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My “Agenda” Concerning Alcoholics Anonymous Discovering and Publishing Facts about Its Spectacular Early Successes by Dick B.

Early AAs claimed a spectacular 75%-to-93% *documented* success rate in the Akron and Cleveland, Ohio, areas among “medically incurable” alcoholics who “really tried.” Yet today, some scholars and government experts believe A.A.’s success rate is as low as 1%-to-5%. Something has changed!

Early works on the history of Alcoholics Anonymous, covering its critical developmental years from 1931-1939, are now more than twenty years old. My own research of the last ten years, analyzing that same period, and my fourteen published titles about it, have unearthed, pinpointed, detailed, and documented the six major spiritual roots of Alcoholics Anonymous and their impact on A.A.’s early successes. Other recent writings have covered some specific historical personalities that figured in the post-1939 period, but did not flesh out our early spiritual picture. This despite the fact that A.A. is appropriately called a spiritual program of recovery.

My purpose here is therefore to present, for all to see, my “agenda” concerning early A.A. history. And to put in the hands of AAs, the recovery/treatment community, and the Christian community, the facts about the historical role played by God, His Son Jesus Christ, and the Bible in the success of early A.A. Also, how that knowledge may be used to help carry the message to those who still suffer today.

A Good Question by a Good Writer

Not too long ago, my friend Mel B., who is a prolific writer for A.A. and Hazelden, graciously thanked me for a copy of one of my historical books. Then he said: “Dick, I now have a shelf of your books. Where does it all *end*?” That’s a good question. And the answer lies in how it all *began* and what gave rise to my search. Actually, Mel played a role in that beginning, along with A.A.’s former archivist Frank M. (now deceased), Dr. Bob’s son Smitty, Willard Hunter (an Oxford Group veteran), a small A.A. group, and myself. We presented two large conferences on early A.A. history in Marin County, California, in the early 1990’s. Each event was called “A Day in Marin.” And each program went to the heart of A.A.’s spiritual beginnings, with the foregoing men as speakers.

The State of Our Spiritual Roots History When the Search Began

Much has been uncovered and discovered about early A.A. in this last decade. But let’s start with what we had by about 1990.

In 1954, Bill Wilson and his secretary Nell Wing began taping their interviews of our A.A. founders and pioneers. In 1957, after A.A.'s St. Louis Convention was over, Bill felt it appropriate to publish a work he called *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age: A Brief History of A.A.* Over a span of twenty-six years, in more than 150 articles, Bill also wrote other bits, pieces, and fragments of history. And these were later published in 1988 by the AA Grapevine, Inc. in *The Language of the Heart*. Dr. Bob died much earlier, on November 16, 1950; and Bill died on January 24, 1971. And you've just seen the basic spiritual history we had during that earlier period.

Ernest Kurtz received a Ph.D. in the History of American Civilization in 1978 and began to study history. In 1979, he published *Not-God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous*. With Bill Wilson gone, historical interest was stirring at A.A.'s General Services. Bill's former secretary Nell Wing phoned Clarence Snyder in Florida and said New York just didn't know the oldtimers.. She proposed sending an A.A. staff person to interview Clarence, because, as she put it: "You do know them." And, of course, Clarence did, having been one of the original 40 pioneers, a sponsee of Dr. Bob's, and founder of A.A. in Cleveland where initial growth and success had been phenomenal. Out of this and other A.A. efforts came *DR. BOB and the Good Oldtimers* (an A.A. "Conference Approved" book). It was published in 1980. Its sequel (a biography of Bill Wilson) was published by A.A. in 1984 with the title *Pass It On*. In June, 1983, Bill Pittman completed a work which he published in 1988 and called *AA The Way It Began*

John H., the 1990 Seattle Convention, and the Gap

By summer in 1990, I had been sober a little over four years. I had been quite active in A.A., serving as a secretary, treasurer, general services representative, and in other A.A. commitments. I had sponsored a good many men in their recovery, been to many area conventions, and soon had my appetite for A.A.'s history thoroughly whetted. Here's how.

