

An Imaginary Scene

I lingered at the entrance to the building, trying to get up the courage to go in. People moved past, heading down the stairs into the basement of the YWCA, some in small groups chatting amiably, others looking tired and desperate. I shook a little bit—from the cold, but also from the fear.

I didn't know if I could go through with the plan. Going into this meeting—just walking in the door—meant admitting I had a problem. And admitting the problem meant something would be lost from my life. Could I deal with that? Could I just stop? I couldn't think about giving it up. The prospect scared me to death.

The fear made me wait it out. While I dreaded getting help, I couldn't live in the grips of my problem anymore. My hand went into my pocket and pulled out a church bulletin from First Original Primary Best Baptist Church. Oh, man! I can't let them see this! It was dated May 16, the last time I caved, the last time I used—the last day I attended church.

I stood there staring at the artifact of my greatest weakness; not a bottle but a bulletin. My addiction had cost me money, family, job. I held the evidence in my hand when my sponsor showed up. I tried stuffing it back into my pants without Dave seeing.

"Don't bother," Dave said. "It's okay. You can't hide anymore, Pete. Your empties are your reminders. Just bring it in with you; we'll help you take care of that."

Minutes later my sponsor stood in front of the group. "Hi. My name is Dave. I'm a churchaholic."

"Hi, Dave!" The response went up from everybody in the room. Later in the meeting they burned my bulletin. Since that day I've been clean for 17 months; haven't stepped into a church in all that time. I am free. My name is Pete. I'm a churchaholic.

by Ron Benson

HOOKED on Religion...

How to Kick the Habit

Addicted to alcohol, sure. Cocaine, of course. Even addictions to sex and food and shopping make sense. But church? Can you really be *addicted* to church?

By church, I don't mean The Church—the Body of Christ composed of all those since Jesus' resurrection that accept him without reservation and call themselves by his name. I mean *church*—that thing we *do*. It's *doing church* that can be habit-forming. And *doing church* is addicting. If you're a religious junkie, you probably *do* a lot of church.

For the sake of a shorter article, let's over-simplify: If you're *doing church* on a regular basis, or you're *doing church* in grave proportions, you may be addicted.

How do we *do church*? Meetings. Lots of meetings. Meetings on Mondays, meetings on Tuesdays. Especially those meetings on Wednesdays and Sundays, which are particularly holy squares on the church calendar. Meetings for worship, meetings for Bible study, meetings for Sunday School, meetings for prayer. Meetings to plan worship, Bible study, Sunday School and prayer. Meetings to elect people to go to meetings to plan things to do during the meetings for worship, Bible study, Sunday School and prayer.

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How do we *do church*? Giving. Lots of giving. The regular, usual, ordinary fund. The generous, heartfelt, benevolent fund. The *building a better building* fund. The *send someone over the ocean to preach in a different language* fund. The *padding the pastor's salary* fund.

How do we *do church*? Rules. Lots of rules. Rules for meetings. Rules

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for giving. Rules for what to wear, see, eat, speak, touch, drive. Rules for each and every kind of relationship. Rules for how to think, feel, act. Rules to monitor and control and prohibit behavior.

Sure, there are other elements to *doing church*. Worship, fellowship, evangelism, teaching—and these can be addictive, too. But it's often these biblical elements in combination with meetings, money and rules that snare the zealous believer into the trap of legalistic slavery.

We are sometimes told that a certain church has found a "different way to *do church*." Although many churches set out with the best of intentions, it's easy to end up in the same trap, with only a few changes in the details. Like wine instead of vodka for the alcoholic or Target instead of Macy's for the shopper, a church addict will discover whatever drug helps the

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—When Religion Goes Bad
by Dale S. Ryan and Jeff VanVonderen

pain. *Doing church* is a drug, just like doing cocaine or doing heroin. And all that *doing church* can make a junkie out of you.

Dale Ryan is an addiction specialist. According to Dr. Ryan and his co-author, Jeff VanVonderen, religious addiction can occur in almost any religious setting:

*"Our experience...suggests that religious addiction is much more common than you would conclude from looking only at the extreme cases. A wide variety of religious behaviors have the potential for mood alteration and therefore the possibility of becoming addictive. Evangelism, worship, personal spiritual disciplines, church attendance, service and many other behaviors that are important and praiseworthy in a general sense can be subverted by the addictive process into very harmful and destructive parts of our lives."*¹

Can we blame the church for our habit? For sure: abusive churches encourage and subtly provide the breeding ground for addiction. But church addiction can occur even in a healthy church, because the addict needs religion.

