ABSTRACT

THE SPIRITUAL DYNAMIC IN ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS AND THE FACTORS PRECIPITATING A.A.’S SEPARATION FROM THE OXFORD GROUP

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Alcoholics Anonymous has grown since the mid-1930’s from a loose cohesion of individuals seeking recovery to iconic status as a paradigmatic self-help organization. Few people among the many familiar with A.A. are aware of its genesis from a popular Christian evangelical organization called the Oxford Group. This paper charts the course of A.A. from its Oxford Group roots, both in terms of historical development and the evolution of the spiritual dynamic that served as the functional nexus for both organizations. This paper also addresses key differences in the agendas of both groups that eventually necessitated their separation, as well as the questionable assumption that Alcoholics Anonymous is the more “secular” of the two.
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Introduction

Most people have heard of Alcoholics Anonymous, as well as many of the “spin offs” from this group, like Narcotics Anonymous and Overeaters Anonymous. Many are also familiar with some of the popular philosophy espoused by these groups in their quest to overcome whatever addiction has infected their lives. Not many, however, know much about the genesis of Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.) or of its central principles. A.A., its principles and its two founders all emerged from a Christian evangelical organization that started to gain popularity in the United States and England in the early 1920’s. First named “A First Century Christian Fellowship”, then the “Oxford Group”, and then “Moral re-Armament”, this group was organized and spearheaded by a Lutheran Minister from Pennsylvania named Frank Buchman.

At certain points, the alcoholics that were attempting to recover within the Oxford Group decided that they could no longer function in that venue and separated to establish their own groups, limited to alcoholics and their families. This happened at different times for different groups, but by late 1939 these groups were fully separated from their Oxford Group origins and were calling themselves Alcoholics Anonymous.

In this paper, I will show what parts of Oxford Group practice were retained by A.A. and which parts they chose to leave behind. Specifically, I will contend that the basic spiritual dynamic (or conversion dynamic) that was most central to Oxford Group practice was retained with very few changes by Alcoholics Anonymous. This adoption of basic Oxford Group principles can be seen in A.A.’s Twelve Steps. Many of the Oxford Group’s more peripheral practices, however, were abandoned as being counterproductive to the goal of sobriety espoused by Alcoholics Anonymous. This can be seen in A.A.’s Twelve Traditions.

I will also propose that there were two factors that were most determinative in the alcoholic Oxford Group members’ decision to separate and establish an independent existence. The first of these concerns the emergence of a sense of mission among the alcoholics that was limited to other alcoholics. The perceived mission of the nonalcoholic Oxford Group members was global conversion. Although these two missions were not necessarily incompatible when considered separately, their coexistence within a single group disrupted overall unity and soon created an untenable situation.

The second of these factors concerns one of the basic tenets undergirding Oxford Group practice that was likewise adopted by Alcoholics Anonymous. Both groups depended upon a high degree of empathy that must be present between the person being converted (or introduced to a method to achieve sobriety) and the person doing the converting (or teaching). This empathic relationship depended upon the perception of the target person that the person trying to help was similar enough to him or her to really understood his or her life. But, as will be seen, it was and is very difficult for a nonalcoholic to understand the experiences of an alcoholic. The requisite empathic contact that would make an alcoholic receptive to trying a new method for sobriety seemed to necessitate another alcoholic. Because they were the only ones who seemed able to help their own kind, it made sense to these forerunners of early A.A. that they had to have their own group.
One of the most advertised changes that took place in Alcoholics Anonymous concerns their apparent replacement of “God” with the more mitigated and secular concept “God, as we understood Him” that appears repeatedly in the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. A reader might wonder why I do not include such a secular shift as one of the determinative factors leading to A.A.’s separation from its staunchly Christian predecessor. I will reply to this expected objection by arguing that this apparently dramatic change was more appearance than substance, and that Bill Wilson’s real expectation was that the alcoholic would eventually turn to the God of the Bible, even if he or she didn’t start out that way.

Chapter one will give a brief history of the Oxford Group during its early years, but will focus mostly on the dynamics it employed to effect individual conversions. Where applicable, connections will be made between the Oxford Group principle under analysis and its re- appearance in the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. Chapter two will concentrate on the development of Alcoholics Anonymous, from its original Oxford Group roots until its landmark 1955 Convention in St. Louis. Chapter three will focus on an analysis of A.A.’s Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions. I will contend that, for the most part, the Twelve Steps represent the parts of Oxford Group practice that were adopted with only minor modifications to work for the recovering alcoholic, while the Twelve Traditions are more representative of the differences between the two groups. Chapter four will conclude this paper by addressing the anticipated objection that secularization should be included as one of the determinative factors that caused the two groups to separate.
Chapter 1: History of the Oxford Group

Buchman’s Biography and Role in the Oxford Group

Frank Buchman was born in 1878 in Pennsburg, Pennsylvania. His father engaged in various vocations, including that of an innkeeper, and the family was considered relatively well-off in relation to their neighbors. Young Frank’s upbringing was unremarkable and it probably would have been a great surprise to those who knew him in these early years to learn of the impact he was to have throughout the entire world. There was, however, an early clue to what would become his passion during his high school years. As Daniel Sack, in his book Moral Re-Armament relates:

Buchman showed an early interest in ministry. In a high school essay called ‘The College Hero,’ he argued that the true hero is not the football star, but the man who ‘saved a fellow student from the snares of hell.’ When the hero of this story ‘saw that his classmate was leading a dissipated life, [he] bravely went to the student’s room, locked the door taking the key, and then opened his Bible, prayed with the man and then asked him to lead a different kind of life. The student was thankful and appreciated the interest he had taken and promised to reform’. (8)

It is remarkable that Buchman had this sense of his calling even at that early age. The majority of his future efforts would be directed towards developing the ability to influence others in a spiritual direction, train others to also acquire this skill, and develop a standardized procedure that would actualize this dynamic.

At least some of Buchman’s later construction of a spiritual dynamic is traceable to his grade school years, when he attended the Perkiomen School, run by a mystically-oriented group called the Schwenkfelders. Like the Quakers, this group believed in what they referred to as the “inner light,” and held the firm conviction that communication with God was possible (and essential) through quiet meditation. This practice would later be called “quiet time” in Buchman’s system and would become the foundation of the daily routine that both he and the members of his group would follow assiduously.

Buchman attended Muhlenberg College and then the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. He was ordained as a Lutheran minister in 1902. His calling to help others in the manner of the “college hero” he wrote about in high school formed an irresistible undercurrent behind everything he was to do for the rest of his life. The next twenty to thirty years would be spent learning how to make this wish a reality, in many cases by trial and error.
In 1905, Buchman was assigned to a hospice for young men in Philadelphia. There is every indication that he sincerely cared for the young men that were in his charge, and often stayed up late into the evening giving personal advice and encouragement on how to aspire to and live a life based on Christian virtues. His success with these transformations was limited, but no more so than was expected or achieved by other ministers in similar situations. The sequence of events that followed would lead to what many consider to be the pivotal event in Buchman’s life and career as a transformer of lives, and as a mentor for those of his followers who would devote themselves to personal Christian evangelism and refer to themselves as “life-changers”. This sequence was precipitated by criticism of Buchman by his clerical superiors and those that were responsible for the financial viability of the hospice. They told Buchman that it would be necessary to cut back on the rations he was providing for the boys, as well as reducing the staff he had employed. Buchman’s response was intractable. He not only refused to make any of the changes requested by his superiors, but asked for a raise. His response was rejected in its entirety and, in a fit of emotion and resentment, he resigned. As Sack recounts:

The event entered the Buchman legend, interpreted to fit the storyteller’s perspective. A supporter wrote that he ‘had come up against the power of bureaucracy coupled with the power of money. He was never to forget the lesson, though in this case he took it personally. He was so bitter that it made him physically ill.’ A critic, on the other hand, suggests that after the dispute Buchman ‘fumed, collapsed, quit, and threw what seems to have been a prolonged fit of hysterical sulks’. (9).

No matter which version is believed, it can be agreed that Buchman was upset and in crisis. His resolution was a therapeutic trip to England, where his crisis would be transformed into a new destiny.

While in England, Buchman attended an annual gathering of Christians at Keswick Lake. At the gathering proper, he did not seem to make much progress through his personal dilemmas. However, when he heard a sermon given by a female Methodist at a much smaller church nearby, the proverbial dam broke. The woman was speaking on the Atonement, and during her sermon Frank Buchman experienced a realization of Christianity that was more powerful, personal and transformative than anything in his previous experience. Again quoting Sack, “Buchman recalled later that although he had often studied the Atonement- the belief that Christ’s death paid for human sins- he actually experienced it for the first time that day. He saw the Crucified; ‘I knew that I had wounded Him, that there was great distance between myself and Him, and I knew that it was my sin of nursing ill-will.’ “(Sack 10). This event is regarded by many (including Buchman) as the most important and pivotal moment in his life. At that moment he was able to recognize that the “sin” that was distancing him from God and the “sin” that was distancing him from others were one and the same. In this case, it was resentment, specifically the resentment he held towards the six members of the hospice board in Philadelphia who had denied his requests. He immediately set out to write all six men an apology for his ill-will (he did not apologize for the position he took with these men, nor is there any indication he thought that this position was wrong). It is often quoted in the literature of his group that, although he wrote sincere apologies to these men for his ill-will, they never deigned to respond to these letters. What these pro-Buchman historians do not
mention, however, is that he neglected to put a return address on any of these letters, which were mailed from a foreign country (Driberg 37). This point is illuminated by Buchman’s critics, and serves as an illustration of the polemical recounting of history which surrounds this controversial figure.

The consequences of what came to be called Buchman’s “Keswick experience” were many. First, he was able to recognize that the fault of his sin (sin, in this case, defined as anything that separates one from God) was to be sought and addressed within the life of the person experiencing the difficulty, and not by focusing on the faults of others. This not only became a central element in Buchman’s philosophy, but became foundational for the philosophy of A.A. as well. Secondly, Buchman was able to see that the most profound and life-changing Christian experience was a matter of deep and meaningful personal perception. All of his prior studies had only given him an intellectual and theoretical understanding of Christianity, which was insufficient to actualize meaningful transformations. This too would become a cornerstone of his philosophy and that of A.A. Third, the experience and realization changed him in a way that dramatically increased his ability to help others attain similar religious experiences and place their lives on a more spiritual path. As quoted by Sack, “Feeling truly converted, Buchman wrote to all the members of the hospice board, asking their forgiveness for his ill-will. More importantly, that afternoon he told the story to an acquaintance, who committed his life to Christ and became Buchman’s first convert.” (Sack 11). The import of the conversion of this acquaintance cannot be overestimated. Through relating his experience in a narrative fashion, in an honest and heart-felt manner, Buchman had been able to lead this man to a spiritual path. The college hero of Buchman’s high school writings had finally found a way to be “born”. From this point on, honest, heart-felt sharing of experience would be the modus operandi of person-to-person spiritual encouragement in Buchman’s system. It would also prove foundational to the philosophy and practice of A.A.

There was now no stopping the “college hero” from fully emerging as the dominant force in Buchman’s life and personality. Through the Keswick experience, he had found a workable method to change lives. The next twenty years would be spent perfecting this method, mostly through experimentation and trial and error. Every experience trying to lead others to a spiritual rebirth functioned as a learning experience to further perfect the method. His longest steady position was with the branch of the Intercollegiate Young Men’s Christian Association at the Pennsylvania State College. Always learning and striving to become a more effective “changer of lives”, Buchman used his experience at Penn State to develop a system of personal evangelism most suited not only to the “down and outs”, who were usually of a lower socio-economic class, but to the group of college age young men who were popular, well-off, and seemed destined to occupy the most powerful and influential niches in society. This group was colloquially referred to as the “up and outs”. When Buchman would later be accused by his critics of trying to pursue personal aggrandizement through associations with the rich and powerful, his defense would be twofold. First, he made sure that he practiced personal evangelism with enough of the “down and outs” to be able to produce several counterexamples to the charges. Second, he claimed that his purpose in deliberately trying to convert the most influential people was based on a very solid strategy for the good of all. He reasoned that if he could convert the most popular, the most athletic, and the most
influential members of society, then the maximum number of others would subsequently be converted through their example. The paradigmatic example of this strategy could be found in the conversion of Constantine. And in many cases, this strategy was successful, especially on college campuses, where young men and women were just learning how to “make their place” within society and would be most likely to be influenced by those who were popular, or members of the “in” crowd. Many of these “up and outs” who joined Buchman in their college days became close members of his inner circle.

Buchman took part in several missionary campaigns, most notably in China and India. During these trips, he not only continued to perfect his evangelical method, but met two individuals of like mind who would prove to be invaluable to his cause. In India, he met Howard Walter, who would work with him on systematizing a form of personal one-to-one evangelism. Together, they would produce one of the written classics on this subject. As Sack notes:

Buchman learned a great deal during his seven years at Penn State, but he hungered for a mission field larger than State College. In the fall of 1915 he received a wire from Sherwood Eddy, a traveling evangelist for the International YMCA. Eddy was planning a campaign through India, and needed someone who could travel ahead of him, training personal workers to follow up on his large rallies...While in India, Buchman met another American who shared his convictions about personal evangelism. Howard Walter, a graduate of Princeton University and Hartford Seminary was literary secretary at the local YMCA...He was also interested in evangelical methods; when Buchman visited his station, Walter found a fellow believer in the principles of personal evangelism. They worked together on the Eddy campaign and shared ideas about evangelical work. Out of their collaboration Walter wrote Soul Surgery: Some Thoughts on Incisive Personal Work. (16)

Soul Surgery became a kind of “how to” book for personal evangelism. It became essential reading for members of the Oxford Group (which was one of the names that Buchman’s group adopted), and many of the principles outlined in this text became inculcated into the philosophy and methods of Alcoholics Anonymous.

On one of his campaigns in China, Frank Buchman met another fellow evangelist who would prove to be an invaluable cog within the machinery of his organization, especially in America. This man was Samuel Shoemaker, who was established in a religious organization at Princeton called the Philadelphia Society. When he first met Buchman, Shoemaker was trying (unsuccessfully) to win converts in China. He asked Buchman’s advice on what he might do better and Buchman promptly diagnosed the problem as unresolved sin. At first, Shoemaker was enraged, but later made the attempt to address the situation according to Buchman’s suggestions. This was crucial, not just for Shoemaker’s progress, but because it further corroborated the effectiveness of Buchman’s methods. It also served as a case in point that these methods could, and should, be applied just as readily to clergy as to lay persons. This was a continual point of contention between Buchman and the established churches. Shoemaker, a member of the clergy who would later be rector of Calvary Church in New York, who would be the leader of the Oxford Group in the United States (second only to Buchman), and who would be instrumental in the conversion and development of Bill Wilson (one of the co-founders of AA and the author of the Twelve Steps), had followed the
same prescription that would be applied to countless others. He took a moral inventory, recognized his sin, confessed his sin, turned it over to his higher power to be free of the sin, and, to the best of his ability, made restitution for the sin through apology. The idea of taking a moral inventory, of confession to God and to another person, and of making restitution to those harmed (when possible, and when it would not cause further harm) all became indispensable constituents in the structural and functional system of AA.

