

THE BIG COVER-UP

**THE STORY OF
BOB AND PAULINE BARTOSCH**

BY PAULINE BARTOSCH



A Christ-Centered 12-Step Recovery Group
addressing addictions and those affected by them

**This family was headed for a breakup
until the problem of alcoholism
was faced head-on.**

If you sit in your pew every Sunday wondering how much longer your family can secretly endure its “thorn in the flesh” of alcoholism, I have good news for you. You *can* find help.

My husband and I know this from experience. If anyone had told us 12 years ago that we could find a way out of our dilemma, we would have accused them of offering the same old pat answers. No one would have told us anything about alcoholism then, because from all appearances we were a model Christian family. Besides, whatever our problems were, they had nothing to do with alcoholism – or so we thought.

Carrying a Secret Load

Church people are supposed to have it “all together,” especially if they are living “victorious” Christian lives, but our family was carrying a secret load of anger, fear, guilt and shame. Every Sunday we would arrive at church exhausted and confused by what had gone on in our home only minutes before. Our three sons were as schooled as Bob and I in wearing plastic smiles so no one could ever guess we had a problem.

Something was wrong, we knew, but we couldn’t put our finger on it. We refused to label it “alcoholism” because of the stigma attached to it, so we continued to ignore the evidence. Besides, we didn’t want to admit to our pastor that *any* drinking was happening at our house – much less that Bob’s drinking was out of control.

Alcoholism couldn’t happen to us. After all, Bob had studied for the ministry and I had majored in Christian education, preparing to be the perfect minister’s wife. We had even formed a gospel team. Somewhere along the line our ministry dreams faded. We also began to rebel against “man-made rules”. Like Jonah, we were taking the ship to Tarshish and eventually would pay a price.

While experimenting with social drinking and the once-forbidden worldly lifestyle, we carefully maintained our Christian image. We were Bible study leaders, Sunday School teachers, choir members and youth leaders. Every Sunday, Bob and I and our three little boys sat in our pew, playing the part.

Eventually, our double standard became a heavy load to carry.

Being “sipping saints” required us to do a little “church hopping”, always searching for a fresh start where people didn’t know us.

Losing Control

In the process, I began to notice that Bob drank differently than I did. At first, he could consume huge amounts of alcohol and handle it pretty well. But after several years, his tolerance dropped radically and he began to lose control. Our family was tossed to and fro, never knowing which dad was coming home – the fun-loving one or the grumpy one. When our sons raised questions about their dad’s erratic behavior, I tried labeling it as “early senility”.

Our family life remained troubled and Bob’s and my marriage grew rockier every day. By our eighteenth anniversary, divorce seemed a strong possibility. Repeatedly, we sought help from pastors, who advised us to “read the Bible and pray” or “get right with God”. They were unaware that Bob and I were working hard at covering up our real problem.

When ministers couldn’t provide a practical answer because we never admitted our problem, we turned to our medical doctor. His solution became an added difficulty later on. He prescribed Valium for both of us – a martini in pill form.

Crossing an Invisible Line

Next, we tried Christian counselors. We were desperately attempting to save what was left of our relationship, though love and respect were long gone. Even with our counselors, however, we expertly sidestepped the fact that drinking had anything to do with our unhappiness, and inevitably, our problem continued. The dull ache in my chest became a constant throb.

Eventually, Bob lost his power of choice about drinking and crossed the invisible line into alcoholism. Now he drank to feel normal and kill his emotional pain. He spent lunch hours imbibing liquid false courage. Whenever he tried to stop drinking, his withdrawal symptoms convinced him that he could never be sober. To feel normal again, he needed another drink.

Time after time he promised to stop drinking. Each time, I believed him, and was always sorely disappointed. I know now that he had meant every word of his promise, but was unable to carry it out.

I was feeling frightened, lonely and overwhelmed with the responsibility of finding a solution to our still unnamed problem. My role in our family had become peacemaker, manager and controller. I was as obsessed with my alcoholic husband and his behavior as he was obsessed with alcohol. Our boys, now teenagers, were ashamed to bring their friends home. They couldn't predict what conditions they would encounter.

Incredibly, Bob was still known as a spiritual leader among our church friends – always having a breath freshener handy at Bible study. We just *couldn't* share our real story with them. They would never understand.

Defenses Begin to Crumble

In the fall of 1972, during the final lap of our race for help, we were attending Dr. Robert Schuller's church in Garden Grove, California. Here we became involved in a small "talk-it-over" group of seven couples. In our intimate sharing times, my defenses began to crumble around my denial of our alcohol problem. A caring group member literally dragged Bob and me to the help we so desperately needed.

