

How to Understand Celebrate Recovery®
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In order to understand how Celebrate Recovery® (CR) is and is not considered a 12 Step program, it may be helpful to compare and contrast CR to Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), which was the original 12 Step program from which other ones have evolved (e.g., with Al-Anon being the first “sister” fellowship in 1951). AA is often the benchmark against which other 12 Step programs are compared. A useful starting point would be the 12 Steps of AA (Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1953), which were largely written by Bill Wilson, one of the cofounders of AA.

The Twelve Steps

Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol--that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood Him*.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. 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.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these Steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

On the surface, the 12 Steps of Celebrate Recovery® seem similar to AA’s 12 Steps. In contrast to AA’s 12 Steps, the additions made by CR are underlined below and the deletions are shown in strikethrough below:

Twelve Steps of Celebrate Recovery®

1. We admitted we were powerless over our addictions and compulsive behaviors, that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. We came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. We made a decision to turn our lives and our wills over to the care of God ~~as we understood Him~~.
4. We made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. We admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. We were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. We humbly asked Him to remove all our shortcomings.
8. We made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. We made direct amends to such people whenever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. We continue to take personal inventory and when we were wrong, promptly admitted it.
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 power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual experience as the result of these steps, we try to carry this message to others and practice these principles in all our affairs.

In contrast to AA’s inclusive and personalized language about God “*as we understood Him*,” CR’s omission of this phrase emphasizes a distinctly Christian variant of the 12 Steps, as shown in the following annotated version (<https://www.celebraterecovery.com/>):

Annotated Twelve Steps of Celebrate Recovery®

1. We admitted we were powerless over our addictions and compulsive behaviors, that our lives had become unmanageable.
“I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out” (Romans 7:18 NIV).
2. We came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
“For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose” Philippians 2:13 NIV).
3. We made a decision to turn our lives and our wills over to the care of God.
“Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God - this is your spiritual act of worship” (Romans 12:1 NIV).
4. We made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
“Let us examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the Lord” (Lamentations 3:40 NIV).
5. We admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
“Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed” (James 5:16a NIV).
6. We were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
“Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up” (James 4:10 NIV).
7. We humbly asked Him to remove all our shortcomings.
“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9 NIV).
8. We made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all.
“Do to others as you would have them do to you” (Luke 6:31 NIV).
9. We made direct amends to such people whenever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
“Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift” (Matthew 5:23-24 NIV).
10. We continue to take personal inventory and when we were wrong, promptly admitted it.
“So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall!” (1 Corinthians 10:12 NIV).
11. We sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, praying only for knowledge of His will for us, and power to carry that out.
“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.” (Colossians 3:16a NIV).
12. Having had a spiritual experience as the result of these steps, we try to carry this message to others and practice these principles in all our affairs.
“Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore them gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted” (Galatians 6:1 NIV).

The Twelve Traditions

Major differences between AA and CR are seen governance of groups and meetings. Whereas virtually all 12-Step fellowships follow some variation of AA’s Twelve Traditions, CR omits these traditions altogether.

Twelve Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous

1. Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon A.A. unity.
2. For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority—a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern.
3. The only requirement for A.A. membership is a desire to stop drinking.
4. Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or A.A. as a whole.
5. Each group has but one primary purpose—to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.
6. An A.A. group ought never endorse, finance, or lend the A.A. name to any related facility or outside enterprise, lest problems of money, property, and prestige divert us from our primary purpose.
7. Every A.A. group ought to be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions.
8. Alcoholics Anonymous should remain forever non-professional, but our service centers may employ special workers.
9. A.A., as such, ought never be organized; but we may create service boards or committees directly responsible to those they serve.
10. Alcoholics Anonymous has no opinion on outside issues; hence the A.A. name ought never be drawn into public controversy.
11. Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio, and films.
12. Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities.

Eight Principles of Celebrate Recovery®

The Eight Principles of CR are not traditions but rather are a condensed restatement of the 12 Steps: Principle 1 (Step 1), Principle 2 (Step 2), Principle 3 (Step 3), Principle 4 (Steps 4 and 5), Principle 5 (Steps 6 and 7), Principle 6 (Steps 8 and 9), Principle 7 (Steps 10 and 11), and Principle 8 (Step 12). For reference, the Eight Principles of CR are contained in the Appendix of this article.