Early Development of the Oxford Group

At first, Buchman’s organization was named A First Century Christian Fellowship. He chose that name because he believed that the principles of personal evangelism they espoused and practiced were based on the practices carried out by the original apostles of Christ. It was later called the Oxford Group. This name was the result of a train porter’s mistake. While Buchman was traveling by train in South Africa with a group of his “up and outs”, several from Oxford University, the porter didn’t know what name to put on the cabin door. Noticing that several were from Oxford University, he wrote down “Oxford Group”. Never to miss an opportunity, Buchman adopted the name, no doubt fully cognizant of the serendipitous prestige that would follow. This name did not become official though until a benefactor of the group passed away and left the Oxford Group a substantial amount of money. It was at this point that the group adopted the official and legal name “Oxford Group”, so that this and similar future situations could be handled without legal difficulties. Shortly before the Second World War, the group once again changed its name, this time to Moral Re-Armament. Buchman felt that he had received divine inspiration while walking in a forest in Germany that what the world needed most was moral re-armament, not the re-armament that required the massing of weapons. Some of Buchman’s critics claimed that this attitude was helpful to the Axis powers because it encouraged appeasement. Buchman’s supporters, of course, would deny the validity of any such interpretation.

One of the most important innovations introduced by Buchman into his method of personal evangelism was the “houseparty”. Again, it is easy to see how this kind of venue would have appealed to the “up and out” crowd, who represented the principle membership of the group. A houseparty would involve the getting together (usually by invitation or by being personally brought by another member) of Oxford Group members and those who were curious about the group. They would last anywhere from a single night to several weeks, during which time people would engage in a mixture of social and religious activities, the main goal always being the conversion of individuals to a more spiritual path through a personal surrender to Jesus Christ. The social venue got people to relax to a much greater extent than would have been possible at a religious revival, and the extended period of time gave the “life changers” more of an opportunity to work on their prospects.

Before the Oxford Group officially and legally adopted the name to avoid financial and
bureaucratic problems, they insisted that their fellowship was devoid of any official structure, in the same way and for the same reasons that the original apostles of Christ had no need of an officially recognized organization. Among the “approved” and encouraged Oxford Group literature was the title, *Practice These Principles and What is the Oxford Group?* Examining this work more closely provides a great deal of insight into the group’s foundational principles, many of which appear (albeit with the words rearranged to fit the organization) in the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. In the beginning of this book, there is a description of the organization that gives insight into the mentality of the members and their view of the essentials of group cohesion. It says:

> Our Fellowship has no official membership list, subscriptions, badge, or rules, nor owns vast amounts of property. It is a name for a group of people who, from every rank, profession, and trade, in many countries, have surrendered their lives to the God of their understanding. They are endeavoring to lead spiritual lives under the guidance of the Spirit of the Universe. Our Fellowship is not a religion. It has no hierarchy, no temples, no endowments; its members have no salaries, no plans but God’s plan. Every country is their country, every person their brother and sister. They carry our message in modern dress, wearing spiritual armor. Their aim is to realize their suggested program of recovery on the world tide of addiction. (1)

Written in 1932, it serves as one of the best examples of the way the Oxford Group’s principles were gradually inculcated, with slight but important changes, into the organization that would become known as Alcoholics Anonymous. The principle stance of the Oxford Group can be seen. At the same time, the subtle changes that would become distinctive features of Alcoholics Anonymous also begin to make an appearance. The most obvious of these is the reference to God as “God of their understanding” and “Spirit of the Universe”. The mention of addiction in the last sentence foreshadows its future utility as a method for recovering alcoholics. The use of the word “addiction” in the context of this specific work, however, probably refers to excessive attachment to a variety of “worldly vices” that cause individuals to focus more on material than spiritual goals. Because this text reviews the fundamental tenets of the Oxford Group in a way that is also conducive and charitable to the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, it will be useful to employ it as an illustrative guide to show how these tenets relate to the Twelve Steps.

Buchman’s method of personal evangelism, practiced by the Oxford Group, and eventually appropriated with minor changes by Alcoholics Anonymous, can be effectively analyzed along two dimensions. The first dimension looks at the simple structural guidelines provided, by which a person seeking to live a spiritual life could judge his or her actions thoughts and tendencies. According to Buchman, these guidelines reflected the absolute standards by which Jesus Christ lived, and represented the ideals to which a spiritual practitioner could aspire. These were Absolute Honesty, Absolute Purity, Absolute Unselfishness, and Absolute Love.

Absolute honesty would include honesty towards oneself and towards others. The function of honesty towards others would include honestly confronting them about their shortcomings if the perception was that these shortcomings were preventing them from growing closer to God. One must be certain, however, that one’s motivation is truly for the
other person’s happiness. If this “honest” criticism is ego-based instead of an expression of altruism, such honesty, even if comprised of statements that are “technically” true, could be used as a destructive weapon. In Practice These Principles and What is the Oxford Group?, the anonymous author writes:

Under God’s guidance, absolute truthfulness is tempered with common sense and kindliness. There is no reason why we should just flaunt and enjoy what we think is Absolute Honesty so much that we should tell a neighbor a truth about themselves that is neither a shortcoming of their own nor our business. Striving for Absolute Honesty should not be a weapon for us to bludgeon our way to what we think is perfection. ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’ is sufficient test as to our motives for honesty. (51-52)

The best way for a person to gauge whether or not their honesty towards another person would be appropriate was the guidance obtained through prayer during daily “quiet times”.

At least as important, and in many cases more important, than honesty towards another regarding their shortcomings was honesty towards oneself regarding one’s own shortcomings. Throughout his career, Buchman always stressed the importance of taking “moral inventory” to see where our thoughts or actions might be violating one of the four absolute standards, thereby drawing us further away from both God and other people. This insistence about being honest and forthright about our own deficits of character found direct expression in Steps 4, 5, 6, 7, and 10 of the 12 Steps recommended by Alcoholics Anonymous for the recovering alcoholic. Step 4 says, “Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.” Step 5 says, “Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.” Step 6 says, “We were ready to have God remove all these defects of character.” Step 7 says, “Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.” And Step 10 says, “Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it” (Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions 6-8).

Absolute Purity, when viewed negatively, involves refraining from thoughts and actions that would be considered sinful (with sin defined as anything that draws us away from God and other people). As our anonymous author makes clear in Practice These Principles and What is the Oxford Group?:

Absolute Purity is not only an idea of a spiritual life demanding a clean mind in a clean body. It is a much larger word. It suggests clean conduct in business, work and play, in our interest in world affairs, our use of our possessions, and our attitude towards relatives, friends and acquaintances. In this sense, Absolute Honesty is akin to Absolute Honesty. Purity is being honest to the best possible side of our natures, mental, physical and spiritual. (56-57)

When viewed positively, the more one adheres to a standard of absolute purity, the closer he or she will feel towards both God and other people, and the more effective he or she will be as a “life-changer”.

Although in A.A.’s 12 steps, there is no explicit directive towards purity, the implications seem clear. For the alcoholic, the ingestion of even small amounts of alcohol creates a state of impurity for two reasons. First, it acts as a catalyst to produce impure behaviors, such as
sexual indiscretion, belligerence and dishonesty. Secondly, the alcoholic has come to depend on alcohol as the solution to life’s problems. In this way, reliance on alcohol has come to take the place of reliance on a higher power. This is one of the primary reasons why alcoholism, and indeed any similar addiction, may be considered a “spiritual disorder”.

Absolute Unselfishness and Absolute Love are close enough to be considered in the same category. Since sin can be defined as anything that separates us from God and other people, the related virtues could be those thoughts, actions and predispositions that draw us closer to both God and other people. Regarding other people, the anonymous author of *Practice These Principles and What is the Oxford Group?* says:

Absolute Unselfishness is possible only if we have absolute love. We can be unselfish only according to the love we bear toward the object of our unselfishness. This love is not necessarily admitted to be love by the world. Sacrifice of ourselves or our interest to other people’s interests without thought of reward is, in itself, love, although we may not consciously recognize it as such when we are performing our act of unselfishness. (62).

To quote our anonymous author once more on the related subject of absolute love, “Absolute Love is the motive power for Absolute Honesty, Purity and Unselfishness. We can have none of those qualities in their absolute without Absolute Love. If we have Absolute Love for God we have all those qualities for the world” (*Practice These Principles and What is the Oxford Group* 67).

These quotations provide insight into some of the basic functional dynamics employed by the Oxford Group, and find similar expression within the context of Alcoholics Anonymous. There is no real functional distinction between the absolute unselfishness shown to others and a spiritual connection to, and love for, the Divine. One not only facilitates the other, but may not be possible without the other. Both find their antitheses in a consciousness that is motivated by and based on an ego-bound self. This ego-bound self would be unlikely to treat others in an altruistic or loving manner unless there was some ulterior motive that would benefit this self. In a related dynamic, the most fundamental requirement recognized by Oxford Group members as necessary to be able to receive guidance from, and draw closer to, God was the suspension of one’s personal ego-based will so that the Divine will could take its place. The setting aside of one’s personal will, the openness to receive and accept the Divine will in its place, and the ability to effectively and compassionately help others were regarded as inseparable and interdependent factors.

These factors find parallel expression in both the practices of the Oxford Group and those of Alcoholics Anonymous. In both groups, they serve the same basic functions. In the Oxford Group, the first step for a member to experience a life-changing conversion experience was to surrender his or her personal will to the will of God. The more complete and unconditional this surrender, the more wonderful and transformative the conversion experience. After one had experienced such a transformation, the key to remaining on this spiritual path and not backsliding into sin was to share this experience with others and help them to develop along these same spiritual lines.

This same progression is seen in steps 1, 2, 3, 11, and 12 of the 12 Steps of Alcoholics
Anonymous. Step 1 says, “We admitted we were powerless over alcohol— that our lives had become unmanageable.” In this step, there is a recognition that our ego-based selves were insufficient to handle the destruction that alcohol abuse had caused in our lives. For Oxford Group members, this would equate to the recognition that their ego-based selves were unable to handle or defeat the effects of sin in their lives. Step 2 says, “Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.” Step 3 says, “Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.” Step 11 says, “Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.” This was practiced by Oxford Group members during their “quiet times” when, after relinquishing their personal wills to the will of God, they sought guidance for their actions so that they could carry out the Divine will.

Finally, Step 12 says, “Having had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics and to practice these principles in all our affairs” (Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions 5-8). Frank Buchman always encouraged members of the Oxford Group to become “life-changers”, and insisted that this was the single most effective way to maintain and progress on one’s spiritual path. Alcoholics Anonymous has expressed similar sentiments and recommendations. A common saying heard throughout AA rooms worldwide is that, “You can’t keep it unless you give it away”. This precedent was originally set by Bill Wilson, the co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous and the author of the 12 Steps. While on a trip to Ohio, Wilson felt the urge to drink, and knew from his Oxford Group training that the most effective way to maintain his sobriety was to help another alcoholic. He desperately made phone calls trying to find one. Eventually, he connected with Dr. Robert Smith, a physician and alcoholic who used to steady his nerves before surgery by having a drink. With Bill Wilson’s help, Dr. Robert Smith (known in AA lore as “Dr. Bob”) achieved and maintained his sobriety. Working together, Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob became the co-founders of Alcoholics Anonymous.

The second dimension along which Buchman’s (and, in many ways, AA’s) system can be analyzed concerns the implementation of his personal evangelism through a predetermined series of steps. Buchman, as well as several before him, regarded the “life-changer” (or individual engaged in personal evangelism with the object of converting others to a Christian way of life) as a kind of physician, who could diagnose the specific sins that were blocking his prospect’s access to God, and then apply the remedy of prayer and spirituality that would help him to overcome this condition. In his book Soul Surgery (which was widely read by Oxford Group members), Howard Walter had the following to say regarding a systematized method for personal evangelism:

If then we accept this definition of life-changing as the ‘Cure of Souls’ (to quote the title of Ian Maclaren’s ‘Yale Lectures on Preaching’), we do not need to argue for a scientific as against a haphazard method of procedure...The true physician only after careful scientific diagnosis administers a remedy, and then he follows the case through with conscientious care. (52)

While aboard ship, a woman approached Buchman and asked that he describe to her his system of personal evangelism, but requested that he phrase it in simple terms that she could understand. According to Buchman, that night he received Divine guidance that produced
what he called the 5 C’s: Confidence, Confession, Conviction, Conversion, and Conservation. These 5 components were then adopted and taught by the Oxford Group as the proper way for a life-changer to proceed with his or her endeavors. I will rely on Walter’s definitions of each of these stages, since these were the definitions adopted by the Oxford Group.

In terms of confidence Walter says, “By this we mean coming so wholly into the confidence of the one we seek to help along the avenue of personal friendship that we know his verdict on his own case, see him through his own eyes. The physician of souls must know his patients intimately, or he cannot diagnose their troubles accurately” (Walter 64). One of Buchman’s most conspicuous talents was reputed to be the ability to diagnose another person’s sins with uncanny accuracy. Of course, he could not always do this unless the person was willing to talk to him and, at least to some extent, confide in him. Buchman found that the most effective way to win someone else’s confidence was to reveal his own sins to that person, or tell him his personal story. He often recounted the story of his realization of holding resentments against the hospice board who denied him his requests and how, once he was able to make an apology and release these resentments, he had been able to win another person to Christ right away.

In AA, there is also an attempt to win the confidence of new members through the use of personal narratives and sponsors. It is common for people in the rooms to tell their stories in a self-revealing fashion so that others will feel comfortable “opening up” as well. When a sponsor takes responsibility for a new member, he or she will frequently take their sponsees out for coffee and offer sincere friendship as a basis on which to build a more confidential relationship.

Regarding confession, Walter writes “This is only the last word of confidence, denoting that the life-changer has won through to the innermost recess of his friend’s life, has been privileged to see into the darkened chamber whose door is usually closed and barred, so that he knows his man- far back into the motives and desires that are the roots of all his actions” (Walter 79). Shared recognition of sin or troubling character defects brings these issues out into the open where they can be dealt with. Counselors and psychiatrists also recognize this necessity. In terms of A.A., this step corresponds to Step 5 which says, “Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs” (Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions 6). The self-revealing nature of many A.A. meetings helps to partially explain the reason for the “anonymous” in Alcoholics Anonymous. Full names are seldom, if ever, used; only a person’s first name is customarily used, there is an emphasis on confidentiality between a sponsor and sponsee, and in the rooms in general. It may be frequently heard, “What is said here, stays here. Hear, hear!!”

Regarding conviction, Walter says, “This stage is as closely related to Confession as Confession is to Confidence...it means a vision of the hideousness of his own personal guilt in the light of the revelation of God’s holy love in Christ” (Walter 107). For the Oxford Group, whose overriding imperative was to win people for Christ, this step would bring the nature of one’s sin into such stark contrast with the love of Christ that the person would feel impelled to make a change. Although I have not been able to find any direct correlation with any of A.A.’s 12 Steps, there seems to be an indirect connection. Before each step in which one actually asks God for help, there is a previous step which stresses recognition of the severity
of the problem and a willingness to accept Divine assistance. This is evidenced in Step 1, which says, “We admitted we were powerless over alcohol— that our lives had become unmanageable.”, and also in Step 6, where it says, “We were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character” (Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions 5-6). It makes sense that the primary impetus leading to one’s readiness to accept God’s help would be recognition of the severity of the problem. This seems to correspond to the Oxford Group’s step of conviction.

