

WHAT HAPPENS AT A BUCHMAN HOUSE-PARTY?

The deserter from a cause, good or otherwise, is viewed, and quite rightly, with suspicion. The assumption is that he must have some axe to grind, some grudge to settle. In this case neither is true. These comments are simply the saner reflection of one of those people 'who cannot be fooled all the time.' They apply only to the First Century Christian Fellowship, *alias* The 'Oxford' Group Movement, *alias* 'Buchmanism,' *alias* 'The Groups,' and do not in any way refer to those quiet, dignified meetings of individual churches, particularly Calvary Episcopal Church in New York City, whose staff, though holding a different viewpoint from mine, have placed me deeply in their debt by their unending kindness, affection and hospitality.

Before writing this article, the writer attended a Buchman meeting and publicly announced this intention.

A FEW weeks ago three sandwich-men, wandering aimlessly up and down the Cornmarket in Oxford, announced to the world, in red letters a foot high, 'The Truth about Buchmanism.' The Buchmanite scowled, the public laughed, which is the proper attitude for the public to take, particularly that part of it which is not interested in reviving an already dying evangelism.

For Buchmanism is only another chapter in revivalistic history, which in a few years will have gone the weary way of all such attempted reforms. Until then, unfortunately, it will take its yearly toll of those more impressionable young people, who, to put it kindly, are not over-endowed with the attributes of clear thinking.

It is, in brief, an evangelical campaign, a 'Fellowship of Personal Religion within the Churches,' whose appeal is definitely to 'a class little reached by other agencies,' and this it sets out to do by reason of its

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exclusive and snobbish character which limits its membership to the fellow who belongs to the same club, or buys his plus-fours at a reputable tailor. In view of this amazing condition, it chose for its name the incongruous title of 'The First Century Christian Fellowship.' Perhaps someone pointed out the humour of this misnomer, for recently it has been passing as 'The Oxford Group Movement,' and when this startled some of the more conservative Oxonians, who knew something of its trans-Atlantic origin, with admirable versatility, it started to call itself 'The Groups.' Unofficially, it is known as Buchmanism, taking its name from its founder, Frank Buchman, who has been classed, by one impassioned admirer, with Martin Luther, John Wesley and the blessed Saint Francis. This same young man begins his article with the sinister remark that, 'When the Church fails, God sends a man.' Frank Buchman is the man.

Over four hundred of these lusty First Century Christians descended upon Oxford this last June, where they gathered at University College and at St. Hilda's for one of their 'house-parties.' Most of them were under twenty-five, many of them were undergraduates. Why had they come?

Some of them said quite frankly that they were seeking an answer they were not finding in their own denominational churches, others because they had no churches in which to seek. And it is these last who are our concern. Young people come in contact with the Group because they are searching for Reality, some of them become interested in the Faith. They conclude, and quite rightly, either it is all true, or all false, that there is no middle ground between Catholicism on the one hand and Agnosticism on the other. They are charmed by the logic of the Catholic position, but long before they reach the place where they

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begin to realize the deeper spiritual significance of the Church, the Buchman leaders ridicule and try to dissuade them.

I often wonder what my own experience would have been, had I been more immature, less used to following my own reasoning, when, as a member of this Fellowship, I first began to catch a vision of the meaning of the Catholic Church. I only know that they did everything in their power to prevent me from taking this step. Before doing so, I, through courtesy, wrote to my former rector, from whom I received a most generous and gracious reply. I also wrote to Frank Buchman. His answer, in about ten curt lines, managed to convey the impression that he did not love the Catholic Church (what good Lutheran does?), nor could he appreciate my intention. 'It was all most unguided.'

In the Fellowship Letter, 6—a semi-annual publication composed of letters and reports from various members of this 'spiritual family of many nationalities scattered over the world (and not intended for general circulation)'—is the following paragraph, in a letter from a minister in Australia, he writes :

The guidance of God is no longer a mere belief. It is proved experience. Things have begun to move fairly quickly. In the last few months, I helped a fellow whose fault was booze; and also a wonderfully fine young fellow, who was thinking of turning Catholic in his search for religious reality and becoming a priest (Unfortunately, the letter is cut here, but we may safely assume this belligerent parson successfully dissuaded him, for the letter continues . . .). This last case shows how great is the power of God, and filled me with a wonderful gladness and awe—to think that I was, in fact, as well as in theory, a life-changer by the Grace of God.

How does one become a 'life-changer'? You must go to a house-party and see. If you would procure an invitation, you must assume the expression of the

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returning prodigal, for those undesirable persons with inquiring minds, who ask embarrassing questions which destroy 'the tone of the meeting,' are not encouraged to partake of the fattened calf of salvation. In addition to this more formal procedure, if you know someone in the Group, you will receive a polite little note urging you to come. Do not be flattered by this delicate attention, it is all done to convey the impression that you are simply going to the country for an ordinary week-end, and with this uppermost in your mind you will arrive, poor unsuspecting wretch.

