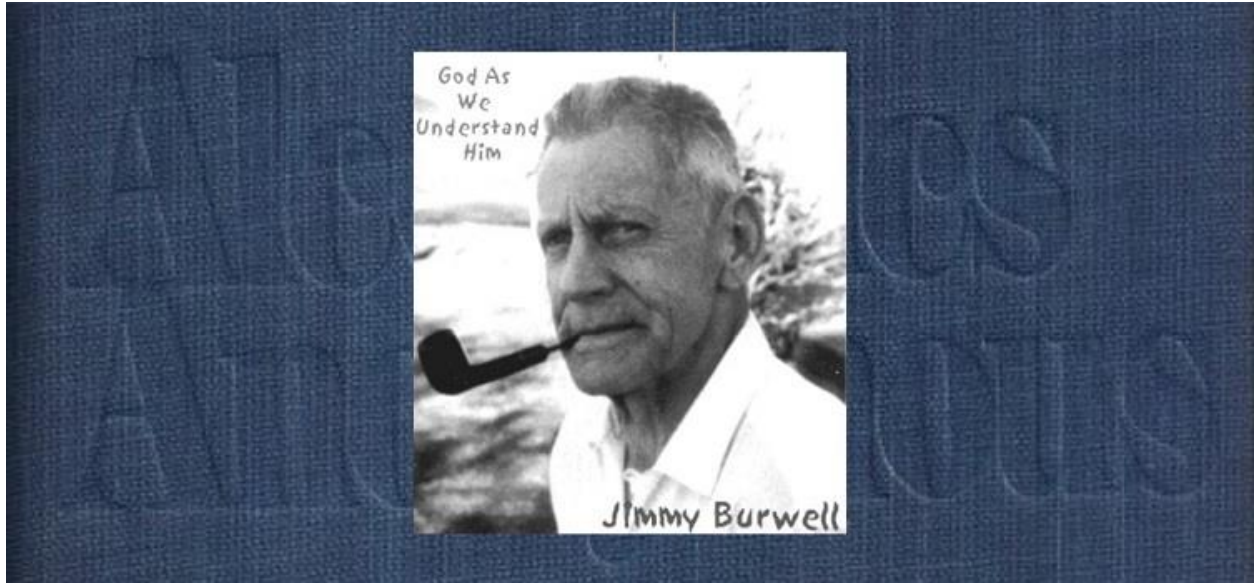


Jim Burwell



***Fifty Chosen Articles:
Number Five.
Posted on AA Agnostica in April 2012.***

Early History.

*Traditional AA is god-obsessed.
But without Jim Burwell, the Big Book and traditional AA would be much more religious.*

By Linda R.

Jim Burwell's contribution to Alcoholics Anonymous is truly significant and second only to that of AA's two co-founders, Bill Wilson and Dr. Robert Smith. Jim is credited with adoption of A.A.'s Third Tradition – "The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking" – as reported by Bill in Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions (pp. 143-145).

In addition, it was primarily Jim, along with Hank Parkhurst, who convinced Bill to change the 12 Steps to be more inclusive for those who did not believe in "God." Bill writes about the contentious battles over the use of the word God in the 12 Steps and the Big Book during the time they were written. Bill says that in New York the AA's split into three factions, which Bill labeled "conservative", "liberal" and "radical."

The conservatives thought that “the book ought to be Christian in the doctrinal sense of the word and that it should say so.” This faction was led by Fitz Mayo, an Episcopal minister’s son from Maryland and the third man to recover at Town’s hospital, after Hank Parkhurst and Bill himself.

The second faction, the liberals, had no real objection to using the word “God” in the book. The liberals pointed out that most members already believed in a deity. The liberals mainly wanted the book’s Christian religious content to be toned down.

And the third faction was the radical faction, consisting of the agnostics and atheists, led by Jim Burwell and Hank Parkhurst. They wanted “God” removed from the book.

But the atheists and agnostics, our radical left wing, were still to make a tremendously important contribution. Led by my friend Henry and obstinately backed by Jim B., a recently arrived sales man, this contingent proceeded to have its innings. At first they wanted the word “God” deleted from the book entirely. Henry had come to believe in some sort of “universal power,” but Jimmy still flabbergasted us by denouncing God at our meetings. Some members had been so angered that they wanted to throw him out of the group. (*Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, p. 163)

What Jim, Hank and the other agnostics/atheists wanted was a *psychological* book to attract the alcoholic into AA, and once the alcoholic was in, the alcoholic could take God or leave Him alone as they wished. Bill reports that to the rest of the group, this was a “shocking” proposal. And the battle raged on for almost a year, until just before 400 copies of the completed manuscript were to be sent into circulation. Bill writes about his own role in insisting that the word “God” be used:

We were still arguing about the Twelve Steps. All this time I had refused to budge on these steps. I would not change a word of the original draft, in which, you will remember, I had consistently used the word “God,” and in one place the expression “on our knees” was used. Praying to God on one’s knees was still a big affront to Henry. He argued, he begged. He threatened. He quoted Jimmy to back him up. (*Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, pp. 166-67)

Finally, at the last minute, Bill partially relented and a compromise was reached. The compromise resulted in four extremely important changes to the 12 Steps:

1. Substituting the phrase “a Power greater than ourselves” for “God” in Step Two
2. Modifying the word “God” to the phrase “God as we understood Him” in Steps Three and Eleven
3. Eliminating the expression “on our knees” from Step Seven
4. Adding the sentence “Here are the steps we took which are suggested as a Program of Recovery” as a lead-in to all the steps, so that they became *only suggestions*.

