

THE HOLINESS MOVEMENT IN THE CHURCH BASEMENT:  
HOW THE 12-STEP MOVEMENT CAN CONSTRUCTIVELY INFORM WESLEYAN-  
HOLINESS SPIRITUALITY

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*Introduction*

On a late Mother's Day afternoon in 1934, two men sat in a little library in the guest house on the Goodyear Estate in Akron, Ohio sharing their hearts and their lives with one another. One was an Akron surgeon, his personal demons and mounting debt threatening to ruin his once successful practice, destroy his good reputation, and tear apart his family. Robert Smith was a tight-lipped man of proud Vermonter stock who had only recently ever acknowledged openly that he had a problem—and this in a small religious meeting with close friends and family. But the total stranger sitting across of him sharing his own story of struggle and failure had opened up the floodgates for the otherwise reserved and cautious doctor and he began to pour out his heart like never before.

Of course, this man was not a *complete* stranger. They had never met before, but they felt immediately as if they had known each other for a long time, and not just because they were both Vermonters. Their common bond was a common affliction—alcoholism. The stranger was in Akron on a business deal that had turned sour. A once successful Wall Street broker, William Wilson had lost everything between the stock market crash and the insanity of his drinking. Only a few months before he had come to a religious conversion that had freed him from his need to drink, and he was trying desperately to resuscitate his career. But now he found himself alone in a hotel far from home. His business prospects looking bleak and only ten dollars in his pocket, a visit to the hotel bar seemed more and more appealing. In desperation, he approached the list of clergy phone numbers in the lobby, took some down, and began making phone calls. If only he could find another drunk with whom to share his story—this method had kept him sober now for several months in New York, and he felt it was his only hope. One call led to another, he finally found someone with sympathy for his predicament, and she was able to get Mr. Wilson a meeting with Dr. Smith. This was the first meeting of Bill W. and Bob S. and is considered in the lore of Alcoholics Anonymous as the founding event of that fellowship.<sup>1</sup>

Today, just 70 years after this momentous meeting, there are an estimated 90,000 AA groups worldwide, and literally millions of people have found freedom from alcohol through its program of recovery.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the movement and principles of AA have been embraced for the treatment of a variety of different maladies and addictions, and there are now scores of different fellowships and programs dealing with a whole range of problems: drug addiction, debt, overeating, sex addiction, co-dependency, and gambling, just to name a few. Such is the

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<sup>1</sup> Wilson's famous account of this meeting, as well as the decisive events leading up to and following the meeting, can be found in *AA Comes of Age* [hereafter *AACA*] (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous Publishing, Inc., 1957) 51–77. The standard scholarly treatment is Ernest Kurtz, *Not-God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous* (Center City, MN: Hazelden Educational Services, 1979), see esp. 7–36 on the founding events.

<sup>2</sup> According to AA World Services 1999 estimates.

importance and influence of AA and the movements it spawned that Bill Wilson was named by *Time Magazine* as one of the 100 most important persons of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

But why should this movement be of interest to members of the Wesleyan Theological Society? For one thing, the 12-step movement is, arguably, one of the most significant religious movements to have emerged in the last century, and, with roots in the nineteenth century holiness movement (as I will demonstrate) marks an important development of holiness theology and praxis that is also distinct from the theology and praxis of the churches of the Wesleyan-holiness movement. Second, I believe that where many of these differences lie, the 12-step movement has much to offer to the Wesleyan-holiness movement—that is, some of the strengths of the 12-step movement coincide with certain of our weaknesses. Before addressing AA and the 12-step movement more at length, I wish to say a few words about what I perceive to be the weakness of Wesleyan-holiness practical theology.

First, with Randy Maddox I affirm that one of our chief problems is that we have fallen short of appropriately connecting the *ends of* with the *means to* holiness. That is, while correctly affirming the goals of sanctifying grace, we have not given appropriate attention to the means by which sanctifying grace is appropriated by believers. According to Maddox, this is because holiness thinkers in the generations following Wesley embraced problematic moral psychologies—that is, problematic presumptions regarding how it is that we make moral decisions and actions.<sup>3</sup> My take on this problem, though parallel to that of Maddox, is a bit different. Instead, I believe that the Wesleyan-holiness movement has generally assumed a theological anthropology that is overly dualistic, individualistic, and simplistic, and thereby has failed to account for the true complexity of human life and experience, and the many dimensions of our being that form our capacity for receiving and responding to sanctifying grace.<sup>4</sup> As I have argued elsewhere, this inadequate anthropology has given rise to models of sanctification, perfection, and assurance that are simply not nuanced enough to account for the full complexity of human life and experience.<sup>5</sup> In my quest for a more nuanced anthropology, I have sought especially to draw upon the human sciences, asking what we may learn about what it means to be human and how it is that humans develop the capacity for moral responsibility and relatedness (which I take to be the heart of personal holiness) from developmental psychology, neuro-psychology, and the sociology of knowledge.

