

# **The Power of True Principles:**

## **A Brief History of the Twelve Steps from Their Origin in a “First Century Christian Fellowship” to Their Use in LDS Recovery Groups**

### **Introduction**

In April 1939 a book was published entitled *Alcoholics Anonymous*. It was intended to publish to the world the amazing story of recovery held in common by approximately 100 previously “hopeless alcoholics.” It was also intended to explain the simple principles and practices that had led to such a miracle.

Their recovery was unprecedented in modern history. These 100 individuals represented a 75% cure rate from alcoholism—a malady that had defied all the efforts of medical and psychiatric science. Since the beginning of recorded human history, alcoholism—the either immediate or gradual physical, mental, emotional and moral decline of a person once they begin drinking alcoholic beverages—has been an unfathomable curse. With no respect for education, occupation, or family background, alcoholism has either caused or contributed to the loss of immeasurable human potential, and this loss is not just to the alcoholic either. It has been estimated that as many as 10 to 15 other people are detrimentally affected by the alcohol addicted person’s slide into living hell.

Yet here, in the middle of the 1930s, at the height of the Great Depression, were one hundred people—mostly men at this early stage of the movement—who were claiming that they had found an answer—not a cure—but a *remission* of their obsession and compulsion to drink.

What was the answer they had found? Was it the result of modern medical science? Or was it insight from the world’s leading psychiatrists and psychologists?

No. Even though several of the foundational figures in their fellowship had consulted world renowned leaders in both the medical and psychiatric fields, none of these sources had any answers. In every instance and on both hands—medical and psychological—the response they received was identical: “We’re sorry we can’t help you. Your degree of alcoholic obsession and degradation appears incurable, beyond any human help.” The “disease” of alcoholism (as well as all addiction) did not seem to be just physical, or just psychological. It seemed to go deeper into the human soul.

Whether serious or in jest and frustration, every experts conclusion was some version of “God help you. We can’t.”

Faced with the alternative of either death or finding Divine help, these men were hard pressed. Many of them had been raised in religious atmospheres to which they could not relate that for one reason or another, either real or imagined. Compelled to be humble, even as the Zoramites to whom Alma preached (Alma 32), these men were in a preparation to hear the word (Alma 32:6).

Curiously, but delightfully characteristic, our loving Heavenly Father (just as the father in the story of the prodigal son) was willing to receive them. Always compassionate, always searching for the lost one who finally begins to search for Him, the Lord was orchestrating a spiritual path gentle enough to entice them to turn to Him.

### **The Origins and Purpose of the Oxford Group**

In 1908, a young man by the name of Frank Buchman began studying the scriptures, listening to others testify of the absolute necessity of giving one’s life to the Savior. After searching the words of the

New Testament over and over, he felt impressed to begin carrying the message of the principles he found there. Gradually, a contingent of like-minded people began to gather around Buchman's message and began to call themselves a "First Century Christian Fellowship."

This was not a church. This Christian Fellowship was hardly even an organization. It required and claimed no membership. Buchman claimed no authority and his work challenged no established Christian church. It simply stated and pursued the goal of encouraging all Christians of any denomination to practice a daily personal devotional time of meditative scripture study, personal prayer and "quiet time" that is devoted to listening to impressions and "whisperings" of the Holy Spirit which come to the sincere mind. This Christian fellowship encouraged all to seek, find, and trust their own consciousness of the Savior's living Presence and to infuse back into whatever religious life they practiced the deep commitment that resulted.

By the mid 1930s, when Bill Wilson and Dr. Robert Smith, who would eventually found the Alcoholics Anonymous fellowship, were facing their need to find a spiritual answer or die, Frank Buchman's work had become identified as "the Oxford Group." This name was taken from the fact that there was an active and world renowned unit of this "First Century Christian Fellowship" based in Oxford, England. The Oxford Group movement had been introduced into the United States, mainly through the efforts of Sam Shoemaker, an Episcopalian minister, in his Calvary Episcopal Mission in New York.

