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A Good Question by a Good Writer

By Dick B.

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 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 the search. Actually, Mel played a role in that beginning, along with A.A.’s former archivist Frank Mauser (now deceased), Dr. Bob’s son Smitty, Willard Hunter (an Oxford Group speaker), myself, and a small A.A. group that 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 went to the heart of A.A.’s spiritual beginnings, with the foregoing men as speakers.

Where Our Spiritual Roots Were When the Search Began

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

About 1954, Bill Wilson and his secretary Nell Wing began taping the remarks of our founders and pioneers. In 1957, after A.A.’s St. Louis Convention was over and Bill had finished having a manuscript edited by Father John C. Ford, Bill felt it appropriate to publish that work as *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age: A Brief History of A.A.* Then, over a span of twenty-six years, in more than 150 articles, Bill wrote bits and pieces and fragments of history. And these were later assembled and published by the AA Grapevine, Inc. in *The Language of the Heart*. Dr. Bob died on November 16, 1950, and Bill W. died on January 24, 1971. And much has been uncovered and discovered about early A.A. since those dates.

Ernest Kurtz received a Ph.D. in the History of American Civilization in 1978 and began to study history after professional experience in both religion and psychology. In 1979, Dr. Kurtz published *Not-God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous*. In June, 1983, Bill Pittman completed a work in partial fulfillment of his Bachelor of Science Degree at University of Minnesota; and by 1988, the work was published as *AA The Way It Began*. Meanwhile, 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 that New York just didn’t know the oldtimers.. She asked permission to send an A.A. staff person to interview Clarence, because, as she put it: “You know them.” And, of course, Clarence did, having been one of the original 40 pioneers, a sponsee of Dr. Bob’s, and the founder of A.A. in Cleveland where initial growth and success rates had been phenomenal. Out of this venture 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*.

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

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By the summer of 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 service jobs in various A.A. groups. I had sponsored a good many men in their recovery, been to many area conventions, and had my appetite for history thoroughly whetted. Here's the reason.

Prior to 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 A.A. and the Bible. I'd never heard such a thing. I said I knew nothing about that story and had never heard it from our mutual sponsor or grandsponsor or in any meetings. So John said: "Read *DR. BOB and the Good Oldtimers*." And I did just that. And I became excited. To be sure, Dr. Bob was quoted as saying that A.A.'s basic ideas came from their study of the Bible. The *DR. BOB* book said that the Bible was stressed, and that early A.A. was known as a "Christian Fellowship." It said the early Akron meetings had been described as "old fashioned prayer meetings."

From that historical piece, I hastened to read *Pass It On* and saw that early AAs had wanted to call their society The James Club, because they favored reading the Book of James. I 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 came.

With that, I went to A.A.'s International Convention in Seattle. I expected to find there the specifics. 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 one 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 the General Services archivist from New York. I asked Frank what he had on Sam Shoemaker, a mentioned leader of the Oxford Group. And Frank said he knew very little but would send me a list of Shoemaker titles. Interestingly, he sent me material from Bill Pittman's *AA The Way It Began* and a short pamphlet by the Oxford Group's Willard Hunter and A.A.'s Mel B.

The bottom line, however, was: At an international convention of A.A. held 55 years after A.A. began, I could find no details about A.A. and the Bible, what the Oxford Group believed, what its relationship to A.A. was, or how A.A. came to base its Steps on Oxford Group practices. I could find nothing on Shoemaker's role other than laudatory statements by Bill that Sam should be listed as a "co-founder" of A.A. and a wellspring of its spiritual ideas. The literature early AAs read was mentioned in small part, but there was nothing on what that literature contained or 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 a mention 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 individuals.

