

[Article 25]

**“God as we understood Him”
An Alleged Compromise That Opened the Door**

By Dick B.

My Own Experience

At my first A.A. meeting, I was delighted. Friendliness, laughter, concern, suggestions. All came pouring toward me at the “Wednesday Night What It’s Like Now” meeting_later to become my Home Group. At my second meeting, I made a speech about needing help with a pending court appearance. And a non_attorney offered to come with me; he said he had studied law in Brazil. By my third meeting, I was beginning to detox heavily. Yet I didn’t know what detoxing was, what was happening, or that I was becoming really sick. They told me to use orange juice and honey. I searched high and low for honey, bought a bag of oranges, put them in the microwave, and never saw them again. But I made another speech. This time, I stood at the door of the “Friday Nite Beginners’ Meeting,” announced that I had been very frightened, said I had seen “God as we understood Him” on the wall, had prayed to God as I did understand Him, and had really found peace, for that night at least. Unquestionably, however, I was a little crazy_as only A.A. newcomers can be. A few days later, I had three grand mal seizures at an A.A. meeting. I was trundled off in an ambulance to the Emergency Room and then Intensive Care. In a day or two, I checked in to a treatment center. But that’s another story. The point here is that I stuck, and have stuck, with A.A. I believed I could and would receive help because A.A. had seemed to recommend entrusting my life to the care of God as I understood Him. I’ve since found out that thousands have done the same thing in the more than sixty_five years since A.A.’s founding. They, like myself, have received help. Some are simply “dry”_still suffering from “untreated alcoholism.” Some say they are “in recovery.” Some of us say we have “recovered,” Some of us, just as Bill Wilson, Dr. Bob, and A.A. Number Three (Bill Dotson) said, say we have been “cured.” Some of us, who are believers, are very clear that we have been delivered

So, Was A.A. about God “as we understood Him”?

It didn’t take very long for me to get an answer to that question. Of course it wasn’t! And how did I find out. Well, I’ve already covered the myriad of “higher power” and “power greater than ourselves” phrases that were floating around the rooms and in recent Twelve Step literature. No rational person could say these have anything whatever to do with our Creator. These “powers” seemed to mean just about anything to the confused crowd with which I hung out. Whether my new_found A.A. friends had been lawyers like myself, painters like my first sponsor, warehousemen like his sponsor, teachers like my room mate, or “consultants” (a handy A.A. word for unemployed, devastated, newcomers), all had different ideas about this “power greater than themselves.”

My first sponsor did occasionally talk about God. His sponsor talked about a “higher power.” My roommate talked about witchcraft. Others talked about a “rock,” a “Big Dipper,” and a “Group of Drunks” as their higher powers. Some even offered to “loan” out their own “higher

power” until the newer person could find his own_which, they said, could be anything greater than himself. One authoritative sounding fellow assured those present at almost any and every Friday Nite Beginners’ Meeting, that his “higher power” was Ralph. Somehow, I was able to resist buying in to that one. However, his name for a god still rings loudly in my ear.

But, as my increasing period of sobriety droned forward, and my continued need for God’s help multiplied by leaps and bounds, I determined that there was no common agreement in the A.A. rooms where I was going daily. There clearly was no consensus as to “who” or “what” this so_called higher power was. In fact, many an older member has simply said in my presence that he couldn’t and didn’t need to understand “it.” Rather, that he just needed to keep his “program” very very simple. All you had to keep in mind, these members proclaimed, was: “Just don’t drink. And go to meetings.” I have had no trouble following that advice for years. But as one writer said, “Drinking’s not the problem.” And I realized these keep_it_simple guys had rarely advanced to any understanding of God. Certainly not that they would admit to. Almost all had not read the Bible, gone to any church, or developed any interest whatever in “religion.” They bragged about A.A.’s being “spiritual, but not religious” even though few had the slightest idea what that meant.

Where Did This Phrase Originate?

I won’t quote or cite the circulating accounts about where this “as we understood Him” phrase came from. Many are wrong. Most are conflicting. In fact, until my research was under way, I had found no one that even mentioned the phrase in the same breath with A.A. The story tellers had simply ignored the very probable, real source_the Reverend Samuel Moor Shoemaker, Jr., Rector of Calvary Episcopal Church in New York.

