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Alcoholics Anonymous and Its Real Oxford Group Connection 20 Years of Input

By Dick B.

The Oxford Group and Our Other A.A. Sources

The Oxford Group is not the only source of A.A.'s principles, practices, and language. The Bible is the major source. Quiet Time, the teachings of Reverend Sam Shoemaker, the materials in Anne Smith's Journal, and the Christian literature A.A. pioneers read are all of major significance. And we have written at length on them elsewhere in books, articles, and seminars. Moreover, one needs to note the difference between A.A.'s Akron root (where A.A. was born) and A.A.'s New York origins (where Bill Wilson received many specific Oxford Group ideas). Both Akron and New York alcoholics were conversant with the Oxford Group, but not all looked at it in the same way. Dr. Bob saw it as a source of ideas. Bill Wilson tended to see it as a program that led to a relationship with God. The real picture, the real connection, and the real facts lie in between.

A.A. is not the Oxford Group. And, most assuredly, the Oxford Group is not A.A. In fact, the development of the Oxford Group since publication of the Big Book has taken Oxford Group activities to a totally different place than it took A.A. in the period about 1938, just before the Big Book was written.

How, then, can you describe the real Oxford Group Connection of A.A. Unfortunately, it has been expunged in part by the editorial work of Father John C. Ford and Father Ed Dowling on *A.A. Comes of Age* and in *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*. It has been clouded by ever-recurring and erroneous statements linking the Oxford Group to the Nazi Party in Germany. It has been lost through Bill Wilson's insistent accreditation of Rev. Sam Shoemaker with the mantle of "American Leader of the Oxford" and the "well-spring" of A.A.'s ideas and steps. Almost no one quotes an early, leading, Oxford Group leader and writer's statement: "The principles of the Oxford Group are the principles of the Bible" (Day, *The Principles of the Group*, p. 1). Finally, the real Oxford Group connection has been virtually discarded in A.A. literature and meetings, along with the Bible, Quiet Time, Sam Shoemaker, Anne Smith's Journal, and the literature early AAs read.

Fortunately, the last 11 years of research and the accumulation of some 23,900 historical items including hundreds of Oxford Group and Shoemaker books in our resource center in Maui has made microscopic looks at Oxford Group ideas and Alcoholics Anonymous codifications of those ideas a reality—just simply unknown to most today.

We've covered most specific details in our titles *The Oxford Group and Alcoholics Anonymous: A Design for Living That Works* (<http://www.dickb.com/Oxford.shtml>), *New Light on*

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Alcoholism: God, Sam Shoemaker, and A.A. (<http://www.dickb.com/newlight.shtml>), and *Turning Point: A History of the Spiritual Roots of Alcoholics Anonymous* (<http://www.dickb.com/Turning.shtml>), and in other works (<http://www.dickb.com/titles.shtml>).

The Important Oxford Group In-put Time Line

There was no “Oxford Group” prior to 1919. There was no “Oxford Group” prior to the time the press gave a tiny group of travelers in Africa the Oxford “group” name in 1928. And basically, there was no “Oxford Group” in America, at least, after 1938 when the idea and name “Moral Re-Armament” were embraced by Oxford Group founder Dr. Frank N.D. Buchman, just prior to the beginning of World War II. Finally, the name in America has now been changed to “Initiatives for Change.” And you will look long and hard to find any resemblance between today’s activities (which often involve a Roman Catholic Cardinal, the Jewish Rabbi of London, the Dalai Lama, and a supportive Japanese business executive, who has no connection with Christianity whatever). Many of the ideas which formed the heart of the Oxford Group’s life-changing program came from Christian evangelism, revivalism, and writings which achieved wide-spread importance and acceptance in the 1800’s. They are seldom mentioned among activists in today’s Moral Re-Armament program. Perhaps the one remnant is an occasional reference to one or all of the “Four Absolutes” or “Four Standards”—honesty, purity, unselfishness, and love. These “standards” were framed in the late 1800’s by Dr. Robert E. Speer in his book *The Principles of Jesus*, and embraced and expanded by Frank Buchman’s major mentor, Dr. Henry Wright, in the early 1900’s in his book *The Will of God and a Man’s Life Work*.