Of great importance, AA has been influenced not only by the holiness movement, but psychologists William James and Karl Jung were also key influences in the early development of the AA program of recovery. Perhaps because of these varying influences, as well as the importance of the medical profession in developing early ideas about the nature of alcoholism, AA has embraced an anthropological model and theory of recovery that is self-consciously

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<sup>3</sup> See Randy L. Maddox, “Reconnecting the Means to the End: A Wesleyan Prescription for the Holiness Movement,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 33.2 (Fall 1998), 29–66.

<sup>4</sup> This is most evident in Wesley’s distinction between sins and infirmities and in later distinctions between purity of heart and maturity of character and has given rise to the problematic metaphor of entire sanctification as a complete eradication or mortification of inbred or original sin.

<sup>5</sup> See my unpublished dissertation: *Perfecting Grace: Holiness and the Human Sciences* (Grand Rapids: University Microfilms, 2004)

attentive to the multifaceted nature of human maladies, treating alcoholism as a *physical, emotional, moral* and *spiritual* illness that must be dealt with from each of these perspective for full recovery to occur. It is for this reason that I believe the theories and practices of AA warrant the attention of those within Wesleyan-holiness circles seeking to be more appropriately attentive to the complexity of human existence in our understanding of and prescriptions for living the sanctified life. What I wish to do, then, is to identify some of the historical connections between AA and the holiness movement; then outline the basic principles that guide the spiritual practices and community formation of the 12-step movement; and, finally, identify where folks in the Wesleyan-holiness churches might have something to learn from those groups meeting in their church basements and fellowship halls on Thursday and Friday nights.

### *The Religious Background of AA: The Oxford Group Movement*

That the first meeting Bill W. and Dr. Bob would be considered the founding moment of AA is extremely important in understanding the core beliefs and practices of the movement. However, there were equally revealing moments both prior to and following this event that were of equal, or nearly equal, importance. The first worthy of mention was Bill’s diagnosis by Dr. William Silkworth of the Towns Hospital in New York—one of the foremost treatments centers for alcoholism in the world in the 1930s and the site of Bill’s occasional attempts to sober up and get cured—that he was an incurable alcoholic, a “hopeless” case who, apart from some miracle, would soon either be dead or locked up permanently in an insane asylum.

The second was another meeting between two drunks shortly after this diagnosis had been given. On an afternoon in late November of 1934, Bill was in his home drinking himself into oblivion when he received a surprise visit from an old drinking buddy, Ebby Thatcher who, to Bill’s great amazement, appeared to have sobered up. Ebby shared with Bill that he had ‘gotten religion’, having had a life-changing spiritual experience through the ministry of the Oxford Group and by applying the teachings of Oxford Group to his life, and Ebby eventually convinced the agnostic Bill to give God a try. Several days later a totally inebriated Wilson showed up at an Oxford Group meeting and there gave his heart and life to Christ, after which he checked himself into Towns for one last detoxification. There, in the depths of a withdrawal-induced depression and seriously questioning the verity of his drunken conversion, he called out to ‘whatever God there might be’ to help him. Bill immediately found himself bathed in an overwhelming hot flash of white light, and for the first time in his life felt the presence of God. Days later he left the hospital an entirely transformed man.

The Oxford Group Movement was founded by a Lutheran minister named Frank Buchman who, exhausted and stinging from the failure of his ministry in inner-city Philadelphia, decided to go on spiritual retreat to the annual holiness convention in Keswick, England in June of 1908.<sup>6</sup> One Sunday during the convention he visited a local Primitive Methodist church where

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<sup>6</sup> The Oxford Group Movement or Buchmanism, as it is often called by its critics, survives under the name “Moral Re-Armament,” reflecting its transformation from its mission to spread first-century Christian faith, to more general, interfaith movement aimed at social and political transformation. It is tough to find a good account of the Oxford Group, as most are written either by detractors or supporters and read like polemic or hagiography, respectively. The most balanced and therefore best accounts that I have found are W. H. Clark, *The Oxford Group: Its History and Significance* (New York: Bookman

a woman was sharing about the great sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. This affected him deeply, and he felt an overpowering sense of the weight of his sin leading him to surrender his life entirely to God, with the result that he felt his sin lifted from him along with the hurt and resentment he felt toward certain persons who had contributed to his departure from his ministry. This moment was to serve as the fount for a renewed sense of calling and a restored sense of God's work in his life. In fact, Buchman often spoke of it as the turning point of his life.

Interestingly, Buchman never seems to have mentioned any influence of the Keswick movement on this experience or the principles that he subsequently developed and which would be the foundation for Oxford Group beliefs and practices; but the influences are real and significant.<sup>7</sup> Founded in 1875, at the zenith of the holiness movement's success and influence in the English-speaking world, the Keswick Convention for the Promotion of Practical Holiness embraced many of the chief tenets that we associate with nineteenth-century Wesleyan-holiness theology: most notably the promise of complete victory over sin through the baptism of the Holy Spirit, a distinct second blessing of grace following one's initial regeneration. However, one very important difference existed: Wesleyan-holiness advocates affirmed that the second blessing resulted in the eradication of the sinful nature, while Keswickian theology affirmed that the second blessing rather merely gives *power over* inbred sin, which yet remains in the heart of the believer until death. (As we will see, this is a key point in understanding the "theology" of AA.) Historian W. H. Clark has identified several salient teachings of the Keswick convention in understanding the movement's likely impact on Buchman's theology:

