

Rev. Sam Shoemaker, an A.A. “Co-Founder” and Spiritual Source

By Dick B.

An Introduction to Sam Shoemaker and A.A.

Bill Wilson often said: Reverend Samuel Shoemaker was a wellspring of the principles and attitudes that came to full flower in A.A.’s Twelve Steps for Recovery; that Sam’s early teachings did much to inspire him and Dr. Bob; and, that from Shoemaker, he and Dr. Bob in the beginning absorbed most of the Twelve Step principles. Then, at A.A.’s 1955 International Convention, Bill declared that early A.A. got its ideas of self-examination, acknowledgment of character defects, restitution for harm done, and working with others directly from Sam Shoemaker. Later, Bill added that early AAs learned about moral inventory, amends for harm done, turning their wills and lives over to God, meditation and prayer “and all the rest of it” straight from the Oxford Group as it was “then led in America” by Dr. Shoemaker. Finally, Bill wrote to Sam himself in 1963: “The Twelve Steps of A.A. simply represented an attempt to state in more detail, breadth, and depth, what we had been taught—primarily by you” and said: “Without this, there could have been nothing—nothing at all.” Bill then added Sam Shoemaker’s name to his list of “co-founders” of A.A.

There is much more. Sam was the Episcopal Rector at Calvary Church in New York, the church which operated Calvary Rescue Mission where both Bill Wilson and his “sponsor” Ebby Thacher made their decisions for Christ. Ebby’s Oxford Group mentors Rowland Hazard and Shep Cornell were much involved with Sam’s Calvary Church at that time. When Bill emerged from Towns Hospital in late 1934, Sam immediately asked Bill to help Professor Frederick E. Breithut with his drinking problem. In March, 1935, Bill, as godfather, sponsored the baptism of Breithut by Sam Shoemaker. Ebby himself became a communicant at Calvary Church. And the relationship of Bill and his early friends with Sam, and with Oxford Group meetings at Calvary House and Oxford Group meetings and houseparties led by Shoemaker was close and continuous. In the mid to late 1930’s, Bill spent many hours closeted with Sam in Sam’s book-lined study at Calvary House, discussing the spiritual ideas which were soon to characterize A.A.

Even more important are these facts: Bill actually asked Sam Shoemaker to write the Twelve Steps; but Sam declined, saying the Steps should be written by an alcoholic, namely, Bill. Then, when Bill had completed the Big Book manuscript, he circulated it to Sam for review prior to publication. Also, Sam’s reach into early A.A. actually extended much farther than New York. For Dr. Bob’s pastor in Ohio wrote to Sam advising him of the progress with alcoholics in Akron as a result of Bill’s stay with Dr. Bob and his wife at their home during the summer of 1935—the period when A.A. was founded.

But much concerning Sam Shoemaker and A.A. has taken back stage. A.A. and A.A. historians have simply ignored specifics that Sam contributed to A.A.’s Step, Big Book, and Fellowship ideas. Unless we learn those details, we will be without access to, or understanding of fundamental spiritual principles AAs borrowed from Shoemaker. One example is “finding God”—a

challenge that has been distorted through lack of knowledge of its Shoemaker source.

Basic Shoemaker Contributions

You cannot fairly appraise Sam Shoemaker's legacy to A.A. without knowing the depth and breadth of what Sam had to offer. Sam wrote over thirty books, at least half of which were circulating (before A.A.'s 12 Steps and Big Book were published in 1939) and being circulated in New York, Akron, and the Oxford Group.