Regarding the Oxford Group’s step of conversion, Walter says, “We need not linger long over this crucial step because it is a transaction that takes place altogether between the soul and God, usually following conviction and a new sense of the need of a Saviour when Christ’s salvation is recognized and appropriated” (Walter 125). This seems to be a point in the Oxford Group process where the life-changer has to step aside and have faith in the Divine process. If all goes well, the person will emerge with a sufficiently convincing experience to not only change his or her life, but function as a life-changer for others as well. This step does seem to have direct A.A. correlates in Steps 3 (“Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.”) and 7 (“Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.”) (Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions 5-7).

Regarding conservation, Walter writes:

Here is where, perhaps, the greatest service can and should be done by the personal worker, and where he most frequently and lamentably falls down. The new convert should receive the most sedulous attention in the days following his conversion, if he is not to prove one more of the sad examples of backsliders (far less numerous than many believe and usually the result of superficial evangelism or imperfect conservation) who are pointed out in deprecation of evangelistic efforts. (138)

After conversion, the new convert might have begun to effect a change, but the temptations that were so hard to deal with before will probably present, at least to some extent, a continual challenge. In addition to the reinforcement of spiritual values provided by one’s comrades in faith, Buchman and others had discovered that the most effective way to keep someone from backsliding was to encourage them to make new converts. Being a life-changer helped keep one’s life changed. In addition to the concept of surrendering self-will, the Oxford Group’s concept of conservation may have the strongest correlation with AA’s 12 Steps. Step 12 says, “Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs” (Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions 8). One of the most powerful strategies that recovering alcoholics can employ to maintain their sobriety is to become someone’s sponsor, or just to be willing to be of service at meetings. As previously mentioned, Bill Wilson’s attempt to maintain his sobriety by helping another alcoholic led to his association with Dr. Bob, the establishment of Alcoholics Anonymous and the 12 Steps.

Chapter 2: The Development of Alcoholics Anonymous

13
Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.) had dual origins in the United States, with formative roots emanating from New York City and Akron, Ohio. Despite the different cultures and attitudes that prevailed in these cities, AA’s development in both areas was firmly rooted in the beliefs and practices of the Oxford Group. Although Alcoholics Anonymous would eventually dissociate itself from its parent organization and establish its own identity, its co-founders would always acknowledge the debt owed to their evangelical predecessor. As will be shown, the very act of dissociation from the Oxford Group can be understood as adherence to an idealized form of Oxford Group praxis.

One of Frank Buchman’s most important breakthroughs was the realization that personal evangelism became dramatically more effective when the first of his “S C’s” (Confidence) was established through an honest and self-revealing sharing of personal experience. Such a communication would be especially effective if the recipient could relate to these life experiences through similar experiences of his own. Perhaps more than any other factor, this dynamic would be adopted by Alcoholics Anonymous as the method of transmission through which one alcoholic would approach another.

Ironically, it was through another practice of the Oxford Group (one that was widely criticized and later unambiguously rejected by Alcoholics Anonymous) that the beginnings of A.A. in Akron were able to take hold. This was the Oxford Group practice of pursuing the “up-and-outers”, those possessing the greatest prestige and wealth, with the expectation that, through them, many others would follow along the path of spiritual conversion. James Newton did not start as an “up-and outer”. He was a rather nondescript young man who started as a luggage salesman, but soon showed that he was possessed of extraordinary ability.

Newton made the acquaintance of Harvey Firestone, owner of the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company. Firestone was so impressed by this young man that he offered him an executive position with the company and asked him to move to Akron. Newton accepted. Newton had also gone through a spiritual rebirth through the Oxford Group and was a strong proponent of their program and philosophy.

Harvey Firestone’s son Russell, nicknamed “Bud”, worked alongside Newton at Firestone. As Dick B. describes in his work The Akron Genesis of Alcoholics Anonymous: Bud Firestone had a serious drinking problem. About it, Newton wrote:

Bud and his wife, Dorothy, and I were good friends from the time I first started at Firestone. We were all of the same age, and as I was unmarried, I often would go over to their house, which was very near where I lived at the Portage Country Club. I found out about Bud’s problem from Bud himself. He was a hard drinker. One day he told me that he had been in and out of institutions to ‘dry out’. His father had sent him in great hopes, but by the time I came into the picture I think Firestone had about given up on Bud’s alcoholism. It was tearing him up, but he just didn’t know what to do. (31)

Newton first showed himself to be a good and loyal friend. Even though he himself was not an alcoholic, he voluntarily attended a rather harsh rehabilitation facility just to stand by Bud. As expected, the results of treatment at this facility were negligible, but the trust
formed between the two was not. A strong relationship of fidelity had been established, so that when Jim Newton asked his friend to attend a large religious convention in Denver, Bud agreed. Jim told Bud that, at this convention, he would have an opportunity to meet some of the leaders and members of the Oxford Group, and suggested that he could benefit from hearing what they had to say. Presumably on the basis of their friendship and the extraordinary loyalty and caring that Jim had extended, Bud acquiesced. The turning point, however, took place on the train as they were returning from Denver. Sam Shoemaker, one of the leaders of the Oxford Group in the United States, was on the same train. As explained by Dick B in *The Akron Genesis of Alcoholics Anonymous*, “In Denver, Shoemaker spent a good deal of time with Bud Firestone; and Shoemaker joined Firestone and Newton on the return train trip from Denver. Shoemaker and Firestone went into a private train compartment together” (B., Dick 33). During this private interaction, Shoemaker led Bud to make a “surrender” in typical Oxford Group fashion, and he made a decision to turn his life (and his alcoholism) over to God. Upon his return to Akron, those that knew Bud were astonished at the change. He stayed sober for quite some time (although he eventually returned to drinking), and became a vocal spokesman for the effectiveness of Oxford Group principles. Out of gratitude for what the Oxford Group had done for his son, Harvey Firestone formally invited the leading members of the Group to come to Akron and put on extended presentations of their program. Harvey Firestone was certainly an “up-and-outer”, and his support provided the Oxford Group with a credible platform from which they could disseminate their message. This was January, 1933.

To document the beginnings of AA, whether in Akron or New York City, is to document the series of interpersonal conversion-related interactions, initially of the Oxford Group kind. Through these interactions, a nucleus of Oxford Group converts who were successfully using the Group’s techniques to overcome their problems with alcohol would gradually make the changes needed to make the program more effective for alcoholics. In Akron, the people who would play key roles in this process, even though many were not alcoholics themselves, were initially attracted to the Oxford Group through the presentations that were given in 1933. Among these individuals were Henrietta Seiberling who was a relative of another local rubber magnate, her friend Delphine Weber, Clarace Williams, who, together with her husband, would host Oxford Group meetings that were especially amenable to alcoholics, and Anne Smith, who was seeking a solution to her husband’s alcoholism. Anne Smith’s husband, Doctor Robert Holbrook Smith, would later be revered as one of the co-founders of Alcoholics Anonymous.

The Oxford Group presentations that took place in Akron in 1933 were successful to the point that a group of local residents made a commitment to continue practicing their tenets and to teach others. They began holding weekly meetings in the Mayflower Hotel. Eventually, Clarace and T. Henry Williams opened their home for these weekly meetings. Henrietta Seiberling, Delphine Weber and Anne Smith were usual attendees. A short time later, Anne Smith convinced her husband, Dr. Robert Holbrook Smith, to attend these meetings as well. Dr. Smith, usually referred to as “Dr. Bob”, was a local surgeon who had an exceptionally seeking mind when it came to spiritual matters. He spent the next two years reading all the Oxford Group literature and suggested reading that he could obtain. He became well-acquainted with most, if not all, of the biblical sources upon which the Oxford
Group principles were based. He practiced the Oxford Group’s method of two-way prayer, whereby he would listen in silent meditation for specific information that the Group believed came directly from God. He also had a drinking problem that was steadily destroying both his professional and personal life. And even though he practiced the principles of the Oxford Group to the best of his ability, he stayed drunk and continued to deteriorate.

To understand how Dr. Bob obtained freedom from this affliction, the narrative must switch to New York City. Just as in Akron, a series of interpersonal conversion experiences would lead to the conversion of a key individual; not so much a “key man” as defined by the standards of the Oxford Group, but a key man who would develop a passion to extend to others the freedoms he would soon gain.

This part of the story begins with the noted Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung and the advice he was to give to one of his alcoholic patients. The patient’s name was Rowland Hazard. He had a severe alcohol problem and had sought out Dr. Jung for treatment. After these treatments proved unsuccessful and Hazard kept drinking, Dr. Jung told him that his case was hopeless, and that his only hope for breaking the bonds of alcoholism was to have a spiritual experience. Taking this advice to heart and recognizing the seriousness of his condition, Rowland Hazard returned to the United States and joined the Oxford Group. He not only was successful in overcoming his alcoholism, but established a close relationship with Frank Buchman and became an influential leader in the Oxford Group.

In keeping with Oxford Group practice, Hazard actively sought to share his conversion experience with others. One of the recipients of his sharing was Ebby Thacher, another alcoholic who was facing a bleak future of institutionalization or death. Thacher took to the Oxford Group program and attained sobriety. Years later, he would lose this sobriety and return to drinking, but the good he was able to transmit before relapsing turned out to be incalculable. For a time during his newly acquired sobriety, Thacher was living at the Calvary Mission in New York City, which was run by Reverend Samuel Shoemaker, the most important Oxford Group leader in the United States next to Frank Buchman himself. Oxford Group meetings were regular occurrences at the Calvary Mission, and more than one alcoholic had attained sobriety as a result. This is not to say that the number of recoveries was overly impressive in its own right. But, considering that severe alcoholism was usually considered a hopeless and incurable disorder by the medical community at that time, even a relatively small number of lasting recoveries was impressive by comparison.

In true Oxford Group fashion, Ebby Thacher wanted to share the news and benefits of his miraculous recovery with others, and sought out his childhood friend and former drinking companion Bill Wilson. Wilson was a once-successful Wall Street businessman whose professional and personal life had been decimated by alcohol abuse. When Ebby called him and asked if he could come over to Wilson’s Brooklyn apartment, Wilson assumed they were going to spend the time drinking and reminiscing. He accordingly had the gin and pineapple juice ready. This was in November of 1934 and is regarded as one of the landmarks in A.A. history. As recounted by Ernest Kurtz in Not-God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous, when Bill offered Ebby a drink, the conversation proceeded as follows:

“No thanks, I don’t want any. I’m not drinking.”
“No drink? Why not? Are you on the water
wagon?” “No, I don’t mean that. I’m just not drinking today.” “Not drinking today!’ Ebby, what’s gotten into you?” “Well, I don’t need it anymore: I’ve got religion.”

The host’s eyes and heart dropped. Religion. His mind wandered as his guest continued to speak. His first thought: ‘Good! That means more for me!’ Now he did not need to worry about replenishing his supply should his wife return home before the visitor left. Although somewhat pleased with that realization, within his mind jarred a less happy awareness. As much as he had looked forward to swapping tales with an old pal, that happy prospect had now suddenly palled- ‘got religion’ indeed! He knew that his friend had been a too-heavy drinker. ‘Had his alcoholic insanity become religious insanity?’ (7)

Wilson, who had served in World War I, was a veteran of gained and lost Wall Street fortunes, and who was now completely under the sway of an addiction that he assumed would soon result in his insanity and death, was utterly unprepared for the reality of Ebby’s sobriety. He was even less prepared for the fact that Ebby seemed happy with his sobriety, rather than white-knuckling every second as he resisted the constant lure of a drink. Although Wilson would not admit it at first, his friend certainly had something that he desperately wanted.

Bill Wilson eventually decided to check out one of the Oxford Group services held at Calvary Mission. As legend has it, he got drunk on the way and was only granted admission after Ebby had taken him into another area and partially sobered him up with coffee and a plate of beans. At the meeting itself, Wilson, who could be something of a show-off, was the first to jump up and recount the miracle of his salvation. Although Bill may not have realized it at the time, something nearing a miracle was occurring in his life. As recounted by Susan Cheever in My Name is Bill:

Half drunk, he launched into a testimonial about salvation and the way he had given his life to God. Afterward, Bill felt sober, and a great weight seemed to have lifted off him. On the way home he walked right by the bars on 23rd Street that had earlier been so irresistible. Perhaps this was it, he thought, the cure he had been wishing for and praying for; perhaps he was released from his need for drinking. (117)

This was indeed a beginning. A rapidly following sequence of events would culminate in his being able to break the bonds of his alcoholic obsession and help countless others to do the same.

Towns Hospital was a facility in New York City that specialized in the treatment of alcoholics. Although this facility was for the elite (those with money), and would ordinarily have been beyond Wilson’s means, certain relatives had persisted in their hopes for Bill’s recovery and had guaranteed payment in the past. Although these past visits had only produced temporary respites from his addiction, Wilson admitted himself once more. This time, however, he was already undergoing an internal change. After experiencing an overwhelming depression and corresponding sense of desperation, Wilson had his epiphany. As recounted by Kurtz: “In the first formal telling of his story, Wilson slid quickly past what happened next. He had learned that recounting it injured rather than aided his
credibility, and it certainly had not helped anyone else to ‘get the program.’ Yet, to him, it had happened, and he knew it, and eventually he had to set it down. Two decades later he did so, in the most detailed telling of his story, at the ‘Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age’ Convention of 1955.” (Kurtz 19) As described in Kurtz’ history of A.A.:

My depression deepened unbearably and finally it seemed to me as though I were at the bottom of the pit. I still gagged badly on the notion of a Power greater than myself, but finally, just for the moment, the last vestige of my proud obstinacy was crushed. All at once I found myself crying out, ‘If there is a God, let Him show Himself! I am ready to do anything, anything!’ Suddenly the room lit up with a great white light. I was caught up into an ecstasy which there are no words to describe. It seemed to me, in the mind’s eye, that I was on a mountain, and that a wind not of air but of spirit was blowing. And then it burst upon me that I was a free man. Slowly the ecstasy subsided. I lay on the bed, but now for a time I was in another world, a new world of consciousness. All about me and through me there was a wonderful feeling of Presence, and I thought to myself, ‘So this is the God of the preachers!’ A great peace stole over me and I thought, ‘No matter how wrong things seem to be, they are all right. Things are all right with God and His world’. (19-20)

Bill Wilson never had another drink.

Bill and his wife Lois began regularly attending Oxford Group meetings at Calvary Church and, for all intents and purposes, began a new way of life. He was grateful for his newfound sobriety and desperate to do two things. First, he was desperate to hold onto this sobriety and not slip back into the living hell that had characterized his life as an alcoholic. Second, he was desperate to share these benefits with others so that they too could be released from this vicious addiction. Wilson was soon to realize that these two components were inseparable. As Kurtz recounts, “Until Wilson arrived at the explicit realization that whether or not he wanted to, he needed to work with other alcoholics to maintain his own sobriety, Alcoholics Anonymous was yet only coming into being” (Kurtz 21). At this point, it should be noted that none of these realizations or desires essentially differed from the basic tenets of the Oxford Group. The Oxford Group practice of sharing the real-life benefits that could be gleaned from their spiritual practice was the very method that Rowland Hazard had used to help Ebby Thacher attain his sobriety, and, in turn, was the method that had enabled Bill Wilson to break the chains of his addiction.