(1) Abandonment of sin. (2) Surrender. (3) 'Appropriation by faith of God's promise and power for holy living'. (4) Mortification of self-life. (5) Transformation of inmost disposition. (6) Separation unto God for service. (7) 'Enduement with power and filling with the Holy Spirit'.<sup>8</sup>

Each of these would find its way into the basic tenets of the Oxford Group, with two important exceptions—the decisive 'secondness' of the appropriation of power for holy living and the centrality of 'baptism with Holy Spirit' as the efficient cause of this transformation.<sup>9</sup> In addition, Clark notes that many of the practical aspects of the Keswick movement would be appropriated into the Oxford Group, including its non-denomination character, the use of daily morning

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Associates, 1951) and Allan W. Eister, *Drawing-Room Conversion* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1950).

<sup>7</sup> Of course, one may speculate. It is possible that he did not himself fully recognize his debt to the Keswick Movement. Or, following a more cynical line, it could be that acknowledging such a debt would have served to undermine his teaching that God was the true source of his experience and subsequent ministry, for, as he believed, God provides us with *direct* guidance which we can receive and follow if we are willing to be attentive and listen.

<sup>8</sup> Clark, 121–22.

<sup>9</sup> Perhaps due to the Christo-centric nature of his experience at the Tithebarn Street Church. He would, however, speak of the experience in terms of having "heard the wind of heaven" which "passed over and through" him, but the pneumotological focus of the holiness movement was never part of his own teachings. Cf. Peter Howard, *Frank Buchman's Secret* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1961), 23–25.

prayer meetings, the importance of testimonials and confession, and the disciplined practice of seeking the direct guidance of God in both individual and communal decision-making.<sup>10</sup>

One of the problems in assessing the theology of the Oxford Group lies in Buchman's disavowal of getting involved in matters of controversy, and especially those of the intellectual variety. For this reason the movement has avoided producing any official doctrines or systematic credo, focusing instead on overtly practical matters of faith.<sup>11</sup> In fact, the central teachings of the movement are found in two sets of instructions for appropriately living out one's faith: the "Four Moral Absolutes" and the so-called "Five Cs."<sup>12</sup> The Five Cs express Buchman's view of process by which persons can be brought to experience a transformed life: Confidence, Confession, Conviction, Conversion, and Continuance. First, *confidence* is believers seeking to establish rapport with a sinner or nonbeliever. Second, believers are to *confess* their own past sins to the nonbeliever, thus deepening the sense of solidarity and rapport with the nonbeliever, and providing hope of salvation from such sins.<sup>13</sup> Third, *conviction* is the attempt to make unbelievers fully aware of their sins and the dire consequences of continuing to live in sin, and thereby to bring them to an act of *conversion* wherein they confess their sins to God and surrender themselves with complete abandon to God's will. *Continuance* is the process whereby believers maintain and build upon their conversion by seeking God's guidance for their lives through bringing others to conversion and living lives of moral action and service to others.<sup>14</sup> The Four Absolutes embody Buchman's understanding of the moral ideals of the Christian life and provide clear evidence of the influence of the holiness movement on his thinking: absolute honesty, absolute unselfishness, absolute purity (especially in sexual matters), and absolute love for God and neighbor. Buchman acknowledged that no one could ever fulfill these absolutes *perfectly*, but that these were to be goals toward which sincere believers should ever be striving.

By the time of Bill Wilson's conversion experience, the Oxford Group had grown into an international movement with its U.S. headquarters in New York City at the Calvary Episcopal Church and under the leadership of the church's pastor, Rev. Samuel Shoemaker, whom Bill often mentioned as one of chief spiritual inspirations of AA. In fact, it was through the ministry of the Oxford Group at this church that Bill's friend Ebby had found Christ and freedom from booze, and through which Bill began to practice his new-found faith in God. Although never an official teaching of the Group, the five Cs seem to have developed into six basic tenets: 1) that all humans are sinners; 2) that all sinners can be changed; 3) that change is contingent upon confession of one's sins; 4) that the "changed soul has direct access to God;" 5) that the age of miracles had returned; 6) and, that those who had been transformed by God are required by God

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<sup>10</sup> Clark, 121–22.

<sup>11</sup> Which is one of the main reasons that he often referred to the movement simply as 'First Century Christianity'.

<sup>12</sup> Clark notes that the actual source of the Four Moral Absolutes was likely Henry Wright, a successful college evangelist and professor at Yale University in the first couple decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>13</sup> This took place in a number of formats: one-on-one, in house parties that were used with great success by the Oxford Group, through public testimonials, and in the literature of the movement

<sup>14</sup> See Clark, 27–29.

to seek to help others experience transformation as well.<sup>15</sup> According to Bill, Ebby communicated the essential tenets of the Oxford Group to him in terms of six “simple” spiritual ideas that, applied to his life, could free him from his alcoholism:

- (1) Admit that he was licked;
- (2) Get honest with himself and take stock of his sins and defects;
- (3) Confess his defects to another person in confidence;
- (4) Make restitution for the harm he had done others;
- (5) Try to help others with no thought of reward; and,
- (6) Try to pray to whatever God he thought there was for the power to carry out these simple precepts.<sup>16</sup>

As we will see, these are the basic practical teachings that Bill would eventually expand into the 12 Steps of AA.