Sam was also a prolific writer of sermons, pamphlets, and articles for the Calvary Evangel, his parish newsletter. The sermons and articles included his 1935 piece on "The Way to Find God." Also, his pamphlet on "A First Century Christian Fellowship" (the name by which the Oxford Group was known during A.A.'s formative years, and a name which Dr. Bob used to characterize Akron A.A. itself. Sam also wrote "Three Levels of Life," and "What if I Had but One Sermon to Preach" (two pamphlets which were tucked into the back of Anne Smith's Journal). Sam's booklet "One Boy's Influence" was quoted in Anne Smith's Journal. Six other Shoemaker books are known for sure to have been owned, and read by, Dr. Bob and his wife Anne Smith. In all, therefore, Sam's ideas reached A.A. through his books, his pamphlets; his published sermons; his Evangel articles; his personal conversations with Bill; his influence on Bill's mentors Reverend Irving Harris, Julia Harris, Rowland Hazard, Shep Cornell, Hanford Twitchell, Victor Kitchen, and others; and Sam's actual conduct of, and leadership in, the very first alcoholic meetings on the East Coast. Meetings which were actually Oxford Group assemblages. Sam's ideas were also passed down the shoot via Calvary Rescue Mission, where Bill first went for help and where he later went to find and help other drunks.

Sam Shoemaker ideas can be found in the very language of the Twelve Steps. They can be found almost verbatim in the Big Book. They are part of A.A. fellowship jargon. And they were later reiterated and explained when Shoemaker addressed A.A. International Conventions in St. Louis and subsequently at Long Beach. Also in the articles he wrote for A.A.'s Grapevine. Also when he wrote about A.A., as he frequently did, in his own books and pamphlets. Recall too that Sam's colleagues described him as a "Bible Christian." His books, sermons, and articles were permeated with references to the very Bible verses and chapters that became the foundation of A.A.'s own basic ideas. Principles that were studied in, and borrowed from, the Bible itself by A.A.'s Akron pioneers. Additional Shoemaker input came from Sam's frequently references to the writings of Professor William James, whom Bill Wilson was later to call a "founder" of A.A. and from whose Varieties of Religious Experiences, Bill obtained important religious principles. Furthermore, Sam was an outspoken advocate of Quiet Time, Bible study, prayer, and the use of devotionals; and these practices became part and parcel of early A.A. meetings, group quiet times, and personal prayer life.

Shoemaker/Wilson correspondence located at the Episcopal Church Archives in Austin, Texas also demonstrates the degree to which Wilson confided in Sam from the beginning of their friendship. The correspondence dealt with Roman Catholic influences and activities in A.A., with Oxford Group ideas, with Bill's ventures into spiritualism and LSD, and with Bill's ideas about A.A. itself.

Specific Shoemaker Ideas in A.A.

Every AA who stays in our fellowship long enough to be exposed to its Big Book, its Twelve Steps, and its meeting buzzwords will readily recognize thoughts that seem to have come directly from the books and other writings of Sam Shoemaker.

These include: (1) Self-surrender. (2) Self is not God. (3) God either is, or He isn't. (4) "Turning point." (5) Conversion. (6) Prayer. (7) Fellowship. (8) Willingness. (9) Self-examination. (10) Confession of faults to God, self, and another. (11) Amends. (12) "Thy will be done." (13) Spiritual Experience. (14) Spiritual Awakening. (15) The unmanageable life. (16) Power greater than ourselves. (17) God as you understand Him. (18) The "Four Absolutes"-- honesty, purity, unselfishness, and love. (19) Guidance of God. (20) "Faith without works is dead." (21) "Love thy neighbor as thyself." (22) Clear references to Almighty God (using Bible terms) as our "Creator," "Maker," "Father," "Spirit," "God of our fathers," and "Father of Lights." (23) The Lord's Prayer. (24) Jesus's "sermon on the mount." (25) Self-centeredness. (26) Fear. (27) Grudges. (28) Quiet Time. (29) Reliance on God. (30) Relationship with God. (31) "Giving it away to keep it." (32) "News, not views." (33) God has a plan. (34) Seeking God first. (35) Belief in God. (36) Born again. (37) Marvel at what God has done for you. (38) Let go! (39) Abandon yourself to Him [God]. (40) "Not my will but Thine be done." And many others.

You can find, in my title "New Light on Alcoholism: God, Sam Shoemaker, and A.A.," a list of 149 Shoemaker expressions that very closely parallel A.A. language. Many more can be found in specific quotations from Shoemaker's books, books which have been fully reviewed in my New Light work on Shoemaker.

