

The Christian's Approach to the Twelve Steps of AA

[Pastors' Institute on Alcoholism, Wisconsin Lutheran College, January 18, 1984]

by: *K.A. Spevacek*

This is a pastor's evaluation of the twelve steps. To my knowledge, this subject has been largely untouched in our circles. In fact, I must confess that before beginning my ministry in Milwaukee I don't recall hearing about the Twelve Steps of AA.

This paper is not a definitive study. Rather, before us we have impressions. The purpose here is to furnish a basis for discussion of the Lutheran Christian's use of the Twelve Steps. The subject has been approached from the non-experiential, theological side. Not being an alcoholic, of course, I do not have some of the insights that our second speaker has.

I. The Problem

Most of us must admit that in the past, we have had very little knowledge of alcoholism. The problem is immense. It has been mentioned that there are at least ten million alcoholics in our nation. Most of these alcoholics are married, have families and full time jobs, When we think of alcoholics though, we usually picture the unshaven winos that stumble into the Rescue Mission, not Winston Churchill or Betty Ford. Do you realize that the gap between men and women here is closing? The ratio of male to female alcoholics now is only 3 to 1.

When we have a beer or a glass of wine, we forget that alcohol is a mood altering drug, and that alcoholism is America's number one health problem. It is "responsible for a wide range of other ailments including ulcers, cirrhoses of the liver, heart disease and diabetes."¹ Studies show that one-third of all hospital admissions are due to ailments directly or indirectly related to alcohol abuse.

That, however, is not the worst. It takes a terrible toll upon our society, yes even upon some of our own congregational members in one way or another. But, first a brief look at its toll upon society. It is estimated that alcohol is responsible for 40% of problems brought to family courts. 50% of all traffic accidents involve alcohol, 25% of suicides.

As to the frequency of its appearance within our Lutheran congregations—it's anyone's guess. There are so many variable factors. Can't we assume, though, that alcoholism is much more frequent than we might imagine in many churches? Remember that many men and women with this problem remain "closet alcoholics." Practically no pastor will shepherd an alcoholic free congregation.

Alcoholism bears its bitter fruits in this life, as described above. Like all sins, drunkenness also places a wall between the alcoholic and his God. Lapses into drunkenness provoke the wrath of God. The apostle pointed out (I Cor. 6:10) "do not be deceived—neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor *drunkards*—will inherit the kingdom of God."

Now how are we Christians going to help our brothers and sisters who are alcoholic and commit this sin of drunkenness with all its accompanying sins which are so destructive to their bodies, families, lives and society?

II. The Only Real Hope

We recognize that the only source of help to which we Christians can turn is our Divine Physician, Jesus Christ.

Our Lord reminds us (John 15:5) “I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; *apart from me you can do nothing.*” Paul points out (Phil 4:13) “I can do everything *through him* who gives me strength.”

To help the troubled our Lord uses us His representatives, pastors, teachers and counselors. We, in turn, use His powerful Word which is the most effective lifesaver that we can use to help those being sucked down in the whirlpool of alcoholism. Through His incomparably helpful Word He offers us both diagnosis and treatment for many of our problems. Alcoholism is no exception.

For a variety of reasons, however, many of our alcoholic members have not turned to us in the church for help. One wrong reason—we are not expert “professionals” in the area of alcoholism. One legitimate reason—some of us lacked understanding of alcoholism and methods to deal with it. In counseling and helping our alcoholic members, one of the problems pastors face is limited time. We often cannot give the time these members need. Then too, supportive help from those who likewise suffer from alcoholism—very beneficial to the recovering alcoholic—is needed.

Thus, outside help has been used, and, I believe, can continue to be used in addition to pastoral counseling.

III. Help Outside the Church

Pity the alcoholics of a century ago. Little, if any, assistance was available to them outside of the church. Today, various agencies stand ready to help those who wish to get on top of their problem: De Paul Rehabilitation Hospital, the Dewey Center, Kettle Moraine Hospital, mental health centers, and alcoholic information centers come to mind. It is not our purpose here to examine them and their strengths and weaknesses. Rather, we want to take a closer look at one of our most well known and influential sources to which many alcoholics turn, Alcoholics Anonymous. Many clinics use this organization as an adjunct.