Following his conversion experience and with his new-found belief in God and the practical effectiveness of Oxford Group teachings, Bill immediately threw himself into regular attendance at Calvary Church meetings and the practice of group principles in his life, especially embracing as his personal mission from God the conversion of other alcoholic sufferers. Bill was able to keep himself sober, and six months later after his famous meeting with Dr. Bob—who was also an Oxford Grouper—both began to find some success in bringing other alcoholics into the Oxford Groups and into successful sobriety. But in the very success of the application of Oxford Group principles to the plight of alcoholics lay the seeds of separation between the Oxford Group and its new disciples. One of Buchman’s missions had been the evangelization of those he called ‘up-and-outers’, believing that the conversion of societies’ movers and shakers could have the most far-reaching impact for spread of Christian faith. But the new group of drunks being brought into the Group ranks by Bill and Bob were largely cut of a different cloth. These were generally middle and lower-middle class men unacquainted with the fineries of high society and whose drinking had all but ruined their lives and livelihoods. The former drunks in New York very soon began to add their own meetings, referring to themselves as the ‘Alcoholic Squadron’ of the Oxford Group. The division would progress more slowly in Akron, largely because of Bob and his wife’s closer ties and longer history with the Group; but by early 1938 even there the alcoholics began to meet separately. The writing was on the wall. Bill W.’s growing vision for a spiritual movement oriented toward the salvation of alcoholics would win the day, and by late 1939 ties long since broken in New York and never having existed in the brand new Cleveland group were finally severed between the Akron drunks and the Oxford Group. But the Oxford Group had left an indelible mark on its progeny, as this purported

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<sup>15</sup> See Matthew Raphael, *Bill W. and Mr. Wilson: The Legend and Life of A.A.’s Cofounder* (Amherst: University Of Massachusetts Press, 2000); and Clark, op. cit., 108.

<sup>16</sup> Bill’s language is a bit different, but the basic ideas are the same. See Bill Wilson, “The Three Legacies of Alcoholics Anonymous,” *AACA*, op. cit., 58–59. According to AA Historian Ernst Kurtz, these six precepts or steps were not taken directly from the Oxford Group, but instead mark Bill’s appropriation of Oxford Group principles for use with alcoholics. This would explain the differences between the precepts ‘given’ to him by Ebby and that which Clark affirms as the central teachings of the Oxford Group in the previous footnote. Cf. Kurtz, op. cit., 69, esp. fn. 32.

“spiritual program” for the treatment of alcoholics had embraced many of its principles and practices.

*Alcoholics Anonymous: A Spiritual Program of Recovery*

While it is at this point that the story of AA really begins, it marks the point where our narrative ends, and our exposition may begin. This is because, by the time that the early AAers had broken from the Oxford Group they already their basic theories and program fully worked out, not to mention printed out in the form of a book—*Alcoholics Anonymous*—from which the fledgling fellowship would gain its name.<sup>17</sup> Typically referred to as the “Big Book” because of its physical size in its first printing and because of its Bible-like stature in AA, it has changed very little since its first publication in 1939.<sup>18</sup> The basic purpose of the Big Book is to convince ‘unbelieving’<sup>19</sup> alcoholics of the dire nature of their malady and their subsequent need to undergo a spiritual transformation in order to recover from alcoholism; and it provides a plan whereby such persons can find such transformation. It includes the opinions of medical professionals and the stories of numerous persons who have recovered by using the program, and claims to represent the collective experience and wisdom of the first one hundred successfully recovered AAs.<sup>20</sup> In truth, it represents the experience and wisdom of one more than the rest—that of Bill W., the primary author, and whose story introduces the book and therefore serves as a model for AA recoveries.<sup>21</sup> The heart of the Big Book is chapter five, which spells out how the program works in terms of the 12 Steps that Bill himself adapted from the six steps they had been using and which had been drawn from the Oxford Group. To understand the basic teachings and practices of AA, it is to these steps, which the Big Book refers to as “suggestions” but which were intended and have come to be used as definite “directions,”<sup>22</sup> that we now turn:

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<sup>17</sup> Of course, there would be much more to be worked out in the subsequent decades, especially as to how the fellowship would function and be governed. These “bylaws” would take some time to work out, and are now known as the “12 Traditions.”

<sup>18</sup> The changes include some minor changes in language, updated forwards to each new edition, six additional appendices (explaining the Traditions, clarifying the language change just mentioned, one each on medical and religious views of AA, details about contacting AA, and the notice of an award presented to AA), and some changes in the personal stories that make up the second half of the book.

<sup>19</sup> Unbelieving in two senses: either not convinced of the nature of the problem, or not believing in God.

<sup>20</sup> *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc., 1976), xiii. My copy is from a February 2000 printing, the 68<sup>th</sup> printing of the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition!

