

CHAPTER EIGHT

“There Is a Solution”

~Early June 1938~

The second chapter Bill needed to write was much more challenging. It was easy enough to defend whatever he might put down in his own “Story”; it was, after all, a straightforward retelling of his own experiences, an autobiographical account of what had happened to him personally. But writing a much more general chapter, one describing the reasons for their success in universal terms, was fraught with treacherous political problems because of the radically different ways Akron and New York understood and practiced the program of recovery in early June 1938.

The Akron Fellowship and the Oxford Group

It is hard to overstate the differences between the Akron approach to sobriety in mid-1938 and what was going on at that same time in New York. Ohio’s brand of recovery was still exclusively based on the practices, principles, and beliefs of the Oxford Group, and the Akron alcoholics were seamlessly blended into that Group. There was no organization called Alcoholics Anonymous as yet, and as far as the newly recovered Ohio drunks were concerned, they were members of the Oxford Group and they owed their salvation to the fellowship and the belief system they had found within it.¹ That belief system was firmly based on the Christian New Testament and it advocated, among other things, surrender to God, daily prayer and “quiet time” to receive direct guidance from God, and a life of reformed behavior based on Absolute Honesty, Absolute Unselfishness, Absolute Love, and Absolute Purity.

While the typical Oxford Group focused their recruiting efforts almost exclusively on the wealthy and drew their membership primarily from within the Episcopalian community, key members in Akron had made unusual allowances in relation to this

motley crew of recovered alcoholics. Despite the disapproval of some local members who suggested “the alcoholics [should] be screened so that only the most socially acceptable would be allowed in,”² both Henrietta Seiberling and T. Henry Williams had extended their strong support to the newly emerging “Alcoholic Squad” within their group, even if it meant ignoring the fact that many of these people had neither the social standing nor the economic resources usually considered prerequisites for membership in the Oxford Group.

The previous February, Dr. Bob had claimed that “the alcoholic set up [here in Akron] . . . could not be identified with the [Oxford] Group,”³ but as already noted, even in “conference approved” literature that sentiment has been justly characterized as “more wishful than real.”⁴ While Dr. Bob may have not seen any formal affiliation between his work with alcoholics and the local Oxford Group, the members of the “Alcoholic Squad” certainly thought of themselves as Oxford Group members, a perfectly understandable conclusion since they were deeply committed to the principles promoted by the Oxford Group, and they were all attending a weekly meeting that was in every respect a typical Oxford Group gathering. The line Dr. Bob claimed to see separating his “Alcoholic Squad” from the Oxford Group was not self-evident to most of the recovering alcoholics in Akron at that time.

One dramatic example of Akron’s adherence to Oxford Group practices was the requirement that each new member get down on his knees and publicly surrender his life to God before being allowed to attend the group’s meeting. As Frank Amos had written the previous February, one of the six “musts” for recovery in Akron was that an alcoholic “must surrender himself absolutely to God, realizing that in himself there is no hope.”⁵

In 1954, while preparing to write the book *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, Bill Wilson interviewed most of the surviving early A.A. members in Akron and two of these transcripts provide conclusive testimony regarding this practice. The first comes from a man who sobered up in February 1937:

Bob: . . . I was going to say the last thing I did there at the hospital before I left was to make a surrender, which I think was important.

Bill: Like the Oxford Group—on your knees?

Bob: Sharing completely—had to be done with another person. Pray and share out loud. The act of surrender.

Bill: You know, in the first draft of the Twelve Steps, it said that people were to be on their knees, but the other drunks made me take it out.* That went back to this practice of surrender—you got on your knees and surrendered your life to the will of God. That was the process which you actually went through?

* Bill is referring here to the Seventh Step, which originally read: “Humbly, on our knees, asked Him to remove our shortcomings—holding nothing back.”

Bob: Oh, yes. Of course, I’ve never forgotten that—it made a tremendous impression on me. I hear a lot, to this day, fellows talk about getting down on our knees to pray at night.

Bill: Oh yes, lots of people do it, to be sure, but this was a certain act of surrender?

Bob: Yes, this was very important at this time. There were no exceptions. You couldn’t attend a meeting unless you had gone through that. You couldn’t go to a meeting—you had to go through the program of surrender . . .⁶

Another comment made by a man who had his last drink two months after Bob in April 1937 confirms this:

Wally: . . . On the business of surrender which I think is probably the most important part of this whole thing, Dr. Smith took my surrender the morning of the day that I left the hospital. And, at that time, it was the only way you became a member—you became a member by a definite act of prayer and surrender, just as they did in the [Oxford] Group. I’m sorry it has fallen by the wayside . . .⁷

This necessity of making a public surrender before attending a meeting was an integral part of the Akron program throughout the late 1930s and well into the early 1940s. “If by accident you didn’t make [your surrender] in the hospital,” one early member recalled, then “you had to make it in the upper bedroom over at the Williamses’ house”⁸ just before the regular Wednesday night meeting began. “The men would all disappear upstairs,” recalled Clarence Snyder’s wife, Dorothy, describing a typical 1938 meeting. Then, “after about half an hour or so, down would come the new man, shaking, white, serious, and grim. And all the people who were already [sober] would come trooping down after him. They were pretty reluctant to talk about what had happened, but after a while, they would tell us that they had had a *real* surrender.”⁹

The meeting that followed these surrenders typically began with the group holding hands and reciting a prayer before they launched into a “quiet time during which [everyone] silently asked God for guidance.”¹⁰ In the beginning, these quiet times took up literally 50 percent of the meeting, but sitting in silence and “listening for guidance half the time . . . made the drunks very restless”¹¹ so the practice was gradually shortened. The leader for the evening would then open the meeting with a reading from Christian scriptures or some other religious writing, frequently relying on a popular Methodist periodical, *The Upper Room*.^{**} Having set the tone with literature, the leader would then ‘witness’ for twenty to thirty minutes before inviting others, alcoholics and non-alcoholics alike, to do the same. Although “not too much was said

* Once the Ohio alcoholics made their formal break with the Oxford Group in late 1939, this practice of going upstairs and surrendering was transferred to Dr. Bob’s house. Visitors are still shown that room at the top of the stairs in Dr. Bob’s house and are often invited to get on their knees and say the Third Step prayer that is conveniently provided for them on a printed card.

** For an interesting discussion of the importance of this publication in early A.A. history, see *The Upper Room and Early A.A.* by Glenn C. (<http://hindsfoot.org/uprm1.html> - retrieved December 16, 2011).

about alcoholism or drinking in the testimonials” (“we were more interested in our everyday life than we were in reminiscing about drinking”).^{*} Dr. Bob was particularly adamant about full participation and he encouraged everyone to be brief in their comments so that each person would get a chance to speak. The meeting ended with the recitation of the Lord’s Prayer.¹²

It was, in short, a very Christian affair, specifically based on the Oxford Group’s religious model, and would hardly be recognized or acknowledged as an A.A. meeting by today’s members. As Dorothy Snyder so wryly commented a few years later: “I often wonder how many of the people that come in now would agree with [the Oxford Group’s] version of the Word of God or anything spiritual and really survive an experience like that—[it was] a regular old-fashioned prayer meeting.”¹³

Bill Wilson and the Oxford Group

Bill Wilson had started out in early 1935 with a similarly strong connection to the New York Oxford Group, but his experiences were strikingly different from those of the people in Akron. While a vocal minority in Ohio actively embraced these new members, the New York chapter wanted little or nothing to do with the drunks Bill was regularly bringing into their meetings. It was a strained relationship from the very start, setting Wilson and the New York Oxford Group on a completely different trajectory from the one unfolding in Akron.

