

The Twelve Steps and Their Relationship to Christianity

It is well known that the twelve-step program developed by Alcoholics Anonymous has become the model for many other popular, lay-managed programs of treatment targeted at people with addictions, compulsions, or dependencies. These conditions include nicotine abuse, narcotics and cocaine abuse, compulsive eating and gambling. Alcoholics Anonymous estimate there are now more than 87,000 A.A. groups in 136 countries world-wide, representing 1.8 million members! Including memberships in other twelve-step programs, it can be estimated safely that millions of individuals around the world attend twelve-step meetings every week.

Alcoholics Anonymous began on June 10, 1935, co-founded by William Griffith Wilson (Bill W.) and Dr. Robert Holbrook Smith (Dr. Bob). Wilson conceived the idea of Alcoholics Anonymous while he was hospitalized for excessive drinking in December 1934. During his hospital stay, Wilson had a spiritual experience that removed his desire to drink. In the following months, he tried to persuade other alcoholics to stop drinking just as he had. Wilson found his first "convert" in Smith, who was willing to follow Wilson's method to find freedom from alcoholism. Four years later, Wilson and Smith published the book, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, which contains the Twelve Steps and a spiritually based program of recovery from alcoholism.

The Oxford Group

Various sources influenced the formulation of A.A.'s program, as developed and recorded by Wilson. Of these, the British-born Oxford Group movement and its American leader, Episcopal clergyman Samuel Moor Shoemaker, Jr., contributed most significantly to the Christian basis of Alcoholics Anonymous. Both Wilson and Smith attended Oxford Group meetings and based much of the A.A. program on this framework.

In the 1920's and 1930's, the Oxford Group movement became a revolutionary answer to anti-religious reaction following World War I. Aiming to rekindle living faith in a church gone stale with institutionalism, the Oxford Group declared itself an "organism" rather than an "organization." Group members met in homes and hotels, mingling religion with meals. Despite its freedom from institutional ties, the movement was distinctly ecclesiastical and looked to the church as its authority.

Dr. Frank N.D. Buchman, a Lutheran pastor, is most often cited as leader of the Oxford movement. Yet, if one were to ask an Oxford Group follower, "Who is your leader?" the reply might well be, "The Holy Spirit." So confidently did the group believe in the guidance of the Spirit that it had no organized board of officers, but relied instead on "God control" through men and women who had fully "surrendered" to God's will.

Buchman traveled extensively in the United States, England and the Orient, organizing local groups and urging people to follow definitive principles in order to experience a life-changing conversion. Buchman emphasized the need to surrender to God for forgiveness and guidance and to confess one's sins to God and others. Oxford Group followers learned also to make restitution for wrongs done and to witness about their changed lives in order to help change others.

The Oxford Group's teachings rested on the following six basic assumptions:

1. Human beings are sinners.
2. Human beings can be changed.
3. Confession is a prerequisite to change.
4. The changed soul has direct access to God.
5. The age of miracles has returned.
6. Those who have been changed are to change others.

(from: Cantril, Hadley, *The Psychology of Social Movements* (Huntington, NY: Robert E. Kruger, 1941), pp. 147-148)

Ernest Kurtz, in his history of A.A. entitled *Not-God, A History of Alcoholics Anonymous* listed the following characteristics of the Oxford Group that were adapted to meet the specific needs of the A.A. program:

- informal home-like settings for meetings, intended to highlight the pleasures of spiritual fellowship;
- an expectation that members would remain in their own churches, turning to A.A. not for theological interpretations, but for support in living a moral life;
- a focus on gradually realizing a "changed life" by passing through "stages," a concept that presented sobriety as something positive rather than merely the absence of alcohol or drunkenness;
- the policy that A.A.'s workers, especially its founders, should never be paid;
- an emphasis on helping others in order to change one's own life.

In addition, Wilson incorporated into A.A.'s philosophy the Oxford Group's five procedures, which were:

1. Giving in to God.
2. Listening to God's directions.
3. Checking guidance.
4. Restitution.
5. Sharing, both confession and witness.

(From: Kurtz, Ernest, *Not God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous* (Center City, MN: Hazelden Educational Materials, 1979), pp. 48-49)

The Evolution of the Twelve Steps

While trying to attract more followers to sobriety from 1935-1937, Smith and Wilson attended Oxford Group meetings in New York led by Samuel Moor Shoemaker, Jr.. "It was from Sam Shoemaker that we absorbed most of the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, steps that express the heart of A.A.'s way of life." Wilson later recalled, "The early A.A. got its ideas of self-examination, acknowledgment of character defects, restitution for harm done, and working with others straight from the Oxford Group and directly from Sam Shoemaker, their former leader in America, and from nowhere else." (From: *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age* (New York: A.A.W.S. Inc., 1957), p. 199)

In his 1937 book, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, Wilson set forth six steps of a spiritual recovery program, based on what he and other A.A. members agreed they had learned from Sam Shoemaker and the Oxford Group. The six steps were:

1. We admitted that we were licked, that we were powerless over alcohol.
2. We made an inventory of our defects or sins.
3. We confessed or shared our shortcomings with another person in confidence.
4. We made restitution to all those we had harmed by our drinking.
5. We tried to help other alcoholics, with no thought of reward in money or prestige.
6. We prayed to whatever God we thought there was for power to practice these precepts.