Seated across the desk from an employee assistance counselor of a large corporation, Bob and I nervously studied the sheet of questions the counselor had handed us to answer. A recovered alcoholic himself, the counselor knew our problem almost instantly. Our answers to the test only confirmed his suspicions.

His firm advice to Bob was to get involved in Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and I was directed to Al-Anon. However, we still clung to our denial of our problem with all our strength! We suffered another year of wretched pain and heartache before we were ready to do as the counselor suggested.

Ready for Help

As we accepted our powerlessness over alcohol and gave our problem to the Lord, our faith was rekindled. Doors of hope opened in our hearts and the void of loneliness began to be filled. Through the AA and Al-Anon programs we learned that alcoholism is a disease of body, mind, emotion and soul and is no respecter of persons.

I was shocked to discover that I had been helping Bob in all the wrong ways. As a good Christian wife, I had spent hours rehearsing my sermonettes to change him, but had overlooked my own attitudes. I needed to get out of Bob's way and allow the crisis to happen. When finally, with love, I could release him, he had to face the consequences of his actions. Though the experience was painful, he became ready for help and our world changed drastically.

Two years of sobriety went by before our boys, now young adults, realized a miracle was happening with their folks! Our once strained and unhappy family grew loving and close.

Time to Help Others

As Bob recovered, the Lord began to speak to him about helping other alcoholics. Soon he was back in school, getting a master's degree in counseling. Eventually he sold his insurance agency to become an alcoholism counselor in a hospital and I served as a volunteer. Two years later, he became the director of the National Council on Alcoholism in Long Beach, California.

Together we began learning more about alcoholism and other addictions. We spent four summers at the University of Utah's School of Alcoholism and Drug Abuse. We began conducting workshops, appearing on radio and television programs, and speaking at a variety of occasions.

We welcomed any chance to help others. However, we felt a special burden for Christians who, like ourselves, were involved in the church yet secretly struggling with alcoholism. We had guarded our secret so zealously. Could there be others like us within the church?

By this time we had become members of Whittier Area Baptist Fellowship. We offered ourselves as a resource for people with alcohol or drug problems. A confidential support group called Overcomers was formed as part of the church's circles of concern. We weren't the only ones in our Baptist Church struggling with alcoholism. People were coming out of the woodwork. Using the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, Bob developed Bible studies and other materials for our Whittier Overcomers.

The Work Spreads

For three years our group grew steadily, meeting monthly at first, and later, weekly. Then, at the urging of some Christian professionals, we started working full time to develop Overcomers and help establish Christian alcohol support groups around the country. Our goal was to provide counseling, workshops, seminars, referral services and Christian resources, including a film library, newsletter and other educational materials.

A number of support groups have now been started and in every case, people are calling the support groups an answer to prayer.

Walls of denial are finally coming down and addicted Christians and their suffering families are getting the help, which they've been praying for, from the church. Now, instead of being addicted to alcohol or drugs, they are becoming addicted to God.

In church, every Sunday morning, a sea of smiling faces will greet each other. Yet, many will be plastic smiles hiding the pain of addiction. Overcomers Outreach is dedicated to helping these Christians end their big cover-up and to stop carrying the burden alone.

Help is Available

Christians often think they are immune to addiction to drugs, alcohol or pills. Or, if they are grappling with such a problem, they work harder than most people to cover it up. They try to carry the load alone. Because few pastors have been trained in this area, they are at a loss as to how to minister effectively to alcoholics and addicts. Often the work seems time-consuming, with few rewards for their efforts. Consequently, many are looking for help, and help is available if they are open to receive it.

Overcomers Outreach (OO) was born out of the need to address this ever-growing problem among Christians. Pauline and I feel that God has chosen us to pioneer this adventure. We intend to provide the Christian community with information to break down the walls of denial. OO offers powerful, proven tools to combat the fear, guilt, anger, loneliness and confusion that affects entire families.

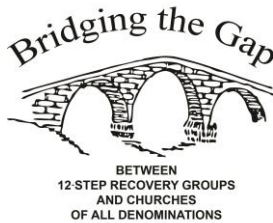
OO Christian support groups meet to study God's Word as it relates directly to the 12 Steps of AA, to study relevant subjects in the light of Scripture, to share with one another in the strictest confidence, and to pray specifically for one another. OO groups are in no way intended to replace Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, or Al-Anon. They supplement these other successful programs and allow us to share not only our recovery, but our faith in Jesus Christ.

Our basic tool is a booklet we've prepared entitled FREED, based on the five keys to the group: Fellowship in recovery, Reconciliation to God and His family, Education about chemicals and addiction, Edification through faith in Christ, and Dedicated service to others. The booklet gives step-by-step instructions on how to get a group going in your church and fully equips you with all the materials needed for the content of your meetings.

Bob Bartosch

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