

"Alcohol is cunning, baffling, and powerful."

by Barbara Curtis

Any debate on Christians and alcohol needs this warning thrown into the mix. It's the mantra that bathes every newcomer to Alcoholics Anonymous and the world of recovery.

I first heard it on March 17, 1980, after stumbling into my first AA meeting. Those half dozen words were a revelation, explaining exactly why I always seemed to be outwitted by wine—outwitted as in drinking in spite of frequent oaths not to, outwitted as in drinking more than I intended, outwitted as in blacking out so I didn't know where I'd parked my car, outwitted as in always having wine in the house, even when I'd forgotten milk for the kids.

Surprisingly, no one in AA hated me for the awful person I'd become. Indeed, the warmth, understanding, and acceptance I found there was unlike anything I'd ever felt before—enough to keep me coming

to meetings where I learned how to stay sober one day at a time.

### The First Three Steps

The first step was admitting that I was powerless over alcohol—boy, was I!—and that my life had become unmanageable—boy, had it! By the time I made it to AA, I was sinking fast and hard, so this step was as elemental as grabbing a life preserver. Some alcoholics find it harder to admit their hopelessness—and they bounce in and out of AA many times before they see the truth about their relationship with booze.

Self-honesty is the crucial first step of AA's powerful and life-changing 12 Steps. Without getting to that humble and broken place where lying becomes impossible, a problem drinker can't be helped at all.

The second and third steps challenge the alcoholic to embrace the only solution to her problem:

*Come to believe that a power greater than ourselves can restore us to sanity.*

# My Story—Christianity and Alcohol

*Make a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understand him.*

### AA—A Way to The Way

These first three steps are the cornerstone of recovery. For many like me, AA served as our first introduction to God, albeit a fill-in-the-blanks kind of deity. Founded in 1939 with strong roots in Christianity, AA's official program remains anchored on a purposely vague Higher Power, the better to save as many lives as possible. For, the theory goes, an alcoholic will drink until he dies.

And who's to say this is a bad idea? On March 21, 1987, after two years of "working the steps" and five more of looking for God in all the wrong places (New Age and Eastern religion), when I finally heard the good news of Jesus Christ, I was ready to receive him—as was my husband Tripp, whom I had met and married

in AA. Without AA, I might not have made it to that point.

In the meantime, no Christian had ever reached out a hand to help me.

For people like me, who grew up unchurched, AA can be a bridge, or as an AA friend who became a Christian and stayed active in the program put it: "A way to the Way."

On the other hand, for people who grew up in the church and later have to come to grips with alcoholism, AA opens the possibility of being embraced by people who really, truly understand—who have no glib answers and would never presume to judge.

The lack of judgmentalism—which provides such safety and security—comes from a questionable

premise. While Christians might call alcoholism a sin, AA would say it is a disease—that some people are genetically disposed to become alcoholics.

Perhaps there is truth in both.

One thing I know for sure: There are many things I learned in AA that make me a better Christian. In fact, I've often thought it would be a blessing if all new Christians went through the 12 Steps as part of their discipleship. It was through

## Nice Christian Girl Becomes Alcoholic

by Marianne Engels

Jayne stood in the doorway and watched his mother pour another drink. She put the glass to her mouth, drank the clear liquid and reached for the bottle again.

"Mommy, does Daddy call you an alcoholic because you drink that stuff?"

Alcoholic. The word sticks in your throat and carries a stigma with it that clings like glue. Yet, whether rich, poor, young, old or in-between, more than five million American women today are alcoholics, and the number continues to climb.

"But how did a nice girl like me become an alcoholic?" That's a question more and more Christ-

ian women are asking themselves each day.

### The Guilt and Shame of Addiction

Alcoholism is the habitual and compulsive use of alcoholic beverages. It destroys self-confidence and self-esteem more than any other illness, and once you start down its lonely road, it becomes harder and harder to stop. Family, work, church, spiritual life and physical and mental well-being no longer take priority. Once the addiction takes over, everything except that drink becomes secondary; no matter how one tries to control the dependency, it can't be done alone.

Though it's the same disease in the Christian as it is in the non-

Christian, the guilt and confusion the Christian woman feels may be more severe as she tries to understand how this could happen to her, a follower of Christ. Her faith begins to suffer as she tries to approach her problem through prayer while trying to control her drinking.

*Why doesn't God answer my prayers? Why am I so nervous? Why doesn't anyone understand? Why do people think I want to get drunk? Maybe I'm no good. I can't seem to help myself, and God isn't answering my prayers.* These and other thoughts plague her constantly. As she drinks more and more, her shame leads to secret drinking, and guilt is piled on guilt. What is her answer?



