

# Changed by Grace

**Hindsfoot Foundation Series on  
Spirituality and Theology**

# **Changed by Grace**

**V. C. Kitchen, the Oxford Group,  
and A.A.**

**Glenn F. Chesnut**



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## *Preface*

A number of wise commentators have already uttered the judgment that Alcoholics Anonymous was the most important new spiritual movement of the twentieth century. It used its extremely effective spiritual tools to give a workable solution to the problem of chronic alcoholism, the third leading cause of death in the United States, and it also gave birth to a number of other twelve step programs which demonstrated that this kind of approach would work with many other human problems as well: Al-Anon, for example, for the families and friends of alcoholics, was born out of the A.A. movement, along with Narcotics Anonymous, Gamblers Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous, and programs for people who suffered from spending addictions or from out-of-control sexual behavior. The group called Emotions Anonymous adapted the twelve steps to deal with a whole range of different crippling emotional problems.

But the praise given to the Alcoholics Anonymous program arose for even more important reasons. Their twelve step approach to spiritual development also successfully navigated the sweeping transformation in our understanding of the world which took place over the course of the twentieth century, and did it far better than most religious and spiritual groups of that period. During that century, the rapid development of the new physics and the new biology made deep and basic changes in the way the world looked to human beings and the way they thought about it. The new psychological systems which appeared likewise forced people to look at the life of the mind and the spirit in totally different terms. Basic explanatory modes were completely altered. It was the biggest shift in human understanding since the ancient Greeks

destroyed the old mythological world view over two thousand years ago. The twelve step program learned how to work smoothly with these new ideas and this new morality of knowledge. Instead of fighting the new science, A.A. learned how to express fundamental spiritual concepts in ways which men and women of the new scientific era could understand and accept. Ancient spiritual ideas came back to life again with a bold new power when expressed in twelve step terms.

Alcoholics Anonymous, the group which accomplished all this, did not however suddenly appear out of nowhere. Both of the founders of A.A., prior to meeting one another, were members of the Oxford Group, an early twentieth century Christian evangelical movement. Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob Smith used a number of important Oxford Group concepts as the basis upon which to build their new method for working with compulsive alcoholics and their new, highly detailed system for producing human spiritual growth.

This book is an attempt to arrive at a better understanding of precisely what Alcoholics Anonymous learned from the Oxford Group. And we are interested not just in the Oxford Group itself, but also in the entire preceding evangelical tradition, for the most important of these ideas can be traced back step by step to discoveries originally made during the 1730's when Jonathan Edwards in colonial America and John Wesley in England were laying out the basic principles of the modern evangelical movement.

What Edwards and Wesley discovered was that human character could be changed. One could take the story of a person's life, and with the aid of God's grace, change the way the story ended. It could be changed from a tale of angry and despairing men and women going helplessly to their tragic doom, and

converted into a tale of great personal victory. One could produce stories with a happy ending instead of a sad one.

Alcoholics Anonymous learned how to accomplish those same extraordinary things in the modern age. A.A. took into its healing embrace people filled with resentment and anger and fueled with fear and anxiety, who were clawing their way through life as though the entire world was their enemy, flailing away at all their foes both real and imaginary, and leaving a trail of destruction in their wake. It took these people and transformed them into men and women filled with love, unselfishness, kindness, and compassion, who approached life with smiles and laughter and an unbreakable faith and courage. A.A. revitalized the great discovery, made by Edwards and Wesley in the 1730's, that human character could be changed. That is what this book is about.

My own research in this area goes back a great number of years, and there are a number of people who have helped me along the way. It would only be right to give acknowledgement to some of them in this preface. I owe perhaps the greatest debt of gratitude to Prof. Albert C. Outler at Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University, for giving me my first introduction to John Wesley's thought. Outler was one of the founders of modern Wesleyan studies, and in fact came out with his first major work on that figure in 1964, when I was a young seminary student in my twenties and he was my mentor and advisor. I continued to learn about John Wesley in later years as I gave lectures on his life and theology to the Methodist students at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary during the 1980's and early 1990's, and gave public lectures under their aegis on topics such as "John Wesley's Aldersgate Experience: What Was He Converted From and To?" and "Methodists and Obsessions: John Wesley's Use of John

Locke's Theory of the Association of Ideas to Deal with the Problem of Obsessive Thoughts and Compulsive Behavior.”

I am also grateful to Prof. Donald B. Marti, my colleague for over thirty years at Indiana University, for all the things he taught me about Calvinist theology in colonial New England — Jonathan Edwards' world — and about the history of American religion in general. I should also thank Prof. Henry Warner Bowden at Rutgers University for asking me to do a chapter in the book he edited in 1988 on *A Century of Church History*, which forced me to learn a good deal about the major currents in nineteenth century Christian theology. While doing that, I was able to explore in more detail some of the immediate precursors of the ideas which the Oxford Group taught.

My student days at Oxford University put me there thirty years too late to experience the peak of the Oxford Group, but it enabled me to recognize the colleges and the atmosphere in which students and faculty were attracted into the movement by Frank Buchman's missionary work in Oxford. It was a world with which I was intimately familiar. So this too ended up being useful in its own way to the writing of this book.

During the summer of 2005, I discovered V. C. Kitchen's extremely insightful book on the Oxford Group, which I had never read before. As I read his book, I jotted down a number of notes and observations about the various connections which appeared between the beginnings of the modern evangelical movement in the 1730's, the rise of the Oxford Group during the 1920's, and the development of Alcoholics Anonymous during the later 1930's. I posted these early thoughts on the internet, and was surprised to see a number of other web sites all around the world picking up this material and making it available on their sites as well. This

was the first indication that I received that this material would be of interest to anyone much other than myself.

So I went more deeply into the subject, and began reading more in that area. On the basis of further research, it became clear to me that some of the necessary bridges between eighteenth and nineteenth century evangelical theology and the theology of the Oxford Group were to be found in late nineteenth century American revivalism, in the holiness movement connected with the Keswick Convention in England, and in Protestant efforts to carry out foreign missionary work at the beginning of the twentieth century. So I have also included material in this book on some of those people: Henry Drummond (who worked with the great revivalist Dwight L. Moody), F. B. Meyer and Henry Burt Wright, H. A. Walter and John R. Mott, and other late nineteenth and early twentieth century figures who played some role in the story (or illustrated influential theological trends of the time) such as Edwin D. Starbuck, William James, Ernest M. Ligon, and Harry Emerson Fosdick, along with some of the other Oxford Group authors such as A. J. Russell. I used them to help trace out the step by step development of a number of key concepts in the history of evangelical theology over the past two and a half centuries, in the effort to understand more clearly what early Alcoholics Anonymous learned from that tradition.

For the role they played during the last stages of the research, I need to express my very special thanks to two of my friends and companions in the spiritual life, Frank Nyikos in Milford, Indiana, and John Stark in Fort Wayne, Indiana. Over the course of the last year they and the other members of our little circle which meets in Milford on Thursday evenings have pushed me into doing the work that was necessary to turn the notes which I had posted on that web site into a proper book, suitable for study by twelve step groups.

Frank and John read through earlier versions of the work and made a number of comments and suggestions which have helped make the book much better. To both of you I need to say, thank you so much for your help, and particularly for your friendship.

I would like to dedicate this volume to them, and also to my son Ben, a decent, caring, and responsible person, who has been one of the best sons a father could ever have.

## CHAPTER 1

# The Oxford Group and the Eighteenth Century Evangelical Movement

**Victor C. Kitchen**

In 1934, Victor Constant Kitchen published a book called *I Was a Pagan*,<sup>1</sup> describing his discovery of the Oxford Group and the way it had changed his life. This little volume is one of the most useful of the works which were written during that period, for those who wish to obtain detailed knowledge about the group's central beliefs and practices, including such things as house parties, confession, moral inventory, quiet time, and guidance. There are also excellent descriptions in that book of some of the spiritual experiences which the group's members had. But *I Was a Pagan* is equally important in terms of understanding the early Alcoholics Anonymous movement, and what the A.A. people learned from the Oxford Group.

One has to actually read Kitchen's little book in order to fully appreciate it. It is a delightfully written work, which also, in both style and attitude, "feels" on page after page so uncannily much like a book written by a cheerful recovering alcoholic, that modern A.A. members will quickly recognize a kindred spirit. When we talk about what early A.A. borrowed from the Oxford Group, we

are talking about matters of style and feeling as well as the taking over of certain specific beliefs and practices. But the ideas and intellectual principles are there in Kitchen's book too, and it is these which we will look at in this present volume.

V. C. Kitchen (1891-1975)<sup>2</sup> was a New York City advertising executive. His firm — Doyle, Kitchen & McCormick — had its offices at 42nd Street and Fifth Avenue. He had a great interest in the Calvary Rescue Mission for down-and-outers at 246 East 23rd Street near Second Avenue, an operation which was supported by Calvary Episcopal Church and run by Oxford Group members.

Calvary Episcopal Church itself was located several blocks away on Fourth Avenue (now Park Avenue South) at 21st Street. The rector, Father Samuel Shoemaker, had constructed an eight-story parish house called Calvary House next door to the church in 1928. Shoemaker was a devoted follower of Frank Buchman, the founder of the Oxford Group. Under Shoemaker's leadership, Calvary House became the American headquarters of the movement. Kitchen, with his writing skills, wrote articles for the Rev. Shoemaker's publication, the *Calvary Evangel*.<sup>3</sup>

In November 1934, the same year that Kitchen's book came out, an Oxford Group member named Ebby Thacher came to visit a stock broker named Bill Wilson in his kitchen in the second floor apartment at 182 Clinton Street in Brooklyn,<sup>4</sup> and told him about the group and its teachings. As a result Bill visited Calvary Rescue Mission, began learning more about the Oxford Group, and eventually (after his vision of the light in Towns Hospital) began attending the Oxford Group meetings at Calvary House, where he got to know Father Shoemaker himself.<sup>5</sup> Bill Wilson eventually founded Alcoholics Anonymous, as a split-off from the Oxford Group of some of the members who were recovering alcoholics, who saw their drinking problem as their central spiritual issue.

What is so important for the purposes of this present work, is that the eye-witness account which V. C. Kitchen gives of the Oxford Group at work describes the kind of practices which existed in the New York City area at the exact time that Bill Wilson first came into contact with the movement. Kitchen and Bill W. were both members of the same Oxford Group businessman's group in New York City during the period around 1935-1936, and became good friends.<sup>6</sup> The two of them were close to the same age, so they could relate to one another easily. In 1934 — which was the year that Ebby visited Bill in his apartment and told him about the Oxford Group, and the year that Kitchen's book *I Was a Pagan* was published — Bill turned 39 years old and Kitchen was 43.<sup>7</sup>

Dr. Bob in Akron, Ohio, the other co-founder of A.A., may have met Kitchen at least once and perhaps twice. In 1933, wealthy rubber baron Harvey Firestone, Sr. (president of the Firestone Rubber and Tire Company) brought sixty Oxford Group members to Akron, paying all their expenses, so that they could get a group started in that city. Dr. Bob's wife Anne was the one who persuaded the doctor to start attending these new Oxford Group meetings early in 1933, shortly after they were begun. We do not know if Kitchen was one of the sixty who came to Akron in 1933, but he was vitally involved with their mission, and he was definitely on the Oxford Group team which traveled through Ohio and other parts of the west in 1934, along with Purdy, Haines, Twitchell, Mrs. F. A. Seiberling, Parks Shipley, and Rowland Hazard (the man who had gone for psychoanalysis with Carl Jung, learned from him about the spiritual solution to the problem of alcoholism, and later helped get Ebby Thacher sober).<sup>8</sup>

Now it should be noted that Dr. Bob was not able to get sober just by joining the Oxford Group, but it created the link which

allowed him to meet Bill W. two years later, in May, 1935. It also gave him enough knowledge of Oxford Group principles to allow him and Bill W. to start talking together productively from the very start, and begin creating the Alcoholics Anonymous movement by modifying and adapting those Oxford Group principles.<sup>9</sup>

So Kitchen had connections of one sort or another with both of the founders of A.A.: with Bill W. directly, but at least indirectly with Dr. Bob too. This is another part of what makes Kitchen's book so important for understanding early A.A.

### **Frank Buchman, founder of the Oxford Group**

The Oxford Group, which had arisen during the 1920's, was a Protestant evangelical movement with its own special flavor. Frank Buchman himself was a Lutheran pastor of German-Swiss background, but a man with strong Lutheran pietist leanings, which began pulling him towards the evangelicals. The modern Protestant evangelical movement had arisen within the English-speaking world, and moved to a very different kind of spirit than was found in orthodox German and Scandinavian Lutheranism.

Orthodox Lutheran pastors laid great emphasis upon holding all of the correct doctrines and dogmas which had been laid out in such enormous detail in the Augsburg Confession, the Book of Concord, and the other standards of Lutheran orthodoxy. If someone broke the rules, for example, and taught that God and a human being were cooperating efficient causes in bringing about that human being's salvation, that was defined as the damnable heresy of Philippism, associated with the name of Philipp Melancthon (1497-1560). He had been Luther's best friend and fellow reformer on the University of Wittenberg faculty, but was

attacked later on by a number of the German pastors and university professors who eventually joined the reform movement. It was equally erroneous, according to these detailed orthodox doctrinal standards, to follow the teachings of the Lutheran theologian Matthias Flacius (1520-1575), a contentious and intolerant anti-Catholic who had stated that our old sinful human nature was replaced by a totally new nature at the time of our salvation.

Orthodox Lutheranism denied the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, which stated that the substance of the bread and wine at the communion service were actually turned into the substance of the body and blood of Christ. The bread and wine remained bread and wine, the Lutherans said, and were not transmuted into his body and blood in the manner described in that medieval theory, which in their estimation was an over-intellectualized attempt to replace the actual language and vocabulary of the Bible with inappropriate Greek philosophical speculations. But they still insisted, just as strongly as any Roman Catholic, on the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the elements of the communion service, and attacked skeptics like the followers of the radical Swiss Protestant reformer Zwingli who said that the bread and wine were only symbols intended to remind us of the sacrifice which Christ had made for us. The correct way of describing the eucharist, the orthodox Lutherans declared, was to say that the body and blood of Christ were truly present "in, with, and under" the bread and wine. If an orthodox Lutheran pastor refused to use those precise words — including the precise prepositions "in, with, and under" — or allowed any members of his congregation to adopt any other theories, that pastor was soon going to be in enormous trouble.

These were only a few of the hundreds of orthodox Lutheran doctrines and dogmas which were subsequently defined in even

greater detail by the Protestant scholastic theologians of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, using (ironically) all of the traditional technical vocabulary of the medieval Catholic Church which they had revolted from in disgust in the sixteenth century.<sup>10</sup>

The conservative Lutheran pastors in America took these matters very seriously indeed, and would never have cooperated, for example, with Calvinists like the Presbyterians, the Baptists, and the New England Congregationalists, let alone people like John Wesley's Methodists, whom they particularly disliked, or the Quakers or Mennonites, or any other non-Lutheran Protestant group. A conservative Lutheran pastor, furthermore, was a stern authority figure who ruled his congregation with an iron hand, and simply issued blunt orders which were expected to be followed. Our souls were saved by Grace, but the church was ruled by Law, and the pastor was the interpreter and enforcer of this Law.

Pietism had been a rebellion in Germany against this kind of authoritarian rigidity, started in the seventeenth century by a Lutheran pastor named Philipp Jakob Spener, who began holding little devotional meetings twice a week in his own home, for people who wanted a kind of spirituality which laid its emphasis upon feeling and intuition, rather than upon following doctrines and dogmas. Spener's movement began spreading and has continued to play a kind of minority role in German Lutheranism all the way to the present. The Lutheran pietist custom of holding small devotional meetings for the deeply pious, separate from the formal church services, was especially important. The pietists would go to the regular Lutheran service on Sunday morning, but then meet separately during the week to develop a more intense kind of spirituality based, not on doctrines and dogmas, but on the religion of the heart.

The “house parties” of the Oxford Group were descended in part from these little Lutheran pietist gatherings which were held in people’s homes and other places of that sort. The emphasis which Frank Buchman placed upon *Gefühl* (feeling and emotion) and the religion of the heart also came from his Lutheran pietist background.

So Buchman’s pietism enabled him to break with the kind of rigid orthodoxy which was typical of so many Lutheran pastors, and made it possible for him to learn how to work with Christians who held a wide variety of other beliefs. Although he had come from outside of the English-speaking evangelical tradition in terms of his own ancestry and educational background, he managed to grasp the heart and core of the Anglo-American evangelical tradition. He developed ways to restate some of the most important of the early eighteenth-century evangelical ideas in modern language in a manner that was enormously effective. The teachings of the early evangelical movement and its child, the American frontier revivalist tradition, were revitalized in his hands , and given their old power and force once again.

This was important, because contact with the Oxford Group, and Buchman’s way of talking about the issues, forced both Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob Smith to rethink the New England evangelical tradition in which they had been brought up, and made them go back and look again at its original formative ideas. Bill W. and Dr. Bob eventually ended up restating these ideas in even more modern language, and began proclaiming the evangelical message in a way which pushed it in an even newer and more radical direction.

Important as his work was, Frank Buchman did not write much himself, however, which is why we must look at people

within his movement like V. C. Kitchen to see what Buchman had discovered and why it worked so well.

## **The modern evangelical movement**

Bill Wilson was willing to acknowledge the debt which A.A. owed to Frank Buchman and his followers. In his July 1954 *Grapevine* article on the origin of the twelve steps,<sup>11</sup> he described “the Oxford Groups as a modern evangelical movement which flourished in the 1920s and early 30s, led by a one-time Lutheran minister, Dr. Frank Buchman.” In describing their teachings, Bill W. noted that “these basic ideas were not new; they could have been found elsewhere,” but that the Oxford Groups were where the early A.A.’s had in fact been introduced to them.

Wilson was certainly correct in saying that he and his little group of recovering alcoholics could (in theory) have discovered some of these spiritual principles from other sources. Some of the most important ideas which they found in the teachings of the Oxford Groups came originally from seventeenth-century German Lutheran pietism or from the evangelical movement which had arisen within the English-speaking world in the eighteenth century. The latter source of ideas was particularly important in fact, so much so, that it needs to be explored in some detail.

To understand the great debt which both the Oxford Groups and Alcoholics Anonymous owed to the evangelicals, we need to go back to the beginnings of that movement, which lay in the period immediately before the American Revolution, and explain some of the most important things which they had discovered. The modern evangelical movement had arisen during the latter 1730’s in England and the English-speaking colonies of North America. The two key theologians during the formative period were

Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), a Congregationalist pastor in Massachusetts, who was selected as the first president of Princeton University shortly before his death,<sup>12</sup> and John Wesley in England (1703-1791), a priest of the Church of England who taught Greek and Latin classics and theology, including the New Testament, at Oxford University.<sup>13</sup>

Edwards was the best native-born philosophical theologian in American history, and the only one to rank with the truly great names of European theological history. Wesley was a scholar at what had been one of the two most important medieval European theological centers, and was fluent in a number of languages, including classical Greek and Latin, Hebrew, Syriac, the classical Arabic of the Koran, French, and even Spanish. Wesley originally learned the latter language to discuss the teachings of the Torah with Spanish Jewish scholars. He had read extensively in the Spanish and French-speaking Catholic spiritual writers of his own era, as well as the ancient founders of Eastern Orthodox spirituality, who had an especially great influence on him.

Edwards and Wesley were both thoroughly conversant with the new Newtonian physics, as well as the writings of John Locke, the founder of modern psychology. Both believed firmly that good theology had to fit in with the best findings of modern science. Neither one saw any necessity for conflict between science and religion, if the theologians were doing their job properly.

I mention all of these things because there are some within the modern world, who think of themselves as intellectuals and people of great sophistication and discernment, who have an unfortunate tendency to regard the entire body of modern evangelicals as nothing but ignorant Bible-thumpers. The founders of that movement did in fact take their Bibles very seriously indeed. John Wesley in particular could probably have recited most of the New

Testament by heart, and in the original Greek, which was the way he read it every morning as part of his morning meditations. But he and Edwards were both highly educated intellectuals who not only knew the ancient philosophical and theological tradition backwards and forwards, but were right at the forefront of all the new developments in thought which were taking place during their lifetimes, which was the period when the rise of modern science first began to affect western ideas in a major way.

## **Psychotherapy and religion**

Wesley was the earliest English-speaking author whom I have read who used the term “psychotherapy” (although given his classical background he left it in the original Greek as *psychês therapeia*). In Greek it meant the “healing of souls.” This was the central task of all real spirituality, and both he and Edwards believed that theologians needed to take seriously the findings of modern psychology in order to carry that job out effectively.

It should be said that throughout the middle ages and early modern period, the healing of souls (*cura animarum*, “the cure of souls” in Latin) had been the province of the ordained clergy alone. It was not until the time of Sigmund Freud and William James, at the end of the nineteenth century, that serious attempts were made to develop a totally secular version of psychotherapy. In the attempt to give an equivalent prestige to the new secular psychological methods, the Freudians hitched their wagon to the M.D.’s and the medical profession, while those who followed James’ approach linked their approach to the new secular Ph.D. programs which began to appear in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century. The modern American university degree called the Ph.D. or “doctor of philosophy” was developed at Johns

Hopkins University during that period and rapidly began being offered at universities all over the United States, finally replacing the medieval masters degree as the standard advanced graduate degree in numerous academic fields.

It is important to note this, because the M.D. psychiatrists, the Ph.D. psychologists, and the M.S.W. psychotherapists propagandized so effectively in the twentieth century for their right to also engage in the cure of souls, that many modern people assume that the psychological disciplines are inherently “secular” studies, and that religion has no “right” to discuss psychotherapeutic issues. So we have people arguing, on that false presupposition, that A.A. must be either totally spiritual or totally psychologically oriented, one or the other. Those who recognize the importance of the spiritual parts of the twelve step program can then be misled into believing that any discussion of the psychological components of alcoholism and alcoholic ways of thinking is a “betrayal” of A.A.’s “purely spiritual” program.

This is a real tragedy, because what A.A. did in fact was to restore the original Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Reformation understanding that the healing of the *psychê* (the Greek and New Testament word for soul) was an essentially spiritual discipline, and that the attempt to create psychotherapies on atheistic assumptions invariably ended up castrating the discipline and rendering it ineffective at any deep level. William James and Carl Jung, both of whom recognized the need to maintain the linkage between psychotherapy and spirituality, were far wiser than Sigmund Freud in this regard.

That was why the early A.A. leaders turned to James and Jung as models, along with another good psychologist of that period, whose name is less well known today but who was an important figure during that era, Ernest M. Ligon, author of the *Psychology*

of *Christian Personality*,<sup>14</sup> a book which was on the recommended reading list which was handed out to the newcomers in the Akron A.A. program. Dr. Bob, Sister Ignatia, and the other early Akron leaders all recognized, just as much as the A.A. people on the East Coast, the need for a synthesis between good spirituality and good psychological theory. It is a total falsification of early A.A. history when some historians of the present day attempt to create the illusion of an absolute dichotomy between a “totally spiritually based” Akron A.A. and a “totally psychologically oriented” and nearly atheistic New York A.A. Neither stereotype is true. The Akron people read books on psychology and sent newcomers to the psychiatrists at St. Thomas Hospital whenever appropriate. And most interestingly of all, it was the New York people (like Bill W., Mrs. Marty Mann, and Fitz Mayo<sup>15</sup>) who saw the supernatural visions and heard the heavenly voices.

### **The attack of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment on traditional Christianity**

But to go back to Edwards and Wesley and the 1730’s, at the time these two men began devising their ideas, the rise of modern science had begun, and the eighteenth-century Enlightenment was beginning to assault traditional Christianity with increasingly skeptical attacks. Widespread open atheism did not begin to appear in western culture until the following century, but the groundwork was already being laid. Voltaire, one of the best known of these Enlightenment thinkers, quipped that the civilized world would not be safe “until the last king is throttled with a noose made from the entrails of the last priest.” The Scottish philosopher David Hume, in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779), skillfully used these Enlightenment-era arguments to create the most

philosophically deadly attack on belief in God ever put together in the history of western thought.

The formative figure behind the Enlightenment was John Locke, who was not only the founder of modern psychology, but also the founder of modern empiricist philosophy. Locke said that the human mind at birth was a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate, with nothing written on it. This seemed obvious: newborn babies knew nothing about anything. There were no innate ideas already present in a baby's mind at birth, he argued, and there was no way the human mind could directly contact the realm of the Platonic ideas — the fundamental intelligible principles of the universe — in spite of all the medieval theological writings which claimed that human beings had that ability. It seemed obvious that all of our human knowledge had to be based on one of two sources of information: (a) our five senses which gave us knowledge of the external physical world, and (b) our knowledge of our own inner mental states. We could use our external senses to tell that the rose was red in color, soft to the touch, and smelled sweet. We could use our knowledge of our own inner states to tell when we felt angry, happy, sorrowful, and other such subjective feelings.

Since God was not a physical object, there seemed no way that we could apprehend God through our five senses in the same direct way that we saw an armchair or a large rock, or heard a rooster crowing in the morning, or felt the texture of a tree's bark, or smelled a rose, or tasted honey. This left the frightening possibility that belief in God arose only as an inner mental state, and was based on nothing more than a subjective emotion which the mind then connected to some fantasy object which had no real existence outside our own minds. By the next century, Ludwig Feuerbach was going to write his skeptical work *The Essence of Christianity* (1841), in which he argued precisely that in rather devastating

fashion. Since God was obviously not an external sense object like a tree or a rock, God was simply a creation of the human imagination which had been projected onto the heavens. Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, and a host of other western thinkers rapidly took up various versions of this Feuerbachian skepticism during the years which followed.

### **The chink in the Enlightenment philosophers' armor**

As long as spirituality was based upon medieval theology, it could not defend itself against Lockean arguments. St. Augustine, St. Denis, and most of the rest of the formative medieval western theologians (including even semi-Aristotelian thinkers like St. Thomas Aquinas<sup>16</sup>) had assumed the reality at some level of the eternal ideas (or universals or Aristotelian forms) as the basic rational principles of the universe, and they believed that this realm of the ideas — the *noumenon* as Kant called it<sup>17</sup> — provided the fundamental framework of reality itself at the ultimate level. And more importantly they had also assumed that our human minds could come into some sort of direct contact with them and have some real knowledge of these fundamental universal principles. Traditional Christian theology was toppled to the ground by Locke's arguments, and simply became unbelievable. If we could in fact have no direct knowledge of the eternal ideas, then we were also presumably blocked from any possibility of directly knowing ideal realities like God and the soul. Medieval theology was reduced to no more than a set of endless and inconclusive debates about things which the human mind could in fact have no knowledge about at all.

Not only that, as long as spirituality was based on belief in an infallible holy book, it had become equally vulnerable in that area also by the eighteenth century. Western sailing ships had by that time traveled all over the world. It had been found that every culture had its holy books — the Bible in the west, the Koran in the Arab world, the Upanishads in India, and so on — and they all contradicted one another. The more the educated western class found out about these other religions, the more apparent it became that all of these traditional holy books contained sections which were only myth and legend, and once one stopped and took a hard look at the Christian Bible, from the outside as it were (in the way that a Buddhist or Hindu would look at it), some of the stories in the Bible seemed just as farfetched as some of the tales in the holy books of these other religious traditions. As a result, appeals to have faith in the infallibility and verbal inerrancy of the Bible began to have increasingly less and less effect on people in Europe and America.

It looked, to an intelligent observer, as though the Enlightenment had won. There seemed no defense against the triumph of atheism. Christianity in particular should have begun shriveling up and dying.

But it did not. What Edwards and Wesley did was to discover the chink in the Enlightenment philosophers' armor, and turn their own attacks back against them. Instead of Christianity beginning to die off, these two theologians sparked a religious revival that was going to make religion far more effective than it had ever been before, even back during the high Middle Ages.

All real knowledge, Locke had said, had to be based upon our own personal experience. What Edwards and Wesley did was to devise a way of preaching spirituality which spoke to immediate personal experience. "Seeing is believing," and the reality of what

we can see happening in our own lives, and happening in the lives of others whom we know intimately, is inarguable.<sup>18</sup> It was experiential spirituality which these two men taught.

## **Jonathan Edwards**

When Jonathan Edwards started his career in the ministry by serving as the pastor of the Congregationalist Church in Northampton, Massachusetts, he began preaching a new style of sermon which had soon created an enormous religious revival in that area. In 1737 he published a thorough study of what he had done and what had happened, in a book called *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God*. His methods were to form the basis of the frontier revivalism which followed the pioneers in their covered wagons in the next century as they journeyed westward over the plains of the North American continent, establishing English-speaking settlements all the way to California by the middle of the 1800's.

In Edwards' work *On the Freedom of the Will*, he began with the observation that all adults had some sort of preestablished character. If one person for example left a purse behind in a university classroom by mistake, and a second person discovered it sitting there, what that second person was going to do was completely determined by that person's character. Some people would automatically steal the purse without a second thought, because that was the kind of people they were. Others would automatically go and try to return it to its owner. What motivated us to act in the way that we in fact always acted was determined by our preestablished character traits. There was no way of genuinely changing people's behavior in any and all situations unless we could change their basic characters, which created enormous

problems in human societies, because Edwards came to the conclusion that deep-set character defects could not be eliminated by any natural psychological methods.

We could sometimes alter negative external behavior by threat of punishment, but this did not change the underlying character defect. Societies had to have judges, prisons, and policemen, Jonathan Edwards realized — he was a tough-minded Calvinist — but people with thievish or murderous characters would still steal and murder in situations where they thought they would not be caught. With some people even threats of dire and absolutely certain punishment did not work, and eventually the courts would realize that these people had to be locked up for the rest of their lives. Of special importance to us, in his book *On the Freedom of the Will*, Jonathan Edwards explicitly singled out alcoholism as a behavior which could not be eliminated by threats of external punishment, no matter how severe.

Edwards discovered however that if preachers used the right methods, they could create a context in which God's divine light could have a better opportunity of breaking through and shining within people's minds. This was a kind of spiritual light, so to speak, which would suddenly illuminate a person's thoughts and beliefs, and cause the person to see good behavior and the things of God in a new light, so that their excellence and attractiveness could be appreciated for the first time. Learning to see good orderly direction and the things of the spirit in a new and more positive fashion would automatically produce a character change, which in turn would produce a new set of motives for action.<sup>19</sup>

In other words, the only way to eliminate deeply ingrained character defects and bad inner motives was to replace them with the kind of good character attributes which produced good inner motives. A direct attack on the bad motives themselves would do

no good. In the case of serious inner character defects, nothing was accomplished by scolding people or threatening them with eternal punishments. They had no motive to change, because bad motives did in fact produce their own pay-offs: thieves got their stolen goods, drunkards got their alcoholic oblivion, adulterers got their sexual satisfaction, and so on. No one was going to give up those pay-offs (those continual positive reinforcements of negative behavior) unless the preacher could present something better and even more desirable. What the preacher had to do was to present the excellence of good and godly ways of living so attractively, Jonathan Edwards said, that people would desire these fruits more than the destructive things they got from their old way of living.

Edwards was an excellent psychologist, and he knew that skillful preachers could easily manipulate the people in their congregations into all sorts of temporary emotional states. A revival sermon, however, which did no more than produce a stream of people coming down to the altar because certain emotions had been triggered, would produce no permanent change in behavior. In his *Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God*, Edwards described how he followed up on any apparent conversion experience to see if the person's behavior actually did change for the better in objective ways, over the weeks and months which followed. Some people fell back into their old ways of living soon after the revival was over. No matter how sincerely they believed that they had seen the light and had been permanently changed, their subsequent behavior proved that it had been nothing but cheap emotionalism. But there were others, he discovered, who showed a real change in their fundamental underlying character. Their old character defects had been removed and replaced with a different and more positive set of motivations. The fact that one could observe this in completely objective fashion — we must

remember that in a small New England town, everyone knew what everyone else was doing, and there were very few real secrets — was a reality which refuted the Enlightenment philosophers' claim that spirituality was totally subjective and imaginary.

If a spiritual solution could alter underlying character in ways which produced objective behavioral changes (when non-spiritual methodologies achieved no positive results at all), this was empirical proof that the spiritual dimension had objective reality, even if we could not perceive it directly as an ordinary sense object. Electrons, neutrons, ultraviolet light, and magnetic fields also cannot be perceived directly as sense objects, but we can know of their existence by their effects on things which we can directly perceive.

Edwards was a good Calvinist, so he was well aware that no preacher could change anyone's character with a sermon, even if the words were spoken with a golden tongue. Only God's grace could reach into the depths of the human heart and shine the divine light which illuminated the good and godly things and showed their true goodness and excellence. But preachers who employed the methods he had discovered could give God's grace a much better chance to work!

This illuminationist theory, as Edwards well knew, went back to Augustine, the great African saint who had lived at the beginning of the middle ages, and in fact went back even before that to the great pagan Greek philosopher Plato and his parable of the cave. Those who finally escape the dark cave of illusion and denial, and emerge out into the bright land above ground, are illumined by the sunlight of the spirit, which Plato called the sunlight of the Good. Ancient and medieval Christian philosophies from the very beginning, along with the old traditional Jewish and Muslim philosophies, were in total agreement that what Plato

called the Good (which is closely connected to what twelve step people call Good Orderly Direction) was simply another name for God. We cannot see the sunlight of the Good directly in its full brilliance, because our human minds would be burnt up by its overpowering light. We cannot stare at the physical sun up in the sky either, and truly focus on it, without destroying our eyesight permanently. But we can know that we are standing in the physical sunlight when we can see other things in its light: trees and grass and flowers and animals and mountains in all their beautiful colors and details. Likewise, people can know that they have left the dark cave of illusion and denial, and come out into the sunlight of the eternal Good when those who saw nothing around them except dark and hateful things, suddenly see themselves surrounded by all sorts of good and worthwhile things.

This is the fundamental change which takes place in Jonathan Edwards' kind of conversion experience. Oxford Group people rediscovered that it does happen. And those who have seriously worked the Twelve Steps also know that it genuinely does take place.

### **Marty Mann's spiritual experience in A.A.**

Genuine spirituality had to be based upon real personal experience in order to be credible. But the experience of walking out of the darkness and entering the sunlight of the spirit was one which both Oxford Groupers and A.A. people could experience *for themselves*, in ways and manners where it was impossible to deny that something truly extraordinary had occurred. Let us look for example at the description of the change which occurred in Marty Mann, the first woman to obtain long term sobriety in Alcoholics

Anonymous. The year was 1939, and Marty had finally hit her bottom:<sup>20</sup>

For the first time in her life, Marty literally saw red, a description she'd always thought was a literary figure of speech. The whole room was red. Little blood vessels were actually breaking in her eyes. "I was raging. I wanted to kill!"

Seething, Marty tore around the room, pounding her fists together, furiously plotting revenge. "I'll go out to the store and get two big bottles of whiskey and get good and drunk and come back here," she panted, "and I'll kill that guy and wreck the place! That'll show them!"....

At the very moment she was about to fling herself out the door and race down the stairs, Marty glimpsed out of the corner of her eye "that damn book," *Alcoholics Anonymous*, lying open on her bed. "In the middle of the page was a line that stood out as if carved in raised block letters, black, high, sharp — 'We cannot live with anger.' That did it. Somehow those words were the battering ram that knocked down my resistance."

The next Marty remembered, she was on her knees beside the bed. The coverlet was wet with her tears. She'd been praying, though it had been so long since she'd prayed that she didn't think she remembered how. And she knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that a Presence she came to call God was in that room with her. The room was alive, and she was a different person.

"The walls crumpled and the light streamed in. I wasn't trapped. I wasn't helpless. I was free, totally and completely free! And I didn't have to drink to 'show them.' This wasn't religion, this was freedom! Freedom from anger and fear, freedom to know happiness and love."

Marty lifted her head to a new world. She looked through her little window under the eaves, and everything

was completely different. The sky was bluer, the grass was greener. Marty said she felt so free that she could have walked out of that third-story window into the open air and kept right on walking.

## **V. C. Kitchen’s spiritual experience in the Oxford Group**

If we now look at V. C. Kitchen’s account in *I Was a Pagan* of his life-changing experience, we can note how similar the language is, and how (just like Plato, Augustine, and Jonathan Edwards) he describes it as having all things illumined by a divine light coming from outside the realm of space and time and ordinary sense objects.<sup>21</sup>

I, excepting for my one brief baptismal glow, had never had a real religious experience in my life. And yet, as I soon found, I *had* to have religious experience before the veil lifted from my eyes and allowed me to see the supra-sensible light of the spiritual domain. I had, in other words, actually to *become* God-conscious before I could see what lay behind my previous failure to do so. I had to gain supernatural insight before I could see the true nature of my own and other men’s natural mistakes. The Oxford Group, however, has a most natural way of introducing one to the supernatural and, in their skillful hands, God’s miracle of changing lives seemed no more *unnatural* than the many natural or physical phenomena we are accustomed to observe.