When Bill was on the verge of being permanently committed to a mental hospital, he had an experience that planted a seed that changed the course of his life and the lives of millions of others since then. An old drinking buddy of his, Ebby Thatcher, a friend since high-school days, came back into his life—sober and glowing with new life and hope. At first sight of Ebby, Bill thought only of getting drunk with him, like in the old days—but very quickly Ebby set him straight. Ebby had found sobriety and sanity through a powerful spiritual experience that included surrendering his weakness to the Savior and being willing to share the good news that the Lord did live, did care—even about total drunkards. He *did* have the *power* to relieve a person of even a destructive behavior as multifaceted and deadly as alcoholism.

Where had Ebby found such hope? By attending the non-denominational Oxford Group meetings held at the Calvary Mission. Bill sobered up enough to attend the same meetings a few times, but then, with no deep personal spiritual conviction yet, he went on a three day drinking binge that landed him back in Towns Hospital.

Back in the hospital, Bill had time to deeply ponder the contrast between the hell his drinking had caused him (as well as the likelihood of death), and the option Ebby and the Oxford Group philosophy had offered. Ebby visited Bill at the hospital and encouraged him to give his life to the Lord and let Him take over its management. Some time later, in desperation and a state of total surrender to "the God idea" Bill cried out in sincere neediness, reminiscent of the plea of King Lamoni's father in the Book of Mormon (Alma 22:18): "If there be a God, let Him show Himself!" (*Pass It On*, p. 121) Bill was through trying everything else. He was finally ready to turn to God as he best understood God. He was about to find out the same truth that Joseph Smith found in the Sacred Grove: God is no respecter of persons, but only of sincerity and real intent. He was about to find out what Alma had taught in **Alma 32:27**:

**But behold, if ye will awake and arouse your faculties, even to an experiment upon my words, and exercise a particle of faith, yea, even if ye can no more than desire to believe, let this desire work in you, even until ye believe in a manner that ye can give place for a portion of my words.**

Some people's spiritual conversion to the reality of God is slow and steady, the result of years of study and practice. Others', such as Paul's in the New Testament, Enos, Alma's and the Brother of Jared's in the Book of Mormon, Moses' in the Pearl of Great Price and Joseph Smith's comes with a sudden

experience that changes their life course in a moment. Such was Bill Wilson's experience.

Here is his own description:

“What happened next was electric. Suddenly, my room blazed with an indescribably white light. I was seized with an ecstasy beyond description. Every joy I had known was pale by comparison. The light, the ecstasy—I was conscious of nothing else for a time.

“Then, seen in the mind's eye, there was a mountain. I stood upon its summit, where a great wind blew. A wind, not of air, but of spirit. In great, clean strength, it blew right through me. Then came the blazing thought, ‘You are a free man.’ I know not how long I remained in this state, but finally the light became more quiet, a great peace stole over me, and this was accompanied by a sensation difficult to describe. I became acutely conscious of a Presence which seemed like a veritable sea of living spirit. I lay on the shores of a new world. ‘This,’ I thought, ‘must be the great reality. The God of the preachers.’

“Savoring my new world, I remained in this state for a long time. I seemed to be possessed by the absolute, and the curious conviction deepened that no matter how wrong things seemed to be, there could be no question of the ultimate rightness of God's universe. For the first time, I felt that I really belonged. I knew that I was loved and could love in return. I thanked my God, who had given me a glimpse of His absolute self. Even though a pilgrim upon an uncertain highway, I need be concerned no more, for I had glimpsed the great beyond.”

Bill Wilson never doubted the reality of God again. He spent his life laboring to help others find their own spiritual experience that would give them such a conviction of God and God's goodness and love that it would cast out all desire to self-destruct with alcohol. With no equivocation or relapse, Bill never took another drink.

Was this experience given of God? As Latter-day Saints we should affirm that it was with a resounding “Yes!”, and support its reality. It taught this man to love God with all his life and heart and soul—and to do good—great good. Moroni taught that this was the measure by which we could determine what was of God. (See **Moroni 7:13**.) The rest of Bill's life was spent in service to his fellow man—especially that percentage of them that needed an answer to alcoholism—specifically a spiritual answer.