Having left Towns Hospital for the last time, Bill “constantly went to Oxford Group meetings” and he soon became a member of one of the smaller “teams” of men who regularly met and sat quietly as they listened for “the guidance of God for each one.”¹⁴ Curiously, Oxford Group guidance was rarely directed toward the person receiving it, but rather was intended for someone else within the group. Bill almost immediately began to have trouble with the guidance others were receiving for him. As Lois noted:

The rest of the team would get guidance for him to work with such and such a person in order to “bring him to God.” Bill usually had different guidance and felt no identity with the person they selected. He became a bit annoyed at being told what to do. He knew he could be far more useful working with alcoholics, with whom he could identify.¹⁵

The crux of the problem was clear. Bill Wilson wanted to spend all his time working with drunks and the Oxford Group members believed (and constantly received confirming guidance from God) that he should go out and get a job on Wall Street where he could mingle with the ‘right’ sort of people, people who would be much more appropriate candidates for membership in their Group. The practice of recruiting recovering alcoholics as new members, which was so generously tolerated in Akron, was at first actively discouraged in New York, and later soundly criticized and

^{*} This in stark contrast to the more prominent focus on alcohol in the New York meetings of this time.

censured.¹⁵ Given these evolving criticisms and restrictions, Bill’s stubborn commitment to working with drunks generated a fair amount of friction as he began to pick and choose which guidance he would follow and which he would not. In spite of the specific instructions others so consistently received and passed along to him, Bill doggedly insisted his time and energy could best be spent trying to sober up and recruit people who were in trouble with alcohol.¹⁶

Or, as he so succinctly put it a few years later: “The Oxford Group wanted to save the world, and I only wanted to save the drunks.”¹⁷

Because of this tension and the undercurrent of hostility, the alcoholic members in New York (whom Bill was recruiting not only from within the Group itself, but also from among the drunks at the Calvary Mission¹⁸ and the patients in Towns Hospital) began to gather by themselves immediately after the regular Oxford Group sessions at Stewart’s Cafeteria, a convenient and congenial spot just a few blocks from the regular Oxford Group meetings. But this eventually proved to be both too public and too unwieldy and, starting late in 1935, Bill moved these sessions to his house in Brooklyn where they began to hold regular “alcoholics only” meetings on Sunday nights.¹⁸

These early Brooklyn meetings began “using the Oxford Group principles”¹⁹ and were remarkably similar to what was happening at T. Henry’s house in Akron at that time, i.e., they started with some quiet time followed by Christian readings and then a talk by the leader (usually Bill) along with witnessing by other attendees, all of which was bookended by opening and closing prayers. But because they did not include any non-alcoholic members in their group—an integral part of the Akron format—the meetings in New York almost immediately began to evolve independently and to have a much more specific emphasis on alcohol than in Akron where drinking was rarely mentioned in their meetings. Given both of these changes, many of the practices specific to the Oxford Group began to fade away as it “became very clear” (as Wilson so delicately put it later) “that [the] drunks couldn’t stand the Oxford Group pace.”²⁰

However, one Akron element that did linger for some time in New York was the belief that an alcoholic had to make an explicit surrender to God if he wanted to stay sober.²¹ The stories of both Hank Parkhurst and Fitz Mayo (who sobered up in September and November 1935, respectively) provide clear testimony that a complete surrender to God was considered an essential requirement for anyone trying to build a solid foundation for ongoing sobriety.

Hank’s rather awkward and rambling stream-of-consciousness Big Book story (entitled “The Unbeliever”) details the many agnostic arguments he formulated while lying in his Towns Hospital bed and then offered to Bill Wilson whenever he visited him there. But despite all his protestations of disbelief, Hank’s story ends abruptly with a dramatic account of his surrender at the side of his bed: “Brrr, this floor is cold on my

* Wilson claims that this Oxford Group reluctance to work with drunks in New York was, among other things, driven by some frustrating and unfortunate experiences that Sam Shoemaker, the rector of Calvary Episcopal Church and the leader of the Oxford Group in the USA, had had with earlier attempts to save alcoholics (*AACO*, pp. 64–65; *Bill W. My First 40 Years*, pp. 158–59).

** A rescue operation run by Calvary Episcopalian Church in New York City.

*** Whether or not, at this time, surrender was a requirement for attendance at New York meetings, as it was in Akron, is not known.

knees . . . why are the tears running like a river down my cheeks . . . God, have mercy on my soul!”²¹

Similarly, Fitz Mayo’s present-tense Big Book story (“Our Southern Friend”) recounts the details of his surrender to God at Towns Hospital:

Suddenly I feel a wave of utter hopelessness sweep over me. I am in the bottom of hell. And there a tremendous hope is born. It might be true [that there is a God who could help me].

I tumble out of bed onto my knees. I know not what to say. But slowly a great peace comes to me. I feel lifted up. I believe in God. I crawl back into bed and sleep like a child.²²

This requirement for a complete, on-your-knees surrender continued to be an active part of the New York program for more than a year after these two men got sober, a fact that is illustrated in a letter Bill Ruddell sent to Bill Wilson several years after he wrote his own Big Book story, “A Business Man’s Recovery.” According to this more detailed version of his recovery, Ruddell says that as he was being discharged from Towns Hospital in February 1937, Dr. Silkworth referred him to Wilson, suggesting he was someone who might be able to help him stay sober. Desperate to stay stopped, Ruddell and his wife Kathleen almost immediately visited the Wilsons at their home in Brooklyn and, after some heartfelt discussion, Bill invited them both upstairs where, as Ruddell reminded him, “Kathleen and I knelt down in front of the fireplace in your upstairs parlor with both you and Lois and [I] made the surrender.”²³

But very shortly after this, during March and April 1937, Bill’s relationship with the local Oxford Group began to deteriorate at an alarming rate. That spring, Wilson discovered the alcoholics at the Calvary Mission had been forbidden to attend the weekly meetings at his home in Brooklyn and had even been told they could not visit the Wilson house for dinner. Worse than this, he learned that word was spreading throughout the congregation saying the Wilsons were “not maximum,” meaning they were not sufficiently committed to the Oxford Group program. This is perhaps the strongest criticism that could be leveled against a Group member without directly accusing them of sin. The end came when an associate pastor at Calvary Episcopal Church delivered a Sunday morning sermon directed against the “divergent work” of a “secret, ashamed sub-group” within the congregation; a clear and caustic indictment of Bill Wilson and the work he was doing with alcoholics.²⁴

* Both Bill’s and Lois’s published recollections of exactly when these negative responses from the Oxford Group and its members took place are either vague or contradictory. I have accepted Kurtz’s version of the time sequence here because it agrees with Bill’s “AA Main Events” recollections and also because it was based on two personal interviews with Lois Wilson. Regarding the timing of the break, it is worth noting that according to Lois’s diary entries for 1937, she and Bill attended Oxford Group meetings on January 10, 21, 22, and 24, on February 7, 14, 21, and 28, and on March 11, 21, and 28, but after March 28, 1937, there is no further mention of any Oxford Group meetings in her diary. In addition, Bill notes in A.A. Main Events (1937, Point 1) that “it was probably in the early part of this year [1937] that we completely withdrew from the Oxford Groups in New York City.”

The Decision to Leave the Oxford Group

The sermon was the final blow, crystallizing all of Bill’s dissatisfactions with the Oxford Group. Deeply committed to his work with drunks and now finally admitting the “impossibility of carrying [on] the alcoholic work in the atmosphere of the Group,”²⁵ he decided it was time for a complete break. But Bill did not take this separation lightly, nor did he make the decision to quit the Oxford Group by himself. According to Ruddell:

. . . the final parting came in the spring of 1937 because Kathleen and I started coming to meetings in your home in February of 1937, and we attended with you meetings on Sunday nights in Sam Shoemaker’s church . . . As we remember it, the decision to disassociate from the Oxford Group was made at a meeting in your home, and at that time it was a very serious decision. You talked it over at one of the group meetings and the decision was made. This was, as we remember it, two or three months after [February of 1937.]^{26*}

A little over three years later Bill was pressed for an explanation regarding New York’s break with the Oxford Group and he responded with a long and thoughtful letter, detailing at length eight reasons that made this separation necessary. Those reasons can be summarized as follows:

1. The “aggressive evangelism” of the Oxford Group
2. Their reliance on “excessive personal publicity or prominence”
3. The unacceptability of the word “absolute” before the virtues of honesty, purity, unselfishness, and love (four virtues that Bill rather testily claimed were “as much practiced [by A.A. members] . . . as by any other group of people”)
4. The coercive nature of “guidance for others” and of the subsequent “checking” by those who had received that guidance to ensure that it was being followed
5. The practice of writing down guidance during ‘quiet time’ which, according to Bill “was too often made ridiculous by novices scribbling messages from God in notebooks”

* Jim Burwell in his wildly inaccurate late 1940s history, “The Evolution of Alcoholics Anonymous,” said that the break from the Oxford Group occurred in September 1937. He repeated this claim a few years later in a letter to Bill Wilson dated January 17, 1957. Bill had sent out proof copies of *AACO*A to many people for comments and Jim’s only quibble with the entire book was to note that “It does seem to me that I saw a copy of a letter from you and Hank to Sam Shoemaker, resigning from the Oxford Group and dated Sept. 1937... am I wrong?” (GSO, Box 29, Reel 13, 17.3 History Book, A. A. Comes of Age: Correspondence with Members Mentioned in Book, Document marked “p. 46”). Despite this observation, Bill did not change the dates in his book based on Jim’s contention. As noted earlier, Burwell is the most unreliable witness we have for facts and dates in early A.A. history so I am reluctant to move the date of the break from the Oxford Group back by several months based on his testimony alone. In addition, no such letter has been found in the Shoemaker Archives. Still, it is possible that he is right on this one particular fact and that there was such a September letter. If that *is* the case, then although the group had made its decision in April or May 1937, they did not *formally* notify Shoemaker of that decision until a few months later. Whatever the exact date, it is clear that Wilson and the New York group had completely severed their relationships before Bill and the others went to Akron for the October, 1937 “counting noses” meeting and the subsequent vote taken there.