With this change — but not before — could I see the reason for my former failures. It was as if I had stepped all at once from the ordinary world of three dimensions into a fourth-dimensional sphere.

It is difficult to describe such matters to those who have not yet gained spiritual insight, just as it would be difficult to explain colors to a man who is color blind. Moral blindness is much the same thing, and it is a blindness which clears away only when you become sensitive to the light of the spiritual realm.

In ordinary terms, therefore, I can only say that I had been unable to see light because I stood in my own way. I had, as you may remember, suspected that there might be some supra-sensible kind of spiritual light, just as there were ultra-violet rays of sunlight and invisible beams of knowledge which flow into our minds. I now found that this was so and found, also as I suspected, that the coarseness of my own nature obscured this light to a degree which made me unable to “see” it. Powerful as is this light of God, man’s own shadow will blot it out of consciousness. I had buried my nose so deeply in my own coat collar and was so eminently conscious of my own desires in life that I could not, at the same time, be conscious of anything else. When later I occupied my mind with the troubles of the world, these did not, by any means, squeeze out my self-absorption. They simply added to absorption as a whole — absorption away from God. A burning candle is not seen in a room already illuminated. And God cannot be heard in a mind busy with other and coarser matters.

The Oxford Group had rediscovered and revitalized the eighteenth-century evangelical conversion experience, and A.A. people discovered that when they did the things they were asked to do, they too experienced the same things. It required a new kind of language however to explain what had originally been taught by the evangelicals of two centuries earlier. It is doubtful that Bill Wilson and his little band of alcoholics in the 1930’s could have

understood what was being said had they turned to the writings of Jonathan Edwards and John Wesley from the 1730's.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the revivalist tradition had been degraded by the activities of too many publicity-hungry “hot gospelers” who were ranting and raving in the pulpit, and insisting on a faith based mainly on a belief in the literal inerrancy of the Bible, as they threatened people with hellfire, and used psychological manipulation to produce what were merely temporary emotional responses. If there were any behavioral changes, it was at best a fear-based adherence to hundreds of rigid, legalistic, external rules. With no real internal character change (that is, in A.A. language, without having carried out the equivalent of the fourth through seventh steps at sufficient depth), these people mechanically followed a system of neurotic, absolutist shoulds and oughts, while barely suppressed anger, resentment, and depression poisoned their lives.

Due to the hot gospelers, the word “conversion” was no longer understood by most Americans in its original evangelical meaning. So the Oxford Group developed a new word for an old concept, and called it “being changed.” This put the focus back where Jonathan Edwards had originally put it in his *Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God*. The goal was to produce a real character change — the replacement of old character defects with new positive character traits — which could be measured objectively in terms of totally changed behavior patterns which flowed from within rather than being imposed by external authority figures, and which continued over the months and years after the life-changing experience. As V. C. Kitchen described it:<sup>22</sup>

This whole change in the direction of my life can best, perhaps, be illustrated through a version of the game of

“truth” taught me by a member of the Oxford Group. You write down the five things you honestly like most in life. And you write down the five things you most hate. Then — if any change has come into your life — you write them down again to show the comparison between your old life and the new. This is how the game works out for me:

#### IN MY OLD LIFE

*I most liked:*

Myself.

Liquor, tobacco and almost every other stimulant, narcotic and form of self-indulgence.

Anything which gave me pleasure, possessions, power, position and applause, or pumped up my self-esteem.

To be left largely to myself.

My wife — because of the comforting and complimentary way she treated me.

*I hated most:*

Poverty (for myself).

Prohibition.

Work.

People who disapproved or tried to interfere with me.

Any betrayal of my inner thoughts or emotions.

#### IN MY NEW LIFE

*I most like:*

God.

Time alone with God. The fellowship of the living Jesus Christ.

The stimulation of the Holy Spirit and the wisdom of God’s guidance.

My wife — because of the things God now enables us to do for each other.

Communion with others who are trying to lead the same kind of Christ-centered life and the witnessing to all of what Christ has come to mean to me.

*I hate most:*

Sin.

Self, because “I” is the middle letter of SIN.

Sins that separate me from God.

Sins that separate me from people.

Anything that falls short of God’s plan for me.

This is a beautiful example of a real life change. This is closely similar to the kind of character change which Alcoholics Anonymous attempts to produce through the twelve steps. People who come into A.A. hear the members describing their own life changes in vivid fashion, and once they start working the steps, they see the same kind of character changes taking place in themselves. Seeing is believing: the kind of skepticism about God introduced into western culture by the Enlightenment no longer seems credible. The tables become totally turned: people who have actually seen and felt God at work in powerful fashion now scoff at the skeptics and the atheists as people engaging in meaningless and empty intellectual arguments about matters of which they have no real knowledge at all.

## CHAPTER 2

# Power to Heal the Soul

### **John Wesley's discovery of the religion of the heart**

In 1735, when he was in his early thirties, John Wesley, a priest of the Church of England who had been teaching at Oxford University, sailed over to the newly founded colony of Georgia to do missionary work among the Native Americans. He was an intense young man who had read deeply in the French Catholic spiritual writers of his time (he was later to read the Spanish Catholics as well). When he was not teaching students or studying, he had spent his time in continual prayer and meditation, daily Bible reading (he read through a section of the New Testament in the original Greek every morning when he first got up), and doing work among the poor in the city of Oxford. He visited the city jail on a regular basis to teach illiterate prisoners how to read and write, so they would be able to read the Bible, and also so they would have a better chance of obtaining honest jobs after their release. He also (like the more fanatical French and Spanish Catholics of that time) devoted himself to frequent fasting and other acts of uncomfortable self-denial.

The first European settlers had arrived in Georgia and had begun building a small town on the coast, which they called Savannah. The local Native American tribal chief had no interest in Christian missionaries and refused to let Wesley enter his village and preach, so John was forced to serve simply as the parish priest for the English colony, among Europeans who likewise had little interest, for the most part, in the deeper things of spirituality. Savannah was a primitive little military bastion whose purpose was to serve as the first line of defense against any attempt by the Spanish in Florida to advance along the coast and attack the prosperous English colonies further north. It is difficult to imagine a sensible person wanting to settle in what was likely to be a death trap if the Spanish ever did decide to march northwards and seize Charleston in South Carolina.

By 1737, Wesley had to leave Savannah furtively after the leaders of the colony had filed a number of largely trumped up legal charges against him. A young colonial maiden named Sophie Hopkey had set her eye on John, and had then been angered when he refused to marry her. Her uncle was the Chief Magistrate of the colony, one thing led to another, and Sophie and her aunt finally leagued up with the uncle to make John pay, both for spurning her and for his behavior afterwards, when he created enormous public embarrassment for her by his treatment of her and her new husband after she married another man instead.<sup>23</sup>

Wesley took a small boat and sailed along the coast to Charleston (he was very good at handling small sailboats), where he took the next ship back to England. He felt like a total failure in every conceivable way. He began suffering from periodic bouts of what would probably be labeled today as acute depression. The resentment at the way he had been treated in Georgia ate continuously at his soul. He knew that a real Christian should not

feel this kind of anger and resentment and bitterness, and that a truly spiritual person should not be overcome by this kind of feeling of complete futility and failure, but he could not shake it off. He fell into doubt, over and over again, as to whether he was genuinely a Christian at all, and worried continually about being eternally condemned by God for his lack of faith and his inability to control his un-Christian thoughts. He tried to preach at a long series of churches in the general neighborhood of London and Oxford, but each time, at the end of the service, he was told that the parishioners never wished to hear him preach again.

He did eventually however obtain a copy of Jonathan Edwards' *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God*, where he found out about a new way of preaching based on the new Lockean psychology, along with Edwards' own discoveries in the area of behavioral psychology,<sup>24</sup> such as the distinctions between positive and negative reinforcement and between immediate and delayed reinforcement. What a modern behavioral psychologist would call positive reinforcement was far more powerful than negative reinforcement, Edwards had observed, and he also noted that immediate reinforcement was far more powerful than delayed reinforcement. If one wanted to produce the greatest amount of behavioral modification in people — the greatest amount of soul-changing — one needed to present them with some kind of positive rewards (not threats or punishments) which they could enjoy almost immediately, instead of talking about heaven and hell and the afterlife, and other things set in the far off future.

(We need to note the revival of this idea in the Oxford Group and the special importance of it in A.A. methodology. One cannot make alcoholics stop drinking by threatening them with punishments: either with earthly punishments here and now or by dire predictions that they are going to burn in eternal hellfire. One

has to present them with a concrete vision of a positive and rewarding new way of life which they can begin seizing as soon as they start working the A.A. program, if one is to produce effective motivation for change.)

During this general period, John Wesley also got to know people whose lives had been changed by developing a real God-consciousness, a group of Lutheran pietists called the Moravians. They presented him with living proof — evidence which he could observe by his own experience — that this sort of God-consciousness could produce gentle and loving people who were also enormously courageous in the face of death, such as during one of the storms which he had experienced on the Atlantic passage. There had also been Moravians on board his ship, and they had put him to shame by their calm lack of fear and trust in God, even when, to the terrified Wesley, it appeared as though they were all going to die.

(Here too, both the Oxford Group and A.A. rediscovered this central evangelical tool of using real people's lives — men and women whom one could talk to in person and observe in action — in order to demonstrate the power of their message. The undeniable proof of the possibility of real soul change was produced by introducing newcomers to people who had in fact undergone that kind of change. Enlightenment-era skepticism and nineteenth-century atheistic attacks on belief in God seemed like nothing but over-intellectualized nonsense to those who had observed for themselves the power of God at work. Seeing was believing.)

On May 24, 1738, John Wesley was having one of his dark days. No matter how hard he tried, he felt like a personal failure and feared that he was going to hell because he could not control every thought running through his head. He had always been an

obsessive-compulsive perfectionist. His own father had once commented wryly, that “when Jackie was a child, he could not even go out to relieve himself until he could first come up with two reasons.” He ended up that evening at a small religious service in Aldersgate Street in London where a number of Moravians were present. While someone was reading Martin Luther’s preface to his translation of the Apostle Paul’s epistle to the Romans, Wesley “felt his heart strangely warmed.” It was nothing spectacular like Marty Mann’s experience, or Bill Wilson’s experience in Towns Hospital (where he saw the room filled with light, and felt as though he were on a high mountain, filled with indescribable ecstasy).<sup>25</sup>

John Wesley’s Aldersgate experience was a quiet but profound inner shift in his basic perspective on life, and in his perception of the real nature of God and the divine power. But it totally changed his life, and turned this rigid intellectual — who had spent years attempting to attain a sort of life-denying fantasy of perfect sainthood by the sheer effort of his own willpower — into a warm and open human being.<sup>26</sup>

In the evening, I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther’s Preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death.

I began to pray with all my might for those who had in a more especial manner despitefully used me and persecuted me. I then testified openly to all there what I now first felt in my heart. But it was not long before the enemy suggested,

“This cannot be faith, for where is thy joy?” Then was I taught that “peace and victory over sin are essential to faith in the Captain of our salvation but that, as to transports of joy — that usually attend the beginning of it especially in those who have mourned deeply — God sometimes giveth, sometimes withholdeth them, according to the counsels of his own will.”

After my return home, I was much buffeted with temptations, but cried out and they fled away. They returned again and again. I as often lifted up my eyes and he “sent me help from his holy place.” And herein I found [in what] the difference between this and my former state chiefly consisted. I was striving, yea, fighting with all my might under the law as well as under grace. But I was sometimes, if not often, conquered; now, I was always conqueror.

There were no supernatural visions, no heavenly voices, no irresistible divine forces driving him to his knees in an explosion of weeping and tears. He had been suffering from a disease of perception. His old way of perceiving the world and God had turned him into a man with a heart of stone, incapable of feeling any deep emotions except resentment, rage, self-pity, fear, anxiety, frustration, and despair. But in an instant, the message these Lutheran pietists had been trying to get through to him for months finally broke through. He suddenly began perceiving both God and the world from a totally different perspective. His stony heart melted and he began allowing himself to feel good human feelings for the first time in years: real warm-hearted love, a feeling of being accepted just as he was, and (as he was to discover when he eventually began giving sermons again) a new-found ability to speak from his heart straight to other people’s hearts, which quickly turned him into the most successful and famous preacher in all of England.

## God's grace as power to change

We need to notice several key elements in Wesley's account of his Aldersgate experience, which were also to be present in Oxford Group and early A.A. experience. (1) For the first time in his life, Wesley felt a real assurance that God loved him no matter what he had or had not done with his life. There was no need for him to punish himself and hate himself any longer, either for things he actually had done, or for what had been simply thoughts which had popped up and started running through his mind on various occasions. (In Wesley's theological writings he referred to the latter — which were simply a natural and normal part of the way the brain functioned in a sane and healthy human being — as “wandering thoughts” and/or as “temptations,” if one wanted to call them that, which arose automatically at times from the psychological phenomenon known as the association of ideas.)

There at Aldersgate, he finally realized down in his gut that he did not need to *earn* God's approval. God already accepted him, just as he was, with an unconditional love and acceptance.

Around this same time, Wesley also came to realize that the sixteenth-century Protestant reformer John Calvin was right when he said that even faith mixed with doubt was still saving faith. And he decided that Calvin was also totally correct — in the case of most human beings for most of their lives — when he stated that none of us in this life ever felt pure faith unmixed with at least some feeling of apprehension and fear at the idea of letting go completely and putting our lives, and everything we valued, totally in God's hands. But in his *Institutes*, Calvin said that for those held captive within the pitch-dark prison cell of their own souls, the tiniest beam of the sunlight of the spirit reflected through a single

small window high overhead on one wall, could give them the little smidgen of faith and hope which would keep them alive.<sup>27</sup>

(2) John Wesley realized the need for “testifying” (making a confession) to the group about the way he was now thinking and feeling, and the way something good had come into his heart which had replaced the old bad feelings and temptations. This kind of confession or public testimonial was taken over into Oxford Group practice two centuries later, and the Alcoholics Anonymous movement developed the idea even further.

We remember that the founders of A.A. discovered that alcoholics have to do a fifth step, where they tell the whole story of their lives to at least one other human being (including the parts of their lives about which they are most deeply ashamed) before they can start real recovery. This fifth step however is a private individual act of confession, which is more like the medieval Catholic practice in which those in the monastic life talk about their lives and all their innermost feelings in detail with some especially knowledgeable and competent priest who serves as their spiritual director, so that they can receive detailed spiritual advice from that wise and caring person.

John Wesley talked about his feelings however to a whole group of people at Aldersgate. The idea of a group testimonial or confession was a new item which was introduced by the eighteenth-century evangelical movement. Some portion of what the twelve-step movement calls the private fifth-step confession — including discussing some of our old negative attitudes and talking about some of the harm we did to others — needs eventually to be repeated before a group of people. This has to be a safe body of people who will react with compassion and acceptance, which for Wesley meant the little fellowship of Moravians and other devout Christians which met at Aldersgate, and for men and women in the

twelve step movement means the little group which they attend, where they have gotten to know people well enough to trust them. Caution should still be used here, of course, since not all things are appropriate for this kind of context. Some things may need to be forever locked into the private confessional experience.

Eventually, people who are fully working and living the twelve steps will need to stand up before a large group at an open meeting filled with strangers, and confess some of their old destructive feelings and behaviors to these people also. It will however be equally necessary to talk at that time about the joys and satisfactions of the new way of living which came after they turned their will and their lives over to the care of God. In the evangelical tradition, witnessing to the group about the blessings of the new life one has been given (as Wesley tells us he did at Aldersgate after his spiritual experience there), is even more important than the confession of the misery and destructiveness of one's old way of life.

In the twelve step program, performing these confessional acts is the way the atonement process works. The guilt and shame are gradually washed away a little bit more each time we tell the story of what we did, and how we have tried to make amends for the harm we did, and the new basis for living which we have now discovered. After the initial fifth step admission — where we finally get everything out into the open for the first time — the primary motive for talking about the bad parts of our past is actually not to make ourselves feel better (though it does), but to help other people who are suffering from similar feelings of guilt and shame. It is a very effective method which the twelve step program uses for carrying out atonement, for there is a conversion process in which we learn how to transform crippling guilt and shame into a tool for healing others, and thereby turn that which

was evil into something positive, while also (as an added plus) gaining a healthy sense of real humility.

But it is absolutely necessary that people in twelve step programs do this. Until we talk about all these things to other people, we still remained locked inside the morass of our own minds. Praying to God without telling another human being about something does not get us out of our own subjectivity. We are not genuinely telling it to God the way it really was until we ourselves have learned how to look at what we did objectively. We cannot ever make a truly full and adequate confession to God until we have performed that act of self-transcendence which allows us to look at our own deeds “from the outside” as it were, seeing how they look from the viewpoint of an external observer. Speaking about it to other human beings, however, puts the matter out into the external world where real objectivity can enter for the first time, as we hear ourselves speaking these words in the presence of fellow human souls, and see and hear our words mirrored in their response to what we have said. Until we have done this, we will remain locked into our subjective feelings and fantasies about God, where the Enlightenment skeptics had warned that we could not truly tell the difference between reality and the illusory products of an overactive imagination.

God must be made flesh before we can apprehend him as a concrete, objective reality. Until we can see God before our eyes, mirrored in another living human being who is serving as the channel of his grace, and hear and touch a living embodiment and witness of God’s grace, we are only talking words. As the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein explained, we are only playing language games when we open our mouths — speaking empty words which have no *meaning* — until we can connect them to

concrete objects and events which we can see with our eyes and touch with our fingers.<sup>28</sup>

It would be an extraordinary experience if we could do our fifth steps with some great channel of God's grace, like Jesus, Moses, Buddha, or Mohammed, where we had a human being who was able to be flawlessly transparent to the divine power and grace. But in the twelve step program, it has been found that even by doing our fifth steps with frail and imperfect channels of his grace — men and women who attempt to make clear to us over and over, that “we are not saints” — we can concretize the grace and forgiveness and acceptance and love, and carry out a full and effective atonement, and be washed clean of our guilt and shame,<sup>29</sup> and can enter once more into the divine presence and stand before the heavenly throne with robes washed white in the blood, sweat, and tears shed for us by the God-bearers who came to pass on to us this gift of salvation.

(3) Wesley spoke of an additional task which was made clear to him by his Aldersgate experience. He had to deal in some way with his festering resentments against the people in colonial Savannah, and all the hurt feelings which had been torturing him since he returned to England: “I began to pray with all my might for those who had in a more especial manner despitefully used me and persecuted me.” This enabled him to gain the spiritual healing which came, as the Oxford Group leaders Frank Buchman and Samuel Shoemaker also discovered had to be done, two centuries later, when they first underwent their own soul change. Buchman and Shoemaker called it “making restitution.” Wesley could not make direct amends, but could at least start praying for the leaders of the Savannah colony and the other people there who had treated him so terribly. A.A. was later going to formalize this in the eighth and ninth steps, the amends steps. It is a vitally important part of

the process of healing our troubled spirits: the Big Book makes it clear that the Twelve Promises do not fully start coming true until we are at least halfway through step nine.

(4) Wesley discovered that it was NOT necessary to have the kind of ecstatic experiences which A.A. figures like Bill Wilson and Marty Mann were to have, extraordinary conversion experiences with “bells and whistles” as some A.A. people put it. John Wesley simply “felt his heart strangely warmed,” and that was all that actually happened. The subsequent pages in his journal make it clear that, as a “babe in Christ,” he was still going to have to make a long journey before he attained *teleiōsis*, full spiritual adulthood.<sup>30</sup> In Appendix II at the back of the Big Book, we see where the early A.A.’s likewise had to give a strong warning that most soul-changing was a matter of a series of “educational experiences” extending over a long period of time. As it says in Appendix II:

Though it was not our intention to create such an impression, many alcoholics have nevertheless concluded that in order to recover they must acquire an immediate and overwhelming “God-consciousness” followed at once by a vast change in feeling and outlook.

Among our rapidly growing membership of thousands of alcoholics such transformations, though frequent, are by no means the rule. Most of our experiences ... develop slowly over a period of time. Quite often friends of the newcomer are aware of the difference long before he is himself. He finally realizes that he has undergone a profound alteration in his reaction to life; that such a change could hardly have been brought about by himself alone. What often takes place in a few months could seldom have been accomplished by years of self-discipline.

It is important to note here however, that there ought usually to be noticeable changes in behavior within a few months after entering the twelve step program. There are some people who have been attending twelve step meetings for twenty years or more (not many of them, but they do exist in every part of the United States) who thump on their Big Books or some other book on twelve step spirituality, and can quote thousands of passages and know all the background history of every passage in that volume, but who totally fail the real test. They still spend a good deal of their time attacking other group members, continually filled with anger, and using underhanded methods and political maneuvering and verbal bullying on anyone who disagrees with them as they try to get their way in every little thing. St. Augustine, in his *City of God*, pointed out that the two most common ways of expressing out-of-control egotism and pride, were the desire for the *gloria mundi* (becoming the center of everyone's attention and praise) and the *libido dominandi* (the lust for dominating and controlling everyone else). But any genuine soul change will of necessity produce behavioral changes which are real, external, and objectively verifiable. So in particular, continual explosions of temper at other people demonstrate that there has in fact been no actual change down in the lower levels of the soul, no matter how piously we may talk.

Jonathan Edwards first discovered the necessity of doing this external reality check, and John Wesley was equally aware of it. People who claim to have had a soul change when there has been very little external behavioral change, are still worshiping the imaginary God of their subjective emotions, the fake God which the skeptics of the eighteenth century Enlightenment warned about. The skeptics and atheists of that long ago era claimed that all spirituality was an exercise in self-deception of this sort, and that no real God actually existed at all. The early evangelical

movement said that the worship of an imaginary God was a trap which religious people could easily fall into (and which many self-proclaimed religious people had in fact fallen into). But they also pointed to the observed fact that some people were able to change and develop loving, tolerant, forgiving behavior toward all by calling upon the power of God's grace, which provided objective proof that the inner soul change was not necessarily just a subjective illusion.

Modern scientific method tells us to assemble objective data and make an empirical check on all our theories. If the bridge falls down, the engineer's theories were incorrect, no matter how logical they sounded. If the bridge remains standing no matter how heavy the loads which travel over it, the engineer's theories must have been correct. The early evangelical movement agreed with the new science totally in this regard. In particular, to verify empirically whether a real soul change had occurred, one had to see how the person reacted under pressure. When people were suddenly plunged into truly difficult and trying situations, threatened by loss or death or vicious attacks, it would become clear that some who claimed to know the real God were fakers and hopeless hypocrites, but that there were others whose lives and behavior, even in the midst of enormous problems, concretely and objectively *showed by their words and deeds that their God was the real thing.*

(5) John Wesley made many new discoveries at Aldersgate, but the most important thing he discovered was that, when the old dark feelings started to overcome his mind, all he had to do was to quietly ask God for help and turn the matter over to God's care, and he would be able to resist the temptation of going deeper and deeper into the bad place where these thoughts were trying to lead him. It is important to note that our character defects do not totally

disappear, as Wesley observed in the aftermath of his Aldersgate experience, which means that they can still cause us temporary discomfort at times. The difference is that without the help of God's power, our character defects always used to win in the long run. With the aid of God's grace, as Wesley discovered, we can use our will-power to push these character defects to the back of our minds, and we can keep them from controlling our actions.<sup>31</sup> This has also regularly been discovered to be true in A.A. experience over the past seventy years. People in the fellowship do not become perfect little plaster saints, without spot or flaw, but they are put back into real control of their own lives once again.

The important thing to note however is that we can use objective external data to distinguish between authentic psychic change and subjective emotionalism. We can distinguish between the real God and imaginary gods. *The grace of the real God, the one who can be experientially verified, is a real healing power which gives us the power to make real change.*

In the 1930's, the early A.A. people were first introduced to these Wesleyan ideas in the new terminology which the Oxford Group had devised for teaching them. They then very quickly stopped reading most of the Oxford Group literature, and began using *The Upper Room* for their meditations every morning.<sup>32</sup> This was published in Nashville, Tennessee, by the Southern Methodists. These were some of John Wesley's followers, who had been nicknamed the "Methodists" because of the methodical way that they went about praying and meditating and singing hymns as they went about their daily lives, and kept spiritual journals in which they searched for any character defects which needed to be uprooted from their souls, and systematically worked at continually learning and growing spiritually for all their days. So *The Upper Room* put the A.A. people into direct contact with

the living Wesleyan tradition and its emphasis upon the religion of the heart and its ability to bring about real soul change and a genuine psychic change that transformed human life at the deepest level.

## **The Oxford Group on the newly-given power to change**

The importance of the Oxford Group, was that they had rediscovered these fundamental evangelical principles which had first been laid out by Jonathan Edwards and John Wesley, and that they were the ones who first introduced the early A.A. people to these fundamental ideas. It was a particular version of these principles however which they had appropriated.

In the form in which Edwards and Wesley had first developed the evangelical preaching method in the early eighteenth century, it was designed primarily for preaching revivals to large groups of people. Even Wesley's Aldersgate experience took place in a group context, as we can observe. In the next century, the nineteenth century, revivalists went west with the American frontier in a religious movement called the Second Great Awakening, conducting camp meetings in the open air and mass meetings in schoolhouses and auditoriums, where hundreds or thousands of people would attend, and large numbers of people would come forward when an altar call was announced, and fall down on their knees and surrender their will and lives to God. For those who are interested in that era, Charles G. Finney (1792-1875) was one of the major early American leaders of this kind of mass revivalism during the early period; Dwight L. Moody (1837-1899) was the most famous revival preacher of that sort from the second half of that century.<sup>33</sup>

The highly respected Scottish evangelical preacher and theologian, Henry Drummond (1851-1897), began his own career after Moody came to preach revivals in Scotland and England in the early 1870's, where Drummond heard him and was overwhelmed by the power of his message. The two men became closely associated, and Drummond later came to speak at Moody's Northfield Conferences in Massachusetts. One of the talks Drummond gave there, in 1887, was called "The Greatest Thing in the World," which was a beautiful explanation of the concept of *agapê* love in 1 Corinthians 13. Moody was so impressed when he heard it, that he immediately arranged for its publication. It was later to become one of the handful of basic works on spirituality (along with Emmet Fox's *Sermon on the Mount*) which early A.A. people were encouraged to read when they first came into the program.<sup>34</sup>

Drummond had already noted in 1873, that there was perhaps too much emphasis on preaching huge revivals with hundreds and thousands of people in attendance, as though that were the only way to do it. The world was changing, and the era of the great mass revivals was beginning to come to an end. We had to find a new way of doing things, Drummond said: we needed to get back to doing evangelism on individuals, just as they did in first century Christianity. Jesus may have preached sermons to large numbers of people on many occasions, but *he collected his true disciples one by one.*<sup>35</sup>

It was in the field of Protestant foreign missions that Drummond was first heard. Missionaries to countries like China and India could not operate successfully by trying to preach American and English-style mass revivals. They had to work on individuals one at a time over long periods in order to bring an individual from a non-Christian background to saving faith. In the

next generation, an American Methodist, John R. Mott (1865-1955), became a major supporter of this new idea of quiet one-on-one personal evangelism. Mott had a profound influence on all of the Christian denominations through his chairmanship of the first International Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910 (the beginning of the modern ecumenical movement) and his work in helping found the World Council of Churches (where he was elected lifetime Honorary President at its first meeting in 1948). He was also awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1946.<sup>36</sup>

Frank Buchman worked as a foreign missionary in India and the Far East in 1915 and 1917-1919, immediately *before* he started the Oxford Group (1920-1929). He was encouraged and supported by John R. Mott, and in 1917 traveled through China for three months with H. A. Walter doing missionary work.

Walter was a famous Protestant missionary (who did his work mainly among people of Muslim background in India) who in 1919 wrote a widely read book called *Soul-Surgery: Some Thoughts on Incisive Personal Work*.<sup>37</sup> The title of Walter's book automatically expresses the crucial point: the best way of producing true soul change or psychic change when doing missionary work was through working with each person individually. His book spoke of the 5 C's (which the Oxford Group took over as important principles): Confidence, Confession, Conviction, Conversion, and Conservation. We had to gain the other person's *confidence*, which was often best done by confessing our own moral problems and how God had removed them. We had to get the other person to *confess* his or her own most deeply felt moral problems. We had to push that person to the point where he or she felt totally *convicted* of helplessness and hopelessness to solve those moral problems by his or her own intelligence and will power. Only then could a real *conversion* (a genuine soul change) occur. And then

we had to continue working with the other person through the days and weeks that followed, to *conserve* what had been accomplished, and to help the person avoid going back to his or her old ways once again.

Frank Buchman in 1920 simply adapted these ideas from the foreign missionary field and began using them to do evangelical work among university students, first at Cambridge University and then at Oxford University.<sup>38</sup> By the time V. C. Kitchen became involved in the Oxford Group, Buchman had expanded his work to include, not just young students from elite universities, but also older people, primarily men and women who were fairly affluent or who held important positions in the government, the military, or the church. The important thing to note is that his methods were based on personal evangelism, passing on the message by working one-on-one with individuals who needed it.

That was part of what was later to make A.A. and the other twelve step programs work so well, the emphasis upon working with each individual on an immediate and intimate personal level, and the recognition that the only way that we could “preach” the twelve step message was to talk about our own personal experiences. If we did it right though, *we could change people’s lives*, and remake their moral character at the most fundamental level.

### **The changes which Kitchen saw in his life**

V. C. Kitchen, in *I Was a Pagan*, describes in detail how he began observing in his own life, that grace did in fact give the power to produce the kind of change which the Oxford Group members had told him about and had witnessed to him about.<sup>39</sup>

This change commenced a few days after my return from the group house-party. My business took me to New Haven and, while on the train, I had ample time for reflection. It was then that I made my first experiments in self-denial.

The trip, for instance, was one I had always drowned in tobacco smoke, for I was an inveterate smoker and lit my pipe the first thing in the morning, putting it out the last thing at night. When, at times, I felt it threatening my heart and lungs, I had made the effort to cut down smoking. But that never lasted more than a few days and I had never succeeded in cutting it out. This time, however, I decided to see if the God the Oxford Group had talked about could and would assist me. I asked His help rather than attempt the thing myself and something unusual happened. I did not strike a match all day and, to my surprise, felt no accompanying nervousness or discomfort.

It was the first time I had ever won a battle of this kind with what seemed to me an utter *lack* of struggle. I felt a strange sense of dependence on some power that was utterly dependable — a power within yet coming from outside myself — a power far stronger than I was.

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I never saw a foaming glass of beer, for instance, without wanting it. I never saw an attractive woman without wanting her. I never saw a comfortable couch without wanting to lie down.

Physically I found only two ways to handle these desires. One was to satisfy the desire which, however, always ended that desire and gave me no real satisfaction in the end. The other way was to restrain the desire which proved even more unsatisfactory. As I got my bearings in the new life, however, I found that God had a far wiser and altogether different way of dealing with desire. He satisfied

unsound desire by *removing* the desire itself and that has given me the only genuine satisfaction I have ever found.

After surrendering my life, for instance, I felt such peace and joy that my reciprocal, instinctive physical desire was to “celebrate as usual” by pouring out a generous libation of alcohol. I had actually started for a bottle in the pantry when God stopped me with my first real bit of guidance and told me that I could not serve Him as long as I was a slave to gin. I then and there admitted my inability to quit of my own will and asked God to take charge of the matter. He did. I looked at the bottle and felt a distinct sensation of nausea. I was revolted at the very thought of a drink and the desire for alcohol has never come back. God simply lifted that desire entirely out of my life, and I have found this freedom far more desirable than any satisfaction or repression of desire I have ever experienced.

The soul change or psychic change which the Oxford Group promised did in fact happen, and as we see in Kitchen’s story, even the desire for alcohol could be conquered by that kind of spiritual transformation. Within the Oxford Group fellowship, the attempt to heal hard-core chronic alcoholism did not work all that well most of the time, but it did work better than anything else the founders of A.A. had tried when they first began trying to devise their own methods for dealing with the problem.

When I say that the Oxford Group method did not usually work all that well for the long term treatment of alcoholism, we must remember that Bill W., after getting a temporary remission from the urge to drink in the Oxford Group, was nevertheless only hanging onto his sobriety by the skin of his teeth until he met another alcoholic, Dr. Bob, with whom he could join in working a program which the two of them quickly began modifying in ways which enabled them to work with alcoholics much more

successfully. Richmond Walker, the author of the A.A. meditational work *Twenty-Four Hours a Day*, had managed to stay sober for a while in the Oxford Group, but then went back to drinking destructively once again, and did not obtain long term sobriety until he joined A.A. Neither Ebby Thacher nor Rowland Hazard were able to stay permanently sober in the Oxford Group (although one might argue that poor Ebby did not do all that well in A.A. either). Dr. Bob was never able to get sober in the Oxford Group at all, even for just a short time. So I feel a certain amount of hesitation when reading works which claim that A.A. could improve its success rate if it would just go back to doing things exactly the way the Oxford Group did them.

### **Change in A.A. — replacing resentment with agapê love**

What early A.A. did was to focus on the part of the Oxford Group teachings which seemed to give some relief to alcoholic cravings, and learn how to make those methods work even better in terms of that one issue alone. This focus on the problem of alcoholism alone was what A.A. called its singleness of purpose. Nevertheless, in spite of the fact that their primary concern was keeping people away from the bottle, they rapidly began producing soul changes which could result not only in lifelong sobriety, but also in the development of an impressive amount of serenity, joy, and all-accepting love. The modifications which A.A. made in Oxford Group practices did not weaken the spiritual fruits which the evangelical method was capable of producing, but — in my own estimation at any rate — seem to have been capable of creating more in the way of positive spiritual changes, and more

rapidly too, than any other version of the evangelical program that I have ever observed.

For in fact the truly extraordinary love and compassion which one saw in the best of the good old-timers in A.A., along with their indomitable courage and inner peace and delight in life, were the spiritual goals which the eighteenth-century evangelical movement had proclaimed as the fruits of authentic faith and grace. Evangelicals like John Wesley in particular would have acknowledged, on the principle that “seeing is believing,” that in A.A. one saw what could only be the strong hand and mighty arm of God himself at work.

As 1 Corinthians 13 says, the greatest of all the charismatic gifts of the Holy Spirit is the grace which teaches us how to love: “faith, hope, and love abide, these three, and the greatest of these is love.” One gains them in that order — faith first as the gateway to salvation, then hope which gives us courage along the road, and finally love as the fruit they bear. It is a special kind of love, for the New Testament was originally written in Greek, and the word for love which the Apostle Paul used when he actually wrote that passage was *agapê*.

There are three Greek words for love: *erôs*, *philia*, and *agapê*. The first word (*erôs*) refers primarily in most ancient Greek authors to sexual lust and other forms of lusting after and desiring things, and is a natural drive (mostly physical and erotic) operating in human beings and animals alike. The second word (*philia*) means to “like” someone, in the way that we like our friends and people from whom we get things we want for ourselves, such as enjoyment, entertainment, favors done for us, and other ultimately selfish satisfactions. When we are looking at the world from the perspective of *philia*, we love our friends and hate our enemies. This too is a natural human drive, just like *erôs*.

*Agapê* love however is not a natural human or biological function in the same kind of way, and can arise only in the realm of divine grace and the fullness of saving faith.<sup>40</sup> It is the power, which only God can grant us, of participating in his divine love for the universe and all the creatures in it. We obtain this power when we are re-created in the *hypostasis* of God's Logos (the Meaning and Divine Harmony of the Universe).<sup>41</sup> *Agapê* love is love which gives, not for the sake of anything in return except pure joy at seeing others receiving joy and contentment, and pure delight in life and beauty itself and the goodness of all creation. Those who truly fulfil the law of love — *agapê* love — show by their lives and actions that, whatever the terminology they are using to describe what they are doing, they do in truth possess the faith that saves, and will in fact be welcomed home in the heavenly realms at the end of their days by the holy angels and all the saints of the Most High, and hear the voice of the Master saying the simple words which mean more than anything else in the world: "Well done, my good and faithful servant."

