THE “SPIRITUAL” TRUTH BEHIND ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS—AND WHY CHRISTIANS SHOULD THINK TWICE ABOUT JOINING A.A.

by John Lanagan
February 4th, 2014

The “Spiritual” Truth Behind Alcoholics Anonymous written by John Lanagan is our newest Lighthouse Trails Print Booklet Tract. The Booklet Tract is 18 pages long and sells for $1.95 for single copies. Quantity discounts are as much as 50% off retail. Below is the content of the booklet

Can two walk together, except they be agreed? (Amos 3:3)
I am the Lord: that is my name: and my glory will I not give to another. (Isaiah 42:8)

Christians in Alcoholics Anonymous may not see it this way, but in their participation of A.A., they are standing in agreement with a belief system that lifts up strange gods. In Alcoholics Anonymous, all gods are considered equal and are called “the higher power,” thus relegating Christ our King to commonality as if He were simply one nameless deity among many. Yet Scripture tells us:

Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved. (Acts 4:12)

In 1941, Jack Alexander of the Saturday Evening Post wrote the article that provided A.A. its first national publicity. Describing A.A.’s “higher power,” Alexander noted the following:

[The alcoholic] “may choose to think of his Inner Self, the miracle of growth, a tree, man’s wonderment at the physical universe, the structure of the atom, or mere mathematical infinity. Whatever form is visualized, the neophyte is taught that he must rely on it and, in his own way, to pray to the Power for strength.”1

Please note that Alexander’s article, with this A.A. definition of “god,” is distributed as official Alcoholics Anonymous literature.

“God” Without the Doctrine

Nearly eighty years later this salad-bar approach—design your own god—has seemingly become a cultural norm. “Spiritual” is in. “Religion” is out. Many Americans now refer to their god as a “higher power.” A.A.’s twelve-step program (along with cultural acceptance of anti-biblical meditative practices) has literally changed the spiritual direction of the country.

In The Fall of the Evangelical Nation, author Christine Wicker credits Alcoholics Anonymous with “hastening the fall of the evangelical church.”2 Wicker notes how A.A. “slowly exposed people to the notion they could get [a god] without the dogma, the doctrine, and the outdated rules. Without the church, in fact.”3

Since the twelve steps have nothing to do with Christ, neither sin nor biblical repentance is addressed. This, of course, is very appealing to the flesh. The Steps address “wrongs,” “making amends,” and “moral inventory,” but one inserts one’s own moral code within the context of these Steps. Because of these Steps, millions believe they are right with “god” and man.

Everything, it seems, has been turned upside down: Alcoholics Anonymous can supposedly help everyone, but experiencing Christ without the twelve steps can supposedly help no one. (Sobriety without A.A. will be addressed at the end of this booklet.)

When all is said and done, A.A. attendance serves to subtly condition Christians to worship with non-believers; perhaps this has been the point all along.
Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? and what concord hath Christ with Belial? ... Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you. (2 Corinthians 6:14-17)

Obviously, we are not separating. Christians participate in A.A.’s Christ-less corporate prayers every day.

A Spiritual Program

For decades, A.A. has been referred to as a “spiritual program,” a harmless adjunct to one’s own religious belief system. Because of this misrepresentation, most Christians are sincerely unaware that A.A. is a subtrend of the New Age.

Richard Rohr, a Catholic priest and renowned advocate for New Age type meditation practices says this of A.A.:

The spirituality of Alcoholics Anonymous will go down in history as the significant and authentic contribution to the history of spirituality. It is genuinely a spirituality.

In A.A.’s twelve step program, anything and everything—from spirits to inner divinity—can be worshiped as “god.” One of A.A.’s Big Book teachings is that God can only be found within ourselves. A.A.’s belief system by no means requires dealing with sin—or the Savior.

In order to comprehend the hold A.A. exerts upon people, it must be understood that two key passages in the A.A. Big Book (essentially the A.A. “bible”) are interpreted from a literal, fundamentalist perspective. Here is what is read to alcoholics at the beginning of every single meeting:

Rarely have we seen a person fail who has thoroughly followed our path. Those who do not recover are people who cannot or will not completely give themselves to this simple program, usually men and women who are constitutionally incapable of being honest with themselves. There are such unfornates. They are not at fault; they seem to have been born that way.

The Big Book goes on to note, “We thought we could find an easier, softer way. But we could not.”

Despite the elasticity of the higher power, these two fundamentalist passages lock many into the A.A. system while also teaching contempt or distrust for alternative ways of gaining sobriety. Particularly opposed is the idea of getting help in “church.”

