

INTRODUCTION BY RICK WARREN



Your First Step to  
**Celebrate**  
**Recovery**<sup>®</sup>

HOW GOD CAN HEAL YOUR LIFE

A photograph of a wooden boardwalk winding through a dense forest of evergreen trees. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a warm, golden glow and lens flare effects. The boardwalk is made of light-colored wooden planks and leads the eye into the distance.

JOHN BAKER

Your First Step to  
Celebrate  
Recovery<sup>®</sup>

# CONTENTS

*Introduction: What Is Celebrate Recovery?*  
*by Rick Warren / 7*

## CHAPTER ONE

Why Did Celebrate Recovery Get Started? / 11

## CHAPTER TWO

How Do I Know Celebrate Recovery Works? / 27

## CHAPTER THREE

What Can I Expect to Happen at My First  
Celebrate Recovery Meeting? / 93

## CHAPTER FOUR

How Can I Get More Questions Answered  
about Celebrate Recovery? / 107

*Closing Thoughts / 117*

*Appendix A:*  
*Twelve Steps and Their Biblical Comparisons / 119*

*Appendix B:*  
*How God Has Changed My Life through Celebrate Recovery / 123*

# WHAT IS CELEBRATE RECOVERY?

BY RICK WARREN

---

The Bible clearly states “all have sinned.” It is my nature to sin, and it is yours too. None of us is untainted. Because of sin, we’ve all hurt ourselves, we’ve all hurt other people, and others have hurt us. This means each of us needs recovery in order to live our lives the way God intended.

You’ve undoubtedly heard the expression “time heals all wounds.” Unfortunately, it isn’t true. As a pastor, I frequently talk with people who are still carrying hurts from thirty or forty years ago. The truth is, time often makes things worse. Wounds that are left untended fester and spread infection throughout your entire body. Time only extends the pain if the problem isn’t dealt with.

Celebrate Recovery® is a biblical and balanced program that helps us overcome our hurts, hang-ups, and habits. It is based on the actual words of Jesus rather than psychological theory. Celebrate Recovery is more effective in helping us change than anything else I’ve seen or heard of. Over the years I’ve seen how God has used this program to transform literally thousands of lives at Saddleback Church and to help people grow toward full Christlike maturity.

Most people are familiar with the classic 12-Step program of AA and other groups. While undoubtedly many lives have been

helped through the 12 Steps, I've always been uncomfortable with that program's vagueness about the nature of God, the saving power of Jesus Christ, and the ministry of the Holy Spirit. So I began an intense study of the Scriptures to discover what God had to say about "recovery." To my amazement, I found the principles of recovery—in their logical order—given by Christ in His most famous message, the Sermon on the Mount.

My study resulted in a ten-week series of messages called "The Road to Recovery." During that series, Pastor John Baker developed the participant's guides which became the heart of our Celebrate Recovery program. I believe that this program is unlike any recovery program you may have seen. There are six features that make it unique.

1. *Celebrate Recovery is based on God's Word, the Bible.* When Jesus taught the Sermon on the Mount, He began by stating eight ways to be happy. Today we call them the Beatitudes. From a conventional viewpoint, most of these statements don't make sense. They sound like contradictions. But when you fully understand what Jesus is saying, you'll realize that these eight principles are God's road to recovery, wholeness, growth, and spiritual maturity.

2. *Celebrate Recovery is forward-looking.* Rather than wallowing in the past or dredging up and rehearsing painful memories over and over, we confront our past and move on. Celebrate Recovery focuses on the future. Regardless of what has already happened, the solution is to start making wise choices now and depend on Christ's power to help us make those changes.

3. *Celebrate Recovery emphasizes personal responsibility.* Instead of playing the "accuse and excuse" game of victimization, this program helps us face up to our own poor choices and deal with what we can do something about. We cannot control all that happens to us, but we can control how we respond to everything. That is a secret of happiness. When we stop wasting time fixing the blame, we have more energy to fix the problem. When we stop hiding our own faults and stop hurling accusations at others,

## WHAT IS CELEBRATE RECOVERY?

then the healing power of Christ can begin working in our mind, will, and emotions.

4. *Celebrate Recovery emphasizes spiritual commitment to Jesus Christ.* The third principle calls for us to make a total surrender of our lives to Christ. Lasting recovery cannot happen without this principle. Everybody needs Jesus.

