

**Roundtable Series on A.A.'s Biblical Roots
(November 2001)
By Dick B.**

[Article 19b]

**Session Two
The Impact of Dr. Bob's Religious Training and Knowledge of the Bible**

About His Training and Study

! What Dr. Bob said about his training as a youngster, his Bible study, and reading:

From childhood through high school I was more or less forced to go to church, Sunday School and evening service, Monday night Christian Endeavor and sometimes to Wednesday evening prayer meeting (Dr. Bob's personal story, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 1st ed., p. 183).

I had refreshed my memory of the Good Book, and I had had excellent training in that as a youngster (*The Co-Founders of Alcoholics Anonymous*, pp. 11-12).

I'm somewhat allergic to work, but I felt I should continue to increase my familiarity with the Good Book and also read a good deal of standard literature, possibly of a scientific nature. So I did cultivate the habit of reading. I think I'm not exaggerating when I say I have probably averaged an hour a day for the last 15 years (*The Co-Founders of Alcoholics Anonymous*, p. 13).

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).

The Sermon on the Mount [Matthew, Chapters 5-7] contains the underlying spiritual philosophy of A.A. (a statement frequently made by Bill Wilson and by Dr. Bob, Dick B., *Why Early A.A. Succeeded*, p. 228).

If someone asked him [Dr. Bob] a question about the program, his usual response was: "What does it say in the Good Book?" (*DR. BOB and the Good Oldtimers*, p. 144).

For the next two and a half years, Bob attended Oxford Group meetings regularly and gave much time and study to its philosophy. . . . "I read everything I could find, and talked to everyone who I thought knew anything about it," Dr. Bob said. He read the Scriptures, studied the lives of the saints, and did what he could to soak up the spiritual and religious philosophies of the ages (*DR. BOB and the Good Oldtimers*, p. 56).

They [the early AAs] were convinced that the answer to their problems was in the Good Book. To some of us older ones, the parts we found absolutely essential were the Sermon on the Mount, the 13th chapter of First Corinthians, and the Book of James (*DR. BOB and the Good Oldtimers*, p. 96).

! What Dr. Bob's kids had to say:

There was no program. Dad and Mom and Bill were working out the program. At that time I was getting involved with quiet times they had in the morning. The guys would come, and mom would have her quiet time with them. . . . They read the Bible, prayed and listened, and got guidance (Remarks of Dr. Bob's daughter Sue Windows, *Children of the Healer*, pp. 43-44).

Before there was a Big Book—in the period of “flying blind,” God's Big Book was the reference used in our home. The summer of 1935, when Bill lived with us, Dr. Bob had read the Bible completely three times. And the references that seemed consistent with the program goals were the Sermon on the Mount, 1 Corinthians 13, and the Book of James (Foreword by Dr. Bob's son Robert R. Smith, *The Good Book and The Big Book*, p. ix).

! What Bill Wilson saw and reported:

[Of his stay with Dr. Bob and Anne Smith in the summer of 1935]: I learned a great deal from you people [T. Henry and Clarace Williams], from the Smiths themselves, and from Henrietta [Seiberling]. I hadn't looked in the Bible, up to this time, at all. You see, I had the [conversion] experience and then this rushing around to help drunks and nothing happened (Dick B., *The Akron Genesis of Alcoholics Anonymous*, p. 64).

[Again, of the summer, 1935]: Each morning there was devotion. After the long silence Anne would read out of the Good Book. James was our favorite (*RHS*, p. 5).

[Again, of the summer, 1935]: We much favored the Apostle James. The definition of love in Corinthians also played a great part in our discussions (Kurtz, *Not-God*, p. 320, n. 11).

[Again, of the summer, 1935]: Bill Wilson found himself in awe of Dr. Bob's “spiritual know ledge” and cherished the guidance of Anne as each morning her pleasant voice read and interpreted the Christian Scriptures and the Oxford Group devotional books (Kurtz, *Not-God*, p. 31).

! And others said. . .

Dr. Bob's morning devotion consisted of a short prayer, a 20-minute study of a familiar verse from the Bible, and a quiet period of waiting for directions as to where he, that day,
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should find use for his talent. Having heard, he would religiously go about his Father's business, as he put it (*DR. BOB and the Good Oldtimers*, p. 314).

Members gathered there [at the Smith home] as well as attending the Oxford Group meetings at the home of T. Henry and Clarace Williams. Early members described how, at their meeting, Bob liked to sit with an open Bible on his lap, out of which a passage would be selected at random and read. A discussion would then follow on its relevance to the personal problems of those present. The emphasis was on day-to-day living, how to cope with personal problems, and self-examination (Nell Wing, *Grateful to Have Been There*, p. 81).

