

The apology that launched a million amends

By Jay Stinnett, Los Angeles

July 27th, 2008, marked the 100th anniversary of Frank Buchman's Spiritual Awakening – one that directly linked him to the cofounders of AA.

As a young man Buchman gave everything he had to establishing a shelter for homeless boys in the slums of Philadelphia. The shelters success surpassed his budget and the six-member board of directors insisted that he cut the amount of food being given to his charges. He quit instead of cutting back. Resentment consumed him. His family despaired that he might not come to his senses. His work was destroyed by what he saw as the short-sightedness of others. His health was well past the breaking point. "Everywhere I went, I took me with me," he later said.

During a trip to recuperate in Europe, he exhausted the funds his father gave him and existed on the kindness of his family and the generosity of acquaintances. Tired and dejected he went to an Evangelical Conference in Keswick, England, hoping to connect with F.B. Meyer, a famous minister he knew, for spiritual help. Meyer was not in attendance; another plan gone awry. July 27, 1908, thirty year-old Frank Buchman, a Pennsylvanian Lutheran Minister, walked into an afternoon service with 17 other people to hear Jessie Penn Lewis preach on the cross of Christ. And then it happened. As Buchman sat in that Chapel, "There was a moment of spiritual peak of what God could do for me. I was made a new man. My hatred was gone...I knew I had to write six letters to those men I hated."

"I am writing," declared Buchman, "to tell you that I have harbored an unkind feeling toward you - at times I conquered it but it always came back. Our views may differ but as brothers we must love. I write to ask your forgiveness and to assure that I love you and trust by God's grace I shall never more speak unkindly or disparagingly of you." Those letters of amends spawned a revolution in Frank Buchman, a revolution that led to the birth of Alcoholics Anonymous.

That evening, Frank was introduced to a young Cambridge man, who upon hearing Buchman's tale of moral regeneration made a decision to change his own life. As Buchman described it, "This was the first fellow who I knew that I had ever brought face to face with that central experience." For the next half century Buchman dedicated his life to demonstrating that an experience of God was available to anyone at anytime, regardless of race, religion, class or nationality.

From England, Frank returned to the United States where he went to work as the YMCA director at Penn State University. There he had a profound effect on campus life, due in part to the conversion of the campus bootlegger, who during a trip to Toronto with Frank and a group of students from Penn State, made a decision to change his life. After having Frank help him by writing an amends letter to his wife, the bootlegger never drank again and went around the world with Frank talking about his change. Frank Buchman described the four years that he spent at Penn State as the laboratory in which he developed a practical program of action and learned how to have honest conversations that led people to make decisions to change their lives.

The formula he developed was: 1. The sharing of our sins and temptations with another Christian life given to God, and to use sharing as witness to help others, still unchanged, to recognize and acknowledge their sins. 2. Surrender of our life, past,

present, and future, into God's keeping and direction. 3. Restitution to all whom we have wronged directly or indirectly. 4. Listening to, accepting, relying on God's Guidance and carrying it out in everything we do or say, great or small.

Sound familiar? The application of this course of action revolutionized the spiritual life of the campus, and its success brought Christian Evangelists from all over the world to find out what was happening on a backwater campus that had been paralyzed by strife. After Penn State, Frank went to China in 1917 where an honest conversation with a young Sam Shoemaker helped Sam to tell him, "I have been a pious fraud, pretending to serve God but actually keeping all the trump cards in my own hands. Now I've told Him how sorry I am, and I trust you'll forgive me for harboring ill will against you. This sprang up the moment you used that word sin!" Buchman said that he freely forgave him.

"Now what's the next step?" Shoemaker asked. The next step was making amends to Sam's Bible study class. The trouble was, Shoemaker told his Chinese students, he disliked China. That admission produced such a profound spiritual experience in Shoemaker that it led to his working closely with Buchman for the next twenty-one years and brought the revolution of "First Century Christianity" (later known as the Oxford Group) to people worldwide. The message of personal revolution was transmitted by one "informed Christian" sharing with another and by inviting people to "house parties." If you have ever attended an AA convention or round up you have experienced an Oxford Group house party. Speakers were brought in from a variety of places to share their experience, strength and hope in both large speaker meetings and small special interest meetings. Men would tell their stories in men's meetings; women in women's; there were even forums for drug addicts, overeaters, and drunks.

At these gatherings, both speakers and experienced members would be available for "personal interviews" where sharing and surrender could take place. Then people would be encouraged to make restitution and have a daily "quiet time" to receive inspiration on how to conduct their lives. When he was pressed for a definition of sin, Buchman said, "What is a sin for one person may not be a sin for another. The true definition of sin is that it is something that separates you from God or from your fellows." In 1922, Jim Newton, a young salesman with a taste for fast living, followed a group of attractive young women into a hotel ballroom thinking they were going to a dance. To his dismay he found himself in an Oxford Group house party at the Toy Town Tavern in Winchington, Massachusetts, where he heard a message that changed his life. Buchman referred Newton to Shoemaker who helped Newton take stock of his life, surrender, make restitution, and start to live a "guided life."

