



Twelve Steps to Power

by Sam Shoemaker

Sam Shoemaker, in one of his most helpful articles, first published nearly twenty years ago, shows how "the program" so effective for alcoholics can work for all of us.

One of the most remarkable phenomena of our time is the growth of the movement called Alcoholics Anonymous. My interest in it is personal as well as objective, for the men who set it in motion first found the spiritual experience which changed their lives in my own church, though the first actual group of Alcoholics Anonymous was formed in Akron, Ohio.

You must go yourself to an "open" meeting, and listen to what recovered men and women say of what they used to be, what happened to them when they came into touch with AA, and what life is like now that they look to the Higher Power, which AA calls God so as to include all in their program. Somewhere about 120,000 men and women* are now in their ranks, sober, industrious, God-fearing, happy, useful citizens.

The AA program has twelve clearly defined steps. These have been built up out of experience. They work. Shrewd observation and insight have gone into their making. They contain eternal truths -- truths that are valuable and necessary for the rest of us, whether or not we are actual or potential alcoholics. Let me list each step, then comment on what seems its universal significance.

(1) *"We admitted we were powerless over alcohol -- that our lives had become unmanageable."*

As you read those words, you may be thinking, "I never touch alcohol," or "I can handle it all right." But does it take a great step of imagination to see that first step as applying to a very much wider range of problems than alcohol? What about the people with an ungoverned temper, who make a hell out of their home, or their office, because they have never learned to manage their own dispositions? What about the men and women whose passions drive them to wrong expressions of human love, and who are as much slaves to sex as anyone was ever a slave to drink?

What about those in whose lives fear reigns like a tyrant -- fear of people, fear of the future, fear of want, fear of death, fear of failure, fear *so* deep-seated and widespread within them that it seems to pervade everything? Are not their lives also "powerless" and "unmanageable," just as much so as if they got drunk? Are they not drunk on fear?

Or think of the people in whose lives hate and resentment are found. I heard the other day of a family where a mother and son have ganged up on a daughter and her husband, and no offers of reconciliation on their part meet with anything but rebuff. Are not their lives quite as unmanageable, really, as any drunkard's? Do they not drink in great, self-destroying draughts of hate and bitterness quite as real, quite as devastating to one's self and others, as alcohol ever was? Make the transfer!

I remember the first time I ever went into a rescue mission. God forgive me, my first thought was to be glad I was not like those men. But it was not long till I came to know that Christ was much harder on the sins of righteous and respectable people than He was on harlots and prodigals. Your life and mine can be quite as unmanageable as an alcoholic's may be through liquor.

(2) *"We came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity."*

AA often calls God or Christ a "Power greater than ourselves" because many people have formed unhappy associations with organized religions, and they do not want to stir up needless antagonisms.

They want to draw needy men and women within the range of cure and recovery. Perhaps we all ought to be drawn to God by the fact that He is God, by the beauty of His perfection and the power of His love. But the simple fact is, most of us do not seek God till we need Him.

We find out through bitter experience that life does not come out when you ignore Him. You find you get into difficulties you cannot solve by yourself. So you begin seeking for God.

How do we come to believe that a Power greater than ourselves can restore us to sanity? By looking at some people who have had the experience. Faith is better caught by contagion than taught by instruction. It is an amazing thing to come into a company of Alcoholics Anonymous and hear testimony to the difference that has been wrought in their lives. It should be an amazing thing to come into a company of Christians in church, and at times it is. Beside its worship services, every church should also have informal gatherings where people seeking faith can hear personal witness from believers, and where they can ask questions and have them answered.

(3) *"We made a decision to turn our wills and our lives over to the care of God, as we understood Him."*

Do you know what most people do who think they believe in God? They stand right where they are and ask God to bless what they are doing. They do not turn their wills and lives over to God, tell Him they are willing to change and be different and ask Him what He wants them to do. That is why many professing Christians are not converted and why they have no power. It is also why AA is such a challenge to the rest of us.

The great philosopher and psychologist William James said, "The crisis, of self-surrender has always been and must always be regarded the vital turning-point of the religious life." Self-surrender is man's part in his own conversion. We cannot and do not convert ourselves; we offer ourselves to God in surrender, and He does the converting by His Holy Spirit, bringing us forgiveness and new life.

