

A Roundtable Series on A.A.'s Roots in the Bible

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[A series of four, filmed, audio-taped, presentations by author Dick B. at the Frederick Robert Johnston Recovery Resource Center, Kihei, Maui, Hawaii—the location of our historical collection of approximately 23,900 items documenting A.A.'s Biblical Roots]

Introduction to the Bible Roots Series

Understanding the A.A. “Program” as our Founders Understood It

The point of this series is to stimulate inquiry into why and whether early AAs placed much emphasis on the Bible, turned to it in developing their spiritual recovery “Program,” studied it frequently on a daily basis, used it regularly in their individual and group Quiet Times, and took their basic ideas from that source which they called the Good Book.

First, we will look at what Dr. Bob said about, and did as to his Bible training as a youngster, about his participation in the North Congregational Church in St. Johnsbury, about Christian Endeavor activities, and about his resumption in the 1930's of the Bible studies and other biblical practices of his youth. We will look at what Christian Endeavor was, where it came from, what it did, and which of its practices paralleled the practices in the earliest A.A. activities and meetings in Akron.

Next, we will review what early A.A. founders said about the importance of the Bible and Bible study. We will see how often it was mentioned by founders, pioneers, and early literature. Next, we will explore the biblical roots and mentors of Christian Endeavor ideas to the end of seeing how and whether their ideas relate to early A.A. principles and practices.

Finally we will review the early A.A. meetings and practices that shaped its recovery “Program” and ultimately the Big Book and Steps.

The important thing here is that this series be a challenge to AAs, other Twelve Steppers, historians, clergy, and treatment people to move away from the straight-jacket of attributing A.A.'s spiritual beginnings primarily to the Washingtonians, the Emmanuel Movement, William James, Carl Jung, Rowland Hazard, and the Oxford Group. It is a challenge for all of us to search out, find, and flesh-out **all** the A.A. spiritual sources—the Bible, Quiet Time and the Morning Watch, the teachings of Rev. Sam Shoemaker, the teachings of Dr. Bob's wife Anne Ripley Smith, the life-changing practices of the Oxford Group, the diverse Christian literature the pioneers read and used, and the input from “new thought” writers such as Ralph Waldo Trine, Emmet Fox, and others.

It is a challenge to report fully the impact of the great social movements that preceded A.A.—the Young Men’s Christian Association, the Salvation Army, the Student Christian Movement, the Abolition and early Temperance societies, and the Gospel missions. To report fully on what AAs ultimately did in their new recovery program that linked them to these social movements rather than distinguishing them from those societies.

This entire series of roundtable topics is labeled as a “roundtable” series because it invites others to revive, rethink, reconsider, reorganize, and report fully their factual findings about early A.A. as a Christian Fellowship. The pioneer A.A. fellowship of forty was an operative society, much resembling the followers of the “way” in the Book of Acts. It stressed conversion by acceptance of Jesus Christ, Bible study, “old fashioned prayer meetings,” Quiet Times, fellowship, living by the standards of Jesus Christ, and witnessing.

To pursue such an approach means abandoning the recovery movement’s present-day hostility (particularly in Twelve Step fellowships) to God Almighty, to His son Jesus Christ, to His Word, to the gift of the Holy Spirit, to the “Lord’s Prayer,” and to “religion.” It also requires rejecting or ignoring the atheists, agnostics, skeptics, and critics who refuse to accept the life-saving program of Alcoholics Anonymous, and for whom Dr. Bob expressed sorrow when, said he, “Your Heavenly Father will never let you down!”

Whether atheists, agnostics, New Age advocates, Buddhists, Hindi, Moslems, secular recovery advocates, and the irreligious are alike welcome and accepted into today’s A.A. is not the question at all. The question is whether the objections and agenda of such people should be, and will continue to be, allowed to reshape the nature and success rate of A.A. Also, whether their vocal positions intimidating believers of many persuasions should continue to be welcomed. The question is whether such people should simply look at A.A., both historically and theologically, for what it was and is—a religious organization which sought for its members a “cure” for alcoholism through reliance upon Yahweh, our Creator. The ultimate question, then, is whether the full purity, strength, and completeness of the original A.A. program shall be permitted to continue intact.

In today’s scene, such questions may seem “apostasy.” They call for examination of the confusing A.A. description: “always inclusive, never exclusive.” They favor of a full and truthful history and a sharp, long overdue, turn away from today’s “spirituality” talk. Christians, Jews, and many other seekers of “Divine help” are feeling more and more awash in the present sea of Twelve Step unbelief—a churning whirlpool replete with “any gods,” no gods, “not-gods,” “somethings,” and just plain inanimate idols. The time has long come for repudiating the idea that A.A. should merely be a “powerless,” inoffensive, undefined adjunct to therapy, treatment, psychiatry, churches, government agencies, and mental health organizations. It is time to reject the theory that A.A. and its offshoots were or should merely be “self-help,” “mutual help,” and “group therapy” movements.

With God Almighty and the Creator’s power at the helm, A.A. promised and produced effective results and high success rates. With “higher powers,” self-made religion, and absurd names for a deity, the results and success rates today are anything but exciting. Large numbers

milling in and out conceal the reality that few remain at the core for extended sobriety. Hence if the original program is forgotten, there is a strong possibility that secular or religious or treatment offshoots will continue to grow and will fulfill the Lois Wilson version and vision of a “universalized” A.A. with Christian origins, requirements, and practices simply faded into total obscurity.

But consider what A.A.’s “old school” *used to say*:

[Co-Founder Bill Wilson said]: Henrietta, the Lord has been so wonderful to me, curing me of this terrible disease, that I just want to keep talking about it and helping people (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, 3rd ed., p. 191).

[Co-Founder Dr. Bob Smith said]: Your Heavenly Father will never let you down! (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, 3rd ed., p. 181).

[A.A. Number Three, Bill Dotson, said of the foregoing]: Bill was very, very grateful that he had been released from this terrible thing and he had given God the credit for having done it, and he’s so grateful about it he wants to tell other people about it. That sentence, “The Lord has been so wonderful to me, curing me of this terrible disease, that I just want to keep telling people about it,” has been a sort of golden text for the A.A. program and for me (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, 3rd ed., p. 1919; Dick B., *The Golden Text of A.A.*).

[Bill’s medical mentor, William Duncan Silkworth, M.D., made the following comments to one of his alcoholic patients about getting a new “physician”]: “Oh, but this Physician is not at all moderate as to expense,” persisted Dr. Silkworth. “He wants everything you’ve got. He wants you, all of you. Then He gives the healing. His price is your entire self.” Then he added slowly and impressively, “His name is Jesus Christ and He keeps office in the New Testament and is available whenever you need him. . . . You will find healing and you will never need to come back as a patient; only as a friend (Dr. Norman Vincent Peale, *The Positive Power of Jesus Christ*, pp. 60-61).

The medicine the AAs use is unique. Though it should be all-powerful, it has never been tried with any consistent success against any other major sickness. . . . It is free as air—with this provision: that the patients it cures have to nearly die before they can bring themselves to take it. The AAs’ medicine is God and God alone. This is their discovery (Article by the famous medical writer Paul de Kruif, *Volume II, Best of the Grapevine*, pp. 202-03)