Irving Peter Gellman observes:

A member who suggests that A.A. is not as effective as maintained, and who implies that some improvement might be made, will be censured when broaching these ideas. The A.A. program is deemed infallible, whereas other methods are considered less than perfect.

Christians in the program often adjust their theology. In a pastor’s office, an A.A. Christian told me straight faced that alcoholics were too angry and didn’t want to hear about Christ, so the “higher power” concept was necessary. This is simply one more repetition of what I have heard at many, many A.A. meetings.

A.A. has given us the confusion of recovery passing for sanctification, and twelve-step theology has some Christians in A.A. believing it is perfectly fine to encourage alcoholics to go ahead and make up a “god.” To help justify attendance in this non-biblical spirituality, the myth has been promulgated that most alcoholics with custom-designed higher powers will eventually come to Christ. This is simply not so. It is relatively rare but is presented as a common occurrence. This claim is one of the primary ways Christians justify A.A.

In Alcoholics Anonymous, most Christians experience a transference of faith. The twelve-step experience often becomes an idol. It is not uncommon to speak with Christians who are more concerned with “recovery” than sanctification and who demonstrate a preference for A.A. rather than the fellowship with the saints.

[And them that worship and that swear by the Lord, and that swear by Malcham. (Zephaniah 1:5)]

On November 15, 1999, the U.S. Supreme Court let stand the Second Circuit Court of Appeals ruling that A.A. is indeed religious in nature. An A.A. meeting is essentially a devotional service. The “higher power” receives praise and worship; confession is heard; testimony is given; the group invokes the Serenity Prayer and the Lord’s Prayer. The 12th Step instructs A.A. members to go forth and Spread the Word.

Whether one calls it religious or spiritual, the bottom line is that millions have been taught to reach outside (or inside) of themselves and draw on a higher power to give them strength.

Lost in all this is the holiness of the God of the Bible—the God who absolutely does not want His people placing Him amongst false idols. Lost—ignored, really—is the Lord’s abhorrence of worship of false gods. Was Jeremiah mistaken? King Josiah? Do biblical passages such as 2 Corinthians 6:14-17 and Galatians 1:8-9 fail to address Alcoholics Anonymous?

A.A.’s “All-Inclusive” God

Alcoholics Anonymous is spiritual in origin; it was created to point unbelievers away from Christ and to dilute the theology of the Christians who do attend the meetings.

A simple perusal of the A.A. Big Book demonstrates how A.A. teaching opposes Christ. The A.A. Big Book states:

We found that God does not make too hard terms with those who seek Him. To us, the Realm of the Spirit is broad, roomy, all inclusive; never exclusive or forbidding to those who earnestly seek. It is open, we believe, to all men. When, therefore, we speak to you of God, we mean your own conception of God.” (emphasis added)

And yet, the Lord specifically warns against the broad way:

Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat. (Matthew 7:13)

If the Lord warns against the broad way of spirituality, why do we think we know better? Why would we even want to participate in such a thing or give it credibility by approving of it?
Hurting alcoholics who do not know the Lord also learn, through meetings and the A.A. Big Book, that they do not need Christ in order to have a relationship with God. According to the Big Book:

“All of us, whatever our race, creed, or color are children of a living Creator with whom we may form a relationship upon simple and understandable terms as soon as we are willing and honest enough to try.”

Speaking from personal experience, this is how it is presented to alcoholics in the meetings—that one can simply reach out to “god,” and there he/she/it will be. Thus have many been pointed away from the biblical God because of A.A. Without Christ, we can never have a relationship or spend eternity with God the Father.

**Some Disturbing History of A.A.**

How did this happen? How did Christians get so involved with Alcoholics Anonymous and other twelve-step programs? Unfortunately, writers such as pro-A.A. author Dick B. have been churning out books and articles about the alleged Christian roots of A.A. and the twelve steps for years. This has influenced many.

According to the Alcoholics Anonymous website, “the origins of Alcoholics Anonymous can be traced to the Oxford Group,” an ecumenical movement of the 1930s. Oxford’s founder, Frank Buchman, said “he never touched any doctrine in any of his meetings, as he did not want to upset or offend anyone.”

The great preacher Dr. H.A. Ironside warned that the Oxford Group:

> . . . appeals to people who reject the inspiration of [the Bible] as well to those who profess to believe it; it appeals to people who deny the Deity of Christ as well as to those who acknowledge it; to those who deny the eternal punishment of sin as well as to those who believe in it. Here in our city it is openly endorsed by the Swedenborgians and by leaders of the Unitarians, as well as by a number who belong to orthodox churches. But it is silent about the blood of Christ.

