

This is a magazine article about a week long Oxford Group National Assembly in Massachusetts that was attended by ten thousand people. For those of you who don't know, the Oxford Group is where Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob first got sober, where AA got most of its principles, and where most of the Steps come from. It is rumored that Bill and Lois Wilson were in attendance at this Assembly. – Barefoot Bill

“THE OXFORD GROUP CHALLENGES AMERICA”
By Emily Newell Blair
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(Many of us have been curious about the Oxford Movement; perhaps we have scoffed a bit at its "queerness" because we have not understood it. Here is a vivid report of its National Assembly, which must arouse our interest in the Group and its great purpose - the spiritual awakening of America.)

Do you know the Berkshires? I did not until I saw them in June this year. I shall never forget my first impression of those modest, friendly hills in western Massachusetts among which nestled little towns in the New England tradition: Stockbridge, Lenox, Great Barrington, Lee, Egremont.

We drove through wide tree-lined streets with wide sodded parkways on each side and ambling unmatched gravel walks. Inns with spacious verandas faced the streets. We passed a church with a thin spire and a porch; a columned town hall with a green between it and the street. Houses spread all over the countryside, large dignified houses set back of deep lawns. Up the side streets were cottages. High on the hillsides sat rambling farmhouses. Along the winding roads we passed large estates. The business blocks were few and seemed to exist only to serve these houses in which, apparently, life centered. A pattern of town designed by our Puritan ancestors to accommodate what was, to them, the good life; a pattern so dear to us that even today one of the rewards of great wealth is to be able to retire to one of these towns and luxuriate in small-town life.

History, I discovered, lives in these towns - in the age of the trees, the architecture of the pale red brick or white clapboard houses. The Mohicans, whose happy hunting ground it was, are called to mind by their graves and the unpainted house where John Sergeant first converted them to Christianity. Jonathan Edwards is recalled by the church where he preached and the benches where his hearers trembled while he depicted the horrors of hell; and Cyrus Field, by the little house where he received the first cable message.

The best of our past, these towns appear, offering sanctuary to the present - a perfect setting for what I saw in them: a National Assembly of the Oxford Group to start a spiritual awakening in America.

As became a Decoration Day, the Assembly began with a parade called as became the place, "A Cavalcade." Simple, but meaningful, as well as beautiful. Just behind the band which led the parade, an Indian chief on horseback in full regalia, the chief of the Mohicans, who had been brought as a guest from far-off Wisconsin. A lonely figure there in his ancestral home, but a graceful one, disinherited but serene, a lesson and a reproach in one.

Next, in a stage coach, those who interpreted God on this frontier: the Jonathan Edwards who preached to the whites a God of judgment, the John Sergeant who taught the Indians of a God who sent His Son to die upon the cross.

Following, where it belongs - after but near religion - education, personified by the Mark Hopkins who founded near-by Williams College, seated on a log talking to a student - President Garfield's idea, so he said, of a liberal education.

Then a break in the parade. It moved from institutions to men on the march ever expanding the scope of their activities. The flags of the state which had grown out of that remoter past, large flags, beautiful in their blues and oranges and white, floating from a phalanx of spears held slanting forward. A picture of our national expansion, of our diversity in unity.

After them a covered wagon to suggest the Westward, Ho! of the pioneers of '49, but behind it an automobile of '36 to signify the Eastward, Ho! of today. A cartoon of our economic history.

As the climax came members of the Oxford Group - an unarmed army of today which sees the world to be won for God. They marched in sections: youth in one; city and farm workers in another; the men and women east of the Mississippi; the men and women west of it; representatives of Oxford University, from

which the Group has already spread under an American founder to fifty countries; a detachment of Canadians.

Last of all, the flags of the nations, with three brigadier generals in front of them.

The past tied up to the present marching briskly into the future. Up the west street it went, bands playing, until it came to the green in front of the town hall at Stockbridge. Against the facade of this hall a rostrum had been built - a high one seating five hundred, for the singers; below it, another stand for the speakers; in front of that, one lower yet for the two bands. On to the benches providing for five thousand people went the marchers. Beside them was an ancient bell tower. Across the street behind them, an old cemetery. Over them a canopy of trees. And in front the rostrum.

