

The Oxford Group and The Churches



The writer.

By
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Illustrated by Edith Davey.

are invited to tea, and told that they will meet one or two group friends. These friends consist of a few who are interested in the movement, but know little about it at first hand; perhaps one or two unhappy ones, whom my friend feels might find that which would help them to face their burdens, and the majority "groupers" proper.

These groupers all belong to other individual groups and are also members of churches of different denominations.

During and after tea there is some general talk, but oh, the difference from the chatter one so often hears at these tea-parties! There is a moment's quiet, a prayer is offered up, and then quite naturally, earnestly and unaffectedly, sitting just where we happened to be, different women in turn, as guided, begin to tell the rest just what the Oxford Group has meant to them in *experience*. I shall never forget how I sat there at my first meeting, listening to these women one after another telling eagerly of this wonderful thing that had come into their lives and revolutionised them; of the joy and happiness it had brought to them and to those about them, frankly confessing their faults and failings, and telling of how they had been given strength to overcome

them, and rejoicing at the new life that was theirs. I was amazed at the love and happiness that filled them—that they radiated. Here was what I had been seeking all my life! Here were Christians such as I had felt Christians ought to be to be called by the name.

There was such an air of absolute honesty, sincerity, and loving kindness about them—and it was loving kindness that I had found so sadly lacking in many Christians I had previously known. There was, too, such an air of conviction, they undoubtedly had found something real, some power or vital force, and they were just bursting to *share* what they had found with everyone in a spirit of love and Christian fellowship.

And right here I am going to begin on Mr Mackintosh's criticism of group "sharing." To my mind he has missed the whole significance and purpose of "sharing" and of the movement itself when he says:—

"Some of you might gain the same

ends if you went to a psycho-analyst and allowed him to probe till you unburdened yourself. You do find a certain release from your burdens and inhibitions, but it all may have a psychological rather than a religious significance. If, on the other hand, your sharing is in godly sorrow for sin through Christ, it may be simply invaluable."

Now "sharing" as I have experienced it in the group is not a matter of unburdening *oneself* at all, of thinking of self at all—it is trying to help *someone else*. And that is the whole spirit of the group. It is not a matter of trying to save one's own soul, of escaping the wrath to come; it is trying to help others, of making love and service one's aim, of living up to the highest that is in one.

I, too, like Myrtle Hounsell, shall have to be personal, as one can only speak of one's own experience in such a vital and essentially personal subject.

Now the crux of the whole matter to me is, that although an earnest seeker after truth from childhood to what I suppose I must accept as middle-age, and although brought up in the church, not one single professing Christian ever tried to help me, or knew or bothered about whether I needed help—and it is just this "sharing" that I am convinced the church needs to make her more effectual.

For pretty well thirty years, as soon as I was old enough to question things, I was troubled by scepticism and doubt. There was so much I could not believe, and I could find nothing real in it all.

I longed for some wise person, someone who possessed real conviction to confide in. If only I could but talk it all out with someone who had perhaps gone through the same struggles and difficulties and doubts—had *won through*, who really believed. There must be many, too, feeling exactly like that.

In all those years I never met one Christian who made it possible for me to talk to them.

It wanted but one tiny word of encouragement, one tiny opening from either minister or real Christian to have had it all come tumbling from my lips and overcharged heart! That opening never came in all the years, until I came in contact with the groups.

Every single "grouper" I have met is only too willing and proud to talk of her faith and the Christ she has found, and her one aim is to share Him with others. I have found them imbued with the Spirit of Christ and they bring it into every phase of their daily lives, and do not make of it merely a matter of belief.

I would like to tell of one minister who is also a grouper, the first minister who had ever spoken to me of religion.

Although he had not ridden a bicycle for about fifteen years, and was a man of sixty, hearing that I was in dire trouble, and knowing something of my state of mind from a mutual friend, and, although he had but met me once for a few moments, he borrowed a bicycle—there being no other means of con-

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WHEN I read the Rev. Rocliffe Mackintosh's article on "The Group and the Churches," I burned to take up my pen in its defence, so that it is with great pleasure that I follow Myrtle Hounsell's suggestion and tell of the group that I know.

This group is not an organised group at all, and, for that matter, all the more significant, I think, for it shows an entirely new spirit and conception of Christianity, for such meetings to take place at all.

These meetings take the form of "afternoons" at the home of a friend, an ardent "grouper." A few people



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veyance—and rode twelve miles up hill and down dale over a very bad bumpy road to come and see me, arriving in a state of exhaustion. Waiting merely long enough to recover somewhat, he plunged straight to the point, and for a matter of about two hours wrestled with my doubts and perplexities in an utter forgetfulness of self. I could feel that minister just bursting to help me, putting forth every ounce that was in him in a spirit of Christian love and fellowship in the desire to help me.