How Church Can Be Addicting

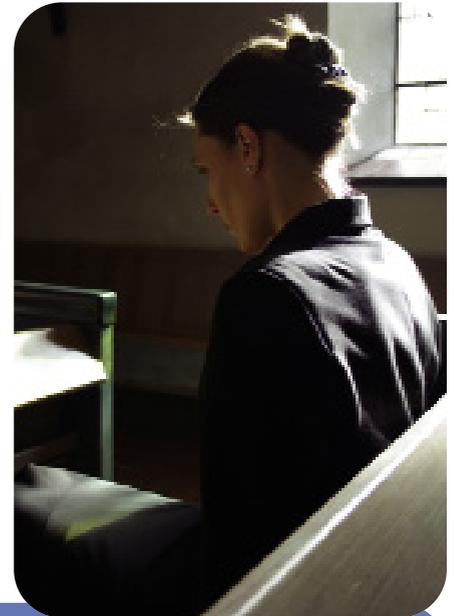
- **Church can alter our mood.** Anything that is mood-altering can be addicting. If something makes us feel a certain way, a way that satisfies a longing or meets a felt-need or cooks up some emotional stew in our lives, we can get "hooked on a feeling." The feelings do not need to be entirely positive to have the addictive effect; even guilt, remorse and sorrow can be satisfying moods when we think we

deserve them. Certainly the legalistic elements of *doing church* can offer a payback that satisfies.

- **Church offers immediate returns.** Dale Ryan calls it a "benefits package." Cults, religious systems and legalistic churches offer the

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potential addict a set of benefits that meet a deep need. Those benefits include:

- 1) **Community—a sense of belonging.** We enjoy being a part of a select group and all the more

when we are exclusive. Most legalistic systems claim they are the “called ones” who hold the secrets to getting in good with God.

2) **Answers—the ability to make sense of life within a strict belief system.** Cults and religious groups offer a way to organize our thinking. Even erroneous doctrine is preferable to a mind in chaos, especially when that belief system is organized and has the appearance of much scholarship and hard work.

3) **Boundaries—rules and regulations that provide a protective barrier.** The fact is we prefer the safety of moral fences compared to open fields of moral choices. It's lazy, but it provides a sense of security.

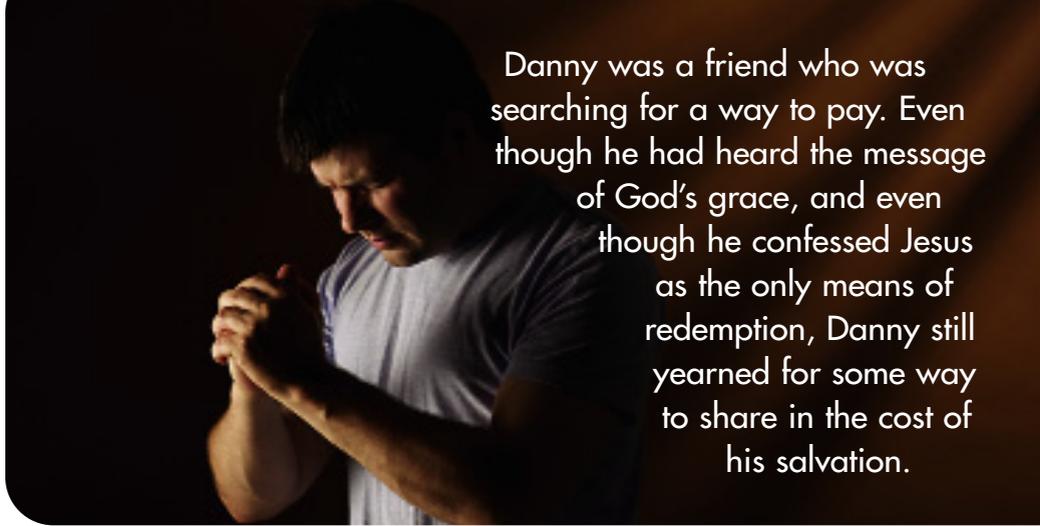
4) **Moral Ease—any gray areas of morality become black and white.** Taking the above one step further—when we allow those in authority to decide what is good and what is bad, the responsibility for the exercise of personal conscience is minimized and obedience is a no-brainer.

5) **Penance—a way to pay for wrong-doing.** All humans have a desire to perform some action, jump through some religious hoops and work off our feelings of guilt. This activity satisfies and salves the conscience, at least for a season, until the drug wears off and the cycle of shame starts over again.

• ***Church, by its very nature, fosters an allegiance***—or call it a *dependency*—that can become unhealthy over time under the right circumstances.

