

THE GROUP MOVEMENT

At first the Oxford Group Movement seemed to shun publicity. Now—doubtless under “guidance”—its leaders are apparently anxious that its principles and its results should be made known to the world. Every facility has been given to an active and skilful journalist, Mr. A. J. Russell, to study the workings of the Movement from the inside; and the outcome of his experiences is a book of quite extraordinary interest, published to-day and entitled “For Sinners Only” (Hodder, 5s.). For the past year or two, “What do you think of the Group Movement?” has been a favourite gambit in the conversation of people interested in religion. Here in this volume is the text for—I will not say for a final judgment, but at least for serious and instructed discussion of a most singular and stirring phenomenon.

Mr. Russell writes like a journalist, both in the bad and the good sense. At times one is jarred a little by his restless vivacity, and by his rôle of “hard-boiled” sceptic gradually becoming overwhelmed by the wonder of the things he has seen and heard. But he certainly was overwhelmed; and one lays down the book with a feeling that he has truly understood the Group Movement and clearly interpreted it. This is to have played the part of a good journalist. Mr. Russell fairly earns a very high compliment—that the reader of this book ceases to think of the author and becomes absorbed in the theme.

I find it hard to crystallize my newest thoughts (i.e., my thoughts in the light of this book) with regard to the Groups. I will set down my impressions in paragraphs—for I am still thinking about the Movement in paragraphs.

First: nobody can doubt the reality of the miracles of conversion and purification which Mr. Russell relates in this book. And these miracle are being wrought because the Movement is absolutely sound on its central principle—that a man must be a 100 per cent Christian or nothing. There is a whole theology in that principle: for it means that to be a Christian is not to believe this or that doctrine, but to open the heart and let the Spirit of Christ live and rule in every tract of one's being. I suppose this justifies the concentration of the Groups upon “personal evangelism,” to the exclusion of theological and sociological concerns. What can possibly be of greater concern than to fill men and women with the very life of God?

I repeat that this insistence on utter surrender seems to me to be the central principle of the Movement: this, and not “sharing” or “guidance,” though Mr. Russell, with the Group leaders themselves, lays equal stress on these two points.

As to “sharing”—in plain words, the full confession to one's Group comrades of one's hampering sins as of one's joyous

liberation—I find myself, rather surprisingly, more of a believer in this practice, after reading “For Sinners Only,” than I was before. Bad taste? Yes, but fastidious taste may be a real barrier to full surrender. I do not accept “sharing” as a principle of the Christian life, nor as a habit, but I perceive that it may be a sternly effective expedient in “breaking down” a man on the edge of decision. Such little things prevent the opening of the door: especially “the last mite of the forbidden treasure.”

“Guidance,” on the other hand, fails to impress me in spite of Mr. Russell's enthusiasm for it. Given the fully surrendered and illumined life, I think a certain confusion

a movement. Behind the Group Movement, in spite of its careful anonymity, stands the figure of its American founder, Frank Buchman. It was undoubtedly he who gave the Movement its central principle and its wonderfully sound practical maxims and psychological tact.

“What is the Group teaching about smokes and drinks?” I asked.

“What do *you* think?”

That is the characteristic Group answer. The decision is left to you. Rigidity over details is unpopular. There are principles in the Fellowship, but no rigid rules. Throw a question at the Group and it comes back to you. Here are certain facts. Interpret them as you think best under God's guidance. “Do anything God lets you.”

There is a big and bold religion underlying this sort of spiritual “direction”; and it is historically sound to trace it back to the semi-

enters when one seeks direct guidance on details from some transcendent source of inspiration. It seems to mark a distrust of the God-illumined intellect. Besides, the whole profound question of Providence is involved: as, for example, in Mr. Russell's story of the Group man who was “guided,” in the war, to give his company the “Left-wheel” instead of the “Right,” and thereby to escape an otherwise fatal shell-burst. To what end was such guidance given? That the men should be killed on some other occasion? That English troops should outwit Germans? No: one humbly thanks God for these deliverances, but it is perilous to build a doctrine of infallible guidance upon them.

I get from Mr. Russell's book a strong sense of the part played by individual leadership in the Groups. My historical theories are old-fashioned, I suppose, for I always expect to find a man behind

anonymous founder and leader.

One could go on for a long time applauding this and criticizing that in the Group Movement. Indeed, one of the strongest points in its favour is that it draws one so inevitably into eager discussion. A movement must be very much alive to do that; and the outstanding fact about the Oxford Groups is the challenge of their sheer vitality to the languid religion all around them. They themselves are not concerned in the discussion. They are simply piling up evidence for the miracle and radiance of the Christ-surrendered life, “For Sinners Only” is the Book of the Acts of this strange new apostolate, testifying to the efficacy of the First Century gospel in the colloquial accents of our modern day. A remarkable book about the most remarkable thing now happening in religion.

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