Here is a brief sketch of “AA”, as it is called. Alcoholics Anonymous is a “fellowship” of men and women who share their experiences, to help each other solve their common problem of alcoholism. They also help others recover from alcoholism. Founded in 1935, AA has over 500,000 members in more than 22,000 local groups in the U.S. and overseas.

“Nobody invented AA. Many streams of influence and many people helped to organize and guide it.”ⁱⁱ One of the men whose influence gave birth to AA was the Episcopal clergyman, Samuel Shoemaker. He inspired the founders Dr. Bob and Bill Silkworth. Another of the founders said: “It was from him (Sam Shoemaker) that Dr. Bob and I absorbed most of the principles that were afterward embodied in the 12 Steps. AA got its ideas for self-examination, acknowledgement of character defects, restitution for harm done—directly from Sam Shoemaker.”ⁱⁱⁱ Another clergyman who played a part in the beginning of AA was the Jesuit priest, Father Dowling.

In its literature, AA often describes itself as a “fellowship.” AA also frequently refers to the fact that it is “spiritually as well as morally centered.”^{iv} A legitimate question then is: can Alcoholics Anonymous be considered an organization which is semi-religious? *Alcoholics Anonymous* says “absolutely not.” Its literature states: “Alcoholics Anonymous is not allied with any sect or denomination. It is a spiritual program based on no particular form of religion. Everyone is welcome, no matter what affiliation or none. Let us not defeat our purposes by entering into discussions concerning specific religious tenets.”^v

Keller says: “AA is not and does not claim to be a church or a religion.”—Yet he states later: “They have experienced and believe that there is a valid spiritual awakening, not necessarily Christian in which alcoholics receive from God what they need to stay sober.”^{vi}

I believe that because of AA’s use of some religious language and prayer we must instruct our members to beware of becoming involved in any practices in AA groups which would violate the Scriptural principles of fellowship (Romans 16:17).

Some other weaknesses, from our viewpoint:

1. AA is intended for alcoholics of “all religious stripes,” from atheists, to Christians, to Jews.
2. Some literature of AA contains questionable statements, which time does not permit me to go into here. Examples are found in this paper.
3. Some local group leaders may abuse their position by injecting their own religious, and/or moral ideas into the group discussion.
4. The “Vox populi, vox dei” philosophy, “Groups rely on the *authority of God as expressed through the group conscience*. What is the conscience anyway?—Together the members seek to be guided by a high power in reaching a decision which will be good for the group as a whole rather than for any one member of clique. This decision is an expression of the group conscience.”^{vii}

These above points are mentioned before an actual discussion of the 12 Steps because in the local groups, interpretation of the Steps is so important.

IV. Step by Step—A Brief Examination

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

Denial of the fact that one is an alcoholic is one of the greatest barriers to successful treatment. Admission of the fact is a great step forward. There is no better word to describe alcoholism than “powerlessness.” The alcoholic lives in compulsive slavery. To admit that one has been ‘whipped’ by alcohol is step one. Admission of helplessness is basic to Scriptural Christianity, Paul pointed out: “For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.”

STEP TWO *Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.*

It is well recognized that trying to use one’s own will power to improve is like trying to pull oneself up by the bootstraps. Alcoholics must have outside help, from sources more powerful than themselves.

But who is this “power greater than ourselves?” The founders of AA originally had the word “God” here. “The atheists and agnostics at first wanted the word ‘God’ deleted—once in, the prospect could take God or leave Him alone as he wished. To the rest this was a shocking proposal, but happily we listened—although Bill strenuously resisted any change in the 12 Steps, there was finally a compromise. They decided to describe God as a ‘power greater than ourselves.’”^{viii}

Obviously, there are great dangers for our members here. Deism can so easily creep in. Members of AA can fashion their own gods to suit themselves. God warns us (Prov. 3:5) “Trust in the Lord—lean not on your own understanding.”

Then too, if a group zealously avoids “specific religious tenets”, might a Christian be muzzled in attempting to witness to the Trinity and our Savior? Can a Christian remain silent? (II Timothy 1:8) Let’s say a recovering alcoholic who was a Mason praised his “higher power” for his sobriety. What could a Lutheran reply?

The positive element in step two is that it points to the truth that it is only God who can restore us. As Paul wrote: “I can do all things through Christ.” In Scripture there are many examples of the afflicted, whom God alone could and did help. (Mark 5:20, Mark 9:18)

STEP THREE Made a decision to turn our will and lives over to the care of God as we understand him.

