which is for family members of alcoholics. This is not surprising since Dobson recommends A.A., Al-Anon, and Alateen in his book *Love Must Be Tough*.<sup>2</sup>

Dobson asks Joe (pseudonym) how he found the Lord. Joe tells a little about his early background and confesses that he did not know God then. Dobson says, "You found Him through Alcoholics Anonymous."

Joe replies, "Yes," and goes on to explain the twelve-step program and how he "got God in my life."

Dobson responds, "They call it a 'higher power' and they've been criticized for that, for not calling Him Jesus Christ and Lord of our lives and so on."

Joe agrees, "Right."

Dobson continues, "But they lead you to Jesus in kind of an indirect way."

One must conclude from his conversation with Joe that Dobson considers A.A. to be a possible evangelistic tool since it recognizes a "Higher Power." However, we would like to say that while God is sovereign and He can save a person in any circumstance of life, including a bar or a brothel, A.A. is not a place that is conducive to that. A.A. meetings are filled with smoke, swearing and sexual contacts. The main focus is ceasing from substance abuse but almost any other sin is permissible. The introduction of

a higher power is less than meaningless. It can even be dangerous because the higher power can be any false god, including a “higher self” or Satan. All are acceptable to A.A.

Regarding the effectiveness of A.A. and Al-Anon, Dobson says, “Alanon and A.A. have been very effective.” This is another case of Dobson sharing his ignorance and offering it as truth to his listeners. If Dobson has proof for this statement we would like to see it. We know of no studies that support the use of A.A. We are not saying that there aren’t any studies, but we would like to be shown. Dobson owes this to his listeners since he is recommending a religious organization, masked as secular, which is a substitute for the church itself. Men and women attend A.A. and it becomes their church, their social group, and (to use their terms) their support group.

In a book about treatment of addictive behaviors, William Miller and Reid Hester present a chapter titled “The Effectiveness of Alcoholism Treatment: What Research Reveals.” They say:

In spite of the fact that it inspires nearly universal acclaim and enthusiasm among alcoholism treatment personnel in the United States, Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.) wholly lacks experimental support for its efficacy.<sup>3</sup>

They first refer to some studies on A.A. that “yield results that are virtually uninterpretable.” Then they say:

Only two studies have employed random assignment and adequate controls to compare the efficacy of A.A. versus no intervention or alternative interventions. Brandsma et al. (1980) found no differences at 12-month follow-up between A.A. and no treatment, and at 3-month follow-up those assigned to A.A. were found to be significantly more likely to be binge drinking, relative to controls or those assigned to other interventions (based on unverified self-reports). Ditman and Crawford (1966) assigned court mandated “alcohol addicts” to A.A., clinic treatment, or no treatment (probation only). Based on records of rearrest, 31% of A.A. clients and 32% of clinic-treated clients were judged successful, as compared with 44% success in the untreated group (Ditman, Crawford, Forgy, Moskowitz, & MacAndrew, 1967).<sup>4</sup>

They also refer to other studies evaluating multidimensional programs that reveal no advantage for A.A. They mention one study comparing a “complex treatment program (including A.A., medication, outpatient, and inpatient care)” with “a single session of counseling consisting of feedback and advice.” A twelve-month follow-up revealed that the complex program with A.A. “was no more effective in modifying alcohol consumption and problems” than the single counseling session with advice.<sup>5</sup>

This is their concluding statement concerning A.A.:

To be sure, these studies (like most any research) can be criticized for methodological weaknesses, and as always “further research is needed.” Given the absence of a single controlled evaluation supporting the effectiveness of A.A. and the presence of these negative findings, however, we must conclude that at the present time the alleged effectiveness of A.A. remains unproved.<sup>6</sup> (Emphasis added.)

Dr. Stanton Peele, who is a senior health researcher at Mathematica Policy Research and author of *Diseasing of America: Addiction Treatment Out of Control*, says, “Several studies have shown that those who quit drinking via A.A. actually have higher relapse rates than those who quit on their own.”<sup>7</sup>

### **Alcoholism as Disease?**

One of the foundational tents of A.A. is that alcoholism is a disease. Dobson agrees. In *Love Must Be Tough*, Dobson responds to a problem with an alcoholic and what to do to help. He says, “Do not nag, complain, scream, cry, beg, plead, embarrass, label or berate the victim. He has a disease which he

can't control. It is not within his power to overcome it alone."<sup>8</sup> (Italics his; bold emphasis added.) Note the words victim and disease. This demonstrates Dobson's tendency to blame sinful behavior on victimization. But alcoholics are not victims; nor do they have a disease. The Bible calls them drunkards and says they will not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 6:10).

