

**Tampa Bay Clean and Sober Plenary Session Address  
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**The Real and Complete Early A.A. History Story**

**A.A. Had Two Founders, You Know**

I had the privilege, on occasion, of sharing the podium with Dr. Bob's daughter, Sue Smith Windows of Akron, Ohio. And Sue frequently began her talks with the statement:

“A.A. had two founders, you know.”

The problem is that a lot of us did *not* know.

Nor did we learn about the Akron story or the details about Dr. Bob and his wife Anne Ripley Smith until months or even years along our sobriety trail. In fact, the chasm between the traditional New York story and the seldom detailed Akron story has grown so deep that many have proclaimed there were “two” A.A.’s—the one that one began in 1935 and was abandoned in 1938, while the real “basic” program didn’t begin until after the Big Book was released in the Spring of 1939. Others thought there had been a “split” between East and West in the effort that began with Bill and Bob in Akron on June 10, 1935. And, while the details have been made murky and confusing by neglect, the time is long overdue to see how A.A. really developed, what its real roots were, and how the complete historical picture can help us all today as we pursue A.A.’s real purpose – fostering the mission of one drunk in helping another.

Forget that, and you’ve forgotten what Alcoholics Anonymous gave to America in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

**With Two Distinctly Different Backgrounds**

Though seemingly never at odds with each other, A.A.’s two founders William Griffith Wilson and Robert Holbrook Smith brought diverse, conflicting, and often ignored backgrounds to the recovery table.

Dr. Bob, the elder of the two, was born in St. Johnsbury, Vermont. He and his family were as Christian as they come. His father taught Sunday School at the North Congregational Church for 40 years. His mother was a fervent, church-going pillar of that same church. The Smith family did, in its church, what so many dedicated Christians did in their churches (and many still do). The Smiths often attended four prayer and other services each week. Son Bob dived into Christian Endeavor, the young people’s group at the church.

Five times a week, Bob was fed the Bible, prayer, Christian literature, quiet times, conversions, witnessing, and fellowship. This was long before the Oxford Group was even a twinkle in Frank Buchman’s eye. Later, Bob attended St. Johnsbury Academy where there was, among other

strains, a definite religious emphasis. And, despite his drinking episodes, Bob was linked to Christian churches and membership throughout his life. When he completed his college and medical school educations, he married the Christian lady Anne Ripley. He was soon affiliated with St. Luke Church, took his kids to Sunday School in Akron, and later became—with Anne—a charter member of the Westside Presbyterian Church and worshipped there for several years. Finally, Dr. Bob concluded his church and earthly life as a communicant at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Akron. Moreover, he read the Bible from beginning to end at least three times, devoted at least an hour each day to reading mostly religious literature, and had quiet individual prayer sessions three times a day. During these, he studied Scripture, some important Bible passage, prayed, sought guidance, and then, as he said, "went about my Father's business."

Bill W.'s story is as different as the night from the day except for the fact that Bill too was born and raised in Vermont – East Dorset, Vermont, to be exact. I've found no record of church participation by Bill's parents – before or after they parted ways. Bill apparently was involved in a Sunday School until age 12 when he left in protest over a temperance pledge.

Bill long characterized himself as a conservative atheist. He said he had never studied the Bible until he came to Akron in 1935. He never belonged to a church; and, despite strong and deep friendships with Episcopalian Rev. Samuel Shoemaker and Roman Catholic Jesuit Priest Ed Dowling, never joined either the Episcopal or Roman Catholic denominations. Bill married a non-Christian, Lois Burnham, in a Swedenborgian Church—a marital tie that carried with it Lois's family who had been active Swendenborgian clergy. Also Lois's declaration that she didn't believe she needed a "conversion," and didn't much care for the First Century Christian Fellowship (the Oxford Group) through whose auspices her husband became sober. For his part, Bill often said he had felt superior to most Christians and that, if he believed in any God at all, it was the "god" of Science.

Such was the background of the two Vermonters who founded A.A.

### **And Two Different Starts in Their Search for Sobriety**

Before Dr. Bob and Bill met each other on Mother's Day of 1935, each had begun his sobriety in a totally different way and from totally different starting points.