Dr. Ironside also warned about the Oxford Group’s unholy meditation (emptying the mind) which often culminated in the practice of automatic writing:

> Each one is urged in the morning to sit down quietly with the mind emptied of every thought, generally with a pencil in hand, waiting for God to say something to them. They wait and wait and wait. Sometimes they tell me nothing happens, at other times the most amazing things come. Tested by the Word of God many of these things are unscriptural. They lay themselves open for demons to communicate their blasphemous thoughts to them. (emphasis added)

This appears to have been the method A.A. co-founder (and former Oxford Group member) Bill Wilson used to receive the twelve steps. T.A. McMahon, chief editor at The Berean Call ministry, writes, “A.A.’s official biography indicates Bill Wilson received the details of the 12 Steps through spirit dictation.”

While some insist A.A. has a Christian or biblical origin, Alcoholics Anonymous is like a pie. One can claim it is made with lemon meringue ingredients, but if tar, rat poison, and glass shards are also in the mix, is it ever really a lemon meringue pie? “[A] little leaven leaveneth the whole lump” (1 Corinthians 5:6).

**The Spiritual Proclivities of A.A.’s Founders**

Factors affecting A.A.’s formation must include: A.A. co-founders Bill Wilson’s and Dr. Bob Smith’s biblically forbidden spiritualism, Dr. Bob’s freemasonry, the meditative silence/spirit communication learned from the Oxford Group, and the anti-biblical teachings of William James and New Thought heretic Emmet Fox.

The A.A. co-founders attended the Oxford Group separately before they met and together during 1935, which is the official starting date of Alcoholics Anonymous. During this time, Smith and Wilson were delving deeply into biblically forbidden spiritualism, which Wilson continued to practice for decades.

Early A.A. member Tom Powers saw the A.A. co-founders firsthand as they engaged in spiritualistic practices the Lord detests. “Now, these people, Bill and Bob, believed vigorously and aggressively. They were working away at the spiritualism; it was not just a hobby.”

There are a number of Bill Wilson’s spiritualistic experiences documented in his official A.A. biography. Wilson wrote:

> The ouija board got moving in earnest. What followed was the fairly usual experience—it was a strange mélange of Aristotle, St. Francis, diverse archangels with odd names, deceased friends—some in purgatory and others doing nicely, thank you! There were malign and mischievous ones of all descriptions, telling of vices quite beyond my ken, even as former alcoholics. Then, the seemingly virtuous entities would elbow them out with messages of comfort, information, advice—and sometimes just sheer nonsense.

> There shall not be found among you any one that maketh his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, or that useth divination, or an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch, or a charmer, or a consulter with familiar spirits, or a wizard, or a necromancer. For all that do these things are an abomination unto the Lord (Deuteronomy 18:10-12).

**A.A. and New Thought Emmet Fox**

The co-founders of Alcoholics Anonymous were also admirers of Emmet Fox and his heretical New Thought/New Age book, The Sermon on the Mount. This book was used in early A.A. before A.A.’s own Big Book was published. As pro-AA author Dick B. acknowledges, “[Fox’s] writings were favored by [A.A. co-founders] Bill W. and Dr. Bob.”

Why is this significant that A.A. founders resonated with Emmet Fox? In The Sermon on the Mount, Fox teaches:

> The “Plan of Salvation” which figured so prominently in the evangelical sermons and divinity books of a past generation is as completely unknown to the Bible as the Koran. There never was any such an arrangement in the universe, and the Bible does not teach it at all.

Fox’s book bristles with teachings that sincere Christians would not be able to embrace at all.

According to Fox’s *The Sermon on the Mount*:

> [In] the Bible the term “Christ” is not identical with Jesus, the individual. It is a technical term which may be briefly defined as the Absolute Spiritual
Scriptures, and we are bearing the consequences.

We should no more participate in A.A. because of alcohol addiction than we should attend the Mormon church to get help with family issues.

6:14-17

One God Among Many “Higher Powers”?

And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light. (1 Corinthians 2:20)

Christians, wrapped in shining deception, communicating instructions and “wisdom” to some. Historically, around the world, much has been experienced in the meditative silence: bliss, spirit-guides, a higher self, oneness. And there have been false christs, wrapped in shining deception, communicating instructions and “wisdom” to some.

The revered Bill Wilson encouraged people to meditate. He stated, “Meditation is our step out into the sun.”

Then, when they reach Step 11, they seek through prayer and meditation even deeper communion with whatever idol–or entity–they have invited into their lives. As instructed, they ask for knowledge—what does the deity want them to do? They ask for power—and some enter the silence. They choose a spirit, perhaps, or a self-designed deity, or decide to worship the universe, or St. Jerome, or virtually anything else. But they are told they must turn to a higher power. It doesn’t matter what you believe in, they are told, but it is crucial you believe in something.