According to Ernest Noble, M.D., Director of the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, alcoholism is not a question of morals and manners, though it certainly affects both. "Alcoholism has been associated too long with moral weakness. It's just not that

simple. Alcoholism involves many factors. Some are environment, peer pressure, cultural attitudes, genetic or biochemical predisposition, alcoholic parents. Unfortunately, we cannot yet accurately predict if one will become an alcoholic, although we do know anyone

can become addicted if he or she continues to drink long enough."

The Christian woman suffers deeply as she gradually recognizes her addiction. Before the true fact of her dependence, she will likely practice many kinds of denial. She may blame everyday pressures,

those steps that I learned how to search my conscience, confess my sin, make amends and to forgive others.

By contrast, I've met some Christians who operate as though forgiveness in Christ leaves them without an obligation to those they've harmed along the way. I've

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also met those who remain bitter or confused by hurts others caused them, rather than being able to see how God has used even the bad for good in their lives.

In AA, recovering alcoholics learn from the get-go that dealing with the wreckage of the past is not just a good choice, but essential to our survival.

#### Freedom in Christ

As a new believer, already clean and sober for seven years, for a few years I assumed that being a Christian meant you were not supposed to drink. You can imagine my confusion when a visit to my Bible study leader's home brought me face-to-face with a well-stocked and very-out-in-the-open bar!

I guess it was the out-in-the-open part that spoke loudest to me, because the conclusion I drew was not that this respected woman and her husband were sinners because there was booze in their home, but that it must be okay for Christians to drink as long as they didn't have a problem with it. And if it wasn't something hidden, if it was something they felt comfortable with, it must not be a problem.

Hand-in-hand with this realization was the attitude adjustment I was making

after being delivered from 18 months in an extremely legalistic church. There, all behavior was codified as to what Christians could do and what we could not do. As one survivor later put it, "We weren't allowed to have sex because it might lead to dancing." Truly, with no options available to us, we were free to leave our brains at the door, because no thinking—nor any individual inspiration from the Holy Spirit—would ever be necessary.

Now, seeking through the Bible, I began to see that while there were specific biblical warnings about

drunkenness, there were at least as many references to wine as something beneficial. The responsibility seemed to lie with each of us to make sure we remained good and faithful stewards. This actually demanded more of us than blindly following a list of dos and don'ts.

I was discovering this thing called freedom in Christ.

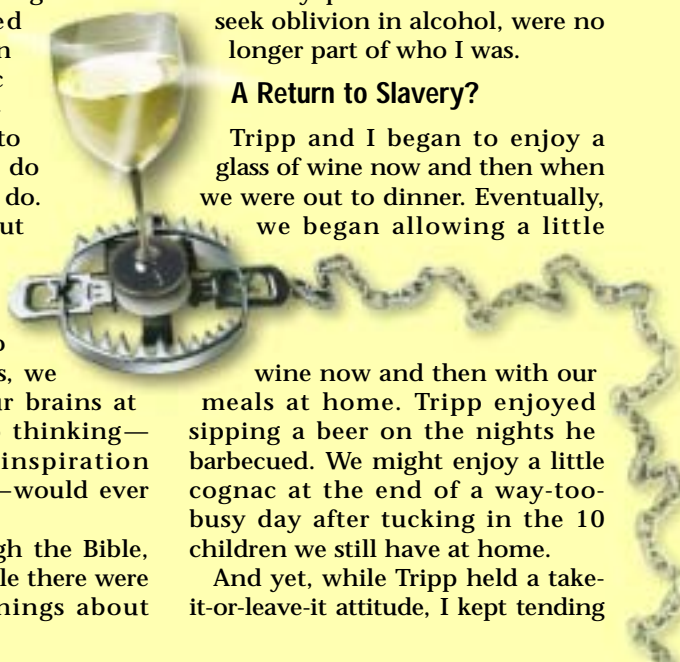
Still, it was a few years more before I realized that I could exercise that freedom myself. For now, I didn't have to define myself as a recovered alcoholic, but a new creation in Christ. The spiritual emptiness which drove me to drink, a few haunting episodes from my past which led me to seek oblivion in alcohol, were no longer part of who I was.

#### A Return to Slavery?

Tripp and I began to enjoy a glass of wine now and then when we were out to dinner. Eventually, we began allowing a little

wine now and then with our meals at home. Tripp enjoyed sipping a beer on the nights he barbecued. We might enjoy a little cognac at the end of a way-too-busy day after tucking in the 10 children we still have at home.