Then sober for a mere five months, Bill Wilson had nonetheless become a zealot in pursuit of drunks to help—even though he seemingly had no significant message which would bring them deliverance. By contrast, though drinking heavily for the previous two and a half years, Dr. Bob Smith had become a zealot in pursuit of further Biblical knowledge. Yet Dr. Bob seemingly had no significant interest in bringing his Biblical studies to bear on *his* drinking problem or even on the drinking problems of any one else.

Out of these two, totally different beginnings grew a powerful combination of talent and enthusiasm that has enabled me, and a host of other alcoholics and addicts, to remain clean and sober for many years. Clean and sober, that is, with a borrowed zeal that involved helping others get better and a concomitant zealous quest for a greater understanding of God, our Creator, and

greater knowledge of how God's power could be called up to help when help from all other human sources seemed unavailable and ineffective.

In a sense, pioneer AAs drew on the life-changing techniques of Oxford Group "teams" in developing a method for message-carrying—utilizing story telling. For knowledge of what God could do and expected them to do, they plunged into the Bible. That this Bible quenched their thirst for spiritual knowledge is underlined by the very name they affectionately gave the Bible itself. They called it "the Good Book."

### **Emanating From Two Distinctly Different Pre-Sobriety Roots**

In the past fifteen years of research and writing, I have taken the liberty of bestowing two totally different names on the two totally different A.A. programs that marked the beginning of our fellowship's growth.

One I called the *Akron Genesis*. This because A.A. co-founder Dr. Bob landed in Akron, Ohio from Vermont to own his home and conduct his medical practice. A.A. itself was founded in Akron. And the real A.A. success story grew out of the work in Akron.

The other program, I have recently called the *New York Genesis*. And, although the real spiritual roots of A.A.—even early New York A.A.—go back much farther than New York, the elements of the New York program were produced by New Yorker Bill Wilson, centered in New York, and mentored on the East Coast by activists in New York's Calvary Episcopal Church and its rector Rev. Sam Shoemaker. The New York people ultimately produced the second program which became embodied in A.A.'s basic text and Twelve Steps.

Regrettably, the real nature and content of the Akron pioneer program had been overlooked, distorted, and minimized by many AAs themselves, and by historians and scholars. But it was this program that achieved the astonishing successes and success rates. And it is, I believe, to this early program that some AAs and 12 Step groups can look today for help with alcoholism and a reversal of today's dismal 1 to 5% success rates. I do not believe the answer lies in more "treatment," new treatment models, critiques or religious controversy or bashing. It lies in the power of Almighty God and the way in which He graciously guided the Akron pioneers as they asked for His revelation and also studied His Bible for His revealed written will.

### **The Roots of the Akron Genesis of Alcoholics Anonymous**

I often call The Akron Genesis of Alcoholics Anonymous (<http://www.dickb.com/Akron.shtml>; <http://www.dickb.com/drbob.shtml>) the "Dr. Bob Root" of A.A. Largely because it got its thrust way back in Dr. Bob's youth at St. Johnsbury Church in Vermont. From that venue grew Dr. Bob's belief that Bible study, conversion to Christ, individual and group prayer, a continuing quest for God's will and God's guidance, strenuous and demanding effort to obey God, the reading of religious literature, fellowship, love, and service—each and all of them—contained the ingredients for a new and abundant life in Christ. According to his son Smitty, Dr. Bob was really much more interested in the "message" than in the views of a "messenger." Hence his ultimate focus was mainly on Biblical fellowship rather than on church activity like that in which

his parents had been intensely involved. Perhaps too, it explained his alleged disdain for “sky pilots” although there is evidence to refute that characterization.

In a nutshell, however, far too little attention has been paid to the research of Akron A.A. and to the huge United Christian Endeavor Movement that had begun in Williston, Maine in February, of 1883, not long before Dr. Bob’s birth in St. Johnsbury, Vermont on August 8, 1879. That dynamic society quickly spread its outreach like wild-fire to a world-wide and astonishingly large membership of some three million five hundred thousand people. And its remarkable membership numbers and growth certainly equaled and probably exceeded that of the combined memberships, at their peak, of the much-discussed Washingtonians, Oxford Group, and Alcoholics Anonymous together.