• ***Church feeds the human need,*** inherited from Adam and Eve, for handling our holiness on our own terms. Legalism grows in the hot-

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house of religious fervor and can convince us that we are accomplishing right living in our own strength, by our own activity, for our own redemption.

The elements that cause addiction include a vulnerable person, a legalistic system and an increasing participation in behaviors (habits and rituals) that feed the need. When this perfect storm begins to brew, the rough waves of religious addiction can break out and cause the shipwreck of faith. Unfortunately, when you're the one in the boat, you never know what hit you.

Heading for a Crash

The one who is caught in church addiction is rarely able to see the problem until there is a crash. As with other addictions, denial builds into the mindset and insulates the person from his/her situation.

With church addiction, the denial is no surprise. If my successful life on earth, and my eternal life in heaven, depend on getting religion right, then all my energies and time and money will go to feed my religious habit. For the alcoholic, the next drink is necessary to get him through the day. For the religious addict, her rituals not only

get her through the day, but buy her a place in God's forever future. Not performing those rituals will most certainly mean eternal punishment in hell. It's easy to see how addiction can sneak up.

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though he had heard the message of God's grace and even though he confessed Jesus as the only means of redemption, Danny still yearned for some way to share in the cost of his salvation. In spite of many counseling sessions, Danny continued to dabble in legalism. He jumped from strident home Bible studies to Deeper Life cassettes to Freemasonry.

In each case, Danny needed more. Eventually, Danny joined

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the Roman Catholic Church and became a deacon, all to assuage his sense of duty to pay his dues for forgiveness.

Recovery specialists call this "tolerance." Over time, the payoffs from legalism grow weaker and the addicted individual needs more. The last time I checked with Danny, he was considering becoming a Jesuit priest. He found it hard to be around his family and friends because they did not believe the way he did, and his increasing need for religion pushed him into isolation.

Danny pulled himself away from the people who could help. If his addiction was not addressed, Danny was headed to a crash point, when exhaustion and frustration and disillusionment could

drive him over the edge and cost him dearly.

Sound Familiar?

Maybe you see yourself in Danny's story. Maybe you sense that there is a growing need in you for more and more rituals and penance. Perhaps someone in your life has told you that you have a problem with *doing church* that is out of control. How can the bondage to religious addiction be broken? Because this type of addiction is "progressive," it can be hard to notice and harder to break. When, however, a person in religious bondage recognizes the dilemma, there is hope. Dale Ryan, in his upcoming book written with his wife, Juanita, and Jeff VanVonderen, offers a basic three-phased approach.²

1) **Saying "no."** Persons trapped in religious addiction need to understand that the *god* to whom they have given their allegiance is not the God of the Bible. Their concept of God has been distorted—and idolatry born. In essence, says Ryan, the addict must "fire all false gods." In recovery terms, this is "going cold turkey." The gods of legalism must be relieved from their authority. All forms of *doing church* must cease.

2) **Saying "maybe."** When the recovering person begins to reacquaint with the God of Scripture and learn to trust in his grace, faith begins to rebuild. This must proceed slowly and with help from discerning friends and helpers. It is easy, at this stage, for the recovering addict to simply find another religious system in which to begin the process all over again. It's similar to going from crack cocaine to heroin—different denomination, same addiction of *doing church*.

3) **Saying "yes."** As trust develops and perspective is gained, the recovering religious addict recognizes that God has been there all the time, loving him/her and helping to restore faith. They experience the freedom of grace, begin again to walk with Jesus and find freedom from legalistic addiction.

There Is Hope

Are you trapped in legalistic bondage? There is hope. Are you addicted to church? You can kick the habit. Are you hooked on religion? You can find freedom. Are you an evangelical junkie? The wagon is waiting for you to get on.

Are you tired of *doing church*? It's time to go through your spiritual house, gather up all the bottles of churchy booze and throw your dependency on religion down the drain. Go ahead. Do it now. I'll wait....



When the recovering person begins to reacquaint with the God of Scripture and learn to trust in his grace, faith begins to rebuild.

OK. Good start. Now, repeat after me: "Hi, my name is _____. I'm a churchaholic." □

¹ When Religion Goes Bad, by Dale S. Ryan and Jeff VanVonderen, at *Spiritual Abuse Recovery*, <http://www.spiritualabuse.com>

² Used by Permission. *Rebuilding a Damaged Spiritual Life will be published by InterVarsity Press in September, 2008.*

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Join Greg Albrecht as he talks with Michael Peterson—Dr. Peterson is a university professor and senior scholar whose research, teaching and writing address the topic of stress. In this discussion Greg and Michael talk about "Religion and Stress." Don't miss the fascinating insights they share.

