

[Article 14]

## **The Oxford Group and Alcoholics Anonymous, Part 2**

**by Dick B.**

### **Part Two**

#### **The Steps, The Facts, The Oxford Group**

##### **The Steps**

People in A.A. who are intensely enthusiastic about the Twelve Steps of recovery are fond of rejecting any “smorgasbord” approach to those Steps. They’ll say, for example, “The Steps are numbered for a reason.” And they rail against those who “take” and/or “practice” such of the twelve as appeal to them, yet leave the remainder of the Steps alone.

I’m not convinced that many really do accept or reject in this manner. Those who are timid about the program are more likely, I believe, to: “balk” at the Fourth Step; “lie” or withhold facts in their Fifth Step; “misunderstand” and underestimate the important principles behind Steps Six and Seven; simply fail to complete Steps Eight and Nine; and somehow overlook the “continuity” purpose of Steps Ten, Eleven, and Twelve. The last category, for example, might include those who say, “I practice *all* of the Steps *every day*,” or “I do *one* Step *each month*,” or “I’m doing all the Steps *again*.” When confronted with a more appropriate order, they may dodge the criticism by arguing that the steps are “suggestive” only and contain no requirements. In other words, they probably don’t ignore any of the Steps. Many—particularly the timid—just haven’t done or perhaps are unwilling to do the hard work involved in completing the first nine steps and applying what they’ve learned in “continuing” to practice the principles involved in the last three steps.

The same thing applies when it comes to learning our spiritual roots. There are at least six major spiritual roots: (1) The Bible. (2) Quiet Time. (3) The teachings of Rev. Sam Shoemaker. (4) The life-changing program of the Oxford Group. (5) The writings of Dr. Bob’s wife Anne Ripley Smith. (6) The Christian literature they read.

Added to these six roots are: (7) Some of the ideas of Professor William James (whose very words were used by Rev. Sam Shoemaker in his writings, and whose book *The Varieties of Religious Experience* was read by A.A.’s founders). (8) Some of the ideas of Dr. Carl Jung about conversion. (9) Some of the new thought phrases of Ralph Waldo Trine, Emmet Fox, and several “transcendentalists.” And then: (10) Some of the fall-out from Dr. William Silkworth on the “disease,” “allergy,” and “psychic change” concepts. (11) Richard Peabody on some of the “treatment” notions covered in his title *The Common Sense of Drinking*—also read by the founders and containing language similar to that found in A.A..

The more you research the more you find that our official, “reported” history has actually cluttered up the historical facts themselves. Thus there has been a failure even to explore or detail Dr. Bob’s work in Christian Endeavor as a youngster. This gap leaves this root of Akron’s “old fashioned prayer meetings” ignored as a major Bible root. Moreover, the failure to write

about Lois Wilson's Swedenborgian beliefs, family church membership, and her own affiliation—together with Bill's exposure to those influences--leaves out this possible "spiritualism" influence on, and support for, Bill's "spook sessions." It also may contribute to a failure to mention Lois's stated opposition to "conversion," "soul surgery," and possibly even to the Bible itself. The latter being a matter of omission rather than explicit opposition.

A problem definitely arises out of a "smorgasbord" approach to our *spiritual* roots and parts of roots. If you pick at some, pick out some, and push out others, you don't have the "Program." By "Program," we mean whatever Frank Amos meant when he came to Akron and thoroughly investigated Dr. Bob and those features which had produced such astonishing successes at Akron No. 1—A.A.'s first group. Worse, you can't attain an understanding of the "Program." It is easy to call it too religious, too Christian, too Protestant, or too Oxford Group—leaving the program itself to float in a sea of unbelief.

You may overlook the Bible because it is so little mentioned today. You may not appreciate the importance of Quiet Time because it has been so hacked up by later "meditation" and "reflection" and "twenty-four-hour" books. You may ignore the immense influence of Rev. Sam Shoemaker because the details of his specific role and contributions have been missing until recently. You may decline to look at the Oxford Group principles because of long-standing Roman Catholic and other opposition to Dr. Buchman and his work some 50 years ago. You may just plain miss the work of Anne Smith because her "journal" has been so long on the shelf—in fact, virtually banned from the history scene at her own home in Akron today. And you may omit the Christian literature early AAs read because it is voluminous and, for some, controversial. You may, as I did for quite some time, fail to appreciate or study the effect on A.A. "theology" of the ideas of William James, Ralph Waldo Trine, Emmet Fox, and others. In so doing, you may not realize the confusion and conflict fostered by putting some of our spiritual sources in your thinking, ignoring others, and believing everything in front of you was and is divinely inspired and just hunky dory.