<sup>21</sup> Other than the personal stories, Bill did nearly all of the writing, though he would submit each draft for revisions and approval to both the New York and Akron groups. The best accounts of this process that I have read are Kurtz, *op. cit.*, 59–82; and Raphael, 115–32.

<sup>22</sup> Bill used this terminology in early drafts of the steps, but was convinced by others that this would come across with too much rhetorical force for most yet-sick alcoholics to stomach.

*ONE: We admitted that we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.*

Bill had learned from Dr. Silkworth—the kindly physician at Towns Hospital—that alcoholics like him dealt with an incurable *illness*. This illness included a *physical allergy* to alcohol, such that the one drink of alcohol rendered the alcoholic unable to stop drinking. But this was not all: they also suffered from an *obsession of the mind* that led them to desire a drink and believe that they could control their drinking. Bill often referred to this as the *insanity* of the alcoholic mind, but his experience told him that this was also a *spiritual* problem, the roots of which were self-centeredness and grandiosity.<sup>23</sup> The first step in the process of recovery, then, is the simple recognition that one is not the master of one’s life, that John Barleycorn has taken control, and left to one’s own devices the final result will be an asylum or death. Such is the *cunning, baffling, and powerful* nature of alcohol for the alcoholic.

*TWO: Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.*

The great hope and promise of AA as a *spiritual program*, is that the powerlessness of the alcoholic is not the final word. There is a Power greater than human power and greater than alcohol who offers the promise of victory over and freedom from the powerless and unmanageability of alcoholism—a great healer who offers release from illness and insanity. The key is *Power*: power to transform, to heal, to overcome the otherwise cunning, baffling and powerful nature of the illness.<sup>24</sup> “Without help it is too much for us. But there is One who has all power—that One is God. May you find him now.”<sup>25</sup>

*THREE: Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.*

If the basic problem of alcoholism is powerlessness, and there is One who has the power to overcome this problem, the solution is to turn one’s life over to that healing, victory-giving power—God. If grandiosity, pride, and self-will are the underlying spiritual problems, the solution is the unseating of the self from its throne by the One and *only one* capable of occupying its place. Only God is capable of properly orienting our wills and directing our lives. To find recovery, we must be completely surrendered to the God of Power and Love. This surrender is enacted when the repentant alcoholic prays: “God, I offer myself to Thee—to build with me and to do with me *as Thou wilt*. Relieve me of the *bondage of self*, that I may better do Thy will. Take away my difficulties, that victory over them may bear witness to those I would help of Thy Power, Thy Love, and the Way of life. May I do Thy will always!”

There are two central reasons why the phrase “as we understood Him” has been included. First, AA seeks to remain nonsectarian in nature, and make its program available to persons from a variety of religious and non-religious backgrounds. Second, for many alcoholics, believing in a Higher Power other than the self is difficult enough, how much more so submitting oneself

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<sup>23</sup> AA, 62. This is why Ernst Kurtz has titled his history of AA “Not-God:” To find true recovery, alcoholics must come to realize that they are *not* God, and must stop pretending that they are.

<sup>24</sup> This is perhaps the key connection between AA and the Keswickian view of sanctification.

<sup>25</sup> AA, 59.

entirely to a Reality that one is not even sure exists. So, this language is intended to soften the blow, and make a bit easier that first step of faith.<sup>26</sup> The key, AA instructs, is that one is to submit to a power greater than oneself. Presumably, this could include the particular fellowship to which the person belongs. More generally, though, God is spoken of in a more classically Judeo-Christian sense—as an “All Powerful, Guiding, Creative Intelligence.”<sup>27</sup>

*FOUR and FIVE: Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.*

In order to experience the reorientation needed to experience recovery, one must come to a complete understanding of the underlying character flaws that have led one to drink. Really this is about identifying the various ways that self-centeredness and grandiosity have manifested themselves so that the alcoholic can see more clearly the complete inward rearrangement that is required. The alcoholic must take responsibility for all wrongs committed in order to make things right. Practically speaking, this has come to involve writing down an extensive list of wrongs done with special focus on the inward dispositions—especially resentment, fear, lust, and pride—that led to outward actions of wrongdoing.<sup>28</sup> This is also done under the guidance of a “sponsor” (one who has already gone through the steps and can serve as a guide) for a couple of very important reasons. First, a second, more experienced set of eyes can help probe beyond what the step-novice might initially be able to see, thereby helping provide illumination into the deeper insights of the process or fill in gaps to which years of self-destructive attitudes and behaviors one might be left blinded. Second, bringing one’s wrongdoings into the light with a caring and understanding person can be a powerful, personal means of experiencing the acceptance and forgiveness of God.

*SIX AND SEVEN: Were entirely ready to have God remove all our defects of character. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.*

Once aware of the full extent of one’s wrongdoings and empowered by the ability to take responsibility for them and to receive forgiveness from God, one can now face the possibility of having them ‘removed’—that is, transformed into new attitudes and dispositions that will manifest actions of love and goodness. Such transformation must begin with a basic willingness. God will not act contrary to our willingness; neither can we “remove” our defects of our own power. Only a Power greater than ourselves is capable of that kind of internal reorientation; but we can experience it if we are willing to be changed by God and truly desire to be changed. These steps, then, mark a deepening of the surrender enacted in Step Three—deeper because this act of surrender is one made with a much fuller awareness of the extent of one’s shortcomings

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<sup>26</sup> AA, 46–47.

