

The following is offered for your study only because it was written in 1955 and presented by Samuel M. Shoemaker, a minister of the Gospel, a world-recognized Christian intellectual and an early friend of Bill W. and Dr. Bob. His teachings of Oxford Group principles helped form the foundation of what later became A.A. If you find it helpful, the next time somebody wants to change the program or its' purpose to further their ends, feel free to quote Dr. Shoemaker from the following or Bill W. who said, "Sometimes the good is the enemy of the best."

What The Church Must Learn From Alcoholics Anonymous

"... God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong . . ."

I Corinthians 1:26

During the weekend of the Fourth of July last (1955), I attended one of the most remarkable conventions I ever expect to attend. It was a gathering in St. Louis of about five thousand members of the movement called Alcoholics Anonymous. The occasion was the celebration of their twentieth anniversary, and the turning over freely and voluntarily of the management and destiny of that great movement by the founders and 'old-timers' to a board which represents the fellowship as a whole.

As I lived and moved among these men and women for three days, I was moved as I have seldom been moved in my life. It happens that I have watched the unfolding of this movement with more than usual interest, for its real founder and guiding spirit, Bill W., found his initial spiritual answer at Calvary Church in New York, when I was rector there, in 1935. Having met two men, unmistakable alcoholics, who had found release from their difficulty, he was moved to seek out the same answer for himself. But he went further. Being of a foraging and inquiring mind, he began to think there was some general law operating here, which could be made to work, not in two men's lives only, but in two thousand or two million. He set to work to find out what it was. He consulted psychiatrists, doctors, clergy and recovered alcoholics to discover what it was.

The first actual group was not in New York, but in Akron, Ohio. Bill was spending a weekend there in a hotel. The crowd was moving towards the bar. He was lonely and felt danger assailing him. He consulted the church-directory in the hotel lobby, and found the name of a local clergyman and his church. He called him on the telephone and said, "I am an alcoholic down here at the hotel. The going is a little hard just now. Have you anybody you think I might meet and talk to?" He gave him the name of a woman who belonged to one of the great tire-manufacturing families. He called her, she invited him out at once and said she had a man she wanted to have meet him. While he was on his way, she called Dr. Bob S. and his wife, Anne. Dr. Bob said he'd give her five minutes. He stayed five hours and told Bill, "You're the only man I've ever seen with the answer to alcoholism." They invited Bill over from the hotel to stay at their house. And there was begun, twenty years ago, the first actual Alcoholics Anonymous group.

The number of them now is beyond count. Some say there are 160,000 to 200,000 recovered alcoholics, but nobody knows how many extend beyond this into the fringes of the unknown. They say that each alcoholic holds within the orbit of his problem an average of fourteen persons who are affected by it. This means that conservatively two and a half million people's lives are different because of the existence of Alcoholics Anonymous. There is hardly a city or town or even hamlet now where you cannot find a group, strong and well knit, or struggling in its infancy. Prof. Austin McCormick, of Berkeley, California, former Commissioner of Correction in the city of New York, who was also with us at the St. Louis Convention, said once in my hearing that AA may "prove to be one of the greatest movements of all time." That was years ago. Subsequently facts support his prophecy.

On the Sunday morning of the convention, I was asked to talk to them, together with Fr. Edward Dowling S.J., a wonderful Roman Catholic priest who has done notable service for AA in interpreting it to his people, and Dr. Jim S., a most remarkable colored physician of Washington, on the spiritual aspects of the AA program. They are very generous to non-alcoholics, but I should have preferred that it be a bona fide alcoholic that did the speaking.

In the course of what I said to them, I remarked that I thought it had been wise for AA to confine its activity to alcoholics. But, I added, "I think we may see an effect of AA on medicine, on psychiatry, on correction, on the ever-present problem of human nature; and not least on the Church. AA indirectly derived much of its inspiration from the Church. Now perhaps the time has come for the Church to be re-awakened and re-vitalized by those insights and practices found in AA."