Prior to the summer of 1990, John H. (a young A.A. friend now dead of alcoholism) said to me: "Dick, did you know that A.A. came from the Bible?" John knew of my interest in the Bible, and we both had the same A.A. sponsor. But I replied that I did not know anything about the matter. I had never heard such a story. I told him I had never heard the statement from our mutual sponsor or grandsponsor or in any meetings. So John suggested: "Read *DR. BOB and the Good Oldtimers*." I did just that. And I became excited. I saw Dr. Bob quoted as saying A.A.'s basic ideas had come from Bible study. That *DR. BOB* book also said Scripture reading was stressed by the pioneers, and that early A.A. was known as a "Christian Fellowship." The A.A. book said early Akron meetings had been described as "old fashioned prayer meetings."

After reading that A.A. history, I rushed to read *Pass It On*. I saw that early AAs had wanted to call their society "The James Club" because they favored the Book of James in the Bible. I then

picked up Bill Wilson's *A.A. Comes of Age*, but was surprised and disappointed to see no references to the Bible and very little about the Oxford Group (from which a number of A.A.'s Bible ideas had actually come). There was a reason, Bill implied: The Roman Catholic Church was, at that time, much opposed to the Oxford Group's ideas, practices, and fellowship. Bill did not state why he had omitted the Bible from his accounts.

With that, I went to A.A.'s 1990 International Convention in Seattle. I expected to find specifics there. But alas, there were none. I wound up at an archives meeting where the Bible was not mentioned; the Oxford Group was alluded to; and a panel member had a book on the Oxford Group which he showed me after the panel discussion was over. I kept hearing them talk of "Frank." And I discovered that "Frank" was A.A.'s General Services archivist from New York. I asked Frank what he had on Sam Shoemaker, a leader of the Oxford Group. And Frank said he had very little but would send me a list of Shoemaker's titles. Interestingly, he sent me this material, and it simply quoted from Bill Pittman's *AA The Way It Began*. He also sent me a short pamphlet by the Oxford Group's Willard Hunter and A.A.'s Mel B.

The bottom line, however, was this: At an international convention of A.A., held 55 years after A.A. began, I could find no specifics on: (1) A.A. and the Bible, (2) The beliefs of the Oxford Group, (3) The relationship of either source to A.A., or (4) How or why A.A. had codified Oxford Group practices in its Twelve Steps. I could find nothing on Shoemaker's role either, except for laudatory statements by Bill Wilson that Shoemaker should be listed as an A.A. "co-founder" and was a wellspring of its spiritual ideas. The literature early AAs read was scarcely mentioned, but there was nothing on what that literature contained or indicating that it was primarily Christian. There was nothing at all on what Anne Smith had contributed, or on the journal she shared with AAs and their families. And there was nothing specific about "Quiet Time," except the statement in a 1938 report that Quiet Time was a "must" in the program and that it was observed in the early meetings and homes and also by individual AAs..

The "Agenda" Began to Crystalize

I am sure my almost immediate interest in our spiritual roots proceeded from several crucibles.

First, at eight months of sobriety, I had been in the VA psychiatric ward in San Francisco and was stone sober, but going nowhere, except to A.A. meetings and group therapy. I was filled with fear, shook like a leaf, and was so brain damaged that I often couldn't control what I was saying aloud. I was a very sick man. So, at the urging of my older son and his wife, I began studying the Bible. Things on the love of God, healing power of God, forgiveness of God, and the deliverance available through what Jesus Christ had accomplished for those who chose to accept him as Lord and believe that God had raised Jesus from the dead (Romans 10:9). The result was almost instantaneous. I believed what

the Bible said. Fear left. I began seeking God's guidance for events that lay ahead. Peace arrived at last. Reading the Bible and believing what it said had resulted in my deliverance, just as it did among early AAs.

Also, I had been an attorney, a very good one, trained at Stanford, Case Editor of its Law Review, a practitioner for 35 years, and an experienced researcher. But I had become a drunk and had resigned from the State Bar under fire after also having seizures in A.A. and being hospitalized at a treatment center. Nonetheless, my former zeal for research and discovery had apparently survived.

Further, I couldn't figure out why AAs were talking about some weird "higher power" instead of our Creator, God, like their basic text and Twelve Steps did. I had seen Bible words and phrases quoted verbatim (but without acknowledgment) in A.A.'s Big Book. I saw Bible words like Creator, Maker, Father, Father of Lights, Spirit. Bible phrases like "love thy neighbor as thyself," "faith without works is dead," and "Thy will be done." And my interest in their route to A.A. was much aroused.

