

**Roundtable Series on A.A.'s Biblical Roots
(November, 2001)
By Dick B.**

[Article 19d]

**Session Four
The Bible in the A. A. Program Yesterday and Today**

We have discussed the verses and segments of the Bible to which early AAs were most assuredly exposed. The pioneers heard passages from the Good Book in their daily Bible study. They saw them as they read *The Runner's Bible*. They were told about them in the extensive amount of Christian literature they were given. They were taught them by Dr. Bob, Anne Smith, Henrietta Seiberling, and Mr. and Mrs. T. Henry Williams. We've also discussed the deep roots of the Bible in Dr. Bob's childhood; its continued emphasis in his personal studies; and its omnipresence in the writings of Rev. Sam Shoemaker, Oxford Group authors, and a host of other Christians like authors like Henry Drummond, Oswald Chambers, and Glenn Clark. Then we discussed the real guts of the Akron program which A.A. trustee-to-be Frank Amos reported to John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Now it is time to see if all of this has forever been discarded in recovery. Or if it offers today, to those in and out of A.A., the same assurance of Christian deliverance that electrified the A. A. pioneers in Akron between the summer of 1935 and the early days of 1939. We mention this period because it was the time when the real A.A. program was developed; and that program began to change even before Bill published his version of that program in the Big Book in the Spring of 1939.

What's the Message from History in Today's A.A.

The A.A.'s Real Problem and the Real Solution the Early Program Presented.

The alcoholic's problem—yesterday and today—is not merely the cessation of his drinking. Yes, many AAs can be heard to say: Anyone can stop drinking and often add: The problem is how to stay stopped. One of A.A.'s Oxford Group mentors, Charles Clapp, Jr., wrote a book about his drinking (*The Big Bender*). His later book was titled, *Drinking's Not the Problem*. Dr. Bob read them both (See Dick B., *Dr. Bob and His Library*). Clapp's two book titles make this point. The battle does not begin when we try to stop drinking. It begins when the alcoholic has to face the world without a drink. There's much more to the problem than drinking. One old saw that has made the rounds in A.A. for years says: If you sober up a horse thief, what do you *then* have? The answer is—a sober horse thief! There's more to the problem than drinking. And I'd go much much further than that based on my own real experience..

I walked in the doors of Alcoholics Anonymous about April 23, 1986. I had taken my last drink on April 21, 1986—two days before. I can barely remember either event. But **then** my problems *really* began: Seizures, shakes, sleeplessness, anxiety, numbness, vague pains, a tongue bitten almost in half, confusion, and forgetfulness. These were accompanied and followed by

much larger problems: Legal entanglements, tax audits, criminal charges, financial disasters, adverse newspaper publicity, divorce problems, and difficulties with the State Bar. But the big ones were still lurking in the wings: Chilling terror; shame; guilt; anxiety; depression, uncontrolled chatter, bewilderment, worthlessness, and despair.

The point here is that these are not uncommon experiences for an alcoholic who quits drinking or an addict who stops drugging. I have sponsored over eighty men in their recovery. Truly, “some are sicker than others.” But I’ve seen most of my own former problems predictably crop up in the early sobriety of those in A.A. I’ve helped or tried to help.

And this leads to two important questions any “sober” alcoholic needs, as I did, to ask himself. First, how’s your life today? Second, what’s the message you will carry to the next fellow down the line in order to help him overcome all his difficulties, drinking and otherwise? When I go up to a newcomer at a meeting and ask him if he has any troubles, he often gives the brave answer: “Everything is just fine.” Then I look at him trembling. I ask him if he is in trouble with the law. With the IRS. With his wife or kids or girl friend. With his debts. And as soon as I tell him my early story, he spills the beans: “Life is awful. Nothing but trouble. I’m miserable.” And he just quit drinking! The battle begins when the bottle is gone.

Early A.A. wanted to call its textbook “The Way Out.” Jesus said: “I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me” (John 14:6). And it is no surprise that his first century followers were said to be of the “way” (See Acts 9:2, 19:23). The phrases of John 14:6 can be found sprinkled in many parts of the literature of early A.A. And, when Dr. Bob and his pioneers said they were a “Christian Fellowship,” they were adopting the solution that Jesus offered to all people.

