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THE OXFORD GROUP MOVEMENT

IN the year 1908, the Rev. Frank N. D. Buchman,—a Lutheran clergyman from Pennsylvania, U.S.A.,—paid a visit to England. Shortly prior to that visit, he had passed through an experience of disappointment, and had left America with anything but kindly thoughts of the people who had occasioned it. These people, six in number, were members of a Committee which had the supervision of a hospice for young men which Dr. Buchman had founded and conducted in Pennsylvania. A difference of opinion on the question of policy between Dr. Buchman and the Committee led to their breaking the bond of fellowship. The details of the disagreement, and the question as to which party was in the right, are of little account here; the sequel alone is interesting. Dr. Buchman left Pennsylvania, sailed for Europe, and after a period of travel on the Continent, attended the 1908 meetings of the Keswick Convention in England. The deepest spiritual impressions which he received during Convention week were not received at any of the Convention meetings however, but at a service in a small village church near Keswick where he heard a woman address a handful of people on "Jesus Christ the Crucified." "There", Dr. Buchman admits, "something happened! Something for which I shall always be grateful." . . . "It produced in me a vibrant feeling, as though a strong current of life had suddenly been poured into me, and afterwards a dazed sense of a great spiritual shaking up."¹

As a direct result of this experience Dr. Buchman wrote to each of the six members of Committee whose action had led to his leaving Pennsylvania, apologizing for his having nursed ill-will against them, and heading each letter with the verse:

When I survey the wondrous Cross
On which the Prince of Glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.

In this act of self-abasement, the Oxford Group Movement was born. But England was to remain unaware of its birth for several years to come.

¹ *For Sinners Only*. By A. J. Russell, pp. 57-8.

The stamping of Dr. Buchman's Group Movement with the name "Oxford" tends to suggest that it originated in the famous English University city. This however, is not the case. It was in his native America that Dr. Buchman first launched his "Movement", its name there being "A First Century Christian Fellowship."¹ Indeed it was to Cambridge, and not to Oxford, that this Fellowship was first introduced in Britain, and that was not until 1920. The bestowing of the distinctive name, "The Oxford Group Movement", is dated in as recent a year as 1928.

The affixing of an Oxford label to the Group Movement may have been for purposes of propaganda. "Oxford," it occurred to A. J. Russell, when he first began to interest himself in the Movement, "Oxford would contribute the dignity so essential to a revival of religion."² But when he adds that Oxford's toleration of the Group would serve as a guarantee that "there could not be much wrong with its teaching,"³ we fear that his inference is unwarranted. For it is a matter of history that not all the "religious revivals" which originated in Oxford were characterized by orthodox teaching. But that by the way.

It is a testimony to the vitality of the Oxford Group Movement that representatives of practically every shade of opinion in the Christian world have made pronouncements on it. And how varied these pronouncements are! On one point only does there appear to be unanimity, and that is, that this new Christian Fellowship is aptly described as a "Movement". A "Movement" it unquestionably is, doing business on a large scale in almost every part of the civilized world. Many have hailed it as a twentieth-century Pentecost in which God is, with the unfettered originality of sovereign power, outpouring the Holy Spirit on the members of the fellowship. Others find reason to denounce it as a movement in which the prime worker is Satan, who, for the purpose of deceiving, if it be possible, the very elect of God, is disguised as an angel of light. And a large party of interested observers, unable to decide either for or against it, take refuge in the counsel of Gamaliel and leave it severely alone, "lest haply they be found to fight against God." The

¹ *The Oxford Group*. By F. W. Rowlands, B.A. p. 4.

² *For Sinners Only*, p. 19.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

counsel of Gamaliel doubtless represents the line of least resistance, but we cannot regard the indiscriminate toleration which, in the present day, is being exercised towards everything that has a religious aspect, as a good thing. It seems to assume that we have no reliable means of testing the doctrines which are in dispute. The assumption is a wrong one. God who has laid upon us the duty of trying the spirits "whether they are of God" has given us the touchstone of an infallible Word, thereby making it possible for us to carry out His own injunction.

With certain features of Oxford Group teaching we are, up to a point, in full agreement. Its insistence on the Christian duty of witnessing is altogether to our liking. The "priesthood of all believers" and the duty entailed thereby of "showing forth the praises of Him Who hath called us out of darkness into His marvellous light" is fundamental in the teaching of the Reformed Church. And yet, there has been a growing tendency to leave the duty of witnessing for Christ solely on the responsibility of the office-bearers of the Church. "A propagating Christian is a normal Christian" quotes A. J. Russell from the Bishop of Leicester, and that saying might be taken as an article of the faith of the Oxford Group. It would be more to our mind if the word "witnessing" were substituted for the word "propagating" in that precept. But if by means of such emphasis, the Oxford Group will succeed in awakening professed Christians to a sense of their responsibilities in this connection, they will earn the thanks of all who desire the prosperity of Zion.