How many persons have I seen make that decision, take that step, and as a result find God and His power in their lives! Have you ever done that? Will you do it now?

(4) *"We made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves."* How does one do that?

If we compare ourselves with other people, we shall probably come off advantageously. But if we take the Ten Commandments, or Jesus' commandments in the Sermon on the Mount, we shall see the vast difference between what they enjoin and what we are and do. Let us look fearlessly at that very difference; for that difference is the measure of the sin in us which needs to be repented of by us and forgiven by God.

Many of us stand aghast at the mounting corruption in this land, the dishonesty, graft, chiseling, using high place for personal advantage, the increase in narcotics and crime among young people. I wonder in how many instances these people have ever heard the claims of Christ placed squarely and tellingly before them? How many of them have ever heard anyone witness about what Christ has done for him? How many have ever faced themselves morally, and found out exactly what their needs are?

The place to begin spiritually is not with our virtues. That makes us prigs and Pharisees. It is with our sins and needs, for that gives us an honest basis on which to proceed.

(5) *"We admitted to God, to ourselves, and to one other human being the exact nature of our wrongs."*

We can easily understand confessing to God, but why include another human being? Why include *him*? I think it is because the deepest need of our hearts is our pride, especially the pride of thinking we can manage our own lives without human help. When you go a priest, a counselor, or just

an understanding Christian friend, and open up to him the exact nature of your wrongdoings, you then know you are sincere in wanting to overcome them.

Some kind of confession is good and necessary for us all. If we took such action in time, many of us would avoid the necessity to seek psychiatric help later on. It is a cleansing, releasing experience to talk out one's whole situation with another human being, omitting nothing of the facts. Something left untold can stay in the mind to break out later in defeat. Let us be fearlessly honest in our inventory and in our admissions to another human being.

(6) *"We were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character."*

Most of us justify our wrongdoings and excuse them. Even when we admit them, we do not quite want to give them up. Would that we could come to the point of desperation which alcoholics reach, where they are ready to do anything to get victory!

Sin hides behind immaturity. We keep up a fence of protection, then when we are found out we whimper like babies. But when we take down the fence of protection, and let another know us well, we are through with shams and self-deception and the attempt to deceive others, and even God.

It will take some prayer to get to this place, where we want God to take the sin out of us, all of it, and for good. We will wrestle with ourselves a good deal, before it happens. It will not happen in a day, but the decision that we want it to happen can take place in five minutes.

(7) *"We humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings."*

There is, I dare say, no moment of comparable importance in the soul's history to this, when in humility and honesty we tell God in prayer that we want Him to take us over, remove our sins, and change our lives. Lots of life-long Christians have avoided the challenge of doing this because they wanted to play safe. There is prayer that means little; we say the words, but do not back them up by our real intentions. Then there is prayer in which we hurl our lives after our prayers, and mean what we say.

When you have isolated that pride, that fear, that contemptuousness, that resentment, that lust, called it by name, and asked God to remove it from your life, meaning what you say with all the resolve you can command, then you mean business and you are on the way.

(8) *"We made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all."*

Jesus once said, "If a man love not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?" We certainly never can get into right relations with God while we are in the wrong relations with somebody else.

In a human tangle and conflict, there are usually two sides. Some people see only their side. Some are ready to admit wrong in themselves as well as in their opponent. But the world is full of people waiting for somebody else to come and make an apology to them. They say they will not make up until they do. But what about making apology yourself first? How about telling the other person, not where he is wrong, but where you have been wrong?

When I first tried to face the issues of Christian conversion in my own life, there was someone right in my family against whom I held a deep resentment. When I began to face God honestly, I knew I had to get right with this other person. The whole relationship stood up before me and I could not avoid it. But, I said to God, "He is nine-tenths responsible for the situation." And do you know what I think God said back to me? He said, "What are you going to do about the one-tenth for which you are responsible.

Deeply imbedded in my first total Christian decision was the necessity to make amends to someone who had done some things toward me that were wrong, but to whom I needed to confess my own bitterness and lack of love. Is it so with you?