Christian Endeavor societies were numerous and their literature was voluminous—with hymnals, guide books, pamphlets, and newspapers, as well as Christian books and articles. Their focus, like that of early A.A., was local. Yet their membership and conventions were world-wide in scope. Their program was very simple – much like the simplicity in approach that was so much stressed by Dr. Bob.

### **The Christian Endeavor Tree**

The Christian Endeavor Society tree had four, simple roots: (1) Confession of Christ. (2) Service for Christ. (3) Fellowship with Christ’s people. (4) Loyalty to Christ’s Church (See Francis E. Clark. *Christian Endeavor in All Lands*. Boston: The United Society of Christian Endeavor, 1906, p. 93). Its founder, Dr. Clark, said it was “an organization as nearly self-governing and self-propagating as any organization can be” (Clark, *supra*, p. 50)—with these later to be descriptive of two major group characteristics of its A.A. step-child. The required, simple pledge, or covenant, was:

Trusting in the Lord Jesus for strength, I promise Him that I will strive to do whatever He would like to have me do; that I will make it the rule of my life to pray and to read the Bible every day, and to support my own church in every way, especially by attending all her regular Sunday and mid-week services, unless prevented by some reason which I can conscientiously give to my Savior; and that, just so far as I know how, throughout my whole life, I will endeavor to lead a Christian life. As an active member, I promise to be true to all my duties, to be present and to take some part, aside from singing, in every Christian Endeavor prayer-meeting, unless hindered by some reason which I can conscientiously give to my Lord and Master. If obliged to be absent from the monthly consecration-meeting of the society, I will, if possible, send at least a verse of Scripture to be read in response to my name at the roll call (Clark, *supra*, p. 252).

### **Christian Endeavor In Summary**

Extensive research—still ongoing—establishes to my satisfaction that the actual practices of a Christian Endeavor Society can be described as: (1) Acceptance of Christ as one’s Saviour—with conversion meetings to foster such decisions.. (2) Daily individual Bible study and group Bible study meetings. (3) Daily individual prayer as well fellowship prayer meetings. (4) Study

and topical discussion of religious literature. (5) Quiet Hour—involving individual confession of Christ, Bible study, prayer, and seeking God’s guidance. (6) Support of one’s church. (7) Love and service as the code of conduct.

### **The Distinctly Different Oxford Group Practices**

Many who are not familiar with Christian Endeavor or its practices and who are equally unfamiliar with the details of early Akron A.A. meetings, practices, and principles hold their noses while joyously reporting—without justification—that early Akron A.A. was a part of the Oxford Group and therefore unsuccessful. Simply not so.

The Oxford Group did not involve decisions for Christ or conversion meetings. Nor did it give special emphasis to Bible study and prayer meetings. Nor did it encourage the reading of much Christian literature other than the many Oxford Group writings themselves. Nor did it allow for self-propagation or self-government. The Oxford Group founder Frank N.D. Buchman was the boss, and Buchman called the signals for his followers. Most significant, the Oxford Group was primarily a life-changing entity rather than an organization that fostered conversions, Bible study, prayer, and reading. It was, however, derived from, and much involved in, the pre-Christian Endeavor and pre-Oxford Group practice of Quiet Time, which was sometimes called a Quiet Hour, and earlier called the “Morning Watch.”

### **The Match-up of Christian Endeavor and Early A.A.**

In almost every aspect, the Akron pioneer Christian Fellowship, as they called themselves, was a solid match in principle, meetings, and practice for the Christian Endeavor Movement in which Dr. Bob had intensely—by his own characterization—been trained as a youngster.

The proof of the Akron Christian Endeavor pudding comes from comparing with each other three types of societies: (1) The long-ignored Christian Endeavor groups. (2) The monolithic Oxford Group and its self-characterized “First Century Christian Fellowship” devoted to “world-changing through life-changing.” (3) The pioneer A.A. group in Akron, which characterized itself as a “Christian Fellowship,” had no national or international leadership, and devoted itself to Bible study, old fashioned prayer meetings, use of Christian devotionals, regular quiet times, conversions to Christ, and serving God and their fellow suffers by love and practical service.