Ironically, it was another Oxford Group practice that may have provided Bill Wilson with a mission that was to force his separation from the Oxford Group proper. Getting guidance from God during meditation was fundamental to the Oxford Group way of life. They would frequently describe the results in terms of clear linguistic communication, but there is no reason why it would always have to be so. Bill Wilson engaged in Oxford Group practice and, indeed, he and Lois carried out daily meditations for the rest of their lives. Bill was inculcated with a tremendous sense of mission that manifested, not so much as divinely inspired linguistic communication, but as an intense and determined passion to help other alcoholics gain the freedom of sobriety. With astonishing rapidity, after his spiritual experience at Towns Hospital (frequently referred to in AA lore as his “hot flash experience”), working with other alcoholics became the dominant element in Bill Wilson’s life.
While attending Oxford Group meetings at Calvary Church, Bill and Lois Wilson quickly formed a relationship with the rector, Reverend Samuel Shoemaker. Although Bill learned from the Oxford Group and practiced their principles, his real mission, to bring the benefits of these principles to suffering alcoholics everywhere, became apparent almost at once. Lying in bed in Towns Hospital, soon after he had his spiritual experience, he was reading William James’ *The Varieties of Religious Experience* and had a flash of realization concerning his life’s mission. In his words, “My thoughts began to race as I envisioned a chain reaction among alcoholics, one carrying this message and these principles to the next. More than I could ever want anything else, I now knew that I wanted to work with other alcoholics” (Wilson in Kurtz 21). And Bill Wilson began immediately. His main focus at the Oxford Group meetings was on the alcoholics present. He would often meet with them afterwards at a neighborhood cafeteria and also began to bring them home. Through all of this, and much more to come, Bill’s wife Lois was more supportive than any spouse would have a right to expect. For the first time in years, her husband was maintaining sobriety. If he was accomplishing this by working with other drunks, so be it. She would stay by his side and do anything necessary to keep him from slipping back into an alcoholic nightmare.

The curious fact, though, was that, although Bill was staying sober, none of the alcoholics that he was trying to help were staying sober. In a quandary about this, he consulted Dr. William Silkworth, who was the medical director of Towns Hospital. Dr. Silkworth was sufficiently impressed with Bill’s progress that he was allowing him to speak with alcoholics that were currently in Towns for treatment. Dr. Silkworth was convinced that the alcoholic suffered from an allergy to alcohol, coupled with a mental obsession to drink. The combination caused the alcoholic to compulsively consume a substance that was essentially poisonous to his system. Even though some of these contentions would not stand up to late empirical research, the practical conclusions that could be drawn from his theory were of immense use to the alcoholic. If Silkworth was right, then the alcoholic could not drink like a normal person without this condition. This conclusion would certainly stand the test of time, whether this state of affairs was brought about by an allergy or not. One of the most dangerous attitudes that would be shown to precede alcoholic relapse was the assumption that the alcoholic could now drink like a normal person. If this was ever found to be true, it was a rarity. Usually the alcoholic would have to accept his condition as a fact. Silkworth’s disease concept of alcoholism helped many alcoholics to accept their condition without having to view it as a moral failing or a sign of personal weakness. Silkworth, who would later write *The Doctor’s Opinion* chapter in the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous, told Wilson that he was failing with these alcoholics because he was preaching at them, and that this was the wrong method. As recounted in the AA Publication ‘*Pass It On*: The Story of Bill Wilson and How the AA Message Reached the World:

It was Dr. Silkworth who helped straighten him out; Bill was preaching, said the doctor, and his preaching was driving his prospects away. He was talking too much about Oxford Group principles and about his own spiritual experience. Why not talk instead about the illness of alcoholism? Why not tell his alcoholics about the illness that condemned them to go mad or die if they continued to drink? ‘Coming from another alcoholic, one alcoholic talking to another, maybe that will crack those tough egos deep down,’ Silkworth said. ‘Only then can you begin to try out your other
medicine, the ethical principles you have picked up from the Oxford Group’. (133)
Because Bill cared more about his mission for other alcoholics than about his own ego, he was always open to any advice that would help in this endeavor. During the coming summer of 1935, he would have a chance to put Dr. Silkworth’s advice to the test.

Because this paper seeks to address both the similarities and differences between Alcoholics Anonymous and the Oxford Group, an observation regarding Dr. Silkworth’s “disease concept” of alcoholism seems appropriate at this juncture. It is tempting to regard the disease approach to alcoholism as significantly different from the Oxford Group’s approach to dealing with sin. The former seems to deal with an abstract situation that has to be dealt with as a pragmatic reality, while the latter seems to imply a moral decision. There is a measure of truth to this distinction; however, viewing both constructs from an ontological approach, which attempts to describe just what alcoholism and sin in general are, from the perspective of a human being trying to live a spiritually fulfilling life, yields an interesting similarity. The disease concept of alcoholism views it as an incurable disorder that one must be on guard against throughout one’s life. The only effective treatment is abstinence. Although this abstinence is difficult to maintain, spiritual practice allows the individual to be more successful in this endeavor. The concept of sin espoused by the Oxford Group, as well as many other religious organizations, is remarkably similar. The tendency towards sin is also an incurable disorder of the individual that is best dealt with through abstinence. There seems to be no equivocation on this point in Oxford Group doctrines. Frank Buchman preached adherence to the four absolutes, not the four suggestions for moderate indulgence. And, just as in A.A., a strong spiritual practice would aid in the person’s ability to abstain from these unwanted, but tempting, behaviors. When considered from this perspective, the two constructs seem to have more similarities than differences.

In early 1935 Bill Wilson was newly sober and, along with aspirations to help other alcoholics achieve sobriety, he also wished to rebuild his career in business. Impressed by Wilson’s progress, some of his former associates felt sufficiently confident in his abilities to trust him with a new opportunity. This concerned a proxy fight in Akron, Ohio. If he was successful, Wilson could regain all of his former prestige and more. But, the proxy fight was not going in Wilson’s favor, his comrades returned to New York, and he was left alone in Akron, attempting to win what would turn out to be an unwinnable battle. It was the day before Mother’s Day, 1935, and the sequence of events that followed stand as some of the most important in A.A. history.

As Bill Wilson stood in the lobby of the Mayflower Hotel (the same hotel that had formerly served as the headquarters of the Oxford Group when they had been invited by Harvey Firestone in 1933), he felt despondent over the business situation and heard the constant and all too familiar buzz of conversation coming from the hotel bar. Bill Wilson wanted a drink. And the prospect terrified him. As recounted in Pass It On:

In New York, he had kept himself sober for more than five months through working with other drunks at Towns and at Calvary Mission. The work had been his protection; it had kept him safe. Now he had nobody. As he recalled later, ‘I thought, ‘You need another alcoholic to talk to. You need another alcoholic just as much as he needs you!’ It was this thought that led him to the church directory at the other end of the hotel lobby. (136)
And Bill Wilson realized at that moment what would become foundational to AA. In order to keep his sobriety, he needed to help another alcoholic, or at least try. Decades later, in thousands of rooms throughout the world, this would be expressed as the AA colloquialism, “You can’t keep it unless you give it away”. Bill Wilson chose the church directory instead of the bar and began dialing numbers.

Bill dialed the number of Dr. Walter Tunks, a local clergyman who, unbeknownst to Wilson, was strongly sympathetic to the Oxford Group. Bill was introducing himself as an Oxford Group member from New York, who was a drunk and needed another drunk to talk to. Going through one number after another in this manner, he was eventually directed to call Henrietta Seiberling. After some initial trepidation, because Wilson mistakenly assumed that Henrietta Seiberling was the wife, instead of the disenfranchised daughter-in-law, of a local rubber magnate, he made the call. Henrietta Seiberling regarded Bill’s call as the answer to her prayers. The specific prayers in question had been directed to a fellow Oxford Group member who had been unable to stop drinking, even though he and his wife both attended Oxford Group meetings and tried to follow their principles. The alcoholic in question was Dr. Robert Holbrook Smith. With several members of their group ardently praying that something would happen to help Dr. Smith break the chains of his addiction, Bill Wilson’s call was seen as Divine intervention. Henrietta would have had Bill meet Dr. Bob immediately, but their meeting had to be delayed until the following day, Mother’s Day, because Dr. Bob was too drunk to move.

Henrietta Seiberling had been exiled with her children to the gate house of the Seiberling estate, which was still quite luxurious, and, on Mother’s Day, 1935, Bill Wilson met with Dr. Bob. Bob had elicited a promise from his wife that they wouldn’t stay more than fifteen minutes. He was hardly enthused to hear anything this self-described rumhound from New York had to say and was only attending because of the respect he had for Henrietta. Bill immediately applied the advice he had recently received from Dr. Silkworth and went right into the medical implications of alcoholism, along with its bleak prognosis. He was slightly reticent and painfully aware that he, a former stockbroker, was attempting to describe the medical implications of alcoholism to a medical doctor. Dr. Bob, however, was entranced. He was probably most impressed with Bill’s sincerity and the fact that this New Yorker, who had been through most of the same agonies that he himself had been through, knew what he was talking about, as a fellow alcoholic. Fifteen minutes turned into six hours and, after a brief stay at the local country club (arranged by Henrietta Seiberling), Bill moved in with the Smiths. This was the start of a friendship and partnership that would form the basis of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Bill stayed with the Smiths throughout the summer of 1935 and Dr. Bob began to put together sober days that then turned into sober weeks. If we can judge by the dynamics that later proved to be so effective for Alcoholics Anonymous, there were probably two main determinants that helped Dr. Bob with his initial sobriety. The first was the daily interaction between Bill and Dr. Bob, for, indeed, they were helping each other stay sober. The second and related factor was that they immediately set about trying to help other alcoholics. For Dr. Bob to attain lasting sobriety, however, a third factor was missing. This became evident when he decided to attend a medical convention in another city. The prospect of this convention caused considerable consternation on the part of Dr. Bob’s
wife Anne, but Bill thought that, since they had to live their lives in a world where other people drank and would continue to do so, a recovering alcoholic must be able to be in the presence of alcohol and still maintain his sobriety. The fact of the matter was that Dr. Bob did not remain sober on this trip and had to be rescued at the train station by his office nurse. Bill and Anne then brought him home.

This presented a very serious situation because Bob was due to perform a rather complicated surgery in three days. This did not give Bill and Anne very much time to get him back on his feet. As recounted in Pass It On:

Bill and Anne wondered if they could get him sober in time. ‘It was a worrisome thing, because if he was too drunk, he couldn’t do it,’ Bill remembered, ‘And if he was too sober, he would be too jittery. So we had to load him up with this combination of tomato juice and sauerkraut and Karo corn syrup. The idea was to supply him with vitamins from the tomatoes and sauerkraut and energy from the corn syrup. We also gave him some beer to steady his nerves. (148)

Early on the morning of the operation, Bob realized the factor that was missing in his attempts to remain sober. Again from Pass It On:

As Bill remembered it, at four o’clock on the morning of the operation, both of them were wide awake. Dr. Bob, shaking, turned to look at Bill. He said, “I am going through with it.”

“You mean you’re going through with the operation?”

“I have placed both the operation and myself in God’s hands,’ Dr. Bob replied.”

“I’m going to do what it takes to get sober and stay that way.”

Dr. Bob said not another word that morning. He was shaking miserably as he got into his clothes. Bill and Anne drove him to the hospital, and just before stopping the car, Bill handed him ‘one goofball’ and a single bottle of beer, to curb the shakes. (148-149)

That beer turned out to be the last drink that Dr. Bob ever had. The operation was successful and Dr. Bob spent the rest of the day making restitution, or promises of restitution, to all those locally who he felt he had harmed through his drinking. The missing factor was Bob’s decision to surrender his emphasis on self-will, turn the problem over to his higher power, and embrace the program that he and Bill had been developing. The day of his decision, June 10th, 1935, is commonly regarded as the day Alcoholics Anonymous was founded (although that name had yet to be employed).

Bill returned to New York in August of that year. He continued to attend Oxford Group meetings at Calvary Church and to use their methods of meditation, prayer and reading scripture. But, by this time, Bill realized that, to stay sober, he would have to be actively helping other alcoholics, and this became his major emphasis. From one perspective, his need to work with other alcoholics in order to maintain his own sobriety could be seen as self-serving. The various writings that recount his personal experiences, however, along with the record of his subsequent activities, indicate that this was not the overriding factor in his case. Since his initial spiritual awakening at Towns Hospital, he had felt a tremendous sense of mission to help other alcoholics. He would remain faithful to this mission throughout his life, even when it meant the loss of money, prestige, position and even his home.
Bill and Lois Wilson began having weekly meetings in their Brooklyn home on Clinton Street. Although these meetings utilized some of the *methods* of the Oxford Group, they were just for alcoholics. Many of these alcoholics that attended both the Oxford Group meetings at Calvary Church and the meetings at Bill and Lois’ began to express the opinion that the meetings at the Wilson’s were far more valuable in terms of maintaining their sobriety. A persistent and growing tension began to develop between the alcoholic Oxford Group members and leaders at Calvary. At first, the situation was unpleasant but tolerable. Then an incident took place that, in Wilson’s view, demanded immediate action. As recounted by Kurtz:

The crisis came to a head in late spring 1937, while Sam Shoemaker was on vacation. One evening Bill discovered that alcoholics from the mission had been forbidden to come to Clinton Street, and soon it became loudly bandied about at the larger Oxford Group meetings that the Wilsons were not ‘really maximum.’ The phrase was strange to Bill and Lois, who found it upsetting. Finally, the ‘divergent work’ of a ‘secret, ashamed sub-group’ became the subject of a Sunday morning sermon at Calvary by the church’s young associate pastor. All this, Bill decided, was just about enough. Wilson rearranged the ideas that had so far held him close to the Oxford Group...more and more Bill discovered that new adherents could get sober by believing in each other and in the strength of *this* group. Men who had proven over and over again, by extremely painful experience, that they could not get sober on their own had somehow become more powerful when two or three of them worked on their common problem. This, then, whatever it was that occurred among them, was what they could accept as a power greater than themselves.

They did not need the Oxford Group. (45)

And so, in the summer of 1937, the New York group of alcoholics headed by Bill Wilson dissociated themselves from the Oxford Group and began to establish an independent identity. In Akron, this separation would not take place for another two years. The alcoholics, under the auspices of Dr. Bob and those he had helped achieve sobriety, continued to attend Oxford Group meetings alongside non-alcoholics. Like Bill, however, Dr. Bob and Anne were regularly sharing their home with recovering alcoholics, who would offer support to each other outside of the regular Oxford Group meetings held at the home of T. Henry and Clarace Williams.

