

Article 01

The Spiritual Beginnings of A.A.

By Dick B.

Bill Wilson often said: A.A. was not invented. He added: Each of A.A.'s spiritual principles was borrowed from ancient sources. Regrettably, he provided very few specifics as to those A.A. sources, or how they reached the A.A. fellowship.

Today, we can supply specific details. They have been gathered over a period of ten years from archives, interviews, historians, and the study of much literature. Those who did the A.A. borrowing and fashioning were A.A.'s founders, Bill W. and Dr. Bob. But one historical fact has been commonly lacking in discussions of the contributions of these two men. Their sources, spiritual infusions, and beliefs were totally different. Bill was a self-proclaimed "conservative atheist," had never belonged to a church, and never studied the Bible until after he met Dr. Bob in Akron. Dr. Bob, on the other hand, was a longtime Christian believer, church member, and Bible student. And most histories ignore these differences and their A.A. impact.

Two Distinctly Different Spiritual Roots

One A.A. root might properly be called the "Carl Jung/Sam Shoemaker Source." It led to the "New York Genesis of A.A." Its ingredients are well-known and legendary, though inaccurately reported. Unfortunately, the incorrect legend has become doctrinal. A.A.'s other root could properly be called the "Bible/Dr. Bob Source." It led to the "Akron Genesis of A.A.." Unfortunately, the facts about this root have been virtually buried..

The New York Genesis and Jung/Shoemaker Source

We will dwell little on A.A.'s New York beginnings because they have so often been recorded, albeit misreported and distorted. To repeat, Bill Wilson, a Brooklyn resident, was a self-proclaimed "conservative atheist." He was never a church member, and had never "looked in the Bible at all" until he came to Akron in 1935.

The Bill Wilson picture as to A.A.'s spiritual beginnings begins as follows.

An East Coast businessman named Rowland Hazard sought help for his alcoholism from Dr. Carl Jung in Switzerland. After treatment and then relapse, Rowland was told by Jung that he needed a conversion experience to recover. Jung defined such conversions as "union with God." He suggested Rowland seek religious association.

Rowland therefore joined "A First Century Christian Fellowship" also known as the Oxford Group. Rowland followed its precepts; recovered from alcoholism; helped rescue a New Yorker named Ebby Thacher from alcoholism; taught Ebby the Oxford Group ideas; and later also spent substantial time with Bill Wilson inculcating Wilson with Oxford Group precepts. Ebby Thacher visited and convinced his suffering friend Bill Wilson that he (Ebby) had "got religion," that "God had done for him what he could not do for himself," and that he had been to Rev. Sam Shoemaker's Calvary Rescue Mission in New York.

A drunken Bill Wilson then went to Shoemaker's Rescue Mission, made a decision for Christ, believed he had really found something, and checked into Towns Hospital in New York. There Bill heard from Ebby some key Oxford Group principles. Bill also then had what he often called his "hot flash" conversion experience. On release from Towns Hospital, Bill was totally unsuccessful either in converting anyone else or even in getting anyone sober.

But he assimilated some major Oxford Group life-changing principles such as the Five C's, Four Absolutes, Surrender, Restitution, Guidance, and Witnessing. He endeavored to carry to drunks his version of the recovery message. And he finally carried it to Dr. Bob in Akron, Ohio, where an entirely different chain of events had been in progress.

The Akron Genesis and Bible/Dr. Bob Source

A.A.'s Akron Genesis began with Dr. Bob, his Christian church activities as a youngster, and his excellent Bible training in that church and in Christian Endeavor..

Dr. Bob was born and raised in St. Johnsbury, Vermont. His parents were pillars of the North Congregational Church in St. Johnsbury. From childhood through high school, Bob each week attended the Congregational church, its Sunday School, evening service, Monday night Christian Endeavor, and sometimes its Wednesday evening prayer meeting. These likely at the insistence of his mother. Yet, Bob continued membership in Christian churches most of his life: St. Johnsbury Congregational in his youth. Possibly St. Luke's Protestant Episcopal Church.

Probably the Church of Our Saviour in Akron, where his kids attended Sunday School. Then Akron's Westminster Presbyterian Church where Dr. Bob and Anne Smith were charter members from June 3, 1936 to April 3, 1942.