After his life-changing experience, Bill tried in vain to persuade other alcoholics to turn to God. Still, he could not forget or deny what had happened to him. When discouragement tempted him to give up and drink again, he found he could maintain his own sobriety by carrying the message—even if the other person refused it. He continued to attend Oxford group meetings and built a strong friendship with Sam Shoemaker. Sam continued to instruct Bill in the basic concepts of the Oxford group movement: admission of total need for God; fearless self-appraisal and admittance of personal shortcomings; restitution to others for any wrongs done to them; and continual willingness to carry the message that God lives and can and will come to us in our deepest despair. Years later, Bill described Sam as his first sponsor and attributed their long talks as the origin of the principles in the Twelve Steps.

Finally, in 1935, Bill met Dr. Robert Smith who came to be known in A.A. as Dr. Bob. This was, at least in part, due to a very interesting “coincidence.” Dr. Bob and his family had also been in touch with the Oxford Group movement in their area. Being a deeply spiritual family, and very devoted to the Savior, they had been struggling mightily to apply the principles that would get Bob free from his own alcoholism. But Dr. Bob wasn't able to make the leap of faith. Maybe God *could*, but *would* He help someone as lost

in a pit of his own making?

Then, the day came that Robert Smith's path was crossed by Bill Wilson. Bill was desperate to share his story with another. In Dr. Bob, Bill found a transfixed listener. Bob was incredulous, but still he believed it was true. Bill could describe alcoholic insanity with the best of them. There was no way for Dr. Bob to deny that Bill had "been there" and was now restored to sanity. Dr. Bob was soon sober, never to drink again. A.A. counts the birth of their fellowship from the first day of his permanent sobriety.

Thus, the "first group" of the movement that would someday be called A. A. was formed by these two men. Together, in harmony with the principle of the truth being established out of the mouths of two or more witnesses, they began to reach out to other alcoholics with increasing success. Looking back on these events, it is not hard to recognize that they were orchestrated by the hand of a loving, merciful, longsuffering God—the God we know so well through the Book of Mormon and the Restoration—the God who feels for and seeks after His children, no matter how rebellious they may be in their immaturity and ignorance of His love.

### **The Christian Foundation of A.A.'s Early Success**

In the earliest gatherings of the A.A. fellowship they had no codified Twelve Steps. Their earliest meetings consisted of reading from the New Testament, especially the following three sources:

- 1.) The Book of James.
- 2.) The Sermon on the Mount, including the Lord's Prayer
- 3.) Paul's sermon on Charity in 1 Cor. 13.

Interestingly, the Book of James was referred to so often in the early meetings of A.A. that some suggested that the new fellowship be called "The James Club."

After reading from the scriptures, they would spend a "quiet time," meditating and listening for their thoughts to be directed by the Lord. They would often keep written notes of their personal inspiration. Thus, they practiced likening the teachings of the scriptures unto themselves. Their clarion message was founded in James' witness that if *any* man lacked wisdom, he might ask of God and receive liberally. They believed it; they acted upon it. It happened.

In the midst of these experiences, Bill continued to be consumed with the desire to spread this blessing to as many alcoholic sufferers as possible. He began to envision a fellowship based on these same principles, but more generalized in its interpretation of God so that all could be included who were willing to acknowledge divine help.

### **Division from the Oxford Groups**

By the winter of 1935 their efforts to narrow the scope of their mission to alcoholics while broadening their interpretation of God were drawing criticism from the more specifically Christ-centered Oxford Group participants. Even so, the growing number of recovered alcoholics continued to hone their program to the specific experiences of alcoholics—many of whom they felt would be repelled by too heavy-handed or specific an interpretation of God. Some of their early membership campaigned to be more specific about surrender to Christ and to include biblical references in the soon to be published AA "Big Book," as it came to be called. But, in April of 1939, when the "Big Book" was published, even though it mentioned "God" hundreds of times—it left each reader free to define God as he or she chose to define "Him." By the end of that summer, the shift away from the definitely Christian influence of the Oxford Group was complete. Alcoholics Anonymous was an entity in its own right.

Interestingly, the Oxford Group itself, after separating from A.A., also began to move away from its original emphasis on absolute need for salvation through Divine Power, and had begun to promote a

more “humanistic” world-view, based in the belief that humanity possessed the abilities to save itself. By 1941, even Sam Shoemaker had severed ties to the movement that had recently been renamed “Moral Re-Armament,” stating that its revised policies and procedures did not have the emphasis it had in its earlier days—that of individual personal application of New Testament principles.

