

The Oxford Group

This article is an effort to put together in sequence the various events that took place in the years from 1908 to 1935 which made possible the meeting in Akron, Ohio between the A.A. founders, Dr. Bob Smith and Bill Wilson, and which resulted in the subsequent birth of Alcoholics Anonymous. It is an assemblage of facts gleaned from the following publications:

Alcoholics Anonymous
A.A. Comes of Age
Pass It On
Dr. Bob and the Good Old Timers
Not God (by Ernest Kurtz)
For Sinners Only (by A.J. Russell)
On the Tail of a Comet (by Garth Lean)
Akron Genesis of Alcoholics Anonymous (by Dick B.)
The Oxford Group & Alcoholics Anonymous (by Dick B.)

Do you know any of these names? Frank Buchman--Sam Shoemaker--Rowland Hazard--Jim Newton--Eleanor Forde--Ebby Thatcher--Shepard Cornell--Henrietta Seiberling--Rev. Walter Tunks--Norman Shepherd--Russell Firestone--T. Henry & Clarace Williams?? All of these people were instrumental in a scenario that contributed to making possible that historic meeting at the Gate House of the Seiberling Estate in Akron that became the birthplace of Alcoholics Anonymous. If it were not for these people, that meeting could never have taken place, and the fellowship to which we all owe our lives today might never have been born.

Where did the steps originate? In A.A. Comes of Age, (p.39), Bill wrote:

"Early A.A. got its ideas of self-examination, acknowledgement of character defects, restitution for harm done, and working with others straight from the Oxford Groups and directly from Sam Shoemaker, their former leader in America, and nowhere else."

We prepare to start this history with the story of Frank Buchman, the founder of the Oxford Group. You will see as we trace the paths of Dr. Bob and Bill Wilson in the years before they met, that the Oxford Group and the aforementioned cast of characters played a part in every twist and turn of the path that led Bill Wilson to Akron.

FRANK BUCHMAN AND THE OXFORD GROUP

Who were the Oxford Group? In 1908, a YMCA secretary named Frank Buchman had a spiritual transformation that changed his life. Upon graduating in June of that year, he started a streetside church in Philadelphia (Church of the Good Shepherd) with a donation of seventeen dollars. The church flourished, and he started a hospice for young men which spread to other cities, and then he started a settlement house project. Frank had a violent argument with his trustee committee because they cut the budget and the food allotment. He resigned and went to Europe, ending up at a large religious convention in Keswick, England. The spiritual transformation occurred when he heard a woman speaker talk simply about the cross of Christ. He felt the chasm separating him from Christ, and a feeling of a will to surrender. He went back to his house and wrote these words to each of his six trustees in Philadelphia: "My dear friend. I have nursed ill feelings against you. I am sorry. Will you forgive me? Sincerely,

Frank." Feeling an urge to share this experience, he went to nearby Oxford University and formed an evangelical group there among the student leaders and athletes.

Later the movement spread, and groups formed over the next twenty years in England, Scotland, Holland, India, South Africa, China, Egypt, Switzerland, and North and South America. Many of the basic things they did have carried over directly into our program. They practiced absolute surrender, guidance by the Holy Spirit, sharing bringing about true fellowship, life changing, faith and prayer. They aimed for absolute standards of Love, Purity, Honesty, and Unselfishness, which were an integral part of the first A.A. programs in Akron and Cleveland and New York. Above all the group was a fellowship: "A First Century Christian Fellowship." They carried the message aggressively to others. They met in churches, universities, and homes.

The Oxford Group and their principles were carried to the United States so that in both New York City and Akron, Ohio an Oxford Group was in place and functioning when Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob Smith hit their respective bottoms. These two groups would befriend and teach their principles to our co-founders before they ever met, and then go on to host the fledgling groups of newly dry and nameless drunks as they came together.

Here is how the Oxford Group came to the United States. One early member at Oxford, Ken Twitchell, had attended Princeton University and had a brother in New York City who was a mainstay in the Calvary Episcopal Church. This becomes one of several amazing coincidences. In 1918 during his travels, Frank Buchman met a young YMCA worker, Sam Shoemaker, in China and converted him to the Oxford Group principles. Years later, Sam became the minister of that Calvary Church in New York, and that same church became the titular headquarters for the Oxford Group in the United States. (The name was changed in 1928 from "A First Century Christian Fellowship" to the "Oxford Group.")