It probably would be quite accurate to say this of A.A.’s “Real Oxford Group Connection.” Nobody invented it. It came through being borrowed from many sources. It developed over a period of some twenty years. It is embodied in a number of titles, with different subjects, different approaches, and different authors. In fact, this is what Bill Wilson often said of A.A. itself. Nobody invented it. It was borrowed from many sources. And—what should be said of the Oxford Group and Alcoholics Anonymous—the basic ideas came from the Bible. Just as Dr. Bob said they did. A fact that Bill Wilson never disputed or rejected.

Major Published Oxford Group Works

We have covered these before. They are listed at great length in *The Books Early AAs Read for Spiritual Growth*, 7th. ed. (http://www.dickb.com/bks_early.shtml), and *Making Known the Biblical Roots of Alcoholics Anonymous* (<http://www.dickb.com/makingknown.shtml>). We must have more than 500 important Oxford Group titles here in Maui at our Resource Center. But in this piece we will just summarize those which will provide the reader with some solid chewing, information, and documentation! And by the way, that’s the reason for all the footnotes, bibliographies, and appendices in my books. So you can look and find out for yourself.

Important Early Sources for Principal Oxford Group Ideas—acknowledged its Leaders

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I like *Streams*, which was published by Mark O. Guldseth in 1982. The book has a real feel for the flow of sources from people like Horace Bushnell, Henry Drummond, F.B. Meyer, Dwight L. Moody, Robert E. Speer, and Henry B. Wright into the thinking of Frank Buchman and the writings of Oxford Group people. To mention just a part of their contribution, these sources from the 1800's contributed a widely known flow of ideas, including (1) The Will of God. (2) The inspired Word in the Bible. (3) The guidance of God. (4) The principles of Jesus, as summarized in the "Four Standards." (5) The major importance of "sin" as a barrier to a relationship with our Creator. (6) The "art" of life-changing involved in the well-known principles of "Confidence," "Confession," "Conviction," "Conversion," and "Continuance." You can hear these principles, in one form or another, on any Billy Graham Crusade, in A.A.'s last three steps, in the Books of Acts and Romans, and in the law respecting confidential communications, etc. (7) Witnessing. (8) Fellowship. (9) Amends and restitution. You can find these ideas in the Sermon on the Mount and the Old Testament and other teachings of Jesus. You can find them in a court of equity. You can find them in the criminal justice system. (10) The Ten Commandments. (11) The love of God and of others, including our enemies. (12) Searching the Scriptures, praying, meditating on the Word, and setting aside a "Quiet Time" or "Morning Watch." (13) Accepting Jesus Christ as one's Lord and Saviour—a much discarded, but primary element in early practices (John 3: 1-8; John 3:16; Romans 10:9).

In sum, Frank Buchman and Sam Shoemaker and Bill Wilson never claimed to have invented the foregoing principles that found their way to early A.A. As Wilson said, they were the common property of mankind. And they sure weren't something that was "distorted" or "poisoned" by the Oxford Group. Just read the Bible. Read any of the non-Oxford Group books Dr. Bob read and recommended. See *Dr. Bob and His Library* (<http://www.dickb.com/drbob.shtml>).

Read the pamphlets published by early Akron A.A. And read the speeches of Dr. Bob and Bill Wilson when they were on the same platform before Dr. Bob died..

Opponents of this or that religion, church, religious idea, or religious book so often try to place their target in a box. Then they label it. Then they condemn it. Often just because it doesn't fit their "box." But they frequently have never mastered the facts about it. Half truths, biased summaries, and basic prejudices lead away from God, the Bible, and the truth, rather than toward it—when it comes to so much "history," including that about early A.A.'s biblical roots, and those of the Oxford Group.

Some Major Contributing Oxford Group Literature in its AA Input Era (1919 to 1939)

Soul Surgery: In my judgment, the first "real" Oxford Group book was *Soul-Surgery*, published in 1919. It was intended to be the collaborative work of H.A. Walter, of Buchman's mentor Henry B. Wright, and of Frank Buchman himself. It set forth a life-changing program—the so-called Five C's—that Frank Buchman called "God's art" for cutting out sin and "opening the way" to a relationship with God. In Confidence, Confess it, become Convicted of it. Get rid of it by Conversion—an experience of God. And Continue the changed life. All of these ideas directly influenced Bill Wilson's Twelve Steps.