It was as if the Oxford Group movement, with its emphasis on true principles and faith in Christ had blossomed for a short season, long enough to drop the seeds that would develop into the deep Judeo-Christian roots of A.A.’s spiritual program of recovery.

### **The Shift in Defining Higher Power in A.A.**

Though each participant in A.A. was left to define God according to the dictates of his or her own conscience, in the same liberal and tolerant manner Joseph Smith prescribed in the eleventh Article of Faith, it was very plain in the earliest gatherings of the fledgling fellowship that the “God” they were all referring to was the God of Judeo-Christian tradition. The terms “Heavenly Father,” “Jesus Christ,” and “Holy Spirit” or “Holy Ghost” were standard expressions in their midst. Reminiscent of these origins is Dr. Bob’s reference to “your Heavenly Father” in his personal story in the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*, (commonly known as the ‘Big Book’), p. 181. Equally revealing of their Judeo-Christian roots are the hundreds of references to God and the many allusions to Biblical language in the “Big Book.” Even the expression, “Higher Power,” which has become so vaguely defined in the current A.A. program as well as other Twelve Step based recovery programs, was used to obviously refer to God. (If you are interested in an extremely thorough exploration of the foundation of A.A. in the teachings of the Bible, you might want to read *The Good Book and The Big Book* written by Dick B., Paradise Research Publications, Inc.: Kihei, HW.)

Nonetheless, Bill’s near obsession with making A.A. accessible to as many people as possible began to shift the fellowship—though still grounded in true principles—further from the Christian definition of God that it had started with. Dr. Bob’s influence on the fellowship, always more anchored in the Christian origins of his and Bill’s first recovery, had diminished with his death in 1951.

By the time Bill wrote *The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* in 1953, in which he hoped to pass on permanently the wisdom of A.A.’s first twenty years of experience, he was influenced by the nearly twenty year old fellowship, which itself was being influenced by the continuing deterioration of faith in God in the U.S. and throughout the world. Thus, in his discussion of Step Two, “Came to believe that a Power greater than ours could restore us to sanity,” Bill included these words, “You can, if you wish, make A.A. itself your ‘higher power.’” (p. 26). Note the loss of the capitalization from the original Step to Bill’s statement. With this statement, the program that had begun in an atmosphere of “First Century *Christian Fellowship*,” slipped away from its foundational truth—that those seeking recovery were “100% hopeless, apart from *divine help*.” (AA “Big Book, p. 43). While some might debate the issue with me, I must agree with those who feel that this slide away from a definite orientation towards God is the most serious reason why A.A.’s “cure rate,” has dropped from 75%, as it was in the first several decades, to today’s dismal level of less than 10%.

### **From A.A. to LDS Family Services—The Origins of the LDS Scriptural Version of the Twelve Steps**

Not long after participants in A.A. started getting sober in amazing numbers, their spouses acknowledged the power of the Twelve Step principles in helping them heal from the devastation of their loved one’s drinking and the shock of their sobriety. In the late 1940s Al-Anon was formed. In 1953 Narcotics Anonymous was formed. In 1957, two men met and decided to form the first meeting of a new fellowship in order to focus the Twelve Steps of recovery on the problem of compulsive gambling. They

created Gamblers Anonymous. About a year after the formation of Gamblers Anonymous (GA), a woman accompanied a good friend to a GA group meeting. As she sat and listened to the people share in the meeting, she saw the truth that she behaved exactly the same self-destructive way as these compulsive gamblers—except with food and eating. By January of 1960 she had found another woman who was willing to meet and begin the fellowship that was to become known as Overeaters Anonymous (OA).

### **The Creation of the Scriptural Version of the Steps**

Twenty-one years later, in 1981, in Mesa, Arizona, I walked into my first meeting of Overeaters Anonymous. The story of what happened immediately after is described in the preface of *He Did Deliver Me from Bondage*.