Today there is ample evidence to show which society resembled which, and which society differed from which. The primary evidence can be found in the A.A. Conference Approved title, *DR. BOB and the Good Oldtimers* (NY: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc., 1980). That excellent and official A.A. history establishes that John D. Rockefeller, Jr.’s agent Frank Amos investigated the Akron A.A. scene in great depth, specifically described its ingredients, and left us with a splendid and simple description of its program that very little resembled that of the Oxford Group or its principles and practices, and yet—in almost every particular—is a dead ringer for the local Christian Endeavor proto-type groups of Dr. Bob’s youth.

### **Christian Endeavor’s “Five Great Principles”**

British Christian Endeavor leader Rev. F. B. Meyer, who inspired both Christian Endeavor and the later Oxford Group founder Frank Buchman as to Quiet Time practices, declared: “Christian Endeavor stands for five great principles:

(1) Personal devotion to the living Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and his will in every department of life. (2) The pledge obligation which implicates the Spirit of God as the only source of the endeavor. (3) Constant religious training. (4) Strenuous loyalty to the local church. (5) Interdenominational spiritual fellowship to realize the Lord’s prayer for spiritual unity (Clark, *supra*, pp. 101-102).

Christian Endeavor Societies carried on *autonomous* local programs, centered on a particular church. Those local groups embraced – as did early Akron A.A. – confession of Christ, Bible study, conversion meetings, revival prayer meetings, the Quiet Hour, love and service. These local societies never crumbled because of their collateral, though sometimes outspoken, interest in temperance—a political action that many claimed to have sounded the death knell of such groups as the Washingtonian Movement.

Add to this mix a specific focus on helping of drunks—which Christian Endeavor did not undertake—and you have almost the prototype for the Akron program which we will soon discuss.

### **The New York Genesis of Alcoholics Anonymous**

I call the New York beginnings of A.A. “The New York Genesis of Alcoholics Anonymous.” I have chosen this name of late in order to distinguish the A.A. timeline on the East Coast of the United States from the timeline that began in St. Johnsbury, Vermont with Dr. Bob’s youth and wound up in Akron, Ohio. The New York story is fairly well known, though some of its ingredients are not. Unfortunately, this New York timeline has become “the” A.A. story – the one in Bill’s Story, the one in many biographies of Bill, and the one usually mentioned by A.A. historians. It is, of course, important if fully and correctly told. But it really only reports on the program Bill fashioned with his 1939 publication of the Big Book. It ignores the details of Dr. Bob’s religious training during his childhood to his renewed religious quest in Akron in the 1930’s. And it winds up highlighting New York A.A. as an unhappy Oxford Group offshoot instead of as a successful Christian Fellowship offshoot unique to Akron. Nonetheless, the New York story is one which also needs fully to be told. And here is what I believe is an accurate synopsis.

### **Rowland Hazard and Dr. Carl Jung**

The exact time of occurrence of the Hazard/Jung events is murky and disputed. But it seems safe to conclude that Rowland Hazard, member of a prominent Rhode Island family, had been suffering the pangs of alcoholism for many years. Around 1930 or 1931, he paid two different visits to the famed Swiss psychiatrist, Dr. Carl Gustav Jung. The first was for treatment, but was followed by Rowland’s return to drinking. The second was for Rowland’s despairing report to Jung that the treatment had failed.

Whereupon Dr. Jung told Rowland that Rowland had the mind of a chronic alcoholic, and could never be helped by human means, but might be cured through a conversion. Jung recommended religious association. Rowland sought out the Oxford Group and followed its life-changing precepts. And a seemingly accurate conclusion as to the resultant facts, would have it that Rowland was permanently cured, went on the start the A.A. ball rolling with Ebby Thacher in New England, and figured prominently in the subsequent writings about, and activities of, Rev. Sam Shoemaker, Jr. and Calvary Episcopal Church in New York. The Hazard/Jung events are often characterized as an introduction by Jung of “conversion” as a viable solution to alcoholism.

### **Ebby Thacher and Rowland Hazard**

Rowland appears to have mastered the Oxford Group’s life-changing principles and practices. And certainly one of these was the principle of Sharing for Witness—passing on the message of what God had done that the Oxford Grouper could not do for himself. Rowland and a couple of other Oxford Group friends (Shep Cornell and Cebra Graves) procured the release by a judge to their custody of an alcoholic from Albany, New York, named Edwin T. Thacher (often known as “Ebby”). It seems quite clear that Rowland Hazard thoroughly indoctrinated Ebby with Oxford Group ideas.