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Rev. Sam Shoemaker's Writings: Often ignored are the powerful, articulate, and simple early writings of Rev. Samuel M. Shoemaker, Jr., There are many, and they are covered in my various bibliographies. They are virtually reviewed in my title *New Light on Alcoholism*. They include *Realizing Religion*, *Religion That Works*, *Confident Faith*, *How to Find God*, *If I Be Lifted Up*, *The Conversion of the Church*, *National Awakening*, *The Church Can Save the World*, and *A First Century Christian Fellowship*. Those who focus too much on the "Oxford Group" tend to ignore the immense personal influence that Shoemaker had as a member of the Oxford Group, as a personal friend of Bill Wilson, and as one that Bill called a "Co-founder" of A.A. and actually asked (at first) to write the Twelve Steps themselves—steps in which Dr. Bob played no part at all as to the writing stage.

The Life-changing books Anne Smith and Dr. Bob recommended: Begbie's *Twice-Born Men* and *Life-Changers*; Foot's *Life Began Yesterday*; Shoemaker's *Twice-Born Ministers*; and Russell's *For Sinners Only*. There were others of less popularity: Kitchen's *I Was a Pagan*; Charles Clapp's *The Big Bender*; and Amelia Reynold's *New Lives for Old*.

"Doctrinal" Descriptions of Various Principles: Almond's *Foundations for Faith*; Sherwood Day's *The Principles of the Group*; Julian Thornton-Duesbury's *Sharing*; Philip Marshall Brown's *The Venture of Belief*; the anonymous *What is the Oxford Group*; Harris's *The Breeze of the Spirit*; Weatherhead's *Discipleship*; Benson's *The Eight Points of the Oxford Group*; Leon's *The Philosophy of Courage*; Phillimore's *Just for Today*; and Winslow's *Why I Believe in the Oxford Group*.

The Bible study, Prayer, and Guidance literature: Carruthers's *How to Find Reality in Your Morning Devotions*; Chambers's *My Utmost for His Highest*; Fosdick's *The Meaning of Prayer*; Holm's *The Runner's Bible*; Jones's *Victorious Living*; Forde's *The Guidance of God*; H. Rose's *The Quiet Time*; Cecil Rose's *When Man Listens*; Sangster's *God Does Guide Us*; Streeter's *The God Who Speaks*; *The Upper Room*; Hadden's *Christ's Program for World-Reconstruction: Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*; Harris's *An Outline of the Life of Christ*; Hicks's *How to Read the Bible*; Viney's *How Do I Begin?*; and Winslow's *Vital Touch with God* and *When I Awake*; Tileston's *Daily Strength for Daily Needs*

Biographical: Austin's *Frank Buchman as I Knew Him*; Buchman's *Remaking the World*; Howard's *Frank Buchman's Secret* and *That Man Frank Buchman*; Hunter's *World Changing through Life-changing*; Lean's *On the Tail of a Comet*; Spoerri's *Dynamic out of Silence*; Thornhill's *The Significance of the Life of Frank Buchman*.

Recent accounts by oldtimers: Belden's *Beyond the Satellites: Is God Speaking—Are we Listening*; Blake's *Way to Go*; Harriman's *Matched Pair*; Lean's *Cast out your Nets*; Martin's *Always a Little Further*; Mowat's *Modern Prophetic Voices*; and Twitchell's *Frank Buchman: Twentieth Century Catalyst*;

Some criticisms: Brown's *The Oxford Movement: Is it of God or of Satan*; Dinger's *Moral Re-Armament: A Study of Its Technical and Religious Nature in the Light of Catholic*

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Teaching; Hensley's *The Oxford Groups*; Niebuhr's *Christianity and Power Politics*; Van Baalen's *The Chaos of Cults*; and Williamson's *Inside Buchmanism*.

Conclusion

You don't have to like the Oxford Group to learn about it. You don't have to condemn it to disagree with it. And you don't have to block it out of A.A.'s past to prevent people from believing in its ideas. But, if you want to understand A.A.'s Big Book, Steps, Slogans, and Fellowship; and if you don't want to make up your own understanding of the spiritual program early AAs developed, you'll want to know the full, the fairly reported, and real facts about A.A.'s real Oxford Group connection. For our introduction, see <http://www.dickb.com/index.shtml>. If you are one of those, you'll have to do a lot of reading and learning. You know what they say in A.A. about "opinions." In fact, they used to say in the Oxford Group and in early A.A.: "Give me news, not views." And I hope I have.

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