Bill Wilson’s drinking and his subsequent preoccupation with a mission to help alcoholics had all but put an end to his business career. However, in late 1937, he still had hopes of resurrecting his former successes on Wall Street. Hopes for a business opportunity led him to travel across the country and enabled him to visit Dr. Bob in Akron. The relationship between Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob Smith had always been characterized by the harmony of complimentary personalities. A description of their initial summer spent together appears in *Pass It On*:

During those first few months, Bill and Dr. Bob established the working alliance and partnership that would last all their lives and mark them as the co-founders of A.A. Each man brought special talents and personal traits to his role. Bill was the promoter, the ‘idea man’ whose mind was constantly racing ahead with plans and projects. Dr. Bob represented the strength and stability of the early Fellowship; his prudent
counsel often blocked rash ventures that might have retarded the development of A.A. or even ruined A.A.; and Bill would later acknowledge that debt in a tribute to his partner. (155)

The complimentary aspects of their personalities, combined with a shared passion and dedication to help others break the chains of the devastating addiction that had formerly held them prisoners, produced a synergistic force that enabled A.A. to grow and develop to its current status as a worldwide organization that has helped millions.

In late 1937, when Bill Wilson once again visited Dr. Bob in Akron, the two shared a realization that was to herald further breakthroughs. As recounted by Cheever:

Although Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob Smith had communicated through dozens of letters, sitting down together after almost two years turned out to be an astonishing experience. When they compared notes in person, they realized that they had actually found something that doctors and laymen had been searching for as long as anyone could remember: a way to help alcoholics get sober that actually worked. Between them they counted forty men who hadn't had a drink in more than a year.

(147)

This might not seem like a lot to show for two years work, but, since the results of the medical profession, as well as most of the results from the efforts of clergy, had been dismal, forty stable and lasting successes in two years was a noteworthy achievement. At this point, the foresight of both men produced another problem to solve. They could see the possibility of their method spreading to help alcoholics everywhere, but it would not spread itself. In keeping with their personalities, Bill immediately proposed the establishment of special hospitals for alcoholics, paid missionaries to spread the message, and the writing of a book that would explain their method. Dr. Bob did not actively dispute the value of any of these suggestions, but wanted to proceed much more cautiously and slowly. Eventually they decided to present the suggestions to the Akron group of alcoholics for a vote. As would be the pattern throughout much of A.A. history, especially those portions of A.A. history where decisions concerning significant changes of any kind were concerned, Bill knew that Dr. Bob’s support was absolutely crucial. Dr. Bob was the charismatic personality in Akron and Bill Wilson was the charismatic personality in New York. Where they stood on issues powerfully influenced the opinions of others. If there should be serious division between the two, it would be very difficult for the groups to make progress as a united whole. Dr. Bob was fully cognizant of these facts and cautiously gave his approval to Bill’s suggestions.

Even with Dr. Bob’s approval, the Akron alcoholics had major concerns regarding Bill’s proposals. With the barest of margins, and after serious debate, the Akron alcoholics gave their approval for Bill to move ahead with all three of his proposals. Of the three ideas, there was the greatest support for a book that would espouse the methods they employed to achieve and maintain sobriety. Such a book would maintain the integrity of this method, which could become distorted over time if only propagated by word of mouth. Even though the majority had given their approval, there were more serious concerns over the other two proposals. There was a fear that hospitals for alcoholics could give rise to financial scandals and that paid missionaries would undermine the very altruistic spirit that was the lifeblood of their continued sobriety. As it turned out, the only one of Bill’s three suggestions to actualize
as a reality was the creation and publication of a book. Even this, however, would take great effort and planning. It would also require another ingredient that would be even more difficult to obtain than the majority vote in Akron: money.

Both Dr. Bob and Bill Wilson were in dire financial straits, and would remain so for years to come. Dr. Bob’s practice had withered because of his alcohol abuse, and the renewed confidence from his peers and patients would come only slowly as he proved his sobriety over time. Bill’s career in business had likewise been devastated by alcoholism, and prospective employers were reticent to give responsibility to someone who had a history of showing up drunk, or sometimes not showing up at all. Besides these challenges, there was the reality that both Bill and Dr. Bob were spending most of their time and energy on rehabilitating drunks. This meant that they were not spending this time and energy on their careers. But both were convinced that they were fulfilling their life’s mission through dedication to this cause. During these beginning years, both were constantly opening up their homes to the alcoholics they were trying to help. While these alcoholics consumed the resources of their households, they rarely contributed. Both Bill and Dr. Bob were in danger of losing their homes to the mortgage companies.

The New York alcoholics were tremendously enthusiastic about the proposed hospitals, paid missionaries and the publication of a book that would espouse their principles of sobriety. They were caught up in Bill’s entrepreneurial spirit as well as his misconceptions. These misconceptions concerned the reception that most people, especially people with money, would give to the idea of supporting alcoholics in their quest for sobriety. Bill and the New York group thought that the worthiness of their projects would be evident to people with means and that their fundraising efforts would proceed easily and productively. This was not the case. Ernest Kurtz describes the situation in detail in his comprehensive history of A.A.:

The problem of obtaining money without strings attached became primary. The New York alcoholics drew up a list of wealthy prospects. In the alcoholics’ hopeful expectation, the startling fact that they–sober–could approach potential donors who knew them to be hopeless drunks would provide the best proof possible of the worth of the program they were promoting. To their very real astonishment, then, they obtained neither one cent nor a single promise of support. (65)

Part of the problem seemed to be the way alcoholism was viewed by the general public. The “disease” concept espoused by Dr. Silkworth and accepted by many of the beginning A.A.’s was foreign to the popular mind. The general public tended to view alcoholism as a moral failing. According to the popular conception that reciprocity is the essence of justice, these alcoholics were simply reaping the just rewards of their own intemperate behaviors. It quickly became clear that charity would not be forthcoming.

In desperation, Bill Wilson contacted a relative who had connections to John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Out of respect to this connection, Rockefeller assigned one of his agents, Frank Amos, to investigate the matter. Amos investigated the group in New York and, at Bill’s suggestion, traveled to Akron. Since the Akron group was more numerous and had a stronger record of cumulative sobriety than New York, Bill thought that this might be the best way to impress Amos with their worthiness. The investigation eventually led to a meeting in the Rockefeller boardroom. Several of Rockefeller’s agents were present and seemed genuinely enthused. And then the conversation took what was to become a familiar turn. As recounted
by Kurtz:

The longed-for and eagerly sought-after moment had come. Wilson spoke up, ‘going for broke.’ He mentioned the need for money, for paid workers, chains of hospitals, and especially literature, stressing the urgency as well as the worthiness of his appeal. Dr. Silkworth and the rest of the contingent—even those from Akron had been moved by Bill’s plea and the proximity of assistance—enthusiastically seconded all the points made, noting with satisfaction nods of agreement among the assembled advisors to great wealth. But then Albert Scott spoke up with yet another question, one which followed up his earlier query from an unanticipated direction: ‘Won’t money spoil this thing?’ (66)

This was to become Rockefeller’s basic position on the matter. The large sums that were anticipated vanished in that deflated instant. Rockefeller did, however, allocate $5,000 for Bill and Dr. Bob’s personal use. A large part of this was used to pay Dr. Bob’s mortgage, a move that Bill wholeheartedly supported. Most of the rest of this money was used to provide Bill and Dr. Bob with a stipend of $30.00 per week. This was to partially offset the funds that were lost through their dedication to the help of alcoholics rather than to their own careers. Rockefeller, however, did lend support in other ways. His staff helped Wilson and Dr. Bob form the Alcoholic Foundation. This formalized structure, although possessing no actual authority over A.A. groups and their members, was the forerunner of the future General Service Board, which would serve as a centralized body to coordinate information and activities among the individual groups.

The quest for special alcoholic hospitals and paid missionaries was eventually abandoned. However, the determination to write and publish a book containing the methods and principles that were proving to be effective for sobriety was doggedly pursued by Wilson. Dr. Silkworth contributed a chapter describing his medical perspective and the disease concept. Bill Wilson wrote most of the text describing the methods and approaches that were recommended. These included a description of the well-known Twelve Steps that still form the core of A. A.’s program for recovery. The rest of the book was comprised of narratives. These took the same basic form, but with different characters and situations. They described what the person was like when drinking, the person’s discovery of the methods of recovery suggested by A.A. (although the name Alcoholics Anonymous was only officially adopted after the publication of the book), and the person’s life after achieving sobriety through the practice of these methods. The narrative section of the book was tremendously important. For many, especially those who did not have easy access to another alcoholic who was willing to share his experience, this would replace or supplement the life-to-life encouragement engendered when one alcoholic shared his story with another. All of the stories in the book were taken from the lives of real people who had recovered using the methods that Bill and Dr. Bob had taken from their Oxford Group origins and refined to better fit the needs of alcoholics seeking recovery. Many of these stories were written and contributed by the Akron members who were still associated with the Oxford Group.

From the first days when Bill Wilson experienced his spiritual awakening, his overriding passion was to help other alcoholics break the bonds of their addiction. He would never waver from this determination, and it would always be the most important factor in any decision he made concerning A.A. Just as the Oxford Group recommended judging their
actions by how well they cohered with their four absolutes, Bill Wilson based many of his decisions and actions on how they answered the question, “How will this affect the ability of alcoholics to attain and maintain sobriety?” Because this question was always in the background, before he officially published the book which was to be called *Alcoholics Anonymous*, he sent out many pre-publication copies to various individuals to gain their input. Chapter by chapter, he had been sending the work to Akron to get the opinions of Dr. Bob and the Akron members. He had also been reading the individual chapters to the New York alcoholics who were meeting in his home. There was general approval at this level. But Bill Wilson was also concerned about groups who might be offended by the contents of the book. A special concern was how the Catholics would respond.

Many Catholic clergy and officials were already instructing their parishioners to avoid any meetings of the Oxford Group. Although there is no mention in Bill’s book of the initial connection of the Twelve Steps to their Oxford Group roots, the Akron alcoholics were still meeting under Oxford Group auspices. As Kurtz describes:

> By 1953, when he was about to begin work on the history of the fellowship which would be published as *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, Wilson had attained sufficient distance to be more honest about one aspect of his concern over the Oxford Group connection. ‘The main reason’ for omitting mention of the four absolutes, he wrote, ‘was possible trouble with the Catholic Church...It seemed wise to omit any material that would identify us with the Oxford Group. Just at that juncture, the Pope had decreed that no Catholics could come to Oxford Group meetings. Therefore, if we used any of their words or phrases, the same sentence might fall on us’. (52)

Bill was concerned that Catholic criticism of the book would prevent Catholic alcoholics from utilizing it for their recovery. Fortunately, one of the New York members had connections to the publication committee of the local Archdiocese. Their response upon reading one of the pre-publication copies was favorable. Their only request was not difficult to accommodate. As recounted in *Pass It On*:

> They suggested some minor changes, which Bill quickly accepted. The most significant of these was at the end of Bill’s own story. Where he declared that the recovered alcoholics had found heaven right here on earth, the committee gently suggested that he change “heaven” to “Utopia.” As they said, “After all, we Catholics are promising folks something much better later on.” Although the committee members gave no official approval of the book, their unofficial endorsement allowed Bill to breathe easier. (201-202)

The “Big Book”, as it has come to be known in A.A. was published in April, 1939. Its title, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, would soon be adopted by groups of recovering alcoholics throughout the country as they made their final separation from the Oxford Group.

Around the time that the Big Book came out, things were coming to a head in Akron. Scholars of A.A. history have differing opinions about why it took so much longer for alcoholics in Akron to separate themselves from the Oxford Group than those in New York. An adequate explanation would best be achieved by recognizing a combination of factors. First, Akron Oxford Group meetings were held at the warm and inviting home of T. Henry and Clarace Williams, who had always had a special feeling for alcoholics and were able to
see those recovering as part of their overall mission for the Oxford Group. In contrast, before the split, Oxford Group meetings in New York were held at Calvary Church, a more impersonal institution that did not seem to embrace the alcoholics to the same extent. Second, geographically, New York City tended to be more cosmopolitan and secular than Akron. Third, the personalities of the two charismatic leaders associated with New York and Akron (Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob, respectively) tended to react differently to proposals involving major change. Bill was often ready to embrace drastic change enthusiastically, while Dr. Bob had a much more conservative and cautious outlook. The fourth factor concerned the particular challenges that were being faced by the Cleveland alcoholics who were making the weekly trek to Akron.

Alcoholics from Cleveland, who were using the methods developed in Akron and New York to attain sobriety were making the weekly round trip from Akron to Cleveland to attend the Oxford Group meetings at T. Henry and Clarace Williams’. Clarence S. was an alcoholic in Cleveland who had worked with Dr. Bob and the Akron group to attain sobriety. In keeping with the principle that, in order to maintain his sobriety, he had to work with other alcoholics, he had taken responsibility for any alcoholics in Cleveland that were willing to try the program that had worked so well for him. He had also taken responsibility for organizing the weekly trips to T. Henry and Clarace Williams’. In addition to the fact that tensions were beginning to increase between the alcoholics and the non-alcoholics at Oxford Group meetings, the Catholics from Cleveland were receiving guidance from their clergy not to attend Oxford Group meetings. Ernest Kurtz gives a cogent rendition of how this condition developed:

Given the nature of Cleveland’s population as well as Clarence’s open-minded zeal, roughly half of the alcoholics making the weekly journey turned out to be practicing Roman Catholics. Some of these, when first approached by Clarence, had shied away from ‘the religion’ they perceived in his message. But in the agony of their active alcoholism, in their desire ‘to do anything’ to get sober, and on his assurance that the Akron gatherings were in no way ‘a religious service’, they had agreed to give it a try. Those who did give it a try got sober. Furthermore, despite all Clarence’s assurances, some of them began again to worry that what went on at the Williams’s in Akron each week was ‘a Protestant religious service.’ They needed Clarence about this on the drive back to Cleveland each week, and eventually at least two of them carried their concerns to their parish priest- who promptly pronounced Catholic attendance at the Wednesday meetings a violation of Church law and so forbade his charges to attend. Meanwhile, the multilib draft [separate copies made on a small printing machine] of the text of Alcoholics Anonymous had been circulating among the Akronites, and by mid-April of 1939 the first printed copies became available. (78)

The objections of the Catholic Church acted as a catalyst to a situation that was already at the breaking point. The Oxford Group non-alcoholics were irritated by the alcoholics at their meetings and vice versa. The Oxford Group practice of pursuing the “up-and-outers” was incongruous with the presence of alcoholics who were frequently destitute, homeless
and had lost all respectability. As they had said of Bill Wilson in New York, they were not “maximum”.

Fortunately for A.A., Clarence S. had the same kind of courageous determination to help his fellow alcoholics that had been evidenced by Bill Wilson in New York and would soon be evidenced by Dr. Bob in Akron. In early May of 1939, at one of the regular meetings at T. Henry and Clarace Williams’s in Akron, Clarence S. announced that the Clevelanders would no longer be attending the Akron Oxford Group meetings at the Williams’s. They were going to meet instead at the home of one of their newer members in Cleveland. This meeting would be just for alcoholics and their families. They would no longer be identifying themselves with the Oxford Group, or, as they had come to be called in Akron, “the alcoholic squad of the Oxford Group”. They would call their group Alcoholics Anonymous, the name they had taken from Bill Wilson’s new book, which would also function as their main text.