You will share a room with two or three other people, all of whom you will come to know very well before the week is over. In fact, you will never have another moment to yourself until, completed exhausted emotionally, you wearily climb aboard the homeward train a sadder and a wiser person. When someone is not in your room trying to win you, someone else will be having a try at one of your room-mates, in which dismal event the tactful thing for you to do is to lurk about in the hall, or go for a walk by yourself in the rain. Perhaps this lack of privacy is one of the things that, in the end, breaks down your resistance. When you are not talking about your own soul, you are talking about the other person's soul (a very great deal about the other person's). . . .
O! wise Church Who conducts Retreats in silence

. . . .
House-parties always begin in the late afternoon, but it is not until after dinner that the real gathering of the clans takes place. These drawing-room meetings are always as attractive as money and luxury can make them. Soft lights, deep arm-chairs, and that receptivity which follows a satisfactory dinner, all tend to soothe the body and lull the mind. 'Good food and good Christianity go together,' is one of their favourite maxims *O! practical Church Who*

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achieves such surprising results of the latter, with the minimum of the former.

With a technique that is perfect to watch, the leaders first win the confidence of the group, and then proceed to make them carry out their wishes. The shrinking violets, in the back rows, find themselves laughingly moved up to the front. This 'gathering closer' is one of the first principles of mob psychology. The proximity of people is bound to produce like-mindedness in groups where the emphasis is subjective, rather than objective. Such a simple rule of contagion needs no further comment here. The first meeting will consist in introductions and that subtle art of putting people at their ease, and in order not to bewilder new-comers unduly, it will close early, always on some note the leaders want to suggest, and with a hint of expectancy of what the to-morrow will hold in store. You will go to bed rather disappointed to find that these devilish Buchman meetings are rather tame affairs after all.

You will be obliged to share your early morning disposition with your room-mates, both of whom will probably be very talkative and jolly, and one of whom (if not both) will sing in the bath tub. Breakfast, out of considerations for the life-long habits of the guests, will be served at a comfortably late hour. The supposition is that the faithful will arise (to the accompaniment of alarm clocks going off all over the hotel in the first flushes of dawn) and keep a 'quiet time' by themselves. This is only the primarily 'quiet time,' the real one—a mixture of Bible-reading, prayer and auto-suggestion—follows breakfast, when all the guests assemble, each with his beaming morning face.

The scratching of fountain pens accompanies your meditation, for 'what comes in quiet time' is carefully noted and written down in numerous little black note-books. (No one but an efficient American would

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ever have thought of this conservation of heavenly grace.) What happens when you write guidance down? As in automatic writing, one letter suggests another, one word another word, words suggest sentences, sentences thoughts, which, following in quite ordinary sequence by the association of ideas, are interpreted as the handwriting on the wall.

Later in the morning there will be a Bible Class. The first house-party I attended had the good fortune to secure one of Cambridge's most brilliant scholars. That his academic subject was not theological added to the appeal of these fascinating lectures. He was not only a man of marked scholarship, but also one of extraordinary charm, but, to quote Sir James Barrie, who in turn quotes someone else, 'what Scotchman lives, who is without charm?' In looking back, I remember he simply gave his lectures and retired to his room and the solace of his books. Somehow, his loosely knit figure, his great height, both of soul and stature, seemed out of place among the chintz-covered furniture, and I can still hear his roar of outrage, when they tried to make him deliver his lectures by a dim religious light.

Only a few of us have ever had the courage to say what we really thought of the Bible Classes at the subsequent house-parties. Suffice it to say, they were given by that dreary text-by-text method. Most of us used the Scofield Reference Bible. You need only turn to the First Chapter of the Book of Genesis to find out all you need to know about this book. The beginning of the world is definitely set at 4004 B.C.

The evening meetings are nothing more or less than the usual revival. The only unusual thing about them is the type of people who attend, sitting back so comfortably in their correct evening clothes. Old man Moody himself would have difficulty in recognising this setting. Testimonies appear in a different

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light when made by young society matrons, and it takes clever strategy to get grave old Anglican bishops down on their ham-bones in a hotel parlour singing gospel hymns.

The appeal is a purely emotional one, in suggestibility, in imaginative emphasis, in narrowed consciousness. Much of this is achieved by imitation, which is the strongest impulse governing any crowd. Perfectly normal people are made to act impulsively, the leader suggests, the initial steps are taken by those having the least inhibitory control over nerves and emotions. Suggestion plays havoc with the intelligence. 'Someone in the room is in great trouble,' says the leader, in an appropriately persuasive voice 'perhaps he will tell us who he is.' Or, infinitely worse to Catholic sensibilities, 'Someone right now is giving his life to Christ.' At best, only an ideal of Christ, there is none of that sacramental grace without which all ecclesiastical systems must sooner or later break down; when this happens the 'convert' is filled with despair, which in extreme cases may lead to one of those tragedies which so recently occurred in Oxford.

