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The Oxford Group and Alcoholics Anonymous

By Dick B.

Part One

Answering Your Questions Accurately and Definitely

At A.A.'s Seattle Convention in 1990, I first heard mention of the Oxford Group and Alcoholics Anonymous. I had come there to learn A.A.'s Bible roots, but heard nothing about that. I did notice that one oldtimer on the archives panel had a book about the Oxford Group. It was called *What is the Oxford Group?* It had an anonymous author, who I was later to learn was not an Oxford Group "member." But his book sure bore some remarkable resemblances to A.A. ideas and language. My later research unearthed the fact that Dr. Bob had owned and circulated several copies of the book among Akron AAs and that Oxford Group Founder Dr. Frank Buchman had also circulated the book.

Then Hazelden historian Bill Pittman and A.A.'s second archivist at GSO Frank Mauser referred me to Rev. Leslie D. Weatherhead's *Discipleship*. As Frank Mauser pointed out to me, the content was directly relevant to A.A. ideas, and the language had the cadence of the Oxford Group. What I observed was that, if I were to know much about the spiritual ideas of Alcoholics Anonymous, I was going to have to do some heavy digging because you couldn't directly or indirectly find much of anything about the Group either in A.A. publications or in the extant writings by A.A. historians. Sure, you could find mention of the "Four Absolutes" with Bill W. criticizing them and Dr. Bob approving them. But what were they? Where did they come from? What did they really require or suggest? And how did they get into A.A.?

Pittman's book *AA The Way It Began* (now published by Hazelden) contained a storehouse of Oxford Group literature. Some was written by Group activists; some by "scholars;" and some by critics. There was enough in the Bibliography to keep me searching libraries, seminaries, and A.A. collections; and the more I searched, the more questions I had and the more A.A. language I saw. Then I was able to visit two of the oldest (in age and participation) Oxford Group people in America—James Draper Newton and his wife Eleanor Forde Newton, who lived in Florida and had participated since the early 1920's, knew both Frank Buchman and Rev. Sam Shoemaker (an American leader) very well, and generously gave me facts, books, and the names and addresses of other Oxford Group leaders here and abroad. This, in turn, put me in touch with Garth Lean in England who is the principal biographer of Frank Buchman's life.

Without describing in detail all the Oxford Group dinosaurs who became a part of my research, friendship circle, and resources, I would nonetheless mention Garth Lean, Charles Haines, Parks Shipley, Sr., Michael Hutchinson (England), Robin Mowat (England), Kenneth Belden (England), Rev. Harry Almond, George Vondermuhll, Jr., James Houck, T. Willard Hunter, Mrs. W. Irving Harris, and several other writers and activists. With these fine guides and the literature they supplied, the answers began to come.

The Places to Look

I would like to believe that four of my own titles answer most of the questions about the Oxford Group origins, principles, practices, and life-changing program that became an integral part of A.A.'s program. My first book is *The Oxford Group and Alcoholics Anonymous: A Design for Living That Works*, 2d Edition. The Foreword is by T. Willard Hunter, the foremost Oxford Group speaker and writer today, who knew Frank Buchman and Sam Shoemaker, and worked for the Group in earlier years. My Oxford Group book covers the sources of Oxford Group ideas, the mentors of the Group, the history of the group, the role of Founder Frank Buchman, the twenty-eight Oxford Group ideas that impacted on Alcoholics Anonymous, the traces in our Twelve Steps, and dozens of Oxford Group phrases that found their way into our A.A. language and literature. *Good Morning!: Quiet Time, Morning Watch, Meditation, and Early A.A.* deals with all the elements of the new birth, guidance, quiet time, Bible study, prayer, listening, and journaling that were part of daily Oxford Group practices and became thoroughly embedded in A.A., particularly in its Eleventh Step. *Courage to Change*, which I wrote with Bill Pittman, examined each of the Twelve Steps and some other historical matter in terms of Oxford Group leader Sam Shoemaker's contribution to the Christian roots of A.A. Finally, because so much of Sam Shoemaker's writings, became difficult to obtain, I wrote *New Light on Alcoholism: God, Sam Shoemaker, and A.A.* In over 600 pages of material, with twelve appendices, and a huge bibliography, this history gives specifics about Shoemaker's life, his A.A. role, his friendship with Bill Wilson, the contents of his pre-1939 books and pamphlets, his impact on the Twelve Steps, and almost 200 words and phrases in his writings that can be found in A.A. literature and language. There is no body of work like that contained in the four books mentioned above.