(From: *Pass It On* (New York: A.A.W.S. Inc., 1984), p. 197)

In 1938, Wilson revised and expanded these six steps, making them more explicit in order to eliminate any possible loopholes perceived by the rationalizing alcoholic. After review and fine-tuning by other A.A. members, Wilson's revisions resulted in the Twelve Steps as we know them today. In the process, a preface was added to emphasize that the steps were intended as suggestions only. Also, in what Wilson called "concessions to those of little or no faith," God was described as a "power greater than ourselves" and "God as we understood Him."

"This was the great contribution of our atheists and agnostics," Wilson explained. "They had widened our gateway so that all who suffer might pass through, regardless of their belief or lack of belief."

"God was certainly there in our Steps," Wilson continued, "but He was now expressed in terms that anybody—anybody at all—could accept and try. Countless A.A.s have since testified that without this great evidence of liberality they never could have set foot on any path of spiritual progress or even approached us in the first place. It was another one of those providential ten-strikes." (From: *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, p. 167)

As the early members of A.A. established their program's principles, they slowly began moving away from the Oxford Group. In doing so, however, they were not implying that the teachings of Jesus Christ were not appropriate for helping alcoholics achieve sobriety. They were, instead, attempting to make their program "available" to the largest audience possible.

Step One	We admitted we were powerless over our separation from God—that our lives had become unmanageable.	"I know nothing good lives 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)
Step Two	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 according to his good purpose." (PHILIPPIANS 2:13)
Step Three	Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God, as we understood Him.	"Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—which is your spiritual worship." (ROMANS 12:1)
Step Four	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)
Step Five	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)
Step Six	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)
Step Seven	Humbly asked Him to remove 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)
Step Eight	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)
Step Nine	Made direct amends to such people wherever 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)
Step Ten	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)
Step Eleven	Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.	"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly." (COLOSSIANS 3:16)

Step Twelve	Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried 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)
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In establishing the principles of A.A., Wilson borrowed material from many sources, including Christianity, and translated them into language easier for the alcoholic to accept. Consequently, A.A. members talk about spirituality, not religion; sobriety, not salvation; wrongdoing, not sin; admitting, not confessing; strength and hope, not resurrection; carrying the message, not sharing the faith. However, the absence of direct Christian references within A.A. does not take away from the program's Christian basis.

The Twelve Steps and Related Scripture

In essence, the Twelve Steps embody the Bible's core teachings concerning God's redemptive relationship with humankind, from salvation to evangelism. They begin with an admission of human shortcomings and a profession of faith in God's power, love and forgiveness—the essence of justification. The Twelve Steps go on to encourage continual confession of wrongdoing, submission to God's control and proper conduct toward others—the principles of sanctification. Finally, they encourage habits of devotion, responsiveness to God's will and sharing the message of recovery with others—the basics of biblical Christian living.

The Twelve Steps listed below have been adapted for Christians and are reprinted with permission from Alcoholics Anonymous. A corresponding scripture verse is included with each Step to illustrate the relationship between scripture and the Twelve Steps.

Charles Knippel, Ph.D., a noted scholar on Christianity's influence on A.A., has this to say about the Twelve Steps and Christianity: "In making use of twelve-step programs and in encouraging others to use them, the Christian will view the Steps within the Christian context and give the Steps Christian meaning. In addressing himself to non-Christian members of twelve-step groups, the Christian will seek, by way of caring and sharing relationships, to bring such twelve-step practitioners to a Christian understanding of the Steps that will provide rich spiritual benefits and a more abundant experience of recovery."

"Like Sam Shoemaker, today's church leader will view Alcoholics Anonymous as a 'tutor' to bring people to Christ and His church and thus respond with a winsome Christian witness and welcome. The examination of Sam Shoemaker's theological influences on William Wilson's formulation and interpretations of the twelve-step spiritual program of recovery yields rich and life-enhancing insights for the practice of Christianity." (From: Knippel, Charles, *Samuel M. Shoemaker's Theological Influence of William G. Wilson's Twelve Steps Spiritual Program of Recovery*, Ph.D. Dissertation (St. Louis University, 1987), pp. 303-304)

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