## CHAPTER 3

# House Parties, Confession, Surrender, and Guidance

Kitchen's first time at an Oxford Group house party was motivated by casual curiosity more than anything else. Based on things he had read in the newspapers, Kitchen had gathered the impression that "Buchmanism" was a kind of fanatical cult with bizarre practices. He assumed he was going to see something very exotic, with flickering torches in a dimly-lit room with tiger skin rugs on the floor. In an orgy of confession, men and women were going to stand up in mixed company and give lurid accounts of all the sins they had committed, including all the gross details of their most perverted sexual escapades. These emaciated true believers, hollow eyes gleaming with blind fanaticism, would also sit around and engage in automatic writing rituals which seemed to be a mixture partly of the kind of seances which mediums held when they were trying to talk to the spirits of the dead, and partly of what young people did at parties when they played with a Ouija Board and allowed the pointer to move around the letters of the alphabet written on the sides of the playing board in an attempt to receive messages from some other spirit world. Under the control of Frank Buchman and the other cult leaders, the converts would blindly do whatever these "divine commands" ordered,

immediately and without question. The Oxford Group was portrayed as a fanatical and authoritarian cult, where the members gave up all their individualism and freedom. Members were not allowed to ask questions and explore issues rationally, but simply had to obey the cult leaders and let the group rule their lives.

There were in fact a number of books and articles published during that era claiming to be exposés of the Oxford Group, where the horrified authors, who seem to have been extremely stodgy people, attempted to give the impression, in their selective and over-dramatized accounts, that this was what went on. The writers of these attacks were the sort who believed that proper upstanding Christians should never talk about anything in a religious context that was not “nice” and “proper” by the standards of a Victorian ladies magazine, and they criticized the Oxford Group for talking honestly about the real sins which people actually committed. In addition, these negative accounts tended to be written by the sort of establishment conformists who wanted a culture religion which was locked in hypocrisy and denial, where there was a polite following of all the surface rules, without anyone ever coming to grips with the ways we human beings really destroyed our lives and did so much harm to the lives of those around us.

After these authors had denounced the way that Oxford Group members would honestly admit their own moral failures, they characteristically went on to criticize what they insisted was the blind authoritarianism of the movement, and the particular way that Oxford Group people would pray to God to receive divine guidance, where they did in fact sometimes take out pencil and paper to record the thoughts that went through their minds while they were praying and asking God for help. It must be noted that some of the most hostile among the Church of England clergy (who were among those writing some of the most scathing

denunciations of the Oxford Group) tended to have a fairly authoritarian mentality themselves, as is clear from observing their attitudes in all sorts of areas. One cannot help but wonder if these particular critics were so upset with the Oxford Group because their parishioners, once having become involved with the movement, stopped blindly doing whatever their Church of England bishops and priests told them to do and started thinking for themselves!

### **Kitchen's First Visit to an Oxford Group House Party**

Kitchen had read some of these lurid accounts of Buchman's movement, but they had in fact made him become so curious about it that he finally wangled an invitation, for himself and a friend (his old college roommate and drinking buddy) and a third man, to a weekend Oxford Group "house party" at Briarcliff Lodge. This was one of America's grandest resort hotels, a huge, sprawling four-story Tudor edifice, surrounded by dairy barns and greenhouses, located about thirty miles north of New York City. Kitchen and his friend assumed that they were going to be in the middle of some very weird goings on, so they decided to fortify themselves with alcohol first. Prohibition was still in force, but they knew where to find an illegal speakeasy, and spent a couple of hours getting very jolly before they set out for Briarcliff. They also tucked some spare bottles into their bags, so they could spend the weekend drinking as they enjoyed what they hoped would be quite a show.

When they arrived at the hotel, fairly drunk by that time, they found about six hundred people already at Briarcliff, gathered in a large hotel dining room, and Kitchen began to feel a little bit

uncomfortable when he realized that none of these Oxford Group members seemed to have been drinking at all. They did not appear to be at all like his stereotype of religious fanatics and anti-alcohol people. He expected at the very least to see a large group of over-moralistic people with pasty skins and weak chins who sniveled about things in a rather pathetic way. What else would one expect from a group which claimed to be seeking Absolute Honesty, Absolute Unselfishness, Absolute Love, and above all, Absolute Purity? As far as the stereotypes were concerned, the idea of people walking around continually attempting to be Absolutely Pure was rather frightening, to say the least! Instead the men and women there looked him straight in the face, with a twinkle of joy and happiness in their eyes, and were incredibly full of life and good cheer.

It was an array of extremely impressive and successful people whom he saw gathered there. In short order, he found himself meeting diplomats, army officers, the rector of a church in Edinburgh who had come over from Scotland, the pastor of a very fashionable church in New York City, a student from the Sorbonne in Paris, a man who had been a chaplain at Harvard, an Assistant Secretary of Agriculture, a man who had formerly been in the court of Kaiser Wilhelm in Germany, a member of the New York Stock Exchange, and a woman doctor (which was quite radical in that period when only a very small number of extremely determined women attempted to have careers of that sort).

Kitchen's dinner companion was a businessman who had been a soldier and at one point a big game hunter in South Africa. They spent the whole meal talking about big game rifles and got along famously. To his surprise, however, when he offered the man a drink after dinner, he turned it down, saying only that he "did not

need it” because he had “something else.” Nothing was happening quite like Kitchen had thought it would happen.<sup>42</sup>

## Confession

There were no people standing up in front of the group and giving lurid public confessions of scandalous behavior. Instead, after dinner, Kitchen found himself sitting down in the lobby of the hotel talking to one of the members in a completely private conversation. There was no exotically furnished dimly-lit room with tiger skins on the floor. It was nothing but an ordinary hotel lobby with easy chairs and couches where the guests could sit and talk with one another. But as the man he was talking to began explaining about the Oxford Group to Kitchen, he told about the enormous change which the group had produced in his life, and he did speak openly about some of the ways he used to act, to contrast with the new attitudes he had now developed.<sup>43</sup> In other words, in A.A. language, the man did a twelfth step on him, where he told him the story of what he used to be like, what happened to him, and what he was like now.<sup>44</sup> The man was so natural, open, and honest that Kitchen found himself complete disarmed, and was soon overcome by a strange compulsion to bare his own heart to this stranger. But then he discovered that he was too ashamed to talk about himself and who he really was at that level of honesty. The other man, he said:<sup>45</sup>

... had been as big a reprobate as I. And yet, as I talked, I stuck pretty closely to a rather hand-picked list of sins. I did not want to let him see the really nasty things inside of me — the things that I was most ashamed of. I did not want him to guess what a rotter I really had been and still was. And so I wound up by saying that my sins were not really

troubling me at all. My real trouble, I glibly lied, was simply confusion — inability to see what we are living for — inability to solve both the “why” and “how” of life.

Just like many present day newcomers to A.A., Kitchen tried to hide his shame about his own life by attempting to turn everything into an intellectual debate about the meaning of life and whether there was a God and other evasive strategies of that sort. He had come to the house party to laugh at the Oxford Group members and deride them, and found the tables turned in a totally unexpected way. Faced with their simple self-honesty, he found that he was the one who felt inferior. And in that first one-on-one conversation, Kitchen already found himself taking the first step toward personal honesty: oh, it was true that at the surface level, he kept on trying to keep up the false front by attempting to turn the conversation into an intellectual debate where he could come up with rationalizing excuses for blaming God and religion and the world for all of his own inner unhappiness and dissatisfaction, but *he was honest enough inside to realize that this was all a lie*. At some deep level he had been forced to admit to himself that it was his own lack of moral behavior, and the mess he had made of his own life, over and over again, which he could not face.

Without admitting anything to anyone else about his real inner response, he found himself to his surprise coming to the next house party at Briarcliff, and this time he brought his wife along too. Neither of them were willing to acknowledge to the other how deeply they were affected by this second house party, either during the weekend or on the ride back home. But once they got back, the walls of secrecy which both of them had erected, began tumbling down:<sup>46</sup>

The miracle, in fact, began to happen as soon as we reached home. I found myself sitting on the sofa by my wife — just as I had imagined. She started the conversation and then, without knowing exactly how or why, I found myself blurting out the whole story I was never going to tell anybody. My wife, to my amazement, had something to tell, too. We both were taken by surprise and then by a sense of great relief which, to me, proved even more surprising.

Kitchen said that he had admitted to himself by this point that he did have shameful “secret acts and desires,” but until he sat down on that sofa, he felt that these were things which he would never be willing to reveal to anyone else in the world. Even though he would have acknowledged that what was stopping him was an overpowering fear that speaking about these things out loud would be too humiliating and embarrassing for him to be able to bear, he was paying no attention to that warning signal, and was still pretending to himself that none of these things were troubling his own conscience. He was still lying to himself, and telling himself that they were not truly bothering him, and that he was perfectly all right with these things inside.

Many modern writers on psychology and spirituality try to make highly technical distinctions between shame and guilt, as though they were mutually exclusive categories at all times and in all places. When I have done things and thought things, however, which I have never ever admitted to any other living human being,<sup>47</sup> this is a dead giveaway that I have some kind of shame and guilt-laden memory buried in my mind, which is going to fester there and make me spiritually sicker and sicker, no matter how much I argue to myself intellectually that this is no one else’s business but my own. And it will always be in some sense or other

a matter of conscience, even if I try to pretend to myself that it is not.

It should be said that the things which bother us the most are not necessarily lurid tales of depravity. For example, the things his wife told him that evening certainly should not have caused any kind of enormous uneasiness of conscience as far as Kitchen was concerned. The important thing however was that the things she began confessing to him had bothered her very deeply, and had made her feel deeply ashamed of herself.

Kitchen had come to the Oxford Group to scoff, and he could still give hundreds of intellectualizations and justifications for keeping this portion of his thoughts private to himself. But in spite of what the rationalistic part of his mind was telling him, there he and his wife were, making an Oxford Group confession to one another. And to his even greater surprise, it suddenly felt as though the weight of the world had fallen off of his back:<sup>48</sup>

When ... we told each other fully and freely the kind of people that we really were — the kind of things we really did and thought — when we took off the masks we had worn through seventeen years of married life and stopped pretending to each other to be something that we were not — we each distinctly felt an acute and actual sense of physical release, as though some forty thousand pounds had rolled from our shoulders.

This sensation of release and freedom is, I now know, an almost universal experience for all who face and confess their sins under the eyes of God and one other person. This is especially true if that other person is one who has suffered through your sins as, in my case, my own wife had suffered. It was the first time I had ever tried being “absolutely honest” with *anybody*. An entirely new bond sprang up between us and, although again I did not realize

it, I had begun to live in touch with God, and without barriers of bluff between myself and my fellow human beings.

This was the miracle which A.A. was later to systematize in the fifth step (admitting your wrongs to another human being) and the ninth step (not only admitting these wrongs, but also attempting to make amends for them with the people whom you had harmed by those actions). The first of the Oxford Group's Four Absolutes — Absolute Honesty — proved to be the most liberating thing which either Kitchen or his wife had ever experienced. To his surprise, Confession and Restitution were not humiliating experiences but the doorway to true freedom.<sup>49</sup>

It takes an enormous amount of energy to go around pretending all the time that I am someone whom I am not. I have to watch every word I say, as long as I insist on pretending and arguing that I was never afraid, that I never did anything wrong, that I always knew all the answers about everything, that I never made a mistake, that I never hurt anybody else unfairly, that I never ever acted out of petty motives, that I was *always in control*. I enter a world of freedom however when I begin to be honest with other people, and also begin to take personal responsibility for who I really am and what I actually did. Confession is worthless though unless I also begin making amends, that is, unless I also attempt to mend the damage I did by my shameful actions. Taking real *personal responsibility* for my own behavior actually puts me *in control* of my own life for the first time, insofar as a finite and fallible human being can ever be in control of anything.

## **Surrender and the power to resist sin**

Kitchen had been intellectually searching for God for years. The Oxford Group told him that he could know God first hand and directly, but that it was not a matter of intellectually solving the meaning of life. They tried to make it clear to him that continuing to read dozens of books and devise hundreds of theories, as he had been doing for years, was going to get him nowhere. If one attempted to connect a piece of copper wire to a radio to form an aerial for receiving signals from a far distance, the wire would do no good if it was covered with dirt and corrosion. The end of the wire had to be scraped clean before it was fastened to the radio, before it could function at all.

In order to contact God, Kitchen had to admit and begin trying to mend his sins, which formed a barrier of dirt and corrosion, blocking out God's attempts to reach out to him and speak to him and help him. A sin, in Oxford Group terminology, was anything which clearly formed a barrier between him and any other human being, or which set up a barrier between him and God. "I would have to surrender my will," Kitchen said, in language prefiguring the A.A. third step, "and make it subject to the will of God."<sup>50</sup> There was no use in trying to set up any kind of communication between himself and God as long as he thought that he could first somehow have a long talk with God, and sit there and think about it, and then decide for himself whether or not he wanted to do what God asked him to do. It did not work that way.

First he had to surrender to God before God would reveal his will to him. He had to commit himself by first doing his best to mend some of those parts of his life which he already knew were grossly contrary to the will of God, even if it was just on the surface, with his mind still partially rebelling inside, and even if he was only partially successful in accomplishing this. And he had to commit himself in advance to doing whatever God would reveal to

him next. Then God would tell him what he wanted him to do next, *and would also give him the power to do it.*

As we saw in John Wesley’s account of his Aldersgate experience, the founders of the modern evangelical movement had rediscovered the principle that divine grace gives *power* to the human soul. Grace brings not just forgiveness and insight, but also enormous personal power. The Catholic tradition also understood that grace gave power, and that no human being in this fallen world could live without sin unless that person had the aid of divine grace. This central Catholic doctrine went all the way back to Augustine, the great African saint who had lived at the beginning of the middle ages. Augustine said that Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden had been *posse non peccare*, “able not to sin.” They actually fell into sin, he said in his *City of God*, before they even ate the forbidden fruit. The talking snake told them that “when you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God” (Genesis 3:5). That was the root cause of all human sinfulness, the desire to be like God, and to be our own Gods. That was what Augustine called Pride (*superbia*) in the evil sense. Adam and Eve fell into sin the minute they decided that playing God themselves sounded much more attractive than following someone else’s directions. Eating the forbidden fruit was simply the secondary consequence of the primary underlying sin, the desire to be their own God.

In the story, after Adam and Eve had been expelled from the Garden, they and all their descendants found themselves in a situation where, having turned away from the primordial unfallen vision of God, they found that it was impossible to recapture it by their own finite human efforts alone, so that they were now left *non posse non peccare*, “not able not to sin.” Good Catholic doctrine, from St. Augustine in the fifth century to St. Thomas

Aquinas in the thirteenth century, had been the same as that of the Protestant reformers of the sixteenth century, and said that no human being had the *power* to escape that dark pit without a direct gift of divine grace. Once having descended into that deep hole where the sunlight of the spirit no longer shone, we could no longer find our way back to the light by our own unaided efforts. All we could do was blunder about in the darkness, and act from sinful motives in all our words and deeds, for we had lost the light which enabled us to tell right from wrong. Even with the power of grace of course, we would still retain the ability to fall back into sin again. We could decide to try to take the reins back into our own hands again, and go back to trying to run our own lives purely on the basis of our own decisions. It would not be until our souls reached the world to come that it would ever be possible for us to become *non posse peccare*, “not able to sin.”

The Oxford Group had rediscovered the original evangelical message, that we received this *power to resist our own self-destructiveness* through developing an immediate personal contact with God. And furthermore, Kitchen said, in what sounds at first like paradoxical language, we must *surrender* to obtain *power*:<sup>51</sup>

Forming a clean contact with God ... does no good unless God ... chooses to release His power. And God ... will not do so unless He knows that He can *trust* you with that power. He will not give you power to use just as you wish, but only as *He* wills, and only for as long as you surrender your own will in absolute obedience. If you admit you need His advice and then decline to take or follow God’s guidance as it is given, you might just as well continue to blunder along “on your own” from the very beginning.

Surrendering (what A.A. was later to call the third step) was not some kind of theoretical decision, but a way of acting that had to be carried out at the concrete level through the course of our daily lives on an everyday basis.

I receive guidance from God only in matters affecting my own behavior, not other people's behavior. This is very important. It is not my job to act as though I were some kind of special agent of God whose function is to bark orders at other people and lay down rules for them and tell them "how God wants *them* to behave."

So for example, instead of telling his wife to watch her tongue, Kitchen said, he had to control his own tongue, following God's directions and using God's power to restrain his desire to speak critically and harshly and meanly to other people. The Oxford Group, just like the early A.A. people, understood the importance of the teachings of the letter of James in the New Testament, and the warning given there that some of the worst sins we human

beings committed lay in the things our tongues said to other people (James 3:6-9):

How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire,  
and the tongue is a fire.  
The tongue is placed among our bodily parts  
as a world of iniquity;  
it stains the whole body,  
sets on fire the cycle of nature,  
and is itself set on fire by hell.  
For every species of beast and bird,  
of reptile and sea creature,  
can be tamed and has been tamed  
by the human species,  
but no one can tame the tongue —  
a restless evil,  
full of deadly poison.  
With it we bless the Lord and Father,  
and with it we curse those  
who are made in the likeness of God.

Whenever he found himself getting angry at his children and shouting at them in fits of temper, he had to realize, Kitchen said, that there were elements of personal selfishness in him which still had to be surrendered to God. Instead of scolding his wife for spending what he thought was too much money, both of them had to take the time to sit down, prayerfully seek God's guidance, and then, with both of them agreeing at all points, "work out the budget by which God wants us to expend His funds." He himself had to quit hanging around with his old drinking companions, and both he and his wife needed to stop evaluating people on the basis of how much money they made, or what they thought they could get out of these people if they pretended to be nice to them. They found

themselves beginning “to move in circles where God has use for us rather than with the people we think we can use.”<sup>52</sup>

Surrendering our lives and wills to the care of God was a series of concrete actions which we performed, in which we sought guidance from God, attempted to act in all things as we believed God wanted us to do, and called on God’s power to enable us to act in this new way whenever our old character defects started pulling us back into our old behavior patterns. God would give this enormous power to us, this real power over ourselves and our own thoughts and actions, but only if we were willing to use it for worthy purposes. The worthier our purpose, the greater the power which God would grant us.

### **Behavior based on divine guidance instead of legalism**

How did we determine what it was that God wanted us to do in each new situation which we encountered in our daily lives? It is important to note that the Oxford Group laid out no complicated set of mechanical moral rules to follow.<sup>53</sup> *Legalistic religions* which create long lists of rules — highly detailed codes of behavior which say that this sort of thing is always evil and ought never be done, while that sort of thing is always good and should always be done — do not in fact help us in the long run in leading a truly good life. They load down our souls with a long and poisonous list of absolute should’s and ought’s which produce a vast array of serious psychological problems including depression as well as a variety of shame and guilt-based disorders. In addition, trying to do things that way, by following a rulebook in rigid and mechanical fashion, fails to do justice to the nuances of the actual

situations in which we find ourselves when we need to make the difficult decisions.

People who belong to legalistic religions also quickly discover that there are all sorts of ways to be unbelievably mean and cruel to other people while still following the official rule book. This of course totally defeats the purpose of the true spiritual life.

The way to actually live our lives smoothly and well, the Oxford Group taught, was to quit being legalistic, and to learn to ask God for guidance whenever we had to make a decision as to what to do next: what to spend my time working on this afternoon, how to respond to a child who was behaving in totally obnoxious fashion, what to say to a spouse or a coworker who was angrily criticizing me, whether I should buy such-and-such even though I had a limited amount of money at this point (so it would mean that I would not be able to pay for certain other things that needed to be taken care of), and the host of other decisions which make up our daily lives. The spirit of God was the spirit of love, tolerance, compassion, and kindness — not a spirit of mean-hearted intolerance which sought only to criticize, condemn, and diminish other people. The spirit of God treated each man and woman as a unique individual, not as someone whose intrinsic personhood had to be crushed and annihilated.

This is where A.A. gets one of its most distinctive characteristics. The Big Book is an anti-legalistic spiritual system. It contains no long lists of moral rules which it orders us to follow. In somewhat surprising fashion it does not even tell us not to steal, or commit murder, or prostitute ourselves, nor does it declare any rules about any other major issues of that sort. What it does tell us to do is to take the third step, and turn our will and lives over to the care of God, and then in the eleventh step the Big Book tells us to use prayer and meditation to “improve our conscious contact with

God ... praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.” And then it instructs us to use obsessive resentment and fear as red warning flags, pointing out the areas of our lives where we are definitely not acting in accordance with the will of God and need to pray for further guidance to show us how to amend our desires and attitudes.

The founders of A.A. had discovered that once you got people doing that, they quickly discovered for themselves that committing acts of theft, fraud, assault, prostitution, extortion, and so on, threw them back into the old fears and resentments and ultimately made their lives unbearable. The light of God revealed all these things clearly. God’s light illuminated our lives and allowed us to see what we already knew was good and what we already knew was bad — even though we had been hiding in the darkness and trying to pretend that this was not so — and it lit up not only the true character of our behavior but also revealed what the results of that behavior were necessarily going to be.

In A.A. meetings we learned that if we habitually went into bars trying to pick fights with people who were bigger than us, there would be natural consequences which were going to occur. We learned — from people who had been there and suffered these things — that women and boys who stood on street corners working as prostitutes would inevitably end up being robbed, beaten up, terrorized, and treated with scorn and disgust even by their customers. In the Orient this basic A.A. principle would be referred to as the law of karma. And committing theft, fraud, and other things of that sort also had their own kind of unpleasant eventual consequences, when our misdeeds finally began to catch up with us. When we create chains of bad karma, we will always ultimately have to bear the karmic consequences when the end of the chain circles around and bites us in the backside.

So the founders of A.A. discovered that one did not need to preach at people and lay out long lists of complicated moral rules for them to memorize. When dealing with adults (as opposed to little children who sometimes needed more direction) all one had to do was to suggest asking the right kinds of questions and then give people credit (as adults) for having some ordinary common sense. When we discover something for ourselves instead of having other people preaching at us and haranguing us continually, then it ceases to be a hateful externally imposed rule and becomes something which I authentically desire from within myself for my own self-fulfillment as a person.

### **Salvation by faith, not by legalism and works of the law**

The early A.A. people learned from the Oxford Group what the apostle Paul meant when he declared, in the book of Romans (3:28), the central core of the gospel which he preached: “For we hold that a person is justified by faith and not by works of the law.” We human beings spend a good deal of time trying to justify our own actions, particularly the ones which clearly seem evil and destructive in some fashion. One strategy is to say “but look at what the other person did to me first, and you can see I was completely right and the other person was wrong.” When we say that, we expect the person we are conversing with, to respond by saying something like, “Well, I don’t blame you, I would have done the same thing myself.” And the strategy which is often used as an alibi for the worst and most destructive actions of all, is to look around for some rule or law given in a holy book somewhere, or spoken by some supposedly holy person, and then to say, “But I was only following the rules.” Like the worst kind of sleazy

lawyers, we act like little shysters and mechanically follow that carefully-selected law in order to obtain something that has nothing to do with real morality or care for other people.

We attempt to stand before God's throne and justify our behavior with various kinds of clever arguments, not realizing that it can never be done that way, because *we are justified by faith alone*. Faith is the key. It is faith that will save us. And what that word means in Paul's writings is *trust*. To be more precise, faith in the Pauline sense means *trusting in God's grace*, that is, trusting that if we turn our will and our lives over to God — letting go and letting God run the universe and make the decisions — that he will love us and heal us and shower us with his blessings, and lead us at the end into his heavenly kingdom.

Faith to Paul meant trust, not belief in complicated intellectual doctrines and dogmas. The faith that saves us through grace did not mean belief in the doctrine of the Trinity, or belief in the virgin birth, or belief in people walking on water and making the Red Sea divide in two, or belief in theological theories about what happened to the bread and wine during the communion service, or beliefs about whether the Bible was or was not infallible.

And in particular, when Paul said in the first century A.D. that we were justified by faith alone, faith did not mean belief in the theory that Jesus Christ died on the cross as a substitutionary atonement which paid the penalty due to God for our sins. He could not possibly have meant that because that was a theory which did not appear until a thousand years later. It was a theologian named Anselm who first came up with that theory in 1098 in a work called *Cur Deus Homo*, "Why the God-Man?"<sup>54</sup> That kind of substitutionary doctrine of the atonement was totally unknown to early Christianity.

In Paul's letters, the work of Christ was to open the gates of heaven and descend down to us as the God-bearer, humbling himself in order to reach out to us and act as a channel of God's grace, and then lead us back up the path that led to the heavenly realm of the immortal sunlight of the spirit, where the God of grace and love sits eternally enthroned. It is that God — the Higher Power which rules over all the universe — who saves us by his grace.

The word faith in Paul's writings meant *trust* in that God of grace. It does not matter how I discover the God of love and grace — it can be through Jesus, or Moses, or Krishna, or my sponsor, or the people in the meetings who love me until I learn how to love myself, or by whatever other route God works out for getting through to me — the only important thing is to discover God's love and mercy and healing power, and then to put my complete *trust* in his ability to restore my soul. In the twelve step program, we must totally surrender to God in order to find the path to life. Everyone with experience in the twelve step program knows that. Faith as *trust* is necessary because no human beings will ever surrender in that kind of way until we become willing to trust the one to whom we are surrendering.

We must turn to God in prayer; we must ask him what to do in this particular situation or that one; and then we must trust him enough to turn our will and our lives over to him, and then simply attempt to follow his directions exactly the way he gave them, acting as honest and trustworthy servants of a God whose love and goodness makes him worthy of our total trust. We must also trust God enough to realize that we still have his full love even when — as inevitably happens — we fall short of the divine perfection. This is the way of faith.

Kitchen had already been taught in church when he was young that we are justified by faith alone and not by works of the law. But before he came in contact with the Oxford Group, he thought that faith meant belief in church dogmas, and that we could automatically obtain the fruits of the spiritual life simply by believing the right doctrines and performing the correct religious rituals. As Kitchen put it:<sup>55</sup>

In my early church life I was taught salvation by faith. But I was *not* taught how to make my faith anything more than a *belief* in certain doctrines. It seemed I had only to stand up, say I believed in Christ and submit to baptism. I then became a “full-fledged” member of the church. There was to me no real birth here. I was not even an incipient saint. And there was no growth thereafter. I remained an adult spiritual infant. The faith that was nothing but a credulous belief lay stored in my memory, like a suit of clothes stored in the attic, and just about as useful.

And one of the biggest problems he had had as a child, Kitchen said, was that the church told him to believe all sorts of teachings about God’s enormous power, but gave him no proof that any of these things actually worked at the pragmatic level in real life.<sup>56</sup>

Without that proof of His living presence — without actually feeling His living power or seeing its result in my own life — I could not really trust God to do things for me. Without, in fact, being able to receive His guidance, I could not even tell what He wanted to do for me nor how He expected me to cooperate with Him in doing for myself.

In order to be intellectually honest, people living in the modern scientific world had to ask a major question about any kind

of religious system, which required a credible answer. “What is your proof, in terms of something I can see or experience for myself in this world, that this all works the way your theory says it does?” The Enlightenment philosophers had asked that question in the eighteenth century, and had claimed that Christianity could not answer it, and had nothing but bogus claims to imaginary knowledge based on illusion and superstition. What the founders of the modern evangelical movement had realized was that no spiritual system could be effective in the modern world unless it responded to this Enlightenment attack. So the eighteenth century evangelicals answered that hostile question by building a spirituality based on immediate personal experience, and not only defeated the attacks of the skeptics and atheists of their century, but produced an enormous revival of genuine religion throughout the English-speaking world of their time.

Unfortunately, by the beginning of the twentieth century, there were people all over the world who claimed to be evangelicals, but who were in fact teaching only the old authoritarian and legalistic religion of works righteousness: being “saved” meant following all of their rigid fear-based rules about what kind of clothes you could wear and how you had to fix your hair, and so on and so forth, and it meant accepting all their particular sect’s laws and rules with a blind and unquestioning faith. These legalistic groups were trying to substitute contrived and highly emotional experiences at revivals — and an overpowering fear of going to hell when you died — for the kind of quiet contact with God’s love and presence which produces a genuine psychic change and deep personal transformation.

The Oxford Group revitalized the original vision of the evangelical movement, and said, in effect: We do not ask for a blind faith. We will show you your proof. We will first show you

people whose lives have genuinely been changed, and then we will show you how to perform your own spiritual experiments, so that you will be able to see, in your own life, the enormous power that comes from trusting God and placing your life under the care of his loving, healing hands. We know how to bring you a new world of hope instead of a nightmare of continual fear, and if you have eyes to see, we can prove it to you.

## CHAPTER 4

# Quiet Time, Guidance, and God-Bearers

### Quiet time and group guidance

Seeking guidance in the Oxford Group was often a group activity. A.A. did not use this particular sort of group session for obtaining direction for their activities, but we need to talk about it a little here in order to give a full account of what the earliest A.A. people encountered at the very beginning, when they were still participating on a regular basis in the ordinary Oxford Group meetings.

A number of Oxford Group members would gather together and have what they called a “quiet time.” A. J. Russell, in his book *For Sinners Only*, described several of these group sessions which he had witnessed in England around this same time.<sup>57</sup> All the members would sit in silence and pray, each with his or her own pencil and guidance notebook, writing down any of the thoughts running through their minds which seemed as though they might have been inspired by God in one way or another.<sup>58</sup>

I cannot think of any really close parallel to this in earlier Christian history. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, some of the Puritans — and also John Wesley<sup>59</sup> and some of the

early Methodists — carried notebooks, but these were called spiritual diaries, and they were more like a continuously running A.A. fourth step and tenth step: they monitored their spiritual state in these notebooks on a daily and even hourly basis, looked for patterns indicating persistent character defects, and (just as in one part of St. Ignatius Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises*) measured their progress in eliminating old character defects from their lives. Although many of the Puritans believed strongly in divine guidance, they did not use these little notebooks, to the best of my knowledge, to systematically record what they found when they prayed for guidance.

The closest thing that can be found in earlier Christian history to these Oxford Group sessions, where they sought group guidance as a communal effort, would perhaps be Quaker meetings, where the members sat together in silence and sought direct inspiration from the Inner Light. The Quakers (or “Society of Friends” as they referred to themselves) were founded by a man named George Fox, who began his preaching in 1647. They rejected ornate church sanctuaries and ordained clergy, and gathered for meetings without any rituals or liturgy, sitting silently until a member of the group felt the Inner Light urging him or her to speak God’s word. That person would then speak quietly to the group.

The Quakers were extremely influential in the eighteenth century in both England and the English colonies in North America, and prefigured some of the practices of the A.A. movement later on, not only in seeking the Inner Light (what A.A. author Richmond Walker in *Twenty-Four Hours a Day* called coming into contact with the spark of the divine within our souls), but also in many other ways, such as some parts of the A.A. organizational structure.<sup>60</sup>

It is nevertheless difficult to see very much in the way of any direct connection between the Quaker movement and the Oxford Group,<sup>61</sup> or between the Quakers and A.A. For the most part we seem to be dealing with parallel developments arising out of certain common assumptions found frequently within the English-speaking Protestant Non-conformist tradition (going back to the seventeenth century and even earlier<sup>62</sup>) which were simply carried out in more radical fashion by the Quakers, the Oxford Group, and Alcoholics Anonymous.

### **F. B. Meyer, Henry Burt Wright, and H. A. Walter**

The most specific and direct influences on the Oxford Group's understanding of divine guidance came from ideas which were widespread at that time in Keswick Holiness circles and also among Protestant missionaries to non-Christian countries like China, Japan, India, and Iran. The Oxford Group simply put a much higher emphasis on seeking this kind of guidance, and made it a more developed part of their system.

A book written in 1896 by one of the key Keswick theologians, F. B. Meyer, entitled *The Secret of Guidance*,<sup>63</sup> is vital and necessary reading for understanding the connection with the Keswick Convention. This is a famous week-long annual gathering of evangelical Christians for prayer, Bible study, sermons and addresses, which draws people from all over the world. It began in 1875 at Keswick in the heart of the Lake District in northwest England, about forty miles south of the Scottish border, for "the promotion of Practical Holiness." Meyer's book gives a good many of the details about how one goes about obtaining guidance, evaluates it, and so on. It was at

Keswick in 1908, we remember, that Frank Buchman made the spiritual discovery which served as the basis for his eventual formation of the Oxford Group, so the connection between him and both Meyer and the Keswick Holiness movement is very important.<sup>64</sup>

The other major source for Buchman's understanding of guidance was Henry Burt Wright's book, *The Will of God and a Man's Lifework* (1909), but this book had been heavily influenced by F. B. Meyer's ideas, so the latter still stands in the background as a dominant source of Oxford Group beliefs about divine guidance.

We must not forget, however, that Buchman during his younger years did a good deal of missionary work in non-Christian countries, so he was also in contact with many of the most influential English-speaking Protestant missionaries of his time. H. A. Walter, for example, was an important missionary in India from 1912 to 1918 who wrote a widely read book called *Soul-Surgery*, explaining how to do one-on-one personal evangelism. Walter and Buchman spent three months traveling together in China in 1917, doing personal evangelism with Chinese students, so they got to know one another well. During the morning quiet time, which Walter emphasized was very important, God "transfers to our minds such part of His perfect plan as we need to know .... At that hour there come to us the mysterious 'leadings' of God's Spirit."<sup>65</sup>

The leaders and prominent authors within the Protestant missionary movement during that period of history (like H. A. Walter) were all in contact with one another, and continually shared ideas. Seeking God's guidance through prayer was one of these ideas. Buchman himself would have been seen as primarily simply another of the foreign missionaries working in various

countries around the globe during the period between 1915 and 1919. But then in 1920, two Anglican missionary bishops in China sent him to Cambridge University in England to do a sort of “missionary work” among the students at that institution, and from there he went to Oxford University to work with their students also, and the Oxford Group was born.

### **General Protestant belief in receiving guidance through prayer**

It is also well to remember the widespread and fairly generic belief in talking with God or Jesus during prayer which we find in English-speaking Protestantism during the early twentieth century. One of the most popular hymns of that time was one written by C. Austin Miles (1868-1946), which breathes with the spirit of this common understanding within the evangelical tradition (with links in this case to St. John of the Cross’s poems and commentaries on the Song of Songs<sup>66</sup>):

I come to the garden alone,  
While the dew is still on the roses;  
And the voice I hear, falling on my ear,  
The Son of God discloses.

And he walks with me and he talks with me,  
And he tells me I am his own;  
And the joy we share as we tarry there,  
None other has ever known.

He speaks and the sound of his voice  
Is so sweet the birds stop their singing;  
And the melody that he gave to me  
Within my heart is ringing.

It was the voice of a simple piety, where ordinary men and women went around talking with God as they would with a friend, and seeking his counsel and guidance and comfort and encouragement through every hour of every day. The Oxford Group and early A.A. were both simply pointing out to those who thought they were among the more worldly-wise and sophisticated, that they too needed to develop that kind of simple piety. Only when we do that will we be able to see the dew on the roses and hear the birds singing, and know the sweet song of the divine love which they reveal, which will heal our souls and change our lives.

Arising out of that same matrix of assumptions, the twentieth-century Protestant Pentecostal movement and the later Roman Catholic charismatic movement developed the idea that God could communicate directly with the human soul in an even more radical fashion, where one not only had people speaking in tongues during their worship services but also prophesying in the spirit in a way which they believed paralleled the great Hebrew prophets of the ancient biblical period. But I know of no evidence of any direct involvement of Pentecostals or charismatics with either the Oxford Group or with early A.A.,<sup>67</sup> so that (to the best of my knowledge) we have no examples within the early Alcoholics Anonymous movement of people speaking in tongues or prophesying in the spirit during meetings. Oxford Group and twelve step practices had a quite different style from that, and were based on different assumptions.

It is wise to remember at all points that it was the liberals and moderates among the Protestant evangelicals<sup>68</sup> who had the dominant influence on early A.A. during the 1930's and 40's, not the fundamentalists and Pentecostals and other aggressively ultra-

conservative and reactionary factions, which were still very small at that period of American history.

## **The potential dangers of believing that we are carrying out the will of God**

I think it should be said at this point that modern intellectuals are apt to comment almost immediately that believing that we are doing the will of God has lain behind the greatest religious atrocities of human history. They point out that the leaders of the Spanish Inquisition who tortured and burnt people at the stake insisted that they knew what the will of God was, and were simply carrying out the divine commands which they thought they had received. The Spanish torturers seemed to have had no awareness of the grotesque and blasphemous quality of the scenes which emerged, as poor men and women screamed in agony at the hands of cruel people in priestly robes who claimed to be the representatives of gentle Jesus, meek and mild, who taught the God of all-forgiving love. The claim that we human beings can know the will of God is the most dangerous thing in the world to let loose, or so these modern intellectuals often believe.