Let’s look at the message early AAs were in a position to carry

“God has done for us what we could not do for ourselves.” In one form or another, that idea can be found quite often in A.A.’s basic text: “. . . there is no doubt in my mind that you were 100% hopeless, apart from Divine Help.” “Who are you to say there is no God?” And “That probably no human power could have relieved our alcoholism. . . That God could and would if He were sought.” And many more. These pioneer expressions in the Big Book are founded on the fundamentalist talk of Oxford Group Founder Dr. Frank Buchman: “Sin, the problem. Jesus Christ, the cure. The result, a miracle.” Thus early AAs often heard of “sin” in their Steps.

The Message Bill W. Tried to shape in New York

Bill Wilson began his approach to sobriety as a self-acknowledged “conservative atheist.” About November, 1934, Bill hosted a visit from his old drinking buddy Ebby Thacher. Ebby was then about two months sober. And Ebby came to Bill with a message. In the Big Book, Bill described Ebby and his visit as follows: Ebby appeared “fresh-skinned and glowing. . . . He was inexplicably different. . . . Simply, but smilingly, he said, ‘I’ve got religion’.” (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, 3rd ed., p. 9). Ebby had previously been rescued from a judge’s plan to institutionalize him. His rescuers were Oxford Group people. He had learned their Christian principles. And he had been Calvary Rescue Mission (run by Rev. Sam Shoemaker’s Calvary Episcopal Church in New York). There as all penitents did, he accepted Christ.

At first, during the long talk with Ebby, Bill voiced objections against and questioned ministers, world religions, a personal God, the shortcomings of Christians, the power of God,

and religiously facilitated wars. In response, Ebby “made the point-blank declaration that God had done for him what he could not do for himself.” “That floored me,” said Bill. “It began to look as though religious people were right after all” (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, supra, p. 11). Bill soon followed Ebby’s example and went to Calvary Mission. He went there drunk. He inquired how he could get what Ebby had received. He attended a mission service drunk. He answered the altar call drunk; and he made a decision for Christ drunk. Soon he went to Towns Hospital drunk, was visited by Ebby again, and had what Bill sometimes called his “hot flash” experience. That experience forever marked the end of his drinking problem. From 1934 to 1939, Bill carried tried to fashion a message for drunks, and he took them into his home, just as Dr. Bob had done for him. But not one got sober. From late 1934 to late Spring of 1935, Bill had worked to help drunks, but not one got sober. Later in 1935, and, after returning from his stay with Dr. Bob in Akron in the summer of 1935, he went around visiting drunks at Towns Hospital, at the Rescue Mission, and at Oxford Group meetings in the East. Yet by his own admission and as confirmed by the statements of his wife Lois, he had little success in helping anyone but himself. At the suggestion of his doctor (William D. Silkworth, M.D.), he had modified his message by slamming drunks with the deadly facts about alcoholism. But, as time went on, he acknowledged that it was in Akron that Dr. Bob was having unusual success and that the success was due to Akron’s emphasis on “the spiritual.” Bill also said that the failures in New York were due to their “pussyfooting” on the spiritual.

The Message Bill and Dr. Bob first put together and that Dr. Bob developed in Akron

Unlike Bill, Dr. Bob began his approach to sobriety as a Christian believer, a long-time Bible student, and a reader of Christian materials. He did develop an aversion, during his drinking years, to churches and ministers. But the “spiritual” program he developed in Akron involved a totally different technique from that which Bill was using in New York. It was not Oxford Group in character. It was not led by clergy. It was focused on helping the alcoholic. And Bill had found himself in awe of Dr. Bob’s religious training and background as he got to know Bob in the summer of 1935. Bill returned to New York and became involved for a time in business ventures and Oxford Group work. But Dr. Bob continued leading and establishing a simple, effective program and message which he said had come from the Bible. He usually called that Bible the “Good Book.” He had had excellent training in the Bible as a youngster. He had refreshed his knowledge of the Bible and read it in full three times before he had met Bill. Then some Oxford Group people in Akron had invited him to pray with them for his deliverance. And, in a few short weeks, Bill Wilson emerged to help him.