The Cleveland group had made a courageous break that formally established the identity of Alcoholics Anonymous. Soon afterwards, the tensions between the alcoholics and the non-alcoholics at the Oxford Group meetings in Akron reached a critical point, and Dr. Bob was faced with a similar choice. Kurtz describes the tensions at the Akron meetings:

Despite the departure of the Clevelanders, in the year 1939, ‘the alcoholic squadron of the Oxford Group increased in numbers and noise- until we took the place over.’ Bob E. gives the best account. ‘Instead of being the alcoholic squad of the Oxford Group, we were the main body there and we had the most to say and we were kind of running the thing.’ The committed Oxford Group members did not make this surrender easily. Bob E. says, ‘They had us in silence, listening for guidance half the time...That’s the way it started. That made the drunks very restless. We couldn’t stand that-get the jitters, you know. As we increased in numbers and influence, that was almost cut out. They could see where their fundamentals were not being adhered to.’...Finally, in late October 1939, most of the alcoholics left the William’s home and began meeting in the home of Dr. Bob and Anne Smith. (80-81)

Soon after the meetings shifted to Dr. Bob and Anne’s home, the attendance grew to the extent that a larger meeting place was required. This meeting shifted to the nearby King School. Meetings still take place there to this day, and Dr. Bob’s bible has an iconic place on the podium.

The actions of Bill Wilson in New York, Clarence S. in Cleveland, and Dr. Bob Smith in Akron served to formally establish Alcoholics Anonymous as a separate organization, independent from its Oxford Group roots. From this point on, new A.A. groups would trace their roots to older A.A. groups, not the Oxford Group. The changes that occurred from this point on would be characterized by compromise in the pursuit of the situation that would provide the maximum benefit to the greatest number of alcoholics. This utilitarian approach provided the rationale for many of the changes and developments that would lead to fierce debates and disagreements among A.A. members and between different A.A. groups. Characteristically, Bill Wilson would be an advocate of such changes, but realized the importance of respecting the wishes of the group, or, as it was soon to be called, the group conscience. He would actively solicit the support of the members, especially that of Dr. Bob,
whose following among A.A. members rivaled his own.

After the Cleveland group had established its precedent, local publicity in Cleveland, plus the public admission by a famous baseball player that he had attained sobriety through Alcoholics Anonymous, caused the Cleveland alcoholics to form several distinct A.A. groups to accommodate their growing numbers. Cases like that of the baseball player produced consternation among many A.A.’s. The publicity produced from individuals of note publicly crediting Alcoholics Anonymous with their sobriety attracted many new members. However, there was a concern about the long term effects of abandoning what had become a tradition of anonymity. Also, there were concerns about the possible fallout if this individual was to resume drinking. Nevertheless, publicity was responsible for the tremendous proliferation of A.A. groups throughout the country in the 1940’s.

Perhaps the most important and determinative publicity that Alcoholics Anonymous received in its formative years was a 1941 article in the Saturday Evening Post. As described in Pass It On:

When, in the issue dated March 1, 1941, the Saturday Evening Post published an article about Alcoholics Anonymous, the struggling Society was finally charted on the map of national consciousness through the telling power of America’s Number One Family Magazine. It was, as Marty M. said, ‘the most exciting thing that had ever happened, because we wanted publicity so badly. We wanted somebody to know about us’. (244)

Jack Alexander, the reporter who had written this article, had done thorough research, had interviewed many of the original leaders, and attended actual meetings of A.A. He was so impressed by the sincerity and altruistic motivations of Bill Wilson, Dr. Bob and the group as a whole that the accolades given to A.A. in his article caused membership in A.A. groups throughout the country to increase at an unprecedented rate. By this time, Alcoholics Anonymous had a small office in New York that functioned as a centralized information center. They were flooded with inquiries. Sales of the Big Book also increased steadily. As calls and letters from alcoholics or their concerned family members reached this office, they could be connected with groups that were already in existence in their respective areas. And there were other cases where, if there was no group in their immediate area, they would start one. Because the Big Book was now readily available, recovering alcoholics could now use it as a resource on which to base their group.

The forties saw the continued proliferation of A.A. groups throughout the country. With their increase in numbers and success came the problems that always accompany increased numbers and success. Although the Big Book presented a suggested program of practice, and there were informal traditions developing like anonymity and the transmission of the program from one member to another without any thought of financial compensation, the particular practices carried out by different A.A. groups could be extremely diverse. The Alcoholic Foundation, which had been started as a result of John D. Rockefeller’s initial interest in A.A., served as a liaison between A.A. and the general public, but had no authority to dictate the affairs of individual groups and, most importantly was not representative of the groups themselves. Describing this state of affairs as it had evolved after 1950, Kurtz writes:

The quandary was that as necessary to the needs of that time as had been the
Alcoholic Foundation with its majority of non-alcoholic trustees in the spring of 1938, its original money-raising function had been unnecessary since 1945. In that latter year, Alcoholics Anonymous adopted its tradition of ‘no outside contributions’ and signally informed the 1940 Rockefeller dinner guests that their assistance not only was no longer needed but even would no longer be accepted. Yet the Foundation with its Trustees had continued in existence. As a source and reservoir of good will, they mediated between Alcoholics Anonymous and the community at large. Explicitly composed of a majority of non-alcoholics, the Trustees and Foundation were the most visible witness to the fellowships’ respectability. (127-128)

Wilson felt strongly that Alcoholics Anonymous had reached the level of growth and maturity that necessitated a more representative body. Further quoting Kurtz:

In response to Bill’s ‘Third Legacy’ call, the first General Service Conference of Alcoholics Anonymous met in New York City in April 1951, its Wilson-chosen theme, ‘Not to Govern but to Serve.’ Throughout the proceedings, the thirty-seven elected delegates were reminded of their limitations— that, for example, they ‘represented no more than half the territory covered by A.A.’ Yet they also were reminded of the exact nature of their privilege. They were to accept ‘full present and future responsibility for the General Services of Alcoholics Anonymous,’ i.e., especially, the A.A. Book, The A.A. Grapevine, and the diverse functions of the Alcoholics Anonymous General Offices’. (129-130)

Bill Wilson was especially adamant about the establishment of two additions to A.A. during these years. The representative body of alcoholics that was instantiated in the General Service Conference was one of these. The other was the formalization of a set of guidelines, or, as they were to be called, “traditions” that might serve as a general stabilizer for the organizational structure of A.A., both at the individual group level and at the level of A.A. as a whole. A single overriding motivation was behind Bill’s push for these additions. This was the same motivation that had empowered the organization ever since its initial principles were constructed in Dr. Bob and Anne Smith’s house in the summer of 1935: A wish to be of maximum help to alcoholics everywhere. This wish was now combined with the realization that the organization must be able to survive after the passing of its two founders. Dr. Bob was already extremely ill with cancer and, although Bill’s health had not yet begun to fail, he had no illusions of immortality and wanted A.A. to continue and thrive after his death.

Bill Wilson was aware of the degree to which most A.A. members venerated their two founders. He was also aware that neither he nor Dr. Bob were doing the organization any favors by allowing this continued dependence. In order to “sell” the ideas of a general service conference composed of representatives from the groups and the formalization of a set of traditions to help A.A. survive as an organization, Bill knew that Dr. Bob’s support was essential. The level of support Bill required was not initially forthcoming, but, due in some measure to Bill’s dogged perseverance, Dr. Bob gave his public approval for both measures shortly before his death in 1950.
Pragmatic Transformations

Bill and Dr. Bob’s formulation of the Twelve Steps and the recommended methods for the recovering alcoholic had strong roots in Oxford Group principles, but were then modified empirically, according to what actually worked to help the prospect achieve and maintain sobriety. This pragmatic approach was to receive special emphasis as Bill began to construct what would be termed “The Twelve Traditions”. As recounted in _Pass It On_:

Much of Bill’s work at the office was taking care of the correspondence. Since the publication of the _Saturday Evening Post_ article, mail had been arriving in a steady stream. Many of the letters asked for assistance in forming new groups, or requested advice on various problems and circumstances in the groups. It was from having seen similar questions arise again and again that the idea of devising clear guidelines for the groups first evolved. This need had been discussed since 1943, when the headquarters office began to collect information, requesting of the groups a list of their membership rules and requirements. Listing them, Bill recalled, took a great many sheets of paper. “A little reflection on these many rules brought us to an astonishing conclusion. If all these edicts had been in force everywhere at once, it would have been practically impossible for any alcoholic to have ever joined A.A. About nine-tenths of our oldest and best members could never have got by!...The basic ideas for the Twelve Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous came directly out of this vast correspondence. In late 1945 a good A.A. friend suggested that all this mass of experience might be codified into a set of principles which could offer tested solutions to all of our problems of living and working together and of relating our Society to the world outside.” (305-306)

Bill’s initial version of these traditions was first published under another title in A.A.’s newsletter, _The A.A. Grapevine_, as early as 1946. The final version was published as part of Wilson’s _Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions_ in 1953. In this work, Wilson not only gives an explanation of each of the Twelve Steps, but also gives an explanation and underlying rationale for all of the Twelve Traditions. Using this text as a base, an analysis of the steps and traditions provide insight into the ways that Oxford Group principles were retained, modified or discarded to fit the needs of the recovering alcoholic.

Chapter 3: The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions

The Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous are basically the principles and practices of the Oxford Group, modified through experience to be more effective for alcoholics. The following is a list of the Twelve Steps as presented in the A.A. publication _Pass It On_:

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1) We admitted we were powerless over alcohol - that our lives had become unmanageable.
2) Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3) Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.
4) Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5) Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6) Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7) Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8) Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9) Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10) Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11) Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12) Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics and to practice these principles in all our affairs.”
   (408)

About the origin of these steps, Bill Wilson publicly acknowledged their genesis at the 1955 convention, when he also officially (albeit symbolically) turned over the leadership and management of A.A. to the members themselves. In part of his speech he also gives credit to Samuel Shoemaker, who was, for a time, the primary Oxford Group representative in the United States. In Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age, Wilson said:
   Sam’s appearance before us was further evidence that many a channel had been used by Providence to create Alcoholics Anonymous. And none had been more vitally needed than the one opened through Sam Shoemaker and his Oxford Group associates of a generation before. The basic principles which the Oxford Groupers had taught were ancient and universal ones, the common property of mankind. Certain of the former O.G. attitudes and applications had proved unsuited to A.A.’s purpose, and Sam’s own conviction about these lesser aspects of the Oxford Groups had later changed and become more like our A.A. views of today. But the important thing is this: the early A.A. got its ideas of self-examination, acknowledgment of character defects, restitution for harm done, and working with others straight from the Oxford Groups and directly from Sam Shoemaker, their former leader in America, and from nowhere else. (39)

Wilson may not have included the requirement of surrender to God (or a higher power) as originating from the Oxford Group because this principle had long been practiced by many previous groups in many different religions, although the other ideas that he mentions as
originating with the Oxford Group also could be traced back before their advent. He may also have been reserving the credit for this particular aspect of A.A. practice to the work of William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

William James’ landmark publication deeply affected Wilson’s perspective on alcoholism and, through that, basic A.A. praxis in two noticeable and fundamental ways. James’ concept of “deflation at depth” made a deep impression on Wilson, especially since he read about this concept directly following his own perception of ego-deflation in Towns Hospital, which, in turn, functioned as a precursor for his mystical and life-transforming experience. The second Jamesian concept that made an impression upon Wilson was contained in the title of the work itself, specifically the word “varieties.” Quoting from Kurtz:

Reading James’s *Varieties* profoundly affected Wilson. In fact, the American philosopher-psychologist was the only author cited in *Alcoholics Anonymous*, in a reference having more to do with “varieties” than with “religious experience”: “The distinguished American psychologist, William James, in his book ‘Varieties of Religious Experience,’ indicates a multitude of ways in which men have discovered God. We have no desire to convince anyone that there is only one way by which faith can be acquired.” Yet Wilson also seemed to attribute the phrase “deflation at depth” to William James. (23)

The theme of “deflation at depth” is clearly evidenced in A.A. praxis as the surrender of the will to one’s higher power. The concept of there being many valid ways to reach God served at least two important functions for Wilson and A.A. First, and most obviously, it formed the basis for the liberal approach to spirituality that has become a hallmark and oft-cited virtue of Alcoholics Anonymous. Secondly, it probably contributed to Wilson’s confidence that Alcoholics Anonymous could legitimately survive as a separate entity, apart from the Oxford Group. When the groups in Akron and Cleveland established their independence, the members of the Akron Oxford Group tried to convince them that they were making a mistake, with the underlying rationale that their way was the *only* legitimate spiritual path. James had showed Wilson, and all those who subsequently learned from him, that this statement simply was not true.

In the first part of this essay, when I discussed Oxford Group tenets and practices prior to A.A., an attempt was made to see how specific Oxford Group fundamentals equated to specific A.A. Steps. Now, for completeness, it is interesting to view this phenomenon from the reverse direction, to see which Oxford Group tenets and practices were retained and which were abandoned. The process of translating appropriate portions of Oxford Group doctrine into the Twelve Steps was pragmatic rather than theoretical. The finished product (the Twelve Steps) was eventually sculpted according to a single criterion: Would the concept under consideration benefit the alcoholic in his quest for sobriety? If the answer was yes, the concept was retained and further modified to be of maximum effectiveness. If the answer was no, Wilson had no reservations about abandoning even those tenets most cherished by the Oxford Group. Others, of course, helped with this process, but Wilson was always the most noticeable, in terms of both his presence and his fervor.

The first three steps concern the alcoholic’s realization that he is powerless, insofar as his ego-driven self is concerned, over the consumption of alcohol, and that the only profitable
solution must be sought beyond this limited self in a higher power. This concept does not essentially differ from the Oxford Group practice of turning one’s will and personal ambition over to the will of God. The only noticeable difference is that, in step one, a specific subgroup, having an extremely specific malady, is being addressed. Consideration of other groups or of the population at large is conspicuous by its absence. Steps four through eleven are not discernibly different from standard Oxford Group practice. Step twelve differs from Oxford Group practice only by delimiting the propagation of the experience to the specific sub-group of alcoholics.

The differences between generalized Oxford Group practice and the specific focus on alcoholics evidenced in steps one and twelve highlight one of the primary causes of dissension between the two groups, and the necessity for these groups to separate if either was to fulfill its primary mission. And, I think more than anything else, it was the lack of each group being able to appreciate the mission of the other that led to unnecessary antagonisms. A comment made by Frank Buchman, as reported in Pass It On, seems to sum up Buchman’s attitude towards A.A. From that text:

Buchman himself was never interested specifically in helping alcoholics, although in Akron, for instance, the Oxford Group was known from its start as a program that could work with drunks. But as Buchman put it: “I’m all for the drunks’ being changed, but we also have drunken nations on our hands”. (130-131).

Buchman’s comment sums up the way that he saw his mission. From his point of view, his mission was to change the world. His scope was general and broad in accordance with this mission. The Oxford Group adopted this view as well, following their charismatic leader. Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob had quite a different sense of their missions, although they felt equally inspired by the Divine. From the time when Bill had his spiritual awakening until his eventual death, he felt that his divinely inspired mission was to help alcoholics. Although Dr. Bob was not as verbose or flamboyant, his determined and steady actions on behalf of his fellow alcoholics indicate that he felt the same way. A.A. adopted this mission from their two charismatic leaders.

