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By Dick B.

The Oxford Group and Alcoholics Anonymous

Part Four

A Mid-Point Pause

Let's review a few things before we proceed: This is the fourth article in a continuing series detailing the story of the Oxford Group and Alcoholics Anonymous. The Oxford Group ideas are certainly not the only source of the principles of A.A.'s "spiritual" program. But the Bible *is* the primary source of both Oxford Group and A.A. ideas. And, if you want to see the "original" A.A. program, as it was described by an objective observer, you need to read the Frank Amos report to John D. Rockefeller, Jr., quoted at some length in *DR. BOB and the Good Oldtimers* (AA World Services, Inc., 1980), pp. 128-36.

In 1938, Frank Amos was soon to become one of A.A.'s first non-alcoholic trustees. He went to Akron only after the pioneer A.A. program had been established as highly successful and had been developed primarily by Dr. Bob and the Akron pioneers. Prior to Bill Wilson's writing of the earliest Big Book drafts, Amos spent a week in Akron and interviewed physicians, a judge, the AAs, their families, and others to get the facts. As you will see from the Amos report, the "Program," as Amos found and described it, contained no Steps, and focused primarily on the Bible, Quiet Time, and Dr. Bob as the leader to whom pioneers were looking for guidance. Interestingly, Amos did not mention the Oxford Group.

To understand the *Oxford Group's* importance in A.A., you need to look primarily not at Akron, but rather at what Rev. Sam Shoemaker was teaching Bill Wilson and a couple of others on the New York scene. You need also to see the remarkable resemblance between the earliest A.A. program in New York and what the Oxford Group--on the East Coast--was reading, writing, teaching, and *doing*. Note at the outset that East Coast Oxford Group activities, including inter-continental teams, house-parties, and large meetings--in which Bill Wilson himself briefly participated--were far different from the single "clandestine lodge" with an "old fashioned prayer meeting" conducted by the "alcoholic squad of the Oxford Group" that was the Akron focus. [Cp. Dr. Morris Martin's *Always a Little Further*, (2001), pp. 102-03, 92-93, 88-89, 71, 61, 51; and *DR. BOB and the Good Oldtimers*, pp. 121, 101, 117]. The Oxford Group program in the East and abroad was simply not the "old fashioned prayer meeting" for drunks that was held at the T. Henry Williams home in Akron.

Yet the twenty-eight ideas of the Oxford Group (of which I wrote at some length in *The Oxford Group and Alcoholics Anonymous*) did become the primary content of the “spiritual program of recovery” Bill incorporated in the “basic text” of the First Edition of the Big Book in 1939. For that Oxford Group program--fashioned by Dr. Frank Buchman, articulated in the East by Rev. Sam Shoemaker, and as Bill fleshed it out in the Big Book and the Twelve Steps in 1939--look then to the Oxford Group as the primary source.

Actually, A.A.'s own literature has thoroughly documented this point about the New York approach. [See *Pass It On* (AA World Services, Inc., 1984)]: (1) “. . . Lois and Bill did not become immediately disillusioned with the Oxford Group or with its principles, from which Bill borrowed freely,” *Pass It On*, p. 169; (2) “Bill was about to write the famous fifth chapter, ‘How It Works.’ . . . It was heavy with Oxford Group principles. . . .” *Pass It On*, pp. 196-97; (3) “Bill’s first three steps were culled from his reading of James, the teachings of Sam Shoemaker, and those of the Oxford Group.” *Pass It On*, p. 199; (4) See also *Pass It On*, pp. 167, 197-99, 264-65, 284-85, 352-53, 211; (5) Later, Alcoholics Anonymous recorded, in *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age* and *The Language of the Heart*, Bill’s increasingly open acknowledgments that almost all the material in Bill’s Twelve Steps had come from the Oxford Group. Compare Dr. Bob’s statement: “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*, pp. 96-97).