The program? A short pageant, "The Quest of Humanity." Speeches: "The Need of America," by an American statesman; "The Voice of Youth," by a young woman and a young man; "Revolution by Consent," by a young Englishman.

Then, the singing of "The Song of the Bridge Builders," written for the Group by a Scotch choirmaster and sung under his leadership by five thousand voices:

"On sure foundations
Build we God's new nations;
Strong and clear,
Tells each year
Of new-bridged relations.
As land reaches to land
On a world front we stand,
And build together
What none shall sever,
Bridges from man to man
The whole round earth to span!"

Came other speeches: A French Baroness. A Dutch political leader. A member of the House of Lords. The theme of all was the same. Through the Oxford Group, they had found the answer to the world's problems. Not one problem only. All. And what was the answer? That the only way to solve the world's problems is first to solve those in our own lives.

Listen to the Baroness de Wattsville-Berckheim. Slight, the Baroness, exquisite, delicate, with gray hair above a young face and teeth with the sheen of her pearls. A figure one might expect to see in a reception line or in an exclusive drawing room. But something never gained from a drawing room shone in her eyes and sounded in her voice as she said: "I am French. I was a nurse in the war, my husband was in the army. After the war we had to remake our lives. I feared war. It was a great fear. I am an Alsatian - a French Alsatian. I did not like the Germans coming in where they were not invited. I would not speak to one. Then I became Oxford Group. And I saw that I could not expect peace between my country and Germany if I, a Frenchwoman, had hate in my heart against the Germans. I gave up my hate. I learned to know Germans. Now we have in Alsace an Oxford Group house party of Germans and French together. Only as we learned peace in our hearts can our nations have it."

So in effect, said all the speakers. Sin in ourselves multiplied by sin in millions of others is what is wrong with the world. The place to begin to change it is in ourselves!

James Watt, a young British Communist who has had to leave his party since his identification with the Oxford Group, put it thus: "The changed lives of the men and women who are speaking here is the answer to the world's problems. It bridges the gulf that separates master from man, class from class, nation from nation. This is indeed a revolution taking place by and through the consent of men and women throughout the world today."

What these people talked about was a way of life to be gained by the practice of what are called the "four absolutes": absolute honesty, absolute purity, absolute unselfishness, and absolute love. As they practice these, they open their ears to God and listen. As they act upon what they hear, they behave differently. All this preceded by a complete surrender of their lives to God and willingness to do anything He asks. This only, they believe, gives the power to follow this way of life.

People had been coming to the Berkshires for over a week - people in the Oxford Group, people curious about the Group. A trainload from California. Men and women from every state in the union. Four hundred from Canada. Sixty from overseas. Ten thousand in all came during the week. They had come to live together - some for a day or two, some for the whole time of the Assembly; to tell each other of their spiritual problems and experiences; to sit together silent while they listened to hear what God might say to them. For God, they believe, did not stop talking to men after New Testament days. As He spoke to Isaac and Isaiah, Jeremiah and Amos, to the Apostles and the early Christians, so He can and will speak today to those who will listen. Every meeting, therefore, at the Assembly, large and small, had its moments of silence when they listened. "Quiet times," they call these moments. We have been accustomed, they say, when we commune with God to do all the talking. Why spend all the time telling Him what we think He ought to do, and never wait to hear what He wants us to do? Pray, they suggest, but pray for ten minutes, and listen for twenty.

"Guidance," they call what comes to their minds during these "quiet times." Guidance not only as to important things, such as litigation, or an economic question, or a family problem, but guidance in the small affairs of daily life. It is a practice, they believe, to be adopted and applied to all activities, since everything great and small has its place in the pattern of your life, and in God's plan for you and the world.

Are they, then, starting a new religious organization? Not at all. The Oxford Group has no membership, no dues, no paid leaders. It has no new creed nor theological theories. It does not even have regular meetings. It is merely a fellowship of individuals who seek to follow a certain way of life. A determination, not a denomination, they say. First-century Christian principles in twentieth-century application. Neither a substitute for a church nor the substitution of one, itself, the Oxford Group practices deepen church ties for those who have formed them and send others to make them. Identified with it are Roman Catholics, Episcopalians, Methodists, Presbyterians, Baptists - members of all churches and none.