<sup>27</sup> AA, 49, This is a tension that remains largely unsolved, which is why AA officially insists that it is not a religion but instead is a “spiritual program,” and is the chief reason that critics have alternatively referred to the program as both a “mutual-help movement” and a “religious cult”. See, for instance, Klaus Mäkelä, et al., *Alcoholics Anonymous as a Mutual-Help Movement* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996).

<sup>28</sup> For an extended discussion, see AA, 63–71; and Bill W., *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions (12 & 12)*, New York: AA World Services, Inc., 1952), 42–62.

and the truly radical nature of the transformation one must undertake to be healed. The ideal outcomes of the sixth and seventh steps are a deepened sense of humility, courage, and honesty that altogether set one on the road to continual growth and healing. It is often sealed by the prayer: “My Creator, I am now willing that you should have all of me, good and bad. I pray now that you remove from me every single defect of character which stands in the way of my usefulness to you and my fellows. Grant me strength, as I go out from here, to do your bidding.”<sup>29</sup>

*EIGHT AND NINE: Made a list of all persons that we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.*

These steps are crucial for obtaining the full fruits of recovery. Now that one has undertaken the life-long process of inward transformation and healing by finding a right relationship with God and self, one may begin to “clear away the wreckage of the past” and undertake the process of rectifying one’s relationships with others. Indeed, as Jesus indicated, love for God and love for others are so intertwined that we may say they are one and the same: in order to be rightly related to God, we must be rightly related to others, and in order to be rightly related to others, we must be rightly related to God. Typically, these steps, like the fourth and fifth, involve written exercises, and require working closely with a sponsor who can help the novice see into blind spots and discern the difference between making amends with someone harmed and assuaging one’s sense of guilt in a way that turns out to be destructive for another. Beautifully, not only do these steps involve the possibility of making right of wrongs and reconciling damaged relationships, but they also offer a way of finding a new sense of self-acceptance and dignity, as the ability to look another person in the eyes and both ask and accept forgiveness is a large stride in the direction of being able to look in the mirror and both ask and offer oneself forgiveness.

*TEN: Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.*

In truth, one never fully completes the steps, which this step makes powerfully clear. Healing and recovery from the ravages of the illness that is alcoholism is a life-long process. As it states in the opening to chapter five of the *Big Book*, which is read at the beginning of nearly every AA meeting: “We claim spiritual progress rather than spiritual perfection.”<sup>30</sup> For one thing, as life goes on and we learn more and more about ourselves, we will find evermore character defects that need to be surrendered to God and transformed. Such is the complexity of being human and ‘many-layeredness’ of our illness. Furthermore, there will never come a point in life when we are incapable of doing wrong and hurting either ourselves or others, and we must be ever-ready to take responsibility for our harmful dispositions and actions.

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<sup>29</sup> AA, 76.

<sup>30</sup> AA, 60.

*ELEVEN: Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood him, praying for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.*

This step makes clear, again, that the work of recovery and healing is a life-long process that is never completed, the true foundation of which is enduring and progressive growth in our relatedness to our Creator. The promise of this step is that through disciplined prayer and meditation—that is, both talking and listening to God in quietness and stillness of mind heart—we *can* come to knowledge of God’s will for our lives and find the power to do God’s will. But, as with all of the steps, this requires some work and effort: we *can* and *will* only if we are willing to do the work that will give us the ears to hear and the hearts to do the will of God.

*TWELVE: Having had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.*

Despite the fact that the healing and recovery of an alcoholic are never complete, the promise of this step is that by the time we come to it we will have experienced a complete reorientation of our moral and spiritual lives.<sup>31</sup> No longer will we live entirely for self and subject to our self-centeredness and delusions of grandeur. No longer must we live utterly in despair, recklessly destroying ourselves and those around us. Instead, we will have achieved a transformation that will enable us to help others, and especially to help others to encounter a loving God who desires to heal them from their insanity and illness as well. In fact, our enduring sobriety and recovery require that we help others, for in helping others we also find that we are helping ourselves.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, these principles are to apply to our entire lives. Just as our illness was destroying every aspect of our lives, so also must the precepts that have transformed our inner lives be used to continue the ongoing growth of every aspect of our lives.

#### *Alcoholics Anonymous: A Fellowship of Healing*

The true heart of AA is the principles embedded in the 12 Steps. However, AA is not just a program of recovery; it is also a fellowship of actual human beings bound together by a common malady and therefore a common purpose: recovery from alcoholism. This is, in fact, one of the great and powerful messages of AA—that there is something indescribably powerful and profoundly healing in the solidarity of two fellow sufferers. As Bill W. found in his first few months of recovery, he *needed* to be with other alcoholics just to remain sober. Finding another alcoholic to talk to who understood his struggle and who could offer him true compassion and

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<sup>31</sup> In the first edition of AA, this step spoke of a spiritual “experience” rather than an awakening, the former indicating a sudden and momentous transformation and the latter a more gradual but no less complete transformation. Many of the original members of AA underwent momentous experiences, but over time they came to realize that this was the exception rather than the rule, that while such an event was certainly possible, most AAs had gradual awakenings. See “Appendix II: Spiritual Experience,” AA, 569–70.