Earlier in this essay, I hinted at the possibility that the decision of A.A. to separate itself from the Oxford Group may be viewed, in itself, as an idealized form of Oxford Group praxis. When one considers the emphasis that Frank Buchman and his followers placed on quiet times, two-way prayer and the unreserved obedience to Divine guidance received in this way, Bill Wilson’s and Dr. Bob’s insistence on following what they perceived to be their Divine guidance to help other alcoholics represented a strict following of this fundamental Oxford Group principle. When these founders of Alcoholics Anonymous first realized their mission, they were still part of the Oxford Group and, with the caveat that their mission now had to take precedence over the more generalized mission envisioned by Buchman, they still believed in and practiced Oxford Group principles. So, at this point, within the Oxford Group we can see two sub-groups that believed in the same basic principles, but had different perceived missions concerning the scope and specific applications of these principles. There seems no reason why these goals had to be antagonistic if pursued separately, but they clearly could not coexist within the same group. The internal dynamics of each group depended heavily on a sense of unity. Even if individual differences were tolerated, as they
were in both groups, it was absolutely essential that the members were in concert concerning their primary purpose. The tension between the non-alcoholic members of the Oxford Group and the alcoholic members of the Oxford Group that would eventually leave to form Alcoholics Anonymous was engendered because there were two primary purposes in a group whose needs dictated that there could only be one. Clearly, if either group was to remain effective, they had to separate. The antagonisms that ensued represented a misunderstanding concerning their respective missions.

Those Oxford Group members who felt betrayed by the alcoholics’ decision to form their own group saw their decision as a statement against Oxford Group principles. Two early events in Akron serve to illustrate this point. The first concerns the break made by Clarence S. from the Oxford Group in Akron to form the first Alcoholics Anonymous group in Cleveland. As related in Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers:

Clarence said, “I made the announcement at the Oxford Group that this was the last time the Cleveland bunch was down as a contingent that we were starting a group in Cleveland that would only be open to alcoholics and their families. Also that we were taking the name from the book “Alcoholics Anonymous.” The roof came off the house.

“Clarence, you can’t do this!” someone said.

“It’s done.”

“We’ve got to talk about this!”

“It’s too late,” I said.

The meeting was set for the following week. [May 11, 1939], Clarence said. “I made the mistake of telling these people the address. They invaded the house and tried to break up our meeting. One fellow was going to whip me. All in the spirit of pure Christian love! But we stood our ground.” (164)

A similar, though less dramatic, response met Dr. Bob when he finally decided to move the alcoholics out of T. Henry and Clarace Williams’s house to form a meeting of their own. Even Henrietta Seiberling chastised Dr. Bob for his actions. Alcoholics Anonymous, however, never stood in opposition to Oxford Group principles, as long as these principles were applied broadly and showed flexibility in their application to the particulars of the group being addressed. When Oxford Group principles were applied rigidly, however, with little consideration for differences in people or context, this excessive rigidity could reduce the effectiveness of the very principles being applied. As pragmatists, interested primarily in what would achieve results, Dr. Bob and especially Bill Wilson struggled to determine which principles they should retain from the Oxford Group and which should be modified or abandoned. The Twelve Steps listed earlier represent the results of this refining process for the individual alcoholic. The Twelve Traditions, first made available in the A.A. Grapevine, and then published in book form in 1953, represent the results of this refining process for A.A. as a whole. These Traditions attempted to correct the mistakes made by the Oxford Group and early A.A. that Wilson perceived could be threatening to A.A. unity and survival. On a positive note, they list what Wilson saw as the essential elements that would have to be present for A.A. to continue and thrive.
The following is a list of the Twelve Traditions (short form) as presented in *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*:

1) Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends on A.A. unity.
2) For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority—a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern.
3) The only requirement for A.A. membership is a desire to stop drinking.
4) Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or A.A. as a whole.
5) Each group has but one primary purpose—to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.
6) An A.A. group ought never endorse, finance, or lend the A.A. name to any related facility or outside enterprise, lest problems of money, property, and prestige divert us from our primary purpose.
7) Every A.A. group ought to be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions.
8) Alcoholics Anonymous should remain forever non-professional, but our service centers may employ special workers.
9) A.A., as such, ought never be organized; but we may create service boards or committees directly responsible to those they serve.
10) Alcoholics Anonymous has no opinion on outside issues; hence the A.A. name ought never be drawn into public controversy.
11) Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio, and films.
12) Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities. (9-13)

Each of these traditions may be interpreted from more than one point of view. In *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, Bill Wilson devotes a short chapter to each, so it would be repetitive to review his explanations here. It would, however, be productive and in keeping with the themes of this paper to notice where certain of these traditions may have derived their impetus from positions and actions taken by the Oxford Group that Wilson thought might be deleterious if adopted by Alcoholics Anonymous. Parts of Wilson’s speech at the convention for Alcoholics Anonymous in 1955 express many of these sentiments. As recounted in Kurtz’ work, Wilson made the following statements:

The Oxford Groupers had clearly shown us what to do. And just as importantly, we had also learned from them what not to do as far as alcoholics were concerned. We had found that certain of their ideas and attitudes simply could not be sold to alcoholics. For example, drinkers would not take pressure in any form, excepting from John Barleycorn himself. They always had to be led, not pushed. They would not stand for the rather aggressive evangelism of the Oxford Group. And they would not accept the principle of ‘team guidance’ for their own personal lives. It was too authoritarian for them. In other respects, too, we found we had to make haste slowly. When first contacted, most alcoholics just wanted to find sobriety, nothing else. They clung to their other defects, letting go only little by little. They simply did not want to
get ‘too good too soon.’ The Oxford Groups’ absolute concepts... were frequently too much for the drunks. These ideas had to be fed with teaspoons rather than by buckets... There was yet another difficulty. Because of the stigma then attached to the condition, most alcoholics wanted to be anonymous. We were afraid also of developing erratic public characters who through broken anonymity, might get drunk in public and so destroy confidence in us. The Oxford Group, on the contrary, depended very much upon the use of prominent names—something that was doubtless all right for them but mighty hazardous for us. Our debt to them, nevertheless, was and is immense, and so the final breakaway was very painful. (46-47)

As we review the traditions with an eye towards how they may have been designed to avert some of the problems posed by Oxford Group practices and positions, it will be useful to keep Wilson’s comments in mind.

Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends on A.A. unity. The First Tradition emphasizes unity as fundamental to recovery. This sense of unity was essential to the non-alcoholics in the Oxford Group as well. But it soon became evident that, as previously stated, there were two primary purposes within one group; an untenable situation that undermined overall unity. The only way to establish and maintain the kind of unity among alcoholics that was essential to recovery was to restrict the group to those members whose common goal was recovery from alcoholism. Wilson’s first tradition not only states that unity is essential for alcoholics functioning within Alcoholics Anonymous, but also serves as an explanation of why it was necessary for them to establish their own identity. Facets of this theme are also expressed in Traditions Three, Five, Six, and Ten.

For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority— a loving God as he may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern. Tradition Two may be seen as an expression of Wilson’s pragmatism. If, as he had learned through experience, alcoholics reacted poorly to authoritative approaches, then an organization dedicated to their recovery must use a different approach to be effective. Frank Buchman’s personal charisma and talent for personal evangelism helped many people to progress along spiritual lines. But, as much as he would deny that his work was in any way a function of his ego, in the final analysis he was as human as anyone else, and as subject to human frailty. There is adequate evidence to assert that he frequently assumed an authoritarian role with his followers. When criticized, he was in the habit of ascribing their criticism to their sins, and not taking seriously the possibility that he himself might be making serious mistakes. In Moral Re-Armament: The Reinventions of an American Religious Movement, Daniel Sack recounts Samuel Shoemaker’s decision to separate himself and his church from Frank Buchman and the Oxford Group. Significant for this study is the fact that Shoemaker, like Wilson, recognized his debt to the Oxford Group, the good that this group and its leader had accomplished, and the regrettable necessity of separating from Buchman’s group so that his own organization could flourish. In Sack’s words:

Since the mid-1910s, Buchman’s closest associates were fellow clergymen, most notably Samuel Shoemaker and Sherwood Day. They led his work at Princeton and Yale in the early 1920s, and Buchman made Shoemaker’s Calvary Episcopal Church his
headquarters. Shoemaker was Buchman’s most visible spokesman through the 1930s, writing books and making speeches across the country. “Judged by sheer depth of influence,’ Shoemaker wrote in 1933, ‘there can be no question that the Oxford group [sic] is today one of the mightiest movements on earth.” In November 1941, however, Shoemaker told his parish that Calvary House would cease being Moral Re-Armament’s national headquarters, effective immediately. He acknowledged the good the Oxford Group had done by encouraging vital personal religion within the churches, but concluded that “certain policies and procedures” on the part of MRA had given him “increasing misgivings.” He had felt those misgivings, he wrote privately, “throughout almost my whole relationship with Buchman.” Anytime he tried to raise them, however, “by the almost infallible process of the Group, the challenge has been hurled back at us time and time again.” He described the numerous times he had tried to talk with Buchman, only to be ignored or told that the problem was his own sin. Groups of other members would lay into him for hours at a time. He finally told Buchman that the movement was wrong in ignoring the church, that his temper was driving people away, and that his ambition was taking over. “He countered almost everything I said, very good-naturedly; but I knew he was using it all to diagnose me, not to find any real light upon himself or the Movement.” Unity, Shoemaker felt, had become Buchman’s god—not Truth. And I see why—unity—on his terms, MRA unity, unity by everybody joining MRA—is the great way to build up the case for MRA, and especially the case for Frank. (116)

If Shoemaker had felt so oppressed by Buchman’s and the Oxford Group’s authoritarian attitude, one can only imagine the reaction of a group of alcoholics with an innate predisposition to reject any coercive authority. In both New York and Akron, the alcoholics attending Oxford Group meetings were feeling oppressed before finally deciding to take their leave and establish their own groups. Wilson’s second tradition seeks to avoid any similar situations inside A.A. groups, so the members there do not feel compelled to leave and form still another group. Since the Traditions themselves are only guidelines (as are the Steps), they themselves have no coercive force or actual authority. Wilson felt strongly, however, that groups would eventually adhere to these guidelines as a matter of survival. His confidence in this contention will be further analyzed later as part of my response to an anticipated objection.

**The only requirement for A.A. membership is a desire to stop drinking.** In Tradition Three, we can see a reiteration of the need for unity. Before Alcoholics Anonymous had separated from the Oxford Group, and even afterwards in the practices of many individual A.A. groups, there were various requirements that had to be met before a person could attend an A.A. meeting, and there could be further requirements if the person wished to stay. As mentioned earlier, this was one of Wilson’s primary reasons for writing the Traditions; if all of these rules and requirements had been in force simultaneously, no one would be eligible. By reasserting the primary purpose of the group as the only requirement for membership, Wilson strengthened the overall unity of the group while making sure that no one could be excluded who really wanted to recover.

*Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or A.A. as a whole.*
Tradition Four gives flexibility to the individual groups, shows confidence in the capabilities of group members, and provides a safeguard against stagnation. The Oxford Groups may have physically been separate, but, in terms of their practices and goals, they were expected to act in accordance with the directions of their leaders. Tradition four specifically states that individual groups may act in accordance with their own wishes. This addition opens new possibilities for development that would not necessarily be available in a more hierarchical structure. Again, Wilson depends upon the assumption that the groups will eventually follow the path that best assures their survival and flourishing. An autonomous group might come up with innovations that could be useful to other groups or A.A. as a whole. Not restricting their activities to a pre-set form allowed the groups to adapt to changing circumstances and situations.

Each group has but one primary purpose - to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers. Tradition Five has both explicit and implicit elements. Explicitly, its message is a positive one, underscoring the importance of unity in purpose. Implicitly, there are two messages. The first is a warning that a group cannot have two primary purposes without sacrificing both its unity and effectiveness in the process. As contended in this paper, the problem of having two primary purposes in the Oxford Group (one carried by the non-alcoholic Oxford Group members and one carried by the alcoholic Oxford Group members) was one of the primary causal factors that led to the secession of the alcoholics to form an independent association. Tradition Five seeks to avoid the recurrence of such a situation within Alcoholics Anonymous. The second implicit warning also seeks to avoid mistakes made by organizational predecessors and assumes explicit form in Tradition Six.

An A.A. group ought never endorse, finance, or lend the A.A. name to any related facility or outside enterprise, lest problems of money, property, and prestige divert us from our primary purpose. Tradition Six specifically states the danger of extending the virtues accrued through successfully pursuing a worthwhile primary purpose to other causes that are not within the scope of this primary purpose. In this case, Wilson is not only remembering certain errors made by the Oxford Group, but also similar errors made by the Washingtonian Movement, a group who, a century earlier, had made significant progress with recovering alcoholics. Some of the mistakes made by the Oxford Group in this regard included their involvement in disputes between management and labor, as well as Buchman’s disastrous comments praising Hitler in 1936. These errors opened the Oxford Group to allegations of partisanship in the first instance and being pro-Nazi in the second. Whether these allegations were actually true is outside the scope of this paper, but the relevant issue here is that, through the association of the Oxford Group name with these external issues, the group itself, and, therefore, its primary purpose became vulnerable.

The evidence that Wilson was remembering the mistakes made by the Washingtonians is clear in his 1955 speech at the Alcoholics Anonymous convention in St. Louis. As recounted in Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age:

The Washingtonian Society, a movement among alcoholics which started in Baltimore a century ago, almost discovered the answer to alcoholism. At first the society was composed entirely of alcoholics trying to help one another. The early members foresaw that they should dedicate themselves to this sole aim. In many respects the Washingtonians were akin to A.A. Their membership passed the five hundred thousand
mark. Had they stuck to their one goal, they might have found the full answer. Instead, the Washingtonians permitted politicians and reformers, both alcoholic and nonalcoholic, to use the society for their own purposes. Abolition of slavery, for example, was a stormy political issue then. Soon Washingtonian speakers violently and publicly took sides on this question. Maybe the society could have survived the abolition controversy, but it did not have a chance from the moment it determined to reform all America’s drinking habits. Some of the Washingtonians became temperance crusaders. Within a very few years they had completely lost their effectiveness in helping alcoholics, and the society collapsed. (124-125)

Wilson was clearly concerned that his beloved organization not repeat the mistakes made by either the Washingtonians or the Oxford Group. Learning from the past mistakes of other groups, instead of insisting on an inflexible idealism, further evidences Wilson’s continual emphasis on pragmatism. He was sufficiently concerned about the consequences to his group of deviating from their primary purpose that this tradition is repeated in Tradition Ten with only minor modifications.