"Not a creed," says its founder, "but a revitalizing of such creed as the individual may have allowed to decay."

What fellowship in the Oxford Group involves, they tell you, is the acceptance of a discipline. This discipline is not rigid, nor is it enforced, except by the individual's own conscience. Briefly, it is this: They rise early enough in the morning to have a "quiet time" before they begin their day, and do what they have been "guided" in that time to do, be it to write a letter, see a certain person, or give up some habit. They make restitution to any one they have wronged - if it is a matter of money, they restore it; if it is an untruth they have told, they confess it. They forswear hate and resentment, not by good intentions but by tracing these emotions to their source - the pride and vanity in themselves - and "surrendering" them. They talk over with some other "surrendered" person their sins and witness what they have experienced in spiritual gain in order to help others. They try to bring others to the same way of life.

Surrender, restitution, listening to God and accepting His guidance, sharing experiences in order to help others - these are the practices which the Group adopts in order to be spiritually reborn. The purpose is to demonstrate the spiritual quality of life that is possible under God's guidance and so to bring the world to a realization of the power of the Holy Spirit as a force for the betterment of the world.

What are they like, these people? At Stockbridge there was every kind. Rich and poor and in-between. A member of the New York Stock Exchange and a poor schoolteacher. A former president of the Manufacturers' Association of Canada and a Canadian baker. A retired Navy Commander and a professional gambler. An investment broker and a leather salesman. An assistant vice-president of the Chase National Bank and a stunt pilot. A movie actress and a waitress. The wife of a New York millionaire and a stenographer. Doctors, merchants, lawyers, politicians, ministers and engineers, clerks and factory workers, housewives and women mill hands.

Every kind, too, intellectually. In the "International Team," as a group of workers made up of persons from many nations including America is called, were an English Lord, a member of the British Labor Party, a Scottish Baronet, and a young man who had been a member of a Communist committee. These four with Dr. J. E. W. Duys, the Socialist leader from Holland, often appeared on the same platform. They still held their own economic and political opinions and worked for their acceptance. But they had discovered, they said, that they could hold these opinions without antagonism to those who thought differently.

Different as they were in some ways, the members of the Oxford Group at Stockbridge appeared alike in two. For one thing they all seemed surprisingly young.

The Group undoubtedly makes a great appeal to the young. As one young woman, late of the Junior League and Vassar College, put it:
"Youth likes adventure. This is the greatest adventure I have met."

But there are other reasons. Youth is in great need today of a faith in something beyond and greater than itself, but young people look on religion as practiced after the age-old formulas as prosy and dull.

The Oxford Group presents religion to them in modern dress. They understand the psychological import of its practices. Its vocabulary is fresh and new to them. And it deals first of all with experiences and goes from that to theory, which tallies with the pragmatic philosophy with which they are familiar. Then, too, youth has a capacity for spending itself, provided it is for something that captures its imagination. The purpose of the Oxford Group to change the world does challenge it. As one young man said:
"I am with the Oxford Group because I have but one life to live. I can afford to spend it for nothing but the most important thing in the world."

But there was more to the effect of youth in that crowd than the number of those who lacked years. Something in the Group apparently makes people young. When I looked more carefully, I saw gray hair. But the hats above it were worn with an air. The shoulders of the wearers were up. You could not associate them with age.

In something else they were different and alike – like each other and different from others. I could not decide at first what it was. I saw only that they were surprisingly direct, friendly without being ingratiating. Impersonal, I called it, for lack of a better word. What I finally realized was that here were people without "fronts." Open-faced. No salesmanship of self. As only what you actually are counts, they believe, there is no point in pretense. All over the place you saw individuals getting rid of it. At least you saw two people in conversation and concluded they were "sharing," by which is meant telling some one else the truth about yourself.

There are, they explained, two kinds of sharing. In one kind a person tells another individual or a group of individuals of something he has done, or felt, either because his experience may help the others, or because he thinks it the honest thing to do. But in the other kind of sharing, a person picks out some one surrendered individual and frankly talks over with him his worst sins. This they call "deep sharing," or sometimes, "sharing under the four eyes," meaning the eyes of the two sharing.

