

Review

Aaron White, 2020. *Recovering: From Brokenness and Addiction to Blessedness and Community*. Ada, MI: Baker Academic. ISBN 9781540960825

By Paul Beckett, MD, CCFP(AM), FASAM, Dip.ABAM

I have worked in the ER managing overdoses, on the ICU and medical wards managing acute and chronic complications, in psychiatry units and recovery homes addressing mental health consequences, and in the prison system witnessing first-hand the personal, familial and societal devastation of drugs and alcohol. Living in a geographical area where substance use, overdoses and death have escalated in dramatic fashion over the past 30 years while multiple NGO and government agencies scramble to find solutions, from opposing viewpoints and the resulting scattered approaches, I tend to approach yet another book on addiction with a frustrated, cynical, jaundiced eye. It was a pleasant surprise to read the work of a pastor-theologian who has lived with his family in ministry, embedded in North America's most drug-infested neighbourhood, the Downtown East Side of Vancouver, BC.

As a contribution to the series *Pastoring for Life* (Baker Publishing), Aaron White's book, *Recovering: From Brokenness and Addiction to Blessedness and Community*, is one of the most challenging books on substance abuse that I have ever encountered as a Christian physician working in the field of addiction.

White presents a compelling thesis that the fractured lives seen on street corners typically labeled as addicts are tip-of-the-iceberg examples symptomatic of the much deeper problem of a broken and displaced society, that churches are filled with people in pain struggling with hidden or socially acceptable addictions, and that the blessed "Beatitude Community" of believers have a message - "The Blessed Way" - of healing for the world.

This book is easily readable and entertaining in style. It a "can't put it down" book. It is scholarly in reference, with a treasure of quotes from physicians in the addictions field, activists in social justice, philosophers, historians, and theologians. Scriptures are used throughout, in a manner that is never abused by being forced or taken out of context. White draws widely on works of historical church writings across all church denominations, Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant, beyond the local church and beyond Christendom's current and historically wide divisions. The breadth of his sources gives a sense of connection to the roots and brotherhood of the historical and contemporary church community, of connection versus fracture.

White begins by identifying the problem of brokenness - briefly touching on the disease model of addiction and acknowledging the science of and medical approach to addiction, while rightly not dwelling on it - this is not a medical textbook. He briefly addresses the work of addiction physicians like me who

provide or medication assisted detox, medical care in recovery centres and “harm reduction” medications such as Methadone, the work of social workers who help those in addiction access their physical needs such as food and clothing, and the work of government agencies providing financial support, free access to health care, “housing first.”

However, White clearly and rightly identifies these measures as temporizing supports – parachute measures that heal the body and not the soul. In doing so he relegates the argument between abstinence and harm reduction as addiction treatment approaches to where it belongs, as moot, and focuses on the heart of addiction: fractured families, fractured communities, fractured and pain-filled lives needing healing at the most basic levels, identified with healing Beatitudes mediated through the local church.

White finds the solution to brokenness and displacement in Beatitude blessing of individual and community through the church. He takes each Beatitude in turn fleshing out each as a step in the recovery process. The structure of each Beatitude chapter is elegant. Parallels are drawn with the well-known 12 recovery steps of Alcoholics Anonymous; each Beatitude is depicted as a rung on a ladder of progression culminating ultimately in recovery. Vivid and sometimes heart-wrenching anecdotes from White’s years of street-level experience introduce readers to addicts who live out the Beatitudes authentically. He uses examples from the life of Christ to demonstrate how he lived out each Beatitude. Each chapter ends with practical suggestions for church leaders, with steps to be taken addressing each beatitude application within the church community. White identifies the local church as the ultimate medium, centred on Jesus, which brings a blessed way of healing to our world.

Recovering: From Brokenness and Addiction to Blessedness and Community should be required reading in every seminary and medical school curriculum. It is an essential read in every church leader’s library.

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