We had much prayer together in those days and began quietly to read Scripture and discuss a practical approach to its application in our lives (*DR. BOB and the Good Oldtimers*, p. 111).

Of course the Bible ought to be the main Source Book of all. No day ought to pass without reading it (remarks about reading by Dr. Bob's wife. Dick B., *Anne Smith's Journal*, p. 82).

Quiet Time—Bible study, prayer, seeking guidance—a Foundation Stone

We will have much more to say about Quiet Time in another session. See also our Appendix on Meditation. It all had roots in much of the material Dr. Bob read, in the practices of the preachers of the 1800's, in Oxford Group customs, and in actual and immense amount of quiet time observed by A.A. pioneers. For background, see Dick B., *Good Morning! Quiet Time, Morning Watch, Meditation, and Early A.A.*

The important point here is that this idea of morning Bible study, prayer, and listening for God's "Voice" can be found in the YMCA, the Christian literature fifty to seventy-five years before A.A., and certainly fifty years before the Oxford Group. In fact, it can be found quite frequently and in varying phraseology in the Good Book itself. It can most assuredly be found in Christian Endeavor—the youth group in which Dr. Bob was trained in these matters and into which we shall now delve..

Christian Endeavor - A Glimpse at Its History and Roots

! Key Resource and Reference Titles

Apparently ignored in previous "histories" of A.A. is the place of Christian Endeavor in the sources of A.A. ideas. Hence it is important to have before us the materials that document what I am about to report. These excellent sources are:

Clark, Francis E. *Christian Endeavor in All Lands*. Official ed., The United Society of Christian Endeavor, 1908.

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_____. *Memoirs of Many Men in Many Lands*. Boston: United Society of Christian Endeavor, 1922.

Guldseth, Mark O. *Streams*. Alaska: Fritz Creek Studios, 1982.

Murch, James DeForest. *Successful C.E. Prayer-Meetings*. Cincinnati: The Standard Publishing Company, 1930.

Spreng, Samuel P. *History of the Evangelical Church: For the Use of Young People, Members of the Evangelical League of Christian Endeavor, etc.* OH: Publishing House of the Evangelical Church, 1927.

Wells, Amos R. *Expert Endeavor. A Text-book of Christian Endeavor Methods and Principles*. Boston: International Society of Christian Endeavor, 1911.

! Beginnings, Founding, and World-wide Proportions of Christian Endeavor

Reverend Francis E. Clark, D.D., LL.D., was the founder and President of the United Society of Christian Endeavor. He was the author of many titles, the most important of which (for our purposes) were *Christian Endeavor in All Lands: A Record of Twenty-Five Years of Progress* and Clark's autobiography, *Memories of Many Men in Many Lands*.

February 2, 1881 marked the formation of the first society of Christian Endeavor at 62 Neal Street, the Parsonage of Williston Church, Portland, Maine. The movement grew with phenomenal rapidity year by year in America. Foundations for large expansion of its work were laid in India, China, Turkey, and Mexico. And in the Kingdom of Hawaii, the first society outside the United States was established in 1883. Large conventions followed with The National Christian Endeavor convention of 1892 in New York City, being the most notable to that date. Some 25,000 young people attended it at Madison Square Garden (See *Many Men in Many Lands*, pp. 77-81, 107-08)

Williston Church is regarded as the Birthplace of Christian Endeavor. But its seeds were sown much earlier by the Puritans of the Massachusetts Colony. For in June, 1741, the young people of the North Parish of Bridgewater (now Brockton) in Massachusetts, adopted an agreement reciting that the youth, through the grace of God, had been awakened to be concerned about the things that belong to their everlasting peace and would remember their Creator in the days of their youth [See Ecclesiastes 12:1: "Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth. . ."]. But the years brought a great loss from the Sunday-school and in Christian families of young people who did not walk in their fathers' ways, and were lost to the church. And this meant the ushering in of what was sometimes called the "Young People's Era." Young Men's Christian Association was formed. Some thought there was a tendency to do "too much for the young people rather than allowing them to do what they could for themselves and others." The response was "that those who should be won for the Christian life must minister, and not merely be ministered unto" [See Matthew 20:28: "Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered

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unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many”]. And the thrust of the new picture was the Week of Prayer in 1881 when many young people were led to decide to live for Christ and to acknowledge Him by joining the church (See *Christian Endeavor in All Lands*, pp 18-33)..