Again, we are in full agreement with the Group's teaching that it is the duty of every Christian to seek Divine guidance. And equally agreeable to us is the prominence which it gives in its teaching to the need for complete surrender to God on the part of the believer. Its four standards of Absolute Honesty, Absolute Purity, Absolute Unselfishness and Absolute Love, though never perfectly attainable even by the best of men in this life, must nevertheless be the standards to which the Christian must aspire. If the Sermon on the Mount had a text, was it not this, "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect?" (Matt. v. 48).

Furthermore, we agree with the Oxford Group Fellowship the Christian religion is not rightly used when it is kept apart from the problems which arise in the everyday life of the individual,

¹ *For Sinners Only*, p. 27.

the home and the nation. It is taking the world a long time to discover that the Christian Gospel is not only the solvent of spiritual problems, but also the rectifier of sin-marred social and international relationships. In seeking first "the Kingdom of God and His righteousness," men attain to the possession of "all other things". But because it has been for so long the custom of a misguided world to think in terms of self, and because the adoption of the way of Christ would result,—as it did in the days of the Apostles,—in the turning of the world "upside down", men are shy of it and prefer to leave the world in its present wrong-side-up condition.

But while we are to this extent in agreement with Oxford Group teaching, we are bound to express our disagreement with it in other points. It has its perils; and in saying this we are only saying what many of those whose sympathies with it are much deeper than ours have said. But let us examine briefly some of those features of Group teaching and practice which, in our judgment, are open to adverse criticism.

(I) GUIDANCE

We have already indicated our belief in the fact that Divine guidance is a privilege of the Christian life. That "the steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord" is a truth long since proclaimed. We have no quarrel with the Oxford Group Movement for believing and teaching it. It merits the widest possible publicity. It is the method of seeking Divine guidance practised by the Oxford Group Fellowship that we do not like. The attaining to a state of quiescence in which one may "listen in" to God, is,—on the showing of Group writings,—more important than definite prayer. "As we turn to prayer", writes Geoffrey Allen, "we shall come with minds already filled. There will be matters of which we are anxious which we would commend to His care, and acts which our imagination views with fear for which we would have His love prepare us, and questions on which we are in doubt on which we would learn His will. To come to God with our minds dominated with some one question which we would ask Him is, however, to remain a God to ourselves, and not to respect His sovereignty."¹ In justification of his views, Mr. Allen reminds us that "The heavenly Father knows our needs."² We agree; but we remember that the heavenly

¹ *He that Cometh*. By Geoffrey Allen. p. 105.

² *Ibid.*, p. 105.

Father, Who knows our needs, has bidden us ask, seek and knock, promising that "everyone that asketh" shall receive, and teaching that "men ought always to pray and not to faint." And as for the danger of prayer as a means of seeking guidance, viz. that "to come to God with our minds dominated with some one question which we would ask Him is,—to remain a God to ourselves, and not to respect His sovereignty," we believe that by grouping all our supplications under the petition "Thy will be done," as our Lord both by precept and example has taught us to do, we shall be making the fullest possible surrender of our way to God, and giving all respect unto His sovereignty.

Oxford Group writers commend their practice of "listening-in to God" to their readers by giving examples of "guidances" received through this means. If, however, the examples given are the best available to the writers, we can only say that we are not impressed by them. Missionary literature, Covenanting literature and Christian biography in general provide us with countless examples of guidance given in answer to prayer and through the study of the Word of God which carry far greater conviction to the reader than do Mr. A. J. Russell's stories of *Quiet Time* guidances given in connection with Tutz, Nick Wade and Howard Rose.¹ And surely so ardent a Grouper as Geoffrey Allen could have culled from his own experience a better example of an authentic "guidance" than that which led him to purchase a new dressing-gown.² One, at least, of the examples given borders on the irreverent. Here it is:

I asked one happily married man in the Group: "How did you happen to marry Anne?"

"Guidance," was the answer.

"You mean you fell in love, and then God told you to go ahead?"

"Heavens, no! There was more to it than that," he explained. "I knew she was the kind of person I wanted to marry. But one day during a Quiet Time on a railway these thoughts came to me: 'Would you like to marry Anne?' 'Yes,' I answered, 'if You think it's all right.'"