<sup>32</sup> As Bill states when recounting his first meeting with Dr. Bob on that fateful Mother’s Day in 1934: “You see, our talk was a complete *mutual* thing.... I knew that I needed this alcoholic as much as he needed me. *This was it.* And this mutual give-and-take is at the heart of all of AA’s Twelfth Step work today. This was how we carry the message. The final missing link was located right there in my first talk with Dr. Bob.” AACA, 70.

mutual support like no other person could was a tremendously powerful experience. The power of this solidarity is three-fold. First, being in the presence of those who understand the sense of powerless, the deep remorse, the sense of self-disgust that alcoholics are trying so hard to ignore and avoid empowers them to be able to look at themselves honestly knowing that there is nothing to hide in the company of fellow-alcoholics, that there is nothing to be ashamed of, that these others are guilty of the same shameful attitudes, actions, and behaviors. Indeed, this dark stain that had led to so many destroyed relationships and isolation is the very thing that brings them into fellowship with others. So, the solidarity of the fellowship can be a powerful force for the alcoholic attempting to face aspects of the self that would otherwise be simply too difficult to look at honestly. Second, the guidance, wisdom, and support that is provided by fellow alcoholics is more credible and therefore more powerful because it is born out of the common experience shared by all. Third, the fellowship of fellow sufferers can provide a powerful sense of “hope and courage” when there are those who have experienced real transformation. It confirms to the one still lost in the addiction that it is possible to find victory because others with the same struggles and problems have been successful. They provide promise that “it works.”

We should also note the simple fact that, as eminently social creatures, we are deeply formed by our relations with other people. We often think of ourselves as isolated individuals whose thoughts, feelings, and decisions are solely our own, but this is simply not the case. For good or for ill, much that makes us unique individuals is a consequence of our being situated in a unique matrix of social relationships (both past and present) as well as a larger cultural and social milieu.<sup>33</sup> The secret that the founders of AA learned long ago is that deliberate and frequent participation in a community committed to recovery can be a powerful aid in finding personal healing. There are several forms of deliberate community that the fellowship of AA has embraced. It is worth mentioning a couple. One is the meetings. Those entering the AA program for the first time or after a relapse are recommended to go to daily meetings for anywhere from a month to three months. There are two basic types of meetings: those open to anyone, and those closed to alcoholics only so that those present may feel a greater sense of freedom and safety in sharing their struggles and difficulties. Some meetings focus on studying AA literature (such as the *Big Book* or *12 & 12*) and discussing how to apply the principles of the program to life, others focus merely on discussion and sharing of difficulties, and some feature speakers who share in testimonial style “what we were like, what happened, and what we are like now.” It is imperative that all persons maintain their anonymity and exist on equal footing, so only first names are given, and during times of sharing, individuals only speak about themselves, addressing their own difficulties and sharing about their own experiences. Thus, cross talk—that is, responding to others’ comments or giving advice—is strongly discouraged. These guidelines assist in the avoidance of controversies and quarreling during meetings; and meetings are often marked by a profound sense of mutual-understanding and support.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> See, for instance, Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967).

<sup>34</sup> This sense of mutuality and equality plays itself out as well in meeting leadership. Leaders are elected for short periods of time, and are governed by the principle that the ultimate authority for AA is “a loving God as He may express himself in ... group conscience.” Therefore, leaders are “but trusted servants; they do not govern.” AA., 564. This is, in fact, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Tradition.

A second form of deliberate community practiced in AA is sponsorship. We have noted already that sponsors are used as guides for going through the steps. Since the steps are not really ever completed, the implication is that one is always to have a sponsor. Beginners are encouraged to find sponsors almost immediately upon entering the program to help to initiate them into the culture of the fellowship and get them started in the right direction. This is the one place in the fellowship where a true relationship of equity does not and really cannot exist. No doubt, sponsors have different personal styles of working with their sponsees, but it is generally understood that one is to regard the sponsor as one's mentor, to listen carefully to and follow all directions that a sponsor gives. Of course, it is always possible to 'fire' one's sponsor (or sponsee for that matter) if it is perceived that the relationship is not working out in a mutually beneficial manner. The key principle here, though, is that one's recovery is best served by being involved in a deliberate and disciplined relationship with another person to whom one is accountable, and who can provide one with special support, encouragement, correction, and guidance.

### *What We Have to Learn from AA*

I should preface my concluding comments by saying that despite its many strengths, AA is no more perfect than any other human institution or movement. In fact, there are many powerful reasons for being cautious about embracing its principles and practices or attempting a simple translation of the recovery model as a means for encouraging our growth in Christian holiness.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, it should also be clear that we have move to learn from AA, and that is now what we will address: the principles and practices that can inform our own as Christians desiring to remain faithful to our Wesleyan-holiness tradition as well as those that can be used to help people within our churches who struggle with various forms of addiction.