Against that criticism, it should be said that the leaders of the Spanish Inquisition were legalists who were following a rule book, not prayerful people who were seeking the guidance of the Inner Light. The Quakers, who began using the principle of direct divine guidance over three and a half centuries ago, have traditionally been complete pacifists who were peace-loving and gentle people.

One of the major goals of the Oxford Group, especially after it renamed itself as the Moral Re-Armament movement, was to bring about peace between nations and to heal controversies within individual nations which threatened to bring violence and

persecution. They prided themselves on the many historical controversies in which they had in fact brought peace and reconciliation to countries where warring groups were ready to start killing and brutalizing one another.

The two Oxford Group principles of Absolute Unselfishness and Absolute Love provided a strong defense against any temptation to start burning other people at the stake, and the kind of guidance which they sought was a highly individualistic guidance, directed toward being more loving and less selfish in our individual daily lives, and directed against our human tendencies to attack other people, particularly in the name of intellectualized social and religious theories. The pietist strain in Oxford Group thought (coming from Frank Buchman's Lutheran pietist background) made them strongly dislike bickering and argument. Like the pietists in general, they sought to resolve differences by just keeping on praying until the group could reach a consensus upon which everyone could cheerfully agree. People who genuinely act like that do not go around burning other people at the stake.

### **The A.A. Traditions as guards against the misuse of the concept of guidance**

The A.A. movement later on developed its own special safeguards against the misuse of the concept of divine guidance. The Twelve Traditions, as they were interpreted within the movement's Historic Heritage,<sup>69</sup> turned out to be excellent tools for guiding us away from deeds of intolerance and persecution.

Let us see how that took place. The Third Tradition was especially important. On the surface, it merely declared that "the only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking." But

that turned out to have broad and sweeping implications. In 1937, when the A.A. movement was only two years old, the first test case walked in. This was a man who asked to join the A.A. group in Akron, who told them he was an alcoholic but that he was also “the victim of another addiction even worse stigmatized than alcoholism.” He was a “sex deviate,” that is, a homosexual.<sup>70</sup> Dr. Bob finally asked the simple question, “What would the Master do?” The man was allowed to join. He stayed sober and passed the message on to dozens of other alcoholics, who in turn passed it on to thousands of others. His sexual orientation never created any problems. Not long after that, a man asked to join the A.A. group who was an atheist. He spent a good deal of time not only attacking all the other A.A. members who believed in God, but doing it in highly obnoxious fashion. Again the A.A. group was confronted with the fact that there was no way they could exclude him from meetings. The first edition of the Big Book was already being drafted, and the man simply pointed out to them that the foreword contained the words: “the only requirement for membership is an honest desire to stop drinking.” He met the membership requirements and they could not kick him out.<sup>71</sup>

Within the Historic Heritage of the twelve step program, other precedents were also established during the early years. Protestants and Catholics found that they had to cooperate with one another and let go of the old religious animosities.<sup>72</sup> They had to drop the old feuds between their two warring Christian groups. Then a Jewish man was admitted to Sister Ignatia’s alcoholism ward at St. Thomas Hospital in Akron. What were they going to do with someone who had no Christian background at all? When Sister Ignatia tried to lead him into the Catholic chapel at the hospital in order to pray the third step prayer with him (as she had been doing with all the men who had come through her program,

the Protestants as well as the Catholics), he told her that, as a Jew, he could not go into a Catholic chapel and kneel and pray. So Sister Ignatia made him kneel on the floor with her outside the chapel door and do the third step prayer. Beginning at a very early date, Mrs. Marty Mann and other early women pioneers made it clear that the fellowship was also not allowed to discriminate against women. It took longer and involved more controversy before the first black members were admitted into A.A., but the racial barriers also eventually collapsed, and yet another precedent was established.<sup>73</sup>

By the time the *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* had been written in 1952, these experiences had been generalized into the principle that A.A. members had to practice tolerance of all people, regardless of “race, creed, politics, and language.” They could not discriminate against beggars, tramps, people who had been in insane asylums and penitentiaries, prostitutes, or any other group of people.<sup>74</sup> No one can participate in things like the Spanish Inquisition or the creation of the Nazi death camps while following the true spirit of A.A.’s Twelve Traditions, nor can they be involved with any organized hate groups at all, no matter who a particular group’s target might be. Alcoholics Anonymous members in sub-Saharan Africa cannot claim they are following the will of A.A.’s God while participating in raids to butcher members of another tribe, nor can A.A. groups in India take part in Hindu anti-Muslim hate groups, or Muslim anti-Hindu hate groups. Alcoholics Anonymous has a single organization for all of Ireland, for they realize that they cannot participate in the murder and terrorism which has divided the beautiful Emerald Isle into two countries, and torn Northern Ireland apart with acts of savagery. For an alcoholic, to hate or become obsessed with revenge is to die.

In addition, the Tenth Tradition stated that “Alcoholics Anonymous has no opinion on outside issues,” which meant that “the A.A. name ought never be drawn into public controversy.” In practice this Tenth Tradition meant that on those grounds also, the A.A. groups were forbidden to become involved in the perverted kind of supposedly moral campaigns which ended up in religious wars and religious persecution, and burning people at the stake because of their beliefs.

In the first test case in 1937, Dr. Bob asked the simple question, “What would the Master do?” He knew his scripture well (better than many pastors of that time). As the Apostle Paul put it in Galatians 3:28, among the true people of God “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female,” for all are children of the one Father. Good parents love all their children equally, and grieve just as much for any of their children who are in pain and are suffering. Good parents also are angered if they see someone insulting and making fun of one of their children and excluding that child from the group, or snatching food from one of their children’s mouths and letting that child go hungry. And if you kill the son or daughter of a great king, you had best never fall into that king’s hands and be dragged helpless to stand before his throne of judgment. Be assured that you will pay the price for what you have done.

In the Twelve Traditions and in the precedents set within the Historic Heritage of the twelve step program, it is made clear over and over that no voice claiming to come from heaven, which incites people to persecution and intolerance and discrimination, can be the voice of God. No voice claiming to come from heaven which is trying to drag the twelve step fellowship into supporting any kind of war frenzy, can be the voice of God. And so far, God be thanked, the A.A. and Al-Anon fellowships and all the other

modern twelve step associations have refused to become involved in organized hatred and bloody atrocities.

So let us not be overimpressed by the modern intellectuals who argue that believing in divine guidance leads to the greatest wars and atrocities. The kind of religiously-motivated persecutors whom these intellectuals are afraid of — and rightly so! — are invariably legalists who are trying to save themselves by works of the law, not the people of true faith who seek only to sit in God’s all-loving presence at the foot of the Throne of Mercy.

### **Quiet time and individual guidance**

The first time V. C. Kitchen attended one of the Oxford Group’s “quiet times,” he did not seem to obtain any special divine guidance himself. Others in the group did, but at first he could not.<sup>75</sup>

They said they were “listening to God.” I listened as attentively as any of the rest, I thought, but “heard” nothing — nothing at all. Gradually as I attended more quiet times, services and witness meetings, however, I began dimly to sense what these people were driving at. They claimed they had gained what I had been trying to gain — a consciousness of the spiritual environment — a direct contact with God ....

“You believe there’s a plan,” they continued. “Did it never occur to you to get in touch with the Author of that plan, asking Him directly what His plan *is* and what He wants you to *do* about it?”

No — I was forced to admit — nothing as simple as that ever had occurred to me. I had thought, from a casual survey of occult religions that, through a series of initiations, adaptations, or whatever you go through, one

might somehow get in touch with a so-called “cosmic consciousness” — whatever that might be. And I had my own idea of exploring a “spiritual environment.” But the idea of getting directly in touch with God Himself — of asking Him questions and getting answers and directions for the conduct of my life — seemed to me an out-and-out absurdity.

Now it has already been noted that A.A. was not going to make any use of the attempt to achieve divine guidance as part of a *group* praying together like the Oxford Group sometimes did, that is, in the particular way that Kitchen was describing in this paragraph. (Although the way in which an A.A. group takes a group conscience is supposed to be a discussion inspired by the spirit of the tables, where engaging in prayer and taking some quiet time might well be a good way of preserving the spirit of love and peace, because a group conscience, as its name implies, is not intended to be a fierce and confrontational debate followed by a mechanical vote.)

But the idea of obtaining *individual* guidance played a major role in both of the two most important early A.A. books: in the Big Book which came out in 1939, and especially in Richmond Walker’s *Twenty-Four Hours a Day*, which he began publishing and distributing for the A.A. group in Daytona Beach, Florida, in 1948.

Seeking individual guidance, where a single person communed with God all alone, was also of course an Oxford Group practice.<sup>76</sup> V. C. Kitchen tells us how he learned to start off each day with an hour spent reading in the Bible or some other book towards which God had guided him, followed by his own personal quiet time. (Notice that it does not have to be the Bible which we read in, as long as it is a book to which God has led us,

which contains good spiritual teaching.) And he learned to make a careful assessment of what he thought God was guiding him to do, by attending group meetings and discussing it with the other Oxford Group people there. Slowly he learned to “hear” God in some way or other — it is difficult to put the experience into words — and he learned how to apply this guidance to his everyday life.

God to-day is teaching me directly through my daily quiet hour in the morning and indirectly through passages in the Bible that He indicates, through the books He guides me to read, through the group meetings and Schools of Life He guides me to attend, through the rich experiences He leads me into and through the difficulties He uses to develop my moral fiber. In this instruction He brings me down to the very essentials of living. He wastes no words in superfluities. He tells me what I am living for and there is no mistaking it. He tells me where I fail to live that way. He tells me what is the matter and how to correct it. He tells me how to add to my stature physically, mentally and spiritually.

Notice that the goal in the Oxford Group quiet time is NOT to figure out ways of perverting religious legalisms in order to provide an excuse for persecuting other people. The goal is always for me, the one who is seeking guidance, to learn how to grow spiritually myself, regardless of what the other people around me are doing, whether it is good or bad.

The A.A. people learned this lesson well, and turned it into one of the basic principles of their program. The only person whose life I am trying to reform is my own. That is what guidance is about. If I am still going around continually attacking and harassing other A.A. people, trying to get them to think and behave like I want them to, and continually starting up divisive arguments

in A.A. committees and groups with my own know-it-all behavior, and playing seamy underhanded political games — *and believing that this is carrying out the spirit of the eleventh step* — I have still not gotten the foggiest notion of what reading godly books and engaging in quiet time and seeking God’s guidance is really about.

Kitchen says that before he started having a quiet time every morning, he used to sit down instead and make an elaborate plan for his day’s work. On his list there would be jobs that had to be completed, people that had to be seen, phone calls that he had to make, and letters that he had to write. Nowadays, however, he says that:<sup>77</sup>

I now simply ask God’s guidance on the day. He strikes from my list the jobs, visits, calls and letters that would afterwards have proved unnecessary or untimely while, at the same time, He reminds me of matters I myself had not considered. He also fills my day to a nicety — laying out just enough work for me to finish in an easy natural stride without fuss or strain.

By doing this, Kitchen says, he now receives supernatural aid every day, not through using some magical Ouija Board or peering into a crystal ball or using tarot cards, but through simply developing his God-consciousness. The reason why he could not do this at first, he discovered, was because he still had to make a full surrender. He had to quit trying to be the captain of his own soul. He had to quit trying to do everything by will-power and clever strategies. As long as he was doing that, he was still trying to supply all the power himself. And he still continued doing that for a while, he said, after he first joined the Oxford Group, “even after I learned that power for moral growth would have to come from the outside.” But gradually he learned to trust God (what the

apostle Paul called saving faith), and once he was willing to let go and let God take care of things, he received all the guidance and power that he needed to live a full, rich, productive, and satisfying life.

## **Show me your glory**

One way we learn to feel God's immediate presence is through practicing a quiet time every day. But there are other ways to feel God's presence. There is an important passage in the Old Testament, in Isaiah 6:3, in which the prophet Isaiah described his vision in Solomon's temple. He saw the mighty throne of God, and seraphim with six wings flying about the throne and singing continually: "Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." This passage gets repeated, with various adaptations, in a vast number of Jewish and Christian liturgies, because it is so central to developing full God-consciousness. The entire universe, and everything in it, is filled with the divine glory. We can learn to feel God's majesty and power in and behind all the things of nature.

Kitchen says that he used to think that a beautiful sunset, for example, was just that, nothing more, some splendid colors that caused him to feel a certain kind of aesthetic pleasure if he looked at it. The sky, the ocean, the trees and mountains, and the animals and birds, were simply that and nothing more. But then he started to see them as the works of the mighty creator, and began to realize that this was God's hand at work which he was looking at. He says that he learned to see, with the poet Wordsworth, a divine presence everywhere and in all things:<sup>78</sup>

A presence that disturbs me with the joy

Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime  
 Of something far more deeply interfused,  
 Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
 And the round ocean, and the living air,  
 And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:  
 A motion and a spirit, that impels  
 All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
 And rolls through all things.

The fact that Kitchen found Wordsworth an appropriate poet to quote was not accidental, because the literary movement of which that poet was a part had its roots in the English poets of the evangelical tradition in the generation which immediately preceded theirs.<sup>79</sup>

But it was not just the poetry of the Romantic Era which spoke that way, for it was an ancient tradition, going back for thousands of years, in which the great spiritual masters taught about the universe as born of God, the icon or holy image of God, and the temple in which God dwelt. The great medieval spiritual writer Meister Eckhart (c. 1260-1327) said that “God was born” in me each time I learned to see him in the world around me, even in things like a tiny caterpillar crawling down a twig. Eckhart was a member of a Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christian spiritual tradition which went back to figures like the Irish theologian John Scotus Erigena, who lived at the beginning of the Dark Ages, and the mysterious Syrian author who wrote under the name of St. Denis and set his (or her) impress upon a thousand years of western spirituality. In Eastern Orthodox teaching (with echoes in Dante’s *Paradiso*), the doctrine of the *Theotokos* — a Greek word which meant the act or event in which God came to birth in our hearts — was symbolized by the figure of Jesus’s mother Mary as

the Gate of Heaven, or by the figure of Sophia, who represented the feminine aspect of God as She Who Gives Birth to All Things.

In the Catholic tradition, one speaks of learning to develop a sacramental view of the universe: we discover that God is present in some hidden and mysterious way not only in the bread and wine of the communion service, and in the water of baptism, and in the rest of the seven sacraments of the Church, but in every part of the universe. Everything in nature is filled with the divine presence, and proclaims the infinite power and beauty which we can sense lying behind it. As the great Eastern Orthodox hymn declares to God every evening at the setting of the sun, when the western sky is filled with luminous crimson and golden light, “behold the universe sings your glory.”

Many people, when they first come into the twelve step program, learn to feel God’s presence in the world of nature in a new and extraordinarily powerful way, just like Kitchen did after he joined the Oxford Group. In the twelve step tradition, this is especially referred to, I have noticed, in Al-Anon writings, but A.A. people learn to feel it too. There is nothing wrong at all with newcomers who begin by regarding nature itself as their higher power as long as this is done in the right kind of way.

Regarding nature itself as our God will *not* work for beginners if nature is regarded as only a cold and sterile thing to be analyzed intellectually and turned into a set of automatic mechanical processes, where our job is to learn how to manipulate and control them by discovering the right set of scientific rules and laws. Most people come into the twelve step program suffering from frozen feelings — no longer able to feel anything at all except for a dull pain and misery — combined with a kind of control neurosis, where they believe that they can only be saved by learning how to obtain total control of their lives and the lives of everyone around

them. They are completely locked inside their own heads, with a kind of morbid self-preoccupation which prevents them from genuinely seeing anything outside themselves, other than as objects which they are trying to manipulate and control for their own self-interest.

If they combine all of this with the belief that they are “intellectuals” who are more intelligent than everyone else in the twelve step program — that is, that they are people who need to think about the universe “scientifically” and “rationally” at all times and in all ways because of their superior intelligence — then trying to regard nature itself as their higher power will only make their situation worse.

If I am a beginner, regarding nature itself as my higher power can only work if I learn to see nature as filled with beauty and life, and as something enormously grand and awe-inspiring, which was there before I came along, and will be there after I am gone, and is for the most part totally out of my power. I cannot make the spring flowers bloom when I want them to, nor can I control the flights of all the thousands of wild geese flying south for the winter. But I can view them with delight and feel the troubled waters of my spirit being calmed even as I behold their beauty. I need to learn that my job in life is, for the most part, to enjoy, not to try to control. Furthermore, if I can begin to understand that nature is filled with the power of life itself, I will be able to enter into a deeper kind of healing. There is an enormous healing power in nature, but the only way I can learn how to obtain its benefits is to learn how to quit standing in the way, so to speak. The source of all life and beauty will not be able to restore my soul if I am continually blocking its healing power by trying to control everything all the time. It will not be able to revive my spirit as long as I refuse to stop and look at the world outside myself

because of my obsessive self-preoccupation, where all I am ever really thinking about all of the time is essentially me, me, me, me, me.

After we have made more progress in the twelve step program and are no longer just raw beginners, we will eventually begin to understand that nature (paradoxically) both is and is not God. We cannot, any of us, know God in his essential reality — that is a fundamental article of faith among the orthodox religious teachers in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all three — but nature itself is God’s *glory*, God-as-he-makes-himself-known-to-us, the light of beauty which surrounds his throne. In the Jewish tradition, it is called the *shekinah*, the visible manifestation of the divine presence.

As St. Gregory of Nyssa put it in the fourth century, nature is not the essential core of the Godhead itself (the divine *ousia*), but is God’s temporal energy (*energeia*), the power of the divine creativity as it is played out in the realm of space and time. Or to put it another way, God is the singer and nature is the song, God is the dancer and nature is the dance, God is the artist and nature is the work of art, God is the weaver and nature is the tapestry, God is the story-teller and the universe is the story being told — where all of us are necessary threads among the tapestry of great beauty which is being woven, or essential characters in the plot of the great tale which is being told, or however we wish to construe this. When we are beginners in the twelve step program it does us no harm at all if we take the song of nature as our higher power, for if we listen to the divine song for long enough, we will come to know what lies in the heart of the singer of the song.

John Wesley at one point discussed the biblical passage which instructs us to “pray without ceasing.” He pondered deeply about what this prayer should be. In the Eastern Orthodox hesychast

tradition, for example, the prayer without ceasing is an adaptation of the prayer of the tax collector in Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner." Wesley decided however that the best kind of prayer without ceasing was the prayer of Moses, "I pray you, O God, show me your glory."<sup>80</sup> We should go about at all times looking with awe at the beauty and goodness in the world all around us, and seeing the grandeur and glory of the universe as God's garment. This is good traditional evangelical theology which goes all the way back to the 1730's and the founding figures of the modern evangelical movement.

Kitchen said that the best description in writing he had ever found of this kind of God-filled vision of the world was found in an article by Margaret Prescott Montague, entitled "Twenty Minutes of Reality":<sup>81</sup>

"I cannot say what the mysterious change was, or whether it came suddenly or gradually. I saw no new thing, but I saw all the usual things in a miraculous new light — in what I believe is their true light. I saw for the first time how wildly beautiful and joyous, beyond any words of mine to describe, is the whole of life ... I knew that every man, woman, bird and tree, every living thing before me, was extravagantly beautiful and extravagantly important .... Never in my life before had I seen how beautiful beyond all belief is a woman's hair. A little sparrow chirped and flew to a nearby branch, and I honestly believe that only 'the morning stars singing together and the sons of God shouting for joy' can in the least express the ecstasy of a bird's flight .... I have seen life as it really is — ravishingly, ecstatically, madly beautiful, and filled to overflowing with a wild joy, and a value unspeakable."

The words from that famous verse in which God described the day of creation to Job, that extraordinary day “when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy” (Job 38:7), were used in the same way by John Wesley back in the eighteenth century to describe the way we must learn to see God’s glory in the world of nature. William James, in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*, collected a number of accounts of closely similar experiences.<sup>82</sup> This was good evangelical theology — no, more than that, good spiritual teaching in the Great Tradition that went back for thousands of years.

### **The God-bearers: my story is my message**

To learn how to feel the presence of God, Kitchen says that we must also come into personal contact with one of the God-bearers, some other human being who has learned how to develop his or her own God-consciousness, and is actually living this new way of life. *It cannot be learned from reading books.* At the end of the work, Kitchen says that “if this book fails to bring you or some other reader to talk to me in person — or to some other group member, minister or evangelist who can show you the way to relate your sins to the remedy” — it will have accomplished nothing useful.<sup>83</sup>

And unless I — or the other person that you go to — can carry on from that point and play our part as a spiritual obstetrician, the creativeness of the book itself — and any prophecy it may contain — will go for absolutely nothing. And since you are as likely to come to me as to the other fellow — particularly if your sins happen to be similar to

mine — I must be filled with enough of the Holy Spirit myself to be able to make Him real to you.

This is a vital principle which A.A. and the other twelve step groups took over and built into the basic structure of their programs. A.A. members commonly remind one another that “we are the only Big Book that most people are ever going to see.” But it goes well beyond that. If I am a member of a twelve step group, I must speak and act in such a way that newcomers can see the love and compassion of God reflected in me, however imperfectly at times. Love is not words in a book; it must be felt in person to be truly understood. No one can learn how to feel God’s presence in any profound way except by being around people who have already learned how to feel God’s presence.

But even more important in the twelve step program is the basic principle that *my story is my message*. The way I can communicate God-consciousness to someone else is by telling them my story, just as V. C. Kitchen told us his story. I must honestly reveal all of my flaws and inadequacies, and all the wrongs I have done. But I must also talk about the new world of hope in which I now live, and the way my life has been transformed by the power of God’s spirit. And I have to be there for these newcomers to help them interpret what is happening to them at various points along the line, mostly by sharing some of my own experiences of similar things that happened to me, and how I dealt with them, as I attempted to walk in the will of God in the sunlight of the spirit.

So A.A. meetings and other twelve step meetings require no sacred sanctuary. There are no ordained clergy or specially certified teachers, no elaborate rituals or liturgies. There is no melody of hymns or chants being sung at these meetings. This is a

curious thing, in fact, because most spiritual movements develop all sorts of music and chants, whether it is Catholicism, Protestantism, Buddhism, Native American religion, or what have you. What does happen is that one of the members stands up and tells the story of his or her life, or people simply take turns talking around the table, and sharing their experience, strength, and hope with one another.

The power of this is shown in the way that, in this odd manner, alcoholics quit drinking and drug addicts quit using drugs, and in each different kind of twelve step program, people start getting well and healthy again. The proof of the twelve step faith is that it works.

## **The Oxford Group and the modern evangelical movement**

Many of the fundamental parts of A.A. belief came from the general evangelical tradition, and could in theory have first been learned by the founders from some other evangelical group, such as the Southern Methodists who began putting out *The Upper Room* meditational booklets during the 1930's. In fact, once early A.A. began breaking with the Oxford Group, they turned to those Methodist pamphlets, and we can see a number of specifically Methodist influences on the Big Book coming from that source.

Nevertheless, it was the Oxford Group where they first learned about the basic principles of evangelicalism, and some of the most distinctive features of A.A. practice still reflect their origins in the Oxford Group. We have seen this over and over again, for example, in our perusal of V. C. Kitchen's little book. Studying the Oxford Group in the right kind of way can still help us to

understand better the basic principles of the Alcoholics Anonymous program.

In our study of the Oxford Group, however, we must see it as it actually was, as a revival and revitalization of some of the most fundamental discoveries of the eighteenth-century evangelical movement. We need to look, not just at the world of the 1930's, but also at the world of the 1730's two hundred years earlier, when theologians like Jonathan Edwards and John Wesley were first devising a new kind of *psychês therapeia*, a spiritually-based psychotherapeutic method for healing the human soul and producing real soul-change, which was adapted to the world of modern science and technology. It is not just the Oxford Group alone which should be studied, but also the sources of that movement's most important ideas.

## CHAPTER 5

# The Four Absolutes and the Dangers of Legalism

### Bill W.'s rejection of the Four Absolutes

As was typical among Oxford Group members, V. C. Kitchen repeatedly stated that the goal of the spiritual life was to follow, at all times, what the Oxford Group called the Four Absolutes: Absolute Honesty, Absolute Unselfishness, Absolute Love, and Absolute Purity.<sup>84</sup> A. J. Russell's famous Oxford Group book, *For Sinners Only*, which had appeared only two years earlier, had a long section on the Four Absolutes which is worth looking at for those who would wish to understand the details of the Oxford Group's interpretation of those concepts.<sup>85</sup>

One version of A.A. teaching, taught by the early Cleveland group, continued to lay great stress upon these principles long after the break between A.A. and the Oxford Group. There were some changes in this later A.A. version however. The concept of Absolute Purity, for example, was totally reinterpreted. In the original Oxford Group understanding, "purity" focused exclusively on sexual issues. A. J. Russell, for example, said that the Oxford Group "recognised the sex-instinct to be God-given," but "they did not condone any perversion of thought or word or deed."<sup>86</sup> This

meant that the young university men in the group were scolded for masturbating or having “impure thoughts,” homosexuality was condemned, and members were encouraged to “sublimate” most sexual desires into impassioned work instead, either for the Oxford Group or in some other worthy endeavor. Cleveland A.A. turned Absolute Purity into something very different: a generalized insistence upon avoiding all moral compromise, actually doing in practice what we knew was “right” as opposed to doing what we knew was “wrong,” and keeping a clean conscience in all our doings, with no reference at all to sexual matters as such.<sup>87</sup>

The Cleveland A.A. kind of approach to the Four Absolutes makes the best sense, I believe, if we focus not so much on the absolutes themselves as on the Four Questions which accompany them in the little A.A. pamphlet which the Cleveland group published, a set of questions which are very valuable to ask whenever we have to make a decision in our everyday lives:

Absolute Honesty: Is it true or is it false?

Absolute Unselfishness: How will this affect the other fellow?

Absolute Love: Is it ugly or is it beautiful?

Absolute Purity: Is it right or is it wrong?

The Four Questions raise important considerations, and are moral questions which we must in fact ask ourselves at all times in our everyday decision-making if we genuinely wish to turn our will and our lives over to God. Speaking of four “absolutes” however presents a quite different kind of issue. When Bill Wilson was asked, in later years, to comment on the debt which A.A. owed to the Oxford Group, he gave honor to them for what that movement had taught him and the other early A.A. people about the spiritual life, but he also regularly added at the end of that

message of thanks, a special criticism of the Four Absolutes and all that they implied.

## **Works righteousness and legalism**

Why the attack on the doctrine of the Four Absolutes? We need to think back to the basic gospel proclamation which was at the heart of the original evangelical message, the good news announced by the apostle Paul in Romans 3:28, that we are justified by faith alone, and not by works of the law. The vain effort to save ourselves by performing works of the law is called “legalism” or “works righteousness.”

This is an issue where Frank Buchman, if he had been a little more orthodox of a Lutheran, would have seen the danger. The insistence upon avoiding any kind of legalistic system which might threaten the priority of the gospel message took the central place in all the great orthodox Lutheran creedal statements. To Martin Luther, the founder of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation, this was the very essence of Protestantism. The task of the reformers, as Luther saw it, was to preach once again the great gospel message proclaimed in the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Romans, and to restore the knowledge of the saving truth that we were justified by faith and grace alone, and not by works of the law. The gospel message had been obscured and falsified, by Luther’s time, by the narrow rule-bound nominalist theologians who had taken over the Catholic universities of Europe in the fourteenth century,<sup>88</sup> and destroyed the foundations of the true Christian faith with their authoritarian and absolutist doctrines. In fact, no decent Roman Catholic theologian or spiritual writer of the last five hundred years has done anything but reject and condemn the nominalist system. Luther and the other Catholic priests who

became the leaders of the early Lutheran church attempted to undo the damage the nominalists had done by preaching once again that lost message of faith and grace.

The Four Absolutes, however worthy they are in intent, are a return to a morality based on rules, and the attempt to justify ourselves by works of the law. If we become trapped into trying to save our souls by following even rules as fine as these, we forfeit salvation through grace, and will find ourselves in a position where the only way we will be able to find salvation is through following these four rules perfectly. The problem here is that, in this fallen world, as the apostle Paul puts it just a few verses earlier in Romans 3:10, “There is no one righteous, no not one,” not in that absolutist kind of sense. Trying to follow moral absolutes breeds either chronic depression or continual hypocrisy.

The only way to keep from eventually collapsing into the depressive side of this psychological dilemma, with its sense of total failure and despair, is to practice massive denial so that we can keep pretending to ourselves that we actually are following these absolutist rules in our lives. The word hypocrite (an ancient Greek word which Jesus used frequently in the New Testament when he was referring to people of this sort) meant an actor on a stage. Once we have put on the right costume and makeup, we can climb up on the stage and pretend to be Hamlet or Ophelia, a cowboy or a princess, a pirate or a dance hall girl. These roles are all make-believe and pretend, of course. If we play our parts skillfully enough, the audience will applaud and we will have obtained our reward. But pretending to be King Midas on a stage does not give us countless chests of real gold back at home. Pretending to be Merlin the magician does not give us the power offstage to actually pull real rabbits out of genuinely empty hats.

## **Absolutist thinking, resentment, and depression**

Some of us can pretend to ourselves that we are living by the Four Absolutes, and can go around play-acting that role so well, that sometimes we can even gain the applause of many of the people in our audience. But others in our audience will know that it is all an act, and that we are simply hypocrites, that is, people all dressed up in stage costumes putting on a phony performance. Since, deep in our hearts, we ourselves will always know this too, even if this knowledge is buried down below the conscious level, this hidden awareness of the lie we are living will always fill our lives with enormous strain and tension. And another part of our subconscious minds will be raging at being forced to comply with all the hateful, inhuman, absolutist requirements, which will produce, invariably, a generalized state of intense resentment which we will dump on every luckless soul who comes along. The psychiatrist Fritz Perls often said (rephrasing one of Nietzsche's major themes): "Show me a Good Boy, and I will show you someone filled with resentment." "Show me a Good Girl, and I will show you someone filled with resentment." He meant the people who were continually playing the role of Good Boy or Good Girl, like a performer on stage, and trying as hard as they could to perform that act in all their encounters with other people.

When the pretense collapses, depression and a total sense of failure is the result. The modern cognitive therapists have discovered that trying to follow absolute should's and ought's is one of the most frequent causes of crippling depression. If they can teach their patients to quit setting up absolute rules for themselves, the depression will disappear. Clinical studies demonstrate that cognitive therapy will help a very high percentage of patients

suffering from chronic depression, just as high a percentage as anti-depressant medication. This is not an either-or issue. Many psychotherapists and psychiatrists have found that the highest success rates in treating chronic depression come from using appropriate medication to calm the patient down if this is necessary, followed by extensive cognitive therapy to teach them how to stop thinking in terms of absolute should's and ought's, how to quit being so judgmental and critical of other people, and so on.

The important thing to note here however, is that if people in A.A. who are trying to follow the Four Absolutes are suffering from continuous depression which never gets any better, these people should look very seriously at the possibility that trying to follow the Four Absolutes is creating all or part of the depression. The same thing applies to people in A.A. who have been trying to live by the absolutes for some time and are still plagued by continual resentment and anger, directed at people and things which on the surface may appear to have nothing to do with the four rules. As has already been noted, the strain of constantly trying to force ourselves to live by an absolutist system will eventually produce an inner rebellion in some part of our psyches which will suffuse our minds with a kind of free-floating rage which is going to spill over somewhere or other.

The apostle Paul's conclusion that trying to save ourselves by works of the law never works, along with Jesus's continual warnings that those who try to appear super-righteous in that fashion will inevitably end up as resentful hypocrites, is not obsolete nonsense from two thousand years ago. These were pearls of true wisdom, the practical observations of two extremely perceptive spiritual teachers. Some of the best modern psychiatric

observations — along with a lot of good A.A. practical common sense — completely supports what they said.

## **Grace as the great healing power**

Most of the world's religions have some sort of concept of grace. To the ancient pagan Greeks, the owl-eyed Athena, one of the personifications of the primordial mother goddess, was a goddess not only of wisdom but also of grace. She saved Odysseus in the *Iliad* when he was shipwrecked and lost, because she heard his sorrowful weeping and was moved to compassion. She was worshiped at her great temple on the Acropolis in Athens as a goddess of mercy who brought justice, victory over evil, and the gift of the civilized arts to the ancient Greeks.

Among the ancient Stoic philosophers who taught on the Painted Porch in the marketplace of ancient Athens, the god Zeus was our gracious and loving Father. If we human beings learned how to live together as brothers and sisters of the one Father, and learned to *accept* life as it happened (acceptance is a good Stoic concept), and in particular learned to accept what had taken place as an act of God's grace, designed to teach us or make us grow stronger or give us a better opportunity to serve God, we would find true serenity (*apatheia*). Serenity meant freedom from the four *pathê* or "passions," that is, the absence of the kind of obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviors which filled us with Desire, Fear, Sorrow, and Joy, and drove us to destroy ourselves.

The four passions (Desire, Fear, Sorrow, and Joy) were linked together in such a way that once we had become obsessively gripped by any one of them, we would also eventually fall into the clutches of the other three as well. "Joy" in this sense meant the kind of brief emotional thrill we obtained when one of our

obsessive Desires was temporarily filled. The problem was that this immediately threw us into the out-of-control Desire for more and more things of that same sort, Fear that we might lose what we had obtained, and Sorrow when we did finally lose them (as would always ultimately occur). We obtained serenity, the ancient Stoics taught, when we learned to accept the things we could not change (*ta ouk eph' hēmin*), the courage (*andreia*) to change the things we could (*ta eph' hēmin*), and the wisdom (*sophia*) to know the difference. Philosophy was *philo-sophia*, the love of that kind of wisdom.<sup>89</sup>

These ancient Greek philosophers saw Zeus, the king of the gods, as the controlling power behind all things. They taught that “nothing, absolutely nothing happens in God’s world by mistake.” But God loved us, so whatever it was that God had caused to happen (or had allowed to happen), it would always ultimately prove to have been an act of grace, a beneficent act of fatherly love — as soon as we accepted what had happened, and began putting our minds to work to see how we could turn it into something positive. That meant that even in the most difficult parts of our lives, it was our task to discover an opportunity somewhere for nevertheless doing something good and praiseworthy in that situation, or some way we could show how a good person could still act virtuously in even that kind of circumstance, or something we could still do which would glorify and honor God. At the end of his life, the great Stoic teacher Epictetus, who had once been a slave in the emperor Nero’s court, said that he was now just a crippled old man, who had nothing else useful he could do except to sing God’s praise. So, he said, that is obviously the duty to which God had now assigned him, and his job in this last part of his life was to be like the song birds, and sing continually throughout every day to bring pleasure to God’s ears.<sup>90</sup>

In Arabia, the Koran spoke over and over of Allah’s mercy and compassion, and commanded us human beings to perform acts of grace and charity for all those who were suffering and were in need. One of the central human duties in authentic Islam to this day is to make charitable contributions to needy people — quite often in the modern world to enable a poor person to obtain medical care or to help someone obtain an education — so that we may be gracious to others as Allah has been gracious to us. There is a profound spiritual insight in Islam’s understanding that healing and teaching are two of the primary modes of grace. These are of course also the two major duties of good A.A., where the task is to heal the disease of alcoholism and to teach a higher and better way of life.

### **God’s gracious acts of loving kindness (*hesed*) in Judaism**

The heart of Judaism lay in the scene on Mount Sinai, where the voice from the burning bush told Moses that he had heard the agonized cries of his children who were trapped in the forced labor camps of Egypt, and was going to come to save them by his grace, with a strong right hand and an outstretched arm. The words of the Passover *seder* which is celebrated every year by Jewish families all over the world, celebrate all the countless acts of divine grace — acts of concrete loving kindness — which have helped the people of Israel over the centuries.

The important Hebrew word *hesed* has as one of its primary meanings the quality of graciousness,<sup>91</sup> the unfailing effort to help all who are suffering, by reaching out to them with deeds of loving kindness. A deed of *hesed* is an act of grace. As the Holy One says through the prophet Hosea, “I desire *hesed* and not sacrifice,”<sup>92</sup>

that is, people who perform concrete acts of loving kindness for others, not all the fancy rituals and rules of organized religion. The *Melek Ha'olam*, the King of the Universe, is not nearly as impressed with religion and religiosity as we human beings sometimes are. All good Jews know in their hearts that Hosea was right, that the primary command of Torah is *not* to carry out endless religious rituals, but to act graciously — that is, with compassion and concrete help — towards all who are downtrodden and helpless to defend themselves: widows, orphans, the poor people, resident aliens working in one's country (“the stranger in your midst”), and those who have no food or clothes.

