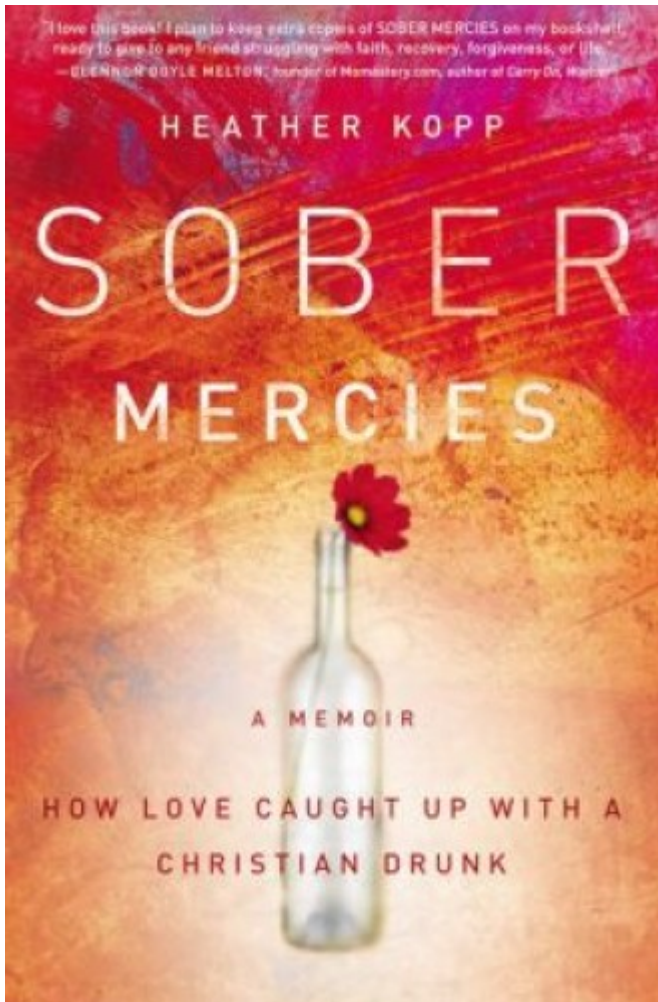


Sober Mercies, by Heather Kopp

reviewed by [Valerie Weaver-Zercher](#) in the [November 27, 2013](#) issue

In Review



Sober Mercies

By Heather Kopp

Jericho Books

One in four children in the United States grows up in a household with an adult who drinks too much, according to the National Institutes of Health. That means that about seven of my third-grader's classmates experience something akin to what

Heather Kopp describes in her recovery memoir. Kopp, who has two children of her own and three stepchildren (all now grown), describes stashing mini wine bottles around the house, drinking herself into oblivion each evening and occasionally driving intoxicated with her children in the car.

Considering the destructiveness of alcoholism, there may be no such thing as too many recovery memoirs. During her own days of addiction, Kopp says, she read many such memoirs, but in a blog post published immediately before her book was released, Kopp explains how her book differs from the others. In most recovery memoirs, the epiphanic moment in which the addict wakes up to the horror that life has become and starts down the road to recovery occurs toward the end of the book, as the climax. In such narratives, recovery functions as a short and sweet denouement. When she was reading recovery memoirs during her worsening days of addiction, Kopp writes:

I needed to know, what did happen next? What happens after you quit the drug or the drink or whatever it was you were addicted to? How could a life devoid of one's favorite and most necessary thing be anything but miserable? I needed to read a recovery memoir that was actually about recovery. I was desperate to hear a newly sober person talk about joy. And if possible, to hear from a Christian who had succumbed to addiction, quit, and come out the other side without losing God in the process.

So Kopp intentionally inverted this narrative arc and started her book with an episode she calls the "beginning of the end of my drinking," which involved an undramatic encounter with a guest who, when Kopp opened a bottle of white wine to serve with appetizers, asked, "Do you have any tea?" During the rest of the visit, Kopp felt increasingly sorry for her guest and her liquorless and thus lackluster life. "It was a life of such vast meaninglessness I couldn't wrap my head around it." Kopp has a spot-on way of depicting her prior self-deceptions.