Complete surrender of self to God makes real change possible. AA material suggests “the 24 hour plan” here. One day at a time the alcoholic is to surrender self to God.

An alarm bell always rings when I hear people speaking of our *making decisions* in regard to God. A Christian recognizes that it is *only* the Holy Spirit who can help us “to will and to do” His good pleasure. Through His Word He turns us from following self will to obeying His Will. Psalm 40:8-“I desire to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.”

STEP FOUR Made searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

This and the fifth step are very important. Self-examination is called for, in order to expose harmful character traits. This “Dissection of ourselves” requires courage.

This step’s weakness lies in the fact that the use of the “mirror” of Scripture is left out. In order to make a complete self-examination, the Christian measures by God’s standards. It is the Word which “judges thoughts and attitudes” as the writer to the Hebrews put it (4:12). Paul: “through the law we become conscious of sin” (Romans 3:20). See also: Psalm 119: 104 & 130.

This is a good step. Taking a self-inventory is always wholesome, but it must be done with Scripture. It is also true that inner satisfaction is gained by looking squarely at ourselves. (AA makes a “A guide to a Fourth Step Inventory” available to pastors).

STEP FIVE Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

Solitary self-appraisal is not sufficient. Our wrongs must be admitted to others. This discussion of our defects with others is most difficult. Complete honesty is very necessary to make real progress. This step does not mean formally sitting down with someone and saying: “I have done wrong first by, secondly by-----.” At this step pastors may be approached by the alcoholic for help.

AA suggests that “the clergyman, psychiatrist or doctor is our best bet here.” But the Christian alcoholic must be very careful with whom he makes “a step five.” Another alcoholic or counselor not of our fellowship could give wrong counsel, for example, in regard to drunkenness.

The basic idea, of course, is good. We become fully aware only of what we are able to express to another, and one reason for drinking will automatically disappear when we admit our “wrong” -i.e. drinking to forget. “A trouble shared is a trouble cut in half” is good psychology. Most important is confession of sin to *God*. Confession to others is in harmony with James 5:16.

STEP SIX We’re entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character,

The Christian should always be ready to turn to the Lord for help in battling and defeating the Old Adam. Again, he is the only one who can change hearts.

STEP SEVEN *Humbly asked him to remove our shortcomings,*

By “shortcomings,” AA means “all our character defects.”^{ix}

A Christian certainly can use this step. There must, of course, be the realization that this removal will not take place overnight. It will be completed only when we forever cast aside our Old Adam at death and enter into the fullness of new life.

Other literature of AA, in reference to this seventh step, contains some statements, which are erroneous. The observation is made that humble prayer is the “spiritual scalpel with which God cuts out the damaged portions of our sick personalities.”^x Doesn’t this make prayer akin to a means of grace? The same “Little Red Book” also informs alcoholics that they are exerting “great mental cooperation”^{xi} with God in this step.

STEP EIGHT *Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.*

Here recovering alcoholics are dealing with the problems that their problems have caused other people. It is suggested that a written, rather than mental list of these people be prepared. It will include such as family, friends, sweethearts, employers and fellow workers.

This is a good scriptural principle. The recovering alcoholic, however, like all of us sinners, should be willing to make emends to others out of gratitude for forgiveness from God, not just as a step to recovery.

STEP NINE *Made direct amends to such people whenever possible except when to do so would injure them or others.*

This involves peacemaking. It requires courage. One obstacle is procrastination. Making direct amends means coming “as close as you can to paying what you owe, giving what should have been given long ago.” This step can regain many broken friendships.

We Christians are happy to make amends to those whom we’ve wronged. This is the Lord’s will (Leviticus 6:4). Making amends is a fruit of repentance (Matthew 3:9). Zacchaeus is an example of making restitution.

Care must be taken here that this making of amends is not perfunctory. The Christian will make sure that it is from the heart. And the Christian must guard against the thinking that such amends earn God’s forgiveness. This is an erroneous thought which pops up in the “Little Red Book”: “The Twelve Steps are one big amend which we make to God.”^{xii}

STEP TEN *“Continued to take personal inventories and when we were wrong, promptly admitted it.*

Step four must be continuous, habitual. One time attention is fatal. Frequent “checkups” are needed.