The rabbinic literature makes this clear over and over again. To give an example, we could look at the rabbinic commentaries on the Ten Commandments, where it is pointed out that even though one of these commandments says, “you shall not steal,” a poor person who comes and collects some of the fallen fruit under your olive tree after you have finished your harvest is *not* stealing from you and breaking that commandment. In fact, the rabbis say, it is your duty under the Torah to deliberately leave the corners of all your fields unharvested, so that you can invite any poor people in your area to come in and help themselves to whatever is growing there. They are not stealing from you, and paradoxically it is you who are breaking the commandments if you do not give to them and give freely, regardless of whether you think they do or do not “deserve” help. The first duty of Torah is the preservation of life, a commandment which any good rabbi would tell you takes precedence over all other rules of Torah. You cannot cite other rules of Torah to defend an action which imperils the preservation of life. No one “deserves” the death sentence simply for being lazy, stupid, or irresponsible, and in particular you do not act with justice if you punish shiftless parents by putting those parents into

a situation where their children will starve to death. Punish someone by killing that person's children? Most of the idol-worshipping pagans act better than that!

Good Judaism is centered around following the Torah or Law of God, but it avoids falling into legalism and works righteousness (in the fashion that the apostle Paul was warning against) in part because the Hebrew word *mishpat*, which is usually translated into English as “justice,” necessarily includes compassion as one of its major components. A blind following of the written code without a shred of grace and compassion is not true obedience to the commands of Torah, and is not justice at all in the Hebrew sense of the word.

In 1935, it was suffering alcoholics who were rejected by all and helpless to save themselves, when *Hashem*, the Holy One of Israel, heard the cries of Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob Smith and stretched out his hand in grace to touch them with his healing power — and commanded them, as the first and greatest of all his requests, to reach out their hands in grace to all the suffering alcoholics of the world, giving what they had been so freely given, and teaching them also to live lives filled with the fundamental principles of the divine *hesed*.

### **The healing power of grace in nontheistic religions**

Buddha was not only a very wise man, he was above all filled with compassion. Although he had been the son of a great king, and could have lived out his life in a royal palace waited on hand and food, he walked out of that palace and never came back. Instead he devoted himself to teaching anyone who came to him, and attempting to help anyone who came to him, without desiring

the fruit of his actions, which meant that his acts of grace were genuinely free acts of grace, imposing no obligation on those who were offered them. In Buddhism, if we are willing to tame our own out-of-control desires, which drive us to pursue boundless fame and praise, total control over the other human beings around us, merciless revenge for wrongs which we believe have been done to us, and the impossible desire to never grow old and live forever, we will find that reality is inherently filled with a strange kind of grace which will automatically heal our troubled minds and bring the cessation of suffering and give us true serenity and real freedom. The Buddhist dharma is a *healing* discipline, which means that it is a way of life filled with boundless grace. It is the path of grace, because the only way to walk it is to realize that we do not have to *earn* nirvana or *deserve* satori by things we do, or by acts we perform in an attempt to win merit and “achieve” things in the world. There are conditions, however, which must be fulfilled, one of which is that we can achieve nirvana or satori only when we realize that *there are no absolutes*.

In many Native American religions (among the Navajos, for example, and in the religion of the Potawatomis where I live) the realm of Nature is sacred. The Potawatomi word for the sacred or holy,<sup>93</sup> also used among many of the other tribes of the northeastern United States, is *Manitou*. It is this concept, rather than the concept of a single highly personal God-figure, which is at the heart of this kind of spirituality. I discover the universal harmony and sacredness of all things — the Manitou — by doing my best to live in harmony with the world around me, including not only the world of Nature but also my fellow human beings.

Among the Navajo, good shamans are especially aware that people who have been filled with too much anger and rage need to go through a healing ritual, where no one scolds them for feeling

that way, and no one tells them to start using their willpower to make themselves think differently. That would be ineffective and useless, because what they are suffering from is a sickness, which is no more under the control of human willpower than any other form of disease. What these people need to cure the anger and rage which is making them ill, is to be put into contact with the healing power of divine grace. These shamans know that someone caught in that destructive psychological state has to receive help from outside, from the sacred realm. We are surrounded at all times by *yo 'zho'*, which is a Navajo concept which takes several different English words to translate fully: it means beauty, harmony, the smooth natural flow of things, peace, and serenity, viewed as a sacred and holy quality which we can sense and feel in the natural world around us — and also within ourselves, when we have attuned our emotions and attitudes to it. Their traditional prayers ask us to visualize this sacred beauty and harmony all around us: “Beauty in front of us, beauty behind us, beauty beside us.” “Peace in front of us, peace behind us, peace beside us.” So the Navajo chants which make up the healing ritual capitalize on the fact that Nature itself — when our eyes and ears and other senses are attuned to its sacredness — will draw away our rage and anger and heal our minds, if we just let it. That is simply another form of the spirituality of grace which we see in religions all over the earth.

### **The Apostle Paul’s discovery**

The apostle Paul however made an important new discovery about the nature of divine grace, which is found in Romans 7-8, and this in turn became the heart of the twelve step program. He found that the power of grace had an almost magical ability to

produce a soul change (a deep psychic change) and heal the kind of self-destructive behaviors which formed the most intractable of all human woes. He realized that the problems which most deeply torment those who want to lead good lives, are the obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviors which we know are wrong and destructive, but which we cannot stop ourselves from doing by our own unaided will power (Romans 7:15-24).

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law [of God] is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me .... I can will what is right, but I cannot do it .... For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my arms and legs another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my arms and legs. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?

Alcoholics give us an excellent example of the kind of behavior Paul was describing. An alcoholic eventually arrives at a point like the one Bill Wilson finally reached at the end of his drinking career, where he knew in his inmost self that his out-of-control drinking was an offense against all that was holy and good. But in spite of what the sane and moral part of his mind was trying to command his body to do, every day it was as though his legs would start walking automatically to the liquor store, and the next thing he knew, his arms, as though they had a mind of their own, were lifting the bottle to his lips.

Preaching the law, Paul says, does no good for someone caught in that situation. Scolding, punishment, and threats of hellfire not only will not work, but make the behavior even worse.

When alcoholics are scolded for their drinking, for example, their instant reaction is to crave a drink even more. The more compulsive overeaters cringe when other people make fun of them and call them “fatty” and other names like that, and again, the more people scold them and make fun of them, the more they crave doughnuts or potato chips or whatever other comfort food they go to in order to relieve stress. If we have tempers which get us in trouble, where we are continually blowing up at our bosses or our spouses or our children, the attempt to control our anger by sheer will-power alone will not work at all (or it will simply delay our explosions of anger and make them even worse, or it will plunge us into depression instead).

Preaching Absolute Unselfishness, Absolute Love, Absolute Purity, and even Absolute Honesty (in this kind of context) is *preaching the law*. It is an attempt to save ourselves by performing works of the law. This will not improve my behavior and frequently will make it worse. Our lives become justified — are brought back into harmony with God once more — through faith alone, not through trying to perform works of the law. This is not only the teaching of the divinely inspired apostle, but is backed up, as we have seen, by good sound modern psychology.

If I am an alcoholic who is drinking uncontrollably, the only thing that will save me is turning my life over to God in faith, where faith means trust in God’s love and compassion and willingness to help me. Telling me that I cannot stop drinking until I start also trying to achieve Absolute Unselfishness, Absolute Love, Absolute Purity, and Absolute Honesty — all four — will plummet any honest person into total despair. So the first reason why Bill W. was so strongly opposed to the Oxford Group emphasis on the Four Absolutes, was that — in an organization that otherwise had done a marvelous job of rediscovering and

revitalizing the central gospel message — it was a disastrous turn back into the kind of legalism and works righteousness which was a total betrayal of the gospel.

## CHAPTER 6

# The Balanced Life: Seeking the Golden Mean

### Seeking the Golden Mean between the two extremes

There was another reason for Bill Wilson's hostility toward the Four Absolutes and the kind of rule-based either-or morality which they represented. On page 65 of the Big Book, in the sample fourth step that Wilson drew up, we see those mysterious words in the third column: sex relations, self-esteem, security, and personal relationships. In the chapter on the fourth step in the *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, Bill W. explained more clearly why he had put them there. All human beings, he pointed out, have certain kinds of natural drives and instincts, which are not at all evil in and of themselves. We have an instinct for survival, which motivates us to obtain food and clothes and a warm place to sleep at night. We have a social instinct, which is a natural drive for banding together with other human beings, where we desire respect from the other members of the group, and a role within the structure of the group which is commensurate with our abilities and talents. We have a sex instinct also. The human race would not last more than a single generation if sexual desire did not exist. Since sex also

plays an important role in the formation of family bonds and other social structures, it is also strongly linked with our social instinct.<sup>94</sup>

It is resentment and fear, the Big Book says, which keep us from living happy and serene lives. Bill Wilson observed that the attempt to regulate the natural instincts by drawing up complicated sets of moral rules was not at all useful in dealing with resentment and fear. First of all, the question of whether someone had or had not broken one of these mechanical rules did not in fact put us in any kind of contact with the real factors that were actually producing the destructive resentment and fear. So he replaced the idea of an ethical system based on following rules with the idea of an ethical system more like the one which the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle laid out in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. In that work, Aristotle explained on philosophical grounds the impossibility of setting up mechanical rules or moral laws which in fact adequately defined virtuous behavior. It was, however, easy to describe extremely bad behavior, and to explain why bad behavior was so destructive. The reason why virtuous behavior was so difficult to define was because it was in fact simply the mean (the middle point) between two extremes of undesirable behavior. The formula which we therefore needed to follow in describing ethical behavior was quite simple in terms of its basic principle: in order to lead the good life *we should seek the Golden Mean*, the balance point between those two extremes.

Aristotle used the virtue of courage as one of his examples. It was impossible to design a set of rules, where merely following those rules would automatically make a person courageous. If only it were so simple and easy! We could however say that courage was the mean (the middle point or balance point) between two extremes: cowardice and foolhardiness. In a life and death situation, cowards let their fear drive them into doing things which

made it far more likely that they would be killed. They totally froze with fear, or they turned and tried to run away in situations where their only possible hope of survival was to stand and fight. At the other extreme, foolhardy people dove into situations which any rational person could see were too dangerous to attempt, just in order to show off to other people or for some other equally foolish motive.

Among the ancient Greeks the word for virtue, *aretê*, was derived from the word *Arês*, which was the name they gave to the god of war. So virtue originally referred to the kinds of qualities which made a good warrior, a man who fought on the field of combat presided over by that fierce god of battle. Courage (*andreia*) therefore originally meant the ability to make ourselves keep on going, and keep on doing the things that had to be done, in order to maximize our chances of survival on the battlefield. It meant the continued intelligent functioning of our survival instinct in situations which were full of enormous danger, even when fear and the wild thoughts running through our minds were threatening to totally unhinge us.

What Bill Wilson did was to use the same kind of Aristotelian approach in dealing with all the natural human instincts in all the possible kinds of situations in which we might be placed. We might take the instinct for material security as an example. At the one extreme, some of the alcoholics who came into Alcoholics Anonymous were very well-to-do people (or at least had been once). They had not been content however with decent food to eat and clothes to wear and an adequate roof over their heads, but had been driven to seek money, money, and more money, in order to have fancier and fancier things to eat and clothes to wear, and bigger and bigger houses to live in, in fancier and fancier neighborhoods. The pressure drove them into becoming more and

more frantic and anxious, and any obstacles they encountered began producing more and more rage and resentment. Then they started drinking alcohol in order to self-medicate all of this anxiety and resentment. They drank to calm down, they would say, or to unwind after a hard day's work, or to console themselves over a financial loss.

At the other extreme, some of the alcoholics who came into Alcoholics Anonymous had never shown any responsibility in their lives. They had always had excuses for not working, and had never had an honest job for very long at any point in their lifetimes. Yet they somehow expected other people (or society) to supply them with food and clothes and a place to live, without them having to do any real work for it. They refused to work and be responsible, but were nevertheless consumed with jealousy towards the people who were better off materially than they were. They were also filled with resentment towards bosses who had fired them for laziness and not showing up. In addition, they always ended up living with continual worry and anxiety over having the water or the electricity cut off because they had not paid the bill, and other problems of that sort. They also drank more and more in an attempt to self-medicate the ever-increasing resentment and fear.

When doing a fourth step, how do we deal with issues revolving around our desire for material security? We need to see what kind of resentments and fears have dogged all our thoughts for years, and why we continually ended up feeling resentment and fear over certain kinds of things that kept on happening in our lives, over and over again. We are looking for repeating patterns of behavior, using resentment and fear as red warning flags telling us where to look at our attitudes and behavior. On the one hand, we may have driven ourselves crazy by an excessive desire for material things: a fancy house, a big car, expensive entertainment

and toys. On the other hand, we may have plunged our lives into continual resentment and anxiety because we refused to work and follow the boss's orders and handle our paychecks responsibly. The natural human instinct for material security can get us in trouble if we fall into excessive behavior in either direction, either too much or too little.

The same principle applies to analyzing our use of the other natural instincts. So for example, in our desire to have respect and recognition from the other people around us, there is nothing evil per se in working hard at a job in order to obtain salary raises and promotions. It is all a matter of achieving balance. Either too much ambition or too little ambition will create resentment and self-pity and all sorts of anxieties and worries and shame and guilt in the long run. We can err in either direction, either by falling into grandiosity and setting our sights too high, or by falling into so much self-loathing and failure to see our own talents that we set our sights far too low. But the balanced life will enable us to live with a basic inner peace down in the core of our being, even during periods when extremely difficult external events are disturbing the surface level of our emotions.

The way we cleanse our minds in the twelve step program therefore involves doing a fourth step inventory of ourselves, searching for continually repeating patterns of nagging, obsessive resentment and fear, or repeated episodes of overwhelmingly explosive resentment and fear, and using this information to work at living life in such a way that our natural instincts will be better balanced.

## **The Bicycle Principle**

What I call the bicycle principle simply notes that it is possible to fall off of a bicycle in either direction, on the left hand side or on the right. Passing a rule which tells people always to lunge towards the right as hard as they can whenever they feel themselves falling will produce disaster. In fact, there is no way a beginner can learn to ride a bicycle by memorizing any kind of system of rules.

We will fall if we lean either direction too much, either to the left or to the right. So people learn how to ride bicycles by learning “what it feels like” when they are beginning to lean a little too much toward either side. Being in balance means learning how to make corrections while they are still possible. If I am falling out of control and hitting the pavement with great force, this means that I have gotten totally out of balance. It does not take a complicated theory to figure that out. When I collide with the street and am lying there all scraped and bruised, I will have a good practical definition of what it means NOT to be in balance.

The bicycle principle is a good way of illustrating the point that Aristotle was making. In attempting to act ethically, I will always know when I have fallen into moral disaster, totally out of control, because it will create great destruction, and will usually end up hurting very badly. Once I have learned how to sense when I am beginning to lean too far, in one direction or the other, and have learned how to make the appropriate correction, *before* I am falling totally out of control, I will be able to journey through life without leaving a trail of destruction behind me. This is our goal in the twelve step program, because it is an achievable goal, and will make our lives a thousand times happier and more successful.

As a canny ancient Greek, Aristotle (along with Plato and Herodotus and the great playwrights and most of the rest of the wisest of the ancient Greek thinkers) knew that the path to the best possible life lay through learning how to accept life on life’s terms.

Idealistic absolutes of any kind were not only fantasies, but dangerous fantasies which would lead us down the path to destruction.

## **The Pancake Principle**

The pancake principle is based on the story of a woman who came to see a psychiatrist, and told him that her family had sent her to him because she liked pancakes. The psychiatrist said, “Well, I don’t see anything wrong with that. I like pancakes myself.” The woman replied, “Oh, you must come visit me at my house, I have fourteen trunks and footlockers stuffed with pancakes in my living room.”

Alcoholics get into trouble because they are perpetually trying to do things to extremes. Passing a rule saying that people who eat pancakes at all are going to hell, does not speak to the real problem which was ruining the life of that poor woman with her living room filled with thousands of pancakes. It was not loving pancakes in the ordinary sense, it was being obsessed with pancakes in truly crazed fashion, which was the mark of her insanity.

The next person to walk in that psychiatrist’s door might have been a woman who was anorexic, who was literally starving herself to death in an out-of-control urge to remain in control of herself. For that patient, salvation would lie in the opposite direction, through learning that if she felt like eating a plate of pancakes with syrup on them, that she should go right ahead and thoroughly enjoy eating the entire plateful.

Mechanical rules (loving pancakes is always evil, or loving pancakes is an absolute requirement for all good boys and girls) do not speak at all to the real issues. Furthermore, if the rules we draw up allow us anything at all that we can still do without

breaking any of those rules, alcoholics will figure out some way of doing that one thing to excess and creating a path of destruction in their wakes. And *any* system of moral rules, no matter how carefully drawn up, and even if the rules are taken from books which we believe to be divinely inspired, will *always* provide loopholes for out-of-control, excessive, and extremely destructive behavior.

Why was Bill Wilson so deeply opposed to the Four Absolutes? Because he knew that preaching the Four Absolutes was apt to make alcoholics worse instead of better, and in particular, because he knew that it totally missed the point of what was creating so much resentment and fear inside these alcoholics' minds. It was their wildly out-of-balance lives which made alcoholics so miserable, and ultimately drove them back to the bottle over and over again.

### **The Myth of Perfection: St. Augustine and Paul's letter to the Romans**

I do not want to give the misleading impression that no one knew about the apostle Paul's solution to the problem of human self-destructiveness and our inability to do things absolutely and perfectly until the eighteenth-century evangelicals came along. At the end of the fourth century A.D., St. Augustine began developing his teaching about our necessary human *imperfection* — central to the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church — after trying for some years to live a life of absolute perfection.<sup>95</sup> He had become bishop of the African seaport city of Hippo Regius by that time, and it had finally come to dawn on him at some level that he had never really managed to live the spiritual life perfectly, and that the African dock workers and their families who made up his

congregation were not bad people, but they were beyond a shadow of a doubt never going to be people of otherworldly sainthood. He was beginning to grasp the fact that obtaining absolute perfection was not an achievable goal, for either himself or for his church members.

His priests liked to set up their own private bible study classes from time to time, and at that point decided to study Paul's letter to the Romans. They kept coming to Augustine for help in understanding that New Testament book, and finally (after two abortive efforts to write a commentary on the work) he realized what the apostle had been saying, and how wrong he had been in his own absolutist kind of approach to spirituality.

He also was finally able to grasp Paul's important discovery about the power of grace. When we were destroying our lives by some kind of irresistible obsessive and compulsive behavior — and could not stop by using our own will-power, no matter how hard we tried — only God's grace could produce the soul change that would free us from the power of that destructive urge.

His mother, St. Monica, had been a childhood alcoholic, but had entered recovery by turning to God's grace for help and praying for God to produce a soul change in her. St. Augustine's problem had been different. Before his conversion, he had been a compulsive womanizer, and could not keep his hands off the ladies. His illegitimate son Adeodatus, whom he dearly loved, had been begotten in an affair which Augustine had with a young African woman, and in fact had been begotten in the back of a church in Carthage when the church was empty and it seemed like a private place where he and the young woman were not apt to be disturbed. He was not an alcoholic like his mother, but he too knew what it was to suffer from an irresistible compulsion to do things which he knew were wrong, but which he could not stop himself

from doing. At the time of his conversion to Christianity over in Italy, however, he called on God for help, and was finally able to stop his womanizing.

But then he went much further in his desire to turn his life and will totally over to God, and started trying to achieve absolute Christian perfection, and forgot the fact that it had been God's grace, not his own human power, which had saved him in the first place. Studying Paul's letter to the Romans brought this important truth back to consciousness — something he had known and had experienced himself some years earlier, when he first became a Christian — so that he was forced once again to acknowledge, at an even deeper level, that it was our radical human powerlessness which was the necessary counterpoint to the power of divine grace.

In struggling with the apostle Paul's letter to the Romans, Augustine finally came to the realization that he needed to start preaching to his congregation and to Christians in other parts of the Roman empire (a) that only God's grace could re-make the human soul and destroy the all-dominating power of the irresistible compulsions which made us destroy ourselves, and (b) that even then, we human beings were never going to be able to achieve any kind of absolute perfection in this world and this life.

God would give us complete victory over the most destructive compulsions in our external behavior. An alcoholic like Augustine's mother St. Monica could stop drinking totally. Someone like Augustine could quit having compulsive affairs with women permanently and completely. But we would never be able to keep our minds from having impulses on occasion towards undue selfishness, the wrong kind of anger, empty vanity, wallowing with neurotic pleasure in the swamp of self-pity, or worrying too much about foolish things. "Venial sins" is what the medieval Catholic church eventually came to call them — those

thoughts and tendencies which were part and parcel of our intrinsic humanity — as opposed to the big destructive behaviors which God, in his grace, was capable of removing from us totally.

Our human inability to do things in absolutely flawless fashion was of course why the Roman Catholic Church later on developed the confessional system (now called the sacrament of reconciliation). It is difficult to see why some Catholic children, in their early religious education, ever got the idea that it was mandatory that we be *absolutely* perfect. If that were a real possibility, Catholic churches could remove all the confessional booths because there would never be any need for them again! Why do little Catholic children think that the sacrament of reconciliation has to be used in the first place? As St. Augustine put it, we human beings are necessarily imperfect, which means that the proper prayer to God is simply to ask him to help us in our imperfection.<sup>96</sup>

## **Martin Luther and Paul's letter to the Romans**

By the fifteenth century, at the very end of the middle ages, the Catholic universities had unfortunately been taken over by a group of theologians called the nominalists. Teachers like Gabriel Biel effectively destroyed the Augustinian concept of grace by teaching that salvation had to be “merited” by performing all sorts of meritorious deeds — and not only that, but in this perverted nominalist theology, the merits had to be earned in the right order.<sup>97</sup> It was a spirituality based, not on grace, but on legalism and works righteousness in a truly destructive kind of way. The great Catholic theologians of the past were no longer being seriously read. It was not just St. Augustine whom they were not

reading, they were not even reading later Catholic theologians like St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Bonaventure.

A young Catholic priest named Martin Luther<sup>98</sup> was brought up in that absolutist and perfectionist atmosphere, and was spending sometimes as much as two or three hours in the confessional booth, trying to ferret out every last little “sin” he might have ever committed, so that Father Johann von Staupitz, his monastic superior, could absolve him of these sins. It was the beginning of the sixteenth century by that time. Poor Luther was absolutely terrified that he might go to hell because he had perhaps been slow in obeying one of his mother’s instructions once when he was six years old, and other absurd fears of that sort. The technical name for this kind of spiritual malady in Catholic spiritual teaching is “scrupulosity.” Ralph Pfau, the first Roman Catholic priest to get sober in A.A. (he wrote the Golden Books under the pen name of Father John Doe) also suffered from scrupulosity when he was in seminary at St. Meinrad’s in southern Indiana, and did not begin to recover until he joined Alcoholics Anonymous.<sup>99</sup>

Luther was finally assigned by von Staupitz to teach the Bible at the newly founded German university at Wittenberg. That good and wise spiritual director probably hoped that young Martin would eventually be able to find his way out of his crippling perfectionism if he could be removed from the world of the scholastic theologians with their over-intellectualized doctrines and dogmas and theories, and forced to deal directly with the earthy, honest voices of people like David and Paul, who could be fallible and irascible, but who also had big hearts and a fierce zeal for life, so that God had clearly loved them and delighted in them, flaws and all, more than almost all of his other earthly children. So one year von Staupitz had Luther give lectures on David and the

Psalms, and not long afterwards, he had him put together a course on Paul's letter to the Romans. Luther's lectures on Romans have survived, and we can see him, over the course of the term, arriving at one liberating insight after another. And he went back and started reading St. Augustine's writings, and came to the astonishing discovery that this was the traditional teaching of the Holy Catholic Church, and that the university professors of his generation were teaching things in the Catholic universities of Europe which were totally contrary to authentic Catholic teaching.

The first time he spoke openly about his new discoveries in a major public setting (his debate with Johann Eck at the University of Leipzig) it acted as a catalyst. All over northwestern Europe, numerous Catholic priests, bishops, and university professors began saying, "You know, young Professor Luther should not have said what he said in that kind of setting, but you know, if we're honest with ourselves, he's right."

The result was the Protestant Reformation. The pope in Rome at that time — where the papacy had gotten hopelessly involved in secular politics — was a member of the Medici family, the aristocratic bankers who controlled Renaissance Florence. He made the mistake of trying to shut down the protest by ordering Father Luther and the others to cease teaching these ideas immediately, and publicly recant for having taught things "contrary to the true Catholic faith." The problem was that Luther and the other priests and bishops and university professors in Germany and the surrounding area had come to realize that what Luther was saying was *not* contrary to the true historical teaching of the Catholic faith. It was the over-contrived system of the nominalist theologians who had taken over the Catholic universities in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries which had distorted and perverted the historic Catholic faith.

In northern Germany as well as Scandinavia, these breakaway theologians formed what was later called the Lutheran Church, built on the principle that we are saved by faith and grace alone and not by works of the law, and the principle that legalism and works righteousness will never save anybody, because human beings are necessarily imperfect and will never be able to save themselves by following some absolutist system.

## **The Calvinists**

A generation later, John Calvin, a French theologian (his name in French was Jean Chauvin) who had moved to Switzerland to keep from being arrested by the Catholic authorities in Paris, made Luther's understanding of the gospel even more radical. The Lutheran Church had tried to hang onto everything that it could from the medieval Catholic past, unless it seemed to them to be totally incompatible with the true understanding of the apostle Paul's gospel. The Calvinists worked instead on the principle that if something were not explicitly commanded in the New Testament back in the first century, it was automatically under suspicion as sub-Christian. They were implacably hostile to anything medieval. The most radical Calvinists were opposed to a large number of traditional Christian practices — church organs, stained glass windows, wedding rings, and celebrating Christmas, for example — as we can see among the more extreme English Puritans, both in England itself and in some of the thirteen North American colonies.

The Calvinists totally agreed with the Lutherans in insisting that all the work of human salvation was accomplished by God's grace. In the eyes of many Calvinist theologians (just as with the Lutherans), any attempt to say that human beings had to *do*

*anything* in order to be healed and redeemed, was regarded as a betrayal of the apostle Paul’s gospel message, and a fall back into works righteousness and legalism.<sup>100</sup>

## **The Anglicans and the letter of James**

In the meantime, over in England, after the death of King Henry VIII (who was *not* a Protestant), his Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer, took advantage of the fluid situation created by having a little boy on the throne (Henry’s son Edward was only ten years old when his father died in 1547) to bring a fairly conservative form of the Protestant Reformation to England. In the Church of England as he refashioned it (we call them the Anglicans or Episcopalians in the United States) it was stated in the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion that we are saved by grace and faith alone, just as the apostle Paul had taught, and not by works of the law. But Archbishop Cranmer added an article stating that the letter of James was also correct (“faith without works is dead”), so that although we are not saved by good works, if we claim to have saving faith but there has been no soul change producing some major alterations in our external behavior, we are just deluding ourselves. Cranmer insisted that good works (or as the Oxford Group put it four centuries later, people beginning to live “changed” lives) are the automatic product of a true and lively faith.

The archbishop also made it clear however, that we human beings are necessarily imperfect, and will never be able to save ourselves by trying to achieve any kind of absolutist standards. Furthermore, he said that if our so-called faith is just a matter of believing a detailed list of all the correct doctrines and dogmas, that this kind of religiosity never saved anyone. Cranmer pointed

again to the letter of James, where the apostle pointed out (“even the devils believe and tremble,” as James 2:19 put it) that the demons down in hell believe all the correct doctrines and dogmas (they know all about the doctrine of the trinity and the virgin birth and all of those things, and know that they are all true) but are nevertheless consigned for all eternity to the flames of hell. Why? Because the faith that saves is trust in a loving God who accepts us in spite of our imperfections. Satan knew all the doctrines and dogmas, but did not trust God. So he attempted to take over the universe and make himself God instead, because he did not think that God adequately realized how much more intelligent he was than all the other angels (as he thought), and because he was extremely unhappy about the way God refused to run things exactly the way he wanted them run.

The eighteenth-century evangelical leader John Wesley was an Anglican priest who insisted that Archbishop Cranmer had gotten things exactly right on that set of issues. Although the Methodist movement which he founded eventually separated from the Church of England (in the United States they formally split off from the mother church right after the American Revolution was over to keep from being run out of the country as Tories), they still continued to teach and worship in what was a fundamentally Anglican style, and the Southern Methodists in particular were very Anglo-Catholic in their approach to all sorts of issues.

After the early A.A. movement broke with the Oxford Group, the majority of A.A.’s began using the Southern Methodist publication called *The Upper Room* for their morning meditations, so the place where they now tied into the Protestant Reformation was into the conservative version originally worked out by Archbishop Cranmer. Anglo-Catholics regarded themselves as the *via media*, the attempt to find the middle point between traditional

Catholic beliefs and the rediscovery of the gospel message by Martin Luther, and the Southern Methodists still preserved a good deal of that Anglican spirit. This meant that *The Upper Room* was a spiritual work which attempted to do justice both to the best parts of the Protestant understanding of the role of faith and grace in bringing us to salvation, and to the best parts of the Catholic understanding of how we continued our spiritual development past that point. The fact that it could speak effectively to Catholics as well as Protestants was vitally important, given that a hefty percentage of A.A.'s came from Roman Catholic backgrounds.

Also, Father Sam Shoemaker, the first important spiritual guide whom Bill Wilson went to, was an Anglican priest, which is another important reason why the A.A. formulation places so much emphasis on the warning in the letter of James that faith without works is dead, and that saving faith is most definitely NOT intellectual belief (no matter how emotionally held) in a detailed list of religious doctrines and dogmas. It is not clear why Father Shoemaker did not realize the destructiveness of trying to live by the Four Absolutes.

Nevertheless, both the Anglicans (traditionally at any rate) and the Southern Methodists (always and coming from the bottom of their guts) insisted that absolutist systems destroyed the principle of grace, and that any attempt to produce a soul change or psychic change by preaching an absolutist moral code would plunge people into depression, resentment, and hypocrisy. This was full-blown legalism and works righteousness of the most dangerous sort.

## **The grounds for Bill W.'s opposition to the Four Absolutes**

I have gone on at such length about this issue to try to make clear that my own opposition to the Four Absolutes (just like Bill Wilson's) is not just a matter of personal idiosyncrasy, and is most definitely *not* the attitude of some wishy-washy "liberal" (in either his case or mine) who wants to water down the requirements of the true preaching of the gospel because he is somehow or other "soft on sin" and searching for "the easier, softer way" by ignoring the clear pronouncements of holy scripture and a truly biblical faith. If one wishes to argue the issue in terms of good Christian theology, one must say that *on scriptural grounds* the teaching of the Four Absolutes as such is a total catastrophe, and a selling out of the true preaching of the gospel. Where does the true church exist? Where "the gospel is truly preached and the sacraments are duly administered." On the basis of both holy scripture and the true Christian tradition, people who claim to be Christian but teach the necessity of pursuing the Four Absolutes are not Christians at all, in spite of all their claims to the contrary, because they do not preach the true gospel which saves our souls.

In this case, Bill Wilson (and the overwhelming majority of A.A. people during the first thirty years) were on the side of the angels — if you are a Christian — when they declared that teaching the Four Absolutes was not just unwise, but was going to do real harm to innumerable alcoholics who took that idea too seriously. Even if many alcoholics can talk in terms of the Four Absolutes without going back to the bottle again — and all too many cannot — for all the others, it is going to have an extremely deleterious effect on their serenity. And the sad thing is these alcoholics make themselves miserable thinking that their devotion to these absolutist ideas proves how highly moral and dedicated they are. They are not bad people — quite the contrary — simply

people who fail to understand the way this kind of approach to spirituality blocks the full working of God's grace.

## CHAPTER 7

# The Names of God and God as Truth Itself

### The one absolute which cannot be discarded: Absolute Honesty

I have tried to be careful in what I said about the Four Absolutes, because although the four of them taken all together can lead people into a destructive kind of works righteousness, one of them does have to be separated off and given an absolute status in A.A. teaching. That exception — the one absolute that A.A. does seek — is Absolute Honesty.

Most of the world's religions and spiritual movements insist that people must first have a conversion experience, or first have faith in certain beliefs, before they can begin walking the path to salvation. In nineteenth century American frontier revivalism, for example, people were told that they had to accept Jesus Christ on faith as their personal Lord and Savior before they could take any other meaningful steps along the spiritual path.

The A.A. program is quite peculiar in that regard. The only thing it requires of us at the beginning is absolute honesty. "Those who do not recover are people who cannot or will not completely give themselves to this simple program, usually men and women

who are constitutionally incapable of being honest with themselves.”<sup>101</sup> We are not required to believe anything, or have a conversion experience, or go through any initiatory ritual like baptism or circumcision or sitting in a Native American sweat lodge.

In sorting through the Four Absolutes taught by the Oxford Group, the majority of early A.A.’s quickly begin to see problems with the other three absolutes, and any attempt to require absolute unselfishness, purity, or love. Or if not the A.A.’s, ask the Al-Anon’s how much trouble the attempt to practice absolute unselfishness got them into before they came into the Al-Anon program, and started learning about the principle of detachment with love! But the early A.A. people saw that absolute honesty had to be dealt with in an entirely different way. Until people became honest with themselves, they could get nowhere.

Now when we speak of Absolute Honesty, we should give warning here that we are only concerned with the conscious levels of the mind, and with areas of our lives which we know we have been told to look at by the program and by our sponsors. There are forms of denial involving subconscious components, however, which will require us to spend years in the program slowly working down through “the layers of the onion.” We will need to work downward progressively through each more deeply hidden stratum of denial, raising materials to conscious awareness which we had never been truly conscious of before. In that sense, in this world and this life, we will always be blithely unaware of the existence of some things in our mental makeup, so that our goal must be progress, not perfection.

But Absolute Honesty is in fact achievable at the conscious level of our minds, and twelve step people have to be warned that there can be no healing in their lives until they begin looking at

themselves sternly, and asking themselves repeatedly the same simple question. Is what I am saying to you and to myself really true? Is the belief upon which I am basing this decision an honest description of what is really so? Acting upon the basis of ideas which I know are not true is treachery to the principle of Absolute Honesty, but of equal importance, failure to even ask the question of truth in matters which are obviously of formative importance in my decision-making is culpable negligence that will prevent my recovery.

### **The four Names of God**

The early Christians of the first five centuries recognized that there were different names for God. We could say that God was (1) the glory and the holiness<sup>102</sup> revealed in the world of nature and in sacred places, (2) the holy spirit which was present “when two or three were gathered” in the divine name, and (3) the Good Itself. When twelve-step people refer to their higher power as the power of Nature or as the kind of feeling of the divine presence which Bill W. felt in Winchester Cathedral, or when they refer to their higher power as the spirit of the tables or as the principle of Good Orderly Direction, these words (taken in the context in which these terms are used in A.A. and Al-Anon) are simply modern translations and adaptations of those three early Christian names of God. In terms of the doctrinal standards of orthodox Christian belief during the early centuries, the A.A. versions are all three theologically correct and completely appropriate ways of practicing God consciousness and being immediately aware of the divine presence.

And there is one additional ancient traditional name for God which is especially important, because this one explains why

Absolute Honesty plays such an essential role in twelve step spirituality: (4) God is Truth Itself. We are told in the scriptures that “God is Spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” It also gives us the solemn promise that “you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”<sup>103</sup> Augustine, the great African saint, put this idea at the very center of his thought. His spiritual and philosophical writings were the most influential source of ideas (after the New Testament itself) for all of western Christianity, both Catholic and Protestant. Those who cannot be honest will never find the truth, and will never find the path of life.

## **1. The divine Glory and the experience of the Sacred**

Before discussing Augustine's concept in any detail, however, let us first look briefly at the other three Names of God, beginning with the idea of the glory and the holiness of God. In the Hebrew Bible, in the book of Isaiah (6:3), the prophet described a vision which he had had in King Solomon's Temple, where he saw the mighty angels who were called the Seraphim (the Burning Ones) flying about the Throne of God and singing the thrice-holy anthem:

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;  
the whole earth is full of his glory.

Different variations of this angelic song appear in a vast number of Jewish and Christian hymns and liturgical passages.