6. “We found” he observed with some irritation and judgment, “that the principles of tolerance and love had to be more emphasized in their actual practice than they were in the O.G., especially tolerance”
7. There could be no “religious requirement” for membership in A.A.
8. The kind of dogmatism demanded by the Oxford Group necessarily precluded Catholics from joining A.A.²⁷

Given all of this, he noted:

I am always glad to say privately that some of the Oxford Group presentation and emphasis upon the Christian message saved my life. Yet it is equally true that other attitudes of the O.G. nearly got me drunk again and we long since discovered that if we were to approach alcoholics successfully these would have to be abandoned. Recovery being a life or death matter for most alcoholics, it became a question of adopting that which would work and rejecting that which would not.²⁸

This decision to leave the Oxford Group in New York was one of the most critical turning points in the history of Alcoholics Anonymous, marking a decisive step away from any preexisting organization or belief and a commitment to both an evolving operational structure and a set of principles that would increasingly be determined by pragmatic results rather than the dictates of any specific doctrines. Finally liberated from the structure, dogmas, and culture of the Oxford Group, the New York alcoholics were free to create a set of beliefs and practices based on their collective experiences, a process that soon evolved into something that looks very much like today’s Fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous.

A Pragmatic Approach to Religious Beliefs

The separation didn’t mean Bill Wilson had abandoned everything he had learned during more than two years with the Oxford Group. They “had clearly shown us what to do,” he admitted, but “just as importantly, we had also learned from them *what not to do* as far as alcoholics were concerned.”²⁹ This meant that most of the specifically religious aspects associated with the Group along with their more authoritarian practices (such as team guidance and the Four Absolutes) were soon dropped in New York.³⁰

But, if Bill and his group weren’t going to follow the religious and evangelical route outlined by the Oxford Group, how then should they proceed?

The fact was Bill Wilson had been moving himself and his group away from a structured religious approach to sobriety well before the spring of 1937. Based on their collective experience, he had come to believe these men “had to be led, not pushed . . . [because many of them] 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.’”³¹ In short, the Akron insistence that a new recruit “must remove from his life other sins such as hatred, adultery and others which frequently accompany alcoholism” and “unless he will do this absolutely, Smith and his associates refuse to work with him”³² was not the model being followed in New York. The culture of the Fellowship on the East Coast was much more tolerant of what might be considered sinful behavior—just so long as the new recruit wasn’t drinking.

In addition, most of Wilson’s potential recruits were “awfully hard-headed guys”³³ who repeatedly had difficulties with many of the teachings of the Oxford Group. The program of recovery certainly required a strong religious foundation, but that foundation did not necessarily have to adhere to any specific set of beliefs or to the practices prescribed by any particular Church. Yes, you had to believe, but what you had to believe in was becoming more and more a matter of personal choice.

In that same 1940 letter where he talked about the reasons for leaving the Oxford Group, Bill was unusually candid about his own religious beliefs, confiding that:

By degrees I find that I have become a rather orthodox Christian. But I do not find, at least within our group, that I can better serve God by demanding that anyone agree with me. If I can be used to help people find a consciousness of the Presence of God I hope I shall please Christ quite as much, if I still permit each individual to attach his own label to that experience. Of course this is no final conclusion on my part. I may be entirely wrong, but I fancy Christ Himself would prefer the hottentot* happily aware of God and usefully serving Him, than He would the most orthodox were he in a state of useless drunkenness. I think Christ would be interested in Christian results rather than Christian professions.³⁴

It is, frankly, a radically pragmatic and amazingly democratic approach to the concept of religious beliefs; one that Bill Wilson carefully laid as a critical foundation stone in the creation of Alcoholics Anonymous.

A Broader Formulation of the Solution

The net result of Bill’s break with the Oxford Group in New York was to accelerate his evolving understanding of alcoholism and to move him farther along the road toward a broader formulation of the solution, one that required not only a much more open religious component, but also one that emphasized the critical physical and psychological elements that needed to be addressed for a successful recovery.

As early as May 1935, Dr. Silkworth had criticized the fervor of Bill’s religious approach. At that time, Wilson’s failure to sober up a single person during the five months since he himself had quit drinking was driving him to the brink of despair and Silkworth was worried Bill himself might pick up a drink. “Stop preaching at them,” he told the evangelical Wilson, “and give them the hard medical facts first. This may

* Referring to the Khoikhoi people who are native to South Africa. These days the term is considered derogatory.

soften them up at depth so that they will be willing *to do anything* to get well. Then they may accept those [religious] ideas of yours, and even a [God].”³⁵

The Medical Aspects

Silkworth’s theories, his understanding of “the hard medical facts” about alcoholism, are most famously presented in “The Doctor’s Opinion” (the opening chapter in the Big Book), which Bill Wilson once neatly summarized as “*the obsession of the mind* that compels us to drink and *the allergy of the body* that condemns us to go mad or die.”³⁶ Bill was very familiar with both aspects of this theory, not only from his own life experiences, but also from his observations of so many other drunks in the five months since he himself had achieved sobriety.

Bill took Silkworth’s advice and had his first real success with the very next drunk he connected with: Dr. Bob Smith in Akron. During their first meeting in May 1935, Bill specifically told Bob about “Dr. Silkworth’s description of alcoholism and its hopelessness,” and armed with this knowledge, Bob “began to pursue the spiritual remedy for his malady with a willingness he had never before been able to muster.”³⁷ Wilson continued with this strong emphasis when he returned to New York in late 1935, enthusiastically pointing out to new prospects “how hopeless they were medically” because “it was this technique that [had] apparently turned the corner with Bob.”³⁸ As Bill began to see some success with his efforts in New York, his confidence in Silkworth’s advice about emphasizing the medical hopelessness of the malady as the best place to start with a new prospect grew rapidly, and he embraced that approach as his own.

Unfortunately, it was exactly this strong emphasis on the medical aspects of alcoholism to which “the Oxford Groupers had very strong objections.” They were insistent in their belief that there was a purely religious solution available for curing this problem; one that, if diligently followed, would certainly relieve the alcoholic of his compulsion to drink. Bill considered such a stance “truly a heartbreaker, for we felt we owed these [alcoholics] everything” that could help them, including an understanding of the important medical side of the problem.³⁹

A Psychological Understanding

Besides religion and medicine, the final component in Wilson’s evolving approach to recovery was a two-sided psychological understanding of the drinker’s problems. The first half of that understanding was his identification of the “peculiar mental twist”⁴⁰ that he now believed to be at the very heart of the alcoholic’s problem. Silkworth had explained how the phenomenon of craving invariably set in once an alcoholic took the first drink, but what baffled Bill Wilson was the complete failure of the alcoholic’s ability to refuse that first drink—when he had no alcohol whatsoever in his body. Why was it that all the accumulated memories of past disasters (and of present promises)

* As noted before, the actual quote in *AACO* uses the words “spiritual” and “higher Power” rather than “religious” or “God” but the former are surely later substitutions by Wilson in an effort to make them conform to the terminology and beliefs that were current in A.A. in 1957 (the year *AACO* was published).

had absolutely no impact on his decision to *start* drinking? Wilson’s own behavior—most notably at the beginning of his final drunken spree on Armistice Day 1934*—was inexplicable to him on any other terms than to admit that he was as sick in his mind as he was in his body.

The second psychological element didn’t concern the source of the problem; it was related to the solution to the alcoholic’s dilemma. Although Dr. Silkworth did not invent this idea, he can fairly be credited with clearly formulating an early explanation of the concept in his April 1937 paper entitled “Reclamation of the Alcoholic.” That article outlines his own three-step medical procedures for the successful treatment of alcoholics and fully describes the last of these three steps, which he called “Moral Psychology.”** This phrase has caused considerable confusion over the years because it appears twice in Silkworth’s Big Book chapter “The Doctors Opinion” without any explanation of its exact meaning. But in this article, the doctor is clear that the primary function of moral psychology is to address the underlying egotism found in alcoholics “whose interests center entirely in themselves” and, when successfully applied, it liberates them to the point where they begin to “ask how they can help others.”⁴¹ The purpose of moral psychology then is to assist alcoholics in overcoming their perspective of extreme self-centeredness and encourage them to adopt an attitude of consideration and care for others. In Silkworth’s opinion, this shift of perspective away from self and toward others was of paramount importance in keeping alcoholics away from their next drink.