In those days, Christian Endeavor pivoted on the prayer-meeting. The Original Constitution declared the object to be “to promote an earnest Christian life among its members, to increase their mutual acquaintance, and to make them more useful in the service of God.” The most important clause of the constitution stated: “It is expected that all active members of this society will be present at every meeting unless detained by some absolute necessity, and that each one will take some part, however slight, in every meeting.” Clark said that the young men and women who were members of Pastor Pennell’s class of young people and of Mrs. Clark’s girls of the Mizpah Circle affixed their names to the constitution—twenty names in all, including Pennell’s. Clark described them as “active, energetic, fun-loving young people, just such as can be gathered in any church to-day. But they were Christian young people. Their hearts were touched by love for Him who gave Himself for them, and they sincerely desired to do His will” (See *Christian Endeavor in All Lands*, pp. 34-41).

The first prayer-meeting of the society was held a few days after the organization. A young man was in the chair as leader. Forty young people, more or less, with Scripture verses and sentences of prayer, and some with longer testimonies or exhortations, held forth at that first meeting. Most important, Clark said it was “an organization as nearly self-governing and self-propagating as any organization can be had come into existence in Williston Church.” Within a year, there were at least four other societies, one in Rhode Island, another in Portland, and still another in Vermont. (See *Christian Endeavor in All Lands*, pp. 42-59).

We conclude the review of Clark’s lengthy descriptions by pointing to the emergence of the “Quiet Hour.” Clark recounts:

So it was proposed that those who wished should band themselves together in a purely voluntary organization called “the Comrades of the Quiet Hour.” The name was chosen rather than the similar name of “The Morning Watch” in order to give the utmost freedom as to the time which should be devoted to meditation and personal communion with God, though the morning hour was strongly recommended. Those who became “comrades” agreed to spend fifteen minutes a day not merely in Bible-reading and petition, but in genuine personal communion with the Unseen. . . and testimonies began to pour in from all directions, of the exceeding value of a “Quiet Hour” in personal experience. . . . Quiet Hour literature began to abound; “Quiet Hours” led by some of the most eminent Christians in the land began to be held (See Clark, *Christian Endeavor in All Lands*, p. 357).

! A look at the Principles and Practices of Christian Endeavor

Here, the most useful research guides are Wells’ *Expert Endeavor* and Murch’s *Successful*

C.E. Prayer-Meetings. Professor Amos R. Wells was, among other things, Editor of *The Christian Endeavor World*. Murch built upon the text-books of Wells and the works of Clark; and Murch laid out hundreds of specifics for CE prayer-meetings and other functions.

There are some vignettes which require more research, some of which I am currently undertaking. The research involves the questions: What did Christian Endeavor do? And, what literature did they study? This is important because it illustrates that the ideas of Frank Buchman, his Oxford Group, and Rev. Sam Shoemaker were in circulation before 1900 and at the period of Dr. Bob's youth. For a beginning, let's start with the "Official Edition," *Christian Endeavor in All Lands*, written by the Rev. Francis E. Clark, D.D., LL.D., Founder of the Christian Endeavor Movement. In this title, Reverend Clark stated:

The roots of the Christian Endeavor tree, wherever it grows, are Confession of Christ, Service for Christ, Fellowship with Christ's people, and Loyalty to Christ's Church. The farther I travel, the more I see of societies in every land, the more I am convinced that these four principles are the essential and the only essential principles of the Christian Endeavor Society. Let me repeat them:—I. Confession of Christ. II. Service for Christ. III. Fellowship with Christ's people. IV. Loyalty to Christ's Church (p. 93).

As to the first principle—Confession of Christ—Clark said:

I. *Confession of Christ* is absolutely necessary in the Christian Endeavor Society. . . . Every week comes the prayer-meeting, in which every member who fulfills his vow must take some part. . . . This participation is simply the confession of Christ. The true Christian Endeavorer does not take part to exhibit his rhetoric, or to gain practice in public speaking, or to show what a logical prayer he can offer to God; but he does take part to show that he is a Christian, to confess his love for the Lord. . . . The covenant pledge is simply a tried and proved device to secure frequent confession of Christ. . . . It also secures familiarity with the Word of God by promoting Bible-reading and study in preparation for every meeting. . . . Our form of confession is the prayer-meeting (Clark, *Christian Endeavor in All Lands*, pp. 94, 96).