Shoemaker had been a vibrant leader of the Oxford Group in America. He had long been a friend and supporter of Oxford Group Founder Frank Buchman. He even provided housing for the virtual American headquarters of the Oxford Group in Calvary House, next to his Calvary Church. He allowed Dr. Buchman to live there when he was in the New York area. And Shoemaker wrote dozens of Oxford Group books, pamphlets, and articles until he split with its founder in 1941.

Actually, you can find many words and phrases in Sam Shoemaker’s books that seem to have been incorporated almost verbatim in Bill Wilson’s Big Book, talks, and writings. Bill often sang the praises of Reverend Shoemaker, dubbed Sam a “Co_founder” of A.A., said Sam had been a well_spring of its ideas, exchanged lots of correspondence with Sam, and had him speak at two A.A. International Conventions. Sam was also invited to, and did, write several articles for A.A.’s “house organ,” the Grapevine. Bill had many a talk with Sam Shoemaker before he (Bill) drafted A.A.’s basic text. Bill submitted a draft manuscript to Shoemaker for review prior to publication in 1939. And Bill had asked Sam Shoemaker to write the Twelve Steps. However, Shoemaker declined_saying the Steps should be written by an alcoholic, namely, Bill.

Shoemaker was the closest thing to a spiritual mentor that Bill Wilson had, prior to his completion and publication of A.A.’s Big Book in the Spring of 1939. Bill had never belonged to a church. He had (by his own acknowledgment) been a “conservative atheist.” Bill has been

reported, by his wife and by A.A.'s first archivist, to have read practically no religious literature. Bill himself said he knew nothing about the Bible until he moved in with Dr. Bob and Anne Smith in the summer of 1935—the period when A.A. was founded and nightly discussions of its principles and practices had been conducted by Bill and Dr. Bob.

The foregoing facts about Bill, A.A., and Sam Shoemaker can be found specifically documented in a number of writings. I have covered them all in my book, *New Light on Alcoholism: God, Sam Shoemaker, and A.A.*, 2d ed. (<http://www.dickb.com/newlight.shtml>). I've also covered them in my books about the Oxford Group and Sam Shoemaker: *The Oxford Group and Alcoholics Anonymous: A Design for Living That Works*, 2d ed. (<http://www.dickb.com/Oxford.shtml>) and *Good Morning!: Quiet Time, Morning Watch, Meditation, and A.A.* (<http://www.dickb.com/goodmorn.shtml>). I've also discussed them in the *Courage to Change* (which I wrote with Bill Pittman) and in *The Akron Genesis of Alcoholics Anonymous*, 2d ed. (<http://www.dickb.com/Akron.shtml>). Bill himself discussed most of these facts. They are recorded, here and there, in *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, *The Language of the Heart*, *Pass It On*, and the *Best of the Grapevine* volumes (all being "Conference Approved" publications of Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc.).

Specific Examples in Shoemaker Writings of the "God as we understand Him" Idea

Surrender to God

Sam wrote much about the importance of surrender—surrender to God! Among his papers at the Episcopal Church Archives in Austin, Texas, I found the following:

There was nothing actually new to be learned from the experience when related. "I just gave my life over to God" or "I surrender to Christ" (Dick B., *New Light on Alcoholism*, 2d ed., p. 92; <<http://www.dickb.com/newlight.shtml>>)

Other Examples of Sam's Surrender Language

Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. . . . A man is born again when the control of his life, its center and its direction pass from himself to God (Shoemaker, *National Awakening*, p. 57).

One may say that the whole development of Christianity in inwardness has consisted in little more than the greater and greater emphasis attached to this crisis of self_surrender (Shoemaker, *Realizing Religion*, p. 30).

Surrender is not conversion, we cannot convert ourselves; but it is the first step in the process (Shoemaker, *Confident Faith*, p. 41).

Sam on the Act of Surrender_a Decision

Decision. . . . We must help people to make an act of self_surrender to Christ, which renounces all known sins, accepts Him as Saviour, and begins Christian life in earnest (Shoemaker, *The Church Alive*, p. 41).