To illustrate this, Silkworth concluded the final section of this paper by presenting two case histories of successful reclamation through moral psychology (certainly Hank Parkhurst and Bill Wilson, although the details do not fit their stories exactly). In his description of the second patient (Wilson), Silkworth notes that:

He gives part of his income to help others in his former condition, and he has gathered about him a group of over fifty men, all free from their former alcoholism through the application of this method of treatment and “moral psychology.”

To such patients we recommend “moral psychology,” and in those of our patients who have joined or initiated such groups, the change has been spectacular.⁴²

This belief that self-centeredness is the central problem for an alcoholic and that it can only be overcome by a life based on usefulness to others are two of the most fundamental and often repeated premises to be found in the book, *Alcoholics Anonymous*.***

* For Bill’s detailed and dramatic account of his last slip on November 11, 1934, see *Bill W., My First 40 Years*, pp. 118–20.

** “We might define these three phases as follows: 1, Management of the acute crisis; 2, physical normalization and cell revitalization so that craving is eliminated, and 3, mental and normal stabilization, which naturally involves some ‘normal psychology.’” (Silkworth, “Reclamation of the Alcoholic,” p. 321) *NOTE*: the use of the word “normal” twice at the end of this sentence makes little sense here and even less in the face of what follows in this article. It is, in all likelihood, a typographical error and should read “moral” in both cases—as it does throughout the rest of the article.

*** These two beliefs are so fundamental to the message of the book that a list of comprehensive references would necessarily be pages long. It is, for instance, a central message in Chapter Five (“Selfishness—self-centeredness. That, we think is the root of our troubles.” p. 62) and there are at least seventy specific mentions of the need to be “useful,” “helpful,” “of service,” or “altruistic” throughout the book.

In brief, whenever Bill Wilson or other early A.A. members talked about psychology in relation to their program of recovery, they were referring to one or the other of these two concepts: either the insanity of taking the first drink (and the need for an effective spiritual defense against it) or the alcoholic ego (and of the need to cure that problem through a change of attitude and positive engagement with other people).

A Bigger Tent

Along with a broader approach to religion and the specific inclusion of both medical and psychological elements in his evolving understanding of recovery, Bill Wilson brought one more important personal factor into all of his work with alcoholics: he wholeheartedly believed everyone who had “an honest desire to stop drinking” should be given the opportunity to get sober. Bill’s compassion for the suffering alcoholic was genuine, deep, and profound; so deep, in fact, that he was reluctant to turn anyone away from his group in New York, no matter what their belief system might be. This dedication to an ever-expanding tolerance was one of the most influential and important ideas he took away from his negative experiences with the Oxford Group and his ongoing efforts to make the Fellowship more and more inclusive became one of the outstanding hallmarks of Bill Wilson’s long leadership of Alcoholics Anonymous. Throughout his life, Bill continually worked to make A.A. into a bigger tent—and then one even bigger than that: a tent that increasingly embraced those who, for whatever reason, had previously been excluded from membership.

There are many stories attesting to Bill Wilson’s efforts to open the doors of Alcoholics Anonymous a little bit wider every year. One typical example occurred at the A.A. Clubhouse in Manhattan just after the end of the Second World War. In those days, visitors entering the building were greeted by a member sitting at the front desk. One day in 1945, a relatively new member, Barry L., was working the desk when he was confronted by an unusual arrival—a black, ex-convict drunk and addict (there were no black members in New York at this time) who was hungry, broke, and homeless. The man also admitted to being a homosexual, an admission that came as no surprise to Barry since the fellow had long and flowing bleached-blond hair that covered one half of his face while the other side revealed him to be an expert with makeup.

Barry was recently sober and he was not about to take responsibility for letting this man into the meeting, so he called several of the older members out of the back room to make the decision; but this only provoked a loud and wandering argument that clearly had no hope of resolution. Finally, in frustration, Barry got the man a cup of coffee and called Bill Wilson at his home in Bedford Hills, NY. He described the prospective new member to Bill in detail and then said, ‘We don’t know what in the world to do with him. He needs all kinds of help.’

After a short silence, Bill asked Barry to run over the list of problems and objections one more time and Barry did so.

‘Now,’ said Bill, ‘did you say he was a drunk?’

* This phrase was explicitly used to describe “the only requirement for membership” in the “Foreword” to the first edition of *Alcoholics Anonymous* (p. viii).

‘Oh yes,’ Barry replied. ‘There’s no question about that. He is definitely a drunk.’

After another brief silence, Bill made his decision and said, ‘Well, I think that’s the only question we have any right to ask.’ Barry invited the man into the meeting.⁴³

In Bill Wilson’s A.A. *everyone* deserves a chance to get sober.

Perhaps even more important than Bill’s broadmindedness in relation to the marginalized members of society was his growing acceptance of people whose beliefs about God were completely different from those of traditional Christianity and eventually, some that did not accept even the most basic Western concepts of divinity. One example of this enlarged religious tolerance appeared in print in 1957 when Bill related the story of the Twelve Steps being shown to a Buddhist leader for his approval. The monk read them over carefully and then commented, “Why, these are fine! Since we as Buddhists don’t understand God just as you do, it might be slightly more acceptable if you inserted the word ‘good’ in your Steps instead of ‘God.’ Nevertheless, you say in these Steps that it is God *as you understand Him*. That clears up the point for us. Yes, A.A.’s Twelve Steps will certainly be accepted by the Buddhists around here.” Bill admitted some members might find this to be a serious “watering down of A.A.’s message. But here we must remember,” he continued “that A.A.’s Steps are suggestions only. A belief in them as they stand is not at all a requirement for membership among us.”⁴⁴ It is the desire to stop drinking that qualifies someone to become a member of Alcoholics Anonymous; that and nothing else.

But in early June 1938, as Bill Wilson sat down to write this critical chapter for their proposed book, a chapter that was supposed to clearly outline the basics of their collective approach to sobriety, sophisticated problems involving gay black men and atheistic Buddhists were not even on the horizon yet.

In June 1938, the problem in New York City was Jimmy Burwell.

Challenges from Outspoken Atheists

Burwell came from Washington, DC, where he quit drinking on January 8, 1938. Two weeks later, he traveled up to New York to meet Bill Wilson and Hank Parkhurst. It turned out that Jim already knew Hank because eleven years earlier, Parkhurst had fired him from a very good job after he’d “totaled out three or four cars on him” while driving drunk.⁴⁵ No matter. Jim was really enjoying his newfound sobriety and this “swell pair of screwballs” (Wilson and Parkhurst) he had fallen in with. His only complaint was “all they talked of that first weekend was God” and then, along with the rest of the men at the regular Sunday night meeting, they always seemed to come back to praising the ways in which “God had touched [them] personally on the shoulder.” As far as Jim could tell, it was all about God, and that was a serious problem because he was a man with a profound aversion to all things religious or theological. Jim Burwell was a confirmed and outspoken atheist.⁴⁶

He was, in fact, the kind of man who would not have a chance of getting sober in Akron. It wasn’t just his lack of belief that was a problem; many people (including Bill Wilson himself and his right-hand man Hank Parkhurst) had started out as agnostics or atheists. The problem was that Burwell was not the least bit shy about

loudly proclaiming his disbelief and accompanying it with a liberal dose of sarcastic commentary about how stupid and unnecessary it was to expect someone to believe in God just because he wanted to quit drinking. What did God have to do with it? There wasn't a glimmer of hope that Burwell would ever make a personal surrender to God (either in public or private) and in Akron, as already noted, a new member was not admitted into the group until he had fulfilled that basic requirement.

In New York, however, Wilson's desire to be inclusive and his reluctance to turn away anyone who wanted to stop drinking had already overridden many of these old beliefs and he insisted Burwell be given a chance; Bill was confident that sooner or later Jimmy would come around to a belief in God or, if not, then he would surely drink.* Hank endorsed this liberal approach and even went so far as to hire Burwell (who had an excellent record as a salesman just so long as he wasn't drinking) to go on the road selling automobile polish for Honor Dealers.** Going one step further, Hank even agreed to put Jimmy up in his house in Montclair, NJ, whenever he wasn't out on the road travelling.