"Well then, why don't you go ahead and try?" came the clear but whimsical answer.³

If it could be proved that God is the only Spirit who transmits "luminous thoughts" to "listeners", the method of seeking Divine guidance which the Groups favour would be absolutely safe. But do the communications which come to Spiritualists

¹ *For Sinners Only*, pp. 151-2, 243-4.

² *He that Cometh*, pp. 34-6.

³ *For Sinners Only*, pp. 275-6.

in their trances proceed from God? We think not. And how can people who are so woefully and wilfully ignorant of doctrine as the average Grouper is rightly discriminate between the communication which is from God and that which is not from God?

The "quiet time" habit is one which ought to be cultivated by all believers, but we believe it will be better spent in the exercise of prayer, scripture reading and devotional study than in the attempt to "listen-in" to God. It has fewer perils, and the advantages of scriptural sanction and age-long Christian example.

(2) SHARING

This term in the Group phraseology signifies the sharing of experience in general, but especially the sharing of the experience of sin through public confession to the Group, or in certain circumstances, through private confession to an individual. We must, "when God bids", declares Geoffrey Allen, "witness to the forgiveness of Christ, by saying in concrete detail what in us He has had to forgive."¹ With this view we are in full agreement. We should not care to think that any believer in Christ would refuse, *at God's bidding*, to draw aside the veil of his past and reveal the depths of sin from which Christ had saved him, especially when such a testimony to the power of saving grace would be likely to bring instruction and hope to a brother crushed by a sense of sin. But although Geoffrey Allen in the passage above quoted, urges a willingness to "share" *when God bids*, in his fuller treatment of the subject of "sharing" he takes for granted that God will "guide" along these lines. "Sooner or later," he writes, "when we are ready to receive it, the Spirit will lead us to a deeper sharing of all that has been weighing on us from the past." "From time to time the Spirit will lead us to speak of our past failure."² We should not expect Mr. Allen, who charges the suppliant who approaches God with his mind "dominated with some one question" with a lack of respect to God's sovereignty, to lay himself open to a similar charge, by confining Divine "guidance" in the matter of "sharing" to the narrow channel of his own preconceptions as in these passages he appears to do.

But we have much more serious objections to the Group practice of sharing than we have yet mentioned. The direction in which it tends may be judged from Mr. Allen's statement

¹ *He that Cometh*, p. 125.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 131 and 135.

that in the case of confession of sin to an *individual* in the Group, "Such an individual will then stand to us as ambassador of the forgiveness of Christ. . . . He will . . . never be shocked; before the utmost evil he will say without blame, as Christ would say: 'Thy sins are forgiven; go and sin no more.'"¹ Such teaching has a trans-Alpine flavour that we do not like.

A more common practice than confession to an individual, is confession to the Group. "The sin which has been thus acknowledged", writes Mr. Allen, "ceases to burden the conscience and its power is broken." "We must in the first instance share our sins before we are fully released from their power, for it is in the sharing that forgiveness is completed."²

Public confession of sin, according to Group writers, is a more effective means of mortifying pride than is private and direct confession to God. We do not agree. In our opinion, there is a much greater danger that pride may feed on the very self-abasement that public confession involves. "I am sorry you asked me to speak of myself," once remarked Captain Hedley Vicars to a friend at the close of a meeting where he had spoken, "one is afraid of being proud *even in speaking of one's sins.*"³

The results of "sharing" are pointed to in justification of the practice. "With this deep sharing", writes Geoffrey Allen, "there will come a great relief of soul, and a great clarity of mind and conscience."⁴ This we do not doubt, but is the "great relief", experienced by the confessor, the Spirit's assurance to him of God's forgiveness, or is it merely the psychological reaction experienced by the person who makes a "clean breast" of things? At all events, the authority adduced by the Group in support of the practice of "sharing" is anything but strong. For the interposition of an "ambassador of forgiveness" between the penitent and Christ, there is no warrant whatever. The Scripture sanctions for public confession cited by Mr. A. J. Russell,⁵ are impressive only in their weakness. The passage in James v. 16, "Confess your faults one to another," may merely lay emphasis on the duty of the offender to acknowledge that he is in the wrong. The passage in Acts xix. 18, which records that in idolatrous Ephesus "many that believed came, and confessed, and showed their deeds," can in no wise be construed as an

¹ *He that Cometh*, p. 132.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 128 and 134.

³ *Memorials of Capt. H. Vicars*, p. 135.

⁴ *He that Cometh*, p. 132.