Behind it all lies the same principle which makes the darky preacher shout: 'Brother, I see them coming down the aisle,' long before any weak-kneed brother has even risen half-way in his seat. I once preached in a coloured church and watched this method employed by the 'Exhorter.' Public opinion drags many a hesitant sinner up to the mourner's bench.

Our sympathies are with the young; that they are swept off their feet is not surprising. They have sat in a dimly-lighted room and had their sensibilities played upon by sob stories. They have heard the witnessing of exhibit Life-changers-by-the-grace-of-God. Nor do they realize that these same stories,

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these same testimonies are told from house-party to house-party, until whatever they may have had of prophetic vision has long since degenerated into the merest repetition. How the travelling members of the Teams stand this sort of thing is a mystery. The first time you hear a story you are interested, the second time you wonder if the same funny bits will occur; finally, you would like to scream every time you hear one begun.

These Teams are recruited from the more interesting of the 'saved.' They are supposed to have been guided to join, but sometimes it suits their convenience wonderfully well to have done so. Their bounty is supplied by other members of the Fellowship, who have taken to heart the moving talk on 'the stewardship of money,' and who, as a result, are willing to furnish first-class travelling accommodations and the best in hotels along the route; also, behind the movement, in New York, is 'an angel.' This same old lady outfitted one of the Scottish members in a complete Harry Lauderish' costume, kilt, tartan and dinner jacket, in which he used to appear to the edification of American audiences at four o'clock in the afternoon, the more enlightened of whom forthwith lost all further interest in the Group at once.

In addition to these larger mixed gatherings are smaller groups. The movement having come to the extraordinary conclusion that 'the sex problem is one which exists' have happily resolved that 'it is not a subject for discussion in mixed groups, though, in separate groups for men and women it is not infrequently brought up, and real help afforded.' Not only does the exposure of the sins of the flesh predominate at these meetings, but people wallowing in introspection not only share their own difficulties, but those of the people with whom their lives are bound up. No matter how disinterestedly these questions are de-

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bated (and it is not fair to the young people involved to put a wrong interpretation upon these groups), emotionally they react on the people confessing them. The meetings of this type I attended were presided over by a person who was obviously not released on this point, and to whom the intimating of past indiscretions was a nervous relief. In this connection my small brother, with that refreshing vulgarity which sometimes so aptly marks the utterances of the young, has been heard to remark that 'Buchmanism certainly is Epsom Salts to the inhibited.'

Far worse than these special groups is the crux of the whole movement, 'personal work,' when individual fastens upon individual (preferably, but not always, of the same sex), and really 'deep sharing' takes place. These amateur 'soul surgeons' (their own term) are told to 'be sensitive' to sex problems, 'it is advisable to be alert to its manifestations, to be ready, if necessary, to discuss it very frankly and very personally.' The good Catholic, with access to the merciful Confessional, naturally rebels at having the last shreds of reticence torn away, and shrinks from submitting his quivering soul to the mercies of none too skilful fingers. Nor is it particularly convincing to find, the next morning, that these sins have become by common consent the property of the rest of the Group, for part of their extraordinary psychology is their willingness to 'share' each other's sins. Some of us are old-fashioned enough to think that the whole subject of sex is best handled by experts—namely, mothers and confessors and family doctors.

Is Buchmanism a religion? As a religion there is something very wrong with it. It makes meeting-hounds out of its adherents, where they are always publicly, and at length, 'surrendering' some perfectly innocent pleasure, until their lives rapidly develop into a series of petty negations, a torment of scrupu-

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lousness. Also, its followers have to be recharged at frequent house-parties to be kept going, and in between times the leaders may be found taking rest-cures in some expensive sanatorium. Picture please, the friars returning from a preaching mission, and informing their superior that they all required a two-weeks' rest on special diet!

Is Buchmanism Christianity? No one knows the meaning of Christianity until, very humbly, he has knelt beside the poor, as with child-like hearts they poured out their simple prayers to God.

*. . . . O loving Church, Whose compassionate touch
heals the souls and bodies of men, by bringing their
broken hopes and sorrows to the feet of Christ*

A life healed by the sacramental grace of Christ needs no public witnessing, no 'deep sharing,' to establish the fact. 'One thing only I know, that whereas I was blind, now I see,' and others seeing, too, come humbly to the Church to be convinced.

J. SHRADY POST.