In this hymn we are told that God is holy (*qadosh*) and that his glory (*kabod*) fills all the earth. By the glory of God, we mean the holiness of the divine presence which shines out in all created

things. When we look at the starry heavens above or at the beauty of the spring flowers and feel a sense of something infinite and majestic somehow present, we are perceiving the glory of God. When we walk through the woods and hear the birds singing and feel the soft earth under our feet, and somehow feel our souls being restored to peace and harmony, we are allowing the glory and the holiness of God to heal us spiritually. When we look though a telescope at a distant galaxy, thousands of light years away, and realize that these stars and galaxies extend out for as far as we can observe, and suddenly feel a sense of incredible awe at this extraordinary universe we live in, we are sensing what the Bible called the glory of God. When we marvel at some of the extraordinary discoveries of modern science, such as what we now know about the strange world of atoms and atomic nuclei and the fundamental particles of which the universe is made, this sense of wonder which we feel is yet another way of sensing the glory of God.

When we are beginners in the spiritual life, let us not argue about what name to put on what we are sensing (such as whether we should call it God or Nature). The only question we should be asking at that stage is, can we *feel* the wonder and the awe and the majesty and the sense of the infinite?

Rudolf Otto, one of the two greatest Protestant theologians in the period right after the First World War, wrote a book called *The Idea of the Holy* in which he showed how the intuitive perception of what he called the holy (which he also referred to as the sacred or the numinous) lay at the basis of all the world's religions. It was a kind of feeling (German *Gefühl*), a kind of immediate awareness (Greek *aisthêsis*), an intuitive knowledge (German *Ahnung*) which was in some ways more like an aesthetic sense. It was of fundamental importance to note that it was not an

intellectualized concept (German *Begriff*).<sup>104</sup> Otto's work is still used as the basis of a good deal of the scholarship in comparative world religions to this day.<sup>105</sup> He said that the awareness of the sacred had to be added to the philosopher Kant's list of the fundamental categories of the human understanding, because it spoke of something real which human beings have been able to sense in the world around them at all times and in all cultures, and because it referred to a specific category of perceptions which could not be explained in terms of anything simpler. Otto said that this fundamental Kantian category (the numinous) could be schematized in three different ways: as the holy in the realm of spirituality and religion, as the sublime in the realm of aesthetics (matters concerning art and beauty), and as the transcendent good in the realm of ethics.

The important thing was that Otto demonstrated that this was what all religion was about, all over the world: teaching people how to encounter the sacred. Even religions which had no concept of God, such as we see in some of the religions of Asia and in certain Native American religions, nevertheless had a well developed concept of the holy or the sacred or the numinous.

The concept of the holy was an extremely important idea in eighteenth century evangelical thought. John Wesley in particular emphasized the need to learn how to become aware of the sacred dimension of reality in his sermons on spirituality. One of his most interesting comments in this area came in his discussion in one of his sermons of the Prayer Without Ceasing, which Christians are supposed to pray at all times (1 Thessalonians 5:17). The nature of this prayer had been much disputed within the Christian tradition. The Hesychast monks on Mount Athos in Greece, for example, had said that it was the Jesus Prayer ("Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner"). That has

continued to be one of the major traditions in the Eastern Orthodox Church. John Wesley however said that it was the Prayer of Moses in the book of Exodus (33:18), a simple prayer to God which said: “I beseech you, show me your glory.” Several verses earlier (in 33:11) it said in Exodus that “the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend.” Wesley said that developing this kind of God-consciousness was the goal of the spiritual life. We must learn to see God’s glory shining through in all things, and we must learn how to stand in the light of that glory and simply talk with God every day, in the way that we would talk with our best friend.

We often encounter people in the twelve step movement who have an impressive amount of serenity who say that they like to go out into the world of Nature and spend a quiet time as a kind of healing meditation. They say that they are using as their Higher Power what they feel when they are out in the woods and fields, surrounded by the trees and flowers and birds and animals.

John Wesley said that Nature was one of the important places where we could see the Glory and the Sacredness of the divine shining through with impressive clarity, and he also said that we should try to be aware of this at all times, because it would strengthen our spirits and comfort us and bring us peace. Jonathan Edwards also pointed out that learning to see the Sacred in the world of Nature would produce a fundamental change in the way we reacted to the world around us. Edwards said that he had once been afraid of thunderstorms, but that after he came to a deepening of his faith, he began to understand that this was an expression of the majesty of the sacred. From the perspective of a new and deeper understanding of God, he came to regard the blazing bolts of lightning and the mighty rumbling of the thunder as a glorious

tribute to the infinite power of God, and as a result, he came to delight in the same thunderstorms which he had once feared.

So using Nature as our higher power (in this kind of way) is a perfectly acceptable understanding of God, going back thousands of years in the Judeo-Christian tradition. This is simply listening to the Song of the Seraphim and taking it seriously.

### **Bill W.'s first conversion experience**

We can also sense the presence of the sacred in other kinds of contexts. Bill Wilson actually had two profound spiritual experiences at the end of 1934. One was the ecstatic vision of the great white light which Bill had in Towns Hospital in December, where he felt as though he was standing on a mighty mountain peak where the wind of the spirit blew.<sup>106</sup> But Bill said nothing at all about any kind of vision of light in the Big Book, although he did mention having an important spiritual revelation and feeling the wind of the spirit in the hospital while he was going through detoxification.<sup>107</sup> Instead he put the major emphasis upon an experience which happened to him shortly before that, in October of 1934. Ebby Thacher had come to visit Bill in his apartment, and Bill had been going on at great length about how foolish any kind of belief in a good and loving God seemed to him. Finally Ebby said to him, “Why don’t you choose your own conception of God?” Bill says that his reaction to that apparently simple question was extraordinary: “At long last I saw, I felt, I believed. Scales ... fell from my eyes.”<sup>108</sup>

Most Americans used to read the Bible regularly in those days, or at least hear stories and sayings read from it in church and Sunday school, so most of the early readers of the Big Book would have immediately understood the reference Bill made to scales

falling from his eyes. This was from the story of the apostle Paul's conversion experience on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:18). The use of this phraseology — “the scales fell from my eyes” — indicates that Bill Wilson is telling us that this was his truly important conversion experience. This was unambiguous and unmistakable to biblically knowledgeable readers from Protestant backgrounds in 1939.

We need to look carefully at what was going on at the feeling level in what Bill W. regarded as the crucial part of this experience. He tells us that right after Ebby spoke those words, “the real significance of my experience in the Cathedral burst upon me.” Years before, when he was a young soldier in England, standing inside Winchester Cathedral, he had encountered God and felt “the sense of His presence.” He suddenly remembered that feeling in the church sanctuary and understood that it had been something real. And it had been he who walked away from God at that point, not vice versa.<sup>109</sup>

What he had felt in that Cathedral was the awareness of the holy. He also remembered feeling that sense of the holy or the sacred — although in a different kind of way — when he had sat as a child *outside* the church building and heard the voice of the preacher from a distance. The point Bill was making there was that it was not necessary to be inside a church building and be a church member in order to intuit the presence of the sacred dimension of reality. He spoke also about his grandfather, who had always insisted that this sense of the sacred which one could feel listening to the service in a little New England Congregationalist church was the same thing that he felt when he looked up at the stars at night, and became aware of the marvelous harmony of nature. And the advantage of doing it that way, outside the church, as his grandfather had pointed out to him, was

that the preacher could not tell you how you were supposed to interpret what you were feeling!

This concept was so important to Bill W. that he introduced it into another story in the Big Book. He told about the alcoholic who was totally hostile to all spiritual concepts, and who was getting nowhere in the program until he was suddenly hit with a thought, “Who are you to say there is no God?” With this there came to him, Bill said, “a conviction of the Presence of God” which was an immediate and direct intuitive awareness of the sacred realm, similar to Bill’s experience in Winchester Cathedral. This story goes on to say that the man, using this human ability to sense the presence of the sacred and the holy, finally “stepped from bridge to shore,” and was able to set foot upon the land of faith.<sup>110</sup>

Bill W. also introduced this idea at an early point in the chapter to the agnostic.<sup>111</sup> Even the most skeptical atheists and agnostics who came into the early A.A. program had to admit that there had been moments when they were, for example, “enchanted by a starlit night.” And for a moment, “there was a feeling of awe and wonder,” even if “it was fleeting and soon lost.” That was the primordial awareness of the sacred and the holy, upon which is built, in one way or another, all the religions of the world. That is because this kind of experience is one which is common to the entire human race, and has been sensed and felt in all the nations of the world at all points in human history. Everyone can learn to feel it and be aware of it.

So we need to be very much aware that in what Bill Wilson said was his real conversion experience, what finally brought him to faith was learning how to sense the feeling of the sacred and the holy and use it to strengthen and empower his soul. This was what was meant by “God-consciousness.” The angels had sung that the glory of the divine holiness filled all the earth, so practicing

continual God-consciousness (as the early A.A. people stressed) was an attempt to be aware that *all* of reality was sacred. I am surrounded by the sacred right this moment, wherever I am, just as though I were standing in a church or temple. The ultimate sacred dimension of reality is right here with me, and all around me, and if I pay attention, I can feel this numinous presence in everything I can see and hear and touch.

It does not matter whether we call it “God” or the holy or the sacred or the numinous. All human languages have had a word for it: it was *qadosh* in ancient Hebrew, *hagios* in ancient Greek, *sacer* or *sanctus* in Latin, *tabu* in Polynesian, and *manitou* in the Algonquian language spoken by the Potawatomi tribe who live in my part of the United States, just to give a few examples. The name we put on it is not terribly important. Intellectual theories about it are not all that useful. What is vital however is that we learn how to actually feel it and experience it.

This is good eighteenth-century evangelical theology. This is what John Wesley called learning to pray the Prayer Without Ceasing, and what Jonathan Edwards called learning to feel “the excellency of the things of God,” which he described as the heart of the conversion experience. Learning to sense the infinite power and majesty of the sacred — whether in the world of Nature, or in a church or mosque or temple, *or while attending a deeply spiritual A.A. or Al-Anon group meeting* — is at the very core of traditional A.A. and Al-Anon spirituality.

## 2. The Spirit

What twelve step people call the spirit of the tables is what the Hebrew Bible calls the Spirit of God (God’s power in action, breathing life into Adam, and calling up leaders like Deborah and

Saul to save the people of Israel, and speaking through the prophets), and what the New Testament calls the Holy Spirit. In the ancient Catholic and Orthodox creeds, the section which speaks of the work of the Holy Spirit links it especially with “the communion of the saints,” that is, with the divine spirit which binds the hearts of believers together and transforms them into a holy fellowship capable of transcending space and time and even death itself. The Father is God in his infinite transcendence and unknowability; the Holy Spirit is the same God, the one God, active here on earth in ways that we can immediately sense and feel within our hearts.

In the twelve step program, learning to feel the spirit of the tables means developing an awareness of the powerful spiritual reality which is present in a good twelve-step meeting, a kind of spiritual current running through all the people gathered together, connecting their hearts and spirits into a unity, and creating a spiritual force far greater by many magnitudes than the additive sum of the prayers of the individual people present could ever accomplish. The three greatest gifts of the spirit — faith, hope, and love — are obtainable only when the spirit truly fills our hearts, for good Catholic theology and good evangelical theology both teach us that these are not natural human abilities but gifts of grace.<sup>112</sup>

John Wesley especially stressed this point and went on to say that whenever we saw people (of any religious background or no religion at all) who had learned to genuinely love others, and who had demonstrated that they could teach other people to love their fellow human beings, this was proof positive that the grace of God and the Holy Spirit had been at work. In this fallen world, there was no other way that they could have learned how to do that — this ability was totally lost to the human race as a natural power

after Adam and Eve’s fall from grace — so our job as servants of God was to honor these love-filled people and defend them against attack, as fellow servants of the true God. And Wesley insisted that this applied, whether they were Protestants or Catholics, Jews or Muslims, or even skeptics and freethinkers. We had to respect them and come to their aid if other people attacked them, or we ourselves were fighting against God and rejecting God’s decision as to where he wished to send his grace.

Although the fourth chapter of 1 John did not show up explicitly on any of the early A.A. reading lists, it was nevertheless (just like the Sermon on the Mount, the letter of James, and 1 Corinthians 13) frequently quoted from by early A.A. spiritual teachers. 1 John 4 speaks very powerfully about the relationship between God, Love, and the Spirit:

Love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for *God is love* .... No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, *because he has given us of his Spirit*.<sup>113</sup>

Even newcomers who cannot sense the divine presence in any other kind of context can often feel the spirit of the tables. One of the great old timers in my part of the country, Ellen Lantz, said that “you can just feel love.” And so the twelve step people tell these beginners that if they wish to, they can take the spirit of the tables — the love which they can feel within the fellowship — for their higher power.

This was St. Augustine’s contribution to the development of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity: when we talk about real love and when we talk about the presence of the divine Spirit, we are

talking about the same thing. The spirit, Augustine said, is the Love which binds the other two members of the Trinity together, the dynamic energy and will which empowers the Godhead.<sup>114</sup> It is the infinite divine well of energy from which all the other energy in the universe derives its being.

When the great Italian Renaissance poet Dante describes his vision of the eternal sunlight of the spirit in the concluding lines of his *Paradiso*, he follows this Augustinian concept of God, and says that the divine Love (which shines forth in that eternal light) energizes and gives guidance, not just to the souls of good men and women, but in fact to all the universe:

*Ma già volgeva il mio disio e 'l velle,  
sì come rota ch'igualmente è mossa,  
l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle.*

But already it turned my desire and my freely given will,  
like a wheel evenly put in motion:  
the Love which moves the sun and other stars.

So even in the most impeccably orthodox traditional Christian theology, it does no harm at all for laypeople who are new to the faith to take as their God the holy spirit which is showering them with all-accepting love and creating the first new glimmers of real love within their own hearts. God is love, and the spirit of the tables is God's love in action: *l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle*, "the Love which moves the sun and all the other stars."

### **3. The Good Itself and the Moral Law**

What A.A. people call living in the sunlight of the spirit is exactly the same as the ancient concept of living in the sunlight of

the Good Itself. This idea went back to the ancient Greek philosopher Plato who wrote at the beginning of the fourth century B.C. In his *Republic*, he told a tale called the Parable of the Cave.<sup>115</sup> Imagine, he said, a group of human beings who had been chained from birth in a dark cave, so that they could only look in one direction, towards one wall. Behind these prisoners was a large fire, and walking between the flames and the captives' backs were other people holding up various pieces of wood and other materials shaped like human beings and animals and ducks and trees and so on, so that the shadows of these objects were cast as black silhouettes against the wall the prisoners were compelled to gaze at.

Since all they had ever seen were the shadows of these objects (and their own shadows intermingled with them) the people in chains believed that this was the real world which they apprehended. If somehow two or three of these prisoners managed to free themselves from their chains and discover a way out of the cave, it would take time for their eyes to get used to the intensity of the light outside the cave, but they would gradually begin to realize that the real world was not the sad, two-dimensional world of black and white stereotypes which they used to live in, but this marvelous realm they now saw, made up of three-dimensional objects in brilliant colors and textures. Now they was no longer looking just at shadows of models of real things, but at the real things themselves.

In Plato's explanation of this extended metaphor, the world of the shadows is the place where most human beings live. It is a realm of *doxa*, mere "opinion" — a Greek noun that comes from the verb *dokeō*, which means to suppose or imagine, to seem so, or merely appear so. And we also must not forget another Greek noun which came from the same verbal root, the word *dogma*,

meaning an arbitrarily decreed doctrine set forth by some authority figure whom we were never allowed to question or challenge.<sup>116</sup>

The shadow world is therefore the mental realm of denial, illusion, and introjected parental admonitions (Freud's superego) simply accepted as dogmatic truths about the world: "Good boys always do this, and good girls never do that." "Are you going to let him get away with talking to you that way?" "You're stupid and clumsy, you'll never make good." We perpetuate the shadow realm when, as a member of a dysfunctional family, we maintain the family lie by refusing to talk about or acknowledge in any way what really happens in our family.<sup>117</sup> We strut about pompously trying to make our shadows appear bigger than other people's. We torture ourselves about shadows from the past, or throw ourselves into frenzied panic as our overactive imaginations project baleful shadows into the future. Some of the shadows are truly nightmarish boogiemens, with long teeth and claws and knives and instruments of torture. In the real world, we fail over and over again to accomplish what we set out to do, because no matter how carefully we analyze the shadows and no matter how hard we try to control these fleeting images, we end up grasping nothing, and we cannot discover why.

The shadowy realm of the cave is a world of black and white, like one of the old black-and-white American cowboy movies where the hero (who is absolutely pure and can do no wrong) always wears a white cowboy hat, while the villain (who is absolutely bad through and through) always wears a black cowboy hat. The leaders among the cave dwellers enjoy inventing hundreds of complicated so-called moral and religious rules, and telling the other people in chains that if they violate even a single one of these rigid dogmas, that they will be automatically blackened by sin to the core and become completely evil. All the

dogmas invented by these authoritarian leaders — all their legalistic “shoulds” and “oughts” — are regarded as *absolute* and their followers are ordered to follow them to the letter, blindly and mechanically, and without a single failure or omission, no matter how small.

Up above in the real world, on the other hand, we behold things by the light of the sun up in the sky. Plato said that the sun stood metaphorically for “the idea of the Good,” that which enables us to see what is right and beautiful, to recognize truth and intelligible meaning, and to act in a manner which is sane and sensible.<sup>118</sup> We observe the vision of the Good being apprehended in a very pure (although extremely primitive) fashion in very young infants, who see the world around them with awed and delighted fascination, and attempt to grasp it and taste it in eager curiosity and sheer joy.

The goal of good education is to inform this primitive vision of the Good while still retaining its openness and spirit of eager delight in the world. In some areas the infants’ parents do need to teach them that certain things are dangerous to explore (for example, no matter how fascinating the electrical plug is, trying to pull it out of the wall outlet may seriously injure or kill a crawling child). In other areas, children need to learn about levels of goodness that require more knowledge and intellectual structuring in order to be appreciated, which is one of the things that higher education accomplishes (in literature, art, music, science, and so on).

Plato pointed out that young people particularly find it especially difficult to rise above the gross physical level when it comes to appreciating goodness, and then only in rather spotty fashion in certain restricted areas of their lives. Johnnie wants to go out with Margie because Margie has beautiful hair and a good

figure; Margie in turn wants to go out with Johnnie because he has a nice car, and clothes that match all the current teenage fads. This is a crudely materialistic approach to life, which will never bring ultimate happiness, because it is blind to all the higher kinds of goodness. Even as adults, many people never rise much above the ability to appreciate the goodness of certain kinds of material things like automobiles, houses, clothes, and so on. So they are consciously aware of only tiny fragments of the goodness which surrounds them. At the very least, this gravely limits their lives and their enjoyment. Unfortunately, it is also usually apt to cause them to act in ways which are both self-destructive and destructive to others, because they fail to see the higher kinds of goodness in the world around them, and go around destroying good things without ever being consciously aware at the time of all the horrendous damage they are doing. At the end they are left crying out piteously, “Why is my life so terrible? I never did anything wrong.”

But good education, along with experience, can teach us to expand our horizons and learn how to enjoy kinds of goodness that we were previously blind to. We can learn to appreciate good music and art and literature, and the fascination of ideas, and we can learn how to delight in the pure joy of learning itself. We can above all learn how to recognize what Plato called “justice,” the difference between right and wrong at a higher level, which appears only when we look at issues in the Light of the Good.

The Platonic tradition particularly stressed one aspect of this metaphor of the sun and the cave. If we try to look directly at the sun, its light is so intense that it blinds us. The way we ordinarily determine whether we are outside in the sunshine (rather than being someplace in the dark) is not to look directly at the sun, but to look around and see if we can clearly distinguish other objects

around us. If we look around and see green trees, and blue ripples on the surface of the nearby river, and red geraniums growing in a flowerbed nearby, then we know that we are in the sunlight. If we see only darkness around us, then we know that we have lost the sunlight.

In medieval Jewish, Christian, and Islamic theology all three, it was believed that the Good of which Plato spoke was the supreme higher power whom the people of the book call God. His goodness is so bright that no human being can gaze on it without being blinded, so that it is impossible to paint a picture of what God looks like, or form any image in our minds of exactly what he is. But I know that God is present in my own personal mental world, first of all, whenever I can look around me and see a world filled with things that are so good and beautiful that I am overcome with gratitude.

Those on the other hand who have left the sunlight of the spirit, and instead gone as far as possible into the darkness, see a world around them that is full of evil, failure, futility, hate, resentment, pain, and confusion. They are no longer able to feel true good-hearted joy and delight at anything. The closest they can feel to this is an evil delight at defeating someone else, or doing someone else harm — a sick kind of pleasure (*Schadenfreude* in German) which will only lead us further and further into the realm of darkness.

Ancient and medieval Jewish, Christian, and Muslim philosophers were therefore in total agreement that the transcendent divine power which Plato called the Good Itself was the one whom they called God or Allah. Anyone who looked carefully could see that Plato, Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed were all talking about the same higher power. God IS the sunlight of the spirit and the Light of the Good, for this has been — for well over

two thousand years now — one of the traditional orthodox Names of God.

In the eighteenth century, the founders of the modern evangelical movement simply continued this orthodox Christian tradition. John Wesley, for example, taught Greek and Roman classics and early Christian theology at Oxford University, and was not only intimately familiar with all of these traditional orthodox ways of talking about God, but continually made reference to them in his works. Wesley's own stated definition of faith, based on Hebrews 11:1 and repeated over and over in his writings, was that faith was an intuitive awareness (partly analogous to but different from sense perception) of God himself in his light, glory, grace, forgiveness, and love.<sup>119</sup> One of Jonathan Edwards' most important works was a little piece called "A Divine and Supernatural Light," where he says that salvation comes from an intuition (an immediate moral/aesthetic awareness or "sense" rather than a rational demonstration) of the divine "excellency."<sup>120</sup> This is exactly what an ancient Platonist would have called the transcendental intuition of God as the Good and the Beautiful.<sup>121</sup> It was simply a rewriting, in eighteenth century language, of St. Augustine's medieval Catholic doctrine of illuminationism, the idea that we come to see the truths which save our souls only when God shines the sunlight of the spirit on us and in our lives and hearts. God's act of grace suddenly breaks through the darkness and spotlights a vital insight (about the nature of life and love and good and evil) which I needed to learn in order to be saved and grow spiritually.

"The divine and supernatural light" which saves us (in eighteenth century evangelical theology) is exactly the same thing as "the sunlight of the spirit" in the language of the modern twelve step program, that is, it is God himself shining his eternal light on

us and showing us what is truly good. So people in A.A. and Al-Anon and the other twelve step fellowships who wish to take this as their way of thinking about their higher power are perfectly justified in doing so.

## **The Moral Law as the face of God unveiled**

One of the things which the divine light reveals is the universal moral law, which people in A.A. and Al-Anon call the principle of Good Orderly Direction. John Wesley in the eighteenth century described that universal moral law as “the face of God unveiled.” It was at the very center of his evangelical theology, as we can see from his sermons on the law in his *Standard Sermons*. This law, he said, was the revelation to human beings of God’s heart. It was a picture of God, and it described who God really was: God was the one who created a universe in which human beings find their greatest fulfilment in acting morally and with love towards one another. In ancient Greek this universal principle was called the Nomos or Logos, that is, the divine Law or Meaning of life.

Wesley learned Spanish when he came to Savannah, Georgia, so he could discuss theology with the members of the Spanish Jewish community there, and was fully aware that what he was calling the moral law (the face of God unveiled, God as he may be known by human beings) was what the Jewish rabbis called the eternal Torah which the Holy One created before he began creating any of the rest of the universe, and used as a sort of architectural blueprint for its design. It was the Meaning and Purpose of the universe. This meant that when we were living in harmony with the eternal Torah or universal moral law, we were automatically living in harmony with the universe as God had created it to be,

and also living in harmony with ourselves and the way that we would find our own greatest human fulfillment, because we were created by God too.

The Law of God (the true meaning of the universe) was therefore not an externally imposed rule which was laid upon us by an external authority figure, but the true principle of our ownmost being, that which lay within us at the core of our being and made us authentically human. Each human being is a unique hypostasis or personification of the meaning of the universe, so each of us has his or her own natural focus in life, representing our own highly individualistic roles within that universal context of meaning. A young woman in A.A., Trina D., puts this very simply by saying “I am an extension of God’s intention.” Therefore, as St. Maximus the Confessor taught back in seventh-century Africa, the natural unfallen human will always automatically wills God’s will, because it is our own true will also.<sup>122</sup> (We are using the term “will” here in the sense of the Greek word *thelêma*, which means the human ability to want, wish, desire, intend, mean, decide, or choose one thing rather than another.)

Therefore all I really need to do to please God is just to be myself — but to be myself as I truly am, not the way my dysfunctional family or the corrupt civilization around me tells me to be. All I genuinely have to do to follow God’s will in my life is to find once again the true inner core of the human personality, the little Child of God within me who is made in the Image of God, and then simply do what comes naturally and follow my true inner self.<sup>123</sup>

Now as John Wesley in particular attempted to make especially clear, the universal moral law (Good Orderly Direction) is not itself God. It is part of the created realm. It is merely an image of God, not God as he is in himself. It exists only in the

human mind, as an attempt by my mind to form an image of God. But we must remember that all good philosophical theologians in the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions have always agreed that the finite human mind cannot grasp or understand what God is in himself in any literal sense, because God in his essence is infinite and above all human concepts and attempts to rationalize the universe. Therefore we are forced to use symbols, images, and metaphors if we are to speak of God at all. What Wesley insisted however — and I believe that he is completely correct in this — is that the universal moral law (Good Orderly Direction) is the most profound and the most helpful image of God which we possess.

If I were asked how I would try to describe some other human being (such as my wife or my father or a close friend) in the fullest and deepest kind of way, I would not waste any time on describing that individual's physical attributes, such as how tall the person is, or the color of the person's hair, or the shape of the person's nose or chin. I would attempt to describe that person's moral character, using phrases like "kind and decent and has a heart of gold," "dependable and trustworthy and someone you can count on when you're in a jam," "treats everybody with equal respect, from the highest to the lowest," and other statements like that. This gives us the true shape of that man's or woman's personality, who that person really is down at the core.

So when we say that "all" we can know about God is not a scientific explanation of how God creates things or where God is or what God looks like — that is, even if we were to say that "all" we can learn to know about God is the universal moral law (the principles of Good Orderly Direction) — this means that what we do know about God is *who God is* in the most important way of all, that is, who God is in terms of his personality and character. *God is he who asks us to treat other human beings with dependable,*

*trustworthy, compassionate loving kindness.* And that is a truly extraordinary higher power, one to whom we can turn without fear, and call upon to heal our spirits and lead us into the realm of the Eternal Love and Light “which moves the sun and all the other stars.”

Now someone might ask, when we speak of this sort of moral law as something which we should strive to follow, are we not falling into legalism and works righteousness once again? The answer to this is no, on two different grounds. God loves us just as we are, so we are not being told that we have to act this way in order to earn God’s love. If we want to be happier, then the universal moral law describes the kind of life that we need to start leading, but we will be doing that for ourselves — because we ourselves want our lives to be more enjoyable, and are tired of being angry and miserable — and not because we are afraid of God rejecting us. God will then help us lead that higher and finer kind of life, because he loves us and wants to see us happy, and delights in giving us gifts.

And furthermore, we are not being asked to follow hundreds of mechanical rules, but to study such things as the spirit of Paul’s description of love in 1 Corinthians 13, as well as some of the stories which Jesus told, like the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37) and the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32), and the story of the way God guided Abraham through the trackless desert and later sent Moses to lead the Israelites out of captivity in Egypt, to give a few examples from the Christian and Jewish traditions. We are then being asked to try to bring this general spirit of love, faithfulness, tolerance, forgiveness, and helpfulness into our own lives. This kind of love can and will break any legalistic rules which stand in the way of giving compassionate help to others.

This is what the letter of James calls the Law of Liberty (James 2:12). Following the Law of Liberty, the apostle James says, is the opposite of being *diakrinomenos*, which means being judgmental towards other people, where I show partiality towards some (the wealthy and successful and well-dressed and “proper” people, perhaps) on the basis of some kind of discriminatory and condemnatory set of principles, while criticizing everybody else and putting them down (James 2:2-4). Complicated legalistic law codes are always set up to mechanically condemn certain groups of people while paying no attention to them as individuals, and showing no feeling for their pain and suffering, and making no recognition of their limitations and what they really are (and are not) able to do at this point in their lives. The Law of Liberty however is the royal law — God’s own law — of showing kindness, tolerance, forgiveness, and above all, mercy. “Judgment is without mercy towards the one who shows no mercy; mercy however turns judgment to ashes” (James 2:13).

When newcomers to the twelve step program take the idea of Good Orderly Direction as their higher power, and interpret this concept with tolerance, compassion, and mercy towards all, they are taking the highest and greatest image of God as the focus of their lives, which is not only good evangelical theology, but would have been recognized for the past two thousand years, by the best theologians and philosophers among the Jews, the Christians, and the Muslims all three, as an extremely good and effective starting point when beginning the spiritual life. Taking the idea of Good Orderly Direction as our higher power means truly turning our eyes towards God, even if at the beginning of our path we do not recognize him yet as God. That is perfectly all right. He recognizes us, which is all that is important, and delights in his heart at our salvation.

## 4. The Truth Itself

Now we come to the Name of God which is the most important one for the purpose of this chapter: God is the Truth Itself. St. Augustine in particular made this central to his understanding of God. In ancient Greek, the verbal root *lêthô* meant to escape, to go unseen or unnoticed. The noun *lêthê*, which came from this same root, meant forgetfulness or oblivion. The Greeks put the privative prefix *a* in front of this root, equivalent to putting “un” or “not” in front of a word, to produce their word for truth, which was *alêtheia*. So the Greek word for truth literally meant “no longer allowed to go unseen or forgotten.” It was an action word, which meant the uncovering of that which was hidden.<sup>124</sup>

Augustine said that it was this word which described God’s saving act, which snatched us back from the path to destruction. The truths that would save us were invariably buried under denial, lies, and confusion. When the divine light shone, the coverings were stripped away, and the truth of our lives (and the fundamental truths of the universe) came into view in a moment of saving *insight*. This is referred to in books on the history of philosophy as Augustine’s doctrine of illuminationism. As we have already seen, the co-founder of the modern evangelical movement, Jonathan Edwards, put this doctrine at the very center of his system also, as seen particularly in his little piece called “A Divine and Supernatural Light,” where he said that the conversion experience itself, where we are changed by grace, is an act of illumination by God’s eternal light, the sunlight of the spirit.<sup>125</sup>

Sgt. Bill S., the best spokesman from the early A.A. period for that branch of the movement which preferred to interpret the

twelve steps in mostly psychological terms, said that “alcoholism is a disease of perception,” a phrase which we still hear in A.A. today.<sup>126</sup> Alcoholics look at the world around them from a perspective which distorts everything they see and feel and hear. Alcoholics seethe with injured feelings as they say things to themselves such as: “This person deliberately did that to hurt me.” “Because my spouse does not cater to my every demand instantly and unflinchingly, and does not read my mind in advance as to what I will want, my spouse is a terrible person.” “It was totally unfair for the boss to fire me simply because I was coming to work drunk all the time.” They fall into unbelievable grandiosity when they say to themselves: “I am a great genius who is going to make a million dollars with this marvelous scheme I have.” “The only reason I am not a world famous musician [novelist, race car driver, movie actress, or what have you] is because I have just had a little bit of bad luck.” They can get in especially bad trouble when they begin telling themselves: “I can lick anybody in this bar.” Or they fall into total despair as they say to themselves: “I am no good. I am a failure. I will never achieve anything. I will fail at everything I try to do. Life is not worth living any longer.” Fearful and resentful phrases like these all arise from a distorted perception of the world.

In order to perceive the world around us at all, the human mind has to construct a cognitive framework, which takes every piece of information coming in through the five senses, and assigns each piece of information to one or another of the pigeonholes created by that framework in the person’s mind. In other words, the new piece of information is given a label of one sort or another. This mental framework can make very prejudicial judgments, because all too often it tells us, prior to any investigation, that it is “obvious” that this kind of information is vitally important, but this

other kind of information can be totally ignored. And it can do even more dangerous things. This cognitive framework also prestructures each piece of information *in advance* in terms of the way it will be fit in with the other things we know, or think we know. So the boss simply says, “you need to put those screws in a fraction of an inch deeper,” but if I have an alcoholic perception of the world, my mind may label this instantly under the category “deliberate insult,” in a cognitive framework where I believe that if I do not respond with instant anger and aggression at any “attempt to insult me,” I will be labeled a spineless wimp and stomped into the ground by all the people around me who sense my weakness and vulnerability.

Alcoholics look at the world around them through a cognitive framework which not only distorts everything that they hear and see, but also blocks out any possibility of hearing or seeing anything that might make them aware of how wrong their ideas about the world are. They live in continual denial because the cognitive framework of their minds will usually not allow any negative counter information to pass through to the judgment centers of their brains. On the rare occasion when a piece of information manages to get through which would raise questions about the truth of their preconceived ideas about the world, this same cognitive framework supplies them with a ready made set of alibis and excuses for “explaining all that away.”

One of the reasons alcoholics have to “hit bottom” is because the weight of counter information must finally become great enough to force that distorted cognitive framework to totally collapse. The realities of the mess I have made out of my life have to finally become huge enough to cause all the alibis and excuses to collapse and fall apart. And Al-Anons and people in all of the other twelve step programs likewise have to do some version of

hitting bottom, of getting to the point where their lives are falling apart, and they finally realize that they can go on no longer, because their old ways of thinking about the world do not work any longer.

But then we must receive a new vision of life, built on new principles of perception and behavior. We have to “reframe” our perceptions of the world, as the cognitive therapists put it. Otherwise we will simply commit suicide or go hopelessly insane at that point. And that is where the divine illumination comes in. The Light of God, as the Truth Itself, has to shine on our souls and show us how to form a different kind of cognitive framework to structure our thoughts and perceptions. As it says in the letter of James (1:5), “If any of you are lacking in wisdom, ask God who gives to all, without lying to you and without blaming you, and it will be given to you.” And how does God give us this gift of his grace? As it says in James 1:17-18,

Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of Lights, with whom there is no change [in his light] or turning away into shadow. In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the Word of Truth [*logô alêtheias*].

## **Being Itself**

There is another Name of God which at first glance appears to be yet a fifth and different name. St. Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century said that the only literal statement we could make about God was that he was Being Itself, and he built his great theological system on this idea. But what Aquinas meant by the term “Being Itself” was almost identical to what St. Augustine called Truth Itself. Aquinas argued that his terminology was more

accurate, but what was mostly going on here was that he was using the word truth in its Latin sense (*verum*), where truth was the adequation of the mind of the knower to the thing known, while Augustine was using the word truth in its Greek sense (*alêtheia*), where truth was the unveiling of that which had been hidden or forgotten or buried in pathological denial. If one used the word “truth” in the way that Aquinas did, one could argue that it was better to choose Being rather than Truth as the central theological focus, but this seems to me to have been more an argument over words than anything else.

In the early twentieth century, Thomas Aquinas’s theology was used as the basis of all Roman Catholic education, from parochial schools to universities. Two Roman Catholic scholars from that century give us particular help in understanding Aquinas’s concept of Being Itself. The works of the Thomistic scholar Etienne Gilson are especially useful in explaining the concept in its original medieval context, while the philosopher Bernard Lonergan, in his book *Insight*, does an especially good job of showing (in modern English and American philosophical terms) what the connection is between Being Itself and the act of insight in which the human mind discovers truth.<sup>127</sup>

Although we run into the idea of Being Itself in the modern period primarily in Roman Catholic theology, there have also been Protestant versions. The Lutheran theologian Paul Tillich, who was one of the greatest theologians of the twentieth century, took the Thomistic concept of God as Being Itself and put it into the context of modern existentialist philosophy.<sup>128</sup> In his theology, the act of Being Itself is that act of new insight in which I learn to reframe the world around me in a new and different way, which will give new meaning to my life when everything I held dear seems to have been destroyed or to have ended in futility. This

gives me a new mental framework for deciding what is true and what is false, and allows New Being to appear when my life seems to be plummeting into the abyss of Non-Being. It is of interest to note, from an A.A. perspective, that Tillich taught at Union Theological Seminary in New York City at the same time as Reinhold Niebuhr, the author of the Serenity Prayer.