Also, as my mind began returning, I wanted to escape the nonsense that was common fare in the daily meetings I attended: Absurd names for God, like "Ralph." and "doorknob." Half-baked prayers like "Here I am." Self-made religion where some said they didn't like their church, didn't like to hear the Bible mentioned, wanted no sharing about Jesus Christ, or claimed that A.A. *was* their religion.

Most important of all, I wanted to help the people I sponsored. Provide them with whatever truth there was in A.A. about our Creator. Show them the rock on which I felt recovery and A.A. itself must have been founded. But I had to learn facts.

And the "Agenda" was . . .

I wanted to know if A.A. really had taken its basic ideas from the Bible. And if it had, I needed to know what those ideas were. I could see that the facts were not to be found in A.A.. I had read Nan Robertson's *Inside AA*, which taught me there were archives to be seen, founding families to be interviewed, and significant historical places to be visited. That too became a part of my agenda. Without interviews, no facts; and I had interviewed dozens of witnesses as a lawyer. But there was more. Early A.A. writings and talks had to be found and studied for references to the Bible, Christian literature, the Oxford Group, Sam Shoemaker, Anne Smith, and Quiet Time. That meant travel and research. More important, I realized from Bill Pittman's book and from a reference or two in Kurtz's *Not-God* that there was plenty of Oxford Group, Shoemaker, and other early A.A. Christian literature that had never been examined, analyzed, or made available, even to AAs. So, reading many thousands of pages became part of the agenda as well.

Again, the main agenda? To see if A.A.'s ideas came from the Bible; and, if they had, then specifically what those ideas were and how they impacted on the Steps, the Big Book, and the Fellowship. And if the facts could be documented, then to make sure that they were made available to AAs themselves, to Al-Anons, to clergy, to the treatment community, to the government, and to non-profits. But the dissemination part had to wait on the research, travel, and writing. And, as a lawyer often finds when he begins to unearth evidence, the whole and truthful picture is often surprising and has often been badly distorted by prior investigations and prejudices..

The Pleasant Surprises

I found, from many years of law practice, that if the truth is diligently sought, it usually can be found. Lots of new truths often emerge. That's the case whether one is looking at raw evidence, interviewing witnesses, or searching collateral leads. It's also true when one is searching for the "purple cow" precedent that will show what the law actually is, or should be, in a given case. Many many times, I have had a hunch that turned into a lead that turned into a case or fact that won the day. Anyway, my quest for A.A. history and Bible sources had all the same ingredients as preparation for a major legal case, and there would be no disappointment.

For example, I had read in *DR. BOB* that our co-founder had given away all of his religious books (very large in number). But I went to Akron, visited Dr. Bob's daughter Sue Smith Windows, and was surprised by her many trips to the attic to bring down Dr. Bob's books. Later, she was to let me see all she had. Dr. Bob had inscribed his name in many, along with the date he had obtained them. Dr. Bob's son and daughter-in-law came up with an equal number of books they owned. I could see clearly that Dr. Bob had read the Bible extensively, as well as books about the Bible, Jesus Christ, prayer, healing, love, and so on. I read those books. And Charlie Bishop published my first history: *Dr. Bob's Library*. Ernie Kurtz wrote the Foreword.

Then, from Kurtz's own book, I found a reference to a notebook Dr. Bob's wife had kept. I contacted Dr. Bob's daughter Sue and also my friends, Bill Pittman, Frank M., and Bill W.'s secretary Nell Wing. I wanted to see and study Anne Smith's notebook for myself. I submitted a letter to the Trustees of A.A. through Frank M., with a supporting letter from Dr. Bob's daughter Sue. And I was given a copy of Anne's journal. I was absolutely amazed. Anne had written this journal between 1933 and 1939. Sue had typed part of it for her mother. Anne had recorded many Bible verses and ideas, Oxford Group and Shoemaker ideas, Quiet Time practices, and even the literature early AAs were reading. Step language, though not so labeled, was present. Later, from Dennis C., an A.A. historian, I was to learn that Anne had shared from her journal with AAs and their families in the morning at the Smith home. Sue Smith Windows said people came there each morning for what they jokingly called "spiritual pabulum." I discovered Anne Smith had been called "Mother of A.A." and for good reason. Her journal contained the heart of the program before it was committed to writing.