### What Steps?

You won't spend much time digging in our early "Program" without realizing that, at its peak percentage-of-success period, which commenced in 1935, there were no Steps. No steps? No steps!" To assure your consideration of that fact, let's look at the record:

"Dr. Bob, noting that there were no Twelve Steps at the time and that 'our stories didn't amount to anything to speak of,' later said they were convinced that the answer to their problems was in the Good Book" (*DR BOB and the Good Oldtimers*, p. 96).

"As Dr. Bob recalled: 'I didn't write the Twelve Steps. I had nothing to do with the writing of them. . . . We already had the basic ideas, though not in terse and tangible form. We got them. . . as a result of our study of the Good Book'." (*DR. BOB and the Good Oldtimers*, p. 97).

"Dorothy [Snyder Murphy] recalled the 1937 meetings when 'the men would all disappear upstairs. . . After about half an hour or so, down would come the new man, shaking, white, serious, and grim. And all the people who were already in A.A. would come trooping down after him. They were pretty reluctant to talk about what had

happened, but after a while, they would tell us they had had a *real* surrender. I often wonder how many people that come in now would survive an experience like that—a regular old fashioned prayer meeting’.” (*DR. BOB and the Good Oldtimers*, p. 101).

“But Bill did get to see John D. Rockefeller, Jr., who dispatched Frank Amos out to Akron to investigate what was going on. Mr. Amos, who was soon to become one of A.A.’s first non-alcoholic trustees, did a thorough job of investigating what he referred to as the ‘self-styled Alcoholic Group of Akron, Ohio.’ He called on Dr. Bob and attended meetings. He questioned members and nonmembers, including professional associates of Dr. Bob. . . . In his report to Mr. Rockefeller in February, 1938, Mr. Amos said. . . . ‘they [the stories of the men, their wives, and in some cases their mothers]. . . were all remarkably alike in ‘the technique used and the system followed.’ He described the ‘Program’ as follows: ‘1. An alcoholic must realize that he is an alcoholic, incurable from a medical standpoint, and that he must never again drink anything with alcohol in it. 2. He must surrender himself absolutely to God, realizing that in himself there is no hope. 3. Not only must he want to stop drinking permanently, he must remove from his life other sins such as hatred, adultery, and others which frequently accompany alcoholism. Unless he will do this absolutely, Smith and his associates refuse to work with him. 4. He must have devotions every morning—a ‘quiet time’ of prayer and some reading from the Bible and other religious literature. Unless this is faithfully followed, there is grave danger of backsliding. 5. He must be willing to help other alcoholics get straightened out. This throws up a protective barrier and strengthens his own willpower and convictions. 6. It is important, but not vital, that he meet frequently with other reformed alcoholics and form both a social and religious comradeship. 7. Important, but not vital, that he attend some religious service at least once weekly’.” (*DR. BOB and the Good Oldtimers*, pp. 128-31).

I remember sitting in Wisconsin in the home of an experienced AA. That was several years ago. We listened to the taped interrogation of Ed Andy, an A.A. oldtimer from Lorain, Ohio. Ed Andy is dead now. But at the time, he was questioned again and again as to how he “took the Steps.” Most of the time, he simply responded with talk about other things they did in the old days. But he also frequently said, “There were no Steps.” I really don’t think his interrogators understood him because they were not that conversant with the “Program” that Frank Amos and Dr. Bob explained as set forth above. The A.A. questioners seemed not to believe that this old duffer had been sober so many years without taking “the Steps.”

But there *were* no steps! The “Program” was described by Frank Amos. And Amos accurately reported what the pioneers did. They renounced alcohol. They surrendered absolutely to their Creator for help. They worked at removing “sins” from their lives. They had devotions in the form of prayer, Bible study, use of religious literature such as *The Upper Room*, and seeking revelation from God in what was commonly called a “Quiet Time.” They helped alcoholics get straightened out. They fellowshiped with other believers. And they often attended a weekly religious service. No steps! No Oxford Group program. Just the simple acts described above.

Their actions and their Program were influenced to a greater and greater degree by what was in the Bible, in Oxford Group writings, in Anne Smith’s journal, and in the religious literature. And they followed much the same prayer, Bible study, quiet time, and witnessing ideas Dr. Bob had learned in his youth in Christian Endeavor in St. Johnsbury, Vermont.