In some ways this is similar to the Christian’s living in daily self-examination, contrition and repentance. Jeremiah wrote (Lam 3:40): “Let us examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the Lord.” Of course, here the Christian will again use the mirror of the Law (Romans 3:20 and 7:7). It also is important to promptly make our “admissions,” especially to God. (Psalm 32:3)

STEP ELEVEN *Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, as we understand Him, praying only for knowledge of his will for us and power to carry it out.*

For the recovering alcoholic, as well as any Christian, prayer and meditation are very important. (We all fall short here). The Christian will, of course, want to center his meditation upon our Savior and His Word.

Unfortunately, here again the “Little Red Book,” an interpretation of the Twelve Steps, slips in some errors. It tells us that “we must *merit* the power we seek by improving our efficiency.”^{xiii}

Another guide, furnished by the Milwaukee Central Office, assures us, “Be certain that the God to whom you pray will make it easier for you to work out your own salvation.”^{xiv}

(These quotations from various A.A. materials should alert us to the fact that we cannot always trust the printed materials prepared to interpret the Steps to be innocuous.)

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

AA defines a “spiritual awakening” as a conscious change for the good, an “AA metamorphosis.”

AA points out: “practical experience shows that nothing will so much insure immunity from drinking as intensive work with other alcoholics.”^{xv} Twelfth Step work is necessary for the recovering alcoholic. We might call it AA’s “evangelistic program.”

The former is a valid principle. A Christian, out of gratitude for forgiveness and help, will seek out and help others, David promised (Psalm 51:13): “Then I will teach transgressors your ways and sinners will turn back to you.”

On the negative side, we must point out once again that for the Christian alcoholic to change, spiritual awakening, primarily comes through the Holy Spirit who uses the truths couched in these steps and especially Scripture.

Keller also points out a problem here. “There are too many alcoholics in congregations who never really become part of the congregation, because their lives are so completely absorbed in AA and with other alcoholics.”^{xvi} It is up to pastors then to encourage recovering alcoholics to involve themselves with their spiritual brothers and sisters in their congregations.

Before we leave the Twelve Steps of AA, let’s take note of one more problem that those who join AA meetings may experience, Keller points out: “Each meeting is opened with a moment of silent prayer, during which the members stand with heads bowed.” This presents no problem. “The meeting is closed by praying the Lord’s Prayer audibly and not in haste.”^{xvii} We must caution our members about such promiscuous joint prayer. Certainly, we cannot join in as the Lord instructs us in Rom 16:17.

Concluding Thoughts

Again, the Church (Christ, His Word and Sacrament) ought to be primary source of help for our brothers and sisters who are afflicted with alcoholism. But, this means that we pastors must “go to meet them” by learning as much as we can about alcoholism. As an “outside” aid to the alcoholic and his pastor, I am convinced that Alcoholism Awareness is an excellent program. Ways ought to be found so that it can serve the wider constituency of our Synod. Perhaps it might be possible to conduct “short courses” for the training of knowledgeable and interested

laymen who could then go back to their home areas and help to begin Alcoholism Awareness groups. Perhaps this is where our W.L.C.F.S. could work out a training program in tandem with Wisconsin Lutheran College?

As a further aid to our alcoholic members AA can be very helpful. We should use it with a few cautions, however. This means pastors should be aware of the character of their local AA groups, and if advisable, refer members to a local group. At the same time, as a part of his counseling, the pastor ought to work through the Twelve Steps program of Alcoholics Anonymous, pointing out both strengths and weaknesses.

God help us all as we work together to help our brothers and sisters, and their families.

ⁱ Tammy Tanaka, "The Trap of Alcoholism"

ⁱⁱ "Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age," p. 2.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, p. 253.

^v "The Twelve Steps and Traditions," p. 30.

^{vi} Keller, "Ministering to Alcoholics," p. 41.

^{vii} "The Twelve Steps and Traditions." p. 15.

^{viii} Keller, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

^{ix} Hagarty, "The Winner's Way," p. 17.

^x "The Little Red Book," p. 92.

^{xi} *Ibid.*, p. 87.

^{xii} *Ibid.*, p. 105.

^{xiii} *Ibid.*, p. 128.

^{xiv} "A Guide to the Twelve Steps of AA," p. 14.

^{xv} "Alcoholics Anonymous," p. 89.

^{xvi} Keller, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

^{xvii} Keller, *op. cit.*, p. 62.