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The Four Absolutes—Still More Revealed**Additional Source Materials From Beginning to End****By Dick B.****The Overview**

This is the concluding article in my series on the Four Absolutes. You can get the full picture as I researched and wrote it by reading three of my titles:

- (1) *The Oxford Group and Alcoholics Anonymous* <http://www.dickb.com/Oxford.shtml>
- (2) *New Light on Alcoholism* (Rev. Shoemaker) <http://www.dickb.com/newlight.shtml>
- (3) *Anne Smith's Journal* (Dr. Bob's wife) <http://www.dickb.com/annesm.shtml>

The articles are designed to give you accurate information concerning the origin of the absolutes in Speer's book *The Principles of Jesus*; their expansion in Wright's book *The Will of God and a Man's Lifework*; their adoption in the writings of Dr. Frank Buchman, Rev. Sam Shoemaker, and other Oxford Group writers; and their use in Akron's first A.A. group as explained by Dr. Bob, his wife Anne Smith, and the AA of Akron pamphlets of the early days. Furthermore, unless you have knowledge of the sources in the Bible from which the Absolutes were taken by Dr. Speer, Professor Wright, Frank Buchman, and the others, you will simply be looking at a lot of individual and diverse opinions—"opinions" being ideas that don't always find great favor in the A.A. community. The early saying about them was: "Give me news, not views."

Let's Start with Professor Henry B. Wright's Book

Our Oxford Group/A.A. friend, Rev. T. Willard Hunter, wrote that Professor Wright of Yale probably had more influence on Oxford Group Founder Dr. Frank N.D. Buchman than anyone other than Buchman's own mother. Wright's key book was *The Will of God and A Man's Lifework* (New York: Association Press, 1924). It was copyrighted in 1909. Its studies were originally prepared by laymen to meet the needs of students in the Association Bible Classes for Seniors of the Academic and Scientific Departments of Yale University. Wright's title is a classic for one who wants to know the origin of the many Oxford Group ideas Frank Buchman borrowed from Wright.

Wright begins his book with a chapter on the will of God. Then he quotes Jesus and the Apostles on the subject. Then he quotes varied verses in the Bible and statements by early thinkers like Professors Horace Bushnell, Henry Drummond, and William James. He dwells at length on the principle of absolute surrender of self, the relationship of surrender of self to spiritual experiences, the decision to do God's will, the concept of

willingness, the universal will of God as found in the Bible, and the “Particular Will of God for Each Individual Man.”

Then comes his presentation of the “Four Touchstones of Jesus and the Apostles.” Wright begins with the verse in 1 Thessalonians 4:3: “For this is the will of God, even your sanctification. . . .” Continuing these theme in Thessalonians, Wright defines God’s injunctions: (1) Purity—1 Thessalonians 4:3-5--abstaining from fornication, possessing your vessel in sanctification and honour, and not in the lust of concupiscence. (2) Honesty—1 Thessalonians 4:6--“That no man go beyond and defraud his brother in any matter. (3) Unselfishness—1 Thessalonians 4:11-13--peaceableness, etc. (4) Love—1 Thessalonians 4:9-10--“for ye yourselves are taught of God to love one another.”

Then Wright discusses the absolutes in detail. As to “absolute purity,” Wright quotes from Bushnell, Speer, and the Bible; and he plunges into the specific verses dealing with being “pure in heart,” and abstaining from fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, adultery and foul stories. And you can find Dr. Bob himself referring to these same sins. Wright takes a similar approach as to “absolute honesty” (dealing with cribbing, sharp dealing, lying, disclosing of confidences, and exaggeration). So too “absolute unselfishness” (speaking of denying one’s self; avoiding bitterness, wrath, and anger; being kind, tenderhearted, forgiving, peaceable, gentle; and eschewing envy, greed, and lawlessness). Finally comes his discussion of “absolute love” (quoting so many of the verses in the Bible on love). The point is that Professor Wright did not wing it when it came to defining the “absolute” standards of Jesus. He went straight to the Bible and quoted what the Word of God had to say on each subject. Therein lies the value and importance of his writing.