This undefined “God” is meant, of course, to help. Tormented people, in the grasp of some overwhelming bondage, enter a twelve-step group and are told they must turn to a higher power. It doesn’t matter what you believe in, they are told, but it is crucial you believe in something.

This is an overall belief in twelve-step theology—there are absolutely no boundaries when it comes to defining the “higher power.”

As previously noted, A.A.’s twelve-step program (along with anti-biblical meditative practices) has literally changed the spiritual direction of the country. As you can see, Alcoholics Anonymous has anything but a fundamental biblical or Christian origin. Spiritualism, New Thought, and contemplative prayer (meditation) are three factors that must be acknowledged.

Spiritually Deceptive Meditation Practices

As previously noted, A.A.’s twelve-step program (along with anti-biblical meditative practices) has literally changed the spiritual direction of the country.

What is meant by the term anti-biblical meditative practices? This refers to Eastern and New Age meditation but also to contemplative prayer, which is New Age meditation disguised with “Christianese” terminology.

In true biblical meditation, the mind remains active. We ponder, we consider, and think about the Scripture we have read. This can be a wonderful and profound time with the holy God.

This is not so with Eastern/New Age/contemplative. Here the object is to stop active thought, often by repeating a word or phrase over and over. When thought is stilled, the person enters what is known as the silence, and it is here that incredible spiritual deception can occur. This can affect and even determine one’s theology, a frightening thing considering all the “Christian contemplative” activity in churches these days.

These practices are rampant throughout our culture. The potential—and actuality—toward such spiritually deceptive meditation exists within A.A.’s Step 11:

Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.

“Meditation is something that can always be further developed. It has no boundaries, either of width or height,” wrote A.A. co-founder Bill Wilson.

Wilson believed:

The actual experience of meditation and prayer across the centuries is, of course, immense. The world’s libraries and places of worship are a treasure trove for all seekers. In other words, Wilson was open to meditative knowledge wherever it could be found—whether in Hinduism, Buddhism, distant libraries, the local Catholic church, or anywhere else.

This is an overall belief in twelve-step theology—there are absolutely no boundaries when it comes to defining the “higher power.”

This undefined “God” is meant, of course, to help. Tormented people, in the grasp of some overwhelming bondage, enter a twelve-step group and are told they must turn to a higher power. It doesn’t matter what you believe in, they are told, but it is crucial you believe in something.

So they do. They choose a spirit, perhaps, or a self-designed deity, or decide to worship the universe, or St. Jerome, or virtually anything else. But they surely reach out to something. Then, when they reach Step 11, they seek through prayer and meditation even deeper communion with whatever idol–or entity–they have invited into their lives. As instructed, they ask for knowledge—what does the deity want them to do? They ask for power—and some enter the silence.

The revered Bill Wilson encouraged people to meditate. He stated, “Meditation is our step out into the sun.”

Historically, around the world, much has been experienced in the meditative silence: bliss, spirit-guides, a higher self, oneness. And there have been false christs, wrapped in shining deception, communicating instructions and “wisdom” to some.

And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light. (2 Corinthians 11:14)

One God Among Many “Higher Powers”?

When it comes to A.A.’s “Christian” roots, God’s people have been—to use a technical term—snookered.

Scripture is clear. We were never meant to be part of an all-gods religion. It is not “legalism” to point out that the Lord will absolutely not be seen as one higher power among many. It is not “legalistic” to state that His people are absolutely to remain separate from non-Christian spirituality. (2 Corinthians 6:14-17, Galatians 1:8-9, Isaiah 42:8, 1 John 4:1-3, 2 John 9-11, Matthew 10:32-36, 1 John 2:23, John 14:6)

We should no more participate in A.A. because of alcohol addiction than we should attend the Mormon church to get help with family issues.

Bluntly stated, many Christians have ended up with more faith in the power of the twelve-step program than in Jesus Christ. We have disobeyed the Scriptures, and we are bearing the consequences.
If ye love me, keep my commandments. (John 14:15)

What, then, is a Christian to do? Bondage to alcohol is no light thing. It is important to understand that drunkards were set free in the early days of the church (1 Corinthians 6:9-11). The power of Christ is just as available to us today.

A.A. co-founder Bill Wilson came to understand that many alcoholics—those who truly wanted to quit drinking—could not be helped by Alcoholics Anonymous. Wilson spent many years looking for effective alternatives, but alcoholics in A.A. meetings are never informed about this.

