

HOW DO I BEGIN? By Hallen Viney

(For those of you who don't know, the Oxford Group is where Alcoholics Anonymous got most of their spiritual principles & spiritual practices from. The following is a powerful & practical way to have a conscious contact with God and to establish two-way prayer. This was written in the 1930's.)

It is all very well for you people to talk, but what I want to know is "How do you get that way?" There's obviously something to this Oxford Group business, and what I'd like to know is "How do I start?"

The speaker, a typical product of modern life, put down his glass and challenged me with a puzzled expression to answer him directly.

'Well,' I said, 'it's a matter of being in touch with God and ---'

'Yes, I know,' he interrupted, 'you all say that, but "touch with God," means nothing to me. What I want to know is how do I begin? What forms do I fill in? What do I have to do?'

'First of all I believe that God wants to talk to you. It is just as simple as that.'

'He's never talked to me,' he replied.

IT'S AN EXPERIMENT

'No,' I said, 'perhaps you have never been within calling distance. It isn't much good saying "Hello" to a friend if you know beforehand he is looking the other way and not listening. How can God talk to you if you don't listen?'

'But even if I did listen, as you say, God wouldn't talk to me. How could He?'

'You haven't tried it yet. Why, people all over the world have tried listening and say that God does talk to them. You need to make the experiment.'

'All right,' he said, 'I'll try anything once. What do I do? Shut my eyes or something? But I'll bet you nothing will happen.'

'Remember, there are one or two conditions attached to this listening. It's rather like telephoning; God can't talk through a dirty contact. If you want to hear what He has to say, you must first find out, as I had to, whether you've got a good connection.'

FOUR TESTS

'Well,' he said, 'probably I haven't. I don't claim to be a saint, but I am as good as the next man.'

'Exactly, but if you really want to listen to God you have to be more definite. If something goes wrong with the telephone, the troubleshooter doesn't say, "I don't claim this telephone is working well, but it's as good as the next one."

First of all he's got to find the fault in the telephone and then to put it right. You have to be just as definite with yourself as the trouble shooter is with the telephone.'

'How do I do that?' he said.

'Well, there are four pretty good test to help you to be definite in finding these faults. They are absolute honesty, absolute purity, absolute unselfishness and absolute love. When I first met this Oxford Group crowd I didn't know much about religion, but I DID know what honesty meant, and when I thought about ABSOLUTE honesty some very concrete faults came into my mind. It was uncomfortably definite.'

'You mean to say,' he went on, 'that if I thought about absolute honesty, purity, unselfishness and love, I might find a few things about myself which stop this listening business?'

WRITE THEM DOWN

'Yes, I do. And a good way I found to make it more definite was to take four pieces of paper and head each one with one of those absolutes. Ask yourself the question, "Where am I not being absolutely honest?" Don't say "everybody does it," or "it doesn't matter." As answers begin to form in your mind don't argue with them, just write them down whatever they are, absolutely

honestly. It's not a bad way to start "listening-in." Then go on to the next absolute, and so on. I began to write down quite a lot when I thought about it like that. In fact, I began to wonder if the paper would hold out!

'I can understand that,' he said, 'and supposing I draw up this incriminating list, what then?'

'Well, like the trouble shooter with the faulty telephone, it's not enough just to know what is wrong and leave it at that. The thing is to put it right. It often means uncomfortable things like apologizing to people, paying back money, and ---'

'If I started apologizing ---' he interrupted ruefully. 'But I see what you mean,' he continued. 'I begin by writing down everything that is wrong and then put it all right.'

THE POWER BEHIND IT

'Yes, that's the first step - as God guides you. But here is the secret of the business. If you make this list honestly, you find you cannot put things in order yourself. I found, for example, there were habits I knew were wrong which I ought to put right, but every now and then they defeated me. Like a child with flypaper, the more I flapped, the more these things stuck. A man can't live up to these absolute standards on his own strength.'

'How do I do it,' he said, 'if I can't do it in my own strength?'

'You need something more than your own strength to deal with some of your problems. Take fear for instance. You can give yourself six excellent reasons why you shouldn't be afraid of Mr. So and So. You say to yourself strongly you are NOT afraid of him, and yet you're still afraid of him. It's the same with worry. You need extra power to get rid of it, don't you?'

'Yes,' he said, 'I suppose I do.'

'Well, now, that something more is the power of Christ, as an experience in your own life. Christ faced all human problems. He was always obedient to what God told Him, and He found power over them. Now we can have the same power ourselves because of what He did, because of His death and resurrection.'

'I don't know that I follow all that; I'm afraid I don't know much about this religion business.'

'Don't worry about the theory now. A lot of people can switch on the light without knowing much about electricity. The main thing is to get the light. In the same way, a lot of people get into first-hand touch with God without knowing all the theory at first. They understand more later, as they gain more experience.'

'I see. Well, how do I get in touch with God?'

'You have to make up your mind to give God complete control of your life. It is the inward attitude, the set of your will that counts. Do you really mean business? If so, God will see you through.'

A DECISION FOR LIFE

'You mean,' he said, 'if I really want to stick to it.'

'It's a decision for life. It means carrying out God's will seven days a week and twenty-four hours a day.'

'What does that imply in practice?'

'For one thing it means getting up earlier to listen to God. An alarm clock may be a help. If you feel chained to your bed, put the clock out of reach across the room.'

'How long should I listen?'

'As long as you feel you need. Most of us began with a few minutes and find we need an hour or so now. Some people sit up in bed with a pencil and note-book, others dress first.'

'What happens? Do I hear a voice or something?'

'No, God normally talks to people through their thoughts. It's the natural way for Him to reach you. Let Him put questions to you about your business, and your home life, and the bit of the world you live in. Think over the problems of the day against the background question, "What does God want?" rather than "What do I want?" You will find convictions forming in your mind as to the right thing to do. Write these convictions down.'

'Why write them down?' he protested.

'Well, you won't forget them and can go over them later to see if they've been done.'

'But how am I to know whether these thoughts are from God?'

'You can test them by those four standards: Absolute Honesty, Purity, Unselfishness and Love. They'll naturally be in line with the New Testament. If in doubt, you can check them with other people who listen to God.'

'Yes, that sounds practical enough. But I would need to talk it over with some one who had taken the plunge before I could see things really straight. Most of us, you know, are experts at deceiving ourselves. As I understand it, first if all I have to be honest with myself and then take my orders from God every day.'

A GOD-CONTROLLED WORLD

'Yes, that is what the Oxford Group is out for, to get God in control of people like you and me.

'Human nature is the real problem. Change that and we're well on the way to solving social, economic and national problems. Everyone admits moral recovery has got to come before economic recovery can be permanent. Besides, God-controlled people make God-controlled nations, and only God-controlled nations will achieve world peace.

'That's what we are enlisting for - and I'm putting all I've got into it. Why don't you try it?'