The Biblical Roots of Early A.A.’s Twelve Steps

Part One:
Steps One, Two, and Three

By Terry D.

Recently, I’ve read a few excellent books that revealed the true Biblical roots of early A.A.’s Twelve Steps—researched and written by Dick B.—who is currently the leading A.A. Historian. The following series, broken up into four parts, will explain the TRUE Biblical roots of the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. I will explain, in detail, how the A.A. founders utilized Christian-based ideals and principles to their “Program” of recovery. I will also answer this extremely important question: Why did the Pioneer A.A.’s have a success rate of over 75%, and how did they utilize early A.A. spiritual roots, while applying early A.A.’s Twelve Steps?

According to Dick B. in his book, Cured!, he writes, “Wilson [A.A. Number One] picked up… some major ideas about deflation in depth, honesty, confession, life-change, restitution, prayer and ‘meditation,’ working with others, and adherence to Christian principles in daily living.” In early A.A., especially within the Pioneer A.A.’s, alcoholics utilized and adhered to Christian principles for living. The Christian ideals and principles that they followed enabled the 40 Pioneer AAs to have an extremely high success rate of over 75%. This important documented fact is the reason why it is so vital to make the Biblical roots of early A.A. known, so everyone of today can apply these life-saving
principles. The following series will provide explanations and documented facts about the Biblical roots of each of the Twelve Steps.

[Step One: We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.]

I’ll begin the discussion of Step One with a quote from Bill Wilson in A.A.’s Big Book:

[W]e have been not only mentally and physically ill, we have been spiritually sick. When the spiritual malady is overcome, we straighten out mentally and physically.²

Here is an excellent description of A.A.’s First Step from a spiritual standpoint:

Viewed from a spiritual standpoint, the core of A.A.’s First Step powerlessness and unmanageability could possibly be said to rest on biblical grounds…. The alcoholic needed to know he or she was powerless over alcohol because of a mental obsession, coupled with a physical allergy. And that life had become unmanageable. But the alcoholic would never recover, found Bill and Dr. Bob [A.A. Number Two], without spiritual wholeness, without finding God—without union with God….³

The founders of A.A. knew that, without spiritual wholeness and finding God, an alcoholic could not be cured. They called this lack of spiritual wholeness, “Spiritually
Sick.” From thorough research, Dick B. found the link located in his book, *Turning Point*, when he explains:

Several A.A. spiritual sources also point to the unmanageability of a spiritually sick life, focused on self—a life of self-centeredness and ego-centricity, in which self constituted God. A common prayer in use at that stage of the path was “O, God, manage me, because I cannot manage myself.”

So how did early A.A.’s find the solution to overcome spiritual sickness? Once again, Dick B. explains when he writes, “…Early AAs… studied the Good Book [the Bible]; and they sought the power of God for the solution to their spiritual misery and despair.”

As we can see, the Bible and Christian principles were vital to early A.A. success, which eventually produced success rates as high as 75%, compared to numbers as low as 1% today. And were early A.A.’s cured from applying these principles? The answer is YES. Yes, Cured! The following quote provides accurate evidence to support this claim:

Alcoholics should not be told they cannot be cured. They should be told they can be cured. They should be told their founders were cured. Those founders were cured by the Creator! Bill Wilson, Dr. Bob, and Bill Dotson [A.A. Number Three] all said so—explicitly, many times (See Big Book, 4th ed., pp.181,191).

Dick B. and I both believe that “Alcoholics need the simple truth in the Bible about what God has done, can do, promises to do, and will do if we obey His will and believe.”

Okay, back to Step One. Located in Dick B’s book, *The Oxford Group & Alcoholics Anonymous*, the well-known a, b, c’s are explained…
The foregoing step language is followed by the A.A. Big Book’s well-known “a, b, c’s,” which are:

Our description of the alcoholic, the chapter to the agnostic, and our personal adventures before and after make clear three pertinent ideas: (a) That we were alcoholic and could not manage our own lives. (b) That probably no human power could have relieved our alcoholism. (c) That God could and would if He were sought.8

Furthermore, “In the Big Book chapter, ‘There is a Solution,’ Bill Wilson said that will-power alone would not solve problems.9 He made it clear that the solution lay in a relationship with God.”10 Now, lets move ahead to the Biblical roots of Step Two in early A.A.

[Step Two: Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.]

According to Dick B. in his book, Turning Point, “Reduced to its essence, and as described in A.A.’s Big Book, the Second Step required (1) “willingness to believe,” (2) belief in a “Power, which is God,” and (3) “seeking” the power of God for relief from alcoholism.”11 Bill Wilson explains the essentials of Step Two when he writes in the Big Book:

We needed to ask ourselves but one short question. “Do I now believe, or am I even willing to believe, that there is a Power greater than myself?” As soon as a
man can say that he does believe, or is willing to believe, we emphatically assure him that he is on his way.\textsuperscript{12}

The founders of A.A. knew that it was absolutely vital that members come to believe in a Power greater than themselves, which was God. From a medical viewpoint, alcoholism was an “incurable disease.” However, A.A. founders also came to understand that alcoholism could be cured by applying the Christian principles adopted by the “Pioneer AAs.” One of the “teachings” that were essential to the success of early A.A. includes the following:

The essence of Jesus’s teaching was, that if one obeyed the known commandments and doctrines of God by acting upon them, he or she would learn about, believe in, and know more about, God and His will... A.A.’s religious sources taught that obedience to God’s will is the organ of spiritual knowledge.\textsuperscript{13}

Furthermore, Hebrews 11:6 states:

But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that He is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.\textsuperscript{14}

There was another important aspect of early A.A. success when “…Dr. Bob was very emphatic that A.A.’s well-known ‘First Things First’ slogan came from Matthew 6:33. The verse declares:

But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.\textsuperscript{15}
Finally, for Part One of this series, we move on to the Biblical roots of early A.A.’s Third Step.

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

In early A.A., Step Three emphasized the importance that members make the decision to surrender to God. Completion of Step Three is extremely critical to recover from alcoholism. The founders knew and understood this important fact, so they emphasized the Christian principles needed in order to successfully “complete” this vital Step. In *Turning Point*, Dick B. explains…

Such a decision is mandated in the following Bible verse discussed by two of A.A.’s sources:

That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved

(Romans 10:9).¹⁶

In my opinion, honesty, open-mindedness, and willingness are the first steps to a successful recovery. Surrender is the next crucial step that will lead us on a journey of self-discovery and enlightenment that will truly set us free. By having the courage to step forward in faith, we will be greatly rewarded with a life that’s full of serenity and hope. No longer do we have to be bound by the deadly grips of alcoholism. For us to achieve
this strength, it was vital that early A.A.’s learned the principle of surrender. Dick B. explains:

The Third Step’s actual surrender phraseology can be found in A.A. sources which used such language as “turned over to Him her life for His direction” and a “decision to cast my will and my life on God.”17

Biblical sources associated with a decision to surrender include the following:

I can of mine own self do nothing: as I hear, I judge: and my judgment is just; because I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent me (John 5:30).

Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord (Acts 3:19).18

Another important element of early A.A. success was the integration of the “Third Step Prayer.” According to Dick B. in his book, The Oxford Group & Alcoholics Anonymous, he writes…

The Big Book’s “Third Step Prayer” and discussion reads in part:

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 Thy Way of life. I do Thy will always (p.63).19
To summarize the preceding discussion, I will explain the Twelve Step ideas early AAs borrowed from the Bible, provided by Dick B’s, *Utilizing Early A.A.’s Spiritual Roots for Recovery Today*, when he begins with Step One:

**Step One**

“O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death? I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord…” (Romans 7:24-25).

**Step Two**

**[Willingness]** “If any man do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself” (John 7:17).

**[Belief]** “but without faith, it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that He is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him” (Hebrews 11:6).

**[Seeking]** “But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you” (Matthew 6:33).

**Step Three**
“That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved” (Romans 10:9). “‘Give in,’ he cries, ‘admit that I am God, high over nations, high over the world’” (Mufatt’s translation of Psalm 46:10); “Thy will be done” (Matthew 6:10).20

By utilizing early A.A.s spiritual roots, Bill Wilson compiled the real 12 Steps and their main roots of early A.A. found in Dick B’s book, Cured! Here are Steps One, Two, and Three therein:

One: We admitted we were licked. Alcohol was our master. We prayed: “O, God, manage me because I can’t manage myself.”

Two: We became “willing to believe” that God could cure us; to “act as if” He would; and to take the action that proves God really can and does cure.

Three: We “made a decision” to “rely on the Creator” for help and to “do His will.”21

As we can see, there are primary sources and documented accounts that early A.A. Twelve Steps had Biblical roots. While utilizing early A.A. spiritual roots for recovery, the Pioneer A.A.’s fully recovered, finally being cured of alcoholism. Yes, the watered down version of today’s “A.A. Principles” seem to have forgotten the important Christian principles that produced early A.A.’s high success rates. From the documented facts herein, you can now see how and why the Biblical roots positively impacted the high
success rates. By studying true A.A. history, we can finally learn how to get cured of alcoholism. Part Two of this four part series will include Step’s Four, Five, and Six. Until next time, my friends. Good luck to all, and to all a good recovery. God Bless.

Appendix

1 B., Dick, Cured! Proven Help for Alcoholics and Addicts, p.54.

2 Alcoholics Anonymous 4th ed., p.64.

3 B., Dick, Turning Point, p.245.

4 B., Dick, Turning Point, p.247.

5 B., Dick, Turning Point, p.248.


11 B., Dick, Turning Point, p.249.

12 B., Dick, Turning Point, p.249.

13 B., Dick, Turning Point, p.250.

14 B., Dick, Turning Point, p.251

15 B., Dick, Turning Point, p.251.

16 B., Dick, Turning Point, p.251.

17 B., Dick, Turning Point, p.253.

18 B., Dick, Turning Point, pp.253, 254.

20 B., Dick, Utilizing Early A.A.’s Spiritual Roots for Recovery Today, pp.15,16.


*A special thanks to Dick B. and his great research on the early Biblical roots of A.A.*