The simple Akron program that was in place by mid-1938 involved these features:

- ! Hospitalization for about a week, with only a Bible as reading matter, with visits from, and stories of victory by, recovered drunks; daily visits by Dr. Bob himself; and then the final day with Dr. Bob’s visit.
- ! Two events characterized Dr. Bob’s last visit with the alcoholic patient. He asked if they believed in God. If the answer was positive, he asked them to get out of bed, get down on their knees and pray, and surrender their lives to Jesus Christ.
- ! They fellowshiped together daily, sometimes even living with Dr. Bob and his wife or other recovered families. In the morning, they had Bible study,

prayer, the seeking of guidance from God, listening to excerpts Anne Smith read from her spiritual journal, and engaging in discussion of these and other biblical subjects.

! Being broke, they reportedly continued their fellowship throughout each day, with meetings, discussions with Anne Smith, Dr. Bob, Henrietta Seiberling, and each other. They broke bread together, studied the Bible, read literature that was recommended and circulated by Dr. Bob. And they utilized daily Bible devotionals such as *The Upper Room* and *The Runner's Bible*.

! At the beginning of each week, the leaders held a set-up meeting in which they asked God's guidance as to who should lead the Wednesday night meeting, what its topic should be, and what should be discussed.

! Each Wednesday before the Big Book was published in 1939, they met at the home of T. Henry and Clarace Williams where about fifty percent of those attending were Oxford Group people and fifty percent were alcoholics and their family members. As detailed, these meetings involved opening prayer, Bible, group prayer, a discussion of Bible or other biblical topics, seeking guidance of God, surrender by those who had not done so in the hospital, arrangements for visits to newcomers at the hospital, and then fellowship.

! Some, as they were urged to do so, attended a church of their choosing. Some pursued the reading of Christian books and literature. Some worked with Dr. Bob on how their lives were measuring up to the Four Absolutes ("yardsticks" as Bob called them) of the Oxford Group. And all took Quiet Times very seriously, whether at the Wednesday meeting, at group meetings, or as individuals.

We've already quoted and discussed the foregoing program as Frank Amos viewed, summarized, and reported it. That program, we believe, provided the answer to the two questions we posed. The lives of the incoming Akron pioneers, of the Wilsons in New York, and of many of us today are hardly the picture of happiness, joyousness, freedom, or peace as we quit our drinking. They are rarely the epitome of success. Most of us then, and most of us now, start our sobriety from some sort of bottom of the well. When we stopped drinking, rehabilitation and life-change were hardly a priority, an acknowledged need, or a mission. But life catches up with the sober alcoholic. "Welcome to reality," is what they say to lots of us. "Acceptance is the answer," some add. But neither reality nor acceptance provide answers to withdrawal problems, to legal and financial problems, or to haunting fears and guilt and disgrace.

The road to recovery involves lots more than quitting the booze and attending meetings. To those who have sought and received God's help, it can and should mean an abundant life based on sonship with God and obedience to His commandments. It also means work! "Faith without works is dead," says the Scripture AAs so often quoted from the Book of James. The work meant the very things Frank Amos specified about the "program": (1) Staying away from the bottle. (2) Seeking God's help. (3) Finding His will in His Word. (4) Talking with Him and listening to Him in quiet. (5) Changing behavior to conform to His commandments. (6) Fellowshiping with Him, His Son, and his children to implement His will, receive His promises, be released from our prisons, and enjoy an abundant and later an everlasting life.

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What's the message if we "do" the early program correctly?

As the Big Book declares, and as the leading Oxford Group writer Eleanor Forde said in the 1920's, as Sam Shoemaker wrote so often in the 1930's, and as Anne Smith stated in her journal: (1) You can't give away something that you do not have. (2) You have to give it away to keep it. And whether such expressions are biblical, they do flow from God's own declarations about His will.