Every A.A. group ought to be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions. Tradition Seven directly addresses the problems inherent in accepting outside contributions. The Oxford Group and Buchman in particular, had frequently come under fire regarding their finances. As Daniel Sack notes, regarding the many Oxford Group activities, including movie productions and the maintenance of three substantial training centers:

Maintaining these three centers and all the full-time volunteers required money. Whenever critics of the movement asked where the money came from—and they often did—Buchman always said that MRA was financed by guided giving. “Where God guides, He provides,” he noted in the mid-1930s. “Sharing” supported the movement. Buchman and his colleagues, however, had solicited donations since the 1920s, and these solicitations became more organized and directed in the years after the war...MRA critics had long suspected that the movement was supported by wealthy donors and industrialists, but movement leaders replied that their money came in sacrificial donations from donors with small incomes. Both were correct. (132)

One can easily see how accepting outside donations could cause criticism to fall upon a movement, especially if the explanations given remained nebulous and evasive. Again, it is not the purpose of this paper to determine the honesty or morality of these practices. The relevant issue here is that, whether these financial practices were legitimate or not, they could potentially function to invite damaging public criticism. They can also serve to question the legitimacy of a group’s primary purpose. If MRA was accepting large donations from industrialists, and also claiming to engage in an objective and non-partisan manner in negotiations between labor and management, their objectivity and legitimacy in these endeavors could certainly be brought into question.

Wilson was well aware that Alcoholics Anonymous’ many successes with alcoholics had engendered tremendous gratitude from many persons. Many wished to repay A.A. with large donations, but the possibility that allowing this practice could eventually compromise...
the group’s primary purpose had to be weighed against the expediency of accepting these offers. In Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age, Wilson recounts several instances where the decision whether or not to accept outside donations was at issue. Eventually Wilson and the trustees decided against allowing the practice and took the example of the Franciscan vow of poverty as their model. As Wilson’s states in the text:

A big factor in our thinking at the time was the philosophy of St. Francis of Assisi. His also began as a lay movement, one man carrying the good news to the next. In his day it was common enough for individuals to pledge themselves to poverty. But it was unusual, if not unique, for a whole organization or fellowship to do the same thing. For the purpose of his society Francis thought corporate poverty to be fundamental. The less money and property they had to quarrel about, the less would be the diversion from their primary purpose. And just like A.A. today, his outfit did not need much money to accomplish its mission. Why be tempted and diverted when there was no need for it? (110)

It should be noted that this decision, especially for Bill Wilson, Dr. Bob and their wives was not an easy one. Dr. Bob and his wife came very close to losing their home to the mortgage company. Bill and Lois Wilson actually did lose their home and were essentially homeless for two years. Under these extreme circumstances, turning down available funds on principle showed extraordinary and selfless dedication to their primary purpose.

Alcoholics Anonymous should remain forever non-professional, but our service centers may employ special workers. Tradition Eight, rather than providing a warning about repeating Oxford Group practices, actually adopts one of their traditions that Wilson thought essential to A.A. The Oxford Group’s “fifth C”, continuance, was always supposed to be given freely. This was adopted in A.A.’s Twelfth Step. Explicitly stating this in the manner of A.A.’s Eighth Tradition helped to clarify ambiguous situations that had arisen during the course of A.A.’s development. At one point, there was a great deal of controversy concerning which activities deserved pay and which activities should be classified as twelfth step work (or “continuance” in Oxford Group parlance), which should always be performed without pay. Eventually it was decided that any work that needed to be done (e.g., janitorial, cooking, etc.) and could be done by an alcoholic or nonalcoholic, deserved pay, and that this did not compromise the integrity of twelfth step work. Twelfth step work proper, which involved the active transmission of the A.A. program from one alcoholic to another, was never to involve financial compensation. When the Eighth Tradition says that A.A. should remain nonprofessional, it specifically refers to twelfth step work. All other functions that are necessary for the continuance of A.A. itself may be performed by “special service workers” who may receive financial compensation for their labors, just as if they were performing these functions for any other organization.

A.A., as such, ought never be organized; but we may create service boards or committees directly responsible to those they serve. Tradition Nine reflects on several levels some factors that are peculiar to Alcoholics Anonymous and the individuals who make up its membership. On one level, Wilson emphasizes his recognition that alcoholics in general tend to rebel against imposed authority. This tendency among alcoholics provided the underlying rationale for Dr. Silkworth’s early advice to Bill that he needed to stop preaching to alcoholics, because their well-fortified egos could not be penetrated in this fashion. Wilson shared the Oxford
Group belief that most human problems stem from over-attachment to our own egos. Kurtz recounts Wilson’s position on this matter in his history of A.A.: “The alcoholic is an extreme example of self-will run riot” (Wilson in Kurtz 34-35). When the Oxford Group had tried to impose their authority on alcoholics, they rebelled and left. Not wanting Alcoholics Anonymous to repeat the same mistake, Tradition Nine set the precedent that there will be no such authority to oppose. On another level, Tradition Nine demonstrates the dynamic that Wilson believed would function to hold A.A. together and create a bond mightier than any that could have been imposed from without. In Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, Wilson explains this rationale:

At this juncture, we can hear a churchman exclaim, “They are making disobedience a virtue!” He is joined by a psychiatrist who says, “Defiant brats! They won’t grow up and conform to social usage!” The man in the street says, “I don’t understand it. They must be nuts!” But all these observers have overlooked something unique in Alcoholics Anonymous. Unless each A.A. member follows to the best of his ability our suggested Twelve Steps to recovery, he almost certainly signs his own death warrant. His drunkenness and dissolution are not penalties inflicted by people in authority; they result from his personal disobedience to spiritual principles (174)

With this statement, Wilson reveals much, not just about his perspective on the factors influencing A.A. coherence, but about his certainty concerning the correctness of his own views. Less controversial was his view that the alcoholic’s wish for survival will serve to keep him on a path to sobriety more surely than any force applied from the outside. More controversial was Wilson’s implicit assumption that the way advocated in the Twelve Steps represented the only true course that would lead to this survival. Once again, it is not the purpose of this paper to argue for or against the correctness of Wilson’s assumptions, but simply to note the effects that these views had on the development of A.A. The assumptions that Wilson seemed to make about the infallibility of his system will help in answering an anticipated objection that appears in the conclusion of this paper.

Alcoholics Anonymous has no opinion on outside issues; hence the A.A. name ought never be drawn into public controversy. Tradition Ten is so similar to Tradition Six, that commentary would be repetitive. Its appearance does, however, highlight the importance that Wilson placed on always avoiding associating the A.A. name with any outside interests, for fear of compromising its primary purpose.

Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio, and films. Tradition Eleven begins to assert the importance of anonymity that will be further developed in Tradition Twelve. It addresses an issue that came up repeatedly in A.A. since its initial separation from the Oxford Group. Using publicity to increase A.A. membership had worked extraordinarily well in terms of favorable newspaper and magazine articles. In some of these cases, a degree of anonymity (for the persons involved) was maintained, while in other cases attention was actively focused on the identities of the people involved. Overall, Wilson, Dr. Bob and (some of) the trustees came to the conclusion that more potential harm than good would be accomplished through the advertising of individuals associated with the A.A. name. As with several of the other traditions, there is an implicit warning against following in the footsteps of the Oxford Group. Frank Buchman’s organization had, from its inception, depended upon the publicity from its
more celebrated members. This was extremely effective for the Oxford Group in terms of generating membership and funds. It should also not be overlooked that it was through the celebrity radiating from the association with the Firestone family that the Oxford Group which helped Dr. Bob and others in Akron was established. Nevertheless, perhaps again because of the particular characteristics evidenced by alcoholics, Wilson and others felt that publicity of this type would prove hazardous both to Alcoholics Anonymous and to the individual alcoholics within its ranks. This feature is further developed in the next and last Tradition.

Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities. This last Tradition re-emphasizes the importance of anonymity, but also provides the underlying reason. This reason is different from the rationale used to support anonymity in the early days of A.A. Before Alcoholics Anonymous gained respectability, an alcoholic who could be publicly identified as an alcoholic might be in danger of losing his job or suffering any of the other repercussions usually associated with stigma. This was the initial rationale behind the tradition of anonymity, plus, as previously mentioned, the worry that once an alcoholic’s recovery was made public, if he or she relapsed, it would also be public. Beyond this, however, was the threat that personal aggrandizement might pose to individual sobriety. Whether in Oxford Group practice or in the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, the reduction of the ego-based self and the relinquishing of self-will and self-aggrandizement was the single most important prerequisite for the process of change (in Oxford Group practice) or sobriety (in A.A. practice) to commence. If there was ever an accusation that was repeatedly aimed at Buchman, it was that he was pursuing his own glory, rather than acting on God’s behalf. Upon reviewing the available evidence, I find it difficult to discern whether this accusation is true or false. More than likely, he succumbed to some extent to the common wish for personal greatness, but also evidenced a degree of sincerity and effectiveness that benefited many of the people he encountered. Both founders of A.A. can be counted among these individuals. Wilson though was of the opinion that an inflated ego was one of the most dangerous things an alcoholic could face. It threatened his sobriety and, therefore, his life. By keeping anonymity, even when personal acclaim could be easily procured, the alcoholic put the principles which maintained his sobriety before the wish for glory and public merit.

Wilson himself struggled with this issue. His biography reveals devastating blows to his personal security from an early age. Perhaps because of these incidents, he was always trying for personal greatness throughout his early adulthood. Wilson, looking introspectively, saw this constant compensatory craving for personal greatness as one of the primary factors that led to his alcoholism. He came to the conclusion that the same was true for most other alcoholics. He was also able to see, along with Buchman and many others, that a reduction in this need for personal greatness must take place before a surrender to a higher power could take place. This would, in turn, provide the necessary strength for the alcoholic to achieve and maintain his sobriety. If the glory of the personality took precedence over the principles that facilitated the strength from one’s higher power, sobriety would be out of reach and the person’s life would be in imminent danger. The Twelfth Tradition functions to remind the alcoholic of his vulnerability and the humility that serves to keep him safe. In addition, this tradition seeks to establish an added safeguard against A.A. becoming a personality cult.
focused around certain elite charismatics. Many persons, not the least of whom was Samuel Shoemaker, had abandoned the Oxford Group because they believed it had reached such a state, where the pressure to follow an authority figure had functionally eclipsed the dignity of the individual.

Chapter 4: Response to an Anticipated Objection and Closing Remarks

Besides charting the general evolution of the spiritual dynamic that animates A.A., the purpose of this paper has been to delineate the two major factors which I contend necessitated A.A.’s separation from the Oxford Group. To recapitulate briefly, the first of these concerned a difference in their target populations, leading to a difference in their perceived primary purposes, and the second concerned the related limiting of group membership to alcoholics and their families. This restriction of membership was needed to facilitate the degree of empathy and understanding that seemed to be necessary for recovery.

At this point, however, there is an anticipated objection that must be addressed. For many, the move towards increased secularism seen within the Twelve Steps and officially endorsed by most A.A. spokespersons and members represents a factor at least as causally determinant as the two that have been mentioned. While it may be conceded that, while the Oxford Group was specifically Christian in its orientation, A.A. has been willing to expand the boundaries of acceptable spiritual practice beyond Christianity, the common A.A. claim is that it is not necessary to believe in a theistic God at all. It is my contention that this is not the case. Wilson’s apparent move towards a level of spiritual liberalism that accepts non-theistic notions of the divine seems to be more appearance than substance. It is true that he put in the Twelve Steps the addendum “as we understood Him” after the word God in Steps Three and Eleven, and seems by this to be accepting of all different religious predispositions. Pragmatically, this modification would seem congruent with Wilson’s emphasis on inclusiveness. It may have served to make A.A. more palatable to people of various religious persuasions. To atheists and agnostics, he would sometimes recommend that they take the “group” as their higher power.

More extreme recommendations have included making a rock or a bridge one’s higher power. The implication, especially of the more extreme suggestions, was that it didn’t matter. Wilson’s words and attitudes do not support this contention. Earlier in this paper, I cited Wilson’s words concerning his certainty that no outside authority was necessary to govern A.A. because survival itself would be the motivator for group coherence. These words evidenced his assumption that the way to sobriety he had advocated in Alcoholics Anonymous was the only way, and that the alternative was inebriation and death. His underlying attitude that faith in a theistic loving God is also the only true path for the recovering alcoholic seems to have a similar tone. In Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, he makes the following comments regarding making the “group” one’s higher power:

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You can, if you wish, make A.A. itself your “higher power.” Here’s a very large group of people who have solved their alcohol problem. In this respect they are certainly a power greater than you, who have not even come close to a solution. Surely you can have faith in them. Even this minimum of faith will be enough. You will find many members who have crossed the threshold just this way. All of them will tell you that, once across, their faith broadened and deepened. Relieved of the alcohol obsession, their lives unaccountably transformed, they came to believe in a Higher Power, and most of them began to talk of God...Therefore, Step Two is the rallying point for all of us. Whether agnostic, atheist, or former believer, we can stand together on this Step. True humility and an open mind can lead us to faith, and every A.A. meeting is an assurance that God will restore us to sanity if we rightly relate ourselves to Him. (31-32)

The implications of Wilson’s words seem clear. While it may be acceptable for a new A.A. member to begin by using the group as his higher power, Wilson clearly expects that this will, over time, lead him to faith in a personal, loving, theistic God. Wilson expects that alcoholics will take this path as the only path for their survival, in much the same way that he expects the survival instinct to provide the coherence for A.A. as the only path leading to sobriety. He does not seem to really believe that the “group” could function as an alcoholic’s higher power in the long run. He is being tolerant of newcomers whom he perceives as being arrogant and misguided. Needless to say, the same arguments would apply to an even greater degree if we consider the newcomer who decides to name a rock or a bridge as his higher power.

Realizing, as has been previously mentioned, that A.A. as an organization has usually followed the examples set by Wilson, it is instructive to notice two practices that take place at most A.A. meetings. Both the Serenity Prayer and the Lord’s Prayer are used in A.A. meetings, frequently at the end. Sometimes only one is recited, sometimes both, but in all cases that I have seen or heard reported, the addendum “as we understand Him” is never used after the word God. In this respect, the God of the Bible is still very much a part of A.A. meetings.

Another point concerns the consistency of the Twelve Steps as a system. Although this point is not original and has been noted by other scholars, it seems too important to be omitted. Even though Steps Three and Eleven include the addendum “as we understood Him” after the word God, several of the other steps seem to describe characteristics of this God (or higher power) that could not be applied to a rock, a bridge, or even the group, but could only apply to God as a caring, all powerful agent. A rock, bridge, or group could not restore us to sanity, remove all our character defects, or provide us with knowledge of its will and the power to carry that out. These properties could only be attributed to a theistic conception of God.

If we accept the argument concerning the consistency of the Twelve Steps as a system, one further point may be worthy of consideration. Earlier in this paper, I produced evidence suggesting that the basic spiritual or conversion dynamic practiced by the Oxford Group was adopted with limited modifications to produce the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. The Oxford Group most certainly used the Christian God of the Bible as the nexus of this
dynamic. It is unlikely that the essentials of their practice could be transferred and remain effective without retaining its most salient and central feature.

In conclusion, based on the foregoing arguments, I contend that the supposed secularization of Alcoholics Anonymous is more pretense than reality, and does not represent one of the significant causal factors that resulted in A.A.’s separation from the Oxford Group. Of the two factors that appear to be most cogent in this regard, the first was a difference in the scope of their respective target populations, which led to a significant difference in the perceived mission of each group. The second was the realization by the alcoholics that, with few exceptions, the effective transmission of a program of sobriety could only take place between fellow alcoholics. This circumscribed the constituency of the group and made it possible for them to focus on their primary purpose.
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