

Jim Burwell: early AA's first famous atheist

by Glenn F. Chesnut

The chapter on the Third Tradition in the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions

Tradition 3 says that "the only requirement for A.A. membership is a desire to stop drinking."

And the chapter on this tradition in the 12&12 (*Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*) forms a kind of A.A. bill of rights, which guarantees that no one can be banned from A.A. because of a whole host of reasons. You cannot be barred for being poor and penniless, no matter "how low you've gone" (page 139). Persons cannot be refused admission for being "beggars, tramps," and street people (140). That is one of the important reasons why "we must never compel anyone to pay anything" for help (141).

Moreover, you cannot be excluded from an A.A. meeting, no matter "how grave your emotional complications," or "how twisted ... you may be" (139). "Asylum inmates" are allowed to be A.A. members, along with just "plain crackpots" (140). "Even your crimes" cannot bar you from becoming an A.A. member, the 12&12 says, "never mind how ... violent you may be" (139), and prisoners can not only form A.A. prison groups but should be welcomed at regular A.A. meetings after they have served their time (140). This chapter in the 12&12 makes it clear that what their era called "fallen women" are certainly allowed to be A.A. members (140), and also lesbian, gay, and transgender people (rather inelegantly referred to in the language of the 1950's as "queers," see page 140).

When we look at the next chapter in the 12&12 as well, we also are told that there is to be no talking about politics in A.A. groups. We would be in serious trouble if groups started labeling themselves as "Republican or Communist" (147). And above all, "we must never compel anyone to ... believe" any particular religious doctrines or dogmas (141). "There would be real danger should we commence to call some groups ... 'Catholic' or 'Protestant'" or by the name of any other similar religious division (147).

This means that in A.A. meetings *there must be no preaching about specific beliefs of specific religious denominations.*

There are two long stories in the chapter on the Third Tradition, placed there in order to emphasize two of these points in particular. Both of them involve what were highly charged issues in that era of American history, and both of them are true stories about real people. The first one is the story of what took place in Akron in 1937 when Dr. Bob encountered the man with the double stigma: he was gay, that is, a homosexual (141-142).

"Ed the Atheist" (1953) was early AA member Jimmy Burwell

The other one was the story of a man whom the 12&12 calls "Ed the atheist" (143-145). But we know his real name, and we know a good deal about who he was. This was Jim Burwell, a famous early A.A. figure, who had his last drink on June 16, 1938. He founded the first AA group in Philadelphia in February 1940, and helped start the first AA group in Baltimore. He participated in the debates over the pre-publication manuscripts of the Big Book in 1938 and 1939, and he is the one who is credited with the insistence that the phrase "as we understood Him" be inserted into the 3rd and 11th Steps.

This is the way his story is told in pages 143-145 of the *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, which came out in 1953:

A.A.'s [New York] group received into its membership a salesman we shall call Ed Ed was an atheist. His pet obsession was that A.A. could get along better without its "God nonsense." He browbeat everybody, and everybody expected that he'd soon get drunk ... Distressingly enough, Ed proceeded to stay sober.

At length the time came for him to speak in a meeting. We shivered, for we knew what was coming. He paid a fine tribute to the Fellowship; he told how his family had been reunited; he extolled the virtue of honesty; he recalled the joys of Twelfth Step work; and then he lowered the boom. Cried Ed, "I can't stand this God stuff! It's a lot of malarkey for weak folks. This group doesn't need it, and I won't have it! To hell with it! ..."

The elders led Ed aside. They said firmly, "You can't talk like this around here. You'll have to quit it or get out." With great sarcasm Ed came back at them. "Now do tell! Is that so?" He reached over to a bookshelf and took up a sheaf of papers. On top of them lay the foreword to the book "Alcoholics Anonymous," then under preparation. He read aloud, "The only requirement for A.A. membership is a desire to stop drinking." Relentlessly, Ed went on, "When you guys wrote that sentence, did you mean it, or didn't you?"

Dismayed, the elders looked at one another, for they knew he had them cold. So Ed stayed.

Ed not only stayed, he stayed sober -- month after month. The longer he kept dry, the louder he talked -- against God. The group was in anguish so deep that all fraternal charity had vanished. "When, oh when," groaned members to one another, "will that guy get drunk?"

Quite a while later, Ed got a sales job which took him out of town. At the end of a few days, the news came in. He'd sent a telegram for money, and everybody knew what that meant! Then he got on the phone. In those days, we'd go anywhere on a Twelfth Step job, no matter how unpromising. But this time nobody stirred. "Leave him alone! Let him try it by himself for once; maybe he'll learn a lesson!"