Either kind of sharing, of course, robs the one who has shared of pretense. He has exposed himself as he is. Inevitably his manner becomes more natural. It was that I had noticed. But "deep sharing" is for a deeper purpose. Not only is it to bring to light sins that have been hidden in the soul and there plagued its owner but to relieve him of them. It thus produces a sense of absolution and sometimes, they say, removes temptation.

Is this "deep sharing" a compulsory part of Oxford Group fellowship? This question is difficult to answer, since the only compulsion is that of the Holy Spirit, and only the individual himself can know what the Holy Spirit has guided him to do. But if one has guidance and does not follow it, he is not, of course, following this way of life and cannot expect results. Certainly no one in the Group compels him to share or tells him what to share. This, too, should be emphasized: The one who wishes to do "deep sharing" himself chooses the one he will make his confidant. Nor has that confidant the right of judgment. He may advise and throw light on a problem from his own experiences. But no one in the Group is the conscience of another. God is the only mentor. The individual shares only what he himself thinks to be wrong with him, following his own guidance.

"Witnessing," which is designed for a different purpose, should not be confused with sharing, even though it may include some form of it. The object of witnessing is to bring others to this way of life. What they say, therefore, when witnessing at a public meeting or even witnessing to an individual (as they may in striving to help that individual) deals primarily with their own reasons for surrendering their lives to God and its concrete results. If, in order to tell this, it is necessary to acknowledge some sin in order to show how they were given a victory over it, they may do so, inasmuch as they would not hold back anything that would help that other to surrender. A man cured of drink, for example, would gladly witness to it that others might be cured. If some difficulty due to pride or vanity or greed had been overcome, a witness would not hesitate to mention the sin or the difficulty if the telling might bring others with a similar difficulty to the Group way of life. But he is supposed to do it with discretion and good taste. Sometimes, naturally, zeal may overstep these bounds, but this is not often as, before each witness meeting, it is customary for those who are to speak to

have a "quiet time" together and share what they feel guided to say. As to the efficacy of this, I can only say that seldom have I listened to speakers who presented so objectively their own experiences.

The Oxford Group, be it noted, does not employ dissertation or exhortation. Religion, it believes, is caught, not taught. Thus, the presentation in short, graphic, often epigrammatic, sentences, of the experiences of individuals. In their variety, it is thought, they reach the varied needs and problems of their hearers,

What the Group is out to do is nothing less than to win the world for Christ. "If I can be changed," they say, "another can be changed; if another, a hundred; if a hundred, a million; if a million, ten million; if ten million, the world."

For ten days I stayed with these people in the Berkshires. They were scattered in six towns and a camp. In each town were daily meetings, morning and evening, with the whole group gathered each afternoon under the Stockbridge trees. The programs dealt with such subjects as The Family, Politics, Business. Few meetings have been held so free from "isms," economic, political, educational. Only brief statements to the effect that the application of the four absolutes would reform these fields, and the witnessing by individuals as to how this application had changed their own economic, business, and political practices, or points of view.

Personal experiences were piled on personal experiences. The cumulative effect was to indicate that as more and more people lived the Oxford way, the institutions themselves would improve and the world become such as Christ asked for when He prayed, "Thy Kingdom come." Whatever the pet cures of the speakers for present ills, they held up only the one objective, "a God-guided world."

"Thoughts in a quiet time," they say, "are the bricks in the new social order."

But they do not wait for the building to be designed before they use their bricks. They begin to use them now, believing that when enough are used, the new order will emerge.

A man in Basel, for example, refuses to move his factory from Geneva when his patent runs out there, even though he would prefer to have it in his own city, because it would put two hundred men out of jobs. Another destroys a munition formula which, if sold, would yield him a fortune. A butcher tells his employer that he cannot cheat, and the employer changes his policy. A foreman apologizes to his workmen and prevents a threatened strike. A Danish manufacturer, out of "quiet times" with thirty of his staff, works out a plan for increasing his production so that he can employ one thousand men instead of five hundred.