And yet, while Tripp held a take-it-or-leave-it attitude, I kept tending



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loneliness, life's apparent meaninglessness, the empty house because the children are grown and gone. "After all," she reasons, "who wouldn't drink with these problems?" The misery of this sick and desperate woman is compounded as she wrestles with these excuses and the added burden of her guilt: "I know it's wrong to be drunk."

Fortunately, social attitudes toward women have changed, but

women with drinking problems are still more sheltered than men because of their role in society. Husbands and children try to protect her while the illness only progresses further before treatment is sought. Years ago, the only recognized alcoholic was thought to be a derelict without any responsible role in society. Today, a Christian woman who is an alcoholic can "hide" in her home,

"protected" by a co-dependent family who think they are helping her.

But the only real hope lies in accepting the fact that you are an alcoholic. Once a woman admits that she is an alcoholic, she can come to know that her God loves and forgives, and that others care enough to help. The first step has been taken on that long road to recovery and control.

more and more toward the take-it side. It was nowhere, nowhere near my pre-AA drinking levels, and yet...

It worried me that I was looking forward to drinking a little something every night. It worried me that a couple times I decided to stop drinking and then didn't see it through. It worried me that alcohol occupied my thoughts at all.

And so, once again I exercised my freedom in Christ—this time to give up drinking, and to give it up before I found out how much I could get away with before hitting bottom.

Tripp stopped drinking too, although for a different reason. For, while he didn't seem to have the same problematic relationship with alcohol, the predisposition to addiction, he gave it up in accordance with 1 Corinthians 8:9-12:

"Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak.... When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ."

#### Is Alcohol A Sin?

Having gone through this experience, I am grateful for the fearless self-honesty I acquired in AA. For the worst problem for an alcoholic is self-deception. The compulsion to drink causes the alcoholic to lie to himself about how out-of-balance his life is becoming.

As alcohol keeps gaining in importance, everything else—family, friends, church, even God—loses importance.

Yes, even for believers—at least those like me, who have a predisposition to alcoholism—alcohol can be "cunning, baffling, and powerful." Or it can certainly become a powerful weapon in the hands of our very cunning enemy.

Does that mean I've changed my mind about Christians and drinking? Not at all.

Alcohol in itself is not evil, though abusing it causes evil.

The bottom line is that we are free in Christ—free to enjoy alcohol if it is not a problem for us or a stumbling block for others—and free to refuse it if we wish. Neither position should be a litmus test for the authenticity of our faith or the quality of our relationship with God.

But our freedom in Christ carries with it the responsibility of being scrupulously *honest* with ourselves, *harmless* to others, *fearless* in confession and *faithful* to obey what God asks of us.

Then, and only then, can we be truly free in Christ. □

*Barbara Curtis, her husband Tripp and their family live in Virginia.*

But it is rarely a step which can be taken alone. Breaking that dependency hinges on sharing the problem with others who can help. It can be the step of a lifetime.



Your pastor or doctor will be able to direct you toward help; if not, call Alcoholics Anonymous or your local hospital. As a Christian woman

who has the disease of alcoholism, I know loneliness, devastation, the deep despair of remorse and the loss of self-worth. After nine years of sobriety, I've a closer relationship with my family and my Lord than ever before. With Jesus, seemingly impossible circumstances can be turned into a rich and satisfying life. □

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## Are You an Alcoholic?

To answer this question, ask yourself the following questions and answer them as honestly as you can.

1. Do you lose time from work due to your drinking?
2. Is drinking making your home life unhappy?
3. Do you drink because you are shy with other people?
4. Is drinking affecting your reputation?
5. Have you ever felt remorse after drinking?
6. Have you gotten into financial difficulties as a result of your drinking?
7. Do you turn to lower companions and an inferior environment when drinking?
8. Does your drinking make you careless of your family's welfare?
9. Has your ambition decreased since drinking?
10. Do you crave a drink at a definite time daily?
11. Do you want a drink the next morning?
12. Does drinking cause you to have difficulty in sleeping?
13. Has your efficiency decreased since drinking?
14. Is drinking jeopardizing your job or business?
15. Do you drink to escape from worries or troubles?
16. Do you drink alone?
17. Have you ever had a complete loss of memory as a result of your drinking?
18. Has your physician ever treated you for drinking?
19. Do you drink to build up your self-confidence?
20. Have you ever been in a hospital or institution on account of drinking?

If you have answered YES to any one of the questions, there is a definite warning that you may be an alcoholic.

If you have answered YES to any two, the chances are that you are an alcoholic.

If you have answered YES to three or more, you are definitely an alcoholic.

(The above test questions are used by Johns Hopkins University Hospital, Baltimore, Maryland, in deciding whether or not a patient is alcoholic.)