About two weeks later, Ed stole by night into an A.A. member's house, and unknown to the family, went to bed. Daylight found the master of the house and another friend drinking their morning coffee. A noise was heard on the stairs. To their consternation, Ed appeared. A quizzical smile on his lips, he said, "Have you fellows had your morning meditation?" They quickly sensed that he was quite in earnest. In fragments, his story came out.

In a neighboring state, Ed had holed up in a cheap hotel. After all his please for help had been rebuffed, these words rang in his fevered mind. "They have deserted me. I have been deserted by my own kind. This is the end . . . Nothing is left." As he tossed on his bed, his hand brushed the bureau near by, touching a book. Opening the book, he read. It was a Gideon Bible. Ed never confided any more of what he saw and felt in that hotel room. It was the year 1938. He hasn't had a drink since

So the hand of Providence early gave us a sign that any alcoholic is a member of our Society when he says so.

So in Bill Wilson's interpretation, it was God himself -- "the hand of Providence" -- who told the AA fellowship that they were not to exclude atheists from their AA groups. The principal message (to Bill's mind) was one which was directed towards those AA members who had a strong belief in a personal God, people who wanted to talk about spirituality in biblical and Christian language.

These members were deeply frightened by open atheism, that is, the total denial that God exists. But Bill was telling them that they nevertheless had to accept people into the fellowship who did not believe in God, because AA experience proved that these God-deniers also could be gotten sober in life-changing experiences.

It is important to note though, that in Bill Wilson's version of Jimmy Burwell's story as he published it here in 1953, it was completely assimilated into the genre of the traditional Protestant frontier revivalist conversion story. In effect, he had Jimmy saying, "I was once a drunkard and a Godless wretch, abandoned by all right-thinking people, when suddenly I was SAVED by an overwhelming spiritual experience which coursed through me, when I stretched out my shaking hand and opened the sacred text of Christ's own holy book."

Bill Wilson put Jimmy's story into the basic format of the nineteenth-century and early twentieth century evangelical Protestant conversion story. But in doing so, was he not gravely altering and distorting Jimmy Burwell's real story, which explained NOT how an atheist found Christ or the biblical God, but how an atheist found his own kind of salvation.

Jim Burwell in the second edition of the Big Book (1955): the Vicious Cycle

But two years later, in 1955, Jimmy Burwell was allowed to write his story in his own words -- it was entitled "The Vicious Cycle" -- for the second edition of the Big Book (pages 238-250). Or at least a good deal more of it was Jim's own ideas and his own words. He began by emphasizing the way in which forcing religion down people's throats in a way which gives them no freedom and no choice, can produce a horrible backlash, turning out men and women who believe that exact opposite of what the neurotic authority figures are trying to coerce them into believing:

At thirteen I was packed off to a very fine Protestant boarding school in Virginia, where I stayed four years developing a terrific aversion to all churches and established religions. At this school we had Bible readings before each meal, and church services four times on Sunday, and I became so rebellious at this that I swore I would never join or go to any church except for weddings and funerals.

This backlash effect would of course affect people in AA meetings in the same way if they started having required Bible readings and insisting that all members spend their time in AA meetings reciting all of the "correct" doctrines and scriptural interpretations which a rigid group of authority figures was demanding (with threats of hellfire and eternal damnation heaped on the heads of any AA members who rebelled).

When Jimmy first came in contact with AA (he got sober the first time on January 8, 1938) the man who made the twelfth step call on him "said something about God or a Higher Power, but I brushed that off -- that was for the birds, not for me."

And so for six months, Jim and the rest of the New York AA group fought one another nonstop, with neither side gaining an inch on the other, until finally -- if we look at the story carefully -- both sides finally backed down and quit standing on their pride, and worked out a way they could live together with mutual respect.

First however was the six-month standoff. Jimmy went to New York City and joined the little AA group there:

There was one meeting a week at Bill's home in Brooklyn, and we all took turns there spouting off about how we had changed our lives overnight, how many drunks we had saved and straightened out, and last, but not least, how God had touched each of us personally on the shoulder. Boy, what a circle of confused idealists! At our weekly meeting ... I took every opportunity to lambaste that 'spiritual angle' as we called it, or anything else that had any tinge of theology. Much later I discovered the elders held many prayer meetings hoping to find a way to give me the heave-ho, but at the same time stay tolerant and spiritual.

