

A Look at “Meditation” in Early A.A.

By Dick B.

The Names They Gave It

Practically none of the names for early A.A. “meditation” was a Biblical name although “prayer and meditation” (as Bill Wilson called them in the Big Book) certainly had Biblical roots—particularly as prayer and meditation were practiced by A.A.’s pioneers.

One of the earliest names was “**The Morning Watch**.” The expression was often used in prior years by the YMCA, by Harry Emerson Fosdick, by Rev. Sam Shoemaker, and by many others from whom AAs took their ideas. Sam Shoemaker was to write later that he preferred the expression “**Quiet Time**” because the principles often needed to be practiced throughout the day and also had a way of slipping from the morning to a later part of the day. “Quiet Time” was an expression widely used by Sam Shoemaker, by Oxford Group people, by early AAs, and in many religious circles. I first heard the expression at an A.A. meeting in Marin County, California, and didn’t have the slightest idea what it meant—though it seemed to involved a “quiet period” before the day’s affairs were started.

“**Two-way prayer**” became an Oxford Group term for describing prayer as “speaking” to God and “meditation” or “quiet time” as “listening” to God. Then came the word “**Guidance**.” You sought “guidance.” You asked for “guidance.” You “got guidance.” And you consulted other believers for “guidance” if you couldn’t understand the meaning of the thoughts that came. “Guidance” was a term used by Christian pro-genitors like F. B. Meyer and his *The Secret of Guidance*. Meyer’s influence extended to the Student Christian Movement, Christian Endeavor, and Oxford Group members. Hence directly and indirectly to A.A. and its founders.

The real emphasis was on “*listening*” for “luminous thoughts.” Then on the necessity for writing them down, preferably in a journal. I have in my possession copies of personal notations from Rev. Sam Shoemaker’s journal in 1931 and in 1934 to 1936. They mention the Firestone family members and their trip to Denver in 1931; and the journal entries later mention “Bill Wilson” and other Oxford Group team members by name. The stress on listening gave rise to Oxford Group expressions like “God gave man one mouth and two ears. That should tell you something!” Writing thoughts down gave rise to the expression that the ancient Chinese believed the strongest memory is paler than the weakest ink.

Oddly, though the words “prayer” and “meditation” are both used in the Bible and easily understood in the Bible and in English, they were shunned by the Oxford Group and some of the A.A. pioneers in favor of the catch phrases above. There was a growing failure to continue mention of the Bible sources. There was a new stress on non-Biblical substitute language, and the added intrusion of “New Age” and Eastern concepts. And all contributed to the kind of self-made religion, self-made meditation ideas, and self-made interpretations of what had been three very simple and clearly comprehended expressions **from the Bible: (1) Prayer. (2) Meditation. (3) Revelation.**

Our early believers prayed to our Creator. Believers meditated on (pondered) God’s

Word—the Bible. And, if God chose to make such guidance available, they received revelation—particularly Word of Knowledge and Word of Wisdom (See 1 Corinthians 12:7-11). The Bible is filled with examples. And, in his title, *The God Who Speaks*, the great theologian (later an Oxford Group supporter) B. H. Streeter cited many examples of these and another revelation manifestation.

What Did “Meditation” Really Involve?

Some of our forbears had the gift of describing with simplicity the desired period they set aside for reading, praying, and communicating with God.

The Reverend Howard C. Blake, a Presbyterian, had much of the same background that Dr. Bob had as a youngster. He often went to church four times a week, belonged to Christian Endeavor, and committed himself to doing the will of God. He also was involved in Student Christian Movement activities, worked with Sam Shoemaker, and kept a close association with Oxford Group founder Dr. Frank Buchman for 32 years. *In Way to Go: Adventures in Search of God’s Will*, Blake wrote this about searching for the will of God:

It is the fulfillment of the promise Jesus made when he said the Holy Spirit would come and teach (p. 64).

Every day I pray for God to guide and direct my thoughts. So I set aside a time for quiet each day in order to let it happen. My conviction is, however, that I am more likely to be receptive if I have begun the day in a disciplined way to listen in the morning (p. 65).

We began by reading the Bible, praying, and then being quiet. After about three thoughts had occurred to me, it became more difficult to receive a further one without forgetting those that had come before. So we found it would clear our minds for some new thought if we **made notes on what had already come** (p. 66, bolding added).