Bill Wilson seemed to have lots of trouble with the “absolutes.” He emphasized in his Big Book that “we are not saints” and “we claim spiritual progress rather than spiritual perfection.” He just plain ignored the four absolutes as such. But this seems the product of guilt about his own womanizing and profiteering, rather than disdain for the principles themselves. And he would have done well to repeat explicitly what Professor Wright had to say about falling short:

Disobedience is a *deliberate, voluntary* transgression of purity, honesty, unselfishness, or love; *the refusal* (not necessarily the failure) to obey one’s conviction of the right (Wright, *The Will of God, supra*, p.223).

After the dedication, the truly surrendered man has made a contract with God to be *always* pure, *always* honest, *always* unselfish, *always* loving in deeds of self-expression; he may fail now and then, but he corrects his mistake as soon as he realizes it and presses on, so the channel is always open. Through compelling convictions of purity, honesty, unselfishness or service, which his vow requires him to translate at once into action, he can now be led into fields of provision and out of paths of danger (Wright, *supra*, p. 251).

Dr. Bob said to the end of his life that he felt the Four Absolutes were important and were “yardsticks” for testing appropriate behavior. I personally do not find the Big Book itself

compromising on the importance of honesty, unselfishness, and love. Moreover, the Big Book's remarks on its restitution steps and on the Tenth Step call for picking yourself up, correcting your mistakes, and seeing what can be done to improve things by following spiritual principles.

Rev. Almond's Foundations For Faith

More than sixty years after Wright spelled out the Biblical concepts supporting the Four Absolutes, Reverend. Harry J. Almond published *Foundations For Faith* (London: Moral Re-Armament, 1975). This was almost 100 years after Speer had promulgated the ideas from the teachings of Jesus. And Almond did a crackerjack job of discussing the Four Absolutes. He picked up the Oxford Group saw: "Sin is The Disease. Christ is The Cure. The Result is a Miracle." He pointed out the commands of the Bible which define the sin or disease—the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:3-17), Jesus's definition of the things that come from within, and defile a man (Mark 7:20-23); Jesus's statement that whoever relaxes the least of these commandments and teaches men to do so shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:19); and Paul's statement that those who violate the commandments will not inherit the kingdom of God, but that some were washed, sanctified, and justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of God (Almond, *supra*, p. 2).

Almond wrote that the "moral standards as tests" must be absolute; otherwise they are not standards. Almond quotes Jesus from Matthew 5:48: "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Almond also points to many specifically relevant verses defining honesty, purity, unselfishness, and love. It is a guidebook to the real meaning of each standard.

Many have asked me where A.A.'s Fourth Step inventory came from. Almond gives one explanation of its origin: "To recognize sin it might be good to stop here, and with pencil and paper take a few minutes to note every point that comes to mind and conscience where your life has not corresponded with these absolute standards: Honesty, Purity, Unselfishness, Love" (Almond, *supra*, p. 5). Sam Shoemaker went through that very process in 1919 in China and often spoke of it in connection with "self-examination"—the precursor of A.A.'s Fourth Step moral inventory.

Origins in "A First Century Christian Fellowship"

Very soon after Frank Buchman began gathering a group of friends around him, those people were calling themselves "A First Century Christian Fellowship." And that name was in common usage by those friends and by what soon became the "Groups" throughout the 1920's. Rev. Sam Shoemaker frequently called the Oxford Group by that name, as witnessed by his remarks in *Twice Born Ministers*; and I have many announcements and invitations I obtained from James and Eleanor Forde Newton that describe the Oxford Group as A First Century Christian Fellowship.

If you go back to the Oxford Group beginnings, you start primarily with the title by Howard Arnold Walter, Literary Secretary, National Council Young Men's Christian Association of India and Ceylon. Walter wrote this title in conjunction with Professor Henry B. Wright and Reverend Frank N.D. Buchman. It bore the name *Soul-Surgery: Some Thoughts on*

Incisive Personal Work, and was published in 1919. Its major topic dealt with what later became called the 5 C's—Confidence, Confession, Conviction, Conversion, Conservation [also called “Continuance”]. These five principles, in turn, became the heart of the ideas behind A.A. Steps Three through Twelve, as Bill Wilson himself was later to write in *The Language of the Heart*. The point here is that author H. A. Walter made much of what Sherwood Eddy had bidden as the third step in soul-winning: that step was to “make the moral test” (Walter, *Soul-Surgery*, Connecticut: Record Press, 1920, p. 69). Walter cited a pamphlet by Sherwood Eddy and Frank Buchman, titled “Ten Suggestions for Personal work,” which I have not yet located. But the third point was “Make the moral test;” and Dr. Bob’s wife Anne picked up on this expression in her spiritual journal. So making the A.A. origins of making a moral test came at least as early as 1919.