(9) "We made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others."

One of the first things I had to do after my initial surrender was to write a letter of restitution. There was a kind of warm glow about getting ready to do that; but when I came to the doing of it, it was just plain hard work. Yet it had to be done.

We have no right in squaring ourselves with another to confess the sins of a third party or bring him into it. In rare cases, to confess in all honesty will hurt the person to whom we confess, and we should not do it. But this must not be taken as an excuse for not doing it when we know perfectly well he deserves to know, and we cannot right the relationship until we tell him.

Pray about it. Pray for the right time and the right spirit. Pray for him to receive it in the right spirit, so that it provides an occasion for spiritual advance for you both. Be honest with the family, or with the company about padding the expense account. Apologize to that person with whom you lost your temper. Sometimes people are dead before we see the need to make restitution to them. Put it in God's hands. Ask Him if possible to make known to them our sorrow, and leave the matter there.

(10) "We continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it."

Even the greatest of all Christian conversions is just a beginning; it must be continued and renewed all the time. The grit of sin gets into our machinery and stops it. Sometimes we even get all the way back into the old ways of self-will and various kinds of sin. So the inventory must go on. Sometimes clear victory comes that is relatively permanent. Sometimes we are fighting thirty years afterward the same old sins as we fought in the beginning.

Daily confession to God, periodical confession to others, for our own clearing or to keep the record straight, are needed and will always be needed. Alcoholics always say, "I *am* an alcoholic," not "I *was* an alcoholic." Christians must learn to believe and to say, "I am a sinner" -- not "I *was* a sinner," but "I *am* a sinner."

If we really feel that, we will avoid the pride of grace which makes some people think that because they have been Christians a long time they do not sin. And we will much more easily admit our wrongs to others when they arise.

(11) "We 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."

Religion is relationship with God, and we must give something to it if we would deepen and enrich a relationship. Prayer, Bible study, and participation in Christian worship are the three classical ways of keeping in touch with God. It is astonishing when you think of it, that we finite, sinful human beings can come into contact with Almighty God. But we can through the introduction Jesus Christ has given us to Him.

Time was when prayer was unreal to me, and the Bible dull; but then came the experience of finding Christ with power, and both things began to be real. When I got them into focus, as means by which one could grow in a life that by then I really wanted to live, they came alive.

We must set apart time each day for this, first thing in the morning. Half an hour is not too much. Then renew it every time you can remember by brief prayers to God through the day. And don't forget: God sometimes sends His own direct word to us for our encouragement and guidance.

(12) "Having had a spiritual experience as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs."

So often you hear AAs speak about being out on "twelfth-step work." That means getting what they have found across to others. They take no money for it, but they will go any hour of the day or night to people who honestly want to learn "the program." The reason these men and women keep going is partly that their friends in AA are willing and ready to give them time, encouragement, challenge. Every member of AA is a carrier of AA.

In none of these twelve steps do the rest of us need to learn from them more than in this one. A Christian who is not enthusiastic about Christ, who does not love to speak about Him and relate His power to the needs of others, is hardly a Christian at all.

In AA everybody is a one-man awakening, wherever he can touch another alcoholic. Let us promise God that we will let Him use us in this way. And let us follow these twelve steps faithfully, that through them we may become effective people for Christ in His world.

Other Articles by Sam Shoemaker:

- ["I Stand By the Door"](#)
- ["What the Church has to Learn from Alcoholics Anonymous"](#)
- ["A 'Christian Program'"](#)

The Reverend Samuel M. Shoemaker, founded Faith At Work while serving as Rector of Calvary Church and spiritual leader of the Oxford Group for many years, provided the early inspiration for the spiritual aspects of twelve-step programs.

Alcoholics Anonymous was founded in 1935 by two struggling alcoholics who needed a spiritual program to attain and sustain ongoing recovery. Out of the efforts of Bill W and Dr Bob, the program known as Alcoholics Anonymous was developed based on living a lifestyle of twelve steps. The principles of A.A.'s twelve steps were a direct outgrowth of the Oxford Group, based at Calvary Episcopal Church in New York NY.

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