## The Steps Appear

Some—unduly impressed, or disturbed by, the Oxford Group influence on A.A.—have asserted that the Oxford Group had six steps.

But it didn't. I have talked with, corresponded with, and studied the literature read by almost every significant Oxford Group survivor in the United States and also several abroad. Most have seen and in fact helped critique my title *The Oxford Group and Alcoholics Anonymous: A Design for Living That Works*. That title documents my finding that there really were about **twenty-eight** Oxford Group ideas that impacted on A.A.

You will see from my title *Anne Smith's Journal, 1933-1939*, that Dr. Bob's wife covered—long before the Big Book was written in 1938--all of the twelve step ideas Bill eventually put in A.A.'s basic text, the Big Book You'll see from my title *The Good Book and The Big Book* that all of the twelve step ideas really did stem from Bible principles, just as Dr. Bob said they did. And you'll see from *New Light on Alcoholism: God, Sam Shoemaker, and A.A.* that the same type of Bible language parallels can be found in the writings and speeches of Rev. Sam Shoemaker, just as could be inferred by Bill W.'s tributes to Sam.

If you look at one of earliest Oxford Group pamphlets—written by Sam Shoemaker's good friend Rev. Sherwood Sunderland Day about 1922—the following statement appears on page one: “The principles of ‘The Oxford Group’ are the principles of the Bible.” And whether you are reading Sam Shoemaker's work, Oxford Group writings, Anne Smith's Journal, *The Upper Room*, or even the new thought ideas of Emmet Fox, you'll find the Bible cited and at the core of almost all the thinking.

From all this, you will see that neither the Bible, nor the Oxford Group, nor the writings of Rev. Sam Shoemaker, nor the Quiet Time literature, nor Anne Smith's Journal, nor the other religious writings studied by A.A. pioneers said anything about “six steps” or “twelve steps” or any formalized step program at all.

As A.A.'s Conference Approved *Pass It On* correctly observes:

In later years, some A.A. members referred to this procedure [an alleged six word-of-mouth steps Bill said had been employed] as the six steps of the Oxford Group. Reverend T. Willard Hunter, who spent 18 years in full-time staff positions for the Oxford Group and M.R.A., said, “I never once saw or heard anything like the Six Tenets. It would be impossible to find them in any Oxford Group-M.R.A. literature. I think they must have been written by someone else under some sort of misapprehension” (*Pass It On*, page 197 and footnote 2 on page 206).

The fact is that Bill Wilson himself described his word-of-mouth “six steps” in several different ways (See Dick B., *The Akron Genesis of Alcoholics Anonymous*, pp. 256-60). How he referred to our Creator seemed to depend upon the time and the circumstances and the audience. The description which I believe to be the most accurate rendition of what early AAs really did as to reliance on our Creator can be found in *The Language of the Heart* at page 200. There, Bill describes “step” number 6 as “We prayed to God to help us to do these things as best we could.” In this rendition, Bill felt there were six steps (certainly *not* Oxford Group steps)—the last one referring to “God” our Creator as “God,” just as Bill did almost 400 times in the Big Book. And this usage as to our Creator is consistent with the wording of the very first draft of the Twelve Steps where “God” our Creator and Heavenly Father is also referred to as “God”—not some

“power” or “higher power” or “God as we understood Him.” (See *Pass It On*, p. 198).

### **The Twelve Steps “appeared” in 1934**

If you read pages 12 to 15 of the Third Edition of the Big Book, and a couple of earlier lines in Bill’s Story, you may be puzzled at seeing all of the Twelve Step ideas on those pages and seemingly propounded by Ebby Thacher to Bill Wilson at Towns Hospital in 1934. This situation prompted me, during my visit to Stepping Stones, to give special attention to three different early Big Book draft manuscripts written by Bill Wilson. And the startling fact is that Bill relates in detail almost all of the Twelve Step ideas and the explanation of those Steps in specific terms that Ebby taught him in 1934. These explicit and lengthy historical portions from Bill’s “story” or “reflections” as he then called them (which I have set forth in *Turning Point: A History of Early A.A.’s Spiritual Roots and Successes*) more than justify the assumption that the Twelve Steps basics—biblical in nature as Dr. Bob and Rev. Sherwood Day said—were floating around in rather concrete form in 1934. In fact, they could well have been passed to Ebby at an earlier point either by Ebby’s mentor Rowland Hazard or by Rev. Sam Shoemaker himself. You can see the remarkable detail in the early pages of my title, *Turning Point: A History of Early A.A.’s Spiritual Roots and Successes*.