But for months, Burwell neither changed his mind about God nor did he drink; he just became an increasingly more vocal and annoying 'problem child' within the group. By his own description he was a shock to the Sunday night meetings at Bill's house in Brooklyn: "I was a menace to serenity those first few months, for I took every opportunity to lambaste that 'spiritual angle' as we called it, or anything else that had any tinge of theology." His constant outspoken condemnation of the God idea upset the New York members so much that, according to Jim, they "held many prayer meetings hoping to find a way to give me the heave-ho, but at the same time stay tolerant and spiritual." The group was, however, never able to resolve that perplexing problem so by default Jim was allowed to stay.

Bill Wilson wrote his own description of what it was like during those first five months of 1938 when Jim Burwell showed up at the meeting every week, ranting about the God problem:

Like a four-ton bomb, the new member exploded among [our] small group of [drunks]. As we were then very young, no one had ever seen

* This belief that exposure to the program of recovery as embodied in the Twelve Steps would eventually lead a person to either believe in a personal God or a drink was one of Bill Wilson's lifelong beliefs. In his May 1944 address at the annual meeting of the Medical Society of the State of New York Section on Neurology and Psychiatry he said: "the new man . . . sometimes eliminates 'the spiritual angle' from the Twelve Suggested Steps to recovery and wholly relies upon honesty, tolerance, and 'working with others.' But it is curious and interesting to note that faith always comes to those who try this simple approach *with an open mind*—and in the meantime stay sober." In the same vein, see the lines that follow his 1957 comments regarding the Buddhist story that are noted above (from *AAOA*, p. 81).

** This was most likely for a product made by a company called Stain-Ox that was located in Roselle, NJ. In his Big Book story, Jim incorrectly states that "Bill and Hank had just taken over a small automobile polish company," but there is no evidence that Hank had anything other than a distribution deal with this company; Bill called it simply a "promising interest" in Stain-Ox in a January 7, 1939, document (One Hundred Men Inc., GSO, Box 59, 1939, Folder C, Document 1939-26 to 1939-32, p. 6). Supporting this contention of a distribution deal is the fact that Stain-Ox was one of the original investors in Works Publishing (eight shares for \$200); something that would not have happened if Hank had been required to put up the money for those shares. He was broke. (See the list of shareholders in Works Publication dated May 15, 1940; GSO, Box 61, Folder D, 1940—Works Publishing Company, p. 76.) *NOTE:* This is a typical example of the wildly inaccurate statements that Burwell so commonly makes in relation to factual details. Because of this, I have been extremely hesitant to accept many of his claims at face value and have relied on secondary source substantiation whenever possible. This is not to say that everything Jim said was inaccurate, but the percentage of his statements that are contradicted by contemporary documents is certainly high.

anybody like Jimmy. Jimmy knew just what he was after; he wanted to stop drinking.

There was no doubt about it. Enthusiastic—sincere—aggressive—he was all of these. But Jimmy was a man of fixed ideas; very fixed, as we soon discovered.

Rising to his feet at a meeting, Jimmy stridently declared, “[Damn] this God business! It’s the bunk. I don’t need it to make [this] program work. And neither does anybody else. It’s a lot of superstition. We ought to stand on our own feet, get honest and work with other alkies. That’s program enough. Let’s skip the God stuff.”

And so the trouble started.

. . . Was it not our experience that we must live by spiritual principles or drink and so die? Of course, it was. The spiritual “angle” was the heart of the program. Some of us had been unbelievers, but we had come open-minded to [the group] and had acquired faith. But here came a man shouting that the very grace by which we were living was ridiculous.

We tried every conceivable means of [bringing] Jimmy around—gentle remonstrance, angry argument, condescending pity, the advice [that he was destroying our] newcomer’s chances by his awful heresy, exclusion from our councils and finally the threat of expulsion from [our group]. None of these devices worked. As well [try to] soften cold steel in a candle flame.⁴⁷

Burwell was proving to be an enormous challenge to Wilson’s desire for an open door policy, but whatever the difficulties and however uncomfortable it might have been at times, Bill persevered in his tolerance and his commitment to the principle that the only requirement for membership was an honest desire to stop drinking. And on that score, Jimmy absolutely qualified.

But Burwell’s presence wasn’t the only problem. His candid and unrepentant disbelief while he continued to stay sober encouraged Hank Parkhurst to become increasingly more open about his own feelings that the group was placing far too much emphasis on the religious angle and that they would have more success with new prospects (and drive fewer people away) if they would just confine themselves to the psychological aspect of recovery. In Hank’s opinion, the most effective way to gain a newcomer’s attention was to talk to him about how powerless he was over the first drink (the “peculiar mental twist” that took him back to drinking) and about his need to become more selfless and caring for others (moral psychology).

Hank has frequently been portrayed as an agnostic or even an atheist—mostly based on his reported insistence on leaving God out of the Big Book. As Wilson later noted, Parkhurst “had been very agnostic” and it was because of this that “he thought a psychological book should be written.”⁴⁸ But Parkhurst’s outspoken objections to

Wilson's constant emphasis on religion was not because he had no faith in a Higher Power. Hank *was* a believer, but his faith was much more along Deist lines than anything else.^{*} Given this different understanding of God, he credited his own sobriety more to the psychological changes he had made than he did to the powerful hand of the providential God to which Bill always gave credit.

More than that, he felt that such an explicit religious emphasis would prove to be a marketing disaster. He knew his own history and how resistant he had been to "the God idea" while he was drinking and he feared Bill Wilson's constant mention of God and religion would alienate the majority of active alcoholics from the very start and thereby deny them any possible chance of recovery.

Jim Burwell's volatile presence in the group provided Hank with the perfect foil for making his increasingly strident arguments about the need to de-emphasize the religious and present their program in a book that used much more general, psychological terms that would not immediately drive away readers. While admitting the religious component was important for any long-term sobriety, Hank felt just as strongly that recovery would be accessible to more people if it was presented to them from the psychological viewpoint first, with the religious elements being slowly introduced at some time later in the process.

Given all of these circumstances, Wilson's challenge was beyond formidable; it seemed impossible. How could he possibly write something that would accommodate the very different and liberal opinions being adopted by his group in New York City, while simultaneously satisfying the much more rigid Oxford Group model practiced by the larger contingent of sober men out in Akron?

Among his many talents, Bill Wilson was an accomplished politician, and he could be absolutely brilliant when dealing with the squabbling factions clamoring for his attention and approval throughout his many years as the unofficial leader of Alcoholics Anonymous. But in this case, it was just not possible to satisfy these two divergent and conflicting approaches simultaneously so, in the end, Bill chose to steer a middle course by focusing primarily on his own experiences in New York, while making every effort to present those experiences in a way he hoped Dr. Bob and the other Ohio members would find acceptable.

Bill Writes the New Chapter

Finally putting pen to paper, Wilson began by boldly titling this new chapter "There Is A Solution," and then plunged immediately into the religion versus psychology controversy then raging in New York by citing the professional opinion of one of the world's leading psychiatrists. Bill presented this head-on confrontation as a story about "a man we know" who "had searched the whole world for a solution to his alcohol problem" before finally traveling to Europe where he consulted with "a noted doctor and psychologist having world eminence in his specialty." This was the famous A.A.

^{*} Merton M.'s unfinished and unpublished manuscript, *Black Sheep*, focuses primarily on Hank Parkhurst and he repeatedly (and credibly) makes the point that "Hank was neither an atheist nor an agnostic" after he got sober (see, for instance, *Black Sheep*, p. 48). Support for that understanding of Parkhurst's religious convictions will be presented later in the story here.

story of Rowland Hazard and Dr. Carl Jung, a tale familiar to the New York members and one that had certainly been passed on to the drunks in Akron.* Despite the extensive treatment Rowland received from Jung, he had slipped back into drinking and the doctor, in frustration, declared him incurable, saying that, in his judgment, he “was utterly hopeless, could never regain his position in society, and would have to place himself permanently in an institution or hire a bodyguard if he expected to live long.”**

Bill followed this dramatic opening with a short teaser paragraph noting that despite this alarming and fatal prognosis “our friend lives and is a free man. He does not have to have a bodyguard, nor is he confined.” After a professional diagnosis like that, how could this possibly be true?

Rather than presenting the conclusion of Rowland Hazard’s story here (it appears later, near the end of the chapter), Bill pauses for dramatic effect, claiming “We, of ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS, now know at least one hundred men” who “have been the victims of a common calamity and have collectively experienced almost every known variety of human misadventure and misery.” But it is these same men who have discovered “a common solution” to their problem with alcohol and “a way out with which we can absolutely agree.” These last six words were surely overly optimistic, but then Wilson was creating something intended as a sales piece to promote donations as much as it was meant to be a how-to presentation on recovery and a positive stance of unanimity was critical to both of those goals.