Finally, a year before his death, Dr. Bob became a communicant at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Akron.

Dr. Bob told AAs he had nothing to do with writing the Twelve Steps. Nor did he have much to do with the writing of A.A.'s basic text, the "Big Book," other than to review manuscripts as Bill Wilson passed them to Bob for approval prior to publication in the Spring of 1939. But Dr. Bob did make some very clear statements about the Bible and A.A. And it was in Akron where A.A.'s basic biblical ideas were honed, tried, and then later put into terse and tangible form at Bill Wilson's hands.

Dr. Bob said A.A.'s basic ideas came from the Bible. Both Dr. Bob and Bill often stated that Jesus's sermon on the mount contained the underlying spiritual philosophy of A.A. Bob often read to AAs from those Bible passages.

He pointed out that the A.A. slogans "First Things First" and "Easy Does It" were taken respectively from Matthew 6:33 and 6:34. When someone asked Dr. Bob a question about the A.A. program, his usual response was: "What does it say in the Good Book?" He declared that A.A. pioneers were "convinced that the answer to their problems was in the Good Book." He added: "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." In fact, James was so

popular with the pioneers that, according to Bill Wilson, many favored calling the A.A. fellowship "The James Club."

The Biblical emphasis in A.A.'s Akron Group No. One involved much more. Meetings opened with prayer. As mentioned, they were "old fashioned prayer meetings." Bible devotionals such as The Upper Room, My Utmost for His Highest, and The Runner's Bible were regular fare at the meetings, individual Quiet Times, and Quiet Times with Anne Smith each morning at the Smith home. Quiet Time itself had distinct Biblical roots. Scripture was regularly read at all meetings. Scripture, both from devotionals and from actual reading of the Good Book, was often the fountainhead for topics discussed at pioneer meetings. Bible study itself was stressed. Dr. Bob called every meeting of early A.A. a "Christian Fellowship;" and early A.A. was in fact an integral part of "A First Century Christian Fellowship." Also, as will be detailed in a later article, every single Twelve Step idea can be traced to specific Bible verses and segments. Furthermore, "Surrenders" were required in early Akron A.A. This meant accepting on one's knees Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. Older members then prayed with newcomers in the manner specified in James 5:16.

And how did all this Bible material wind up in A.A.? Certainly not from, nor properly described as through, Bill Wilson. It was the daily grist of the Akron experimental work to deliver drunks.

There is a final point. One that really marks the beginning of the Akron Genesis. Its details were only recently unearthed in the author's research. It has to do with Christian Endeavor, the Christian church movement for youth to which Dr. Bob belonged as a youngster. And that movement, its practices, and principles can be seen as having great impact on many of the basic and unique aspects of Akron A.A.. These aspects differed from the Oxford Group approaches and principles with which Bill Wilson had been indoctrinated on the East Coast. They did not involve the Four Absolutes, 5 C's, Restitution, Guidance, Witnessing, and other distinctly Oxford Group ideas with which Bob and Bill were both familiar from their respective Oxford Group connections.

The Akron prayer meetings, Bible study, devotional literature discussions, confession of Christ, emphasis on church affiliation, and Christian outreach were a distinct characteristic of the Akron program. They were not emphasized in New York. They showed Christian Endeavor influence on Dr. Bob.

Christian Endeavor was a movement formed in Williston Congregational Church in Portland, Maine on February 2, 1881. It was designed to meet the need of the church for training young Christians. Activities included the weekly young people's prayer meeting. Each member promised to attend and take some part. A Bible verse or a sentence of prayer answered the individual's obligation of "taking some part aside from singing." In addition to prayer meetings, there were social gatherings, missionary committees, music and floral committees, and committees to visit the sick and poor and welcome strangers. The organization endeavored to be self-governing and self propagating. It spread to Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Vermont. Then to numerous U.S. churches, to Hawaii, China, and many parts of the world. In a few years, nearly 25,000 young people journeyed across the United States to attend a convention in San Francisco.

