

Acceptance, God and the 3rd Step



By Jason W.

Is accepting reality – acknowledging things the way they actually are, not how we think they should be – the same as a belief in God?

As an atheist, the 12 steps of AA were quite difficult early on, with some seemingly impossible for me to undertake.

For many non-theists, the 3rd step – “Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood him” – stands out as a non-starter.

For one, the word “God” (capital G) means something. It is how in the English language we describe a specific monotheistic deity. “Him” denotes this God to be masculine as is customary. To me, this is equivalent to people describing Big Foot as “Him” when the gender of something I don’t believe exists is irrelevant.

Just adding “as we understood him” doesn’t help much in that it is still asking us to define our own concept of a specific monotheistic deity.

One thing I’ve learned in my many years of sobriety is that the wording of the 12 steps is less important than the principles underlying the steps. One of the steps even states this when we are to “...practice these principles in all our affairs”.

In meetings we are told that we can choose our own idea of God, or even our own concept of a “higher power”. One would have to attend many AA meetings to comprehend the

nuances of this concept and would have to disregard all of the other mentions of God in the Big Book that seem very specific.

There's even a chapter that would seem to give hope to non-believers – We Agnostics. This chapter could be summarized as “some of us used to believe like you, but now we don't. Keep coming back and eventually you will join us.” Seems very condescending to those who are fine with their current beliefs.

So why not just skip the God steps, or all of the steps?

Because the program of recovery in AA – the 12 steps – seem to work for many suffering alcoholics. I can personally attest that they worked for me.

For those who recover from alcoholism, the 12 steps seem to help elicit a spiritual awakening as defined in Appendix II of the Big Book – “...the personality change sufficient to bring about recovery from alcoholism”. Most members have no issues with the God stuff, so they attribute this personality change to their higher power, who most choose to call God.

Non-theist alcoholics who find sobriety in AA must also have this personality change. If they didn't, I suspect they'd return to drinking. As the saying goes, “if I do what I did, I'll get what I got”. The way we see the world and our place in it must change or we will fall back to what we did in the past.

Back to step 3. The underlying principle of this step for me is faith. A faith that works under all circumstances. This is important for alcoholics because when life throws us challenges or a catastrophe, having faith that we can get through it without having to resort to oblivion from that first drink helps us stay sober.

There is wisdom in the saying “there's nothing so bad that a drink won't make worse”. For alcoholics, this is certainly true.

This faith, not that everything will be ok (sometimes it's not), not that whatever happened was meant to be (too mystical), but faith that we will be able accept circumstances without resorting to the first drink is vitally important for long-term sobriety.

Our theistic brethren get this same faith, but they have something they can attribute it to – God. They get to acceptance with the help of their higher power with thoughts such as “it must be God's will”, or “God knows what's best for me”, or “God will see me through this without having to take a drink”, etc. The end result is acceptance of the way things are.

Theistic or not, both can stay sober with their individual brand of a faith, and most in AA would point to the 3rd step as to where they got this faith.

For me, turning my will and life over to my higher power, who I choose to call Reality, is simply striving to align my thinking with the way things are. Not how I think they are. Or worse, how I think they should be.

This gives me a faith that works under all circumstances, but I often need to remind myself:

Something is bothering me – It is what it is.

My past is holding me back – It was what it was.

The future concerns me – It will be what it will be.

For my theistic friends in AA – it is, was, or will be God's will.

The outcome for both of us is the same. Continued sobriety.

Jason W. has been sober since May 30, 1988. He credits getting sober at an early age due to experiencing the effects of alcoholism growing up and developing the “phenomenon of craving” from his first drunk. While admitting to another person that he was an alcoholic at 18, in his 18 year-old brain this meant he would probably have to quit drinking in his 50’s. The thought of not drinking was out of the question. Consequences caused an early surrender at 23. Always an atheist, AA didn’t seem like an option due to the “god stuff”, but the people he met in the early meetings he attended seemed happily sober and their lives were improving so he kept coming back and found a path to sobriety. He started the first We Agnostics meeting in Dayton, Oh in 2014, and another secular AA meeting in 2022. Thanks to sobriety and the wisdom he garnered in AA, he has been able to become a successful entrepreneur, a father of two, and a friend to many.