However, I have always believed—perhaps because of my thirty years of law practice—that the best evidence is the raw material itself. This means the correspondence, manuscripts, pamphlets, pictures, and books on the subject matter. And when it comes to the Oxford Group, we are blessed with hundreds, if not thousands. Most of these were not discussed or available for view until I began my research, travel, and writing. Today they are becoming more and more available at the Griffith House Library, operated by the non-profit Wilson House Foundation at East Dorset, Vermont. We had and are now distributing 23,000 historical books and materials at the Frederick Robert Johnston Recovery Resource Center here on Maui. And in the last day or so, we arranged to place key materials at Dr. Bob's church in Akron—St. Paul's Episcopal Church. We expect to have more in New England, the Midwest, and the Southwest.

Already there are three sets of 15 TV segments running on community television on three of the Hawaiian Islands including Maui and Oahu. Others are planned for central and southern California. The films depict our entire 23,000 item collection with explanations of the various books, certainly including the Oxford Group books.

And What are the Oxford Group books?

If you want to get definitive information, some of the original Oxford Group books are becoming more and more available—not only at our proposed resource centers, but also through purchase on the internet and in used bookstores. They will also become available at some 12 Step Fellowship Conferences, just as they were at Archives 2000 in Minneapolis this year. Now, what are those Oxford Group books?

The answer is that there are hundreds of them. But some books and pamphlets are far

more important than others, particularly those published in the period from 1919 to 1939—the latter being the date A.A.'s Big Book was published. And the core books are listed here for your use or acquisition. Most fall into categories which tell you what they are about and what you can learn from them.

The Oxford Group ideas that counted in early A.A.

From the key books mentioned below and which will be referred to in later articles, you can get the meat and meaning of Oxford Group ideas that influenced and survived in A.A., though AAs may not always realize it. All the ideas came from the Bible; and the Bible was daily fare among Oxford Group people. These ideas number twenty-eight; and, at the suggestion and with the approval of the Oxford Group writers such as Garth Lean and Willard Hunter who helped me, I have grouped them in certain categories to make them easier to identify. They focus around the need for man to find God and change his life to harmonize with God's will. Frank Buchman simplified this life-changing program by using the expression: Sin is the problem. Jesus Christ is the solution. The result is a miracle.

The ideas and brief bibliographic Oxford Group references are as follows, and a listing of the literature follows in the next portion. You find the full titles, precise quotes, complete footnotes, and page references in my book *The Oxford Group and Alcoholics Anonymous: A Design for Living That Works*.

Ideas about God: God is our Creator as the Bible says (See Streeter, *The God Who Speaks* and Brown, *The Venture of Belief*); God has a plan (See Buchman, *Remaking the World*). Man's chief end is to do God's will and conform to God's plan (See Streeter, *The God Who Speaks*). You start by believing that God is (See Weatherhead, *How Can I Find God?*). And check out Hebrews 11:6

Sin—the blockage of self—is a reality and estranges us from God and our fellow man (See Foot, *Life Began Yesterday*).

Finding God: Surrender (of self to God) is the required turning point (See Benson, *The Eight Points*). Soul Surgery (cutting out sin) is the art or way (See Walter, *Soul Surgery*). A life-change is the needed and anticipated result (See Begbie, *Life Changers*).

The path to elimination of sin and establishing a relationship with God: Decision to surrender (See *What is the Oxford Group?*); Examining your self for sins (See Rose, *When Man Listens*); Confession of those sins to God and another (See Thornton-Duesbury, *Sharing*); Conviction that these sins must go (See Begbie, *Life-Changers*); Conversion so that a new birth occurs and man is a new creature (See Buchman, *Remaking the World*); Restitution to right the wrongs caused by the sins (See Russell, *For Sinners Only*).

Jesus Christ: The way to God, to power, and to change is through Christ (See Almond, *Foundations for Faith* and Phillimore, *Just for Today*).

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Continuance of the change is required for spiritual growth (For the so-called 5 C's—Confidence, Confession, Conviction, Conversion, and Conservation—see Walter, *Soul Surgery*): Conservation of the life-change is essential; Daily surrender is the need (See *What is the Oxford Group?*); Guidance—walking by faith is essential (See Forde, *The Guidance of God*); The Four Absolutes—honesty, purity, unselfishness, and love—are the perfect standards for measuring the walk as Christ defined it (See Russell, *For Sinners Only*); Quiet Time is an important part of daily surrender; Bible study is the first element; Prayer is next; Listening for God's voice and journaling the thoughts is next; Checking the thoughts against self-deception by seeing that they conform to the Bible is part of the process (See H. J. Rose, *The Quiet Time*).

