

A painting of a mountain landscape. In the foreground, a dirt path winds through green grass and rocks. A wooden signpost with two arrows points in different directions. The middle ground shows rolling green hills and a valley. In the background, there are snow-capped mountains under a soft, pinkish-orange sky. The overall style is painterly and evocative.

TURNING POINTS

PHILIP BOOBBYER

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A series of discussions inspired by the ideas of
Frank Buchman

Introduced and arranged by Philip Boobbyer

Introduction

This short course is based around the ideas and insights of Frank Buchman (1878-1961), a Lutheran pastor from the United States, who was the founder of the movement known as the Oxford Group and Moral Re-Armament (MRA), and now Initiatives of Change.

Buchman once said: ‘The world is slow to realise that the spiritual is more powerful than the material.’ That is the insight that underpins these discussions.

The format and atmosphere is intended to be conversational and reflective. In response to the questions listed under each heading, participants are encouraged to share experiences from their lives, and think collectively about what makes for lasting change in people and the world.

Many of the themes raised in the course are explored in my book, *The Spiritual Vision of Frank Buchman* (2013).



Frank Buchman

Course Structure

There are eight main themes. It is envisaged that groups doing the course might cover one of these in each session, but the questions listed in each section are mostly very broad in scope, and some may prefer to give more time to certain subjects than others. It will not be possible to address every question in equal depth. There are also some questions entered under one heading that could equally be discussed under another.

People doing the course might find it helpful to have a preliminary meeting to look at the themes as a whole, and consider what they hope to get out of the discussions. In addition, either in the middle or at the end, they are encouraged to set aside a more extended time for quiet reflection on how they might respond personally to the issues that have arisen. Some of the language used here reflects the Western, Christian tradition that Buchman was shaped by. People from other traditions and backgrounds are, of course, welcome to bring their own vocabulary and experiences to the subjects under discussion.

Preliminary meeting

1. Changing direction
2. Silence and creative thinking
3. A purpose for life
4. Caring for people
5. Teamwork and unity
6. Strategy and planning
7. Hope for the world
8. Underlying questions

Time of silent reflection and sharing

1. Changing direction

Buchman grew up in Allentown, Pennsylvania. His father was a hotelier, and his mother came from a farming family. In 1902, he was ordained as a minister in the Lutheran church. A couple of years later, he started an outreach programme in Philadelphia aimed at helping underprivileged boys; but he resigned after clashing with the Trustees of the project—over what he saw as inadequate funding. In 1908, during a visit to a Christian conference centre in the North of England, he had a religious experience that changed his life. Christ became real to him in a new way. As part of this experience, Buchman found freedom from bitterness towards the Trustees of the work in Philadelphia; he wrote to them, apologising for his attitude. The whole episode shaped his thinking profoundly. The idea that people's attitudes and motivations could be fundamentally changed became a central element in his philosophy of life.

1. What is the deepest kind of change we can aspire after—in ourselves, in others?
2. Does such change happen in one moment, or over a long period of time, or both?
3. How do people find freedom from selfishness, and have their motivations renewed or redirected?
4. In restoring broken relationships, are apologies always needed?
5. What role does restitution play in putting right past wrongs?

Buchman thought that people's lives are sometimes built around negative reactions or fears, and that this can change. 'If you break the power of your instinctive actions and reactions by obeying the Spirit, you are on track', he once said.

He was an admirer of the Indian leader, Mahatma Gandhi; he first met him during the First World War. Gandhi's dictum, 'Be the change you want to see in the world', had something in common with his own approach.

6. What does it mean to 'be the change' in any situation?

2. Silence and creative thinking

In the years 1909-1915, Buchman worked as Secretary of the YMCA (Young Man's Christian Association) at State College, Pennsylvania. His main aim was to help young people find faith and purpose for their lives, but he found that although he generated a lot of activity, the results were superficial. In response to this, he started to take time in silence in the early morning in order to try to attune his life more profoundly to God's direction. Listening to God and being alert to the promptings of conscience became an important part of the culture of the work that Buchman started.

1. What is the purpose of having quiet times or practicing silence?
2. How do people quieten their minds, and get free from noisy, anxious thoughts?
3. What factors makes for a good quiet time?
4. How can a person distinguish between true and false inspiration, between genuine conviction and impulsiveness?

