

# The Christian Recovery Movement Today—Growing or Going?

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## Consider the Origins

In two of our recent books, *Dr. Bob of Alcoholics Anonymous* and *The Conversion of Bill W.*, we covered the seemingly-forgotten-yet-very-important origins of Alcoholics Anonymous in five groups of people and organizations, primarily of the mid-to-late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Though critics of A.A., within and without, have often sidetracked discussions of origins by pointing to the Washingtonians and the Oxford Group, they have almost-uniformly failed to research, report, and discuss the real Christian roots of the recovery movement. And, of late, some of those critics tend to bypass A.A.'s documented Christian roots and misapply Scriptural principles and segments by claiming no Christian should be involved in today's recovery movements.

Briefly, those Christian roots consisted of the following large Christian movements of the mid-to-late 19<sup>th</sup> century:

1. Evangelists like Dwight L. Moody, Ira Sankey, F. B. Myer, and Billy Sunday. These brought tens of thousands of drunks and derelicts to Jesus Christ long before the Oxford Group or Alcoholics Anonymous were even thought of.
2. The Gospel and Rescue Missions, spurred by the highly-successful efforts of Jerry McAuley, H. H. Hadley, and the Water Street Mission. The testimonials still available show the huge number of alcoholics and derelicts who went to and were helped by many such missions.
3. The work of the Young Men's Christian Association ("YMCA") lay leaders during the 1870's—especially those of Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Vermont—who cooperated with churches of various denominations and held huge conversion meetings that changed thousands of lives. And the greatest record of the beginnings is found in the "Great Awakening of 1875" in St. Johnsbury, Vermont, where A.A.'s Dr. Bob was born.
4. The Salvation Army's unique, early outreach in the slums of London and elsewhere, touching the lives of drunks and criminals; bringing them to Jesus Christ; and, upon their transformation, persuading them to help others by joining "God's Army."
5. The Young People's Society of Christian Endeavor. At its peak, it had a worldwide membership of 4.5 million. It was founded in Maine in 1881, and it reached the Town of St. Johnsbury about 1887—with Dr. Bob and his parents involved in it at North Congregational Church, St. Johnsbury. It laid out a pattern of conversion meetings, Bible studies, prayer meetings, Quiet Hours, topical discussions, and reading of literature that found place in the original Akron A.A. "Christian fellowship" founded in 1935 by A.A.'s cofounders, Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob Smith.

## **Consider the Changes between 1939 and about 1985**

Bill Wilson fashioned a new A.A.—far different from the highly-successful, original Akron A.A. “Christian fellowship” program begun in 1935—at the time Big Book was published in 1939. This new A.A. was accompanied by an increasing growth of welcome to atheists and agnostics, people of non-Christian beliefs, and people of no belief at all.

The new era saw the emergence of “higher powers.” These substitutes for the power, love, and healing of Almighty God, the Creator, took on strange names and idolatrous forms. They were called “the Group,” chairs, light bulbs, door knobs, trees, Santa Claus, Ralph, Gertrude, Somebody, Something, “It,” “not-god-ness,” and just about any concept a fellowship member wanted to choose.

The higher power era was marked by a growing attempt to delete references to Christianity, religion, and church by calling A.A. “spiritual, but not religious.” And this baffling “spirituality” has given rise to equally-strange names and idolatrous practices including devil worship and spiritualist practices. Not that these have received acceptance by court decisions or most Christians in A.A. But they have frequently moved fellowship meetings, speeches, and members far far away from the original “Christian fellowship” of A.A. founded in Akron in 1935.

## **Consider the Interesting Christian “Awakening” That Began Thereafter**

During the Big Book period just discussed, treatment centers, insurance companies, therapists, counselors, academics, historians, and writers began to treat A.A. as secular and to attempt to bar any talk of religion or God or church from “treatment.”

But whatever the merit of such attempted “cleansing,” there followed a Christian regurgitation. Perhaps it began with such organizations as Teen Challenge, Alcoholics Victorious, Alcoholics for Christ, Overcomers, Overcomers Outreach, Inc., and others. And, except for a few, these tended to try blending A.A., its Steps, and its “spirituality” with biblical verses and Christian precepts.