A guide book that came out of Sam Shoemaker’s Calvary House (headquarters of the Oxford Group in America), said:

The more general results of the Quiet Time are: (1) A firsthand experience of God through Christ, the **Bible**, **prayer** and the **listening** for the voice of the Holy Spirit. . . (Howard J. Rose, *The Quiet Time*, last page, bolding added).

Very simple. Read the Bible. Pray. Listen. (Write). Sam Shoemaker described it with equal simplicity in *The Conversion of the Church*, pp. 59 to 61:

Listening became the dominant note. Not the exclusive note: for there was **Bible study** first, taking a book and studying it straight through; there was **ordinary prayer**, confession, petition, thanksgiving, intercession. But the bulk of the time is listening. Most of us find it indispensable to have a **loose-leaf notebook**, in which to write down the things which come to us (bolding

added).

Very simple. Read the Bible. Pray. Listen. Write! And Dr. Bob followed suit:

Dr. Bob's morning devotion consisted of a short prayer, a 20-minute study of a familiar verse from the Bible, and a **quiet period of waiting for directions** as to where he, that day, should find use for his talent (*DR. BOB and the Good Oldtimers*, p. 314, bolding added).

Very simple. Read the Bible. Pray. Listen!

How They Did These Specific Things During Meditation

Study the Bible: There were many instructive books and pamphlets available to early AAs that made practical suggestions for Bible study. One of the principal ones was edited by Oxford Group leader and writer Roger Hicks (who had been with the Oxford Group team that came to Akron in 1933). Significantly, it was titled: *How To Read The Bible* and was available from "The Oxford Group" at Berkeley Square in London.

Roger Hicks provided a very specific guide to study of the Book of Acts, and covered many other topical Bible sections as well. He cited, as sources of the Oxford Group's biblical ideas, some of its most popular books of the day (*When Man Listens*, by Cecil Rose; *Life Began Yesterday*, by Stephen Foote; *For Sinners Only* by A. J. Russell; *The God Who Speaks*, by Canon B. H. Streeter; among others). Anne Smith (Dr. Bob's wife) had recommended to early AAs in her journal that they start their Bible study with the Book of Acts; follow up with the Gospels and then the Epistles of Paul; leave Revelation alone for a while; but be sure to read Psalms and Proverbs.

Sam Shoemaker strongly recommended using Donald W. Carruthers' *How To Find Reality In Your Morning Devotions*. Carruthers stated:

Regard the Bible as God's case-book, recording the experiences of various men in finding God as well as the repeated instances of God's revealing more and more of Himself to men. . . . Be sure you have some definite plan of approach to the Word. Then work your plan. Make as study of (A) The Bible as a whole, or (B) The Individual Books, or (C) The Personality Delineated, or (D) The Evident Principles set forth, or (E) The Unfolding of God's Promises (p. 1).

Shoemaker himself, his Assistant Minister W. Irving Harris, and other Shoemaker people all had a crack at how and where to study the Bible. Furthermore, either Shoemaker or Frank Buchman had Rev. Cleve Hicks lead Bible study at Oxford Group house-parties. And Dr. Buchman hired a famous Bible teacher—Miss Mary Angevine—to teach Bible to Oxford Group people to get them sharp on God's Word. Both Anne Smith and A.A.'s Big Book suggested the use of "helpful" books, and this certainly was part of the widespread use of *The Upper Room*, *My Utmost for His Highest*, and *The Runner's Bible* for pertinent verses and further study. Details can be found in Dick B., *Anne Smith's Journal*, *Why Early A.A. Succeeded*, *The Good Book and The Big Book*, *By the Power of God*, and *The Books Early AAs Read for Spiritual Growth*.

Pray: In *How To Find Reality In Your Morning Devotions*, Carruthers suggested “four steps in the process” of prayer: (1) Get “tuned in,” by which he suggested reading well known passages from the Word that bring God close to you; reading the words of some hymn that makes it easier for you to think high thoughts; *beginning prayers with thanksgiving and make your confession of sins and failures*, (2) Pray for the day’s special opportunities and perplexities and ask God’s blessing on your appointments, on your period of refreshment, and on the particular burdens the day is to lay upon you. (3) Pray for the progress of the Kingdom at Home and Abroad, the Problems of Your Community, The Peace of the World, The Church of the Lord Jesus, The Spread of Christ’s Message, and so on. (4) Pray for those you love most in the world, that the Truth may come home to those who have not found Him great and good and near.