I think some of you may be a little horrified at this suggestion. I fear you will be saying to yourself, "What have we, who have always been decent people, to learn from a lot of reconstructed drunks?" And perhaps you may thereby reveal to yourself how very far you are from the spirit of Christ and the Gospel, and how very much in need of precisely the kind of check-up that may come to us from AA. If I need a text for what I say to you, there is one ready to hand in I Corinthians 1:26, "... God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong." I need not remind you that there is a good deal of sarcasm in that verse; because it must be evident that anything God can use is neither foolish nor weak, and that if we consider ourselves wise and strong, we may need to go to school to those we have called foolish and weak.

The first thing I think the Church needs to learn from AA is that nobody gets anywhere till he recognizes a clearly defined need. These people do not come to AA to get made a little better. They do not come because the best people are doing it. They come because they are desperate. They are not ladies and gentlemen looking for a religion, they are utterly desperate men and women in search of redemption. Without what AA gives, death stares them in the face. With what AA gives them, there is life and hope. There are not a dozen ways, there are not two ways, there is one way; and they find it, or perish. AA's each and all have a definite, desperate need. They have the need, and they are ready to tell somebody what it is if they see the least chance that it can be met.

Is there anything as definite for you or me, who may happen not to be alcoholics? If there is, I am sure that it lies in the realm of our conscious withholding of the truth about ourselves from God and from one another, by pretending that we are already good Christians. Let me here quote a member of AA who has written a most amazing book: his name is Jerome Ellison, and the book is "Report to the Creator." In this (p. 210) he says, "The relief of being accepted can never be known by one who never thought himself unaccepted. I hear of 'good Christian men and women' belonging to 'fine old church families.' There were no good Christians in the first church, only sinners. Peter never let himself or his hearers forget his betrayal in the hour the cockcrow. James, stung by the memory of his years of stubborn resistance, warned the church members: 'Confess your faults to one another.' That was before there were fine old church families. Today the last place where one can be candid about one's faults is in church. In a bar, yes; in a church, no. I know; I've tried both places." Let that sting you and me just as it should, and make us miserable with our church Pharisaism till we see it is just as definite and just as hideous as anybody's drunkenness can ever be, and a great deal more really dangerous.

The second thing the Church needs to learn from AA is that men are redeemed in a life-changing fellowship. AA does not expect to let anybody who comes in stay as he is. They know he is in need and must have help. They live for nothing else but to extend and keep extending that help. Like the Church, they did not begin in glorious Gothic structures, but in houses or caves in the earth, --wherever they could get a foothold, meet people, and gather. It never occurs to an AA that it is enough for him to sit down and polish his spiritual nails all by himself, or dust off his soul all by himself, or spend a couple of minutes praying each day all by himself. His soul gets kept in order by trying to help other people get their souls in order, with the help of God. At once a new person takes his place in this redeeming, life-changing fellowship. He may be changed today, and out working tomorrow--no long, senseless delays about giving away what he has got. He's ready to give the little he has the moment it comes to him. The fellowship that redeemed him will wither and die unless he and others like him get in and keep that fellowship moving and growing by reaching others. Recently I heard an AA say that he could stay away from his Veteran's meeting, his Legion, or his Church, and nobody would notice it. But if he stayed away from his AA meeting, his telephone would begin to ring the next day!

A life-changing fellowship" sounds like a description of the Church. It is of the ideal Church. But the actual. Not one in a hundred is like this. The layman say this is the minister's job, and the ministers say it is the evangelist's job, and body finds a rationalized excuse for not doing what every Christian ought to be doing, i.e. bringing other people into the redeeming, life-changing fellowship.