I rocked along my merry independent way until June [of 1938], when I went out selling auto polish in New England. After a very good week, two of my customers took me to lunch on Saturday. We ordered sandwiches and one man said, "Three beers" I spent the next four days wandering around New England half drunk, by which I mean I couldn't get drunk and I couldn't get sober. I tried to contact the boys in New York, but telegrams bounced right back This was when I really took my first good look at myself. My loneliness was worse than it had ever been before, for now even my own kind had turned against me. This time it really hurt, more than any hangover ever had. My brilliant agnosticism vanished, and I saw for the first time that those who really believed, or at least honestly tried to find a Power greater than themselves, were much more composed and contented than I had ever been, and they seemed to have a degree of happiness which I had never known I crawled back to New York a few days later in a very chastened frame of mind.

Taking the AA group as his Higher Power (June 1938-February 1940)

Jimmy was the first one to bend slightly. He began thinking of "the power of the group" as his Higher Power.

This was far more than I had ever recognized before, and it was at least a beginning. It was also an ending, for never since June 16th, 1938, have I had to walk alone.

But then the rest of the AA group also began to unbend, and more than just slightly, as they began writing the Big Book. Jimmy notes only one of his contributions, his insistence that the phrase "as we understood Him" be inserted into Steps 3 and 11 (Big Book page 59), but this little four-word phrase has stood ever since as a guarantee to atheists that they cannot be excluded from AA.

Around this time our big A.A. book was being written and it all became much simpler; we had a definite formula which some sixty of us agreed was the middle course for all alcoholics who wanted sobriety, and that formula has not been changed one iota down through the years my only contribution to their literary efforts was my firm conviction, being still a theological rebel, that the word God should be qualified with the phrase 'as we understand him' -- for that was the only way I could accept spirituality.

The insertion of that key phrase was, however, only the tip of the iceberg. It was what did NOT appear in the Big Book, and Jimmy Burwell's influence on that, which was decisive to the future of the movement.

The word "Jesus" did not appear even once in the first 164 pages of the Big Book. And the name "Christ" occurred but one time, and that only in the kind of negative context which one would expect in a book written by an angry atheist (Big Book pages 10-11).

With ministers, and the world's religions, I parted right there. When they talked of a God personal to me, who was love, superhuman strength and direction, I became irritated and my mind snapped shut against such a theory.

To Christ I conceded the certainty of a great man, not too closely followed by those who claimed Him. His moral teaching -- most excellent. For myself, I had adopted those parts which seemed convenient and not too difficult; the rest I disregarded.

The wars which had been fought, the burnings and chicanery that religious dispute had facilitated, made me sick. I honestly doubted whether, on balance, the religions of mankind had done any good. Judging from what I had seen in Europe and since, the power of God in human affairs was negligible, the Brotherhood of Man a grim jest. If there was a Devil, he seemed the Boss Universal, and he certainly had me.

In all the subsequent books written by early AA members for other early AA members, references to Jesus Christ and the Bible progressively became fewer and fewer: look at *The Tablemate* (1943), *The Little Red Book* (1946), and *Twenty-Four Hours a Day* (1948), just to give some of the more important examples.

Working the fourth step forced Jim to begin looking at moral psychology (1940 and after)

It was moving to Philadelphia that pushed Jimmy into the next stage of his spiritual growth, when he began, piece by piece, to work on his own fourth step character defects, and had to begin looking at the moral dimensions of the program.

Most early twentieth-century American psychiatrists, following Freud's teachings (see *Civilization and Its Discontents* for an especially clear discussion of what Freud saw as the basic problem), believed that speaking of right and wrong, or good and bad, or any other moralistic distinctions of that type, would push patients back into the realm of introjected parental admonitions and other superego issues that would drive these patients even further into crippling guilt and all sorts of bizarre neurotic behavior.

But early AA had from almost the very beginning combined the neo-Freudian belief that it was our childhood traumas and blockages which created our most damaging psychological problems, with the conviction that, in sorting out one's past, one could not escape having to deal on many occasions with what were in fact moral issues. So AA fourth-step work of necessity involved having to engage in what many AA's (and their friends among the psychiatric profession) called "moral psychology," bringing these issues up out of our subconscious minds so we could process them, and learn new and better ways of dealing with them.