The spirit of that man did more to convince me than all the arguments or advice he could offer, or the most eloquent sermon ever preached—and I was a stranger to him and not even a member of his church!

Where Mr Mackintosh got his ideas about groupers from I do not know, unless the group he knows is very different from the one I know. I feel that he is judging the groups by the few foolish ones that make mistakes. There always have been and always will be foolish ones in every movement that make mistakes.

As for the charge that they are antagonistic to the churches—why, every grouper that I know is an ardent church-goer, and most of them never went before! The group teaches, “join some church or go back into your church and become a better member and worker than you were before.” All they do is to demand something more vital and real than mere church-going.

Surely it is because of the spreading influence of the groups that we do not hear so much about empty churches these days! The groups are filling them.

The great thing about belonging to the groups is that one cannot remain in them and be a professing Christian only. It is the very downright honesty and sincerity one finds there that attracts the earnest seeker and repels those not willing to face up to it.

Christ was essentially practical Himself. He did not theorise about His teaching. He lived it. He fed the hungry, healed the sick, forgave sinners, washed His disciples' feet. Christ never told anyone to get down to solid thinking. He said: “Thy faith has made thee whole,” and “Except ye become as little children ye cannot enter the Kingdom of God.”

Mr Mackintosh says, “It is well that you should apply yourselves to problems of conduct, but, after all, these are not the chief concern of Christian people . . . it is what we believe and how much we believe it—these are the things that really count.”

Surely if Christ came to teach us anything, it was just that—that all the belief in the world, if your conduct was wrong, was worse than useless. Surely the Pharisees believed in their religion and in God, and very strongly, too!

When Jesus wanted to boil down His gospel into a few words, was it anything about belief? No—it was, “Do unto others as you would they should do unto you.” “Love your neighbour as yourself.” A matter of conduct.

The whole of the Sermon on the Mount is a matter of conduct.

St. James says, “My brothers, what is the use of anyone declaring he has faith if he has no deeds to show? You show me your faith without any deeds, and I will show you by my deeds what faith is. You believe in God? Well and good. So do the devils, and they shudder!” And again: “You observe it is by what

he does that a man is justified, not simply by what he believes.”

I come last to the suggestion that groupers have “mounted with wings as eagles, have had visions and raptures, but you don't seem to have reached the stage where you have walked and not fainted.”

That is the unkindest cut of all. That is to me one of the great differences between a grouper's “surrender” and an emotional revivalist conversion. I heard it so often said in the beginning, of certain people, “Oh, it is all right—but will it last?” With those I know it has lasted. Some may have fallen out, although I know of none myself, but if so, it would be found to be those who have not been able to face up to the absolute honesty and sincerity involved. The groupers I first met nearly three years ago have proved that they have the staying power as well as the enthusiasm.

It is this downright, honest-to-goodness, literal carrying out of Christ's teaching that frightens those who want to keep their religion nicely parcelled up into a harmless, genteel sort of Sunday-go-to-meeting religion. Groupers believe that Christianity should not be an opiate—but a dynamic!

And so I would like to testify that I am one who found in the groups what I failed to find in a lifetime of seeking elsewhere—the Spirit of Christ shed abroad in men's hearts.

I would like to conclude by quoting a passage from a letter from a grouper at present in England who was privileged to attend a large house-party at Oxford recently.

“The house-party was just wonderful, and I wish all my friends could have been there. There were three colleges occupied and about six hundred people present.

“This movement is growing in England like wildfire, and the Bishops of London, Leicester, Rochester and others are definitely connecting themselves with it.

“There were people from India, China, America, the Continent, South Africa, Cairo, Sweden—oh, just everywhere!—and, my dear, the radiancy, the happiness, the fellowship, the love and, oh, all the beautiful cultivated lovely young men and women! I just couldn't do much more than sit and stare during those days.

“The work is growing amongst the rich, the poor, the slum dwellers, the titled and the intellectuals—there was one dear old bootlegger! Every class was there—all one in Christ. We were like one big lovely family. It was heavenly.”

And that, I think, speaks for itself, and is where the group has taken such a hold on the imagination of thinking, earnest people, just because they do endeavour to practise what Christ preached, and to carry out His teachings literally in every circumstance of life, instead of doing as Ezekiel said, “And lo, thou art unto them as a very lovely song, of one that hath a pleasant voice; for they hear thy words, but they do them not,” or, as St. Paul predicted men would do in the latter days: “For though they keep up a form of religion, they will have nothing to do with it as a force.”

To those who would criticise the movement or are afraid of it, I would give the advice that Gamaliel, a doctor of law, gave to the sanhedrin when the Apostles were arraigned before it for preaching Christ:—

“Let them alone. If this project or enterprise springs from men, it will collapse; whereas, if it really springs from God, you will be unable to put them down.” (Moffat. Acts VI.).