If you wish to know the Oxford Group technique of guidance read pages 85-87 in the book Alcoholics Anonymous. A few years later, Jim Newton was trying to help Bud Firestone, the alcoholic son of his employer, Harvey Firestone, to change. Unable to help his friend, Jim introduced Bud to his mentor, Samuel Shoemaker. Sam, who had a remarkable gift bringing people to make a decision, went through the process with Bud who immediately lost his obsession to drink, made amends to his father and wife, and returned to the good graces of his family. Harvey Firestone was so impressed with the change in his son that he convinced his fellow industrialists in Akron, Ohio, to help underwrite an Oxford Group house party held in January 1933 at the Mayflower Hotel. Buchman and his team were welcomed by the Rev. Walter Tunks, a close friend of the F. family; also in attendance were Henrietta Seiberling and T. Henry and Clarace Williams who were to become the founders of the West Hills meeting of the Oxford Group in Akron.

Also in 1933, Shoemaker's ministry at Calvary Church in New York City's Gramercy Park was a hub of Oxford Group activity. There were Oxford Group meetings held three times a week at Calvary Church where people shared the life changes they had discovered from applying the Oxford Group principles. He also founded the Calvary Mission, which was a hostel for indigent alcoholic men. Many important families had ties to this Calvary Church, among them the Hazard family whose eldest son Rowland was described by Bill W. as "a business man who had ability, good sense and high character... who had floundered from one sanitarium to another." Rowland had returned from Europe after another attempt to get his life in order after consulting with Dr. Carl Jung. Rowland was drinking and going to Oxford Group meetings at Calvary Church.

Among the people whom he met at Calvary was Vic Kitchen, author of *I was a Pagan* (published in 1934), which described his release from alcoholism, drug addiction, and "anything that gave me pleasure, power or applause" in the Oxford Group. While on a business trip to Detroit, Rowland read the book, identified at depth, and as Shoemaker said, "had a change right there on the train." Rowland stopped drinking, reconciled with his family, made restitution for questionable business dealings, became active with the Oxford Group businessmen's team, spoke at meetings and encouraged others to find what he had found.

One of the many people Rowland touched was an old childhood friend, Edwin 'Ebby' T. who was about to be locked up as a chronic inebriate. Rowland, whose alcohol problem was well known, convinced the judge to release Ebby into his care. Two weeks later, Ebby was speaking at Oxford Group meetings around Vermont, and after a couple of weeks with Rowland (who had all of six months in the group), the freshly sober Ebby moved into Calvary Mission in New York City and became active there. Sober six weeks, Ebby was inspired to find another old school friend, Bill W., who was known to be in awful shape. Bill could not get the change in Ebby out of his mind for he knew his friend was a hopeless drunk like himself, yet was sober. A few days after that, Bill went to see Ebby at the Calvary Mission, gave an impassioned, albeit drunken testimony from the podium and soon after landed in Townes Hospital. Ebby visited him there and reacquainted Bill with the steps of the Oxford Group whereupon Bill had his profound white light experience, lost his compulsion to drink and was seized with a desire to pass on his experience to others.

When Bill was released, he and Lois immediately started attending Oxford Group meetings at Calvary Church and had frequent contact with Sam Shoemaker. Lois said that they went to a minimum of three meetings a week and attended house parties during the first three years of Bill's sobriety. Six months after sobering up, Bill went to Akron, Ohio, on a business venture that failed. When he found himself about to enter the bar at the same Mayflower Hotel where the Oxford Group had met, he started searching for an alcoholic to help. That moment of desperation led him to the Rev. Walter Tunks and ultimately to Henrietta Seiberling who knew just the man. A local proctologist, who thought he was a closet drinker, had been attending the West Hill Oxford Group meeting for two years with his wife, his problem becoming progressively worse. The Doctor later described his impression of the West Hills Group, "I was thrown in with a crowd of people....I sensed that they had something I did not have, from which I might readily profit. I learned that it was something of a spiritual nature, which did not appeal to me very much, but I thought it could do no harm." Bill W. met with Bob S. (lovingly referred to as Dr. Bob) on Mother's Day 1935. Bob stopped drinking abruptly. Though he accepted Bill's description of alcoholism as a fatal illness and the Oxford Group steps as the solution, Bob believed that making restitution to

those he had harmed would destroy his practice and put his family further at risk.

A short time later, Bob drank again and was completely demoralized. On the way to perform a surgery, Bill steadied his friend's hand with a bottle of beer and a "goofball." Before entering the hospital, Bob told Bill, "I am going to go through with it." That afternoon Bob did not return home. His wife, Anne, and Bill were filled with dread that Bob had gone on another binge. When Dr. Bob returned late that night, he told his frightened loved ones that he had been making restitution to people to whom he had been too afraid to admit his alcoholism. Bob S. never took another drink. AA's anniversary is not the day Bill W. stopped drinking, nor the day that he met Dr. Bob, but the day that Bob stopped drinking and made his amends.

From 100 years ago in Keswick, to 73 years ago in Akron, to this very moment; women and men are proving the validity of their own personal spiritual awakening by making amends for their past wrongs, making restitution and rectifying their errors. Frank Buchman's metamorphosis was remarkable. He developed a program for personal change that affected homes and nations. It is a practical program of action using the four standards of absolute honesty, purity, unselfishness and love. Over the past one hundred years, Buchman's vision has been transmitted under different names: First Century Christian Movement, the Oxford Group, Moral Re-Armament, and since 2001, Initiatives of Change, which continues to heal the wounds of history by building trust across the worlds divides. Without Frank Buchman, those in today's many anonymous programs would have no 12 steps and no freedom from bondage. His spiritual awakening and the action that followed indeed launched a million amends and produced many millions of transformed lives.
