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a foundation for Alcoholics Anonymous



By Mel B. Toledo, Ohio

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Frank Buchman 1878 - 1961

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A telephone call I received in early 1978 gave me new meaning about that old saying, "God works in mysterious ways His wonders to perform."

The call was from Jack M., now deceased, who was both editor and principal artist of the Grapevine, the magazine of Alcoholics Anonymous. He'd just received an article about Frank Buchman, the controversial founder of the Oxford Group (AA's predecessor fellowship), and thought it needed a rewrite to make it more acceptable for AA members. Would I take on the assignment? Without a fee, of course, since the Grapevine does not pay for articles!

I was more than willing to tackle the challenge. As a member of Alcoholics Anonymous since 1950, I had contributed a large number of articles to the Grapevine. Indeed, the Grapevine's acceptance of my first article in 1955 had helped give me the confidence to become a business writer beginning the following year. So by 1978, I was employed in the public relations department of a Fortune 500 company in Toledo and had also established a good track record as a contributor to the Grapevine---mostly articles based on my experience in maintaining sobriety and working with others. Now, unknowingly, I

was to become involved in writing about a controversial man who had played a major role in my own recovery and sobriety, but was not well known to the AA fellowship.

The AA Connection

I did know several things about the Oxford Group and Buchman, who was an ordained Lutheran minister. First, my two heroes who had co-founded AA, Bill W. and Dr. Bob S., had both found their sobriety and spiritual principles in the Oxford Group. The Group, which had been renamed Moral Re-Armament (MRA) in 1938, emphasized four main standards: Absolute Love, Absolute Purity, Absolute Honesty, and Absolute Unselfishness. AA's principles, embodied in the now-famous Twelve Steps, had come from the Oxford Group and its successor, MRA. In the 1950s, when I attended AA meetings in Jackson, Michigan, MRA had offered the Four Absolutes in full-page ads in our local paper and also held well-publicized rallies on Mackinac Island in northern Michigan, though I never attended any. Buchman's name was prominent in connection with these rallies, but never with any mention of AA. I had even wondered if he knew that AA had emerged from his fellowship!

Within a few days, the manuscript arrived. Its author was Willard Hunter, himself an ordained Congregational minister then employed as director of communications for the Claremont School of Theology. Hunter had been attending Harvard Law School on scholarship in 1938 when he met Frank Buchman. He had gone through a spiritual conversion that convinced him to become a fulltime MRA worker. But following Buchman's death in 1961, MRA had declined and Hunter left, first for a promotional position at The Claremont Colleges and then to attend

Andover Newton, where his thesis for a masters degree in sacred theology had been about Buchman. Now, in 1978, he was promoting an event in Allentown, PA to observe the centennial of Buchman's birth in 1878. He had invited AA World Services in New York City to participate, but had received a flat turndown. But Bob P., then general manager of AA World Services, had agreed that an article about Buchman for the Grapevine might be acceptable.

The Buchman Controversy

Why hadn't AA cooperated in the Buchman centennial, which turned out well thanks to Hunter's persistence and hard work? It all goes back to what a Buchman biographer referred to as the "Buchman controversy," and a shade of it lingers today. It unfolded this way: Buchman, born on June 4, 1878, in Pennsburg in eastern Pennsylvania, had grown up in Allentown in a loving Pennsylvania Dutch family that helped point him towards a ministerial career and humanitarian work. His first employment following ordination was running a hospice for orphan boys in Philadelphia, but a dispute with his trustees over the food budget drove him from his post in 1907. Funded by his parents, he left for a trip to Europe, in the meantime harboring self-pity and a seething resentment towards the trustees who had ousted him. He said he felt like "a whipped cur, all tired out."

He carried his resentment to various countries before arriving in Keswick, England, in July, 1908. He hoped to hear a famous minister at the annual Keswick Convention of religious people who still convene under the slogan: "All One in Christ Jesus."

The famous minister wasn't there, but on Sunday afternoon he wandered into a stone chapel where a woman evangelist, Jessie Penn-Lewis, was addressing an audience of seventeen persons. She was speaking about the Cross of Christ, and her message reached into Buchman's heart and changed his life. "I had entered the little church with a divided will, nursing pride, selfishness, ill-will, which prevented me from functioning as a Christian minister should," he would say later. "The woman's simple talk personalized the Cross for me that day, and suddenly I had a poignant vision of the Crucified."

The experience shook Buchman to the core as he saw the abyss that stood between him and the Master. The result was a sudden personal transformation that swept away his false pride and resentment. He would later say that a strong current of life poured into him and he had a great sense of a spiritual shaking-up. To use a more popular later term, he was born again. He left the chapel a changed man.

His next step was to return to his rooming house and write letters of amends to the trustees in Philadelphia. He apologized to them for the ill-will he had been feeling, and thus released his anger. He also witnessed to another young man at the boarding house and led him to a conversion experience that he would still confirm fourteen years later.

A Program of Change

Back in the U.S., Buchman launched a mission of leading others to change, first at Penn State and later at Hartford Seminary. He also gained a following, and by the late 1920s the movement was drawing considerable attention. It emphasized five C's: Confidence, Confession,

Conviction, Conversion, and Continuance. People confessed their wrongs, sought guidance through prayer and meditation, made restitution for past wrongs, and helped others while living on the new basis. It was also able to bring together people from many denominations.

Almost from the beginning, Buchman had a message that helped a number of alcoholics recover. One of his early achievements at Penn State was winning the conversion of the campus bootlegger, whom the students called "Bill Pickle." It was this specialized feature of the Oxford Group that eventually led to recoveries for Bill W., Dr. Bob, and a number of other AA pioneers. They would have spiritual transformations much like Buchman's Keswick experience.