It was about ten years later, in Orem, Utah, that I began to meet with a handful of other LDS “Twelve-Steppers”—first casually, but then more deliberately—to discuss the Twelve Steps and our efforts to live the principles contained in them. We spent hours on the phone and after OA meetings, discussing the beautiful correlations between the scriptures—especially the Book of Mormon—and the Twelve Steps. Gradually, I began to compose the prototype of the study guide, *He Did Deliver Me from Bondage* and shared it with my closest friends. Recovery among us was enhanced ten-fold. The Restored Gospel made the Steps come alive with even more Divine power for us as Latter-day Saints!

Within a few months we were convinced that this was something we did not want to lose. In these “discussions” we could talk freely from our hearts as LDS people. We could pour out our hearts concerning our relationship with our religion—how significant it was to us. We could mention “Heavenly Father” and “Jesus Christ” openly. We could turn to the scriptures and to the teachings of the prophets to validate this wonderful pathway of principles that were leading us, one-by-one, to a spiritual awakening and a heart-deep conversion to our personal need for the Savior. The word spread and LDS participants in Twelve Step work in other communities wanted to use the “study guide.” More and more frequently I took my first draft of *He Did Deliver Me from Bondage* to the corner copy center to run 10, 25, 50 copies at a time.

Then one day, during a discussion, one of us told the group about another LDS recovery effort they had just heard of based on the Twelve Steps. S.A.V.E. (Substance Abuse Volunteer Effort) had begun in Ogden some years earlier. We were so excited. Even though S.A.V.E. was only meant to serve drug and alcohol addicts, maybe they would consider allowing us to form groups under their name. After all, we thought, food is a substance and we definitely abuse it if we’re not in recovery. After some research, I was able to make contact with Dr. Rick Hawkes, S.A.V.E.’s founder. He said that there was no hope of broadening the focus of S.A.V.E.

Our little group was crestfallen, at first. Through our contact with S.A.V.E., we had learned that Elder Vaughn J. Featherstone was personally aware of the recovery efforts of A.A. I felt a powerful desire to share the development of the study guide with him. He graciously met with me and reassured me of his personal testimony that there was a great need among the Saints to understand these precepts. He encouraged me to keep up the “good work.” He assured me that the Lord would open a way to share this message.

Then, during a conversation over the phone, a landmark idea came to a couple of us. If S.A.V.E. had gotten permission to start an LDS fellowship and modify the Twelve Steps to reflect faith in Christ, maybe we could do the same thing! Maybe we could change a “few” things and get A.A.’s permission to use the steps in connection with our Book of Mormon study! Once again, I was elected to give it a try.

Prayerfully I approached the work of coordinating as many phrases of the Twelve Steps as possible with scriptural phrases and concepts from the Book of Mormon. After the months of study I and that original group had done, I knew there was perfect harmony between each Step and the “precepts” of

the Book of Mormon.

I will never forget the miracle of watching the “Scriptural Version” of the Steps come together on my monitor screen. My mind was remembering references and cross-references as fast as I could record them. When all twelve of the Steps were paraphrased, I read them over and over, cherishing the familiar words of the Book of Mormon phrases. I wept for joy. I felt like I had just been handed one of the greatest gifts I had ever longed for—the precious Twelve Steps redeemed from the humanistic fate of being detached from their beginnings in “First Century Christianity.” Now they were safely framed in the amazing words of the Restoration and of the “most correct book ever written.” Think of it! If these amazing Steps that had led totally destitute people to God could be offered to the Latter-day Saints, combined with the Book of Mormon’s power to bring a man closer to God than any other . . . what might be the result? I knew I was in the presence of an act of Divine Intervention, not only on my own behalf, but on the behalf of all the other LDS families that were being ravaged by the trials and evils of the Last Days.

I wrote to A.A. They graciously consented to the adaptations made in the LDS scriptural version of the Steps.

### **The Search for an LDS 12 Step Fellowship**

So, there we were. We had an LDS Version of the Twelve Steps, and we had an LDS study guide, but there was no organization for LDS people that we knew of. We began to talk seriously of forming such a fellowship. Then, someone heard that the Church was trying to hold recovery groups for alcohol and drug addicted members somewhere in the Salt Lake valley. I became so excited! Maybe here was the purpose of the new steps and the book’s creation. I made several phone calls and finally found Dr. Howard McFarlane in SLC. He was one of the men who was instrumental in getting the recovery groups started. He agreed to let me come and talk to him at his home in Salt Lake City.