Now go back to the next hard-to-find title: Clarence Irving Benson, *The Eight Points of The Oxford Group: An Exposition For Christians and Pagans* (Melbourne: Humphrey Milford Oxford University Press, 1935). Benson has a chapter (IV) on “Daily Checking The Four Absolutes” (pp. 44-57). Though I could find little evidence that Benson’s book itself was read widely either in the Oxford Group or by the A.A. pioneers, there is clear language in that book that somehow found its way to Alcoholics Anonymous. Thus Benson speaks of a business inventory, checking the books, and taking stock (p. 44). He says:

The Group takes the four absolute standards of the life of Christ—Absolute Love, Absolute Purity, Absolute Honesty and Absolute Unselfishness. These are applied as daily tests of life in all its issues. This practice of regular self-examination in the light of Christ has proved to be of genuine practical value in our Christian development” (p. 45).

He deals with the issue of “perfection” and says Christ did not ask the impossible. He simply asks that man emulate God as the perfect Father (pp. 46-47). Benson then refers to 1 Corinthians 13 as the summary of perfect love—a chapter that was highly favored in early A.A. Benson further quotes evangelist Dwight Moody for these words: “If you want to be miserable, look within. If you want to be distracted, look around, but if you want to have peace, look up” (p. 56). He quotes Paul: “I love; yet not I, but Christ loveth in me.” He adds that we are not merely trying to approximate to a standard without and separate from us, but God begins to dwell in us. We are not called to conform to an outward code, we work out a living principle that is within us (pp. 56-57). And if so many today, and Bill Wilson yesterday, could have studied and understood the heart of the Four Absolutes—the Christ in you declaration—they would not have been so quick to put their senses knowledge to defining absolutes in human terms or rejecting them as human impossibilities.

The Picture as A.A. Developed

In the mid-1930's (when A.A. was founded), there were plenty of discussions, and books with discussions, of the Four Absolutes. Dr. Bob read the books and circulated them. *What is The Oxford Group* was one, though it was not written by an Oxford Group person. But the most popular was certainly Arthur James Russell’s *For Sinners Only* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1932). It was mentioned in Anne Smith’s Journal. It was read and circulated by Dr. Bob. And it was immensely well-known and widely read by Oxford Group people. I have found

copies in the library of every Oxford Group person to whom I have talked.

A few points in *For Sinners Only* will help us conclude this summary. Russell essentially devoted an entire chapter to the Four Absolutes (pp. 267-277). He covered the common Buchman teachings about sin and then introduced Buchman's moral standards as follows:

Christianity has a moral backbone. And let us take for convenience four of the simple moral standards that we see in Christ's own life—honesty, purity, unselfishness and love. Those standards are absolute. No one has ever yet proved He compromised on any one of those four. Let us take them one by one and see how we measure up to His standard (p. 269).

Using terms familiar to both Oxford Groupers and AAs, Russell tackles each of the absolutes in detail. He cites Scripture, and he gives examples of shortcomings. His portion on unselfishness will ring on familiar A.A. ears in Russell's discussion of *Self*. Dealing with a well-known and old A.A. foe, Russell says:

Then, again, there is self-centeredness. Most of us are born rotating on the axis ego, and continue to do so until the end of our lives, often at an increasing rate. One result of that is that we are never able to keep friends for any length of time. It not only loses us friends, but often keeps us from bothering to make them. . . . And now for one of the biggest monsters of the self—self will. We simply want our own way and will not yield (pp. 274-275).

Those familiar with the A.A. philosophy as stated in the Big Book will quickly recognize the foregoing and many other A.A. expressions that poured out of Russell's 1932 Oxford Group book. Russell ends the absolutes chapter with a plea to ask for a "Christ-controlled life" where he is "Lord and Master of all" (p. 277).

A Suggestion

If you'd like to know what the Four Absolutes were really intended to be, where they came from, and how they can be understood today, particularly in A.A., I believe the foregoing resources will be most helpful. They'll put these moral standards in Godly terms for you instead of mere human opinions of what some person thinks is "right or wrong."

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