History

AA: The founding of AA is considered to be the day that Bill Wilson and Dr. Robert Holbrook Smith (Dr. Bob) were introduced to each other by an Oxford Group member named Henrietta Sieberling in Akron, Ohio. Dr. Bob and his wife Anne arrived at Henrietta's door at 5:00 PM. Henrietta discreetly whisked off the two men to the library. Bob's words were, "Mighty glad to meet you, Bill. But it happens I can't stay long; five or ten minutes at the outside." With six month's sobriety, Bill laughed and observed, "Guess you're pretty thirsty, aren't you?" Bob's rejoinder was, "Well, maybe you do understand this drinking business after all." This dialogue began a talk that lasted several hours on that evening. "I know now that I'm not going to take another drink," said Bill, "and I'm grateful to you." Bill stayed with Dr. Bob for the next three weeks. Through their friendship, Dr. Bob gained sobriety. Dr. Bob's first "dry date" of June 10, 1935 is officially counted as the beginning of Alcoholics Anonymous. Bill and Bob began working with other alcoholics, helping them achieve sobriety one day at a time. Four years later, they published the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*, which explained their program of recovery.

Although AA history archivists date Dr. Bob's actual last drink on or around June 17, 1935 (Gary N., personal communication), AA Founder's Day is by tradition considered to be June 10, 1935. AA historians know that Henrietta Sieberling had arranged for Bill to meet Dr. Bob on Mother's Day, May 12, 1935. However, when Bill and Henrietta went to the home of Dr. Bob on that occasion, he was passed out on the floor—thus necessitating the follow-up visit when he was not intoxicated.

CR: According to public information available on its website, Celebrate Recovery started in 1991 at Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California. At that time, the church was meeting at a high school gymnasium. John Baker wrote Pastor Rick Warren the "now-famous, concise, 13-page, single-spaced" letter outlining the vision God had given John for Celebrate Recovery. After reading John's letter, Pastor Rick said, "Great, John — go do it!" The first night, 43 people attended, and Celebrate Recovery was born. Beginning with only four Open Share Groups — Men's and Women's Chemical Dependency and Men's and Women's Codependency — the ministry has grown to over 14 groups today. Over 27,000 people have gone through the program at Saddleback Church. Many of them are now serving in Celebrate Recovery and the Church. Celebrate Recovery is the number one outreach ministry at Saddleback Church, with over 70 percent of its members now coming from outside the church.

Purpose

AA: Each group has but one primary purpose---to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers (Tradition 5). This tradition is described as AA's "singleness of purpose."

CR: The focus is on "hurts, hang-ups, and habits." According to its website, CR is for people who want to deal with "Dependency on alcohol or drugs, pornography, low self-esteem, need to control, depression, anger, co-dependency, depression, fear of rejection, fear of abandonment, perfectionism, broken relationships, and abuse" (<https://www.celebraterecovery.com/>).

Membership Requirements

AA: "The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking" (Tradition 3).

CR: "We expect each group to be accountable to Christ, the local church, and the model of Celebrate Recovery established at Saddleback Church" (<https://www.celebraterecovery.com/>).

Affiliation

AA: "AA is not allied with any sect, denomination, politics, organization or institution" (AA Preamble©).

CR: "A Christ-centered recovery program at Saddleback Church" (<https://www.celebraterecovery.com/>).

Authority

AA: "For our primary group purpose, there is but one ultimate authority---a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience" (Tradition 2).

CR: Celebrate Recovery® requires that, if the *Celebrate Recovery*® name is used, then certain guidelines must be maintained" (<https://www.celebraterecovery.com/>).

Leadership

AA: "Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern" (Tradition 2).

CR: "Program uses Leaders and teachers. The Large Group lessons are taught from the Leader's Guide" (<https://www.celebraterecovery.com/>).