In addition, I established three important facts during my eleven years of research: (1) Bill actually asked Rev. Sam Shoemaker, Jr., to write the Twelve Steps, but Sam declined. (2) There are at least twenty-eight Oxford Group principles that impacted on the Big Book, the Steps, and the A.A. Fellowship. (3) Both in Sam Shoemaker’s writings and in those of other Oxford Group activists of the 1930's and before, you can find dozens of expressions that closely parallel those in many pieces of A.A. literature including the Big Book. In sum, then, if you want to understand the Big Book, the Twelve Steps, the “Slogans,” and the A.A. Fellowship, as Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob understood them when the Big Book was published in 1939, you need to know the Oxford Group-Shoemaker writings as well as their sources in the Bible itself. And I firmly believe that the most authentic and comprehensive study and detailing of those topics can be found in my two titles, *The Oxford Group and Alcoholics Anonymous: A Design for Living That Works*, 2d ed. (<http://www.dickb.com/Oxford.shtml>) and *New Light on Alcoholism: God, Sam Shoemaker, and A.A.*, 2d ed. (<http://www.dickb.com/newlight.shtml>).

More Oxford Group Parallels Bill Adopted in A.A.’s Writings and Steps

In the previous Oxford Group article (Part Three), we began a review of some of the remarkable instances where language Bill Wilson used in his Big Book, Twelve Steps, talks, and slogans very closely resembles language used by a host of Oxford Group writers in a host of Oxford Group writings. Again, for many additional specifics, you should look at my Oxford Group and Shoemaker titles mentioned above. This article will continue with examples of the parallels in language to whet your appetite for a thorough Oxford Group quest. Your search can be much aided by using the bibliographies found in my titles.

As to the Fourth Step:

“The root problems in the world today are dishonesty, selfishness and fear--in men, and consequently in nations” (Buchman, *Remaking the World*, p. 24).

“Moral recovery starts when everyone admits his own faults instead of spot-lighting the other fellow’s” (Buchman, *Remaking the World*, p. 46).

“To win the soul, the physician must ‘make the moral test’ which requires the lost soul to make ‘entire self disclosure’” (Walter, *Soul Surgery*, pp. 41-48).

Oxford Group writings used (as does the A.A. Big Book) the imagery of a businessman’s taking an inventory--checking the financial position by having “taken stock” (Benson, *The Eight Points of the Oxford Group*, pp. 44, 162, 18, 7) and getting involved in “this business of looking into the books” with a pencil and paper and notes (Cecil Rose, *When Man Listens*, pp. 17-19).

“It would be a very good thing if you took a piece of foolscap paper and wrote down the sins you feel guilty of. . . . One of the simplest and best rules for self-examination that I know is to use the summary of the Sermon on the Mount--Absolute Honesty, Absolute Purity, Absolute Unselfishness, and Absolute Love. Review your life in their light. Put down everything that doesn’t measure up. Be ruthlessly, realistically honest” (Shoemaker, *How to Become a Christian*, pp. 56-57).

As to the Fifth Step:

“Take the four standards of Christ--absolute honesty, absolute purity, absolute unselfishness, and absolute love. When people’s lives are wrong, they are usually wrong on one or more of these standards. Many quite respectable people have hidden things in their past and their present that need to come out in confidence with some one. . . . The only release and hope for many bound and imprisoned and defeated people lies in frank sharing. . . . If the person is honest with himself and with God, he will be honest also with us and be ready to take the next step, which is a decision to surrender these sins, with himself wholly to God” (Shoemaker, *The Church Can Save the World*, pp. 110-12).

As to the Sixth Step:

“Christian revolution begins when a man is really willing for God to displace everything but Himself from a share in the control of life” (Cecil Rose, *When Man Listens*, pp. 62, 74-78).

“By ‘conviction’ two things are meant: conviction first of sin, and then a growing assurance that Christ can meet the need” (Shoemaker, *Realizing Religion*, pp. 81-82).