There are many categories of prayer, suggested prayers and methods of prayer, and even daily prayers suggested in the Bible devotionals AAs used each day. The important thing to note is that healing, forgiveness, deliverance, guidance, strength, and needs are all appropriate (See for specific details and discussion, Dick B., *Anne Smith’s Journal*, 1933-1939)..

Talk with God: When we briefly look at Scripture references, we will see the ways in which we can talk with God and the ways in which He can communicate with us. Unfortunately, many of today’s discussions leave out the Bible, the sonship with God, and fellowship with God and hence do not present the full ingredients of what Sam Shoemaker called a “full-orbed Quiet Time.” But there are ample guides early AAs had available from Shoemaker’s writings and from such Oxford Group literature as Bremer Hofmeyr’s *How to Listen*, Forde’s *The Guidance of God*, Leon’s *The Philosophy of Courage*, Cecil Rose’s *When Man Listens*, Howard Rose’s *The Quiet Time*, Sangster’s *God Does Guide Us*, Streeter’s *The God Who Speaks*, and Winslow’s *Vital Touch with God: How to Carry on Adequate Devotional Life and When I Awake*.

A full and detailed description of the details of Bible study, prayer, and talking with God can be found in Dick B., *Good Morning!: Quiet Time, Morning Watch, Meditation, and Early A.A.*, *The Oxford Group and Alcoholics Anonymous*, and *New Light on Alcoholism: God, Sam Shoemaker, and A.A.*

What God Said in the Bible Was the Real Guide

We haven’t found anyone in the Oxford Group, the Sam Shoemaker circle, or early A.A. who was presumptuous enough to make up the reading to be done, the prayers to be uttered, or the listening techniques without reference to the specifics in the Bible about attaining status as a child of God and following God’s directions. The biblical references are amply covered in Dick B., *The Good Book and The Big Book*, *Turning Point*, and *Good Morning*. So there is no need to enlarge this article with lengthy citations. But there is profit in noting these conditions God laid down and which were often quoted in Oxford Group, Shoemaker, and devotional literature.

- “But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know *them*, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor 2:14).

One not born again of the spirit of God could whistle Dixie before he could receive, understand, or witness to the Word of God, prayer to God, or communications from God.

We know God. We love Jesus. But the Spirit seems an unreal accessory in a theological formula. The Spirit giveth life. He is God's Messenger. The Spirit has been given to illumine the Word, to bring the Truth to light and to teach us how to pray. The Spirit guides men (Carruthers, *How To Find Reality*, supra, p. 7).

Rom.12, 2 "Be transformed in nature" . . . 2 Cor. 5, 14-15 "There is a new creation whenever a man comes to be in Christ". . . Eph. 2, 1-10 "God's gift" . . . Phil 3, 7-16 "Knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." (Roger Hicks, *How to Study the Bible*, supra, p. 32)

The Conditions For An Effective Quiet Time: The whole-hearted giving oneself to Jesus Christ, the daily offering of ourselves, our souls and bodies in His service (Gal. 2:20; Romans 12:1-2). Howard J. Rose, *The Quiet Time*, supra, p. 2).

Some of the Scripture that called for a new birth through believing on Jesus, obedience, and a turning to God for meditation in His word, to speak to Him, and to hear from Him:

- Ye must be born again (John 3:7—frequently cited and discussed by Rev. Shoemaker)
- That if thou wilt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved (Romans 10:9—"the word of faith" discussed and cited by Winslow, *Why I Believe in the Oxford Group*, and others).
- Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and ye shall be my people (Jeremiah 7:23)
- Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths (Proverbs 3:5-6)
- My voice shalt thou hear in the morning, O Lord; in the morning will I direct *my prayer* unto thee, and will look up (Psalm 5:3)
- Speak, Lord; for thy servant heareth (1 Samuel 3:9)
- O how love I thy law! it *is* my meditation all day (Psalm 119:97).
- Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15)

Conclusion

In today's A.A., you cannot say the foregoing comments are representative of the Big Book text, the beliefs of most AAs, or their "prayer and meditation" practices. You can say, however, that these are the things they pioneers did, that they studied, that they believed, and that they used with great success.

And not to know these roots is, for some, walking into a tangled bunch of roots without understanding one sure way out that worked from 1935 to 1939. The tangled roots certainly exist for the confused newcomer entering from a Christian background, some knowledge of the Bible, and a desire to retain his belief system while pursuing today's A.A. **Dick B.:** Email: dickb@dickb.com; URL: <http://www.dickb.com/index.shtml>.

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