

WHAT I FOUND OUT ABOUT THE OXFORD MOVEMENT

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For liberals with common sense and open minds - A frank revelation from one who heard, saw, and was conquered.

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Statesmen are saying that unless men make what they call "spiritual values" the basis of society, civilization as we know it is doomed. They say it, but they do nothing about it. Yet what these spiritual values are is well known, has been known for centuries: Honesty, purity, unselfishness, and love.

The difficulty is that they cannot be created by fiat or won by a drive. You cannot even see them. You can only see what they do to people who have them.

Now, what first impressed me about the Oxford Group people was their acts. They did not perform as other people I knew. They were amazingly joyous. They were not self-conscious. They were kind. They actually seemed to care about you. They were generous. A little more experience with them and I saw that they said just what they meant - no more and no less - and were ready frankly to acknowledge their mistakes.

It took no cleverness on my part to decide that back of these actions of theirs there must be some force or power not operative in me. Naturally I wanted to know what it was. Their answer was that they practiced absolute honesty, absolute purity, absolute unselfishness, and absolute love. I would have said, offhand, that I practice these qualities myself. But when I compared my acts to those of these Oxford Group people I saw that the word "absolute" made a heap of difference in results.

My next question to Group members was: "Where and how do you get the power to practice these absolutes?" Their answer involved nothing less than what they called "a changed life," and when they explained what it was, my Episcopalian soul rebelled at what I had scornfully known as "conversion."

Now this is not the place to go into theology, nor did these Oxford Group people to whom I talked go into it. They have, I suspect, many different conceptions of God, many different theories of that process by which man establishes a contact with a power not himself making for righteousness. They are not given to explanations of what happens. They concentrate on the experience. They have been changed; you can see the results. If you want the effect, then try the method.

The point is that you do see the results. I went to one of their "house parties" at a Richmond hotel where two hundred of them, men and women from every kind of life, were spending ten days together to talk over their experiences and plans. It was the most joyful, informal, and gayest meeting I had ever attended. I saw then what society might be like if it was made up entirely of people like these. Not that they had any political or social platform or formula for making the world better, but because what they were in themselves so affected their relationship with each other.

I saw also what this Group meant by "a way of life." It was just that - doing, feeling, thinking without greed or envy or deceit or malice. Did they, then, never feel such emotions? I asked. "Of course," was the cheerful answer. But when they did, it seemed, they recognized their feeling for what it was and acknowledged it - and miraculously it seemed to leave them.

In spite of their gaiety and lightness, they had, I discovered, a deeply serious purpose in life. It was nothing less than that of changing America, even as they had been changed. Through the

meeting like a motif ran this desire and intention. Yet, and here again the uniqueness of this Group struck me, they had not joined the Group in order to change America; they had joined the Group in order to be changed themselves; but because they had been changed, they did want to change America.

I met the Group again at a winter resort in Florida. It was then I really learned to know Frank Buchman, the leader of the movement. It interested me to discover what manner of man this was who without funds of his own, without position or great gifts of oratory, had founded a fellowship with members in fifty countries which numbered hundreds of thousands of members, including Prime Ministers as well as coal miners. What struck me first about him was his freshness, his zest - qualities one associates with youth - and he is over fifty. There was, too, his simplicity. You felt that he always saw things stripped of the extraneous, and got down to bedrock.

The most noticeable thing about him to me was his way with people. All specimens of humanity seem to have a special preciousness to him. Which may be what is meant by that much abused word "love."

I met the Oxford Group again at the large Berkshire Hills assembly. There were thousands of them scattered through several towns. Men and women on many kinds told their stories of what "going Oxford Group" had done in and for them. But again it was not so much what they said as what you saw in them.

A beautiful woman radiating such understanding that little lame girls and burly laboring men took their problems to her for help. A robust man of the cut and jib of a well-set-up successful business man talking of a drink habit that had been cured. A young butcher who spoke with power and poise of the spiritual experience that had come to him.

Seeing may not be believing if you have a skeptical mind, but seeing is often wanting. This was the case with me. These people had what I felt would make life what it should be.

What I had to do seemed simple. It involved an act of faith, but the faith might be only that of the man who prayed: "Lord, I believe; help Thou mine unbelief." What seemed necessary for an answer is that you really mean it; that you really are willing to give up your own ideas of what you want your life to be, or want to do, and will accept the will of this Power you call upon, though He be an unknown God.

There is nothing new in this. There are men and women in all churches who, in their lives, bear witness to the same experience. The Oxford Group does not seek to be a substitute to these, or to others, for the church. It is a fellowship of people who are giving a demonstration in their daily lives of what the church exists to promote - the Christian way of life. The Group has been called "the shock troops" of the church because it does seek to bring people to God. Many are the people it has sent back to the churches with their belief revitalized. Others it has sent who never before felt the need of a church.

A great religious teacher, Stanley Jones, has said that the Beatitudes, far from being impractical, are the only practical rules whereby a permanent society can be built. In this Group people are committed to practicing them the only place a person may - in their own daily lives.

Now, for a housewife to treat her servant honestly, for a merchant to tell the truth to customers, may seem a long way from solving the servant problem and the problem of monopolistic prices. But if enough merchants and housewives were doing the same thing, if enough industrialists and politicians practiced the absolutes, would not some of our difficulties be on the way to solution?

But I drop into argument, and this is not the Oxford Group way. They simply practice the absolutes in their daily lives and then bear witness to what has happened to them because of it. I must do the same. I must bear witness to what the Oxford Group has done to me.

One of my first discoveries was that back of what I hugged as a righteous indignation was a jealousy of another woman who had succeeded at things in which I had failed. I sat down and wrote a letter to her acknowledging this jealousy. On second thought, I did not send the letter, realizing that I had no right to inflict her with my affairs in order to ease myself; but I had really meant to send it when I wrote it, and so had been willing to expose myself to her. That, I think, must be the reason that the jealousy left me.

Three things that have ridden me all my life have also left me: the dependence upon outside things, such as clothes, house, etc., to build up my own self-confidence; a feeling that people did not like me; and self-consciousness that built a wall between me and others. I have gained a new friendliness for people.

Put simply, what has happened to me seems to be that whereas once I acted on the principle that God and I were one and that one was I, now the principle is that God and I are one and that one is God.

All this I must credit to the "quiet times," when I sit down each morning to speak with the power, force, person we call God, ask for what I need, and listen to what I hear. There is this two-way prayer. You do get guidance as to the day's work. When you do, there are no problems. You go forward with a peace and ease that releases in you all your abilities and energies.

The idea of a group like this is not new. The truths it teaches are as old as the first Christian century. The importance of the Oxford Group lies in the fact that it applies its message to the problems of life today. It speaks the language of today. (The Group's new magazine, "The Rising Tide", the first issue of which is now in preparation, will demonstrate this modern approach.) It employs methods that accord with the pragmatic psychology of today. It therefore reaches people of today.

Never will we adopt spiritual values because we know we should in order to save society. We will adopt them and practice them only as they solve our own problems. The Oxford Group shows us that they can. But - and here is the paradox - though we adopt them for that purpose only, this adoption, as we practice them, would in turn save the world.