The suspense in Kopp's memoir operates on two levels. She hints at her relapse pages before she narrates it, so the reader is kept wondering when and under what circumstances it will occur and how recovery will look post-relapse. Because she begins her story near the end of her drinking, Kopp can give relapses and their aftermath the space and attention they deserve.

“This time, I didn’t have that giddy feeling of making a new start,” she writes of the aftermath of relapse. “I didn’t have the protective walls of a treatment center. And now, I had planted the idea in the back of my mind that relapse was an option.”

Even though the reader anticipates the relapse, Kopp keeps the mechanism of suspense running on more than the question about whether she drinks again. By offering insightful commentary on her changing theology and sense of herself, she keeps the reader thirsty for more. We watch her as she watches herself go through the stages of recovery, ugliness not redacted. We watch as she tries to impress her young adult sons with her newly sober and (she hopes) contented, fun-loving self. And we watch as the ego trip of early recovery gets leveled. “I had naively assumed that when I got sober, a better Heather would naturally emerge,” she writes. “But clearly alcohol hadn’t created my personality flaws, it only exacerbated and magnified them.”

For good memoirists of any stripe, suspense is lodged not only in dramatic events but in carefully executed self-revelation. Watching Kopp trace the roots of her addiction does not feel like rubbernecking. Her story contains horrifying episodes that will make readers flinch. But the narrative does not hang on pity or *Schadenfreude* from the unaddicted. Rather, Kopp’s struggles with faith, identity and change are universal enough to connect her story to many Christians’ experiences.

At points in her recovery, she writes, her Christian faith became a stumbling block that slowed her healing. Initially she imagined that her faith would make her immune to the “gross moral lapse I considered alcoholism to be.” But following a divorce and reevaluation of her erstwhile conservative brand of faith, Kopp remarried and became a social drinker. Looking back, she writes, “It was a perfect spiritual storm: a growing cynicism about my faith, guilt about my divorce, and a new affinity for alcohol.”

Additionally, Kopp says, even in a newer, more progressive form, her faith offered her little help in coping with her addiction. She remained on what she calls a “prideful intellectual journey aimed at being right about God instead of on a desperate soul journey aimed at being real with God.” The difference between those two paths, Kopp claims, “can make you sick.”

Whether or not you accept Kopp’s cleaving of intellectual and spiritual journeys, she makes an important point: faith and recovery can work at cross-purposes,

depending on what form each takes. During her recovery, Kopp shed a kataphatic approach to faith that emphasized defining and knowing God in favor of an apophatic one. “The God I thought I knew and understood was not the God who could save me,” she writes, again with aching poignancy. “What if I could rediscover God *as I didn’t understand him*—and arrive somewhere closer to the truth?” Ultimately, she discovered that recovering from alcoholism and following Christ don’t need to be in conflict: “Like streetlamps lining both sides of the street, they could light my way back to God.”

Kopp straddles the debate about whether alcoholism is sin or sickness, refusing to land in either camp. She recalls sitting in Bible studies in which people bristled at the use of the term *disease* for various kinds of addiction, claiming that such a view gave addicts an excuse to sin. Early on in her own treatment process, she defended the idea of alcoholism as sin in a therapy group, only to be challenged by the counselor. “What is it about labeling alcoholism a disease that *you* object to so much?” he asked, and she later mulled over the interaction. “The more I thought about it, the more it seemed to me that alcoholism wasn’t a matter of sin *or* sickness, but *both*,” Kopp writes. “My own experience had proven to me in a way no theory or doctrine ever could that the issue was much more complicated than a single paradigm could explain.”

Addicts and ex-addicts will find what Kopp herself was looking for when she was still in the throes of sin-sickness: a dramatic story not only of addiction but of recovery, and of how one alcoholic found life on the other side to be anything but miserable. Nonaddicts will find a narrative that makes them both grateful for their placid if somewhat boring lives and that reminds them of the milder habits that can still separate them from God. Both types of readers, if they are paying attention, will find prose that connects to their own histories and their faith.

“I don’t care what people say,” Kopp writes, describing the catharsis of reading her drinking history aloud to a friend, “you can get saved so many more times than once.”