First, as suggested in the introduction, in AA we find sensitivity to the complexity and ambiguity of human life, human experience, and human transformation that has often been lacking in our tradition. This is most notable in our classic distinction between "sins" (as conscious and willful transgressions of known laws of God) and "infirmities," and in our related embrace of a fairly clear distinction between "purity of heart" and "maturity of character."<sup>36</sup> This has resulted in what I have identified as the overly dualistic, individualistic, and simplistic view of holiness: dualistic in the sense that we see our spiritual and/or moral capacities as essentially unrelated to and unaffected by the rest of who we are physically, emotionally, etc; individualistic in the sense that holiness is treated as a quality of discreet relations with God and others which is found and nurtured through individual decisions and practices; simplistic in the sense that prescriptions for the finding, developing and experiencing sanctifying grace tend to be rather

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<sup>35</sup> In this regard, Linda A. Mercandante provides the best assessment of the recovery model from a theological perspective. See her "Sin, Addiction, and Freedom," in Rebecca S. Chopp and Mark Lewis Taylor, *Reconstructing Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994); and her more extensive treatment in *Victims and Sinners: Spiritual Roots of Addiction and Recovery* (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996).

<sup>36</sup> The first distinction is found in Wesley's work, and carries on through the rest of the holiness tradition. The latter is not Wesleyan, but a late-nineteenth century holiness movement extrapolation from the distinction that Wesley makes in regard to sin, and has found its way into official holiness denomination statements of faith.

narrowly defined and inattentive to the full complexity of human experience of and capacity for appropriate responsiveness to God grace.

AA identifies the problem the alcoholic faces as having many layers and many dimensions—spiritual, moral, emotional, physical, relational, etc. The illness of alcoholism affects the whole person, and therefore true healing must encompass the totality of the person as well. For this reason, AA offers no simple, one-step, ready-made, cookie cutter solutions. Miracles of transformation are possible, but these miracles are the result of God working through a variety of steps and disciplines and a lot of hard work.<sup>37</sup> This is where I see the 12 Steps as being especially helpful, as they provide a model for the practical spiritual formation in a nondualistic fashion. Indeed, as we have seen, the steps are oriented toward helping sick persons gain a better sense of how deeply their illness has affected their *entire* lives, and provide a way to make right and find healing for not only their inner core relation to God, but also their relations to others, their emotions, their habits of thinking and acting, etc. In this sense, the Steps provide a helpfully holistic model for sanctification.

Second, AA is comfortable embracing the complexity of human experience, accepting simply that persons are transformed by God in many different ways. Some experience immediate and decisive conversions, God's grace coming upon them like a white, hot flash that leaves their complete lives *instantly* redirected. Other persons, either because of constitution or due to the mysteries of God's will, experience God's grace transforming them in a more *gradual*, progressive fashion. The point is that God will work however God happens to work. So, rather than focusing on *how* we *should* experience transforming grace, our focus is to accept God's grace however it might be offered to us, and to respond as best we can one day at a time.

Third, AA offers us a model for authentic Christian community and communal spiritual formation—one that is strikingly similar to that practiced by the earliest members of the Wesleyan-holiness movement: the Wesley's themselves and the original Methodists. I am convinced that the real genius of early Methodism was not its theology of holiness but its practices for holy living, and especially the class meetings, where members were routinely brought together to confess their sins and provide one another with mutual accountability, support, and encouragement. Sadly, we have generally lost touch with this practice, relying on either individual practices such as Bible reading, individual prayer, and devotional reading; or large communal gatherings like worship and revival services. These practices are all important, and I am certainly not suggesting that they be done away with. Rather, I am saying we would do well to draw more deliberately on the kinds of communal practice that the early Methodists used and that AA uses with such great success: small group meetings where struggles can be confessed, forgiveness accepted, and support and encouragement found. Related to this, the AA practice of sponsorship points us to another communal discipline lost to our tradition—that of discipleship and spiritual direction. As we have said, we are not isolated islands, entirely unconnected to other persons, even as we relate to our Creator. To enter into a committed

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<sup>37</sup> This could lead into a kind of legalism, but AA appears to be protected from this by an Arminian-like understanding of recovery. We are powerless over our problems, and must rely on God's power and guidance. Nevertheless, we are also responsible for our problems, and required to participate deliberately and actively in the healing process.

relationship of this sort is merely to deepen the power of accountability and support that any relationship potentially offers.

We began this paper with the story of the founding of AA: Bill W. and Dr. Bob's first meeting. What those two men learned that Mother's Day afternoon is the power of God's grace available to even the most broken of people when they are willing to come together, confess their brokenness, and seek God's healing grace *together*. This is not a new message. Jesus himself told his disciples that he is present in a special way whenever two or more are gathered together in his name. Those of us today desiring to experience the fullness of God's sanctifying grace would do well to learn again the lesson that those two men learned by bringing the principles and practices of this holiness movement out of the church basement and into application in our daily lives.