Clark also referred to the remarks of the Rev. F. B. Meyer, who not only had a substantial influence on Oxford Group development and on early A.A. ideas, but was president of the British Christian Endeavor Union. Clark quoted Meyer as follows:

Christian Endeavor stands for five great principles: (1) Personal devotion to the divine Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. . . . (2) The covenant obligation embodied in our pledge. . . . (3) Constant religious training for all kinds of service. . . . (4) Strenuous loyalty to the local church and denomination with which each society is connected. (5) Interdenominational spiritual fellowship (Clark, *Christian Endeavor in All Lands*, pp. 101-102).

A simple form of the much-mentioned "covenant," said Clark, was this:

Trusting in the Lord Jesus for strength, I promise Him that I will strive to do whatever He would like to have me do; that I will pray and read the Bible every day; and that, just so far

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as I know how, I will endeavor to lead a Christian life. I will be present at every meeting of the society, unless prevented by some reason which I can conscientiously give to my Saviour, and will take part in the meeting, either by prayer, testimony, or a Bible verse. As an active member of this society I promise to be faithful to my own church, and to do all I can to uphold its works and membership (Clark, *Christian Endeavor in All Lands*, p. 252).

According to Clark, “Every Endeavor meeting has its topic, with many Scripture references and abundant helps” (*Christian Endeavor in All Lands, supra*, p. 261). We can remember here that the early A.A. meetings took a similar turn, and even today, many A.A. meetings use a “topic” either for discussion or which the speaker introduces for discussion.

Clark mentioned and recommended a Christian Endeavor text-book written by Amos R. Wells, Editorial Secretary of the United Society of Christian Endeavor. Wells’s book was titled: *Expert Endeavor: A Text-book of Christian Endeavor Methods and Principles*. And here are some of the things Wells had to say about “the prayer meeting”:

What are the results that we may gain from the prayer meeting? They are five: original thought on religious subjects; open committal to the cause of Christ; the helpful expression of Christian thought and experience; the cultivation of the spirit of worship through public prayer and through singing; the guidance of others along all these lines of service and life (p. 9).

How can we get original thought on the prayer-meeting topics? Only by study of the Bible, followed by meditation and observation. First, the Endeavorer should read the Bible passage; then he should read some good commentary upon it; then he should take the subject with him into his daily life for five or six days, thinking about it in his odd minutes and watching for experiences in his own life or the lives of others, or observing nature and looking for illustrations on the subject from all these sources (pp. 9-10).

Are we to read Bible verses and other quotations? Yes, all we please, if we will make them the original expression of our own lives by thinking about them, and adding to them something, if only a sentence, to show that we have made them our own. Always give the writer's name, or the part of the Bible from which you quote. Commit the quotation to memory and do not read it (p. 11).

These Christian Endeavor segments provide real insight into the frequent descriptions in A.A.'s *DR. BOB and the Good Oldtimers* of Dr. Bob's intensive study of the Bible; his ability to quote Scripture freely; his using Scripture to answer questions about the A.A. program; his emphasis on, and practice of, prayer three times a day; his stress on outside reading of Christian literature, prayer and meditation at early A.A. meetings; and the use of many “outside” (non-Oxford Group) devotionals. The quotations also help to underscore and explain Dr. Bob's own very clear and continued allegiance to Jesus Christ and to Christian Fellowship throughout his days.

! Christian Endeavor Principles and Practices Traceable to Early A.A.

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Bill Wilson himself frequently pointed out that nobody invented A.A. Its ideas came from a number of people, books, and movements. And the mention of one source does not mean that other sources can be ignored. Thus, Christian Endeavor had no corner on the Bible-reading market. Dr. Frank Buchman, founder of the Oxford Group, was said to be “soaked in the Bible.” Buchman hired a Bible teacher (Mary Angevine) to lead East Coast Oxford Group people in study, and often quoted the Bible and urged the study of it. Rev. Sam Shoemaker was called a “Bible Christian,” and there is scarcely a book or sermon or article by Shoemaker that does not touch on the Bible. So also Anne Smith’s *Journal*, the Quiet Time devotionals, and the Christian literature early AAs studied. In fact, the progenitors and mentors of the Oxford Group—who wrote so much about, and regularly quoted Scripture—were also the mentors of other groups that contributed to A.A. ideas—groups such as the Y.M.C.A., the Salvation Army, and the Student Christian Movement.