Nor is this “common solution” or the “way out” immediately described. Once again, Bill sidesteps the issue he has just introduced and spends the next two pages establishing the credentials for these “one hundred men” who “as a group . . . have had four years of intensive and unique experience on which to draw” and who “during this time . . . have most intimately touched some two hundred cases of acute alcoholism.”*** This has typically been done, he says, by having one “ex-alcoholic who has found this solution, and who is properly armed with certain medical and psychiatric information”

* The often told A.A. version of this story has frequently eluded attempts at corroboration. For an in-depth investigation and some interesting conclusions about the disputed facts of this story, see “Stellar Fire: Carl Jung, a New England Family and the Risks of Anecdote” by Cora Finch (available at <http://hindsfoot.org/jungstel.pdf> - retrieved March 4, 2012). For one interesting theory on how this story came to Bill Wilson through Cebra Graves who supposedly heard it directly from Rowland Hazard, see Jared Lobdell, “Progress Report: The Messengers to Ebby: Cebra G.” in Vol. III, no. 7 of *CASQ, Culture Alcohol & Society Quarterly*, p.12.

** Unless otherwise noted, the quotes here from “There Is A Solution” are taken from the earliest version of the chapter I have been able to locate, a reduced copy of a typed original in the Stepping Stones archive that has the title “Alcoholics, Anonymous.” at the top of the page in pencil (StSt, AA 501.1, Alcoholics Anonymous—Early Draft of Chapter “There Is A Solution,” Box 13, Folder 24). Stepping Stones preserves a later, edited version of this chapter (in the same folder), while GSO has archived an even later, edited version (GSO, Box 59, 1938, Folder B, Documents 1938—53 to 63). Note that all of these were typed on 8½” x 14” (legal) paper. The first two are twelve pages in length and the GSO copy is eleven pages long. See Appendix III starting on page 635 for a full transcript of the text used here.

*** This “four years” of group experience (not to mention the “one hundred men”) is completely inaccurate given the date of the writing. In June 1938, Bill was sober just three-and-a-half years and Dr. Bob (the second oldest person in sobriety after Ebby’s slip in April 1937) had only three years of sobriety. The same claims are made in both of the other two early archived version of this chapter. Contemporary mention of the “one hundred men” claim can also be found in a letter Bill wrote in August 1938 (Wm. G. Wilson to Mr. Charles Parcelles [sic], July [but really August] 1, 1938 (GSO, Box 59, 1938, Folder B, Documents 1938-31 to 1938-34) and appears again, along with the “four years” assertion in an undated “To Whom It May Concern” letter that Wilson wrote, most likely in mid-July 1938 (GSO, Box 59, 1938, Folder B, Document 1938-49). Perhaps this is just simple exaggeration (a defect that Wilson was consistently prone to) or these inflated numbers may have been used in anticipation of what the situation would be on the book’s projected publication date.

carry the message of their common solution directly to another suffering alcoholic. Wilson then goes on for almost two pages about the absolute necessity of expanding this work with the publication of a book that will suggest “a definite program of action and attitude to everyone concerned in a drinking situation.” Such a book, he notes, will necessarily involve “a great deal of discussion . . . of matters medical, psychiatric, social and religious;” subjects which are, by their very nature, “highly controversial.” But he quickly reminds his readers that, as these discussions progress, “we are most anxious not to appear in a role of those who would preach or reform, as we deem such attitudes ill befit the kind of people we have been and to some extent still are.”

Having spent almost five pages on these preliminaries, Wilson finally arrives at the heart of the matter and offers three critical questions that he claims will frame the general outline of the book, questions he feels would have by now occurred to anyone with enough interest in his subject to have “read this far:”

1. Why it is that all of us became so desperately ill from drinking?
2. How and why have we all recovered from an utterly hopeless condition of mind and body?
3. What do I have to do to get over it?

“The main purpose of this book,” he states confidently, “is to exhaustively, definitely and specifically answer those questions and to let you know what you can do about it.”

In the next two pages Wilson briefly describes a “moderate” drinker and then a “control” drinker before launching into a long and detailed description of “the true alcoholic;” a picture that he admits is not comprehensive but that he hopes will “suffice for the moment to roughly identify him in the mind of the reader.” This is the man we are talking about and here is what his problems look like in graphic detail. How did he ever come to such a place and what is it about his drinking that has made him “so desperately ill”?

The Problem: Insanity

Perhaps the most striking example of genius in all of Bill Wilson’s writings occurs in the next two and half pages of this manuscript as he pinpoints the central problem of the true alcoholic and identifies it with the moment of insanity just before the problem-drinker—with no alcohol whatsoever in his body—picks up the first drink:

The almost certain consequences that follow taking a glass of beer do not crowd into the mind and deter us. If these thoughts do occur, they are vague or hazy and become readily supplanted with the old threadbare idea that this time we shall handle ourselves like other people. There is a complete failure of the kind of defense that would keep one from putting his hand on a hot stove . . .

[Now,] all of these observations would be quite academic and pointless if our friend never took the first drink, thereby setting in motion the

terrible cycle that everyone has seen so many times . . . If hundreds of experiences have shown him that one drink means another debacle with all its attendant suffering and humiliation, how is it that he takes that one drink? What has become of the common sense and will power that he frequently displays with respect to other matters?

These are inspired and penetrating questions and they lead Wilson to the inevitable conclusion that "the real problem of the alcoholic centers in his mind rather than in his body." Usually the alcoholic "has no more idea why he took that first drink than you have," and there is no possible explanation for this complete lapse of "common sense and will power" other than to admit that he suffers from some form of temporary insanity.

This is a startling diagnosis: the alcoholic's *real* problem isn't his drinking, it is his *thinking*, more specifically, his thinking during the brief moments just before he picks up the first drink.

At a certain point in the drinking of every alcoholic, he passes into a state where the most powerful desire to stop drinking is of absolutely no avail . . . The fact is, that all of us for reasons which are yet obscure, have entirely lost the power of choice with respect to alcoholic drinks. Our so-called will power with respect to that area of thinking and action becomes virtually non-existent. We are unable at certain times, no matter how well we understand ourselves, to bring into our consciousness with sufficient force, the memory of the suffering and humiliation of even a week or a month ago.

This is a unique insight into the very heart of the mystery of alcoholism and an ingenious reformulation of the drunkard's most basic problem; it is already and exactly *there*, fully blown, *before* he ever drinks. This belief is firmly based on Bill Wilson's own experiences during the years when he was so desperately trying to stop drinking. His final, month-long drunk began on November 11, 1934, a day on which he traveled out to Staten Island to play some golf and, along the way, struck up a conversation with another passenger on the bus. The bus broke down and, while they waited for its replacement, Bill told the story of his drinking life to his new friend and explained he was sober now and could never again drink alcohol in any form. An hour later, the two men sat together at a bar finishing their lunches when:

we were almost ready to leave when my mind turned back again to Armistice Day in France, all the ecstasy of those hours. I remembered how we'd all gone to town. I no longer heard what my friend was saying. Suddenly, the bartender, a big, florid Irishman, came abreast of us, beaming. In each hand he held a drink. "Have one on the house, boys," he cried, "It's Armistice Day." Without an instant's hesitation I picked up the liquor and drank it. My friend looked at me aghast. "My God, is it

possible that you could take a drink after what you just told me? You must be crazy.” And my only reply could be this, “Yes, I am.”⁴⁹

This is a clear-cut and very personal example of the insanity that precedes the first drink, and it proved to Wilson that, in some perverse and inexplicable way, his primary problem was mental rather than physical. The man who woke up on that Armistice Day morning had recently completed an extensive round of professional treatment and he was supremely confident that his newly acquired self-knowledge would protect him from drinking. But after this incident it was obvious that self-knowledge—along with every other avoidance technique he had ever tried—would always fail him in the moments just before he started to drink again. At some unpredictable time in the future, whatever mental defense he might have developed would be forgotten and disappear in the instant before the first drink was raised to his lips. Then the crazy cycle of drunkenness would begin again for “once [the alcoholic] takes any alcohol whatever into his system, something happens both in the bodily and the mental sense, which makes it virtually impossible for him to stop.” Disaster was inevitable. Whatever confidence a drunk might have in his ability to resist that first drink, it would eventually and inevitably prove to be a delusion. Even if a “true alcoholic” does manage to stop drinking for some period of time, there was no way he can ever stay stopped.