I took him the materials—the Steps and a copy of *He Did Deliver Me*. He looked at them briefly and then set them aside, stating that the Church’s recovery program was going to stand on its own and had no need to resemble A.A.’s program. Again, I went home dejected. How could it be that no one “in the Church” saw the powerful harmony and correlation between the principles in the Steps and the principles of the Gospel?

I burned with the testimony that the Twelve Steps were an inspired curriculum for awakening people to their “nothingness without God” as Ammon had been (Alma 26:12) and as Bill Wilson had been (Alcoholics Anonymous, p. 13). And then the Steps brought people from those depths of humility into a “right relationship” with God—a spiritual awakening that was nothing short of the “mighty change of heart” that only God can bring about in the human soul (Mosiah 5:2; Alma 5:7).

### **Heart t’ Heart**

Once again, I returned to my little informal support group, there in Orem. What could we do? Someone suggested that we follow through with our efforts to emulate S.A.V.E.’s example. We would start “our own” LDS Twelve Step fellowship open to people dealing with any kind of addiction or other insurmountable problem.

What would we call this new fellowship? In jest, one of our little band suggested “Mortals Anonymous”—since this whole recovery effort was all about overcoming the effects of the Fall by connecting with the Savior and His Atoning power. We laughed, but thought it might sound like “Mormons Anonymous,” and none of had any desire to be “cured” of our devotion to the Church. Then came the thought: I had started a little newsletter for our group and had called it “Heart t’ Heart.”

Heart t’ Heart. That would do! That would be our designation. The name conveyed that this is a

place we can go to be honest with ourselves and with others, and open and willing to be changed from the heart out.

On June 19, 1991, I filed the basic paperwork with the State of Utah that incorporated Heart t' Heart as a non-profit organization. We began to meet officially as Heart t' Heart, (HtH). We decided to be true to the Twelve Traditions as closely as we could, making only those modifications that were prayerfully considered. We formed a General Service Board to serve the tiny, but faithful fellowship. Others were hearing about our efforts and enquiring about our program. There were more and more members of the Church willing to acknowledge addictive behaviors other than drugs and alcohol abuse. Groups began to form in other parts of Utah and even in other states.

Through the financial assistance of a participant in the SLC Wednesday meeting of HtH, I was able to get *He Did Deliver Me from Bondage* printed in quantity for the first time. The appendix was included to contain the necessary meeting guides and information about Heart t' Heart. After all, at that time, the book's destiny seemed to be for use only by participants in Heart t' Heart.

### **LDS Family Services**

Then a most miraculous turn of events occurred. In the last months of 1995, I was contacted by representatives from what was then LDS Social Services. They wanted to discuss the use of *He Did Deliver Me from Bondage* in their Substance Abuse Recovery (now Addiction Recovery Program) groups. It seemed that someone had introduced the study guide to participants in their groups and the interest and benefit had been immediate and powerful. This correlation of the Book of Mormon with the Twelve Steps could provide the structure their recovery movement seemed to need. I was delighted and humbled by their request.

Over the next six years the LDS Social Services became LDS Family Services and LDS-FS Addiction Recovery Program (ARP) groups began to experience amazing growth. The Twelve Steps proved themselves to be the true principles they had been from the very beginning when the Oxford group first gleaned them out of a careful study of the New Testament. Their common heritage with the Restoration, based so firmly in the testimony of James 5:1, had been proven true in every instance along their history until their adoption by Family Services recovery groups. And the miracle continues.

Lives are being changed. Hearts are being changed. Dispositions are being changed. Literally thousands of participants are experiencing that mighty change the people of King Benjamin experienced—they are losing the very desire to do the self-destructive things they once were enslaved by (Mosiah 5:2). They are being restored to the greatest sanity there is—a personal witness of the reality of Heavenly Father and His Son Jesus Christ and to the continual companionship of the Holy Ghost.

In eternal gratitude, I remain ever your fellow-servant in this work.

--- Colleen H.