## **Truth and Absolute Honesty**

Since understanding what is meant by the concept of Being is usually not part of the intellectual framework of people in the modern English-speaking world, it seems to me however that it is far more useful to go back to St. Augustine's original formulation, where God was linked to the unveiling of truths which had been hidden.

This is especially so because the spirituality of the Big Book owes more to the theology of St. Augustine than to almost any other source. In fact, for western theology of all sorts, both Roman Catholics and Protestants of all varieties (including the eighteenth century evangelicals and especially Lutherans like Frank Buchman, the founder of the Oxford Group), St. Augustine has been by far the most important source of spiritual concepts outside of the Bible itself. So we see the great Augustinian catch phrases and technical terms appearing over and over again in the A.A. Big Book.

Why do people find it so hard to admit the truth? Augustine pondered this at the end of his *Confessions*. If this is what would save our lives, why did people struggle so hard to resist knowing the truth? He came to the conclusion that it was because they were so filled with pride that they could not stand to admit that they had been wrong, even literally to save their lives. So we human beings

find ourselves in a position where foolish pride will put us in chains, while the truth will set us free.

Again and again we read in the Big Book that pride is at the root of most of the things we human beings do when we are engaged in the deeds which load our minds with unbearable fear and resentment. The *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* likewise says that there may be Seven Mortal Sins, but pride is by far the most important of them, and tends to become worked into the fabric of the other six vices in ways that make them far worse and even more difficult to remove.

Pride leads us to destruction, St. Augustine said, but the truth will save us and put us back on the path to healing and the saving of our souls. Therefore, as we read in the Big Book, before we can work the twelve step program effectively we have to give up our foolish pride and surrender to the truth. We have to begin by admitting that we had been wrong, in terms of the principles upon which we had tried to live our lives. We have to make a fourth step, as a beginning exercise in confronting hard truth. A fourth step in which I gloss over some of the most embarrassing things in my life with various kinds of dishonest attempts at self-justification is totally useless. (But we must give a warning here: it is also true that listing only the bad things in my self-inventory does not become the truth, the full truth, and nothing but the truth, until I also include an honest account of my genuine good points also. Partial truth is often not truth at all, but the most destructive of all lies.)

When we begin to understand that God is Truth Itself, it makes it so much clearer why the Big Book said that honesty was the gateway which led into the true spiritual path, and why it said that failure to be honest with ourselves would inevitably doom us.

We remember the ringing words from the beginning of the chapter on “How It Works”:

Rarely have we seen a person fail who has thoroughly followed our path. Those who do not recover are people who cannot or will not completely give themselves to this simple program, usually men and women who are constitutionally incapable of being honest with themselves .... They are naturally incapable of grasping and developing a manner of living which demands rigorous honesty.

Notice the unequivocal nature of that statement. This is a spiritual way of life “which demands rigorous honesty.” It breaks with the way the Big Book usually speaks, and does not “suggest” but *demand*s. It does not say that we can be halfway honest, but that we must practice *rigorous* honesty — strict, exact, uncompromising honesty. The truth shall set us free. God is the power of truth, while the Devil is the father of lies. Honesty is the gateway through which we must pass before we can begin walking the path that leads to salvation. The attempt to practice absolute honesty at all times is also what will keep us from wandering off that path further down the way.

### **A.A.’s great debt to the Oxford Group**

What did A.A. inherit from the Oxford Group? Many things, but let us especially note the importance of this principle of Honesty as the gateway to the path to glory. The place where V. C. Kitchen was forced to change his attitude about the Oxford Group was the point, during the first house party he attended, where he and another member sat down in the hotel lobby to talk, and the other man told Kitchen honestly about himself. And Kitchen was

ashamed, because he could not make himself speak the truth about himself that evening. But he came back for a second house party, and after it was over, he sat down on a sofa with his wife and began speaking the truth to her for the first time in their marriage. He talks about the incredible sense of release and freedom which this brought: it felt, he said, as though “some forty thousand pounds had rolled from our shoulders.”

The idea of making restitution or making amends was central to Oxford Group spirituality. If we look at the lives of both Frank Buchman (the founder of the Oxford Group) and Father Samuel Shoemaker (the head of its American branch) we see that the act of going to the people against whom they held such great resentments and apologizing and admitting their own wrongdoing, was the great spiritual breakthrough which brought them into the new way of life. A basic part of making amends in this way is simply *admitting the truth*, not only to God, but even more importantly to ourselves, and most importantly of all, to those whom we had so deeply resented. The truth we try to evade is that, regardless of what the other person did, we too were in the wrong before it was all over. But until we do that, we are not practicing absolute honesty. We are not telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. We are telling ourselves the partial truth which can so often be the greatest of all dishonesties.

What did A.A. and the later twelve step movement inherit from the Oxford Group? Perhaps the most important thing of all was the recognition that trying to practice absolute honesty in all things was the only way that a real soul change could ever be produced. But this meant that those who were willing to surrender to the truth, and to get honest with themselves and with other people, would receive as their reward a kind of soul change which brought with it “a new freedom and a new happiness,”<sup>129</sup> the life of

heaven brought down to earth, surpassing anything they could ever have imagined experiencing in this world and this life. This most especially is what the Oxford Groupers gave to the twelve step movement, and for that all those whose lives have been saved by the steps must be eternally grateful.

## NOTES

1. CHAPTER 1: V[ictor] C[onstant] Kitchen, *I Was a Pagan* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1934). Page references to that book refer to the second American printing of the first edition, giving first the chapter number and then the page number, followed (in parentheses) by the page number in the edition available on the internet at [www.stepstudy.org](http://www.stepstudy.org). So for example, the reference at the beginning of the next endnote, which is 12.123-124 (66-67), is to *I Was a Pagan*, Chapter 12, pages 123-124 in the first edition, which corresponds to pages 66-67 in the version available on the internet.

2. Kitchen 12.123-124 (66-67), with additional details being provided by his obituary in the *New York Times*, January 30, 1975, p. 37: "KITCHEN — Victor Constant, son of the late Dr. and Mrs. J. M. W. Kitchen of East Orange, N.J., born New York City, April 9, 1891, died at home in Cabool, Missouri, Jan. 29, 1975. Husband of Elsie Rodman Kitchen, father of Beverly K. Almond of Bloomfield, N.J., Myra K. Prindle, Redding, Conn., Hope K. Ayer, Cabool. Nine grandchildren and five great-grandchildren. Attended Carteret Academy, East Orange High School, Stevens Institute of Technology, Columbia School of Journalism. Advertising executive, Doyle, Kitchen & McCormick, N.Y.C. Since 1934, full time with Oxford Group and Moral Re-Armament. Author of the book, "I Was A Pagan." Gathering of gratitude at his home, Route 2, Cabool, Mo., 3 P.M., Saturday, Feb. 1. Eventual interment, Gilmantown, N.H. In lieu of flowers, family suggests remembrance to Up With People, 3103 No. Campbell Ave., Tucson, Ariz. 85719."

Orange, East Orange, West Orange, and South Orange formed a cluster of residential suburban communities just north of Newark, New Jersey. It was also within commuting distance of New York City, which lay fourteen miles to the east. For the wealthier families who lived there, Carteret Academy was the private school for boys. After finishing high school in East Orange, Kitchen became a student at Stevens Institute of

Technology, which was a major university located not very far away, in Hoboken, New Jersey, right on the Hudson River, immediately across from Manhattan and New York City. From there, Kitchen went on to study at the Columbia University School of Journalism. Since Columbia was of course one of the great ivy league institutions, this was a very prestigious place to study. Its journalism facility was located in New York City on the southeast corner of W. 116th Street and Broadway at the main entrance to the university's Morningside Heights campus. The School of Journalism was built with money donated by newspaper magnate Joseph Pulitzer, and held its first classes in the Fall of 1912. It is the institution which awards the prestigious Pulitzer Prize, the highest award an American journalist can be given. After he had finished there, Kitchen at some point decided to go into the advertising business and rose to become one of the partners in a New York City advertising firm.

In 1934, the same year he published *I Was a Pagan*, Kitchen left the advertising business and spent the rest of his life working full time for the Oxford Group and Moral Re-Armament (as the Oxford Group was renamed in 1938). Dick B. (Kihei, Maui, Hawaii), personal correspondence 23 May 2006, gave additional information about Kitchen's active involvement in the Oxford Group in and after 1934: "The August, 1935 *Evangel* reports that Shoemaker had taken abroad with him Kitchen, Professor Brown, and Parks Shipley." "After I had met Shoemaker's younger daughter in Florida, I saw frequent mention in Shoemaker's personal journal entries of Bill Wilson, Rowland Hazard, Shep Cornell, Victor Kitchen, Charles Clapp, Professor Brown – Appendix 5." "When I met with Jim Newton in Florida, we had the businessmen's team picture in front of us; and Jim identified Victor Kitchen as one of the members."

Kitchen ended his life in the little town of Cabool (population 2,168) in southern Missouri in a very sparsely populated and isolated part of the beautiful and scenic Ozark Mountains, just north of the Mark Twain National Forest.

Up With People was a group which worked with students of university age from all over the world to bring about greater international understanding, bringing these young people together on world tours through North America, Europe, and Asia, where they put on musical performances and were given the opportunity to build friendships with young men and women from all these other countries. Activities which could help contribute to world peace had been an important part of the Oxford Group's program, an interest which was even more emphasized after it changed its name to Moral Re-Armament in 1938. Kitchen was deeply concerned with this as well as matters of individual moral and spiritual development.

3. A.A. historian Dick B. (Kihei, Maui, Hawaii), as mentioned in the previous note, wrote me a letter on 23 May 2006, giving me a good deal of valuable information about Kitchen which he had turned up during his own researches, some of it as yet unpublished. I enormously appreciate his kindness in this regard. He wrote that "after I had gone to Calvary Church in New York, I added a lengthy Appendix 10 to the revised Shoemaker book. It has extensive notes from *The Calvary Evangel* and the Calvary Church yearbook. They tell of Shoemaker, Hazard, Kitchen, and others. The literature list added *I Was A Pagan*. They tell of Kitchen's 'Points West' article in the February 1934 *Evangel*."

Dick is the author of a number of books on A.A. and the Oxford Group, including: Dick B., *The Akron Genesis of Alcoholics Anonymous*, 2nd ed. (Kihei, Maui, Hawaii: Paradise Research Publications, 1998; orig. pub. Seattle, Washington: Glen Abbey Books, 1992). Dick B., *New Light on Alcoholism: God, Sam Shoemaker, and A.A.*, 2nd ed. (Kihei, Maui, Hawaii: Paradise Research Publications, 1999). Dick B., *The Oxford Group & Alcoholics Anonymous: A Design for Living That Works*, 3rd ed. (Kihei, Maui, Hawaii: Paradise Research Publications, 1998; orig. pub. Seattle, Washington: Glen Abbey Books, 1992).

4. The Big Book = *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 4th edit. (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 2001 [1st edit. 1939]), pp. 8-13.

*Pass It On: The Story of Bill Wilson and How the A.A. Message Reached the World* (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1984), pp. 87, 98, 111-115.

5. *Pass It On* pp. 116-119 and 127.

6. Dick B. (Kihei, Maui, Hawaii), personal correspondence 23 May 2006: “After I had met Shoemaker’s younger daughter in Florida, I saw frequent mention in Shoemaker’s personal journal entries of Bill Wilson, Rowland Hazard, Shep Cornell, Victor Kitchen, Charles Clapp, Professor Brown – Appendix 5.” “After I had gone to Stepping Stones, I added from Lois Wilson’s Oxford Group notes her mention of meeting Victor Kitchen .... Nell Wing told me personally on the phone that Kitchen was one of Bill’s friends.”

7. Kitchen was born on April 9, 1891, and Bill Wilson was born on November 26, 1895.

8. Dick B. (Kihei, Maui, Hawaii), personal correspondence 23 May 2006: “Kitchen tells of a major team that went to the west, including Ohio, in 1934, and writes of the dearth of ‘continuance’ work since the Akron visits in 1933. The 1934 group included Kitchen, Hazard, Purdy, Haines, Twitchell, Mrs. F. A. Seiberling, and Parks Shipley. My notes suggest that Kitchen was thoroughly familiar with both events, but they don’t show if Kitchen was present in 1933. Parks Shipley (whom I met and knew) was much involved at Calvary in the 1930’s. He was in Akron with both the 1933 and 1934 teams — as Cuyler’s *Evangel* article reports.”

9. *Pass It On* pp. 53-60.

10. Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology, ed. Richard A. Muller (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1985).

11. Reprinted in Bill W., *The Language of the Heart: Bill W.’s Grapevine Writings* (New York: AA Grapevine, Inc., 1988), see p. 196.

12. Jonathan Edwards, *Basic Writings*, ed. Ola Elizabeth Winslow (New York: New American Library, 1966). Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards* (Cleveland, Ohio: World Publishing Co., 1949).

13. Albert C. Outler (ed.), *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964) — the one-volume introduction to Wesley's life and thought, not the four-volume critical edition of Wesley's sermons which Outler published twenty years later in 1984-87, which is often listed in confusingly similar fashion in library catalogs. Richard P. Heitzenrater, *The Elusive Mr. Wesley*, Vol. 1: *John Wesley His Own Biographer*, and Vol. 2: *John Wesley as Seen by Contemporaries and Biographers* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984).

14. Ernest M. Ligon, *The Psychology of Christian Personality* (New York: Macmillan, 1935).

15. *Pass It On: The Story of Bill Wilson and How the A.A. Message Reached the World* (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1984), p. 121. Mrs. Marty Mann's story is in the Big Book under the title "Women Suffer Too," see p. 206. See also Sally Brown and David R. Brown, *A Biography of Mrs. Marty Mann: The First Lady of Alcoholics Anonymous* (Center City, Minnesota: Hazelden, 2001), pp. 107-108. This part of John Henry Fitzhugh (Fitz) Mayo's story is in the Big Book twice, first on page 56 and then in his story, entitled "Our Southern Friend" (see p. 215). Fitz, who was from Maryland, was Bill's second or third success at twelfth stepping after he returned from Akron in 1935.

16. In Aquinas's case, he argued that we could only know them by abstraction from what we apprehended through sense perception, but the eternal forms were nevertheless regarded by him as both totally real and knowable.

17. In Kant, at the end of the eighteenth century, the *noumenon* (as he called the noetic realm of eternal ideas) was still regarded as something real which actually existed. But he followed Locke in denying that we could know these ideas. Kant's noumenon was basically just another name for what Locke had called the unknowable "real essences" of

things. In ancient Greek philosophy, the Middle and Neo-Platonists usually called the ideas the *noêta* (“thoughts”), which was a noun derived from the verb *noêô*, which meant to think. Kant used the present passive participle of that verb instead, and referred to the realm of the ideas as the *noumenon* (“that which is thought”) so that he could engage in a kind of word play where he contrasted it with the word phenomenon (which comes from the Greek word *phainomenon*, “that which appears”).

18. In early A.A. literature, the principle of “seeing is believing” is stressed over and over: the reality of divine grace is demonstrated by cold, hard pragmatic proof. Richmond Walker, the second most-published early A.A. author, points to this repeatedly in *Twenty-Four Hours a Day* (Center City, Minnesota: Hazelden, 1975; first published 1948 under the sponsorship of the A.A. group in Daytona Beach, Florida), see for example the reading for April 25: “I don’t believe that A.A. works because I read it in a book or because I hear people say so. I believe it because I see people getting sober and staying sober. An actual demonstration is what convinces me. When I see the change in people, I can’t help believing that A.A. works. We could listen to talk about A.A. all day and still not believe it, but when we see it work, we have to believe it. Seeing is believing.”

19. H[oward] A[rnold] Walter, *Soul-Surgery: Some Thoughts on Incisive Personal Work*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1932; 1st ed. pub. 1919), p. 87, reaffirmed the heart of Jonathan Edwards’ great discovery that the effect of an authentic conversion or psychic change would be that the person would “begin developing a new character.” Walter also quoted from more recent theologians and psychologists to show how this same fundamental fact had continued to be observed in the twentieth century, even though expressed in a variety of different words.

Walter pp. 59-60 for example referred to the work of Edwin D. Starbuck, an Indiana Quaker who wrote a book called *The Psychology of Religion* in 1899, which was the first work written in the modern period on the psychology of religion, and was the immediate precursor to

William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience*. Starbuck's studies showed that in conversion one saw the dissociation of personality and its recentering, in such a way that there occurred "the formation of a new ego, a fresh point of reference for mental states" (see p. 129 in Starbuck's book). This was just a different way of describing a fundamental change in character, and in fact, in his later academic career Starbuck devoted himself to the study of "character education" (as he called it) in educational theory.

Walter p. 80 quoted William James himself, from *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1901-1902), p. 196: "It makes a great difference to a man, whether one set of his ideas, or another, be the center of his energy; and it makes a great difference, as regards any set of ideas which he may possess, whether they become central or remain peripheral in him. To say that a man is 'converted' means, in these terms, that religious ideas, previously peripheral in his consciousness, now take a central place, and that religious aims form the habitual center of his energy." In other words, in an authentic conversion or psychic change, a new kind of character will be enabled to take over and dominate the person's mind, a kind of character which holds worthy spiritual and moral ideals as its highest goals and values.

20. Sally Brown and David R. Brown, *A Biography of Mrs. Marty Mann*, pp. 107-108.

21. Kitchen 5.41-42 (24-25).

22. Kitchen 9.89-90 (48-49).

23. CHAPTER 2: John Wesley was on leave from his teaching position at Oxford University, and intended to go back after his visit to America, which meant that he could not marry her. The university required all of its faculty members to be priests of the Church of England, and although ordinary English parish priests were allowed to marry after Archbishop Cranmer brought the Protestant Reformation to England in the sixteenth century, Oxford still enforced the old medieval rule of celibacy for the priests who served on its faculty. When John refused to marry her, Sophie promptly married another man in the

Savannah colony. In response to this, John (whose grandparents had been staunch English Puritans, and who had a deep streak of that in his own makeup) began refusing to give communion to Sophie and her new husband when they came to church, on the grounds that she and the new husband were leading loose and dissolute lives, and could no longer be regarded as good Christians. See Richard P. Heitzenrater, *The Elusive Mr. Wesley*, Vol. 1: *John Wesley His Own Biographer*, and Vol. 2: *John Wesley as Seen by Contemporaries and Biographers* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), for a fascinating collection of documents from the period, describing all of these events, both from John Wesley's side and from the side of his detractors.

24. In an interview in *Psychology Today*, the famous twentieth-century behaviorist psychologist B. F. Skinner described how he was made to read Jonathan Edwards when he was an undergraduate student at Harvard and discovered, to his surprise, the basic principles of a psychological system which he was going to develop further and radicalize into a mechanical system which could produce any kind of human behavior which one desired, simply by using the right conditioning processes. Or this was what Skinner believed that he could do, at any rate, and his writings gave birth to a behavioral emphasis in much of American psychology which has lasted to this day, some of it good and some of it bad.

25. See *Pass It On*, pp. 120-121, for the full description of this experience, which Bill W. spoke about only briefly in the Big Book on p. 14.

26. Albert C. Outler (ed.), *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), pp. 66-67. An account in Wesley's own words, excerpted from the entries in his *Journal* for Wednesday and Thursday, May 24-25, 1738. Outler's scholarly texts of Wesley's writings are the most accurate, painstakingly prepared from the earliest printed versions, but this story can also be found in John Wesley, *The Journal of John Wesley*, ed. Percy Livingstone Parker (Chicago: Moody Press, n.d.), pp. 64-65, and in numerous other editions of Wesley's *Journal*. Outler, who

was my teacher at Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University, was one of the leaders in the establishment of modern Wesley studies in the 1960's.

27. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), see the part where Calvin gives his key descriptions of the nature of saving faith in Book III, chapt. 2, sects. 14 and 19-20. The *Institutes* is the foundational work in Reformed theology, which means the wide variety of Protestant churches in the Calvinist tradition. In the United States this includes the early New England Puritans and the later Congregationalist Church, Baptists, Presbyterians, Dutch Reformed, and the United Church of Christ (a late twentieth-century merger between the Congregationalists and another denomination called the Evangelical and Reformed Church which had been originally formed by German-speaking immigrants).

28. Ludwig Wittgenstein, Preliminary Studies for the "Philosophical Investigations": Generally Known as the Blue and Brown Books (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969).

29. This same point was made by the Oxford Group author A. J. Russell in his book *For Sinners Only* (Tucson, Arizona: Hats Off Books, 2003; orig. pub. 1932), pp. 16-17 [my italics]: "We are in desperate need of forgiveness." There "are very many who need the help of Sharing with another, so that they may come directly face to face with God .... Only so do they grasp the reality of their confession, of the God to whom they confess, and of the forgiveness which He bestows. *The forgiveness itself does not depend upon the Sharing; its appropriation by the individual constantly does.*"

30. This was a concept which Wesley learned from early Greek patristic authors like Clement of Alexandria and St. Macarius the Homilist. (St. Gregory of Nyssa was a member of that same ancient Christian spiritual tradition, about whom more has been written in our own time, if anyone wishes to read more about that form of spirituality.) If we look at it from the divine perspective, the goal of the spiritual life is

*theôsis* (the Greek word for “divinization”), which means restoring the image of God in our souls, and infusing our lives with the power and presence of the Eternal. If we look at it from the human perspective, the goal (*telos*) of the spiritual life is *teleiôsis*. This means taking our injured, maimed, torn and tattered souls, held back at a childish emotional level by trauma and abuse, and healing them so that we become *adult* and *whole*. *Teleios* in ancient Greek meant adult and grown-up as opposed to childish and infantile. It also meant whole and entire, as opposed to something which had been broken into fragments or had had major pieces torn off (see 1 Corinthians 13:9-12, which plays on both senses of the word *teleios*). Because of a serious mistranslation in the medieval Latin, which led to an even worse garbling of the meaning by early English translators, this word is still being translated in many of the modern English translations of the New Testament as “perfect,” giving people the totally incorrect idea that God expects human beings to be perfect in an obsessive-compulsive perfectionistic sense. It is incredible how much harm this faulty translation has done to good-hearted men and women who despaired over their failure to follow a rule which Biblical authors never wrote. In the New Testament, the goal is “progress rather than perfection” (as the Big Book puts it), going on “from glory to glory,” *apo doxês eis doxan* (as the Apostle Paul said in 2 Corinthians 3:18) to ever-deeper insights into the divine love and grace.

31. This is a doctrine of salvation by grace alone but with a synergistic element. John Wesley had learned it from the early Greek patristic theologians (St. Gregory of Nyssa and other Christian authors from the eastern end of the Mediterranean during the first few centuries A.D.). Wesley explained the inner dynamic of this way of interpreting the work of grace with great clarity in his *Standard Sermons*. The Greek verb *synergeô* means to work together with or co-operate. When human beings are yoked together with God, divine grace pulls most of the load (Matthew 11:30, “my yoke is easy and my burden is light”). Furthermore, the load cannot be pulled at all without the aid of this divine grace, so it is salvation *sola gratia*, by grace alone, in that sense. But it is also necessary for human beings to pull their share of the load,

no matter how small and trivial by comparison, so a minor synergistic component must also be involved. Human beings who want to be saved with no real work at all on their part, by passive listening and reading and minimal effort, and “doing what they are told,” but with no attempts to take personal responsibility and no burning desire down in their guts to heal and get well, will never achieve salvation.

This synergistic doctrine was (as Wesley knew) the old catholic and orthodox tradition prior to St. Augustine (354-430 A.D.), who developed a doctrine of predestination at the beginning of the middle ages, where he attempted to make everything the work of an all-powerful divine grace which arbitrarily selected some to be saved and some to be damned, so that we human beings had no freedom of choice about our eternal fate. This was rejected or heavily modified by later Roman Catholic theology, and is not good Catholic doctrine. Furthermore, as Wesley pointed out, the only systematically developed predestinarian teachings in the ancient Greco-Roman world prior to Augustine appeared in the fatalistic doctrines of some of the pagan Stoic philosophers, and in the polytheistic myths of the ancient Gnostic systems which portrayed the created world as intrinsically evil and the creation of an alien fallen god, or even a satanic god who was locked in eternal combat with the God of Light. Wesley insisted that Augustine had remained too locked into the non-Christian thought world in which he had lived before his conversion to Christianity in 386, and that doctrines of predestination were intrinsically non-Christian, as one could see by looking at the original sources of the idea. But later on, Calvinists (like Jonathan Edwards) attempted to revive and defend St. Augustine’s dire theory, so we can still see it being taught in some versions of American Protestantism. The eighteenth-century Calvinists accused Wesley of “Arminianism,” but what he was teaching was not the new doctrine of grace developed in the early modern period by the Calvinist heretic Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609), which attempted to provide some role for human free will in a different way. For our purposes, the important thing to note is that actual observation of human beings struggling to heal their lives (as we see here in Kitchen’s book and among most of the early A.A. teachers) matches

up with what Wesley and the old catholic and orthodox tradition said happened.

32. Dr. Bob's children said that many of the early A.A. members in Akron met at their house every morning, where they had coffee and listened to their mother read to them from either the Bible or *The Upper Room*. The use of *The Upper Room* by A.A. people spread all over the United States and Canada, and it continued to be the principal A.A. meditational book from the latter 1930's all the way down to 1948, when A.A. member Richmond Walker in Daytona Beach, Florida, published *Twenty-Four Hours a Day*, based in part on the Oxford Group work *God Calling* by Two Listeners, and began distributing copies of it from his basement. So during the first formative decades of the A.A. movement, twelve step spirituality was dominated at all times by meditational literature coming out of either the Methodist (that is the Wesleyan) tradition or by the Oxford Group tradition.

33. See for example Mel B., *New Wine: The Spiritual Roots of the Twelve Step Miracle* (Center City, Minnesota: Hazelden, 1991), pp. 134-136 (Finney) and 136-138 (Moody). See also Ernest Kurtz, *Not-God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous*, expanded edition (Center City, Minnesota: Hazelden, 1991; orig. 1979), p. 183 on parallels between A.A. and Finney's teachings, and pp. 49 and 164 on Frank Buchman's conscious modeling of himself on Moody.

34. Mel B. (introduction and commentaries), *Three Recovery Classics: As a Man Thinketh* by James Allen, *The Greatest Thing in the World* by Henry Drummond, *An Instrument of Peace: the St. Francis Prayer*, Hindsfoot Foundation Series on Spirituality (New York: iUniverse, 2004), see p. 46 for Mel's short account of Henry Drummond's life and work, and pp. 47-79 for the text of "The Greatest Thing in the World."

35. H[oward] A[rnold] Walter, *Soul-Surgery: Some Thoughts on Incisive Personal Work*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1932; 1st ed. pub. 1919), pp. 9-10.

36. Ibid. 11-13.

37. *Ibid.*, from the short biography of Walter found at the end of that book, written by Charles D. Thompson, “Memories of Howard Arnold Walter,” pp. 101-106.

38. A. J. Russell, *For Sinners Only*, pp. 247, 283, 285. Even after the Oxford Group had thoroughly established itself among a number of the students and faculty at Oxford University in England, which was the time when A. J. Russell first became interested in them, the group still remained closely tied to Christian missionary work in non-Christian lands, including activity in Egypt, India, China, and Iran.

39. Kitchen 7.62-63 (35-36) and 8.73-74 (41).

40. Glenn F. Chesnut, *The Higher Power of the Twelve-Step Program: For Believers & Non-Believers*, Hindsfoot Foundation Series on Spirituality and Theology (San Jose: Authors Choice/iUniverse, 2001) Chapter 8, “Being at Home,” pp. 179-187, is a long description of *agapê* love as “welcome home love,” which was one of the principal meanings of the Greek verb from which it was derived.

41. There are three *hypostaseis* in the one divine reality (*ousia*), where *hypostasis* means (in this context) something like “substratum.” God as Father (or Generative Power) is the Ultimate Mystery, out of which comes that which is Arbitrary, Willful, or Random. God as Logos is Rational Structure, Meaning, or Harmony. God as Spirit is Energy and Love. The feminine aspect of God, frequently called by the name Sophia in ancient times, was traditionally linked either to the second *hypostasis* (God as Logos) or to the third *hypostasis* (God as Spirit), depending on whether she was regarded primarily as Lady Wisdom or as the Divine Mother of All Things. In ancient art, the three *hypostaseis* or *personae* were sometimes portrayed as an old man with a white beard, a young man, and a woman (who was sometimes depicted as accompanied by her three young daughters Faith, Hope, and Love). The word *persona* in ancient Latin did not mean a person in the modern English sense, where it means an individual with a separate center of consciousness, so this way of speaking did not mean that they believed in three different gods. *Persona* meant an actor’s mask, so that the different *personae* or

*hypostaseis* or artistic representations referred simply to various different roles played by the one God. The important thing here however is that the statement that “God is Love” was taken very seriously in ancient theology, and that the ability to love with *agapê* love and be possessed by the divine *erôs* is a gift given only to those who bow before God the Ultimate Mystery and allow God the Spirit into their hearts so that they may receive the grace to bring their lives into harmony with God the Logos, which then gives true meaning and satisfaction to their lives.

42. CHAPTER 3: Kitchen 6.50-52 (29-30).

43. A[rthur] J. Russell, *For Sinners Only* (Tucson, Arizona: Hats Off Books, 2003; orig. pub. 1932), pp. 15-16. My story is my message. I preach the saving message by telling the other person the story of my life. As Russell points out here, the Bible itself is simply a collection of stories about men and women from the past. I follow its teaching my turning my own life story into a similar story of redemption and triumph over temptation and evil. “They regarded [the New Testament] as not so much a set of rulings or arguments by the careful observance of which one acquired a safe seat in Heaven, but pictures — ‘movies’ if you will — or revelations of what was bound to take place in any age, in any life entirely surrendered to the will of God .... They were making a film of first-century Christianity by living it.” And after learning how to live it in their own lives (p. 17), “those who had been spiritually healed themselves had the necessity laid upon them to hand on the good news to others.”

44. Big Book p. 58, “Our stories disclose in a general way what we used to be like, what happened, and what we are like now. If you have decided you want what we have and are willing to go to any length to get it — then you are ready to take certain steps.”

45. Kitchen 6.59 (33).

46. Kitchen 7.65-66 (37).

47. All the good old timers in the twelve step program would advise, however, that one NOT do a fifth step with one’s own spouse, as Kitchen

did. We have to tell at least one other living human being about even our deepest and darkest secrets, but for a fifth step, it not only needs to be someone completely safe, but also (unlike a spouse) someone who was not affected by our actions and someone who would not be totally devastated by the knowledge of our true inner thoughts. The Oxford Group tended to mix together what the twelve step program called the fifth step (confession) and the ninth step (making amends). By 1939, the early A.A. people had begun to realize the wisdom of keeping these separate, for there were different rules which needed to be followed when it came to making amends.

48. Kitchen 7.66 (37). Russell, *For Sinners Only*, p. 19, likewise makes it clear that we must make a complete surrender in order to get our lives back.

49. Compare Russell, *For Sinners Only*, pp. 48, 97, 113, and 185.

50. In the Alcoholics Anonymous context, Harry M. Tiebout noted the importance of surrender in his article on “Surrender Versus Compliance in Therapy: With Special Reference to Alcoholism,” *Quarterly Journal of Studies on Alcoholism* 14, No. 1 (March 1953), pp. 58-68. Psychiatrists, Tiebout said, “talk about undermining the resistance by uncovering the reasons for the particular set of resistances, as if the unconscious mind must then accept those reasons — a nonsequitur.” Understanding intellectually why we do something does not in and of itself give us the power to stop doing it. He told about one of his patients who explained to him how “his logical mind could perceive and believe all the factors underlying his difficulties but he remained cantankerous and unreasonable as far as his feeling life was concerned. In his head, or conscious mind, he could ‘accept’ the explanations but deep inside where the heart, or the unconscious, operates there was no feeling of acceptance.” Understanding the intellectual explanation of his behavior might produce an attempt at outward compliance on the part of the patient with what the psychiatrist was telling him to do. But there had to be something deeper and stronger

than mere external compliance. “One must have a *feeling* — *conviction* — otherwise the acceptance is not wholehearted but halfhearted.”

51. Kitchen 7.66-67 (37-38).

52. Kitchen 9.86-87 (47-48).

53. Russell, *For Sinners Only*, pp. 15-16, made this point in an interesting way: “They regarded [the New Testament] as not so much a set of rulings or arguments by the careful observance of which one acquired a safe seat in Heaven, but pictures — ‘movies’ if you will — or revelations of what was bound to take place in any age, in any life entirely surrendered to the will of God .... They were making a film of first-century Christianity by living it.” H. A. Walter, *Soul-Surgery: Some Thoughts on Incisive Personal Work*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1932; 1st ed. pub. 1919), p. 54, quoted one of the classic Pauline texts attacking legalistic religion: “We are told what the fruits of the spirit are in Galatians 5:22, 23; ‘But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, self-control; against such there is no law.’”

54. Glenn F. Chesnut, *Images of Christ: An Introduction to Christology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row/Seabury, 1984), ch. 1, “The Sacrifice on the Cross,” pp. 1-19 (and espec. 10-12). Gustav Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*, trans. A. G. Hebert (New York: Macmillan, 1951). An English translation of *Cur Deus Homo*, “Why the God-Man?” can be found in Anselm of Canterbury, *Basic Writings*, trans. S. W. Deane, 2nd ed. (LaSalle, Illinois: Open Court, 1962).

55. Kitchen 15.155 (83).

56. *Ibid.*

57. CHAPTER 4: For examples of group guidance, where a large number of Oxford Group people prayed and took notes together, see A. J. Russell, *For Sinners Only* (Tucson, Arizona: Hats Off Books, 2003; orig. 1932), pp. 74-77 and 202.

58. Russell (p. 193) gives a long example of what one member wrote down in one particular session when he prayed for guidance:

They went every one of them with their faces straight forward, as the spirit was to go they went, they turned not as they went. (Ezek. i. 12) Trust in the living God and He will give thee thy heart's desire. God does guide even to the picking of texts. Trust Him in all things.

Tell mother you are sorry about your remarks about .... Commit thy way unto the Lord and He will direct thy path. Talk to Ray Purdy about this feeling of defeatism and things being snarled up. God will direct it. Beware of cheap optimism. Take a college by storm [i.e., begin vigorous missionary work at one of the colleges which make up Oxford University]. Be more generous towards those who differ from you. A. J.'s future is in God's hands — the good is soon lost when the best is not aimed at. Get to the bottom of sin and the way God delivers from all the lures of the evil one. Be of good cheer. I have overcome the world. Pray that you be not disturbed. Constant prayer. A much deeper prayer life.

A new trip south is right. Pray for the money for it. Face and name your sins and commit them to God. There is no urging in love. It is a free response to a measureless love, that meets every need. A. J.'s time in America will be richly used. Learn to take burdens off one another. Let God do it. Where we deeply care there is no strain.

59. It was Richard P. Heitzenrater who finally worked out how to read the shorthand system which Wesley used for keeping all of his spiritual diaries, and gave us for the first time an immediate, firsthand look into the man's most private thoughts. Some of this material, along with a large number of other very interesting documents, may be found

in Richard P. Heitzenrater, *The Elusive Mr. Wesley*, Vol 1: *John Wesley His Own Biographer*, and Vol. 2: *John Wesley as Seen by Contemporaries and Biographers* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984).

60. Nevertheless, the A.A. organizational structure, including the relationship between the individual groups, was probably not based on Quaker practices as such, in spite of the similarities. There had been a widespread belief in local group autonomy among many of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteen-century English Nonconformist groups (including the Congregationalists and Baptists), along with the custom of small Nonconformist groups meeting when necessary in private homes or small rented rooms. These practices were brought over to North America by the English-speaking colonists, and are still practiced by numerous Protestant groups in the United States today. It is therefore probably fairer to say that such A.A. practices as group autonomy, holding house meetings and meetings in small rented rooms, and so on, were merely variations of common Protestant Nonconformist and evangelical themes.

61. One cannot say however that there was no Quaker connection at all. The English Baptist author F. B. Meyer, whose book *The Secret of Guidance* (and whose general influence) made its mark on Frank Buchman's ideas, did have certain Quaker contacts in his background. He had been raised by a Quaker grandmother, and was also much influenced by an American woman with Quaker roots, Hannah Pearsall Smith, who spoke at a conference on "Scriptural Holiness" at Oxford in 1874.