Buchman wanted people to have the largeness of heart to engage properly with the needs of the world, and take them into silence; and then to bring a more contemplative, spiritual quality of life back into their daily activities. He thought a deeper source of inspiration was needed both in personal matters and in public life, and that creative thinking often arose in people when they were inwardly quiet and free of selfish demands. 'Silence can be the regulator of men and nations [and] the daily source of all our creative thinking and living,' he said on one occasion. In this way, he sought to bring politics and spirituality together.

One figure who Buchman influenced was the British theologian, B.H.Streeter (1874-1937). Streeter believed that the spiritual and intellectual sides of life complement one another. Buchman was similar in this respect. He once said: 'The Holy Spirit will teach you to think.'

Buchman stressed the teachings of scripture as guidelines for people seeking God's wisdom and inspiration; and he also emphasised the importance of spiritual accountability—as a protection for people when they are tempted to confuse their own desires with the wisdom of a higher power.

5. How can silence help us to see the world and its needs more clearly?
6. Is faith opposed to reason or complementary to it?
7. Are there dangers in the idea of listening to God, and can these be avoided?

3. A purpose for life

Buchman owed an important debt to the Yale-university classicist, Henry Burt Wright (1877-1923). As well as being a scholar, Wright devoted much of his energy to helping young people find a sense of purpose for their lives. He always insisted that God had something definite for each person to do in the world—a kind of ‘life-work’—that was perfectly suited to that person’s character and situation. This life-plan or calling was not normally revealed all at once; it generally emerged step-by-step. Nor was it a mechanistic thing that could never be recovered if a person somehow made a mistake and missed something important.

1. What is it that gives people a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives?
2. How can one discern one’s own vocation? How does it grow?
3. Can a vocation change, if people’s life circumstances change?
4. Does having a ‘calling’ mean doing certain things, or is it more about being a certain kind of person?

Buchman thought that people often have too narrow a vision of what they can do with their lives. For example, he wrote to one young man, ‘I have coveted for you a larger service. I feel that you have not [reached] your full capacity.’

Another figure who influenced Buchman was the Scottish writer and scientist, Henry Drummond (1851-1897). Drummond once observed, ‘If you give everything to God, he gives it all back again and more.’

5. Do vocations always relate to ‘big’ projects, or are they sometimes narrower in their focus?
6. Are our personalities and identities enhanced or diminished when we choose to dedicate our lives to God’s service and will?

Buchman also thought that having a sense of purpose enables people to steer clear of unhealthy patterns of behaviour. When people channel their energy into constructive activities, destructive attitudes or habits lose their appeal.

4. Caring for people

Buchman always placed great emphasis on what he called ‘personal work’—a phrase that was used in the religious circles he grew up in. Essentially, it meant helping people to find or deepen their faith and discover clearer direction for their lives. He took the view that many people are prevented from realising their full potential by character weaknesses. At the end of his life, he said that he had spent much of his life ‘pulling the cork for bottled-up people’; personal work was about the releasing of the potential that lay dormant in people’s lives. He once remarked that he prepared in as much detail for a meeting with one person, as for a talk to 400. He tried to encourage people about what they could achieve, often by suggesting role models for them. Gandhi and Abraham Lincoln were amongst his favourites.

1. Is it possible to help other people in their personal lives without being intrusive?

2. Buchman thought that people often have a good initial understanding of a problem or situation, but then act on it in an ill-advised way. How can we help people use their gifts constructively?

3. In training people, Buchman tried to expose them to new situations, and expand their sense of responsibility. What can we learn from that?

Like many religious figures, Buchman stressed the connection between faith and moral standards. From his own experience, he concluded that certain kinds of behaviour or attitudes are harmful to the spiritual life. He used the concepts of ‘honesty, purity, unselfishness and love’ as a summary of Christian ethical teaching—indeed he talked of them as ‘absolute standards’. He wanted people to look at their lives and behaviour in the light of the highest ideals.

He also warned people not to get drawn into self-centred, lustful and angry patterns of thinking. ‘A [person] must learn to say: “No,

Evil Thought, you can't come in", he once declared. In this context, he was fond of the saying, 'You can't stop crows flying over your head, but you can stop them nesting in your hair.'