He went into his room, knelt by his bed, and gave his life in surrender to God (Shoemaker, *Children of the Second Birth*, p. 175).

She surrendered to God her groundless fears, and with them turned over her life for His direction (Shoemaker, *Children of the Second Birth*, p. 82).

That night I decided to “launch out into the deep:” and with the decision to cast my will and my life on God, there came an indescribable sense of relief, of burdens dropping away (Shoemaker, *Twice_Born Ministers*, p. 134).

And Then, Surrender As Much of Yourself As You Can to As Much of God As You Understand

So they prayed together, opening their minds to as much of God as he understood. . . (Shoemaker, *Children of the Second Birth*, p. 47, italics added).

So he said that he would “surrender as much of himself as he could, to as much of Christ as he understood” (Shoemaker, *Children of the Second Birth*, p. 25, italics added. See also, and compare “In Memoriam” Princeton, *The Graduate Council*, June 10, 1956, pp. 2_3; and Shoemaker, *How to Become a Christian*, p. 72).

The finding of God, moreover, is a progressive discovery; and there is so much more for all of us to learn about him. (Shoemaker, *How to Find God*, p. 1).

Begin honestly where you are. Horace Bushnell once said, “Pray to the dim God, confessing the dimness for honesty’s sake.” I was with a man who prayed his first real prayer in these words: “O God, if there be a God, help me now because I need it.” God sent him help. He found faith. He found God. . . God will come through to you and make Himself known (Shoemaker, *How to Find God*, p. 6. See and compare: Alcoholics Anonymous, 3rd ed., p. 37: “But He has come to all who have honestly sought Him. When we drew near to Him. He disclosed Himself to us!” See also the Bible book so popular with the pioneers_James: “Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you,” James 4:8).

[A]ny honest person can begin the spiritual experiment by surrendering “as much of himself as he can, to as much of Christ as he understands” (Shoemaker, *Extraordinary Living for Ordinary Men*, p. 76, italics added).

There was no talk at all about surrendering to as much of Ralph or to as much of a lightbulb or to as much of a tree as you understand! A.A.’s Big Book implored: May you find God_not just some A.A. group! Groups are found in meeting schedules, not the Bible.

Said Sam in substance: You simply start where you are in your understanding. You surrender as much of yourself as you can. To as much of God as you understand. Then, added Sam, God will come through to you, make Himself known, and enable you to understand more. You will come to believe. You will find God, said Sam. God will make Himself known. God will not be making

known a tree, a coke bottle, or a radiator. He will make known Himself_God, our Creator!

Similar Ideas and Words in Other Oxford Group Writings

Stephen Foot was one of the most popular Oxford Group writers of the early 1930's. Foot used a slightly different form of expression. It presented the same idea of initial, limited understanding. It spoke instead of initial, limited knowledge of God (surrendering all that you know of self to all that you know of God). Foot's language was also used by Dr. Bob's wife Anne Smith in her journal, and by long_time Oxford Group activist James D. Newton in his biographical *Uncommon Friends* title. These stalwart Oxford Group admirers were also readers of, and thoroughly acquainted with, the works of Rev. Sam Shoemaker. Respectively, they wrote:

Life began for me with a surrender of all that I know of self to all that I knew of God (Foot, *Life Began Yesterday*, pp. 12_13, italics added. See also James D. Newton, *Uncommon Friends*, p. 154).

Are you prepared to do his will, let the cost be what it may? That is surrender of all one knows of self to all one knows of God (Foot, *Life Began Yesterday*, p. 175, italics added).

[In her journal, Dr. Bob's wife Anne Smith twice wrote the following idea:] Try to bring a person to a decision to "surrender as much of himself as he knows to as much of God as he knows." Stay with him until he makes a decision and says it aloud (Dick B., *Anne Smith's Journal*, 3rd ed, pp. 25, 97, italics added; <<http://www.dickb.com/annesm.shtml>>).