But trouble came in 1936, the very year Buchman was featured on Time Magazine's cover. It all stemmed from a newspaper interview that made Buchman appear to be a Hitler sympathizer. He had only speculated that Hitler could be a force for good if he became God-controlled and used his leadership talents to help convert the German people. An Oxford Group associate would later say that Buchman never thought any person, no matter how steeped in evil, was beyond the reach of God's love. But that never came through in the criticism that followed.

Buchman did survive this public relations debacle to lead MRA to prominence during and after World War II. But this unfortunate publicity may have been a factor in AA's complete separation from the Group in 1939. It's also likely that Buchman considered alcoholic recovery of secondary importance to his major goal of seeking world peace. "I'm all for helping alcoholics," he was reported as saying. "But we have drunken nations on our hands."

I became good friends with Willard Hunter while working on his article, and we stayed in touch until his passing in 2009. The piece we worked on, titled “AA’s Roots in the Oxford Group,” never made it to the Grapevine, but is now used by AA World Services in responding to inquiries about that part of our history.

In the meantime, I became grateful for Frank Buchman and what he did for my recovery and that of others. As a public relations professional, I cringe while thinking about his ineptitude in the newspaper interview that led to his temporary downfall. But as an alcoholic who owes his life to principles Buchman sponsored, I acknowledge that God used him as a channel for extending Grace to all of us in the AA program.

Bill W. did privately acknowledge that AA owed its existence to Buchman and the Oxford Group. After Buchman’s passing in 1961, Bill wrote to an Oxford Group friend: “Now that Frank Buchman is gone and I realize more than ever what we owe to him, I wish I had sought him out in recent years to tell him of our appreciation.” This was noted in AA’s authorized biography of Bill, which included a photo of Buchman. I was a contributing writer to this biography and was pleased to find this reference.

Given the negative publicity that occasionally swirled around Buchman and his movement in the 1930s, I feel Bill W. was correct in severing connections with it. But seven decades later, it might be time to take a look at Buchman’s life and what he brought to the world, because his influence went far beyond AA. In 1991, I wrote the following acknowledgement in *New Wine*, my book about the spiritual roots of AA. I’d like to see it on a plaque or scroll:

“Alcoholics Anonymous, in its pioneering time, received generous assistance, guidance, and support from many institutions and individuals. Probably no gift surpassed the principles and practices of the Oxford Group, which was a major source for the material of AA’s Twelve Steps. Everyone in Twelve Step programs owes a debt of gratitude to Frank Buchman for his singular efforts in laying the foundation for this in the Oxford Group. Buchman was neither an alcoholic nor a close AA supporter in his lifetime, but his work---albeit for the larger world-changing purpose that guided him---had the effect of passing on to the fellowship some of the basic principles of recovery.”

T. Willard Hunter: Frank Buchman’s Tireless Advocate



T. Willard Hunter
1915-2009

If future members of Twelve Step movements finally decide to honor Frank Buchman’s contribution to their beginnings, this acknowledgment will owe much to the efforts of T. Willard Hunter, a Buchman associate from 1938 onward. For more than thirty years, Hunter never passed up an opportunity to remind editors and other influential persons that AA’s famous Twelve Steps came directly from principles espoused by Buchman’s Oxford Group. Though not an alcoholic, he turned up at AA conferences and gave skeptical members the news that a predecessor fellowship had had much to do with getting AA launched. If he spotted a reference to AA in any publication, he would

fire off a letter pointing out the Buchman/Oxford Group connection. Sometimes he delivered the information in personal visits or talks.

Willard was the right person for this self-appointed mission. Born in Idaho in 1915, he grew up in Northfield, Minnesota, where his father was an English professor at prestigious Carleton College. Willard attended Carleton and displayed such promise that he won a scholarship to Harvard Law. With that beginning, he seemed destined to become an attorney with a major corporation or a top law firm in Boston or New York. Handsome, articulate, and energetic, he seemed to have the right qualities for such a role.

But he was miserable in law school and was also being drawn into the work of the Oxford Group, which he had first observed at Carleton College. When some Oxford Group men visited Harvard and stayed on for a week holding small-group meetings, he felt a growing bond with the fellowship. At one of the small-group meetings, he remembered, "I was hooked. They talked about four absolute moral standards---honesty, purity, unselfishness, and love. They also talked about the guidance of God. And they talked about life-changing." He had few regrets about leaving the law school after two years, though he later conceded that he would have appreciated having a law degree as "a credential."

As a key worker in the Oxford Group (which soon became Moral Re-Armament) Hunter became closely acquainted with Frank Buchman and worked with teams aimed at helping men and women change their lives. His service with MRA continued until 1961. He then attended

Andover Newton Theological School, became an ordained minister, and was later associated with Claremont Colleges. He and his wife, Mary Louise, had three sons, two of whom preceded him in death.

He authored a number of publications, including a biography of famed aviator Charles Lindbergh. He also became acquainted with a number of prominent persons in politics, sports, and entertainment. He was best known as an after-dinner speaker and orator, and was twice featured in the *Guinness Book of World Records* for his Fourth of July oratory. One of his favorite topics was our national fascination with Jesse James, whose gang had made a failed attempt to rob the bank in his hometown, Northfield, Minnesota, in September, 1876.

But his main interest in retirement was to seek recognition and acceptance of Frank Buchman's life work, and especially how it had influenced other movements, including AA. It was his abiding interest up to the day of his death, June 29, 2009.

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