5. *Celebrate Recovery utilizes the biblical truth that we need each other in order to grow spiritually and emotionally.* It is built around small group interaction and the fellowship of a caring community. There are many therapies, growth programs, and counselors today that operate around one-to-one interaction. But Celebrate Recovery is built on the New Testament principle that we don't get well by ourselves. We need each other. Fellowship and accountability are two important components of spiritual growth.

6. *Celebrate Recovery addresses all types of hurts, hang-ups, and habits.* Some recovery programs deal only with alcohol or drugs or another single problem. But Celebrate Recovery is a "large umbrella" program under which a limitless number of issues can be dealt with. At Saddleback Church, only one out of three who attend Celebrate Recovery is dealing with alcohol or drugs. We have many other specialized groups.

I'm excited that you have decided to begin the Celebrate Recovery journey. You are going to see your life change in dramatic ways. You are going to experience freedom from your life's hurts, hang-ups, and habits as you allow Jesus to be Lord in every area of your life. To God be the glory! I'll be praying for you.

# WHY DID CELEBRATE RECOVERY GET STARTED?

---

You are not alone.

In the small city of West Monroe, Louisiana, men and women meet at Celebrate Recovery to share the hurts, hang-ups, and habits that have affected their lives. In greater Atlanta, Georgia, sixty-five churches are safe places where people come to Celebrate Recovery to find victory over their past. Elementary, junior high, and senior high school students are meeting in their own groups to talk about their hurts. In jails and prisons across the country, men and women are meeting in small groups to work through the participant's guides and the eight recovery principles based on the Beatitudes found in Matthew, chapter 5. Regularly, men and women from churches across the United States are making trips to countries such as Rwanda, Brazil, Great Britain, and Australia, to name a few, to share Jesus Christ as the one and only true Higher Power who can help them on their road to recovery.

You are not alone.

This book will help you understand how Celebrate Recovery got started, what the program is based on, and what to expect the first time you come to a Celebrate Recovery meeting. In addition, we will answer the questions that you may have as you begin this exciting, life-changing adventure.

I have asked my wife, Cheryl, to share with you our journey through recovery and how God's vision of Celebrate Recovery was born.

### **Cheryl and John's Story**

I was born in St. Louis, Missouri. My dad was an Air Force sergeant and my mother loyally followed him throughout the United States as well as overseas. Alcohol was prevalent in my home, but my parents assured me that it was not a problem because they didn't drink at work, they just enjoyed the taste of beer, and they could quit whenever they wanted. I noticed that my parents were different after they drank, and I observed that my friends' parents drank very little, but I wanted very much to believe Mom and Dad's behavior was normal.

My mom had polio as a child and suffered a great deal of pain. She spent a lot of time in hospitals after surgeries and felt abandoned and alone. She said she could not believe in a God who would allow little children to feel such agony. Our family never went to church. When friends invited my brother and me, we were discouraged to attend.

By the time I was sixteen, we had lived in Missouri, Texas, Kentucky, New York, Portugal, Japan, and England. I learned early on how to use masks to hide my feelings of insecurity, to accept everyone, and to use a sense of humor when things got uncomfortable. These skills helped me to make friends by the end of the first day of every new school transfer.

My dad retired from the Air Force in the city where I was born, St. Louis, where I began to attend college. At a fraternity-sorority football game, I met John. At the party after the game, John told me that because he was president of his fraternity and I was president of my sorority, it was our "duty" to start off the dancing. Months later, I learned that John had arranged that entire evening so that he could meet me. (Years later, in Celebrate Recovery, I learned this was very manipulative and controlling!)

As John and I began dating, I learned that his childhood was



very different from mine. He had been raised as an only child and had lived in a small town, Collinsville, Illinois, his entire life. Two years before John was born, his parents had given birth to a baby boy who died during his first few days of life. His mother never quite got over the pain of the baby's death, but her small Baptist church helped her deal with the loss. John grew up in that church and accepted Jesus into his heart at age thirteen.

It appeared that John had many successes while in high school: he was class president and lettered in baseball, basketball, and track. But John never felt that he was quite good enough. He was always certain that he was letting someone down—his parents, teammates, friends, and girlfriends. While searching for a college to attend, John had applied to several Christian universities to pursue a position in ministry. However, his feelings of low self-esteem caused him to feel unworthy to answer God's call, so he decided on the state university instead.

