

Bill Wilson on the Oxford Group

"What did A.A. learn from the Oxford Group and why did they leave them?"

AA's first step was derived largely from my own physician, Dr. Silkworth, and my sponsor Ebby and his Oxford Group friend, Rowland Hazard. I refer to the medical hopelessness of alcoholism - our 'powerlessness' over alcohol.

The rest of the Twelve Steps stem directly from those Oxford Group teachings that applied specifically to us. Of course these teachings were nothing new; we might have obtained them from your own Church. They were, in effect, an examination of conscience, confession, restitution, helpfulness to others, and prayer.

I should acknowledge our great debt to the Oxford Group people. It was fortunate that they laid particular emphasis on spiritual principles that we needed. But in fairness it should also be said that many of their attitudes and practices did not work well at all for us alcoholics. These were rejected one by one and they caused our later withdrawal from this society to a fellowship of our own - today's Alcoholics Anonymous.

Perhaps I should specifically outline why we felt it necessary to part company with them. To begin with, the climate of their undertaking was not well suited to us alcoholics. They were aggressively evangelical. They sought to revitalize the Christian message in such a way as to "change the world." Most of us alcoholics had been subjected to pressure of evangelism and we never liked it. The object of saving the world - when it was still very much in doubt if we could save ourselves - seemed better left to other people. By reason of some of its terminology and by exertion of huge pressure, the Oxford Group set a moral stride that was too fast, particularly for our newer alcoholics. They constantly talked of Absolute Purity, Absolute Unselfishness, Absolute Honesty, and Absolute Love. While sound theology must always have its absolute values, the Oxford Groups created the feeling that one should arrive at these destinations in short order, maybe by next Thursday! Perhaps they didn't mean to create such an impression

but that was the effect. Sometimes their public "witnessing" was of such a character to cause us to be shy. They also believed that by "converting" prominent people to their beliefs, they would hasten the salvation of many who were less prominent. This attitude could scarcely appeal to the average drunk since he was anything but distinguished.

The Oxford Group also had attitudes and practices which added up to a highly coercive authority. This was exercised by "teams" of older members. They would gather in meditation and receive specific guidance for the life conduct of newcomers. This guidance could cover all possible situations from the most trivial to the most serious. If the directions so obtained were not followed, the enforcement machinery began to operate. It consisted of a sort of coldness and aloofness which made recalcitrants feel they were not wanted. At one time, for example, a "team" got guidance for me to the effect that I was no longer to work with alcoholics. This I could not accept.

Another example: When I first contacted the Oxford Groups, Catholics were permitted to attend their meetings because they were strictly non-denominational. But after a time the Catholic Church forbade its members to attend and the reason for this seemed a good one. Through the Oxford Group "teams", Catholic Church members were actually receiving specific guidance for their lives; they were often infused with the idea that their Church had become rather horse-and-buggy, and needed to be "changed." Guidance was frequently given that contributions should be made to the Oxford Groups. In a way this amounted to putting Catholics under a separate ecclesiastical jurisdiction. At this time there were few Catholics in our alcoholic groups. Obviously we could not approach any more Catholics under Oxford Group auspices. Therefore this was another, and the basic reason for the withdrawal of our alcoholic crowd from the Oxford Groups notwithstanding our great debt to them. -NCCA 'Blue Book', Vol. 12, 1960

- Compiled by Jim B. at www.barefootsworld.net/askbillw.html