The Solution: A “Deep and Effective Religious Experience”

Given this penetrating and frightening analysis of the problem, was there no hope? In fact, he claimed, “there is a solution, and how glorious was the knowledge of it to us.”

The solution, Bill explained, requires that certain actions be taken, including extensive “self searching” along with “the leveling of our pride [and] the confession of our sins of omission and commission.” He also notes that, at first, “almost none of us liked” the idea of doing any of these things, but once “we had come to believe in the hopelessness and futility of life as we had been living it” and had seen this process “really worked in others,” then “there was nothing left for us to do but accept the proposals placed before us.”

And now, beyond these suggested actions, there is one other element absolutely essential to sobriety that Wilson could no longer avoid. While the alcoholic’s *problem* can be understood in medical and psychological terms, the *solution* is most certainly religious in nature. The “GREAT FACT is just this and no less; that all of us have had deep and effective religious experiences which have in every case revolutionized our whole attitude toward life, toward our fellows and toward God’s great universe.” Furthermore, “the central fact of our lives today is the absolute certainty that the Creator of you and me has entered into our hearts and lives in a way which is to us new and beautiful and has there commenced to accomplish those things which by no stretch of the imagination were we humanly capable of.”

Self-searching, a reduction of pride, and the confession of our sins are all necessary actions, but they are only effective when carried out in the context of a new and “revolutionized” attitude that comes from having a “deep and effective religious

experience." Both the actions *and* the experience are necessary if there is to be any hope of truly quitting drinking and of being able to begin a new life of wholesome and continued sobriety.

From his long experience with drunks Bill knew exactly what kind of reaction to expect once his alcoholic readers were confronted with this revelation:

Is it possible that this announcement has given you a severe jolt, followed by thoughts something like these—"Oh, so that's what it is, I'm so disappointed, I had begun to think these fellows knew what they were talking about." But let us assure you that you should be cheered up . . . for we think that no one should miss THE GREAT REALITY which we have been lucky enough to find . . .

Wilson is almost pleading here: please don't go away in despair; please do not close your eyes to this wonderfully effective solution. Where you are now, we have already been and while we were there, we tried every imaginable—and ultimately unsuccessful—way to stop drinking. But now, we have finally found something that works and it has worked for all of us. If you can believe just that much, then hopefully you will be able to agree with us that:

There is no tenable middle of the road solution. You are in a position where life is becoming impossible, and if you have passed into the region from which there is no return through human aid, you have just two alternatives. One is to go on to the bitter end, blotting out the consciousness of your intolerable situation as best you can. Or, you can surely find what we have found, if you honestly want to and are willing to pay the price.

Bill immediately tempers the need for a "deep and effective religious experience" by emphasizing he is not talking about some sort of instant conversion. No one expects, he told his readers, that you are "going to get rightly related to your Creator in a minute. None of us found God in six easy lessons, but He can be found by all who are willing to put the task ahead of all else."

Carl Jung and William James

Having so far offered a solution based on the experiences of one hundred sober men, Bill now returns to the story of Rowland Hazard and Dr. Jung and shares that great psychologist's professional opinion about the *only* possible cure for alcoholic drinking; an opinion that aligns perfectly with the religious solution Bill has just insisted is so essential to any recovery:

On the bare chance that our alcoholic readers still think they can do without God, let us complete for you the conversation which our friend was having with the celebrated European man of medicine. As you will recall, the doctor said—"I never have seen one single case in which alcohol mindedness was established in the sense you have it that ever recovered."

Naturally, our friend felt at that moment as though the gates of hell had closed on him with a sickening clang. He then said to the doctor, "Is there no exception?" The doctor answered, "Yes, there is. The sole exceptions in cases such as yours have been occurring now and then since early times. Sporadically, here and there, once in a while, alcoholics have had what are called vital religious experiences. I am not a religious man, to me these occurrences are a phenomena. They appear to be in the nature of huge emotional displacements and rearrangements. Ideas, emotions and attitudes which were once the guiding forces of the lives of these men, are suddenly cast to one side and a completely new set of conceptions and motives commence to dominate them . . ."

Rowland was, at first, greatly pleased by this news since, as he told Jung, he was already "a very good church member." But the doctor quickly dashed this cavalier optimism by noting that "his faith and his religious convictions were very good so far as they went, but that in his case they did not spell the vital religious experience so absolutely imperative to displace his insanity with respect to matters alcoholic." Jung made it perfectly clear he was not talking about a typical run-of-the-mill religious belief in God demonstrated by regular attendance at church. Such a faith would have absolutely no effect on Rowland's ability to stop drinking nor could it ever be "successful with an alcoholic of your state of mind." Jung insisted it was "imperative" for Rowland to experience something much more "deep and effective" than just a commonplace belief in God and noted that, unless Rowland found such a "vital religious experience," he would never be able to stay sober.

Directing his attention back toward the reader, Bill writes that:

You and I would say that the patient was on a very hot spot, [and] that is probably what he did say and feel. So have we, when it began to look to us as though we must have a vital religious experience or perish. Our friend did finally have such an experience and we in our turn have sought the same happy end, with all the ardor of drowning men clutching at straws. But what seemed at first to be a flimsy reed has proved to be a loving and powerful hand of God. A new life has been given us, or if you please, a design for living that really works.

Having addressed the religion versus psychology controversy by citing the opinion of a world-famous European psychiatrist who believed the only solution was a "vital religious experience," Wilson now begins the final three paragraphs of the chapter by once more combining psychology with religion; but, this time, approaching it from a completely different perspective.

Rather than introducing yet another authority to confirm the necessity of a God-centered solution, Bill takes that point to be proven and moves on to his next important insight by citing William James (at the time the most famous and revered of all American psychologists) to substantiate the fact that there was absolutely no need for this God-centered solution to be tied to any particular set of beliefs or prescribed

practices. Wilson refers the reader to James’s important and influential 1902 book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, presenting it as conclusive psychological proof that there are “a multitude of ways in which men have found God.” He then goes further and claims that this open approach to theology is the very one adopted and endorsed by each of these one hundred men:

As a group, or as individuals, we have no desire to convince anyone that the true God can only be discovered in some particular way. Anyone who has talked with all of us would soon be disabused of the idea. If what we have learned, and felt, and seen, means anything at all, it indicates that all of us, whatever our race, creed or color, are children of a living Creator with whom we may form a new relationship upon very simple and understandable terms, the moment any of us become willing enough and honest enough to do so. Therefore, we waste no time in the kind of religious disputation which has so frequently torn people apart.

These men, who have individually discovered that flimsy reed, which later proved to be the “loving and powerful hand of God,” have all come to their beliefs by different paths, and there is no particular set of dogmas or religious practices they subscribe to or that they will demand of you. Nor do they care what church you belong to or even if you go to church (although most of them do). “We feel that should be entirely one’s own affair.” Attendance at church is an individual decision to be made “in the light of [each man’s] past association, his newly found religious experience, his convictions and preferences, and above all, his future usefulness.”

Bill then ends the chapter with a final paragraph noting that “the next few chapters” will have “the personal narratives of several of us” describing “the way in which [each writer] found the living God.” “We hope,” he says, “that no one will be disturbed that these stories contain so much self revelation” or think they exceed the bounds of good taste. They are necessarily candid so “that the reader may get a fair cross section and a clear cut idea of what has really happened, and why we think it happened.” But most important, these stories are written in the hopes that the alcoholic reader will readily identify with them and having made that identification, will “be persuaded to say, ‘Yes, I am one of them; I must have this thing.’”

Bill’s Religious Perspective

What would likely be surprising—and, in some cases, even shocking—to many current A.A. members in this early version of the chapter is the repeated insistence that the solution for alcoholism is specifically “religious” in nature, a word that drags a fair amount of baggage into the discussion. Perhaps none of these would be more surprising than Dr. Jung’s observation that the only hope for recovery from drinking is be found in a “vital religious experience”; a dramatically different prescription from the frequently quoted “vital spiritual experience,” which appears in the Big Book today.

Bill is aware of this problem and he is constantly reminding the reader that when he says “religious,” he intends that word to be understood in the most flexible and open-ended way possible. He almost pleads with the reader to keep an open mind on this question of religion, pointedly claiming that the word is meant to encompass “nearly every conceivable . . . shade of belief” and, “we have no desire to convince anyone that the true God can only be discovered in some particular way.” The religious solution is explicitly understood to be as accommodating as possible, allowing people to approach and resolve whatever issues they might have with God in absolutely any way they find acceptable. Bill’s final appeal to William James’s book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, is meant to emphatically underline the fact he is talking about a religious solution that comes with no formal dogma and with no prescribed religious practices.