As soon as John arrived at college, he joined a fraternity and found the solution to all of his problems—alcohol. While he was the life of the party—it didn't start until he got there and wasn't over until he left—I approached the sorority life with caution. I had seen the effects of alcohol at home, and I was afraid that I might be someone who would not be able to handle it well. I didn't drink at all until I was twenty-one, and then I drank very little.

I was aware that John drank a lot in college, but I wanted to believe that it was normal behavior for someone just enjoying the college experience. I did not want to see it as a problem. Despite the warning signs, we got married in our senior year of school. We did not want to wait because we anticipated that John would be called to serve in the war in Vietnam.

John attended Officer Training School and pilot training, and he learned to act like an officer and drink like a gentleman. Again, it continued to cover his pain of low self-worth. He even discovered that the 100 percent oxygen in the plane could cure morning hangovers! When the war ended, he was assigned to a

reserve unit and quickly began to pursue a business career. He joined a paper company and earned his masters' degree in business in night school.

After being married for four years, John and I had our first child, our daughter, Laura, and two years later, our son, Johnny, was born. John had been persistent in talking to me about accepting Christ. After our daughter was born, I did accept Him as my Lord and Savior. However, our church attendance was very irregular.

A few years later, when our son started attending a Christian preschool, Johnny explained to me that we could go back to his school on Sundays to hear more stories about Jesus. This tugged at my heart, and we finally committed to our first church home. Meanwhile, John continued to be promoted at work. He was achieving all of his life's goals before the age of thirty.

Each time John was promoted, our family moved. I was following in my parents' footsteps and going from city to city. I worried that my children would have feelings of insecurity from so many relocations. I also noticed that with each business success, John seemed unhappier. He certainly wasn't the life of the party anymore. He drank more and more and got quieter and quieter. I didn't know what to do or whom to turn to. I didn't want my children raised in an alcoholic home. By this time, church had become very important to me. I even taught preschool at our church, but I didn't feel like I could tell anyone there about our struggles. Everyone at church looked and acted as if their lives were perfect. The kids and I already felt different enough because John wasn't attending church with us anymore.

Gradually, things began to change between John and me. We didn't seem to understand one another, and we talked less and less. At first, I thought our relationship was shifting because of all of our relocations—we had moved seven times in the first eleven years of marriage. Or maybe we were losing touch because he traveled so much with his job. But I could see that his drinking was increasing and his relationship with our family was changing. He was emotionally distant and uninterested in our lives.

Each time I confronted John about his drinking, he assured me that it was not a problem, because he did not drink at work, he just enjoyed the taste of beer, and he could quit whenever he wanted. But even though I had grown up with those words, they had a different impact on me as a wife and mother. If he could “just quit whenever he wanted,” then why didn’t he quit? Maybe there was something about me that caused John to keep drinking. Maybe if I were prettier, or smarter, or funnier, or if I just worked harder, maybe then John would quit drinking. Since we didn’t tell anyone about these struggles, to the outside world we looked like an average, normal family.

John began to be defensive about his drinking. He had grown up in the church and was starting to feel uncomfortable with some of his choices: his relationships with our family, his work practices, and the steady increase in the amount of alcohol. He knew that he had a choice—to continue to live by the world’s standards or to repent and turn to God. Proverbs 14:12 (TLB) says, “Before every man there lies a wide and pleasant road that seems right but ends in death.” But John turned his back on God, and the drinking escalated.

Our family continued to live as if the drinking was not affecting us. After all, John told me repeatedly, he had never lost a job due to alcohol. He had never even gotten pulled over by the police for drunk driving. He wanted so much to convince us that he was a normal, social drinker.

However, when John began drinking beer for breakfast, I knew that we had to face the family secret. John was an alcoholic. This time when I confronted him in anger, I gave him an ultimatum: quit drinking or leave our home. I was completely surprised when he packed his suitcase and announced that we were separating after twenty years of marriage.

Finally, the attempt to cover up John’s hurts, hang-ups, and habits with alcohol was causing the breakup of our family. At first, alcohol seemed to be the solution to help him with his low self-esteem, but now it had become the problem in his life that

was affecting him emotionally, mentally, physically, and most importantly, spiritually.

While on a business trip in Salt Lake City, John came to the realization that he could not take another drink, but he had no idea how he was going to live without one. Although he did not realize it, he had come to the first Christ-centered recovery step: *We admitted we were powerless over our addictions and compulsive behaviors, that our lives had become unmanageable.* “For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out” (Romans 7:18).