Dr. Herbert Fingarette, a professor at the University of California and an internationally distinguished scholar, has written a book titled *Heavy Drinking: The Myth of Alcoholism as a Disease*. The subtitle tells what the book is about. In an essay published by Harvard University, Fingarette asks, "Why do heavy drinkers persist in their behavior even when prudence, common sense, and moral duty call for restraint?" Then he says:

That is the central question in debates about alcohol abuse. In the United States (but not in other countries such as Great Britain) the standard answer is to call the behavior a disease, "alcoholism," whose key symptom is a pattern of uncontrollable drinking. This myth, now widely advertised and widely accepted, is neither helpfully compassionate nor scientifically valid. It promotes false beliefs and inappropriate attitudes, as well as harmful, wasteful, and ineffective social policies.<sup>9</sup>

In concluding his essay, Fingarette says:

But the greatest scandal of the argument for the disease concept as a useful lie is the claim that it helps alcoholics by inducing them to enter treatment. On the contrary, both independent and government research show expensive disease-oriented treatment programs to be largely a waste of money and human resources.<sup>10</sup>

The description for Peele's book, mentioned earlier, reveals its contents:

Stanton Peele documents the scientific fallacies of the addiction-as-disease movement. At the same time, he points the way to positive personal and social change. Most people already overcome their addictions to alcohol, drugs, cigarettes, or food on their own.<sup>11</sup> (Emphasis his.)

The research and conclusions by Fingarette and Peele show that Dobson's idea of an alcoholic as a victim having a disease he cannot overcome alone is wrong.

### **Dobson's Support of A.A.**

During the broadcast Dobson gives thirteen characteristics of ACAs. Those on the panel give affirmations to some of the characteristics. However, four people do not a sufficient and random enough sample make. While those characteristics surely promote the mythology of ACAs from the popular literature, no research is quoted or referred to for support. At the conclusion of the programs, the announcer says:

If you'd like to obtain more information about support groups for Adult Children of Alcoholics, we have a free fact sheet available. This fact sheet tells how you can recognize the characteristics of an adult child of an alcoholic and it gives steps on how to start an ACA support group in your church or community.<sup>12</sup>

The fact sheet supports secular notions about ACAs and demonstrates Dobson's encouragement to start an ACA support group in the church or community. The Focus on the Family fact sheet, titled "New Hope for Adult Children of Alcoholics," says that "the information provided in this booklet has been mainly adapted from AA materials and concepts."<sup>13</sup> "The 12 Steps to Healing" listed in the fact sheet "were modified from the Alcoholics Anonymous 12 Steps."<sup>14</sup>

Neither the theology nor the methodology of A.A. is such that Christians should go there. It is not a good place to hear the true gospel or to find Christ. It is a good place to hear another gospel and find a false Christ. Because the theology is bad, the methodology is bad, and the results are highly questionable, no Christian should be sent there. Contrary to what Dobson thinks, Christians should not endorse A.A. either as a place to find Christ or as a place that gets results.

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#### Notes

1. James Dobson and panel, "Adult Children of Alcoholics." Focus on the Family Radio Broadcast, CS 428.
2. James Dobson. *Love Must Be Tough*. Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983, pp. 172-175.
3. William Miller and Reid Hester, "The Effectiveness of Alcoholism Treatment: What Research Reveals." *Treating Addictive Behaviors: Processes of Change*. W. R. Miller and N. Heather, Eds. New York: Plenum Press, 1986, p. 135.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 136.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. Stanton Peele, "Mr. Peele Responds." *Reason*, May 1990, p. 12.
8. Dobson, *Love Must Be Tough*, *op. cit.*, p. 170.
9. Herbert Fingarette, "We Should Reject the Disease Concept of Alcoholism." *The Harvard Medical School Mental Health Letter*, Vol. 6, No. 8, February 1990, p. 4.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
11. Stanton Peele. *The Diseasing of America*. Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath and Company, 1989, back cover.
12. "Adult Children of Alcoholics, *op. cit.*
13. "New Hope for Adult Children of Alcoholics," *Facts from Focus on the Family*, Pomona, CA, p. 1.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

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#### BOOK CHAPTERS

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