The "Agenda" Began to Crystalize

I am sure my interest in our spiritual roots proceeded from various crucibles. (1) At eight months of sobriety, I had been in the VA psychiatric ward in San Francisco and was going nowhere,

except to A.A. meetings and group therapy. I was filled with fear. I shook like a leaf. I was sufficiently brain damaged that even I could tell I didn't know what I was talking about. And on and on. I was "sick." So, at the urging of my older son and his wife, I began studying the Bible. Things on the love of God, the healing power of God, the forgiveness of God, and the deliverance that could come because of what Jesus Christ had accomplished for those who chose to accept him as Lord and believe that God had raised His son from the dead. The result was almost instantaneous. The fear left. I began seeking God's guidance instead of trying to program my future, events that lay ahead, and the rest of my life. Peace arrived at last. In other words, reading the Bible and believing what it said had resulted in my deliverance, just as it had for early AAs (but I didn't know about the early AAs yet). (2) I had been an attorney, a very good one, trained at Stanford, Case Editor of their Law Review, a practitioner for 35 years, and an experienced researcher. But I had become a drunk and had resigned from the bar in disgrace after having seizures in A.A. and being hospitalized in a treatment center. Nonetheless, my zeal for research and discovery had apparently survived. (3) I was having difficulty understanding why people were talking about a "higher power" instead of talking about God as the Twelve Steps and Big Book and early AAs had done. I saw 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," "Thy will be done," and so on. (4) Most of all, as my mind returned, I wanted to get away from the nonsense that was common fare in the meetings I attended: Absurd names for God like "Ralph." Half-baked prayers" Self-made religion with people saying they didn't like their church; they didn't like to hear about the Bible; and that it was against the Traditions to mention Jesus Christ. As a solution, they said that A.A. was their religion. (5) Finally, I wanted to help the people I sponsored, help them with the truth about God, and help them understand the rock on which I felt recovery and A.A. itself must have been founded. But I had to know the facts..

And the "Agenda" Was. . . .

What it boiled down to for me was simple. I wanted to know if A.A. really took its basic ideas from the Bible. And if it did, I wanted to know what those ideas were. I could see that the facts were not to be found in A.A. Conference Approved literature or in the meetings I attended or the Conference Speakers I heard. I had read Nan Robertson's *Inside AA*. That book indicated that there were archives to be seen, founding families that could be interviewed, and significant historical places that could be visited. That too became a part of the agenda. Without interviews, no facts; and (as a lawyer) I had interviewed dozens of witnesses. But there was more. Early writings and talks had to be studied for references to the Bible, to Christian literature, to the Oxford Group, to Sam Shoemaker and to Quiet Time. That meant travel and research. More important, I realized from Bill Pittman's book and from a reference or two in Dr. Kurtz's book that there was plenty of Oxford Group and Shoemaker and other spiritual literature that had never been examined, analyzed, or made available to AAs. So reading many thousands of pages became part of the agenda. Again what was the main agenda? To see if A.A. ideas came from the Bible; and, if they did, 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 and travel and then on the writing. And, as a lawyer often finds when he begins to seek and unearth evidence, the real truth is often vast and surprising and often badly distorted by previous 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 unearthed. Moreover, lots of new truths emerge. That's the case whether you are looking at raw evidence, interviewing witnesses, or searching collateral leads. It's also true when you are searching for the "purple cow" precedent case that will show what the law actually is or should be in your case. Many many times, I have had a hunch that turned into a lead that turned into a case or a fact that won the day. That's what's good about the law. When you're not drinking too much! Anyway, the quest for A.A. history and Bible sources had all the same ingredients as preparation for a major legal case, and there was to be no disappointment.

For example, I had read in *DR. BOB* that our co-founder had given away all of his spiritual books (very large in number). But when I went to Akron and visited Dr. Bob's daughter Sue Windows, I was greeted by her trips to the attic to bring down Dr. Bob's books. And the books had Dr. Bob's name inscribed by him in them 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 had. And then I could see that Dr. Bob had read the Bible, books about the Bible and Jesus Christ and prayer and healing and love, and so on. I read those books. Charlie Bishop published my *Dr. Bob's Library*, and Ernie Kurtz wrote the Foreword.