And where might Bill’s alleged “six steps” (that preceded the Twelve) have come from if they weren’t in the Bible, Quiet Time, Shoemaker, the Oxford Group, Anne Smith’s Journal, or the Christian literature AAs read?

Actually, during A.A.’s formative period from 1934 to 1939, mixed into the various analyses and descriptions of Oxford Group ideas, were the following alleged “six basic assumptions” of the Group: (1) Men are sinners. (2) Men can be changed. (3) Confession is prerequisite to change. (4) The changed soul has direct access to God. (5) The Age of Miracles has returned. (6) Those who have been “changed” must “change” others. See Kurtz, *Not-God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous*, 1979, p. 49.

Also, Lois Wilson had described “the Oxford Group precepts” as: (1) Surrender your life to God. (2) Take a moral inventory. (3) Confess your sins to God and another human being. (4) Make restitution. (5) Give of yourself to others with no demand for return. (6) Pray to God for help to carry out these principles. In fact, however, neither the so-called “six assumptions” nor Lois’s six Oxford Group “precepts” adequately reflects the complete Oxford Group thinking that impacted on early A.A. The “assumptions” are, in no sense, biblical; yet the Oxford Group principles avowedly were. Lois’s “precepts” were also not biblical; yet Dr. Bob said A.A.’s basic step ideas were based on study of the Bible.

In sum, it is very doubtful that Dr. Bob would have subscribed to the idea that the original A.A. “Program” had four steps, six steps, eight steps, or twelve. His own Christian Endeavor background and extensive studies of the Bible led him to the very simple program Frank Amos described; and I have found no particular evidence to indicate Dr. Bob did not use those simple Bible ideas in bringing recovery to the 5000 alcoholics he personally helped in Akron.

### **And What of the Oxford Group and Our Twelve Steps**

I believe it might be fair to say that A.A. had three approaches to recovery in its earliest days: (1) An approach directly related to recovery and based primarily on the Bible and reliance on our Creator—applied by Dr. Bob and the Akron pioneers (See *The Good Book and The Big Book*:

*A.A.'s Roots in the Bible*). (2) An approach that was not directly related to recovery but involved a “life-changing” program whose principles were biblical and were applied for recovery—applied primarily in the East, prior to, and then in, early A.A. (See *The Oxford Group and Alcoholics Anonymous: A Design for Living That Works*). (3) An experiment by Bill W. and Dr. Bob utilizing both approaches and culminating in the Big Book text whose (a) “Steps” were based primarily on the Oxford Group’s aim of attaining a life-changing experience of God and continuing in that experience, and whose (b) Big Book “text” was possibly much more influenced than the Steps by the Bible and yet propounded several inconsistent and even conflicting theories on alcoholism as an “incurable” mental, physical, and spiritual malady; required a “conversion” that was more “change” than a “born again” experience; and “action” seemingly focused more on *doing* things than on *believing* the truths which the Bible said would make believers free (See *Turning Point: A History of Early A.A.'s Spiritual Roots and Successes*).

As to the Steps, however, and even as to many explicit phrases in the Big Book, you can’t ignore the Oxford Group’s immense influence on A.A.—coming from the Oxford Group’s twenty-eight principles such as: (a) God is Almighty and our Creator; (b) God’s Plan; (c) Our Obedience, (d) Initial belief that God is; (e) Surrender of your “will” to God; (f) A “turning point”—leading to “steps” embodied in the OG’s 5 C’s—(g) Confidence, (h) Confession, (i) Conviction, (j) Conversion, (k) Continuance)—five “steps” that would eliminate “sin” “blocking” one from God and others; (l) Making restitution for harms caused by sins; (m) Making “daily” surrender that continued to apply the “steps;” (n) “Growing” spiritually through Bible study, prayer, and Quiet Time observances enabling receipt of God’s revelation; (o) Becoming “God conscious” as the result of such obedience; (p) Witnessing to what God had done that the person had been unable to do for himself; (q) Fellowshiping; (r) Serving; (s) Practicing Christian principles, made available to believers by their new-found power of God in Christ which is mentioned in 2 Corinthians 5:17.

This article is simply a synopsis of what I believe is the practical result of A.A.’s Oxford Group exposure from 1934 through approximately 1941. Much more about the Oxford Group, and also our *other* spiritual roots, is covered in detail by my fifteen titles listed and described at <http://www.dickb.com/titles.shtml> (Alcoholics Anonymous History).

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