The Good Book says His desire is that we become His children by being born again of His Spirit. When that happens, we have a relationship with Him—a relationship coming directly from our being born again and having become His children—when we do what He says we must do to accomplish that. Here's what the Good Book says:

Marvel not that I [Jesus] said unto thee, Ye must be born again (John 3:8)

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved (John 3:16-17)

Be it known unto you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom ye crucified, whom God raised from the dead, *even* by him doth this man stand before you whole. . . . Neither is there salvation in any other; for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved (Acts 4:10, 12)

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)

Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God which liveth and abideth forever (1 Peter 1:23)

Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God. . . (1 John 5:1)

This new birth from above, from being born again, being born of God, being "saved" or made whole by receipt of the spirit of God, is the relationship early AAs sought, obtained, and had. That is what they had.

Now, what was the message they were to learn and pass on so that others could receive the spirit of God? They were to tell others what God had done for them and how the others could receive that same sonship, fellowship, power, love, sanity, forgiveness, and deliverance by becoming God's children through a new birth and by then obeying His commandments.

From Bible to Big Book

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Did the original “program” in Akron take its basic ideas from the Good Book?

Dr. Bob said that the basic ideas were taken from the Bible. He said the oldtimers found the answers to their problems in the Bible. When he was asked a question about the program, he would ask: What does the Good Book say? He and Bill both said the Sermon on the Mount contained the underlying philosophy of A.A. And Dr. Bob cited Matthew 5 to 7, 1 Corinthians 13, and the Book of James as being “absolutely essential” to success in the “program.” Bill confirmed their study of “Corinthians” and said that James was their favorite. The Bible roots can be found in Anne Smith’s Journal, in the AA of Akron pamphlets, and in the very words and phrases pioneers used—“Creator” (Genesis 1:1); “Faith without works is dead” (James 2:20); “Love thy neighbor as thyself” (Matthew 5:43; 22:30; Leviticus 19:18); and the “kindness, honesty, love, and patience” principles in the Big Book (1 Corinthians 13:4-6; James 1:3-4, 5:7-8). We have identified many more in **The Good Book and The Big Book: A.A.’s Roots in the Bible** and in Appendix Three of **Why Early A.A. Succeeded: The Good Book in Alcoholics Anonymous Yesterday and Today**. The Bible sources of A.A. are overwhelmingly confirmed by the statements of its founders and the language used in its Big Book. But few in A.A. today know the facts or can find the facts in their Big Book or literature or even consider those facts important.

Now those two questions again: First, “How is your life now that you have stopped drinking?” Second, “What message are you able to carry to the alcoholic who still suffers?” Is the message merely that you should not pick up the first drink? Is it just about going to meetings? Is it just about making the coffee, pushing the broom, or counting the money? The original answer from Ebby Thacher—conveyed by his very presence and his firm talk—to Bill Wilson was that he (Ebby) was inexplicably different and a happy man—one who had “found religion.” Ebby’s message to Bill also communicated that he had gone to Calvary Rescue Mission, surrendered his life to Jesus Christ, and found that God had done for him what he was unable to do for himself. The message was straight from the Oxford Group and Calvary Mission’s Bible roots.

In Akron, neither Dr. Bob nor Bill Dotson (A.A. Number Three) needed to accept Christ. They were already Christians. But a new life for them hinged on the decision to obey the words of God. In the words of the sermon on the mount, they would only enter into the kingdom of heaven if they did the will of their Father who was in heaven (Matthew 7:21) It would not happen, said Dr. Bob in his personal story, if they merely stood on atheist, agnostic, or skeptical ground. If they followed the words of the Good Book as they were embodied in the early program, said he: “Your Heavenly Father will never let you down!” (Big Book, 3rd ed., p. 181).

What happened to that program and where can you find it in the Big Book and Twelve Steps?

We can take Bill and Bob at their word. The program in Akron—the program developed by the “older ones” as Dr. Bob spoke of them—found its ideas and answers in the Bible. As you can see from the Frank Amos report to Rockefeller, this Biblical program was still intact, working, and highly successful in May, 1938—about the time Bill secured approval for starting the Big Book drafts (*Lois Remembers*, p. 111). But what happened? We don’t really know how the elements of the original program disappeared. But we do today have some well-established facts about what

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happened in the period from 1938 to the Spring of 1939 when the Big Book was first published. Here's what we do know about what happened?