The groups' popularity peaked during this period. There were 10,000 people at one meeting at Stockbridge in the Berkshire Mountains. Business teams began to have their "house parties" in various cities.

In 1931 in England, a London newspaper editor, A. J. Russell, attended an Oxford Group meeting with the intention of exposing the group. But he wrote, "I came as an observer and became a convert!" (Russell later edited "God Calling", which may have found its way into material used by the early A.A.s.) Some 9 years later, in 1940, Richmond Walker of the Quincy, Mass. group wrote the 24-hour book still used by us today. This was modeled after Russell's "God Calling" but was slanted away from all spiritual to more of a 24-hour not drinking theme. Russell's book, "For Sinners Only", described his journey from prodigal son to the Oxford Group and became a best seller in the early 1930s in England and the United States, and was printed in eight languages.

One chapter of the book was devoted to Calvary Episcopal Church in New York City and its rector, Sam Shoemaker. Calvary Church became the virtual American headquarters for the Oxford Group during the 1930s. And it was here, (in the church's mission), that Bill Wilson's sponsor, Ebby Thatcher, was living at the time of Bill's last drunk.

HOW THE MESSAGE CAME TO BILL

In 1932 and 1933, a man named Rowland Hazard, son of wealthy Rhode Island mill owners and a State Senator, had become a hopeless alcoholic, and in his quest for help had sought out the world famous psychiatrist, Carl Jung. Jung told him there was no hope for him there, and to go home and possibly find

a conversion through some religious group. He did this in the Oxford Group in the United States and became sober. They taught him certain principles that he applied to his life. This story is documented in our Big Book.

In 1934, Ebby Thatcher, childhood friend of Bill Wilson's, was about to be locked up as a chronic drunk in Bennington, Vermont. He was visited by three men from an Oxford Group; Shep Cornell, Rowland Hazard, and Cebra Graves. (A precursor to our Twelve Step work!) They later sent Rowland Hazard back alone to see Ebby. He acted as a sort of sponsor and told his story. He taught Ebby the precepts he had learned from the Oxford Group. Later, as we know, in December of that year, Ebby had his chance to relay these precepts to Bill Wilson. Here they are, transcribed from a tape of one of Bill's A.A. talks:

1. We admitted we were licked.
2. We got honest with ourselves.
3. We talked it over with another person.
4. We made amends to those we had harmed.
5. We tried to carry this message to others with no thought of reward.
6. We prayed to whatever God we thought there was.

Now we begin to see the emerging pattern of events in Akron and in the New York area in the ten year period before the start of A.A.. We see how, through the machinery of the Oxford Group and its key leaders, Frank Buchman and Sam Shoemaker, events conspired to make possible this meeting between Bob and Bill in Akron in 1935. Shep, Cebra, and Rowland were all three Oxford Group members. They were part of the business teams which were working around the country in various cities. In November of 1934, Ebby surrendered his life to God at the Calvary Episcopal Church mission run by Sam Shoemaker. (Sam had met Frank Buchman in China in 1918, and by 1934 was regarded as a major leader of the Oxford Group movement in the United States and was hosting their headquarters.) Ebby is staying at his mission. Bill W. shows up there drunk looking for Ebby, can't find him, and goes to Towns Hospital.

Bill Duval recalls in a letter, "Bill W. told us at the mission that he had heard that Ebby, on the previous Sunday at the Calvary Church, had witnessed that with the help of God he had been sober a number of months." Bill said that if Ebby could get help here, then he (Bill) needed help, and he could get it at the mission, also. Bill looked prosperous compared to our usual mission customers, (actually, he was wearing a Brooks Brother's suit purchased at a rummage sale for \$5.00!), so we agreed that he go to Towns Hospital where Ebby and others of the group could talk to him.

After his spiritual experience at Towns, Bill immediately made a decision to become very active in Oxford Group work, and to try to bring other alcoholics from Towns to the group. He visited the mission Oxford Group meetings and the hospital daily for four or five months, right up to the time of the Akron trip. No one stayed sober.