Nonetheless, Christian Fellowship, Confession of Christ, the emphasis on Bible study, use of Bibles in meetings, encouragement of loyalty to one’s church, prayer meetings, fellowship with believers, and bringing people to Jesus Christ can be identified much more readily with Christian Endeavor than with the other oft-mentioned A.A. roots. And Christian Endeavor principles and practices were strictly biblical and not simply a product of the many formulae found in many Oxford Group practices—Oxford Group ideas which, though derived from Bible sources, were not themselves to be found in the Bible. Ideas such as the Five C’s, the Four Absolutes, Restitution, and Surrender.

Here then is a summary of those Christian Endeavor principles which seem to have been heavily and uniquely utilized by Dr. Bob and the Akron A.A. pioneers.

! Confession of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour

The “required” surrenders to Jesus Christ and confession of Jesus as Lord in Akron, with spinoffs found in the later Steps Three and Seven

! Daily Bible study and Bible references by individuals and meetings

Such Bible study and references to the Bible were regular fare in Akron meetings, Bible study, and group Quiet Times, with spinoffs found in the later Step Eleven

! The reading of devotionals and “helpful books”

A.A. pioneers were regular students of *The Upper Room*, *The Runner’s Bible*, and other Christian books and pamphlets such as *The Greatest Thing in the World* and *The Sermon on the Mount*, just as Christian Endeavor people were, with spinoffs found in

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the Big Book discussion of using “helpful books” recommended by one’s rabbi, minister, or priest

! Public and private prayer

Regular prayers at meetings and as individuals, with spinoffs as to prayer found throughout the Big Book, particularly in Step Eleven, and even in the opening and closing of today’s A.A. meetings

! Daily Meditation and Quiet Time

Coming from the same mentors, such as F. B. Meyer, who inspired Christian Endeavor leaders, Harry Emerson Fosdick, Frank Buchman, and Sam Shoemaker, to observe “Morning Watch,” with spinoffs in later Step Eleven

! Conforming one’s life to Christian standards

Christian Endeavor was no less tuned to Christian moral standards than was the Oxford Group with its Four Absolutes, emphasis on the Sermon on the Mount, and 1 Corinthians 13, with spinoffs in the “principles” of the A.A. such as honesty, kindness, and patience

! Service to Christ

Early A.A. was a Christian Fellowship, and the service aspect was spun off to the Big Book statement that our main purpose is to be of maximum service to God and our fellows

! Witnessing and testimony

Coming from the carrying of the Gospel message that was enjoined by Jesus upon the Apostles, then disciples, and then believers (See Mark, Chapter 16), with spinoffs in the Big Book personal stories and the telling of stories in A.A. meetings.

! Fellowship with Christ’s people

Christian Endeavor’s emphasis on fellowship with like-minded believers is straight from the Bible, and much more emphasized than Oxford Group “team” loyalty, with spinoffs in the early A.A. description of itself as a Christian Fellowship, and focus on continuous meetings, service, commitment, group study, and eventually conferences.

! **Loyalty to Christ's Church**

According to Scripture, all Christian believers are part of the body of Christ with churches and denominations simply being a part of that body. In early A.A., there was emphasis on religious comradeship and affiliation and not on membership in a particular church or denomination. That was part of the basic thinking of Christian Endeavor as well. The Oxford Group was not a church, but a fellowship. Christian Endeavor was church-oriented, and the church was part of the body of Christ.

What's the Point? The Point is....

A knowledge of history does not necessarily mean allegiance to the ideas reported by the history. It does usually mean the acquisition of tools enabling better understanding of the historical events and ideas covered. Today's treatment, therapy, and literature ideas are tending more and more to look upon A.A. as an adjunct to something else required for "recovery." A.A. and 12 Step fellowships are more and more called "self help" groups. But history shows a different A.A. of yesteryear.

You can move from a knowledge of the Bible, Christian conversion, adherence to Christian principles, complete reliance upon our Creator, communion with the Creator and His son through prayer and worship, fellowship with like-minded believers, witnessing, and bringing deliverance to others. If you do, you can place great emphasis on self, self-knowledge, self-sufficiency, and self-help—the very things A.A.'s Big Book still denounces. Sam Shoemaker told AAs at their own Long Beach convention that every "spiritual awakening" (including the one referred to in Step Twelve) involves four things: 1) Conversion. 2) Prayer. 3) Fellowship. 4) Witness. This was the link to history that Sam Shoemaker emphasized. It incorporated every part and parcel of Dr. Bob's biblical training and understanding. It did not support the illusory values of "self-help" groups—groups with programs Shoemaker criticized in his very first published title.