



# The Four Absolutes in Twelve-Step Recovery

## History of the Absolutes

A study of AA history reveals that many of its principles and practices came directly from the Oxford Group and especially from the Group's Four Standards of Honesty, Purity, Unselfishness, and Love. As AA Co-founder Dr. Bob remarked, "The Four Absolutes, as we called them, were the only yardsticks we had in the early days, before the Steps." He was quick to add, "I think the Absolutes still hold good and can be extremely helpful.

I have found at times that a question arises, and I want to do the right thing, but the answer is not obvious. Almost always, if I measure my decision carefully by the yardsticks of absolute honesty, absolute unselfishness, absolute purity, and absolute love, and it checks up pretty well with those four, then my answer can't be very far out of the way." (AA Pamphlet-53, The Co-Founders, p 17.)

AA's Co-founders, along with many of its Pioneer members, found their sobriety within the Oxford Group and Bill Wilson credited the Group with no fewer than ten of the twelve principles and practices he later codified into the famous 12 Steps:

"Where did we learn about moral inventory, amends for harm done, turning our wills and our lives over to God? Where did we learn about meditation and prayer and all the rest of it? The spiritual substance of our remaining ten Steps came straight from Dr. Bob's and my own early association with the Oxford Groups...." (Bill Wilson, The Language of the Heart, p. 298.)

The Four Absolutes first appear in the work of Robert E. Speer, a Presbyterian missionary and scholar who studied the life and teachings of Jesus. Speer concluded that Jesus' own life reflected a set of absolute moral standards that could effectively serve to guide us in determining the course and content of our thoughts, decisions, and actions. Speer grouped these moral guidelines under the headings of Honesty, Purity, Unselfishness and Love and they later formed the foundation of the Oxford Group program.

When Bill Wilson was asked where the Absolutes could be found in his 12-Step formula, he replied, "I put them in Steps Six and Seven."

(Ernest Kurtz, Not-God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous, p. 242-43.)

The Absolutes never became a recognized part of the AA program. In part, this was because AA didn't want to be identified as an off-shoot of the Oxford Group and because Bill Wilson, unlike Dr. Bob, feared the Absolutes would scare off alcoholics by presenting them with unachievably high moral standards they might not be ready to accept.

Instead, the Big Book authors chose to focus on the opposites of these standards cautioning us to watch carefully for "selfishness, dishonesty, resentment, and fear."



## Understanding the Absolutes

Since Dr. Bob and many of the Akron and Cleveland area Pioneers continued practicing the Absolutes throughout their lives, it might be helpful to examine briefly each of these Four Moral Standards.

- **Absolute Honesty:** “No lying, no cheating, no stealing; in a word, in all your affairs, simply and absolutely no falsehood.” This is how one Pioneer based group (Tom Power’s All Addicts Anonymous) arrived at a working definition of honesty. “Is it true or is it false,” was the question asked in an early pamphlet on the Absolutes commissioned by Dr. Bob and still published by the Cleveland AA Central Office. This moral standard transitioned into the Big Book as our need to practice “rigorous honesty.”
- **Absolute Purity:** “Purity of mind, purity of body, purity of the emotions, purity of heart, sexual purity.” This Standard rests on an honest examination of our lives in all their dimensions. Regarding motives, decisions, thoughts, and actions, AA Pioneers asked the question, “Is it right, or is it wrong?” The Group rarely prohibited particular behaviors; rather, they asked members to consult their own conscience and follow God’s will and guidance for themselves. The founder of the Oxford Group is quoted as saying, “Do anything God lets you.” (A.J. Russell, *For Sinners Only: The Book of the Oxford Groups*, p.66.)
- **Absolute Unselfishness:** “Seeking what is right and true ahead of what I want in every situation.” Here the Pioneers asked, “How will this affect the other fellow?” A.J. Russell, one of the Groups major authors, listed the many destructive forms of self: “self-importance,” “self-interest,” “self-pity,” “self-seeking,” “self-consciousness,” “self-indulgence,” “self-centeredness,” “self-sufficiency,” “self-will.” The Group proposed a radical but simple solution: Shift from being self-centered to becoming “God-centered” while being of maximal service to others.
- **Absolute Love:** “Loving God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength – loving your neighbor as yourself.” In their pamphlet the Pioneers asked, “Is it ugly or is it beautiful?” They stated, “...we have tasted a little, and we are hungry for more.” As alcoholics and addicts, we, like the Pioneers, need more of the only thing our souls find satisfying enough to bring meaning, wholeness, and purpose in life we crave. That thing is love, and we have come to know truly that “God is love.”

## Using the Absolutes Today

Those of us who have followed in Dr. Bob’s footsteps incorporating the Absolutes into our 12-Step Programs, have found these simple Standards to be helpful guides for both simplifying and enriching our Step work while also deepening our intimacy with God and with one another. Like the Pioneers, we make no claims of attaining them, rather, we use them as guideposts toward which we strive for living new lives free from the things that lie at the core of our addictions. For us, they have become powerful transformers of our consciousness, our character, and our conduct. We hope they may be so for you as well. Here are just a few of their applications we have found:

- **Steps Four & Five:** The Pioneers didn’t have the set of Big Book instructions for taking inventory. They were simply given four sheets of paper with one Absolute written atop of each as their guide. They were to ask God to show them where they were blocking his presence from entering their lives. They then listened, they wrote, and they shared.



- **Steps Six and Seven:** Focusing on these Four Standards we have built more solid foundations for our 12-Step programs. Knowing that this is where Bill Wilson put the Absolutes has given many of us a wholly new perspective on these two Steps.
- **Step Ten:** We use these Standards to “watch” our thoughts and actions as we grow daily in mindful awareness. Falling short as we do, we bring our need for strength, direction, and power to God in prayer. As one Pioneer wisely remarked, “If we don’t watch – we won’t know what to pray for.”
- **Step Eleven:** Through the practice of Two Way Prayer we grow in intimacy with God as we receive our daily Guidance. We record these thoughts in our journals and check them by the test of the Four Standards. If they are not honest, pure, unselfish, and loving, we know they cannot be from God.
- **Step Twelve:** As we grow through an intimate experience of God’s love, we lose many of our fears and undergo the deeper psychic change the Big Book says is necessary to overcome addiction. Dr. Bob said, “Keep It Simple” and we believe applying the Absolutes to our Programs can help us do exactly that.

Please watch our video at: [www.TwoWayPrayer.org](http://www.TwoWayPrayer.org)

Listen to our Podcasts on **TWP @ Father Bill W.**

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