⁵ *For Sinners Only*, p. 25.

injunction from God to all believers to make a practice of public confession. And the warrant for this practice that Mr. Russell adduces from Church History, is really a warning against it rather than a sanction for it. For it was the evil which arose from public confession which led to its abandonment by the Church.

(3) SIN

Equally unsatisfactory do we find the Group teaching on Sin. It is true that Loudon Hamilton in his talk on Sin reproduced in *For Sinners Only*,¹—the talk which so completely won Dr. Buchman's approval—says many fine things. But he does not go deep enough. True, "Sin blinds", "Sin binds", "Sin multiplies", "Sin deadens and deafens." But it does more than that. *It damns*. Sin is even more vile than Loudon Hamilton makes it. "Sin", to quote the Immortal Dreamer of Bedford, "turns all God's grace into wantonness; it is the darer of His Justice, the rape of His mercy, the jeer of His patience, the slight of His power and the contempt of His love . . . if sin be such a dreadful thing as to wring the heart of the Son of God, how shall a poor, wretched sinner be able to bear it?"

The Group's conception of Repentance is quite in line with their view of Sin as outlined in Loudon Hamilton's talk. Of sorrow for sin there is little trace in their writings. Such manifestations of grief belong to the "old-time evangelism". A. J. Russell is almost scornful of it. "No sackcloth and ashes here, no 'pi' psalm-singing. But a breeze and a gaiety and a sureness of direction . . ." So he describes the Group meeting to which the two South African Rhodes scholars were introduced. "Sackcloth and ashes", apparently, are not in favour at Group meetings.

What then is the Group's doctrine of Redemption? What place does Christ occupy in it? It has been said that Group teaching has no doctrine of the Atonement. Is this true? A recent issue of *The British Weekly* reported that at a meeting held in the City Temple, London, in January of this year, Mr. A. J. Russell was asked "Does the Group ignore the Atonement?" "No," replied Mr. Russell, "it builds upon the doctrine of the Cross."³ The worth of that answer, it seems to us, depends entirely on what Mr. Russell understands by "the doctrine of

¹ *For Sinners Only*, pp. 317-29.

² *Ibid.*, p. 331.

³ *British Weekly*, January 26th, 1933.

the Cross." There is a "doctrine of the Cross" in Group literature, but it is not the "doctrine of the Cross" as evangelicals know it.

What Mr. Russell understands by the "doctrine of the Cross" is, probably, best expressed in his own words. "Every blow, every failure, every misadventure must be a lesson for a further advance. As Christ accepted the wrath of the world in Gethsemane, we must be prepared to receive everything that came our way and re-direct the impact for the good of the Kingdom and our self-development."¹

Such a doctrine of the Cross will scarcely satisfy evangelicals. For we believe, on the clearest possible Scriptural evidence, that Christ accepted something more than "the wrath of the world" in Gethsemane. He accepted the stripes by which we are healed. It was not to the "wrath of the world" but to the wrath of God that His bitter cry, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me," bore witness.

It is significant in this connection to note that the Rev. W. Scott, Chaplain, St. Peter's Hall, Oxford, who was for some time associated with the Oxford Group Movement in that city, and who is no longer connected with it, gives his reasons for leaving it as follows:—"I would summarize my scruples under two principal heads; the Atonement and the Bible. I was astonished at the emphasis which they laid upon the psychological acts of sharing and surrender, and the scanty reference, if there was any at all, to the atoning and redeeming work of our Blessed Lord, 'for us men and for our salvation.' I readily recognize the force of their argument that in dealing with present-day pagans, sometimes entirely ignorant, and often bitterly prejudiced, it is unwise to approach them with theological dogmas or to antagonize them by using language associated with pious cant. But when prejudice has been overcome and interest awakened, surely clear and unmistakable teaching upon this crucial theme of Christ's work *for us*, as the only ground of our forgiveness and acceptance, is essential. Yet, according to the Group teaching, it seemed that so long as one 'shared' one's sin (i.e. confessed it to the Group), and 'surrendered' to the ideals of perfect honesty, purity, unselfishness, and love, nothing else was necessary for a man's salvation."²

¹ *For Sinners Only*, pp. 227-8.

² From the *Glasgow Evening Citizen*, February 4th, 1933.