He had finally hit his bottom. He went back home and attended his first Alcoholics Anonymous meeting and attended over ninety meetings in ninety days. Then he became ready for Step 2: *We came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.* “For it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose” (Philippians 2:13).

As it became clear to John that God loved him unconditionally, he began to find hope. It was time to make the decision to turn over his life and will to the care of God. This was a departure from the secular program he was attending where a “higher power” was very vague. As a child, he had learned who his Higher Power was: Jesus Christ!

John’s stubborn willpower had left him empty and broken. The definition of willpower had to change. Willpower now became the willingness to accept God’s power for his life. He began to accept, “I can’t, God can, and I decide to let Him, one day at a time.” He was ready for the third step: *We made a decision to turn our lives and our wills over to the care of God.* “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship” (Romans 12:1).

God provided a sponsor to help navigate the road to recovery. The sponsor taught John that recovery is not meant to be a journey that is traveled alone—we need others to help us. He helped

John stay balanced and didn't judge him. He guided him through the fourth step: *We made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves*. "Let us examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the LORD" (Lamentations 3:40).

Finally, John had to take a look at that young boy from Illinois and face the hurts, hang-ups, and habits that he had attempted to drown with alcohol for all those years. He discovered how the loss of his brother as an infant had impacted his family and affected his low self-esteem. This inventory made it clear that his alcoholism had destroyed all of his important relationships.

In Step 5 he learned: *We admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs*. "Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed" (James 5:16). Finally, John was able to face the truth of his past and to accept the forgiveness of Jesus, which led him "out of darkness into his wonderful light."

I was completely unaware that John was beginning to deal with his alcoholism. I was busy putting all of my energies into using a mask, once again, to hide my pain. It was important to look as though nothing was wrong—I had to "hold it together." This is when my dysfunctions really began to surface. I had never told anyone about the breakup of our marriage. I didn't even tell my parents until they came to visit us seven months into the separation. I wanted so much to tell my close Christian friends at the church preschool where I worked, but I just didn't feel safe. I was afraid they might judge me. I didn't think they would understand. As I looked around my church, I wondered if there were others who were also struggling with pain that they were too afraid to share and feeling so different and alone.

Thinking that if we switched churches we would find a safe place to tell others about our pain, the kids and I began attending Saddleback Church. But we didn't want to feel different or alone, so we didn't tell anyone there about the separation either.

I was afraid that the church where I worked would judge me if they learned about the separation, so I accepted the position

as the director of another preschool. This job paid more—and the pastor was understanding of my situation. The preschool had 400 families, 50 women on staff, and as I learned my first day on the job, was \$40,000 in debt. The first thing I was expected to accomplish was for the school to pay back the money.

Up until this point, I had done a good job of pretending that I could manage all of the changes in my life. But after the first day of my new job, I fell apart. I couldn't stop crying as the pain of the drinking, the failed marriage, and now the impossible job came together. I couldn't believe it when John arrived at the house to visit the kids and to find out how my first day on the job had gone. I was embarrassed to have lost control, but I didn't seem to be able to do anything about it.

As I was crying about the job, I noticed that John had tears in his eyes as he tried to comfort me. He asked what he could do to help and offered suggestions. I realized that we were having a loving conversation—he seemed to be hurting right alongside me. This was confusing to me. John was showing signs of changing, and I had no idea how to cope.

Although I didn't know it at the time, I began working Steps 1 through 3. I knew I was completely powerless to get through the separation by myself. I began to trust Jesus and to lean on Him. Colossians 1:11 (NCV) tells us, "God will strengthen you with his own great power so that you will not give up when troubles come." I held onto that verse, but I didn't realize that Jesus was getting me ready for more changes.

John completed Step 6—*We were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.* "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up" (James 4:10)—and Step 7—*We humbly asked Him to remove all our shortcomings.* "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). He allowed God to change everything in his life and rebuild his self-worth based on God's love for him alone, no longer trying to measure up to the world's standards.

## WHY DID CELEBRATE RECOVERY GET STARTED?

Gradually, John began coming by the house more frequently. He said he was coming to visit the kids, but because they were teenagers, they were often not at home. I began to see a lot of changes in him. He would bring along a pizza or a movie, and we began spending some evenings together. John smiled more often, and sometimes he even laughed out loud. I hadn't seen him laugh like that in years. Although hesitant, Laura and Johnny asked him to join us at our new church. John loved Saddleback Church and said he felt like he was home. He began meeting us there every week on Sunday mornings.