Shoemaker and our Twelve Steps

Make no mistake. Whatever Bill Wilson may have said or implied from time to time, Sam Shoemaker was **not** the only source of A.A.'s spiritual ideas. Wilson often steered his applause in Sam's direction in an effort to avoid Roman Catholic and other objections to the Oxford Group from which A.A.'s ideas also came and of which early A.A. was a part. Moreover, Bill never mentioned A.A. specifics from Dr. Bob, Anne Smith, the Bible, Quiet Time, God's direct guidance or Christian literature that was daily fare in early A.A.

Remember also! Dr. Bob said he did not write the Twelve Steps and had nothing to do with writing them. Those Steps represented Bill's personal interpretation of the spiritual program that had been in progress since 1935. Dr. Bob emphasized, on more than one occasion, that A.A.'s basic ideas had come from study of the Bible. Dr. Bob studied the Bible. Daily, for three months, Anne Smith read the Bible to Bill and Bob. Bob read the Bible to AAs. He quoted the Bible to AAs. He gave them Bible literature. And he frequently stressed Bible study, stating that the Book of James, 1 Corinthians 13, and Jesus's sermon on the mount (Matthew 5 to 7) were considered absolutely essential in the early spiritual recovery program. Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob both said that the sermon on the mount contained

the underlying philosophy of A.A.

Nonetheless, Sam's own imprint is on the Steps. Every one of them. His imprint was on the presentation of Oxford Group ideas that Ebby Thacher made to Bill Wilson in Towns Hospital. And we will briefly take a look at just where Shoemaker's language parallels the language of the Twelve Steps. In fact, our third chapter in "New Light on Alcoholism" provides further details and complete documentation.

Step One: Shoemaker spoke of the gap between man and God which man is **powerless** to bridge, man having lost the power to deal with sin for himself. As to the **unmanageable life**, Sam referred to the prayer in the Oxford Group so often described in "Victor's Story" and quoted by Anne Smith in her journal: "God manage me, because I can't manage myself." **Step Two:** Sam spelled out the need for a **power greater than ourselves**. He quoted Hebrews 11:6 for the proposition that **God is**. He declared: God is God, and **self is not God**; and that man must so believe. Sam urged **seeking God first**, from Matthew 6:33. He espoused the "experiment of faith" by which man **believes** that God is; **seeks** God first in his actions, and then **knows** God **by doing** God's will, and seeing that God provides the needed power. For this idea, Sam frequently cited John 7:17. **Step Three:** Sam taught about the **crisis of self-surrender**, quoting William James's Varieties of Religious Experience. Sam said it involved being **born again**; and declared that man must make a **decision** to renounce sins, **accept Jesus Christ as Saviour; and begin Christian life** in earnest. Sam illustrated a surrender with language similar to that in A.A.: namely, a "decision to cast my will and my life on God." Many times, Sam said one need only surrender as much of himself as he understands to **as much of God as he understands**. A clear precursor of A.A.'s "God as we understood Him"—which has unfortunately been misunderstood and has been attributed to other sources.

Step Four: Sam wrote of **self-examination** to find where one's life fell short of the **Four Absolute Standards of Jesus: honesty, purity, unselfishness, and love**. One was to **write down** exactly where he had "fallen short." There was a "**moral obligation**" to face these facts, recognize these as blocks to God, and be "**ruthlessly, realistically honest**." **Step Five:** Shoemaker taught of **honesty with self and honesty with God, quoted James 5:16 for the importance of confession to others, and stressed the need for detailed sharing of secrets**. **Step Six:** Though the fact of Bill's borrowing of this "**conviction**" step from the Oxford Group 5 C's seems to have been overlooked, Shoemaker taught often about the need for man's conviction that he has been miserable, has (by his sins) become estranged from God, and needs to come back to God in honest penitence. Sam urged **willingness to ask God** exactly where one is failing and then to admit that sin. **Step Seven:** Sam clarified this as the "**conversion**" step of the 5 C's. It meant a **new birth**, he said. It meant **humility**. It meant, for Shoemaker, the **assumption upon ourselves of God's will for us and the opening of ourselves to receiving the "grace of God which alone converts"**. It meant "**drawing near and putting ourselves in position to be converted . . . utter dedication to the will of God**." Shoemaker often defined "sin" as that which blocks us from God and from others." So, originally, did Big Book language. And each of the foregoing life-changing steps hangs on early A.A.'s definition of sin and the "removal" process of examining for sin, confessing sin, becoming convicted of sin, and becoming converted through surrendering it. The conversion experience, according to