After the book appeared, we all became very busy in our efforts to save all and sundry, but I was still actually on the fringes of A.A. While I went along with all that was done and attended the meetings, I never took an active job of leadership until February 1940. Then I got a very good position in Philadelphia and quickly found I would need a few fellow alcoholics around me if I was to stay sober. Thus I found myself in the middle of a brand new group. When I started to tell the boys how we did it in New York and all about the spiritual part of the program, I found they would not believe me unless I was practicing what I preached.

Then I found that as I gave in to this spiritual or personality change I was getting a little more serenity. In telling newcomers how to change their lives and attitudes, all of a sudden I found I was doing a little changing myself. I had been too self-sufficient to write a moral inventory, but I discovered in pointing out to the new man his wrong attitudes and actions that I was really taking my own inventory, and that if I expected him to change I would have to work on myself too. This change has been a long, slow process for me, but through these latter years the dividends have been tremendous.

To do this, Jimmy had to consider the fact that we each of us possess, as part of some kind of "deep conscience," a fundamental knowledge of the difference between right and wrong. When we have to make an important decision, we can ask the simple question, "if I go this way, will I be walking on the sunny side of the street, or on the dark side of the street?" We all know in our hearts what it is like on the dark side of the street -- people lying, cheating, manipulating, conning, taking pleasure from hurting other men and women, and walking away while other people lie bleeding and dying as the results of our actions. And we all know in our hearts what it means to walk on the sunny side of the street.

But this means, as Jimmy slowly came to realize over the following years, that "the Good" exists in every human being, even if many of us try to deny it and shut our eyes to it. The Good can be used as a kind of Higher Power that one can truly respect.

Jim Burwell thirty years later (1968)

To round off the story of Jimmy's spiritual progress, we need to conclude by looking at an article he wrote a good deal later, entitled "Sober for Thirty Years," which was published in the May 1968 issue of the *A.A. Grapevine*. (It was reprinted yet another thirty years afterwards in the November 1999 issue of the *Grapevine*).

I came into the Fellowship in New York in January 1938. At that time A.A. was just leaving the Oxford Group. There was one closed discussion meeting a week, at Bill's home in Brooklyn, -- attendance six or eight men, with only three members who had been sober more than one year: Bill, Hank, and Fitz. This is about all that had been accomplished in the four years with the New York Oxford Group. During those early meetings at Bill's, they were flying blind, with no creed or procedure to guide them, though they did use quite a few of the Oxford sayings and the Oxford Absolutes. Since both Bill and Dr. Bob had had almost-overnight experiences, it was taken for granted that all who followed would have the same sort of experience. So the early meetings were quite religious, in both New York and Akron. There was always a Bible on hand, and the concept of God was all biblical.

Into this fairly peaceful picture came I, their first self-proclaimed atheist, completely against all religions and conventions I started fighting nearly all the things Bill and the others stood for, especially religion, the 'God bit.' But I did want to stay sober, and I did love the understanding Fellowship. So I became quite a problem to that early group, with my constant haranguing against all spiritual angles."

I was suddenly taken drunk on a sales trip. This became the shock and the bottom I needed for the first time I admitted I couldn't stay sober alone. My closed mind opened a bit. Those folks back in New York, the folks who believed, had stayed sober. And I hadn't. Since this episode I don't think I have ever argued with anyone else's beliefs. Who am I to say?

I feel my spiritual growth over these past thirty years has been very gradual and steady For the new agnostic or atheist just coming in, I will try to give very briefly my milestones in recovery.

This spiritual journey ended up bringing Jimmy real serenity and happiness. He never came to believe in any kind of biblical concept of God, or the kind of Protestant evangelical principles that the Oxford Group had taught, where it was believed that salvation could only come through a highly emotional experience where you fell down on your knees and took Jesus Christ as your personal savior, or something of that general sort.

But he did find that he could totally depend on the AA fellowship as a Higher Power, and eventually found that the concept of the Good which all human beings had buried down deep in their hearts, could serve as a perfectly adequate God for him. As Jimmy put all this in his own words:

1. The first power I found greater than myself was John Barleycorn.
2. The A.A. Fellowship became my Higher Power for the first two years [1938-40].
3. Gradually, [in the process of starting the first A.A. group in Philadelphia] I came to believe that God and Good were synonymous and were found in all of us.
4. And I found that by meditating and trying to tune in on my better self for guidance and answers, I became more comfortable and steady.

Learning how "to tune in on [his] better self for guidance and answers," that is, how to contact what Emmet Fox and Richmond Walker called the spark of the divine within his own mind, Jimmy found true blessedness and a lasting and happy sobriety.