BILL W. AND THE OXFORD GROUP

WORK (Jim Newton enters the scene)

Rowland Hazard, who rescued Ebby in August 1934, had a thorough indoctrination in Oxford Group teachings and he passed many of these along to Ebby and Bill W. Soon after his release from Towns Hospital at the end of 1934, Bill and the rest of the alcoholic contingent of the Oxford Group began gathering at Stewart's Cafeteria in New York following their regular meeting. Shep Cornell, then a

member of the Oxford Group business team that included Rowland, Sam Shoemaker, and Hanford Twitchell, was also a recovering alkie. Lois Wilson talked of regular attendance at the Oxford Group meetings with Bill, Shep, and Ebby. James Houck, a nonalcoholic Oxford Group member in Frederick, Maryland, stated that Bill W. went to many Oxford Group meetings at the Francis Scott Key Hotel in Frederick and always centered on alcohol. He was obsessed with the idea of carrying the message. The conclusion is that Bill had a wide acquaintance in Oxford Group circles, not just confined to Sam and Calvary House. Bill told Houck that he worked on 50 drunks in the first 6 months with no success. Calvary House was Sam's residence and contained an Oxford Group bookstore. Calvary Mission was at another location in the "gas house" district. Thousands of people passed through the mission where they offered lodging, free meals, and Oxford Group meetings every night. Tex Francisco was its superintendent in 1934 when Bill showed up there.

Now enters the man most certainly responsible for the fateful Akron meetings between Bill and Dr. Bob. Jim Newton was surely the sole catalyst that ordained the Oxford Group would be in place in Akron, Ohio when Bill showed up there in 1935. This amazing string of circumstances plays out as follows:

Jim, at age 20, was a luggage salesman in New York who had come upon an Oxford Group meeting by accident (actually, he was looking for fun and games that night!) in Massachusetts in 1923 when he was 18 years old. He was converted at the party, got on his knees and gave the direction of his life to God at that time. He met a lady named Eleanor Forde who greatly influenced his thinking about the movement. (He and Eleanor were to meet and marry 20 years later in 1943.)

Several twists and turns of fate placed Jim Newton in Akron, Ohio and installed our next cast of characters. These were both Oxford Group members and regular attendees at Oxford Group meetings. We will be talking about the intertwined relations of Henrietta Seiberling, Dr. Walter Tunks, Harvey and Russell Firestone, Sam Shoemaker, Frank Buchman, T. Henry and Clarace Williams, and Anne and Dr. Bob Smith.

Jim Newton went to Ft. Myers, Florida in 1926, at age 21, to visit his father, and they bought a 35 acre tract of land across the road from the Thomas Edison estate (6). Jim Newton became as an adopted son to Mr. and Mrs. Edison, and often acted as host and toastmaster at Edison's famous birthday parties which were attended by Henry Ford, Harvey Firestone, and many world renowned business leaders and public figures.

Here begins another key circumstance to set the stage in Akron, Ohio. Harvey Firestone, Sr., offered Jim a job as secretary to the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company in 1926, and moved him to Akron, Ohio putting him in residence at the Portage Country Club adjacent to the Firestone Estate. Jim worked for Firestone eleven years and was being groomed as president of the company when he resigned and went full time with the Oxford Groups. Firestone's clergyman was Rev. Walter Tunks. Jim joined Tunks' church and became active in raising funds for their birthday committee.

Jim had been in New York for the Jack Dempsey vs Gene Tunney fight. While there he confessed to Frank Buchman that his life was in turmoil and he was about to take a "geographical cure". Buchman sent him to meet Sam Shoemaker at the Calvary Church and he made an Oxford Group confession to Sam and was led to join one of the Oxford Group business teams.

These were groups of important men who made attempts to convert others to the Oxford Group method of spirituality. Jim frequently met with the aforementioned Shep Cornell and Rowland Hazard. He met T. Henry and Clarace Williams, husband and wife Oxford Group members from Akron and members of

Walter Tunks' church. The business team put on house parties in various cities at the finest hotels and clubs. In January of 1933, Frank Buchman, leading a team of thirty men and women, descended on Akron for the first time to give testimonials at the Mayflower Hotel and in Akron churches, and initiate the townspeople in the experiences of the Oxford Group. Here we can clearly see input from Jim Newton's parties with Firestone and Tunks' Episcopal Church group to influence the choice of Akron as the site of this endeavor, rather than some other city. Had Jim not already been a business team member and in place in Akron, it is very unlikely that Buchman would ever have chosen this small, rather unknown city as a place to pursue his evangelistic efforts. Jim was the spokesman who introduced Buchman at all the affairs that week in Akron.

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