Rev. Francis E. Clark, Founder of the Christian Endeavor Movement, said the roots of the Christian Endeavor tree were: (1) Confession of Christ. (2) Service for Christ. (3) Fellowship with Christ's people. (4) Loyalty to Christ's Church. As to the Confession of Christ, Clark said: "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. . . . The true Christian Endeavorer. . . does take part to show that he is a Christian, to confess his love for the Lord. . . . The covenant pledge. . . secures familiarity with the Word of God by promoting Bible reading and study in preparation for every meeting.

Rev. F. B. Meyer, who later was to have a substantial influence on the Oxford Group and on early A.A. ideas and was president of the British Christian Endeavor Union, said Christian Endeavor stood 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.

The C.E. founder, Rev. Francis Clark, summarized the C.E. covenant as follows: "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 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."

Amos R. Wells, Editorial Secretary of the United Society of Christian Endeavor, asked: (1) What are the results 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 singing; the guidance of others along these lines of service and life. (2) How can we get original thought on the prayer meeting topics? Only by study of the Bible, followed by meditation. First, the Endeavourer 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. (3) 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.

If you read A.A.'s DR. BOB and the Good Oldtimers, as well as our own titles on early A.A., you will see unique Christian Endeavor parallels and practices in what was called the Akron "Program." In fact, if you read the personal stories of the pioneers in the First Edition of A.A.'s Big Book, you will see the practices in action. To be sure, the Akron pioneers called themselves the alcoholic squad of the Oxford Group. But their unique meeting structure was not like that of most Oxford Group meetings or "house parties." Moreover, the Akron practices were not familiar to eastern Oxford Grouper Bill Wilson when he came to Akron. For Akron meetings resembled Christian Endeavor meetings in a number of ways: As stated, the Akron A.A. meetings were called "old fashioned prayer meetings" and "Christian Fellowships." Group study of the Bible,

meditation, reading of Bible literature, and discussion of topics from the Bible as they impacted on the member's life all contained ingredients different from those at Sam Shoemaker's Calvary House. So too Akron's mandatory surrender to Jesus Christ, self_support and self_propagation, emphasis on church religious training, fellowship with like_minded believers, service, witness.

These Akron elements caused it to be described as first century Christianity such as that found in the Book of Acts, and these elements were the heart of Akron A.A.

Most assuredly, common spillovers from Oxford Group life changing techniques were present in both New York and Akron A.A. beginnings. But the Akron Genesis was biblical.

Melding the Roots was a Bill Wilson Project

In the midst of substantial controversy, Bill Wilson obtained a split vote in Akron that authorized him to write a basic text describing the steps pioneer AA's had taken to achieve their astonishing successes, which were said to be seventy_five percent.

Bill took some basic medical facts about alcoholism and the alcoholic that he had learned from his own physician Dr. William D. Silkworth. Though he mentioned neither the Bible nor Jesus Christ, he adopted much from the Akron surrenders. From the Oxford Group, Wilson codified in A.A. the OG life_changing techniques. To this mix, he added (using Oxford Group terms like spiritual experience and later spiritual awakening) his own recovery experience, calling it the finding or rediscovering of God. He left the unearthing of details to others, and the digging goes on to this day.

Dick B. is a retired attorney, living in Hawaii and student of the bible. He has more than 15 published titles to his name including Courage to Change The Christian Roots of the Twelve_Step Movement

Dick B. is extremely pleased to announce that the foregoing article is one of a series which will be run by <http://www.aabibliography.com> on its FAQ/articles page on the Internet each month. At the moment, there will probably be six articles (now 34 articles) briefly covering the major aspects of A.A.'s spiritual history. Invite your friends to check this site out for frequent articles by Dick B.

Dick is also pleased to announce that the Lowe Family Foundation will shortly feature on its website (<http://www.lowefamily.org/home.html>) and also widely distribute copies of the interview which foundation president Kathy Lowe Peterson did with Dick during his recent visit to Washington, D.C., in March of this year. The topic is spirituality and the substance of the interview will be very useful to its readers. The Lowe Family Foundation is a public charity founded in 1997 to educate the general public about the disease of alcoholism and its effects on families and individuals and to help families by increasing awareness of the disease and the resources available to facilitate the process of recovery.

We are very grateful to AA Bibliography internet site and the Lowe Family Foundation for the opportunities to disseminate facts about the history of early A.A.'s spiritual roots and astonishing successes.