4. Why are moral standards important?
5. Is it possible to have a strong moral code without being judgmental?
6. Are moral codes liberating or repressive?
7. How can we best ward off evil thoughts or temptations?
8. How can we break the power of engrained habits that are destructive?

There was a strong emphasis in Buchman's work on 'story-telling'. People were encouraged to tell their own stories of change to others. It was felt that stories could open hearts and awaken consciences in a non-prescriptive way. Some of Buchman's colleagues wrote plays and musicals as vehicles for such stories.

5. Teamwork and unity

Buchman often called his colleagues the 'team'. In his view, people perform best when they work in teamwork with others. Moreover, small groups of individuals can have a big influence on events if they follow God's leading in unity with each other. Working with others develops character, checks selfishness and pride as well as exaggerated self-reliance, and helps people to develop a disciplined sense of responsibility. In other words, individuals need the wisdom of a community, just as much as communities need the inspiration of individuals. Buchman also encouraged people to meet together in small groups to share their ideas and struggles. This was to play an important role in Alcoholics Anonymous—an organisation that drew many of its methods from Buchman. Furthermore, Buchman wanted such groups to think creatively about the needs of their communities and the world.

1. What can we achieve through working with others that we cannot do on our own?
2. What factors in individuals make it more difficult for them to work with others?

3. What is the difference between a healthy kind of teamwork, and a teamwork that forces conformity on people?

4. How can people in leadership develop a sense of unity and teamwork in those around them?

Buchman believed that people have complementary gifts, and need one another. He once wrote to a colleague: 'You have dare, and [your friend] has caution. Each brings what the other lacks. That is the fellowship.' In some cases, he thought that unity was the product of personal change amongst team members. 'Unity is the grace of rebirth' was a phrase he used to express this.

5. How can we learn to love people we find difficult?

6. How do we discern with whom we are meant to work?

Buchman and his colleagues often stressed the importance of apology and forgiveness.

7. How do we find the strength to forgive those who have wronged us?

8. Does forgiveness mean overlooking people's wrong-doing, or being naïve about them in some way?

6. Strategy and planning

Buchman's emphasis on personal work informed his approach to strategy. He described one of his early gatherings as a 'personalized conference'; he thought that at a spiritual level the most effective conferences were those built around trying to meet the needs of specific individuals.

'Personalization' was also a key element in Buchman's approach to peace-making. For example, he talked of 'mining for people' and 'quarrying for leadership' in one country. 'In conflict situations he was on the lookout for people who could give constructive leadership; he thought that individuals who were not governed by negative reactions to people or events, could bring a new perspective on problems.' Fruitful spiritual work was generally built around such people. In talking about diplomatic issues, some of Buchman's colleagues used to say, 'The problems on the table are not as difficult

as the problems sitting around the table.’

Buchman once said: ‘That’s what I want—to be in touch with the Holy Spirit, for a world in a very serious situation.’ He thought that there was such a thing as a ‘strategy of the Holy Spirit’, and he wanted to create a network of people who were able to recognise and respond to it. In this context collective ‘quiet times’, where people spent time in silence and then shared their thinking and inspiration with each other, were encouraged.

1. In what ways do changes in people’s motives affect the course of events?
2. How are private and public life linked?
3. Do we sometimes exaggerate the extent to which one person can change things?
4. In what way is politics the outcome of a country’s character?
5. What are the characteristics of a movement that is led by the Spirit of God?

Buchman thought that there was an advantage in creating teams of people drawn from different backgrounds and cultures that represented the best of humanity’s experience. Hence, in promoting reconciliation in the post-war era, MRA travelling groups were often multi-national in character. The French philosopher, Gabriel Marcel, called MRA a ‘world conscience’—a good summary of what Buchman was seeking to promote.

Buchman also encouraged people to be flexible in their approach to organisation and planning. It was important for people to respond to events and situations as they arose. He said to one Christian colleague: ‘How can you say that you are a Christian and know in advance exactly what you are going to do? Where is the opportunity for the leading of the Holy Spirit?’ At the same time, he took a lot of trouble to get the details right in planning for events. Indeed, he once said that the secret of his success was a ‘tremendous attention to detail’.