Meanwhile, John began working on Step 8: *We made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all.* “Do to others as you would have them do to you” (Luke 6:31). After being separated for a year, John left a note on my table asking me to meet him for lunch.

I was surprised that John wanted to meet for lunch on February 14, 1991 — Valentine's Day! John explained that he was in recovery, and that he went to meetings every day. He was working on Step 9: *We made direct amends to such people whenever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.* “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift” (Matthew 5:23–24).

John told me that he had a lot of names on his amends list, including former employers, employees, friends, and neighbors, but most importantly, he had very special amends to make to Johnny, Laura, and me. He said he was sorry for all of the pain he had caused by his drinking. He took full responsibility for his drinking and freed me from the doubts that I had been the cause of his alcoholism. He said he still loved me, and asked if I would be willing to work on the marriage.

God changed our lives with Step 9. John and I began to work on the issues that had torn apart our marriage. We made Step 10 a part of our daily lives: *We continued to take personal inventory*

*and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.* “So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall!” (1 Corinthians 10:12).

Five months after John’s ninth step to me, God opened our hearts and we renewed our wedding vows. As a family, we were baptized together, and we took all of the church’s membership classes together. In the maturity class, John found one of his life’s verses, 1 Peter 2:9–10 (TLB): “You have been chosen by God himself . . . you are the priest of the King . . . you are God’s very own—all this so you can show to others how God called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were less than nothing; now you are God’s very own.”

However, at John’s secular meetings, some of the men made fun of him whenever he talked about his higher power, the one and only true Higher Power, Jesus. It seemed as though anything could be claimed as a higher power, just not Jesus. At church, we tried to find a small group where we could be open and honest about the issues that had torn our marriage apart. But we couldn’t find that safe place—a group of other Christians who wanted to share openly about their struggles.

We began working Step 11: *We sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and power to carry that out.* “Let the message of Christ dwell in you richly” (Colossians 3:16). Finally, John said, “We can’t be this different from everyone at church. We can’t be the only ones struggling with a hurt, hang-up, or habit.” At the time, Saddleback Church had over 6,000 members.

John began writing down an outline for a program that would fit our needs. Realizing that “God never wastes a hurt,” the pain and the heartache of his sin addiction to alcohol were finally beginning to have a purpose. In Joel 2:25, God promises to restore “the years the locusts have eaten.” We discussed the ideas for the program for weeks while the vision from God continued to grow. We saw an opportunity to share our hurts with others



## WHY DID CELEBRATE RECOVERY GET STARTED?

as we began to work Step 12: *Having had a spiritual experience as a result of these steps, we try to carry this message to others and to practice these principles in all our affairs.* “Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted” (Galatians 6:1).

John finally finished a thirteen-page, single-spaced letter for a vision of a ministry called Celebrate Recovery—a Christ-centered recovery program. In summary, the letter said, “The vision for Celebrate Recovery is for the church to provide a safe place where families could find healing and restoration; where moms, dads, and their children of all ages could find freedom from their hurts, hang-ups, and habits.”

John gave the letter to Rick Warren, the senior pastor of Saddleback Church. We were confident that Rick would find just the right godly man to head up this new ministry. Neither of us was prepared for Rick to call John into his office and say, “It’s a great idea, John, I would like you to do it!”

The first meeting for Celebrate Recovery started on November 21, 1991. Saddleback Church did not have any property, so the only place we could find to hold our meeting was a psychiatric hospital! And, still, God used it—forty-three people attended! In order for the whole family to be able to come, we provided child care. Our son and daughter, Johnny and Laura, started the open share group for teens. A small group of volunteers led our worship, and the lessons were taught in a large group format. Since at that point we did not have any recovery stories from our program, we did not have testimonies. As time went on, testimonies were added to our large group as people began to want to share how Jesus Christ was changing their lives.

There were four groups: a woman’s chemical addiction, a men’s codependent, a men’s chemical addiction (led by John), and a woman’s codependent (led by me). I didn’t even know what a codependent was! But I wanted to share with others who could identify with our struggles, so I was willing to learn.

After the meetings were over, we were all so excited to talk

about our recoveries with other Christians that we went to a restaurant to keep sharing. Often we would close down the restaurant, and then go back to our house so that we could continue our conversations. It was such a relief to talk to others who understood our hurts, hang-ups, and habits. We had found a safe place; we were no longer different or alone.