“The heart of that problem is that many of us are wrong with God and wrong with each other. . . . The first step is not resurrection, it is crucifixion. . . . It is the crucifixion of pride, narrowness, stupidity, ignorant prejudice, intolerance. . . . There is no resurrection without crucifixion. . . .

either God's will is crucified on it [the Cross] or our will is crucified on it so that God's will may prevail. Christ died to show us the everlasting victory and effectiveness of dying to self, that God might make His will prevail" (Shoemaker, *National Awakening*, p. 5).

As to the Seventh Step:

"Except a man be born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God. Nicodemus saith unto him [Jesus], How . . . ? (John 3:3-4). . . . If the Christian Church is to be effective again in the affairs of men, it must begin by once more illuminating this great truth of rebirth. . . . The how of getting rid of sin, if you are in earnest about doing it at all: face it, share it, surrender it. Hate it, forsake it, confess it, and restore for it" (Shoemaker, *National Awakening*, pp. 55, 57, 58).

"Conversion can be viewed from two sides: On man's side, it is an act of faith in which the sinner deliberately and finally turns from all known sin and identifies himself with Christ, for the future, in a saving, victorious moral unity and fellowship. On God's side, it is an act of God's free grace by which God is able, through bearing human sin—in suffering and redemptive love—to forgive the sinner and so to effect in Christ a new relationship in which the barrier of sin no longer remains" (Walter, *Soul Surgery*, p. 79).

As to the Eighth Step:

"If thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee, first go and be reconciled unto thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift' [Matthew 5:23-24 in the sermon on the mount]. It is idle for us to try to be in touch with God or keep in touch with Him, so long as there are human relationships which must be righted at the same time" (Shoemaker, *The Conversion of the Church*, pp. 47-48).

"Nothing is clearer in the gospels than the direct teaching that our relation to God cannot be right unless our relations with men are as right as we can make them" (Weatherhead, *Discipleship*, p. 113).

Your Mission—Should You Choose to Accept It

If our spiritual history is to be meaningful for you, there is work to do. That history enables those who care about it to avoid the pitfalls of making up their own program, their own religion, and their own recovery through the Twelve Steps. You don't just "take" the Steps. You "study" them. You come to "understand" them. And you endeavor to "apply" them. That's why the number of A.A. Big Book studies has, thankfully, proliferated in the last two decades. Groups, discussions, and speakers were getting so far afield from the Bible, the Oxford Group, the early A.A. "Program," and even the Big Book's summary of that "Program" that the A.A. door was opened to a social, "relationship"-oriented, involuntary-commitment-fed, "self-help" service club. And that's not a "spiritual" program at all. Nor does it resemble pioneer A.A.

Many of the foregoing quotes will have no meaning for you if you don't open and study the Big Book. Most will have little meaning if you don't acquaint yourself with the portions of the Bible from which they were drawn. A strong inclination to "keep it simple," "just go to meetings," and not "think" has often superseded the work that needs to accompany our program. There are many additional quotes, and documentation of the quotes, in the Oxford Group and Shoemaker books I've written and in those I've quoted. You will only know whether they are accurate if you read my books or their books. That also takes work.

The next article will conclude my discussion of the Steps from their Oxford Group context, and you are reminded that these articles present just the tip of the iceberg. The "basic text" of the Big Book was only 164 pages long. Many have never absorbed even those pages. And those pages have been sanitized to the point where neither the Bible, nor Quiet Time, nor Shoemaker, nor Anne Smith, nor the Oxford Group, nor the literature of the 1930's can be compared or even found in them. The accomplishments of the 1930's Program were first rate and astonishing. They can be achieved again today by taking the same path the pioneers took--if we place our reliance on our Creator, come to Him through His Son Jesus Christ, and learn about the whole relationship and fellowship process by learning more about the Good Book! That's exactly what those who worked with Sam Shoemaker, Frank Buchman, and the Oxford Group activists were doing every day. And the ones I've met from that early cadre are still doing it!

Please feel free to contact me by phone, fax, email, or regular mail via the addresses on my website: <http://www.dickb.com/index.shtml>.

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