"Stewardship," they call this. All they have they hold in trust for God to spend as He guides them. An English country gentleman is guided to sell his estate and live in a small flat so he can work for and give money to the Group. A woman tells her husband that she does not need a motor and spends the money for treatment of a sick friend. Where God guides, He provides, they say. Those who have provide for those who have not. Nor does pride prevent acceptance. It is not charity that gives, but stewardship. That all this does not solve the social or economic problems, they would acknowledge, but, as things are, they would say, it is a step away from possessiveness, greed, and self-indulgence. That such practices will ultimately lead to a better and more just social system they undoubtedly believe. As the Honorable Carl Vrooman, an assistant secretary of Agriculture under President Wilson, said, "Substitute stewardship for greed as the driving force in our economic life, and we could produce enough wealth to satisfy all classes and enrich our common life beyond any seen before."

Their feeling about the improvement of the social system was expressed by Lord Addington, of the great English firm that prints England's paper money, thus: "God can work only through men like you and me. All through history He has worked with them. The way is to put ourselves under His guidance."

Loudon Hamilton, of Christ Church, Oxford, one of the British leaders, expressed the same thought differently in the words, "The sin of adopting an attitude instead of responsibility, of having a point of view but not an experience."

Here is a simple instance of what they mean: The research director of a milling machine factory drove toward the Assembly, where he had rooms at a hotel. He picked up a boy hitchhiking to the camp established by the Group near Lee. The boy had tried everything else in the thousand miles he had traveled since leaving home, and thought he would see what this was like. The research director asked himself, "Am I doing all I can for this boy by driving him to camp and leaving him?"

His answer was to cancel his hotel reservation and stay at the camp with the boy. Better this, they think, than mere discussions of the problem of the vagrant boy.

This camp was to me the most interesting part of the Assembly. In it were one hundred and twenty men and boys, their ages ranging from thirteen to fifty-odd. Among them bartenders, pugilists, taxidrivers, policemen, janitors, scholars, ministers, sculptors. They called it "The First City Run by God." It had no officers and only one rule – that there should be no rule. Literally, they did just this. Yet, practicing as they did the four absolutes of honesty, purity, unselfishness, and love, the camp ran with precision and economy. The canteen, to take a spectacular example, was run by a man who had been a pickpocket and a strong-arm man. It had no cashier. The men took what they wanted and paid for it. Yet accounts balanced.

What caught me particularly about the faces at the Assembly was that mouth corners all went up instead of down. One has only to notice any crowd of adults to discover how unusual this is with those over thirty, how rare with those over forty. All well dressed, too. They make a point of appearance. Yours to add to the scene, not detract from it. This does not mean, however, expensively dressed. I gather that most of them spend less rather than more on clothes since they went into the Group. Their practice of stewardship accounts for this. The woman who has wealth is likely to dress two where she once dressed one. There are many in the Group who have little money to spend on clothes. For theirs is not a moneymaking religion. It does not necessarily pay bills or raise salaries or increase profits. But neither does it regard poverty as a virtue. To meet it valiantly – yes. To accept it with humility – yes. But they take seriously Christ's words, "Ask and ye shall receive." They believe that He will see them through. So they turn over to Him their needs. Miraculous answers aplenty they report, but if there is no miracle, they do not regard envy, resentment, jealousy as the proper counter-irritant.

The planner, the Chief Marshal of the Assembly, was Dr. Frank Buchman, who started the movement fifteen years ago. Pennsylvania born, of Colonial ancestry, he had gone abroad unhappy after some disagreement over the social work he had been doing in Philadelphia. Always religious and imbued with a desire to help his fellow man, he yet felt defeated in his effort to lead them to Christ. For a year he wandered. Then, in a little English church, he had a religious experience which left him convinced that it was possible for men to surrender their will to God and by receiving the direction of the Holy Spirit actually practice the four absolutes. Naturally he felt impelled to carry this message to others. He went with it down to Cambridge. Then, with a few Cambridge students, he took it to Oxford. There, in the room of a war-weary young Scotchman, Loudon Hamilton, some Oxford students accepted his message and decided to adopt this way of life. Hence the name, Oxford Group. They called themselves at the time, "A First Century Christian Fellowship," but when a few of them went out to Africa to carry this message, the newspapers referred to them as "The Oxford Group." Thereafter, though its founder was not an Oxonian, was not even an Englishman, the name stuck.