An article in Journal of Alcohol and Drug Education notes the following:

Cochrane Database conducted a systematic review of randomized controlled trials evaluating the effectiveness of AA and other Twelve-Step programs (labeled Twelve Step Facilitation or TSF). Eight studies were included in the review, and, of these, three evaluated AA programs. The conclusions of this review were that “no experimental studies unequivocally demonstrated the effectiveness of AA or TSF approaches for reducing alcohol dependence or problem.” (Ferri, Amato, & Davoli, 2006)” (emphasis added)

People have the right to know A.A.’s success rate is limited. The body of Christ has the right to know that sending people into A.A. violates Scripture, points unbelievers away from Christ, and waters down essential theology of the Christian faith.

There are powerful Christian options such as Teen Challenge and the online ministry, Setting Captives Free. There is another totally biblical approach called The Most Excellent Way founded by a husband and wife who were alcoholics. They left A.A. and sought the Lord over how to help others.

Churches that allow the Holy Spirit to work in people’s lives will see people freed from addiction (bondage to sin). My church has fellowship once a week for those who are struggling. We already have the weapons to fight: the indwelling of the Holy Spirit when we are born again into Jesus Christ, prayer, and His Word. In fact, the Bible tells us we have armor that we can wear when battling against the flesh, sin, and the works of darkness.

Therefore . . . let us watch and be sober. For they that sleep sleep in the night; and they that be drunken are drunken in the night. But let us, who are of the day, be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love; and for an helmet, the hope of salvation. (1 Thessalonians 5:6-8, emphasis added)

Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil . . . Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. (Ephesians 6:11, 16)

We look to the Bible to understand the sheer power of God: His holiness, His love, and His grace and mercy.

We do not downplay His hatred of sin. We rejoice in His faithfulness.

Nor do we overlook simple common sense—but we start first with His Word and go from there.

The Word of God will pierce even the hardest heart. It is time to stop relying on Alcoholics Anonymous and obscure “higher powers,” and on mystical meditative practices, and start depending—truly depending—on the supremacy of Jesus Christ.

. . . That he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man; That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith. (Ephesians 3:16-17)

Editor’s Note:

The editors of Lighthouse Trails and John Lanagan are in no way minimizing the importance of those with addictive behaviors in getting help. But what we advocate and encourage is Christ-centered help (based on the Word of God). Two places that offer this (and there are others) are:


Endnotes:


3. Ibid.


6. Ibid., p. 58.

7. Ibid., p. 58.


10. Ibid., p. 28.


14. Ibid.

15. T.A. McMahon, “Where’s Your Head . . . and Your Heart?” (The Berean Call newsletter, March 1, 2002), http://www.thebereancall.org/content/wheres-your-headand-your-heart.


17. Ibid., p. 278.


20. Ibid., p. 124.

21. Ibid., p. 3.
The Sober Truth: Debunking the Bad Science Behind 12-Step Programs and the Rehab Industry by Lance Dodes & Zachary Dodes (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014). Review by John M. and what kind of alcoholics and drug addicts should not be recommended for participation in AA (NA) or 12-Step treatment. In the Big Book, disease is mentioned only once in a metaphorical way as a “spiritual disease,” and the 12 step essays in the Twelve & Twelve not once refer to alcoholism as a disease. (None of this, by the way, is pointed out by the authors.) AA has a rich, odd, and even controversial past and present that most know nothing about. My name is Chris, and I’m an alcoholic. Twice a year, many AA members take weekend-long retreats with anywhere from a handful to a few dozen fellow recovering alcoholics. The getaways are typically led by a spiritual leader—a pastor, a rabbi, even a Zen Buddhist master—who is also in recovery. The retreats offer themed lectures, breakout sessions, and a heavy dose of fellowship with others willing to sacrifice a weekend to enhance their recovery. The movement’s namesake was a 19th-century Dublin resident.[3] After years of low-bottom alcoholism, he recovered by taking “the pledge” to a priest—a common practice for those swearing off Alcoholic Anonymous 12 Steps Ever Increasing Popularity. Ever since the first group of alcoholics involved in the program opened their arms and their doors in the 1930’s to begin spreading the care and compassion that this group is so well-known for sharing with other alcoholics, its level of popularity has continued to increase world-wide. Recovering alcoholics follow the AA 12 step program and engage in regular Alcoholics Anonymous meetings through sharing experiences, knowledge, and care for others. Through the Alcoholic Anonymous 12 steps meetings, new members of the group are often able to identify similarities in messages that other alcoholics share within the group, resulting in the realization and admission that they themselves have a problem with alcohol.