This tutoring produced several results: (1) Ebby learned the Oxford Group life-changing ideas quite well. (2) Ebby was placed in by Hazard in Rev. Sam Shoemaker’s Calvary Rescue Mission and there answered an altar call and made a decision for Christ (facts seldom correctly or adequately reported). (3) Ebby applied the Oxford Group Sharing for Witness technique and sought out his old alcoholic friend, Bill Wilson, to give him a deliverance message. (4) Though Wilson was kicking and screaming, Ebby presented Bill with a straightforward statement that he (Ebby) had “got religion,” that God had done for him what he could not do for himself, and that, by learning and applying the Oxford Group’s principles, he had been converted and cured. The Thacher/Hazard events are sometimes characterized as constituting the introduction into A.A. of the Oxford Group’s “practical program of action” as the method for achieving the conversion ingredient of recovery that Dr. Jung had told Rowland Hazard would be needed for recovery.

### **Conversions, Calvary Mission, and Bill’s Recovery**

This part of the story is frequently omitted, distorted, or misinterpreted. But 15 years of research have now documented some its important aspects. First, Ebby went to the altar at Calvary Mission, made a decision for Christ, and was converted. Second, Bill Wilson followed suit, went to Calvary Mission stating that he wanted what Ebby had received. Wilson soon responded to the altar call, made a decision for Christ, and was converted—though wandering drunk and aimlessly for a short time and then checking in to Towns Hospital.

Ebby visited Bill in Towns Hospital and elaborated on the Oxford Group “practical program of action.” Bill followed directions, “humbly offered himself to God as he then understood God,” cried out “If there be a God, let Him show himself,” and reported having his famous “hot flash experience.” Bill’s experience and recital of it was much like that of his grandfather in Vermont. It caused Bill to believe that he had “found” God and had had a conversion “experience.”

Whatever Bill had—whether at Calvary Rescue Mission or at Towns or at both—Bill Wilson never drank again.

### **The Dr. Silkworth and Professor William James Ingredients**

Just exactly how valid the so-called “disease theory” of alcoholism may be is a matter that has been discussed and disputed for many years. And Dr. William D. Silkworth, chief psychiatrist at Towns Hospital, who had often treated Wilson, may have espoused it. But if we take Wilson at his word, Dr. Silkworth, both during and after Bill’s last hospitalization, imbued Wilson with the theory that his malady was both mental (an obsession of the mind) and physical (accompanied by an allergy of the body), and perhaps required some kind of “moral psychology” to cure it. The fact is that Dr. Norman Vincent Peale later made clear that Silkworth himself believed that the “Great Physician, Jesus Christ” was the one who could successfully cure alcoholism. And, when Wilson reported the “hot flash” to Silkworth, the good doctor said he couldn’t explain the event but could observe the change in Bill, and that Bill should hang on to what he had found. These events, in context, have often been characterized as linking the problem (alcoholism as defined by Silkworth) with the solution (conversion as prescribed by Jung), which was produced by a religious program – the practical life-changing program of the Oxford Group as Rowland had described it to Ebby and Ebby to Bill.

While in Towns Hospital, Bill had been given a copy of Professor William James’s *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. The book was reportedly given to Wilson by either Rowland Hazard or Ebby Thacher. Wilson believed that the religious experience accounts by William James, plus the professor’s analysis of them, validated Wilson’s own “religious experience.” Bill also felt he had discovered from the James book another founding recovery ingredient—that the conversion or religious experience had to be preceded by “deflation in depth.” So at this point, Wilson felt he had been cured through a program that addressed seemingly hopeless alcoholism, articulated surrender of self through life-changing techniques, and produced a resultant conversion and relationship with God, which in turn assured a cure for alcoholism. One that needed to be told abroad. This he began trying almost the moment he got sober, but without success.

### **The Interim Failure of Wilson’s Outreach**

Regrettably, secular, universalist, and revisionist A.A. observers have erroneously fallen for Bill Wilson’s own explanation of his failure as an evangelist. Bill said that he had been totally unable to get anyone sober during the first five months of sobriety when he had chased drunks at Towns Hospital, at Calvary Rescue Mission, and at Oxford Group meetings. He concluded that he had failed because he needed to follow Silkworth’s suggestion that he must hit his witnesses hard first with the bald facts about “medically incurable” alcoholism and *then* present them with the Oxford Group program. But, the record is clear from the statements of Wilson and his wife Lois that this effort produced absolutely no successes, either with the drunks they took into their home, or with those approached during Bill’s outreach. And these failures continued for some time, as Bill himself related..