Dr. Buchman, or Frank, as he is called by the Group, has traveled all over the world – China, India, Australia, Africa, Japan, and all Europe he has taken in his stride. From America to Europe he has weaved back and forth, constantly adding to the Group – Americans going with him to Europe, Europeans coming with him to America. In all that time he has lived by faith – for he has no income. Now, he is consulted by prime ministers and kings, prelates and statesmen. But he is still the same unpretentious man.

As that of an exemplar of his message, his personality is worth study. What impresses me most in him is the rare combination of personal meekness and humility with the authority of leadership. This is exemplified by this incident:

"I must share with you," said a man, "that I do not like your personality."

"I know," he answered. "I've often wondered why God should call a person like me to do this work. But He has."

In this simplicity and faith of Dr. Buchman we have, it seems to me, the key to his effectiveness. It is what makes him at once so powerful and so unselfish, so direct and so unself-conscious in his dealings with men. Since his ego does not enter into situations, he regards himself, and so is regarded, as a vehicle or instrument of truth.

Yet he is not distant or cold. Few men have so many others devoted to him. And he has gifts. His knowledge of human nature is amazing, his sensitivity to atmosphere and situation, his instinct for the dramatic, his astuteness, his sense of strategy, his courage. But he himself would explain these gifts, I believe, by what he once said of the Group, "Ordinary men doing extraordinary things – that is the genius of the Group."

With Dr. Buchman was the Reverend Samuel Shoemaker, Rector of Calvary Church in New York, one of Dr. Buchman's lieutenants in this country, and a number of others who give all their time without salary to the Group work. For the most part, however, teams, as they call working groups, are made up of people who salvage time from their other work, whether to operate in their own towns, or to journey to another country.

Thus far I have written of the Group as "they," setting forth this Assembly and the Group as an unbiased observer explaining only as necessary their practices. Now I step into my own character, as in honesty I must. When I went to this Assembly, I had never attended one of the Group's large meetings. I had never seen them at work. I had heard few of them speak. But I was identified with them.

Over a year ago I came to one of those periods common to the middle-aged – and today, even to the young – when they lose faith in themselves, in life. Then there came to my notice some articles about the Oxford Group. Critical in tone, they were not designed to win adherents to it. Nevertheless, I thought the Group which they discussed had a technique and a discipline which would give one what I needed. I felt, too, that only when people in large numbers were free from the tyranny of their own egos could they ever solve the personal problems men must solve if society's problems are in turn to be solved.

Circumstances brought me in contact with a member of the Group. She told me of her experiences and the few simple steps by which, through surrender of her life to God, new power and purpose came to her. I decided to take those steps. Since then, in one year, I have discovered more about myself than in fifty previous ones. And I have found a peace, a contentment, I never had before. I feel more free, more alive, more independent of fortune. I have found a way to work for world improvement that offers hope. Above all, I have a clearer realization of that X we call God which makes life seem a development of something beyond the immediate.

I went to this Assembly as a reporter for GOOD HOUSEKEEPING. The Editor went as an invited guest. We tried to see the Group objectively. We saw the human beings there as human beings with all their human limitations and handicaps. But we saw them, too, in the process of transcending their human limitations and handicaps. We saw the teaching of Christ actively at work in men as the yeast works in the dough. We saw what miracles self-surrender can perform in men. We came away with the feeling that we had caught a glimpse of evolution in operation. This effort of man to transcend man was enough to give us both hope for man, for his world.

"America, Awake" was the message carried on the Oxford Group's poster for this Assembly. It was the message of the programs. The awakening of America through the individual regeneration of its citizens. As crusaders, the members of this Group go out to carry this message across the country. They go in the belief that the faith that can move mountains can remove from our hearts hate, greed, vanity, and all the deadly sins, and that when they are removed from our own hearts, they will be removed from our economic system, our politics, our business. May it not be that in these Berkshire hills, where our forefathers sought to found a nation dedicated to God, there has been sounded a message which will bring that nation to practice what alone will make it so – those principles preached so long ago on the hills of Galilee?