Approved Literature

AA: The definitive text is the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*, commonly known as the Big Book. Many AA members have said that groups are guided by AA's Conference-Approved Literature (CAL) and that "everything else is just someone's opinion." CAL refers to audiovisual or written material approved by the AA General Service Conference (GSO) for publication by the AA GSO. Books, brochures, pamphlets, and audiovisual materials that are published by AA will have the statement, "This is A.A. General Service Conference-approved literature" printed on the item. However, the term CAL does not imply Conference disapproval of other material about AA, nor does AA try to tell any individual member what he or she may or may not read. The AA General Service Conference meets once a year. The pamphlets, booklets and materials approved for publication by AA World Services (AAWS) out of this process go through a thorough process of review. To ensure the continued integrity of AA literature, and to make sure the AA program will not be distorted or diluted, permission to reprint must be obtained from AAWS in writing. At the same time, AA newsletters, bulletins, and meeting lists have blanket permission to use the material, providing proper credit is given to ensure that the copyrights of AA literature is protected. When AA's copyrighted literature is reprinted, it must show one of the following statements: (1) "Reprinted with Permission of AA World Services, Inc.," or (2) "Reprinted with permission of the AA Grapevine, Inc."

While statements from the GSO on this topic have been scarce, the GSO did issue a statement in a 1978 *Box 459 Newsletter*:

"It [Conference Approved] does not mean the Conference disapproves of any other publications. Many local A.A. central offices publish their own meeting lists. A.A. as a whole does not oppose these, any more than A.A. disapproves of the Bible or books on health or any other publications from any source that A.A.'s find helpful. What any A.A. member reads is no business of G.S.O., or of the Conference, naturally. (GSOAA, 1978, p. 6)

CR: "The Celebrate Recovery Bible and Celebrate Recovery® curriculum consisting of the Leader's Guide, four Participant's Guides, and the Celebrate Recovery Journal are to be used exclusively" (<https://www.celebraterecovery.com/>).

Supplemental Literature

AA: Although some AA members occasionally bring other materials into meetings, the only commonly cited materials are from the book *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* and *The Grapevine*, which is known as *The International Journal of Alcoholics Anonymous*. The AA Preamble is actually copyrighted by The Grapevine, Inc. Many thousands of books, articles, pamphlets, newsletters, tapes, and videos used by AA members and groups are not Conference-approved literature. For example, *Twenty-Four Hours a Day*, published by Hazelden since 1954, was the second largest best seller (behind the Big Book) to AA members for many years. *Twenty-Four Hours a Day* is used by AA groups in meetings and is clearly not Conference-approved literature. As a general guideline, what any AA member reads is no business of GSO or of the Conference (GSOAA, 1978, p. 6).

CR: *Life's Healing Choices* is part of the Celebrate Recovery curriculum.

Holy Bible

AA: Some verses of the Holy Bible are paraphrased in the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous. Because the Big Book was originally published in 1939, verses quoted from the Bible are from the King James Version. However, for AA members who use Bibles, any version is considered acceptable.

CR: "We strongly encourage the use of the Celebrate Recovery Study Bible. It is the only Bible that directly corresponds to the Celebrate Recovery curriculum. We designed the Celebrate Recovery Study Bible to work with the resources developed and tested in the national and international ministry of Celebrate Recovery" (<https://www.celebraterecovery.com/>). On its website, CR quotes Bible verses—only from the New Testament—from the New International Version (NIV) of the Bible.

Sales

AA: All materials available through public access and downloadable at no cost. The Big Book of AA is available for free at any meeting and on the internet.

CR: "Items produced for commercial sale using the Celebrate Recovery name or any part of the Celebrate Recovery curriculums is strictly prohibited. This is a trademark and copyright violation" (<https://www.celebraterecovery.com/>).

Meeting Format

AA: Alcoholics Anonymous designates meetings as Open, Closed, Speaker meetings, Discussion meetings, Big Book study meetings, and Step meetings.

CR: All CR groups use the Small Group Guidelines and format. According to Saddlebrook Church (<https://saddleback.com/>), there are three main components that make up the Celebrate Recovery program.

Large Group: Everyone meets together to hear either a recovery centered Teaching or a personal Testimony of a changed life. This group is considered a “shoulder to shoulder” experience.

Open Share: This time involves breaking into separate gender and issue specific groups where each person is safe to share their struggles and victories with others who share their similar hurts, hang-ups and habits. These groups are considered a “face to face” experience.

Step Study: It has been said that “you go to a meeting to feel better, but you work the steps to get better.” Step Studies are a safe place to work through the Jesus-centered 12 Steps in a gender specific group. They are a minimum one-year commitment and meet on different nights of the week. It’s a place where the “why” behind addictions and behavior can finally be uncovered and freedom can be found. Step Studies are considered a “heart to heart” experience.