This program was working for our family and that is all we hoped to accomplish. We just needed to keep the program going. But God had so many other plans! John was asked to join the Saddleback Church staff in 1992. He served at Celebrate Recovery as a volunteer while his job was to oversee the small ministries of the church.

In 1993, because lives were changing at Celebrate Recovery, Rick decided to take the entire church through “The Road to Recovery” sermon series of the eight principles based on the Beatitudes. This series helped us to experience another growing phase. But more importantly, Celebrate Recovery participants began to serve in other areas of the church. While finally experiencing freedom and forgiveness, and with many tears, Celebrate Recovery even served communion. Saddleback Church became a safe place for anyone with a hurt.

In order to better understand the choices that we had made in our lives, we began to feel that we needed something in addition to the open share groups. We decided to try some of the Christian 12-Step published materials. Often we would start off a group of twenty-five men or women, but only two or three would finish the study. The available, published resources did not work for us.

So the search began for a Christian study that was based on the Bible and would apply to anyone with a hurt, hang-up, or habit. We wanted the curriculum to be concise and easy to use while helping people deal with their past in a thorough manner. We studied many resources, but none of them seemed to be a good fit for Celebrate Recovery.

As the search continued for the right curriculum, our participants were having trouble getting through Step 4. John slowed

down the lessons and took three months to teach on that principle. At the completion of those lessons, many had completed the step successfully and were ready to move on in their recovery. One of the leaders, Carl, was so impressed with John's teaching, that he suggested he put his teaching notes into a fourth step workbook.

Not having much confidence in his writing abilities, John quickly said he would consider the idea but within a few days had forgotten all about the request. However, as John would arrive at the next Celebrate Recovery meeting, Carl would greet him at the door and ask how the fourth step workbook was coming along. He repeated the same scenario at the Saturday night and Sunday church services. "How's that fourth step workbook coming?"

John finally decided that God was using Carl to encourage him to write the workbook, so he completed the participant's guide in 1994. The book was based on God's Word, so it was not addiction or compulsion based. We knew that it worked because the lessons had been so successful at Celebrate Recovery, and it applied to anyone with a hurt, hang-up, or habit.

Since Saddleback is a teaching church, it was not long before several churches in California were using the workbook. Then some churches in other states began incorporating the book into their programs. Much to our surprise, Canada and Australia contacted us about using this fourth step workbook. The workbook was helping people from all over the world get through their fourth step. Carl had been right.

And then it wasn't long before John began getting requests for the workbooks for steps one through three and steps five through twelve. All of a sudden, John had hundreds of "Carls" all over the country asking for step study workbooks. He went back to the computer and the late nights and completed all four workbooks—the participant's guides—in 1995. The workbooks included all twelve steps and the eight principles. Finally, the search for a Celebrate Recovery curriculum was over.

As we began to use the participant's guides, we had a huge

growth spurt. Leaders began to emerge from those step study groups and wanted to start new groups. Gradually, groups for newcomers, anger, eating disorders, food addiction, love and relationship addiction, sexual addiction, codependents in a relationship with a sexually addicted man, gambling, sexual/physical/emotional abuse, and adult children of the chemically addicted were added to the original four small groups.

The participant's guides began to be shipped all over the country, and people started calling the church office to find out how to start Celebrate Recovery at their churches. The questions were endless and complex. "How do you start the program? How do you find leaders? How can you prepare lessons with full-time jobs and family commitments?" In order to answer the flood of questions, a leader's guide was written in 1996.

For a couple of years, John and I printed those participant's guides and leader's guides and sold them from our garage. We had a post office box for the orders. It was a highlight of our week to pick up the orders and learn where Celebrate Recovery programs were being started. This Christ-centered recovery program was beginning to appear all over the United States, and other countries were starting the program as well!

In 1998, in order for the participant's guides and the leader's guide to receive wider distribution, Zondervan took over printing and distributing the materials. The participant's guides and leader's guide have now been published in twenty-three different languages and are in forty-five prison systems. Luke 4:18 (MSG) says, "God's spirit is on me; he's chosen me to preach the Message of good news to the poor, sent me to announce pardon to prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to set the burdened and the battered free . . ."

As the program continued, Celebrate Recovery leaders from across the country wanted to meet one another and to develop a network. In 1999, the first Celebrate Recovery Summit was held at Saddleback Church for that purpose and seventy-three people attended. Twelve years later, a sold-out crowd of 3,400 people met

at Saddleback Church to learn how to meet the growing numbers of people with hurts, hang-ups, and habits. The network now includes regional and international directors, a prison director, and volunteer state representatives who help Celebrate Recovery programs get started and continue to grow. This was beyond our wildest dreams!