Next, I tackled the Oxford Group. I read and read. I was put in touch with all the early Oxford Group people who were active when Bill and Bob were in the Oxford Group and even long before. I put together twenty-eight ideas that came from the Oxford Group and could be found in A.A. Later, I found dozens of actual phrases in A.A. that paralleled those in the Oxford Group. I got the lead to those phrases from *Pass In On*. I got the phrases from the Oxford Group people I interviewed. And I documented them from Oxford Group books I studied. Bill Pittman published my first Oxford Group/AA book and also my first Anne Smith book. Endorsements from Dr. Bob's kids, the Seiberlings, the Shoemaker family, and the Oxford Group pioneers were easy to come by because all wanted the facts known. In fact, they wanted to know them for themselves!

I'll not go into all of the rest of the search. My findings will come in future articles; and AnonymousOne.com has already presented one on Rev. Sam Shoemaker's role in A.A.. But my original quest in 1990 to learn if A.A. had come from the Bible turned into a major, ten-year project that unearthed spiritual sources, ideas, practices, and literature AAs hadn't heard or seen for years and years. Yet many of the materials had been codified in our A.A. program. And, because they were not remembered, different expressions and complete distortions emanated from them: God had become a "tree." Religious had become "spiritual." Bible became "books." Quiet Time became "meditation." Revelation became "intuition." And the Serenity Prayer (which begins with the word "God") became "acceptance."

There are many A.A. searchers today. Some collect books. Some start groups. Some write books. And I'd like to mention several of the book-writers. Mel B. wrote *New Wine* which has a summary of some spiritual sources. Mary Darrah wrote *Sister Ignatia* which chronicles work of the tireless nun who helped Dr. Bob at St. Thomas Hospital after the Big Book was written and A.A.'s Oxford Group tie was broken. Mitch K. wrote *How It Worked*, a book about Clarence Snyder and Cleveland A.A. It focused on what began there in 1939 just after the Big Book was written. It helps confirm the astonishing early Cleveland 93% success rate. There are books now on (1) Father Dowling (who met Bill after the program was developed and became Bill's Roman Catholic "sponsor"). (2) Bill's own "sponsor" Ebby Thacher, (3) Bill himself, (4) Sam Shoemaker, and (5) On every aspect of the Oxford Group. But the heart of the early A.A. spiritual program as reported by trustee-to-be Frank Amos in 1938, and the details about it, have unfortunately and consistently been given a back seat or completely ignored until my work began.

Where Does It End?

For the first time in perhaps 50 years, the spiritual history of A.A. made an appearance at an International Convention 2000. Not **on** the Minneapolis Convention grounds. But as **near** to them as one could get. A group of dedicated AAs rented a church next door to the Convention.. They exhibited a historical video, many of our early religious books, and many historical books (including all of mine).

They presented a panel of speakers. But why not **at** the Convention? Why not at all Conferences? Why not in A.A. meetings? Why not in A.A. Conference Approved Literature? Why not a complete uncovering of A.A.'s connection with the Bible, Quiet Time, the Oxford Group, Sam Shoemaker, Anne Smith (the Mother of A.A.), and the religious literature that fed our program?

My agenda was to get the facts about A.A.'s biblical roots. And the facts have largely been unearthed. Then, I wanted to know what that had to do with early A.A.'s success rates. Early A.A. claimed a 75% success rate among "medically incurable" alcoholics who really tried. We know the names of most of these people because their pictures are on the wall at Dr. Bob's home and their names are written in rosters. Bill Wilson claimed an 80% success rate. Early Cleveland A.A., which grew from one group to thirty in a year, documented a 93% success rate and has the names and addresses to confirm the fact. And Jack Alexander wrote in his 1941 *Saturday Evening Post* article that there was a 100% success rate among non-psychotics.

Today's TV and radio shows are filled with talk of the drug and alcohol problem. They seldom speak of the early A.A. solution: the power of God as recorded in the Bible and utilized in the early fellowship. The *dissemination* of truth about early A.A. and its reliance on God is now probably the greatest "agenda" item on my plate. Progress is being made. There is growing interest among AAs themselves, where the present failure rate of perhaps 90 to 95% is a matter of common knowledge and grave concern. Also interest among the churches, therapy community, and non-profits.

A.A.'s former archivist Frank M. often said: "Whenever a civilization or society perishes, there is always one condition present. They forgot where they came from." We now know for sure that A.A. came from the Bible, just as Dr. Bob said it did. We now know many of the specifics. And there's lots of history concerning the details. Day by day, the gap is being filled by those searching and researching for more of the truth. Making the documentable facts known *is* my "agenda."