The Spiritual Experience or Awakening (See Buchman's *Remaking the World* and Shoemaker's *National Awakening*): These phrases were Oxford Group phrases used commonly by Dr. Frank Buchman and Rev. Sam Shoemaker in their writings and speech. Following on the heels of the foregoing life-changing steps, they promised a knowledge of God's will and "God-consciousness"—an expression still found in A.A. literature.

Fellowship and Witness (See Benson's *Eight Points* as to Fellowship and Buchman's *Remaking the World* as to Witness). Calling itself A First Century Christian Fellowship, the Oxford Group sought fellowship with God and one another as a teams meeting in fellowship, working in groups, and sharing their experiences with others. Buchman himself used the expression "Pass it On" (later an AA phrase)

Biographical materials on Founder Dr. Frank Buchman

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 Begbie, Harold. *Life Changers*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1927
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 Howard, Peter. *Frank Buchman's Secret*. New York: Doubleday, 1961
 Lean, Garth. *Frank Buchman: A Life*: London: Constable, 1985
 American version: *On the Tail of a Comet*. Colorado: Helmers & Howard, 1988
 Spoerri, Theophil. *Dynamic out of Silence: Frank Buchman's Relevance Today*. London: Grosvenor Books, 1976
 Thornhill, Allen. *The Significance of the Life of Frank Buchman*. London; Moral Re-Armament, 1952.

Early Literature (read by AAs prior to publication of their Big Book)

- Allen, Geoffrey Francis. *He That Cometh*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1933
 Begbie, Harold. *Twice Born Men*. New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1909
 Benson, Clarence Irving. *The Eight Points of the Oxford Group*. London: Oxford

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- Foot, Stephen. *Life Began Yesterday*. New York: Harper Brothers, 1935
- Forde, Eleanor Napier. *The Guidance of God*. London: The Oxford Group, 1927
- Hamilton, A.S. Loudon. *Description of the First Century Christian Fellowship*. Vol 2. The Messenger, June, 1923.
- Kitchen, V.C. *I Was a Pagan*. New York. Harper & Brothers, 1934
- Letter 7, The South African Adventure. A Miracle Working God Abroad*. Oxford: The Groups, A First Century Christian Fellowship, 1930
- Raynor, Frank D. and Leslie Weatherhead. *The Finger of God*. London: Group Publications, 1934
- Russell, A. J. *For Sinners Only*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1932
- Viney, Hallen. *How do I Begin?* The Oxford Group, 61 Gramercy Park, New York, 1937
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Informative Summaries of Oxford Group Principles

- Almond, Harry J. *Foundations for Faith*. 2d ed., London: Grosvenor Books, 1980
- Belden, Kenneth D. *Meeting Moral Re-Armament*. London: Grosvenor Books, 1979
- Brown, Philip Marshall. *The Venture of Belief*. New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1935
- Buchman, Frank N. D. *Remaking the World*. London: Blandford Press, 1961
- Day, Sherwood Sunderland. *The Principles of the Group*. Oxford: University Press, circa 1923
- Hunter, T. Willard. *World Changing through Life Changing*. Thesis. Newton Center, Mass: Andover-Newton Theological School, 1977.
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- Phillimore, Miles. *Just for Today*. Privately published pamphlet, 1940
- Rose, Cecil. *When Man Listens*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1937
- Rose, Howard J. *The Quiet Time*. New York: Oxford Group at 61 Gramercy Park, North, 1937
- Streeter, Burnett Hillman. *The God Who Speaks*. London: Macmillan & Co., 1936
- The Layman with a Notebook. *What is the Oxford Group?* London: Oxford University Press, 1933
- Weatherhead, Leslie D. *Discipleship*. London: Student Christian Movement Press, 1934
- ___ *How Can I Find God?* New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1934.
- Winslow, Jack. *When I Awake*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1938.
- ___ *Why I Believe in the Oxford Group*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1934

The Pleasant Surprise

You can come to our centers where the actual information can be seen—particularly The Wilson House at Bill Wilson’s birthplace. You can listen to audio tapes and view video segments on public television. You can run to used bookstores and surf the net. You can go to seminars, <http://www.aabibliography.com> eztone@hotmail.com <http://www.dickb.com>

libraries, and archives. You can borrow a book. Or you can read the details in *The Oxford Group and Alcoholics Anonymous*. However you choose to learn about the Oxford Group and its impact on Alcoholics Anonymous in the 1930's, I predict a surprise for you. You'll see ideas, principles, and practices—often citing the sources in the Bible. You'll recognize words, phrases, and ideas that appear in A.A. literature, are used in meetings, and underlie the Steps. And I believe if you want to know and understand and help others with our spiritual program of recovery, you will be surprised at the benefits derived from knowing and understanding its sources such as the Oxford Group.

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