Celebrate Recovery began as a ministry at Saddleback Church so that our family could have a safe place to share the struggles that had torn us apart. We wanted to identify with others who would claim Jesus Christ as their Higher Power and were willing to turn their lives completely over to Him.

Now our “Forever Family” includes people from all over the world who want to break the cycle of dysfunction and live out 2 Corinthians 1:3–4 with us: “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.”

## **Victory Can Be Yours As Well**

I hope you can see from Cheryl’s testimony how God changed two broken lives and restored our marriage so that we could live out God’s purpose in Celebrate Recovery. It is our prayer that you will read the rest of this book with an open heart, knowing everyone has hurts, hang-ups, or habits. One of the misconceptions about the word *recovery* is that it is only for those struggling with drugs and alcohol. Of over the million people who have gone through a Celebrate Recovery step study, only one out of three has been dealing with substance abuse.

The remainder of the book is designed to remove any fears, doubts, or questions you might have about attending a Celebrate Recovery meeting for the first time.

If you are going through any type of hurt, hang-up, or habit, Celebrate Recovery is for you.

God can give you the same victory He has given us!



# HOW DO I KNOW CELEBRATE RECOVERY WORKS?

---

## **Change Is Possible: The Eight Principles of Celebrate Recovery**

Since the beginning of time, men and women have searched for happiness—usually in all the wrong places, trying all the wrong things. But there’s only one place where we can find tested-and-proven, absolutely-gonna-work principles that will lead to healing and happiness. These principles come in the form of eight statements from the truest of all books—the Bible—and from the most revered Teacher of all time—Jesus Christ. Jesus laid out these principles for happiness in the Sermon on the Mount in the gospel of Matthew, chapter 5. Today we call them “the Beatitudes.”

Change, Jesus says, can be ours, but the pathway to change and happiness may not be exactly what we’re expecting. From a conventional viewpoint, most of the following eight statements don’t make sense. At first they even sound like contradictions. But when you fully understand what Jesus is saying, you’ll realize these eight statements are God’s pathway to wholeness, growth, and spiritual maturity.

*“Happy are those who know they are spiritually poor.”*

*“Happy are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.”*

*“Happy are the meek.”*

*“Happy are the pure in heart.”*

*“Happy are those whose greatest desire is to do what God requires.”*

*“Happy are those who are merciful.”*

*“Happy are those who work for peace.”*

*“Happy are those who are persecuted because they do what God requires.”\**

## **My Own Personal Journey**

I know that the eight principles work. Why? Because they worked in my life. I have not always been a pastor. Prior to being called into the ministry, I was a successful businessman. I was also a “functional alcoholic.” My wife Cheryl told my story in chapter one. I struggled with my sin addiction to alcohol for nineteen years. Eventually I came to a point where I was losing everything. I cried out to God for help, and He led me to Alcoholics Anonymous. Even then I knew that my Higher Power had a name — Jesus Christ! I started attending Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California. After a year of sobriety, God gave me the vision for Celebrate Recovery, a Christ-centered recovery program. I answered God’s call to start Celebrate Recovery. Since 1991, over a million courageous individuals have found the same freedom from their life’s hurts, hang-ups, and habits that I did. If these eight principles worked for someone like me, I promise they can work for you too!

## **My Partnership with Pastor Rick**

After Celebrate Recovery had been going for a year, Pastor Rick Warren, my senior pastor, saw how Celebrate Recovery was helping people in our church family find God’s healing from their

---

\* All quotations of the Beatitudes throughout this book are taken from the *Good News Translation (Today’s English Version)*.