The third thing the Church needs to learn from AA is the necessity for definite personal dealing with people. AA's know all the stock excuses--- they've used them themselves and heard them a hundred times. All the blame put on someone else --my temperament is different-- I've tried it and it doesn't work for me-- I'm not really so bad, I just slip a little sometimes. They've heard them all, and know them for the rationalized pack of lies they are. They constitute, taken together, the Gospel of Hell and Failure. I've heard them laboring with one another, now patient as a mother, now savage as a prize-fighter, now careful in explanation, now pounding a heavy personal challenge, but always knowing the desperate need and the sure answer.

Are we in the Church like that? Have you ever been drastically dealt with by anybody? Have you ever dared to be drastic in love with anybody? We are so official, so polite, and so ready to accept each other and ourselves at face value. I went for years before ever I met a man that dared get at my real needs, create a situation in which I could be honest with him, and hold me to a specific Christian commitment and decision. One can find kindness and even good advice in the Church. That is not all men need. They need to be helped to face themselves as they really are. The AA people see themselves just as they are. I think many of us in the Church see ourselves as we should like to appear to others, not as we are before God. We need drastic personal dealing and challenge. Who is ready and trained to give it to us? How many of us have ever taken a 'fearless moral inventory' of ourselves, and dared make the depth of our need known to any other human being? This gets at the pride which is the hindrance and sticking-point for so many of us, and which, for most of us in the Church, has never even been recognized, let alone faced or dealt with. The fourth thing the Church needs to learn from A. A. is the necessity for a real change of heart, a true conversion. As we come Sunday after Sunday, year after year, we are supposed to be in a process of transformation. Are we? The AA's are. At each meeting there are people seeking and in conscious need. Everybody pulling for the people who speak, and looking for more insight and help. They are pushed by their need. They are pulled by the inspiration of others who are growing. They are a society of the "before and after" with a clear line between the old life and the new. This is not the difference between sinfulness and perfection; it is the difference between accepted wrongdoing and the genuine beginning of a new way of life.

How about us? Again I quote Jerome Ellison, in his report to God (page 205): "... I began to see that many of the parishioners did not really want to find You, because finding You would change them from their habitual ways, and they did not endure the pain of change . . . For our churchman-like crimes of bland, impenetrable pose, I offer shame..." I suppose that the sheer visibility of the alcoholic problem creates a kind of enforced, honesty; but surely if we are exposed again and again to God, to Christ, to the Cross, there should be a breaking down of our pride and unwillingness to change. We should know by now that this unwillingness multiplied by thousands and tens of thousands, is what is the matter with the Church, and what keeps it from being what God means it to be on earth. The change must begin somewhere. We know it ought to begin in us.

One of the greatest things the Church should learn from AA is the need people have for an exposure to living Christian experience. In thousands of places, alcoholics (and others) can go and hear recovered alcoholics speak about their experiences and watch the process of new life and take place before their eyes. There you have it, the need and the answer to the need, right before your eyes. They say that their public relations are based, not on promotion, but on attraction. This attraction begins when you see people with problems like your own, hear them speaking freely of the answers they are finding, and realize that such honesty and such change is exactly what you need yourself.

No ordinary service of worship in the Church can possibly do this. We need to supplement what we do now by the establishment of informal companies where people who are spiritually seeking can see how faith takes hold in other lives, how the characteristically Christian experience comes to them. Some churches are doing this, but not nearly enough of them. One I know, where on Sunday evenings laymen and women speak simply about what has happened to them spiritually: it is drawing many more by attraction. This needs to be multiplied by the tens of thousands, and the Church itself awakened.

As I looked out over that crowd of five thousand in Kiel Auditorium in St. Louis, I said to myself, "Would that the Church were like this---ordinary men and women with great need who have found a great Answer, and do not hesitate to make it known wherever they can--a trained army of enthusiastic, humble, human workers whose efforts make life a different thing for other people!"

Let us ask God to forgive our blindness and laziness and complacency, and through these re-made people to learn our need for honesty, for conversion, for fellowship and for honest witness!