Shoemaker and early A.A. established or enabled rediscovery of a “relationship with God” and initiated the new life that developed from the relationship with God which conversion opened. Since both the Sixth and Seventh Steps were new to A.A. thinking and added something to the original “surrenders” to Jesus Christ, these Steps cannot easily be understood all without seeing them in terms of the complete surrender, the new relationship, the new birth, and giving the sins to God, as Shoemaker saw the process and as Bill attempted to write it into the recovery path.

Step Eight: Wilson added this step to the Oxford Group’s “restitution” idea. Bill also incorporated the Shoemaker talk of “**willingness**” to ask **God’s help** in removing the blocks, being convicted of the need for restitution, and then being sent “**to someone with restoration and apology.**” **Step Nine:** Sam said the last stand of self is **pride**. There can be no talk of humility, he said, until **pride licks the dust**, and one then **acts to make full restoration and restitution for wrongs done**. As AAs in Akron did, Sam also quoted from the sermon on the mount those verses enjoining the bringing of a gift to the altar without first being reconciled to one’s brother (**Matthew 5:22-24**). Restitution was not merely a good deed to be done. It was a command of God from the Bible that wrongs be righted as part of the practicing the principle of love. If one understands Shoemaker, one can understand the absurdity of some present-day AAs’ guilt-ridden suggestions about writing a letter to a dead person or volunteering help for the down-trodden or making a substitutionary gift to some worthy cause. **Sam taught that the required amends were not about works. They were about love!**

Step Ten: This step concerned **daily surrender** and the Oxford Group idea of “**continuance.**” Sam taught it was **necessary to continue** self-examination, confession, conviction, the seeking of God’s help, and the prompt making of amends. This continued action was to follow the new relationship with God and others that resulted from removal of the sin problem in the earlier steps. **Step Eleven:** Sam wrote eloquently about **Quiet Time, Bible study, prayer, and “meditation”** (listening for God’s guidance). Sam urged daily contact with God for **guidance, forgiveness, strength, and spiritual growth**. So does A.A.’s Big Book. Quiet Time was a “must” in early A.A. And Shoemaker defined every aspect of Quiet Time from the necessity for a new birth to a new willingness to study, pray, listen, and read rather than to speak first and lead with the chin. **Step Twelve:** This step comprehends: (1) **A spiritual awakening**, the exact meaning of which Shoemaker spelled out in his books and in his talks to AAs. (2) **A message about what God has accomplished for us**, a phrase which Shoemaker himself used, saying, in several ways: “**You have to give Christianity away to keep it.**”(3) **Practicing the new way of living in harmony with God’s will and in love toward others**, an idea easily recognized from Sam’s teachings that a spiritual awakening comes from conversion, that the gospel message concerns God’s grace and power, and that the principles to be practiced are defined in the Bible. Accordingly, our Twelfth Step language, without Sam, has become ill-defined and illusory. For A.A. Big Book students know that none of the three 12 Step ideas is set forth or explained in the chapter of the Big Book dealing with the Twelfth Step. To be frank, A.A. left Christianity in the dust. In so doing, AAs lost an understanding of what Sam Shoemaker taught and Dr. Bob emphasized: Conversion, the gospel message, and love and service were defined in the **Book of Acts, the Four Absolutes, 1 Corinthians 13, Jesus’ sermon on the mount, the Book of James, and other specific parts of the Bible.**