## *Principles That Will Change Your Life*

### **The Road to Recovery**

Based on the Beatitudes

Pastor Rick Warren

PRINCIPLE 1	<b>R</b> ealize I'm not God. I admit that I am powerless to control my tendency to do the wrong thing and that my life is unmanageable (Step 1). <i>"Happy are those who know they are spiritually poor" (Matthew 5:3).</i>
PRINCIPLE 2	<b>E</b> arnestly believe that God exists, that I matter to Him, and that He has the power to help me recover (Step 2). <i>"Happy are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted" (Matthew 5:4).</i>
PRINCIPLE 3	<b>C</b> onsciously choose to commit all my life and will to Christ's care and control (Step 3). <i>"Happy are the meek" (Matthew 5:5).</i>
PRINCIPLE 4	<b>O</b> penly examine and confess my faults to myself, to God, and to someone I trust (Steps 4 and 5). <i>"Happy are the pure in heart" (Matthew 5:8).</i>
PRINCIPLE 5	<b>V</b> oluntarily submit to every change God wants to make in my life and humbly ask Him to remove my character defects (Steps 6 and 7). <i>"Happy are those whose greatest desire is to do what God requires" (Matthew 5:6).</i>
PRINCIPLE 6	<b>E</b> valuate all my relationships. Offer forgiveness to those who have hurt me and make amends for harm I've done to others, except when to do so would harm them or others (Steps 8 and 9). <i>"Happy are the merciful" (Matthew 5:7). "Happy are the peacemakers" (Matthew 5:9).</i>
PRINCIPLE 7	<b>R</b> eserve a daily time with God for self-examination, Bible reading, and prayer in order to know God and His will for my life and to gain the power to follow His will (Steps 10 and 11).
PRINCIPLE 8	<b>Y</b> ield myself to God to be used to bring this Good News to others, both by my example and by my words (Step 12). <i>"Happy are those who are persecuted because they do what God requires" (Matthew 5:10).</i>

hurts, hang-ups, and habits. He decided to take the entire church family through a sermon series called “The Road to Recovery.”

Pastor Rick’s R-E-C-O-V-E-R-Y acrostic identifies eight principles. As you read the eight principles and the corresponding beatitudes (see box on page 29), you’ll begin to understand the choices before you. (Throughout this chapter, you also will be introduced to the Christ-centered 12 Steps. These have been adapted from the 12 Suggested Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, with the significant difference that we know our Higher Power to be Jesus Christ. To read these Steps and their biblical comparisons in one convenient spot, please see Appendix A on page 119.)

We will explore each of the eight Celebrate Recovery principles in the rest of this chapter. Let’s begin with Principle 1. (NOTE: After four of the eight principles—4, 5, 7, and 8—you’ll find a personal story, a testimony by a real person from the Celebrate Recovery family. You will see how with God’s power, and working their program, they are overcoming their hurts, hang-ups, and habits. These courageous individuals come from very different backgrounds with a variety of problems and issues. As you read their stories, please keep your heart and mind open. You will see how their journeys relate to your own life or to someone’s close to you.)

## Principle 1

**Principle 1:** Realize I’m not God. I admit that I am powerless to control my tendency to do the wrong thing and that my life is unmanageable.

*“Happy are those who know they are spiritually poor.” (Matthew 5:3)*

Your amazing recovery journey starts with Principle 1, where you admit that you are powerless to control your hurts, hang-ups, and habits and that your life has become unmanageable, out of control. But before you begin this exciting journey, you need to ask yourself the following two questions:

## HOW DO I KNOW CELEBRATE RECOVERY WORKS?

*Am I wearing a mask of denial?*

*Over what do I really have control?*

These questions are not just for you, but for everyone! Let's look at the first question: Are we wearing a mask of denial? Before we can make any progress in our recovery, we need to face our denial. As soon as we remove our mask, our recovery begins—or begins again! It doesn't matter whether someone is new in recovery or they have been in the process and working the principles and steps for years. Denial can rear its ugly head and return at any time. We may trade addictions or get into a new relationship that's unhealthy for us in a different way than a previous one.

God says in Jeremiah 6:14 (TLB), "You can't heal a wound by saying it's not there."

Denial is serious. We can't heal our hurts, hang-ups, and habits by pretending they're not there. Denial will disable our feelings, isolating us from God and alienating us from others.

As soon as we start working on this principle and admit that we're powerless, we begin to change. We see that our old ways of trying to control our hurts, hang-ups, and habits didn't work. Our attempts were buried by our denial, and our problems were held close by our false sense of power.

This leads us to the second question we need to answer: Over what do we really have control? In Principle 1 we recognize our need to admit our powerlessness. Our lust for the power to control is rooted in our weaknesses, not in our strengths. We need to realize our human weaknesses and turn our lives over to God. Jesus knew this would be difficult. How difficult? He said this about a related issue, but it applies here as well: "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26).

Pride, worry, resentment, selfishness, and loneliness act like "serenity robbers" in our lives. We have to come to a place where we admit that we are powerless.

The power to change comes only from God's grace. In Principle 1 we start working and living this program in earnest. When