The Group's doctrine of the Cross is reflected, as might be expected, in their "life-changing" methods. "Old-time evangelism" is quite out-dated by this Twentieth Century Fellowship. A. J. Russell's *Three Troubadours* "had much evidence that men and women could be changed effectively without the emotionalism and noise of a former day."¹ And this from a Movement whose activities have been styled, "The Acts of the Apostles—continued!"² There was both noise and emotion on the day of Pentecost! And the "old-time evangelism" that day bore fruit to the extent of the adding to the Church of "about three thousand souls"! Can the Oxford Group tell us of any of the great spiritual revivals of the Christian Church that lacked "emotionalism"? And were they less effective because "sackcloth and ashes" and "emotionalism" were so much in evidence in them? It will be time enough for the Group to reply when the wearing qualities of the changed life produced through their own "evangelistic" methods have been so thoroughly tested by time and circumstance as have been those of the changed life produced through the medium of "the old-time evangelism."

The name "Life-Changers" given to the "evangelists" of this new Movement, is also open to criticism. If by so styling themselves they restricted their claim to the ability to effect mere psychological changes in their fellow men, they would leave us very little to controvert, for their methods are those of the psycho-analyst, and it is a matter of common knowledge that remarkable changes are inducible by such methods. But their claim goes far beyond that. In his narrative of Group activities in South Africa, A. J. Russell tells about an unemployed waiter who went to see a well-known barrister to request him to use his influence in finding him a "job". "The barrister not only got him a waiter's job," writes A. J. Russell, "but gave him an experience of Christ."³ A tremendous claim surely!

But again, let us quote from Group literature—this time from *For Groupers Only*, by B. C. Plowbridge, B.D. "A bachelor might just as well venture into the company of a mob of charming but resolute husband-hunting young women and hope to come out unscathed as an ordinary man to go to a house-party and expect to come out unchanged."

¹ *For Sinners Only*, p. 30.

² *The Oxford Group*, p. 9. By F. W. Rowlands.

³ *For Sinners Only*, pp. 333-4.

If all this be true, then the evangelism of Paul and Apollos has in the course of the centuries been greatly improved upon. For it would seem that Group "Life-Changers" can not only "plant" and "water" but can also give the "increase".

The "Life-Changer" doesn't "argue"; he witnesses.¹ And he claims to be following Apostolic example in adopting this method, quite regardless of the fact that the New Testament conclusively proves that the Apostles and evangelists of the early Church went far beyond personal testimony in their public utterances and have, in the New Testament Scriptures, bequeathed to the Church, for all time, a body of Theology which is soundly buttressed by masterly reasoning and irrefutable argument. Indeed, from what we know of the evangelism of the Oxford Group, we should say that, far from being similar to that of the Apostles, it lies under the rebuke of an Apostle who declared, "For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord."

In a recent article on the Group Movement, Canon R. J. Campbell (who described his own attitude to the Group as "discriminatingly sympathetic") commenting on the Group's lack of Theology, says "No spiritual propaganda can sustain itself on stories of moral regeneration alone, and it cannot be denied that the principal weight of Group testimony so far is upon moral change,—they need, and should acquire something more. Many of the young adherents of the Movement betray an extraordinary ignorance of the full content of the Christian faith, and they use the name of Jesus almost as a sort of magical formula without any clear idea of what it stands for in Christian thought and experience."² It may be that the Group's neglect of Theology and dislike of creeds are reasons for this though Canon Campbell,—if he suspects them,—has left them unmentioned.

A. J. Russell foresees the possibility that the Group Movement "may speed up the reunion of Christendom, even Catholic and Protestant."³ If this is its aim, its attitude to Theology and Creeds is explained. For its leaders are wise enough to know that in the endeavour to unite in the one Fellowship such opposites as Protestants and Romanists, Modernists and

¹ *For Sinners Only*, p. 38.

² *The Quiver*, February 1933, p. 389.

³ *For Sinners Only*, p. 8.

Evangelicals, insurmountable difficulties would speedily arise from the Theological dogmas and Credal statements which represent the viewpoints of these widely differing parties. But earnestly though we desire the "reunion of Christendom", not even for the purpose of "speeding up" so desirable an event would we wish to witness the rejection of any of the "things most surely believed." For unless the basis of such a reunion be the full content of the Christian faith, we are convinced that the Fellowship resulting from it would not be to the glory of God.

There are many other matters connected with the Oxford Group Movement on which we might offer criticism, but this article has already expanded beyond the limits intended. We must rest content with having touched on the most prominent features of Group practice and teaching. We have no desire either to question or belittle the extraordinary success with which their activities have met. But at the same time, we refuse to be "stampeded into accepting standards of human pragmatism unwarranted by Holy Scripture."¹ The criterion by which we shall test their doctrine shall not be, "Does it work," but "What saith the Scripture?" "To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them."

G. N. M. COLLINS.

Greenock.

¹ From the *Glasgow Evening Citizen*, February 4th, 1933. By Rev. W. Scott.