Then, from Kurtz's book, I found a reference to a notebook Dr. Bob's wife had kept. I contacted Dr. Bob's daughter, my friend Bill Pittman, my friend Frank Mauser, and Bill's secretary Nell Wing. My objective was to see and study Anne Smith's notebook. I submitted a letter to the Trustees of A.A. through Frank with a supporting letter from Sue. And I obtained Anne's journal. I was aghast. Anne had written this journal between 1933 and 1939. She had recorded all the Bible ideas, Oxford Group and Shoemaker ideas, the Quiet Time practices, the Bible verses, and even the literature early AAs were reading. Later, through my friend Dennis C., an A.A. historian, I was to learn that Anne had shared this journal with AAs and their families every morning at the Smith home. Sue Windows said the AAs came there for "spiritual pabulum." After more interviews and reading, I discovered that Anne was 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 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. Bill Pittman published my first Oxford Group/AA book for me and also my first Anne Smith book. Endorsements from Dr. Bob's kids and from Oxford Group people were easy to come by because they all wanted the facts known.

I'll not go into all of the search. But I interviewed all the Seiberling children, T. Henry Williams' daughter, and Sam Shoemaker's wife and daughters to find out what actually took place at those early meetings and the facts about the contributions of Henrietta, T. Henry, Sam Shoemaker, Anne Smith, Dr. Bob, and Bill's Oxford Group circle in New York. I went to the Akron newspapers for 1933 when it all began. Lo and behold. The entire story was emblazoned in the papers with the very kinds of expressions by Oxford Group people in Akron that AAs themselves use all the time: self-centeredness, meditation, resentment, fear, and so on.

In other words a simple agenda in 1990 to learn if A.A. came from the Bible and what it had borrowed from the bible turned into a major, ten-year quest that unearthed spiritual sources, ideas, practices, and literature that AAs had never heard of for decades. Yet these sources in some cases were codified in the A.A. program. And because they were not known, different expressions and complete distortions emanated from them: God became a tree. Religious became 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 searchers today. Some collect books. Some start groups. Some write books. And I'd like to mention several of the writers. Mel B. has written *New Wine* which summarizes some of our sources. Mary Darrah has written *Sister Ignatia* which chronicles the work of the dedicated nun who helped Dr. Bob at St. Thomas Hospital once the Big Book was written and the Oxford Group tie was broken. Mitch K. has written a book on Clarence Snyder and the Cleveland picture (*How It Worked*) which began in 1939 just after the Big Book was written and where the astonishing 93% success rate was achieved with the early program. There are works now on Father Dowling, who met Bill after the program was developed and became Bill's Roman Catholic "sponsor." There are studies of Bill's sponsor Ebby Thacher, of Bill himself, of Sam Shoemaker, and books galore on the Oxford Group. But the heart of the early A.A. program as reported by trustee-to-be Frank Amos in 1938 and the details about it were consistently ignored and specifics could not be found until my quest 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. Not **at** the Convention. But as near to it as you can get. Just as near as the drunk junk booths at the other end of the Convention buildings. A group of dedicated AAs rented a church next door to the Convention and presented a video, many of the early spiritual books, and many historical books (including all of mine). A panel of speakers (most of them early dinosaurs) covered reminiscences. But why not **at** the Convention? Why not at all the Conferences and Conventions? Why not in the meetings? Why not in A.A. Conference Approved Literature? Why not in full at Dr. Bob's Home? Why not at A.A. General Services in New York? Why not a complete uncovering of A.A.'s connection with the Bible, with Quiet Time and what it meant, with the Oxford Group, with Sam Shoemaker, with Anne Smith the Mother of A.A., and with the religious literature that fed the program?

Well, our agenda was to get the facts about A.A.'s biblical roots. And the facts have largely been unearthed. Then, we wanted to know what that had to do with A.A.'s success rates then. We know now that 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, TV and radio shows are filled with people talking about the drug and alcohol problem. They seldom talk about the solution of early A.A.: the power of God as recorded in the Bible and utilized in the early fellowship. The *dissemination* of the truth about early A.A. and its reliance on God is now probably the greatest "agenda" item on our plate. And progress is being made. There is growing interest among AAs and churches, where the present failure rate of perhaps 90 to 95% is a matter of common knowledge and grave concern.

As A.A.'s former archivist Frank Mauser said in so many of his talks: "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, as Dr. Bob said it did. And we know many of the specifics.. There's lots of history concerning the details; and day by day, the gap is being filled by those searching and researching for more of the truth.