Age Limits

AA: Any age is allowed.

CR: A person must be at least 18 years of age to attend a One Day seminar.

Gender

AA: Depending on what the Group Conscience has decided for the group (Tradition Two), AA meetings can be mixed or gender specific. Transgender individuals are welcome to attend their meetings of preference.

CR: All Small Groups and Open Share meetings are gender specific (<https://www.celebraterecovery.com/>).

Online Format

AA: Even before the pandemic, AA online meetings have been available 24 hours a day for seven days a week. Currently, many meetings take place by Zoom.

CR: Prior to the pandemic, there were no online CR groups. Currently, there are some Step Groups and Share Groups meeting by Zoom

Higher Power

AA: Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood Him* (Step 3).

CR: Jesus Christ is the one and only Higher Power (<https://www.celebraterecovery.com/>).

Understanding of God

AA: It was in January 1938 that a former atheist named Jim B. gave AA the phrase “God as we understand Him.” The phrase originated with Rev. Sam Shoemaker (1893-1963), DD, DST, an Episcopal priest who was rector of Calvary Church in New York City, and head of the Oxford Group in the United States. Considered one of the best preachers of his era, Shoemaker’s sermons were syndicated for distribution by tape and radio networks for decades. He also ran Calvary Rescue Mission, developed the Work at Faith program, and focused on *one’s own understanding* of God. His interdenominational focus and the Oxford Group were significant influences for the founders of AA. In his book *Children of the Second Birth*, Shoemaker describes stories of men and women whose lives were changed by turning them over to God. In one story told by Shoemaker, a man said that he would “surrender as much of himself as he could, to as much of Christ as he understood” (1927, p. 25). Several pages later, Shoemaker recalls, “So they prayed together, opening their minds to as much of God *as he understood*” (Shoemaker, 1927, p. 47, italics added). Shoemaker believed that any honest person could begin the spiritual experiment by surrendering “as much of himself as he can, to as much of Christ as he understands” (1965, p. 76).

CR: “Our prayer is that Celebrate Recovery will create a bridge to the millions of people who are familiar with the secular 12 Steps (I acknowledge the use of some material from the 12 Suggested Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous) and in so doing, introduce them to the one and only true Higher Power, Jesus Christ. Once they begin that relationship, asking Christ into their hearts as Lord and Savior, true healing and recovery can begin!” (<https://www.celebraterecovery.com/>).

Anonymity

AA: In Alcoholics Anonymous, “Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities” (Tradition 12).

CR: In Celebrate Recovery, anonymity may not exist for members of CR who may also be members of the church where CR groups take place.

Websites

AA: Alcoholics Anonymous uses an organization (.org) domain for its official website:

<https://aa.org/>

CR: Celebrate Recovery uses a commercial (.com) domain for its official website:

<https://www.celebraterecovery.com/>

Appendix

Eight Principles of Celebrate Recovery®

1. Realize I’m not God; I admit that I am powerless to control my tendency to do the wrong thing and that my life is unmanageable. (Step 1)
2. Earnestly believe that God exists, that I matter to Him and that He has the power to help me recover. (Step 2)
3. Consciously choose to commit all my life and will to Christ’s care and control. (Step 3)
4. Openly examine and confess my faults to myself, to God, and to someone I trust. (Steps 4 and 5)
5. Voluntarily submit to any and all changes God wants to make in my life and humbly ask Him to remove my character defects. (Steps 6 and 7)
6. Evaluate all my relationships. Offer forgiveness to those who have hurt me and make amends for harm I’ve done to others when possible, except when to do so would harm them or others. (Steps 8 and 9)
7. Reserve a time with God for self-examination, Bible reading, and prayer in order to know God and His will for my life and to gain the power to follow His will. (Steps 10 and 11)
8. Yield myself to God to be used to bring this Good News to others, both by my example and my words. (Step 12)

References

- Alcoholics Anonymous World Services. (1953/2010). *Twelve steps and twelve traditions*. New York, NY: Author.
Copyrighted in 1952 by The A.A. Grapevine, Inc. and Alcoholics Anonymous Publishing (now known as Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc.), the first printing of the book was in April 1953.
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This book is a Hazelden Meditation with a Copyright © 1975 by the Hazelden Foundation in Center City, Minnesota. The first HarperCollins paperback edition was published in 1992.
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