Also there were Quakers included sometimes among the evangelicals attending the great Keswick Convention, held every year in the Lake District up in the north of England, where Frank Buchman had his life transformed in 1908. One notable example was the great Quaker mystic Hannah Hurnard (1905-1990), who had her life-changing experience at Keswick in 1924 when she was only nineteen years old, and made a heart-wrenching decision to turn her life and will over to the care of God, including even her greatest defects, such as her

uncontrollable stuttering and her crippling phobias. *Hind's Feet in High Places*, which she wrote in 1955, is still the eleventh best-selling book in evangelical bookstores. The edition I have on my bookshelf is Hannah Hurnard, *Hind's Feet in High Places* (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, 1975). It was the most famous twentieth-century commentary on the Song of Songs, a theme which was so important in the ancient mystical tradition, from St. John of the Cross in the sixteenth century all the way back to St. Gregory of Nyssa in the fourth century.

It is important to remember that there is one wing of the evangelical movement which is deeply in touch with the spirit of medieval mysticism, and regards St. John of the Cross as one of “their own” evangelical authors. There are a number of ways in which the Quaker experience of the Inner Light can be combined with those more ancient spiritual techniques for achieving a deep personal experience of God’s immediate presence.

In Richmond Walker’s *Twenty-Four Hours a Day*, the second most published book in the A.A. tradition, the concept of the divine spark within our souls bears certain resemblances to the Quaker idea of the Inner Light, but Walker had no Quaker connections that I know of. The common evangelical understanding that our God-consciousness and knowledge of God’s presence has to be internalized as “knowledge of the heart” is the most likely and understandable source, along with perhaps some sort of secondhand contact with the medieval concepts of the *scintilla animae* (an uncreated spark of the divine within the human soul) and the *scintilla conscientiae* (the spark of conscience within all of our souls which teaches us the fundamental difference between right and wrong).

62. Oliver Cromwell in the seventeenth century, for example, as a good Puritan, would make no major political decision (sometimes delaying for days) until he was sure that he had obtained “God’s leading” and knew what God wanted him to do. The methods used for obtaining divine guidance were various: John Wesley sometimes attempted to learn the will of God in rather odd fashion by casting lots, presumably in

imitation of the way the ancient Israelite high priest cast the Urim and Thummim. But this was definitely not a standard practice! During my own childhood during the 1940's, ordinary pious men and women from all the different evangelical denominations regularly prayed before making important decisions, to try to make sure that they were doing what God wanted them to do.

63. F. B. Meyer, *The Secret of Guidance* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1896). The text is also on the internet at <http://www.ccel.org/m/meyer/guidance/guidance.htm>. This is an important book for understanding what guidance meant to the Oxford Group and early A.A. Frederick Brotherton Meyer (1847-1929) was a highly educated English Baptist preacher who had a B.A. from the University of London and held pastorates at a series of churches in Liverpool, Leicester, and London. He had been raised by a Quaker grandmother, and was also much influenced by an American woman with Quaker roots, Hannah Pearsall Smith, who spoke at a conference on “Scriptural Holiness” at Oxford in 1874. He is still an extremely popular author, much read by conservative evangelicals today. Nevertheless, like the Southern Methodists who published *The Upper Room*, Meyer was a late nineteenth/early twentieth-century Protestant liberal who took modern biblical criticism for granted, and was not a fundamentalist. For Meyer and most of the leaders of the Keswick conventions, “the violent spirit of Fundamentalism” (as they saw it) was a divisive force which was incompatible with the gentleness that should mark true spirituality, and placed an overemphasis on doctrines and dogmas.

Although Meyer was a Baptist, the term “scriptural holiness” was drawn from the Methodist tradition, and Meyer expresses many other Wesleyan ideas and observations in his writings (such as John Wesley’s concept of the Law — both the laws of nature and the moral law — as God’s face revealed). But he also expressed his indebtedness to Jonathan Edwards, who represented the Calvinist side of the eighteenth-century evangelical movement.

Between 1887 and 1928, Meyer addressed twenty-six Keswick Conventions, and was a major spokesman for the Keswick Holiness movement, which combined evangelical theology with elements drawn from Roman Catholic mystical theology (especially St. John of the Cross and Johann Tauler). We need to remember that it was at the Keswick Convention of 1908 that Frank Buchman had the experience which gave birth to the Oxford Group, and taught him the importance of surrendering all his earthly resentments, and making restitution (or “making amends” as the twelve step people call it) to those at whom he held those resentments. Since Meyer was one of the leaders of the Keswick Holiness movement, all of his writings are important sources for understanding the background out of which the Oxford Group theology arose, and its roots in the writings of John Wesley and Jonathan Edwards.

64. As noted by Mel B. in *New Wine: The Spiritual Roots of the Twelve Step Miracle* (Center City, Minnesota: Hazelden, 1991), pp. 32-33.

65. H[oward] A[rnold] Walter, *Soul-Surgery: Some Thoughts on Incisive Personal Work*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1932; 1st ed. pub. 1919), pp. 25-27. A good many of Walter’s key ideas were taken over into Oxford Group thought and practice, such as the concept of the five C’s: Confidence, Confession, Conviction, Conversion, and Conservation.

66. Compare for example St. John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle*. This popular Protestant hymn is singing about what St. John’s friend and protector St. Teresa of Avila called the spiritual “marriage” or union with God, which she regarded as the goal of the spiritual life. John Wesley, who had read deeply in Spanish and French Catholic spirituality, likewise regarded it as the goal of the spiritual life, and referred to it in early Greek patristic terminology as becoming one of “the Friends of God,” which is the term that the A.A. author Richmond Walker also used in *Twenty-Four Hours a Day*, the second great book of early A.A., and the only book which ever rivaled the Big Book in importance.

67. Dick B., the A.A. historian, told me in a private note which he sent me in 2005 that Clarence Snyder, the important leader of the early Cleveland A.A. group, came in contact with the Holiness movement when he married his third wife Grace in 1972. Grace had first heard Holiness preachers when she was only eight or nine years old, although she went to Baptist or Methodist churches most of her life. Nevertheless, Dick B., who interviewed her and has written about her, says that there was a strongly Holiness and Pentecostalist element in Grace's faith. Clarence, as the leader of the Orthodox Movement within early A.A., and a strong rival with Bill W. for control of the A.A. movement, was a major early A.A. figure, but the basic framework of Alcoholics Anonymous spirituality had already been firmly established long before the 1970's, so we cannot count any involvement by Grace in what may have been partially Pentecostalist-like beliefs as a formative force on the A.A. movement as a whole, or even in Cleveland.

The Pentecostalist movement began when William Seymour, a black Holiness minister who founded a mission on Azusa Street, Los Angeles, began holding meetings (at the time of the great San Francisco earthquake in 1906) where some people in his congregation began speaking in tongues. The movement became interracial, and rapidly began spreading over the United States. In the next year (1907) Pentecostalist meetings also began being held in the British Isles. The largest Pentecostalist denomination, the Assemblies of God, was formed in 1914. In the 1930's and 1940's, however, this was still a very small movement, far out of the mainstream, whose members were frequently referred to derisively as "holy rollers." It did not have the large membership and influence which it has today.

There appears to have been no major influence on early A.A. of either Pentecostal ideas or the ideas of the twentieth-century Protestant fundamentalist movement. A.A.'s link was to the liberal and moderate evangelicals of the early twentieth century, who applied the modern historical critical method to their reading of the Bible, and were frequently made quite uncomfortable by those who attempted to revive what they regarded as hopelessly outmoded medieval doctrines and

dogmas like the doctrine of the Trinity, the Virgin Birth, and the substitutionary doctrine of the atonement. Modern Christians, in their opinion, would be foolish to try to go back to the ignorant and superstitious world of the Dark Ages and Ancient Near Eastern mythology.

68. The Oxford Group and the *The Upper Room* (the meditational pamphlet published by the Southern Methodists in Nashville, Tennessee, who were early twentieth-century Protestant liberals) were the two most important specific influences on early A.A., along with contacts with New Thought, Roman Catholic and Anglo-Catholic spirituality, Neo-Freudian psychiatry, and possibly Protestant Neo-Orthodox thought as mediated through the faculty of Union Theological Seminary in New York City.

During the formative period of early A.A. history, Union Theological Seminary (which was the best Protestant seminary in New York City and one of the three best theological graduate schools in the entire United States) had a number of famous theologians on its faculty. Reinhold Niebuhr (who taught there from 1928-1960), and the existentialist theologian Paul Tillich (who taught there from 1933-1955) were prominent Neo-Orthodox theologians. The similarities we see in some early A.A. writings (like the Big Book) to certain elements in twentieth-century existentialist philosophy may have come via Niebuhr or Tillich (although it is also possible that they were simply a parallel reaction to the spiritual dilemmas created by combat experiences during the First World War).

The famous preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick also taught at Union from 1908-1946, while simultaneously pastoring Riverside Church in New York City (which was built for Fosdick by John D. Rockefeller, Jr.) from 1930-1946. He had been forced out of his previous church in New York City by Presbyterian fundamentalists after delivering his famous sermon there on May 12, 1922, "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" That sermon was an attack on the basic doctrines of the fundamentalist movement, which became a sort of manifesto of the Protestant liberals

during the fundamentalist-liberal controversies of the 1920's and 30's. The faculty at Union were part of the New York circles in which Bill Wilson's friend the Rev. Samuel Shoemaker, and other Oxford Group leaders moved.

69. By the A.A. movement's Historic Heritage, I refer to four different sources of general principles or well-established precedents: (1) Official publications and statements coming from Bill Wilson and the New York A.A. headquarters, such as the Big Book, the book called *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, some of the statements made in Bill W.'s letters or in official letters from the New York A.A. headquarters, and so on. (2) Works written by early A.A. members like Richmond Walker, Ed Webster, Ralph Pfau, the authors of the Detroit/Washington D.C. pamphlet, and so on, which were widely used and appreciated by numerous early A.A. groups all over the U.S. and Canada; the messages of these books and pamphlets was given additional weight when their publication was originally sponsored by an A.A. group. (3) Certain books and pamphlets by non-A.A. authors, such as Emmet Fox's *Sermon on the Mount* and *The Upper Room*, which were widely used and recommended reading among early A.A. groups all over the U.S. and Canada. (4) We also have a number of what were originally oral traditions from the early A.A. period such as (to give one example) the account of how the words "as we understood Him" were inserted after the word "God" in the third and eleventh steps to allow people who did not wish to use the word God at all to be members of the fellowship, including even declared atheists, which is not immediately apparent from the wording of the Big Book itself. (5) And finally we have widespread practices found in early A.A. all over the U.S. and Canada, along with accounts of the way in which certain early controversies were resolved (such as the gradual development of ground rules for the relationship between A.A. and Mrs. Marty Mann's National Committee for Education on Alcoholism), which established precedents for how various principles were to be interpreted in practice. We need to remember that, just as in the English Common Law, well-established precedents in A.A. outweigh attempts at narrowly legalistic interpretations of written rules by later

generations, even if the wording of the rules themselves was formulated during the early period, and that no A.A. governing body can rewrite well-established early A.A. precedents by a simple vote or the publication of some official declaration resulting from that vote. The fundamental guidelines laid out in A.A.'s Historic Heritage could in principle be revised upon the receipt of permission (from each group in writing) of three quarters of the A.A. groups in the U.S. and Canada, together with all the other A.A. groups around the world which are officially associated in any fashion with U.S. and Canadian A.A. In reality, this means that (for all practical purposes) the twelve steps, the twelve traditions, and the other well-established guidelines from A.A.'s Historic Heritage cannot be changed.

70. See *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, p. 142. The explanation that he was a “sex deviate” comes from an audiotape of Bill W. explaining more about that incident at an open meeting of the 1968 General Service Conference. It meant that the man who came to them was a homosexual. This happened in 1937 in Akron, and was a totally different event from the one which took place in New York in 1945: in that later situation, a black man walked into the 41st Street clubhouse, with bleached blonde hair, and wearing women’s clothes and makeup. He let them know that he was an ex-convict and that he was also a “dope fiend.” In this second situation, it was Bill W. instead of Dr. Bob who made the decision. When they asked Bill whether they should let the man attend meetings, he posed the question, “Did you say he was a drunk?” When they answered “Yes,” Bill replied, “Well I think that’s all we can ask.” This man did not end up getting sober (he disappeared shortly afterwards and never came back) but that is irrelevant to the principle that was established.

71. *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, pp. 143-145. The man stayed sober. By the end of 1938 he had found a higher power as the result of a spiritual experience in a hotel room, and as Bill W. said, writing in 1952, “he hasn’t had a drink since.”

72. For two examples, see first Mary C. Darrah, *Sister Ignatia: Angel of Alcoholics Anonymous* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1992), pp. 85-86, where the A.A. fellowship's breaking of its link with the Oxford Group, which was totally Protestant in orientation, allowed Sister Ignatia greater freedom in setting up an A.A. treatment program at her Catholic hospital. See also Father Ralph Pfau and Al Hirschberg, *Prodigal Shepherd* (Indianapolis, Indiana: SMT Guild, 1958), pp. 214-216. At the first one-day experimental A.A. spiritual retreat which the Catholic priest Ralph Pfau set up at the Little Sisters of the Poor, he had sixty-seven A.A. members present, of whom only twenty or so were Catholics (the other two-thirds were Protestants).

73. The fullest account at present of the challenges which early black A.A. members had to overcome in order to join the fellowship is given, in the words of some of these heroic men and women, in Glenn C., *The Factory Owner & the Convict: Lives and Teachings of the A.A. Old Timers*, 2nd ed., Hindsfoot Foundation Series on Alcoholics Anonymous History (New York: iUniverse, 2005), and Glenn C., *The St. Louis Gambler & the Railroad Man: Lives and Teachings of the A.A. Old Timers*, 2nd ed., Hindsfoot Foundation Series on Alcoholics Anonymous History (New York: iUniverse, 2005). [Both orig. pub. in South Bend, Indiana, by the Hindsfoot Foundation in 1996, as a single volume.]

74. Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, pp. 140-141.

75. Kitchen 6.54-56 (31-32).

76. The fullest account of the Oxford Group method is probably the one given in A[rthur] J. Russell, *For Sinners Only* (Tucson, Arizona: Hats Off Books, 2003; orig. pub. 1932), see pp. 2, 55-56, 90, 125, 127-128, 189-190, 194-195, 200-201, 204-207, 241-243, and 249. Guidance meant discovering that God has a plan for every human being's life (pp. 17-19):

That telling phrase ... "God has a plan for every man's life," came up continually .... Somewhere I had seen it stated that when each human being was born, the plan of what he

would become was made for him in the next world, and one of his joys or sorrows when he went there would come from a comparison of his past with the original plan of his possibilities. “Not only has God a plan for every life,” said one of the [Oxford Group people], “but when through sin we spoil that plan, God is always ready with another” .... Our sin of sins, embodying all other sins, was ... doubting God’s interest in us, that He had a plan for us, that He would show us the plan, and that He would help us to carry out the plan which was the only satisfactory plan for our lives.”

They called this early morning listening to God “Quiet Time.” The Oxford Group believe that God spoke to them when they needed His guidance. I believed it possible that nowadays, as in days of old, there are men to whom the Lord still speaks.

One part of the Oxford Group method for seeking guidance which made it different from its predecessors, was the practice of keeping a guidance book. When they had their morning quiet time, they wrote down on paper what seemed to be the most important thoughts which appeared in their minds. Russell quoted a Chinese proverb in this regard (p. 19, see also pp. 74-77 and 95): “The strongest memory is weaker than the palest ink.”

77. Kitchen 12.122-123 (66).

78. As quoted in Kitchen 17.167-168 (89).

79. In the history of the modern evangelical movement, John Wesley (1703-1791), whose Aldersgate experience took place on May 24, 1738, was one of the key figures of the first generation. His brother Charles Wesley (1707-1788) was an outstanding hymn writer, many of whose hymns are still sung today. The second generation of evangelicals produced a number of people who wrote poems instead of hymns, but

poetry which nevertheless was often devoted to spiritual themes. William Wordsworth (1770-1850), who was one of the great English poets of the Romantic Era, was of the third generation. Many of the same central spiritual themes were still present in the poetry written by him and his fellow Romantics. See Hoxie Neale Fairchild, *Religious Trends in English Poetry*. Vol. III: 1780-1830. *Romantic Faith* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1949). See also Glenn F. Chesnut, *Images of Christ: An Introduction to Christology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row/Seabury, 1984), ch. 4, “The Vision of God,” and specifically the part of that chapter (pp. 57-62) on “nature mysticism,” Wordsworth, and some of the personal experiences recorded in William James’ *Varieties of Religious Experience*.

80. 1 Thessalonians 5:17, Luke 18:10-13, and Exodus 33:18.

81. Kitchen 17.169-170 (90). He quotes, he says, from the *Reader’s Digest* condensed version of Montague’s original article in *Harper’s Magazine*.

82. See Glenn F. Chesnut, *Images of Christ: An Introduction to Christology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row/Seabury, 1984) p. 60, quoting from William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion delivered at Edinburgh in 1901-1902 (New York: Modern Library, 1994), from Lecture III, the passage beginning with the words “I remember the night, and almost the very spot on the hill-top, where my soul opened out, as it were, into the Infinite ... the unfathomable deep without, reaching beyond the stars ....”

83. Kitchen 16.162 (86-87).

84. CHAPTER 5: See for example Kitchen 3.22 (14), 6.57 (32), and 13.130 (70).

85. A. J. Russell’s book came out in 1932, and then Kitchen’s book was published in 1934. On the Four Absolutes, see A[rthur] J. Russell, *For Sinners Only* (Tucson, Arizona: Hats Off Books, 2003; orig. pub. 1932), pp. 269-277; see also pp. 23-25 (on sex), and p. 12.

86. Russell p. 23.

87. The Cleveland pamphlet on “The Four Absolutes” (which is undated but seems to come from a fairly early period in A.A. history) is still published by the Cleveland Central Committee of A.A. Copies may be ordered through the Cleveland District Office, 1701 East 12th Street, Lower Level, Cleveland OH 44114. The pamphlet’s description of Absolute Purity makes no reference to sex at all, but says: “As far as the mind is concerned, it is a simple case of answering the question, ‘Is it right, or is it wrong?’ That should be easy for us. There is no twilight zone between right and wrong. Even in our drinking days we knew the difference .... We know which is right, but do we have the dedicated will to do it?... Were we to contemplate the peace and contentment that a pure conscience would bring to us, and the joy and help that it would bring to others, we would be more determined about our spiritual progress .... If you have turned your will and your life over to God as you understand Him, purity will come to you in due course because God is Good.”

Regardless of what the Oxford Group literature said, the word “pure” in the Bible was never used in conjunction with sexual matters in even a single passage. The Cleveland A.A. people knew their Bible better than the Oxford Group in this regard. For a typical Biblical usage, see Psalm 24:3-4, “Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place? Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false, and do not swear deceitfully.” The Biblical word meant being honest in our dealings with others (Proverbs 15:26) and keeping our promises (Psalm 12:6). For the letter of James it meant, in addition, faithfully carrying out our responsibility to take care of the helpless and downtrodden, instead of being dominated by the kinds of concerns about increasing their own money and property and prestige which totally controlled so many people’s lives (James 1:27). In other words, genuinely dealing honestly with other people requires us to act with compassion, instead of insisting on “giving people what they deserve” with a surface pseudo-honesty that hides the deep inner lie about who we ourselves actually are: people desperately in need ourselves for God’s mercy and compassion.

88. We are talking here about the followers of William of Occam (c. 1285-1347) and Gabriel Biel (c. 1420-1495). Biel's description of the different kinds of works of "merit" that had to be performed in order for us to earn our salvation, was typical of the kind of theology towards which the Protestant reformers were so hostile. It was not just Martin Luther in Germany who singled out Gabriel Biel's type of merit theology for the focus of his attacks, but also the other major Protestant reformers, including John Calvin in Switzerland and Archbishop Thomas Cranmer in England. Ironically, modern Roman Catholic theologians, whether liberal or conservative, likewise regard the fourteenth and fifteenth century nominalists with total hostility. They see them as out-of-control academics who tried to use logic-chopping and over-intellectualization to distort traditional Catholic philosophical theology in destructive ways. For more on Gabriel Biel, see Heiko A. Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963).

89. R. D. Hicks, *Stoic and Epicurean* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910).

90. Epictetus, *Discourses and Manual*, 2 vols., trans. W. A. Oldfather, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1959-61).

91. So for example, in the Jewish mystical tradition called the Kabbalah, the Tree of Life is said to be composed of ten *sephiroth*. One of these is *chesed*, which is usually translated as meaning grace, compassion, or loving kindness. It is one of the three *sephiroth* which make up the Pillar of Mercy, which is composed of *chokmah* (wisdom), *chesed* (grace or mercy) and *netsach* (victory through endurance and eternal constancy, which is the nature of God's active grace in the world).

92. Hosea 6:6, *ki chesed chephatzti welo' zabach*. The Hebrew word *zabach* refers to everything that went on in the entire range of ancient Israelite sacred ritual celebrations, with all their long chants and prayers, and also all the ritual actions which were involved. The latter, in the

period when the Temple was still standing, almost invariably involved a sacrifice of some sort, as was typical also of ancient Greek and Roman religion. After the destruction of the Temple, the sacrifices themselves were no longer performed, for they were not in fact an essential part of the religious service, but were instead spiritualized (making sacrifices of prayer and obedience to God instead) and transformed into the various synagogue services, many of which were taken over and further ritualized in the early Christian worship services and sacraments. So *zebach* in this case is best taken as referring not just to rituals involving killing an animal in front of an altar, or burning pancakes on an altar, but to any sort of formal religious service with hymns and solemn prayers. An ordinary Protestant Sunday morning service, or a Roman Catholic saying the prayers of the rosary, is a *zebach* in terms of Hosea's basic meaning here.

93. See Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, 2nd ed., trans. John W. Harvey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950) for this important concept, which has been used by scholars of comparative religion as an essential tool ever since the first publication of Otto's book in 1917. For the German text, I have used Rudolf Otto, *Das Heilige: Über das Irrationale in der Idee des göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen*, 11th ed. (Stuttgart: Friedrich Andreas Perthes, 1923). To understand the background of Otto's attempt to provide a full phenomenological account of the concept of the holy or sacred in the various religions of the world, see his earlier study of the Kantian commentator Jakob Friedrich Fries (1773-1843): Rudolf Otto, *The Philosophy of Religion Based on Kant and Fries*, trans. E. B. Dicker (London: Williams & Norgate, 1931). We need an additional Kantian category, Otto discovered after studying Fries. This category is called the sacred or holy when it is schematized in the realm of religion. It is called the sublime when it is schematized in the realm of philosophical aesthetics. And it is called the good when it is schematized in the realm of ethics. For some valuable illustrations of the way the concept of the sacred can be used in the study of comparative world religions, see

Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. W. R. Trask (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959).

94. CHAPTER 6: We can see the Oxford Group people also sometimes speaking in terms of the natural instincts, and the problems they raised for the spiritual life. For example A. J. Russell, *For Sinners Only* (Tucson, Arizona: Hats Off Books, 2003; orig. 1932), pp. 23-25, said that there were two basic natural instincts, which were the desire for Sex and Money. Russell was not interested however in the kind of balancing approach which Bill W. used, where one tried to avoid going to extremes in either direction. In the case of the sex instinct, Russell stated that “any perversion of thought or word or deed” and all “the lusts of the flesh” were to be put down and totally removed. He attempted to dress up this old rigid, puritanical approach in the new Freudian psychiatric language by saying that this was to be done, not by “suppression, but sublimation.” To begin with, he got the Freudian terminology partly wrong! He should have said “not by *repression* but by suppression and sublimation.” And although Freud — who had to survive in Vienna, which was run by the Roman Catholic church and its priests — had to state publicly that some people could live in total chastity by sublimating all their sexual desires, Freudian psychiatrists when working with patients rarely if ever saw that as a viable option. In the case of the natural desire for money (as a means to obtain food, clothing, and housing), Russell simply stated that “if no work was available, then we must live on Faith and Prayer,” and gave numerous examples of Oxford Group workers who seem to have survived for long periods of time, without holding any kind of salaried job at all, on donations, gifts, and grants from people who wanted to support their evangelistic work. The Oxford Group members tended to be, for the most part, either carefree students at elite universities or fairly affluent professional people, who took having money (and being able to make money) for granted.

95. Glenn F. Chesnut, *The Higher Power of the Twelve-Step Program: For Believers & Non-Believers*, Hindsfoot Foundation Series on Spirituality and Theology (San Jose: Authors Choice/iUniverse,

2001), chapt. 5, part 2, “The Myth of Perfection: Father John Doe’s Golden Books,” pp. 129-133. This section refers to Ralph Pfau (Father John Doe), *The Golden Book of Resentments* (Indianapolis, Indiana: SMT Guild, 1955), pp. 41-55, “The Myth of Perfection.” See also Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham, *The Spirituality of Imperfection: Modern Wisdom from Classic Stories* (New York: Bantam Books, 1992), which makes the point superbly, with numerous beautiful stories and tales, that human beings are necessarily always imperfect. Chapter 4 however, “A Sense of Balance,” pp. 56-67, is talking about a different kind of balance than the one which Aristotle and Bill Wilson discussed.

96. The section on “The Myth of Perfection” in Ralph Pfau’s *Golden Book of Resentments* begins on p. 43 with a quotation from Augustine to this effect: “Let us admit our imperfections so we can then begin to grow toward perfection.”

97. Heiko A. Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963).

98. Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand : A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: New American Library/Mentor Books, 1950); Philip S. Watson, *Let God Be God! An Interpretation of the Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1947).

99. This is a theme which runs through a large part of his autobiography. See Ralph Pfau and Al Hirshberg, *Prodigal Shepherd* (Indianapolis IN: SMT Guild, 1958).

100. A good many denominations in the United States come from Calvinist roots, including the old New England Congregationalists, the Presbyterians, the Dutch Reformed, and the Baptists.

101. CHAPTER 7: Big Book p. 58.

102. This has already been partially discussed in Chapter 4, in the section entitled “Show me your glory.”

103. John 4:24 and 8:32.

104. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, 2nd ed. trans. John W. Harvey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950). Rudolf Otto, *Das Heilige: Über das Irrationale in der Idee des göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen*, 11th ed. (Stuttgart: Friedrich Andreas Perthes, 1923). Otto took the term *Ahnung* from the German philosopher Jakob Friedrich Fries (1773-1843), who spoke of the *Ahnung* of the Infinite as the heart of spirituality, see Rudolf Otto, *The Philosophy of Religion Based on Kant and Fries*, trans. E. B. Dicker (London: Williams & Norgate, 1931). It was this study of Fries, as he notes at the end of that book, which prompted Otto to carry out his phenomenological study of the idea of the holy in religions all around the world.

105. See for example Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. W. R. Trask (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959).

106. *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age* (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1957), p. 63.

107. This was on page 14 of the Big Book, where he spoke of making a third step commitment after he had admitted himself into the hospital, and how, upon making that decision, “I felt lifted up, as though the great clean wind of a mountain top blew through and through.” In traditional evangelical theology, however, this was not a conversion experience *per se*, but the way in which God called him to preach, so to speak, because the outcome of this experience, Bill said, was the realization of the “thousands of hopeless alcoholics” to whom he needed to carry this message. In traditional evangelical theology, a conversion experience and a call to preach are both well-known but totally different kinds of spiritual experiences.

108. Big Book p. 12.

109. Big Book pp. 1, 10, and 12-13.

110. Big Book p. 56.

111. Big Book p. 46.

112. I Corinthians 12:31 and 13:13.

113. 1 John 4:7-13.

114. We also need to remember that in traditional Catholic and Orthodox theology, there are three hypostases in the Trinity but only a single operation (*energeia* or act). People who primarily focus upon the divine spirit (the third hypostasis) as their higher power are still effectively taking the entire Godhead as their higher power, because the entire Godhead always acts as one and as an inseparable unity.

115. Plato, *Republic*, 2 vols., trans. Paul Shorey, Loeb Classical Library (London: William Heinemann, 1935–7), 7.1.514A-3.518B. In 7.3.517B–C he said that the sun stood metaphorically for “the idea of the Good” (*hê tou agathou idea*), which was that which enabled us to see what is right (*orthos*) and beautiful (*kalos*), to recognize truth (*alêtheia*) and intelligible meaning (*nous*), and to act in a manner which was sane and sensible (*emphrôn*). This central concept therefore linked together the Good (and truth and beauty), and the establishment of the noetic realm (the realm in which the cognitive structures of our minds enable us to think intelligibly).

116. The Stoic philosopher Epictetus, for example, preferred to use the word *dogma* to refer to those basic principles of what we “should” do and “ought” to do, which we normally simply assume without question and then allow to dictate all our major decisions. So the entire Trojan war, Epictetus said, basically resulted from an unquestioned Greek dogma of that time about what you *ought* to do if your wife ran away with another man. See *Moral Discourses of Epictetus*, trans. E. Carter and T. W. Higginson, ed. T. Gould (New York: Washington Square Press, 1964).

117. See, for example, Eric Berne, *What Do You Say After You Say Hello? The Psychology of Human Destiny* (New York: Bantam Books, 1972); Susan Forward, *Toxic Parents: Overcoming Their Hurtful Legacy and Reclaiming Your Life* (New York: Bantam Books, 1989).

Also see Frederick S. Perls, *Gestalt Therapy Verbatim*, compiled and ed. by John O. Stevens (New York: Bantam Books, 1969), for example the stories he relates about Liz (pp. 87–95), and Maxine (pp. 142–152), and what Perls calls the “dybbuk” from the past who gets into someone’s mind and continues to dominate it with the poisonous emotions it inspires. In Jewish legend, a dybbuk is the ghost of a dead person which rises from the grave and totally takes over the mind of some living person, turning that man or woman into a mindless zombie who is rendered totally helpless and forced to speak the ghost’s words in the ghost’s voice, and perform the ghost’s actions.

118. Plato, *Republic* 7.3.517B–C.

119. See John Wesley, “An Earnest Appeal to men of Reason and Religion,” in Albert C. Outler (ed.), *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), pp. 384-424. See also Glenn F. Chesnut, *Images of Christ: An Introduction to Christology* (San Francisco: Seabury/Harper & Row, 1984), ch. 4 “The Vision of God” (pp. 50-67) and p. 151.

120. Jonathan Edwards, “A Divine and Supernatural Light,” in Jonathan Edwards, *Basic Writings*, ed. Ola Elizabeth Winslow (New York: New American Library, 1966), pp. 123-134. See also Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards* (Cleveland, Ohio: World Publishing Co., 1949), a superb intellectual biography of a man who was the greatest philosophical theologian whom North America has ever produced. And see also the reference to Chesnut, *Images of Christ*, in the preceding endnote.

121. For a study of this in the early Christian and medieval Eastern Orthodox tradition, see the beautiful and insightful book written by a Russian Orthodox priest named Vladimir Lossky, *The Vision of God*, trans. A. Moorhouse (London: Faith Press, 1963).

122. The best study in English of Maximus is the book by Lars Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator: The Theological Anthropology of Maximus the Confessor*, English revised by A. M. Allchin (Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1965).

123. That is, as Maximus puts it, we must learn to will the natural will instead of the gnostic will. All human beings by nature spontaneously will the Good (as what they truly most want and desire), which is what God also wills. *Gnômê* is simply another Greek word which, like Plato's term *doxa* or Epictetus' term *dogma*, means mere opinion or a never questioned or investigated common societal assumption. When we will the gnostic will we are refusing to make an authentic decision (as the twentieth century existentialist philosophers put it) and refusing to take responsibility for ourselves. Instead we listen to the opinions of the other people around us, and blindly and uncritically accept whatever they say as true, and then act on it. The goal of the spiritual life, Maximus says, is *theôsis* (the divinization of our human lives), which we accomplish by reviving the image of God within our souls and making that the center of our lives, instead of blindly doing whatever the craziest and most destructive people around us are telling us to do. And I would like to add, as my own note, that some of the sickest and most dangerous people I have ever run into were wearing clerical collars or nun's habits or hitting on a Bible or Koran up in the pulpit, or claiming that they were the only ones who possessed "the true secret" of real old-time A.A. while continually attacking people viciously and spreading resentment and hate towards others wherever they went!

On the nature of will and the image of God in Maximus' theology, see Vladimir Lossky, *Orthodox Theology: An Introduction*. trans. I. and I. Kesarcodi-Watson (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1978), p. 106, and Vladimir Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, ed. I. H. Erickson and T. E. Bird (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974).

124. The early twentieth-century existentialist philosopher Martin Heidegger pointed out the importance of understanding the deeper meaning of the Greek word for truth in his major opus, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco: Harper, 1962). A human being at the foundational level is *Dasein*, "that which exists here and now," either seeking or fleeing from *alêtheia* (truth), which is the moment of insight in which new Being appears through the

uncovering of the true ground of being. That ground is the soil in which all our ideas about Being and beings have their roots. The vision of the ground itself is the primordial vision of that abyss of No-thing-ness which lies beneath all our human ideas and concepts in its total otherness and alienness, which can be felt and intuited as a liminal presence, but can never be analytically described by words and concepts drawn from other areas of human knowledge, or “explained away” in terms of things even more fundamental and basic.

125. In Jonathan Edwards, *Basic Writings*, ed. Ola Elizabeth Winslow (New York: New American Library, 1966), pp. 123-134.

126. Sgt. Bill S. (with Glenn F. Chesnut, Ph.D.), *On the Military Firing Line in the Alcoholism Treatment Program: The Air Force Sergeant Who Beat Alcoholism and Taught Others to Do the Same*, Hindsfoot Foundation Series on the History of Alcoholism Treatment (New York: iUniverse, 2003). Modern A.A. people may first have heard this phrase from Clancy, the famous A.A. speaker from California, who has a well known talk entitled “Alcoholism, a Disease of Perception,” but my own research seems to show that Sgt. Bill (who got sober in 1948 and had an extremely successful military alcoholism treatment program going by the early 1950’s) was using this phrase long before Clancy.

127. Etienne Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (New York: Random House, 1955). Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: a Study of Human Understanding* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1957).

128. Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952). Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, repr. 1967 as three vols. in one (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951-63).

129. Big Book, from the Twelve Promises on pp. 83-84.

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## **Books by Glenn F. Chesnut**

### **Changed by Grace**

“Each century produces a small handful of great spiritual books. I believe strongly that *Changed by Grace* is going to prove one of the greatest of our present century .... Those who read it with an open mind will not only come to understand what spiritual experiences and spiritual awakenings are about, but will also learn the simple daily actions required to produce such awakenings. It is my prayer this day that all who read this book will open their minds like morning flowers and absorb the sunlight of the spirit contained within this book.”

John Barleycorn in *The Waynedale News*

### **The Higher Power of the Twelve Step Program: For Believers & Non-Believers**

“As an old hard-bitten, somewhat cynical surgeon I started reading it with a very critical attitude which quickly evaporated and I found much to admire and practically nothing to criticize. His discussion of higher power, God, spirituality and grace were very meaningful and not at all religious. I wish the book had been available for the many questions that my alcoholic sailors had that I could not answer. He makes the Twelve Steps good medicine for a host of problems. I hope the physicians of today will come to learn how many of their patients could benefit by sharing in the fellowship.”

Captain Joseph Zuska, M.D., founder of the Navy’s first program for the treatment of alcoholism at Long Beach. His program later became world-renowned when Betty Ford, wife of President Ford, and Billy Carter, brother of President Carter, were sent there for treatment.

“It should be required reading for anyone who wants to become a chemical dependency counselor. It makes the process of the spiritual awakening within the context of the twelve step program understandable to both professionals and lay person. It explains why that process is so necessary and vital within a person who is trying to grow within the twelve step program.”

Lori Croy, R.N., Psychiatric Nurse, Charter Hospital

## **Images of Christ: An Introduction to Christology**

“What a pleasure to have an outstanding historian of early Christianity now approach the key Christological issues from the perspective of their historical significance in the life of the ordinary believer, recovering it for the life and thought of this book’s readers.”

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“This unpretentious little book ... is full of many new interpretations of the Christological tradition (especially with regard to the continued relevance of Chalcedon and Maximos the Confessor) and it sums up the contemporary issues in a more fruitful way than most of the bulkier and more polemical essays in this field. It will bear the scrutiny of the experts and it will edify ‘plain folk.’”

Albert C. Outler, Professor of Theology, Southern Methodist University

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“This book describes the way alcoholics actually think better than anything I have ever read.”

William E. Correll, Board of Governors, Life Treatment Center

“From one sentence to the next my head was nodding and silently screaming YES, YESSS, YESSSSS, that’s exactly what I’ve observed about alcoholics and alcoholism.”

John Stark, newspaper columnist and advocate for alcoholism and drug addiction treatment, Fort Wayne, Indiana