6. How far is it possible to have unity between people with different beliefs?
7. How is it possible to combine careful planning for the future with flexibility of mind?

7. Hope for the world

Buchman's ideas were partly a response to some of the difficulties facing the world in the mid-20th century. He felt an urgent need for people of goodwill from across national and religious boundaries to work together for constructive change. He was hopeful that a different, more unified world could be built.

In the post-war era, MRA threw a lot of resources into promoting reconciliation (especially in Europe and Asia) and good industrial relations; and it also tried to foster a dialogue of understanding in countries undergoing decolonization. This often involved inviting public figures from different sides of disputes to conferences, so that they could talk with one another in a constructive, informal atmosphere. MRA was not alone in doing such work; other movements were also engaged in this kind of 'non-official diplomacy'.

1. How does an organization that seeks to do a spiritual work discern which issues it is meant to address, and which ones to leave to others?

2. Should people concentrate on promoting goodness, or opposing evil, or both?

3. When should we yield to the direction of events (even while trying to inject a good spirit into them), and when should we try to stand against the current?

4. How do personal and structural change reinforce one another?

Buchman told his team in 1940: 'You don't get the urgency of world events. They don't move you.'

5. How can people be concerned about the world's needs without being over-anxious about them?

6. How does one find the motivation and inner resources to do long-term, constructive work?

Buchman was often in search of creative thinking for particular countries, regions or groups, and he sometimes tried to condense his ideas into short visionary phrases. For example—talking in the context of the post-war world—he said that Japan could be the 'lighthouse of Asia' and Africa the 'answer continent'; and he talked

of Islam being a ‘girder of unity for civilization.’

8. Underlying questions

Buchman wanted to foster a global perspective in people; he once said that people should think ‘in continents.’ He also talked of ‘remaking the world’—which was the title of his collected speeches. This reflected a wider tendency after the two world wars to try to create international structures that could unify humanity and act against the spirit of division. In Buchman’s mind, political structures do not function adequately if they are not underpinned by an awareness of the spiritual dimension of life. His religious training led him to believe that God was at work in the world; there was a higher meaning or overarching purpose behind mankind’s existence. He thought that God was trying to bring humanity into a deeper kind of interdependence. He also believed that there was a struggle going on in the world between materialist and spiritual conceptions of life; he sometimes called it a war of ideas or ideologies.

There was an element of paradox about Buchman’s philosophy. For example, he held to the distinctiveness of the Christian message while being appreciative of other faiths. A strong believer in absolute moral standards, he was also wary of responding to situations or the needs of people in a formulaic way. Imagination and love were always needed.

In his political thought, Buchman believed that democracy depends on people not giving way to selfishness, but working for the common good, and that the spirit of democracy is best reflected in people who have found an answer to dictatorial patterns of behaviour in their own lives. He also thought that all nations have a contribution to make—in some ways his philosophy can be understood as a response to an emerging global society.

1. What evidence is there for God, or a higher power, being at work in the world?
2. What factors have most shaped your thinking about the world?

Speaking in 1938 at the launch of MRA, Buchman said: ‘Suppose everybody cared enough, [and] everybody shared enough, wouldn’t everybody have enough? There is enough in the world for everyone’s

need, but not for everyone's greed.'

3. How realistic is it to envisage a world where cooperation, rather than division, is the norm, and where people's basic needs are met?

4. At what point does a healthy ambition for a different world turn into an exaggerated utopianism?

5. When is a desire for change a good thing, and when is it the product of an immature impatience with the real world?

It has been said that civilisations emerge and grow by responding to successive challenges.

6. What challenges does our world face?

7. How can we tackle some of these challenges constructively, either in our localities, or at a national or global level?

Further reading on Frank Buchman

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In our angry, fearful world, what can we do to
make things different?

How can people find inner freedom and a
sense of purpose for their lives?

How do we overcome our divisions, and create
genuine teamwork?

These are some of the issues raised in this short question-
led course, inspired by the ideas of Frank Buchman—the
founder of the movement known as Initiatives of Change.

The eight-section course is a tool for encouraging
conversation around some of the deeper questions of life,
and how to make a positive contribution to a world in need.

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Initiatives of Change, 24 Greencoat Place, London SW1P 1RD
reception@london.iofc.org