- ! Lois Wilson said this: “Finally it was agreed that the book should present a universal spiritual program, not a specific religious one, since all drunks were not Christian” (*Lois Remembers*, p. 113).
- ! Lois said this of the next step away from the original program: Bill had finished writing his draft of the Big Book. Then, said Lois: “But when he showed them to the group, the old discussion was resumed. There was ‘too much God,’ it was said; and ‘For pete’s sake, take out that bit in Step Seven about getting down on your knees.’ . . . Finally they hit upon the phrases ‘God as we understood Him’ and ‘a Power greater than ourselves.’ These expressions were ten-strikes; they could be used by anyone anywhere” (*Lois Remembers*, p. 113).
- ! The Big Book drafts continued in their march away from the Bible, adding New Age and New Thought concepts about a “fourth dimension,” “Creative Intelligence,” “Spirit of the Universe,” “Higher Power,” and the like.
- ! Then Sam Shoemaker himself suggested that people go to an “open” meeting of A.A. and listen to what recovered men and women say of what life is like now that they look to the Higher Power, which AA calls God so as to include all in their program. . . . AA often calls God or Christ a “power greater than ourselves” (Dick B., *Turning Point: A History of Early A.A.’s Spiritual Roots and Successes*, p. 166; Shoemaker, *The Twelve Steps of AA: What they Can Mean to the Rest of Us*)
- ! The next step seems to have born much fruit after Dr. Bob’s death? Bill Wilson said: “You can, if you wish, make A.A. itself your “higher power” (*Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, pp. 27-28).
- ! The final step has led to a lightbulb, a doorknob, a chair, a radiator, and all the rest of what Shoemaker called “absurd names for God..” In *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, the authors claim: “The most basic understanding of the concept “Higher Power” within Alcoholics Anonymous is that is that which keeps me sober,” (p. 208).

If you want to know where God went—how AAs lost their Creator—just consider the historical facts related above. There is no place in the Bible for “that which keeps me sober” or “higher power” or lightbulbs. And there is no place for believers today in an interpretation of A.A. that is in flagrant contradiction to the Bible, to the early history, and to the program that won the support for a Big Book.

Now where do you go? The choice is yours!

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There is no ban on the Bible in A.A., either in the original program or in today's fellowship. There are those who don't like the Bible, who don't read it, who criticize it, and who raise all kinds of fuss when it is mentioned. But they have no more standing than a mouse in a cat's mouth as far as speaking for A.A. is concerned.

There is no ban on the Creator or on Jesus Christ in Alcoholics Anonymous. The Creator is part and parcel of the language of every edition of the Big Book. Jesus Christ is part of the history.. There are those who don't like the Creator or Jesus Christ, who denounce them, who establish idols in their place, and who raise all kinds of fuss when they are mentioned. These people also have no more standing than our mouse.

There is no ban on learning the history of early A.A. and using it. I did. So did more than 80 men I have sponsored. So are thousands around the world today. There are those who treat any document that is not "Conference Approved" as somehow being contrary to A.A. Traditions, likely to produce drinking, and not fit for A.A. consumption. But A.A.'s own *Box 459* put the lie to such talk many years ago. People who want an index of forbidden books in A.A. don't know their history, their own literature, or the harm they do. They also have no standing, but they are loud in their protests.

You can, if you choose, go where the early AAs went and can be delivered as they were

You may start where Henrietta Seiberling, Bill and Bob, and Frank Amos started. They certainly did declare the necessity for abstinence: Don't take a drink, no matter what—not a drop. You can't do much with God, Jesus Christ, or the Bible if you are a practicing alcoholic. Even ministers and priests have tried and often wound up in our fellowship.

You may partake of the great support and understanding A.A. provides to those who seem to have no home and no welcome elsewhere. And you may learn from those who have researched our history exactly how early AAs recovered and the tools they used.

You may read the Big Book and the Twelve Steps so that you know what A.A. offers today. If you don't abandon God, His Son, or His Word, you may study and use the A.A. tools. There is no need to revise the language of the 12 Steps. There is no need to form an outside fellowship. There is no need to hold your tongue about your own experience although there is little value in speaking publically to those who refuse to listen and learn.

You may go from spiritual birth to youth to maturity if you choose. And the Bible provides God's plan as to how you can do that as His child and in obedience to His will. The early Akron pioneers gave it a try and succeeded. Why not you!