Later edits to this chapter would significantly tone down the impact and the implied message of the word “religious” by repeatedly replacing it with the much gentler “spiritual”; a word that undoubtedly comes with some baggage of its own, but nowhere near as much as the more specific “religious.” To most ears, that word almost necessarily implies “church” and “dogma,” while “spiritual” might be understood to apply to a meaningful life that is lived independent of any formal religious organization.

But just how open was Bill in this early version of “There Is A Solution” to “nearly every conceivable . . . shade of belief”? It does not require a careful reading of the text to realize that Wilson is very much a man of his own time, culture, and upbringing and when he uses the word “religious”—despite all of his protests to the contrary—he was identifying with a specific concept of God to the exclusion of all others. Whatever later liberalizations may have been introduced by the substitution of spiritual for religious or by Bill’s consistent efforts over the years to open the doors of A.A. ever wider, the open concept claimed for religion here does not embrace a whole host of the “varieties” so candidly acknowledged in William James’s book, a study that includes investigations into the religious beliefs of Pagans, Hindus, Buddhists, and Sufis (among others).

As his language consistently shows, when Wilson uses the word “religious” here, he is talking about the belief in a personal, providential God, very much along the lines of the God of Abraham, who is to be the ultimate source of salvation for alcoholics. When it comes to recovery, he is not talking, for instance, about the indifferent Creator God of the Deists or about any of the other more liberal concepts of “God as you understand Him.” Bill Wilson’s God is “the Creator of you and me,” the “living Creator” and “the living God.” He is a God with “a loving and powerful hand”; one who is capable of “entering into our hearts and lives” where He can “accomplish those things which by no stretch of the imagination were we humanly capable of.” This is a God who wholeheartedly offers each of us the opportunity to form a very personal and direct relationship with Him and on whom we can absolutely rely for help to overcome the insanity that precedes the first drink.

Like almost everything else in the chapter, this conception of God came from Bill Wilson’s own personal experience, it is the foundation of a belief system he adopted when he first got sober and it is the one he maintained for the rest of his life. Since Bill’s own God was a providential God—one you could pray to with the full expectation

of receiving an answer to your prayers—that is the God he explicitly described as the “glorious” solution to the problem of uncontrolled drinking in this first version of “There Is A Solution.”

Further Distancing from the Oxford Group

While it is interesting to note that what Bill writes is little more than a generalized version of his own personal experience, it is what he does *not* say here that is even more striking. He makes no specific or implied mention of the Oxford Group and he carefully avoids using any of their traditional terminology (Absolutes, quiet time, checking, etc.). Beyond this, Bill also rejects the Group’s particular Christian practices as being unnecessary for their solution and in their place, he wholeheartedly endorses William James’s infinitely broader definition of what qualifies as a valid religious experience.

Where then does that leave the very successful Akron prescription for getting sober; an approach that, in almost all of its important particulars, has been either completely ignored or significantly watered down in this chapter?

A little over a year earlier Frank Amos had noted in his report that there were six different ‘musts’ in the sobriety solution he found in Akron. In this chapter, four of these are certainly touched on, although their presentation has been considerably softened (the word “must” in this sense is not used in Bill’s first version of “There Is A Solution”):

An alcoholic must realize that he is an alcoholic, incurable from a medical viewpoint and that he must never again drink anything with alcohol in it

He must surrender himself absolutely to God realizing that in himself there is no hope

He must be willing to help other alcoholics get straightened out . . . ⁵⁰

But the other two “musts” are not mentioned or even implied in this first attempt at what was supposed to be a comprehensive outline of how the so-called “one hundred men” (the majority of whom were in Akron) had managed to stay sober. Completely missing are:

Not only must he want to stop drinking permanently, but he must remove from his life other sins such as hatred, adultery and others which frequently accompany alcoholism . . .

He must have devotions every morning—a “quiet time” of prayer, and some reading from the Bible or other religious literature. Unless this is faithfully followed, there is grave danger of backsliding; . . . ⁵¹

Bill has come out strongly for his own vision of alcoholics who are saved by the intervention of a providential God, but while doing so he has softened or abandoned a large amount of what was considered to be the very core of recovery and sobriety in

Akron. Would Dr. Bob and the other Akron members be able to follow him down this new path?

Exactly how Bill thought these slights might be received in Akron is unclear, but his blatant omissions and rejections would certainly offend the non-alcoholic Oxford Group members who were so deeply intertwined with Akron sobriety, not to mention how they might upset those sober members of the Ohio “Alcoholic Squad” who thought of themselves primarily as Oxford Groupers and who credited the Group (and its way of life) with saving their lives.* But, however deeply committed these sober members might be to the Oxford Group, Wilson was clearly articulating a position that flew directly in the face of that partnership and decisively distanced him from everything he felt was wrong with the Oxford Group, including all of the unnecessary baggage and entanglements such an alliance entailed.

Wilson’s significantly moderated presentation of the first four “musts,” and his complete elimination of the other two, speaks volumes about his vision for the future of their growing Fellowship. It is not just that he makes no mention whatsoever of the Oxford Group here; instead, the chapter emphatically describes a group that will not tolerate the “religious disputation which has so frequently torn people apart” and further states “that it is no concern of ours as a group what religious bodies we shall identify with as individuals.” In fact, “not all of us have [even] joined religious bodies.” Essentially, he says, we are a group of men who wholeheartedly embrace the “varieties of religious experience” approach and we are committed to honoring *whatever* religious beliefs our members feel will take them “a step toward new growth and [a greater] availability for God’s purpose.”

Given the timing of this writing and what was then going on in Akron, this first version of “There Is A Solution,” can hardly be read as anything other than Bill Wilson’s Declaration of Independence from the Oxford Group and, for that matter, from every other religious organization imaginable.

A New Path to Sobriety

At this point, it is important to take a few steps back in order to fully appreciate the startling vision and leadership Bill Wilson displays in this first version of “There Is A Solution.”

By defining the solution as primarily religious—while pointedly insisting it must not be affiliated with any particular dogma or church—Wilson has resolutely staked out the basic grounds upon which the future Fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous would be built. His solution is progressive, pragmatic, democratic, and expansive. It is a vision conceived in an open-ended and inclusive spirit going far beyond anything imagined in the restrictive religious outlook adopted by Dr. Bob Smith or to be found in the psychology-first perspective advocated by Hank Parkhurst. Bill has categorically

* This was certainly the case when the book was finally published. “If the alcoholics in Akron had their problems with the Big Book, members of the Oxford Group had even more. There was the impression that it was commercial, for one thing. Another reason they were disappointed was that there was no mention of the Oxford Group in the book. Furthermore, the Twelve Steps had replaced the four absolutes, which were not mentioned, either.” (*Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers*, pp. 154–55.)

rejected the pitfalls of an Oxford Group connection while simultaneously refusing to reduce their proposed solution to mere psychology. His vision, even at this early date, is already broad, brilliant, and uncompromising. Wilson has seen what would be needed to capture and hold the attention of the thousands (and later the millions) of people he is trying to reach with his “Solution” and he has gone there with confidence.

As he first started to write, Bill might well have set for himself the goal of creating an extremely broad explanation of their solution, one wide enough to encompass both the Oxford Group sobriety of Akron and the more liberal psychology-based model favored by the vocal minority of Parkhurst and Burwell in New York. It would have been the safest and the most political thing for him to do under the circumstances. But the simultaneous accommodation of both perspectives was impossible and Bill was not about to compromise his own vision by capitulating to one or the other of these views exclusively. Instead, he rejected the pointed, single focus of both camps and drafted a far-sighted vision of recovery radically different from the extremely limited views then being advocated by his two main compatriots.

“There Is A Solution” is pure Bill Wilson; a clear and forthright presentation of a new path to sobriety, one that is firmly rooted in his own experience and that would, a few months later, begin to blossom and grow into the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Given the chance, Dr. Bob Smith might have written a chapter very different from this; one with an explicit Christian message and a far more dogmatic approach to the requirements for sobriety. Knowing this, Wilson was justifiably nervous about the reception this chapter would receive in Ohio. It might be difficult to predict how Dr. Bob would react to this particular presentation of their solution, but Bill had been stung all too frequently and much too recently by the angry resistance of many Akron members to doubt there would be severe opposition once they had the opportunity to read what he had written. It was a situation that called for delicate handling.

But however uncertain or confrontational the Ohio reaction might prove to be, it was a problem that lay in the future. Hank Parkhurst, on the other hand, was sitting in the same office while Bill dictated “There Is A Solution,” and he was not about to give up his own vision of sobriety without an argument.