This changing picture was seized by Christian publishers who pumped out and sold tens of thousands of what I will call “Christian Recovery Bibles.” Well-known Christian publishing houses like Zondervan, Thomas Nelson, Baker Book House, and others filled the pages of Bibles with notes, annotations, Big Book and Step references, and won a large audience of Christians.

There were other, less-widespread Christian publishing efforts in the form of Christian Twelve Step Guides which tended to link each A.A. Step with one or more Bible verses thought to be relevant to the Step or an understanding of its Christian roots or application.

In one form or another, these Christian recovery efforts survive today.

## **Consider the Heavy Impact of Celebrate Recovery and “Christian Treatment Programs”**

Not satisfied with the “higher power” idolatry in Twelve Step fellowships, there followed a huge growth of church-sponsored and church-related imitative 12 Step recovery programs. And at the top of the list was and still is Celebrate Recovery—emanating from Saddleback Church.

With secular treatment programs and ideas changing and/or failing, many treatment program efforts were turned toward Christian Treatment Programs, Christian-Track Treatment Programs, and Christian residential treatment programs—along with others.

Also, counselors and therapists began to emphasize “Christian” alcohol, drug, and substance abuse counseling. And this too is still in the works.

### **Consider the Gap and the Emerging Change for the Worse**

More and more Christians in A.A. and Twelve Step Fellowships were taking flight. Some went to the organizations and programs above. Many seemed to relapse. Many became part of the growing anti-A.A. community. And a few sought refuge in the anti-Christian A.A. community peopled by “Psychoheresy” and similar individuals and groups who regularly lambasted Christians who went to A.A. and issued dire Scriptural warnings about their going to “destruction”—perhaps a synonym for just plain hell

### **Good News!**

#### **The Pendulum is Swinging Toward Effective, Comprehensive Christian Recovery Today**

We invite readers to look at the International Christian Recovery Coalition Web site, projects, literature, and “Christian Recovery Resource Centers.”

They stemmed from a large gathering of Christian leaders and workers in the recovery arena, as well as other concerned professionals, treatment people, and Twelve Step Fellowship members. The gathering was held in the Mariners Church Community Center in Irvine in May 2009. And its focus was on the hard times Christians in recovery and others were having because of A.A. opposition to Christianity, Christian opposition to A.A., and lack of what I call “A.A.-friendly, Bible-friendly, Christian-friendly, history-friendly” recovery efforts.

Without usurping the next article on “growing” Christian recovery efforts, suffice it to say that there is a worldwide effort today to bring before those who want God’s help the much-needed resources and programs and opportunities that the Christian community provides. And that it is not supplying as a united effort with common goals today. We have begun a major effort to fill many of the “gaps” in Christian recovery efforts by encouraging Christian individuals, groups, and organizations to become “Christian Recovery Resource Centers”—a project of the International Christian Recovery Coalition.

The need is great. It is spelled out on the Coalition's Web pages. And it includes all facets of successful and abundant Christian life after recovery. And it is based on the idea that Christian alcoholics, addicts, and affected others can be healed and transformed by the power and love of God, and given a new life in Christ.

It involves primarily efforts by Christians: initial interviews, assessments, and providing of basic information; possible intervention; possible counseling and therapy; possible referrals; genuine, comprehensive, Christian treatment that involves something more than a Bible study and a chaplain, Christian recovery after-care and alumni groups, Christian residential and outpatient treatment options; Christian sober living; Christian recovery fellowships, study groups, Bible studies, “James Clubs,” Big Book studies, Step studies, and retreats.

It involves reaching into prisons, jails, hospitals, rehabs, half-way houses, homeless situations and communities. It involves addressing veterans' needs, military needs, family needs, health needs, economic needs, and other elements of successful Christian living.

And then entry into the community in fellowship with like-minded believers who can provide honest and wholesome access to vocational education, school education, higher learning, opportunities in trades, technicians, industrial, service, sales, teaching, military, government, and social atmospheres. Accompanied by awareness of and chances to acquire medical, nutritional, mental, fitness, recreational, sports, psychological, and religious training.

### **Consider That It Is Happening Now—And Growing, Not Going**

In the next article, we will name the many efforts of the International Christian Recovery Coalition, and of other Christian leaders and workers in the recovery arena, among those we know and among those we would like to get to know and have our readers search out and learn.

*Gloria Deo*