Apologists in A.A. and in the Oxford Group have often chortled that, while Bill got nobody sober, he himself did not drink. Huzzah! But that’s not a program or successful outreach. The far

more reasonable and logical conclusion is that Bill was a messenger without a message. He had never been to church. He had never read the Bible. He had not even had much sober exposure to Oxford Group ideas; and he was reportedly not a reader. How then, could he have roused the drunks to conversion and salvation!

### **A Change of Scene in Akron**

We have told before and elsewhere the story of the Wilson-Smith meeting at Henrietta Seiberling's Gate Lodge in Akron (See Dick B., *Henrietta B. Seiberling: Ohio's Lady with a Cause*). We've also recounted what Bill and Bob did together in the summer of 1935 (See Dick B., *The Akron Genesis of Alcoholics Anonymous*). But what we have devoted our time to most recently is the totally different scene Bill encountered in Akron when he met and stayed with the Smiths. Bill participated in arranging hospitalizations, Bible study, group prayers, seeking God's guidance, acceptance of Christ, Quiet Times, and team outreach by groups of individuals. And right away, these efforts produced cures. Bob was cured in a few weeks. A.A. Number Three (Bill Dotson) was cured in a few days. And so it went through the chain of pioneers up to mid-1938 (See Dick B., *When Early AAs Were Cured and Why*).

### **A Change of Program in 1939**

Though he was commissioned, after much argument and a split vote in Akron, to write a book reporting the Akron program to the world, Bill did not do that. He began work on his Big Book in mid-1938. But from the beginning, its writing and publication was a commercial venture that he worked on with his partner Hank Parkhurst. Bill drew on a variety of new sources: (1) One was the alcoholism treatment comments by lay therapist Richard Peabody. (2) Another was the New Thought ideas from Emmet Fox and others. (3) Still another—and the major one—was a prototype of the Oxford Group principles as reduced from 28 to 12 and embodying almost the very language Bill had learned from Oxford Group leader Rev. Sam Shoemaker (See Dick B., *The Oxford Group and Alcoholics Anonymous* and *New Light on Alcoholism*). (4) Moreover Wilson salted into the language of the Big Book several New Age counterfeits of Christian words and phrases. (5) But he left out the major elements of the Akron program: the Bible, Akron's Christian literature, Anne Smith's Journal, and Quiet Time. (6) A new idea and a new language were fashioned to appeal to atheists and agnostics and those of non-Christian faiths. (7) The simple United Christian Endeavor principles and practices from Dr. Bob's youth were never once mentioned. (8) The word "cure" was deleted from A.A. vocabulary and replaced with "once an alcoholic always an alcoholic." And the results seem to have verified the validity of the new, "no cure" proclamation in all but a small percentage of fellowship members.

### **The Conclusions of Some**

- 1. Statistical surveys show that today's A.A. produces only a small percentage of permanent abstainers – one to five percent.**
- 2. Documented records of the 1930's and early 1940's show a 75 to 93% success rate during that A.A. period.**

3. **Christian and atheist groups alike point out that alcoholism can be cured without A.A.—Christians stressing the power of God, and secularists the power of the will.**
4. **A.A. itself has stopped growing. Treatment programs are being eliminated. Treatment money is being directed toward every conceivable malady that will enable government or insurance money to be received.**
5. **Watered-down A.A. (with ever-increasing idolatry, simplistic emphasis on Meetings, and the rejection of religious beliefs and religious expressions) has not cut the mustard with enviable support or results.**
6. **A huge number of alcoholics and addicts, both within and outside of A.A., are simply not recovering.**
7. **The time is long overdue for a careful look at the early A.A. history story.**

**Summarized, our suggested history concerns an understanding that God had done for real alcoholics what they could not do for themselves. And the remainder of my talks will enable you really to see what our Creator did and what the pioneers did to produce real victories in recovery battles within early A.A.**