Look at What Bill Wilson Said before the "Atheism" Compromise

Before he scratched out "God" in favor of his "as we understood Him" compromise language, Bill was telling the story far more differently, far more accurately, and far more consistently in terms of what he had learned from his sponsor Ebby Thacher, from Anne Smith and her journal, and from Shoemaker and Oxford Group writings and talks. Bill wrote:

This is what my friend [Ebby Thacher] suggested I do: Turn my face to God as I understand Him [italics added] and say to Him with earnestness_complete honesty and abandon_that I henceforth place my life at His disposal and Direction forever (*Bill Wilson's Original Story*, a thirty_four page document I found at Bill's home at Stepping Stones, p. 30, lines 989_992).

[Ebby Thacher said to Bill:] So, call on God as you understand God. Try prayer (W.W., "The Fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous," *Quarterly Journal of Studies on Alcohol*. Yale University, 1945, p. 463, italics added).

[Reciting in A.A.'s own basic text, precisely how he had followed Ebby Thacher's instructions, Bill wrote:] There I humbly offered myself to God, as I then understood Him, to do with me as He would. I placed myself unreservedly under His care and direction (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, 3rd ed., p. 13, italics added).

Bill did not turn his face to, or call on, or humbly offer himself to, a radiator, a tree, a lightbulb, a

Group of Drunks, or any other blatantly idolatrous symbol. He turned to God as he (Bill Wilson) did then and there understand God. That is a piece of ignored A.A. history that should be blazoned on the desk of everyone who tries to sell snake oil to an unwary A.A. newcomer.

Using language very similar to that used by Sam Shoemaker in his book *Confident Faith*, Bill wrote quite eloquently:

When we became alcoholics crushed by a self_imposed crisis we could not postpone or evade, we had to fearlessly face the proposition that either God is everything or else He is nothing. God either is, or He isn't. What was our choice to be? (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, 3rd ed., p. 53). See Hebrews 11:6 (. . . for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him); and Shoemaker, *Confident Faith*, pp. 20_21 (God is, or He isn't. You leap one way or the other.).

Bill did not assert that a radiator either is or it isn't. He did not claim that a lightbulb either is or it isn't. He didn't declare that Santa Claus either is or he isn't. Consistent with the words of Hebrews 11:6 in the Bible, and the reasoning of his friend Sam Shoemaker, Bill Wilson made the very simple and rational statement that God either is, or He isn't. Then, following the instructions of the Oxford Group, Shoemaker, and his friend Ebby Thacher, Bill Wilson "surrendered as much of himself as he understood to as much of God as he (Bill) then understood."

You Start with Shoemaker, the Oxford Group, and Dr. Bob's Wife

That's it, folks. The story of how the "God as we understood Him" phrase came to be inserted in the Big Book and Twelve Steps seems to have been much distorted by the claim of an A.A. old_timer Jim B. that he (Jim) was responsible for this phrase "as we understood Him." We thoroughly explored that claim, just as far as we were able; and we found that Bill Wilson had never acknowledged Jim's claim. As we researched Shoemaker's writings, Oxford Group books, and Anne Smith's journal, we saw a far different history that suggested a far different origin of the phrase. For one thing, we saw that Jim B. had not been sober until long after Stephen Foot, Sam Shoemaker, Jim Newton, and Anne Smith had tendered the commonly used expression that you surrender to as much of God as you understand! (See Dick B., *Turning Point*, pp. 172_181 <http://www.dickb.com/Turning.shtml>; *Anne Smith's Journal*, 3rd ed., p.26, n.10 <http://www.dickb.com/annesm.shtml>) You don't start with an avowed atheist (Jim B.) who apparently was neither sober nor present when the phrase "as we understood Him" was suggested and substituted in Step Three and Step Eleven. You start with the Bible students (Sam Shoemaker and Anne Smith_Dr. Bob's wife) who were close to Bill Wilson in the pre_publication years and who had been expressing, for beginners, this idea five to ten years before A.A.'s Big Book was first published. They had an understanding of God. They felt others could gain an understanding and knowledge by starting with whatever understanding they had at the time of their "surrender" to God. Quite clearly, Bill and his friends were talking about God, our Creator, Yahweh!

END