After agreeing to these changes in the 12 Steps, Bill acknowledges the contribution of Jim, Hank and the other agnostics / atheists in the group:

Such were the final concessions to those of little or no faith; this was the great contribution of our atheists and agnostics. They had widened our gateway so that all who suffer might pass through, regardless of their belief or *lack of belief*. (*Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, p. 167)

Jim joined the fledgling New York AA group in January 1938. His sobriety date was June 1938 and he remained sober for 36 years, until his passing in September 1974. His story, "[The Vicious Cycle](#)," was published in the Big Book's 2nd through 4th editions. He wrote the first history of AA called "[The Evolution of Alcoholics Anonymous](#)," which sketched AA's beginning years from 1935 to 1940. He played a key role in the publication of the 1940 Saturday Evening Post article written by Jack Alexander. Working with Fitz Mayo, Jim started the first AA groups in Philadelphia, Washington and Baltimore. After moving permanently to San Diego, he was instrumental in the growth of AA there.

There are some who say that Jim later "mellowed" in his atheism, but according to Cleveland AA founder Clarence Snyder: "Jimmy remained steadfast, throughout his life and 'preached' his particular [non-God] brand of AA wherever he went." (*How it Worked: The Story of Clarence H. Snyder and the Early Days of Alcoholics Anonymous in Cleveland, Ohio*, p. 107)

Jim himself, thirty years sober, wrote an article for the May 1968 Grapevine, and in it he writes: "Gradually, I came to believe that God and Good were synonymous and were found in all of us." Jim's words have an eerie similarity to the humanist slogans in recent ad campaigns, such as: "Why Believe in a God? Just be Good for Goodness' Sake" or "Humanism is the idea that you can be good without believing in God" or "Good, Without God." Funny thing, because in a sense, humanism begins where atheism ends. Unlike atheism, humanism is primarily concerned with ethics, not with the debate concerning the existence of God. Perhaps Jim evolved into a secular humanist? Perhaps like Jim, non-believers and believers can find common ground between good and God.

At any rate, what is known is that Jim remained an atheist for his entire life, regardless of the evolution of his ethical life philosophy toward goodness. He never developed a belief in a supernatural God.

The controversy over his atheism seems to stem from Jim's one and only slip, six months after he joined AA. Prior to his slip, Jim aggressively attacked any belief in God. After his slip, Jim came back with a different attitude. He realized that he needed the group to stay sober. And the group was against him because he openly attacked their beliefs. So Jim "mellowed." Jim says that "his closed mind opened a little." Did this mean he started to believe in a supernatural God? No. He realized that for the group to let him back in, it would be wise for him to stop aggressively challenging the beliefs of others in the group. And when his "closed mind opened a bit," he was finally able to recognize that for some of the others in his group, their belief did help keep them sober. Apparently, what was not useful to him was useful to them. As Jim says, "Who am I to say?"

Did Jim's changed attitude to be more tolerant of believers stop him from arguing against the use of the word "God" in the new book. No. It was in the period immediately following his slip, June 1938 through April 1939, when Jim argued unrelentingly and most vehemently against the use of the word "God" in the 12 Steps and the Big Book.

Jim's experience will be familiar to most agnostics, atheists and freethinkers in AA. When interacting with the believers in his group, Jim found that it was important to respect their beliefs and stop his "constant haranguing" against "God," which he had done when he first joined the group. Belief in "God" is an extremely important component of sobriety for many. And arguing against the religious beliefs of others can become dysfunctional on many levels, for as Jim said about the believers in his group: "Who am I to say?"

On the other hand, it is frustrating to agnostics, atheists and freethinkers to be subjected to the proselytizing of the believers in the rooms. Would that believers would respect the lack of belief of others. Unfortunately, while believers no longer hold prayer meetings on what to do with the non-believers, as they did in Jim's case (see Jim's article below), they do push the idea that belief in God is an *essential* component of sobriety. If only more AAs realized that from the beginning, there was a lot of controversy over the idea that belief in God was essential to sobriety. There were some, such as Bill and Dr. Bob, who truly thought belief in God was essential. But there were others, such as Jim and Hank, who did not think that belief was essential to sobriety. Jim and Hank argued that the alcoholic should be able to "take God or leave Him alone as he wished." For Jim, as he says in his article, it was the group that kept him sober, not "God." After his slip, Jim was humbled with the realization that he could not stay sober alone. He admitted that he needed the group.

It is remarkable that individuals like Jim and Hank were able to accomplish so much in those early years, given the religious and social climate of that period. They paved the way for what is happening now with a growing population of agnostics, atheists and freethinkers who are asserting their rightful place in the fellowship.

Jim's 1968 Grapevine article, which was later reprinted in the November 1999 Grapevine, under the category of "Big Book Authors," can be found here: [Sober for Thirty Years](#).
