

# The Deep Wisdom of the Oxford Group

By THE OBSERVER

**A**FTER observing somewhat closely the ways of the seventy or eighty men and women who have been for the last fortnight irradiating our city with their gay piety, I feel like characterizing them as Cromwell with somewhat less obvious appropriateness characterized his praying, psalm-singing but grim and terrible "Ironsides". "They are a lovely company." Personally I have been drawn out in affection towards those of them whom I have seen most of as I have rarely, or never, before been drawn out after so brief an acquaintance. Looking back with such knowledge of church history as I have, I cannot find anything like the visits this company is making to our cities till I get back to the most winsome of the famous saints, Francis of Assisi, and the tours he and his devoted band used to make among the cities of Umbria, to be received at first with contempt and ridicule and later with ringing of church bells and the whole population turning out en masse to welcome them.

I rejoice in the interest the Group has aroused. The movement is not free from danger. No powerful religious movement ever was. It is only a dead religion that is perfectly safe. But two features of it seem to me to be deeply expressive of true Christianity.

**T**HE first and greater is the way it teaches, and actually succeeds in leading people to, a first-hand, personal experience of God. After thirty or forty years in which the most powerful and wealthy nations of Christendom had forgotten God in a more widespread and complete way than they had perhaps ever done before the irrepressible hunger of the ever-lonely, ever-unsatisfied heart of man has awakened. Underneath apparent absorption in money-making or reckless pursuit of excitement or professed self-sufficiency there are deep longings for something only God can give. The Oxford Group brush aside all trivialities and speak directly to this hunger of the heart. They tell of finding God. They tell of a God who is great enough to find nothing that interests nations or children too great or too small for Him to be interested in. They bring God into the homely details of the most ordinary life. They exalt human life. The poorest, the dullest, the person of least account, may have the guidance he needs as readily as bishops, popes or kings.

This teaching is tremendously comforting, tremendously re-assuring. It emancipates from worries and fears. It delivers from morbid self-consciousness and the depressing "inferiority complex" which poisons so many lives. It inspires courage and hope. It gives in these times of commotion and change "An anchor that keeps the soul Steadfast and sure though the billows roll."

It meets what is the deepest need of the human soul, for after all there is not one of us who does not need God more than he needs anything else.

**B**UT it is a teaching also that may go to the head like wine. It may intoxicate. It may so fill the soul that the exercise of the human intelligence may seem superfluous and futile. It is a satisfaction that Professor Grensted's teaching was so clear on this point. Guidance by the Spirit, he pointed out, is like the cleansing of one's glasses. We still use the glasses but we see

through them more clearly. God's part in the direction and development of our life is real and maybe sheerly miraculous, but always it demands the human co-operation to the fullest possible extent. It may do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. The whole teaching of Scripture forbids the idea of His doing for us what He has fitted us to do. The guidance and inspiration of God do not mean our human abilities thrust contemptuously to one side, but all our abilities raised to the nth power. The law that governs the relation between God and man according to the Scriptures would seem to be the law of co-operation, though it may freely be allowed that if we must fail to do justice to both, it is better that we should magnify too much God's part than our own.

**T**HE other teaching of the Group seems to me the natural corrective of dangers that may lurk in the glorious emphasis that is placed on the direct experience of God and guidance by His Spirit. Anything of undue introspectiveness or of self-conceit or eccentricity that might steal into the soul through the opening of the heart to God is checked by the equal stress that is laid on fellowship with a group, on the "sharing" of one's experiences, of respect for the guidance given to the other members of the group, membership in which is secondary only to fellowship with God.

Every thoughtful Protestant is aware of advantages as well as dangers in confession as practised in the Catholic Church. It does give relief. It does give peace. It does inspire humility. It does help people in the moral struggle and is a corrective of unlawful impulses. Every trusted pastor and many trusted Protestants who are not pastors are being continually called to hear confessions. But for various reasons I do not think (or desire) that the Catholic confessional will ever be adopted in Protestant churches. Yet I am strongly inclined to think Protestantism has suffered for lack of this opening up of dark corners in the soul. The Group's insistence on "sharing" with others one's experiences of victory or defeat seems to me to have the advantages of the Catholic confessional in a form more congenial to the Protestant mind. Like the former, it does correct morbidity and clarify one's thinking. It is a medicine to sick souls and a powerful help to humility. But what I specially like in this Oxford Group "sharing" is the mutuality of it. The two or more confess alike. They are all brought down to the same level—all sinners, needing help and sympathy. If this practice becomes general among Christian people, as I hope it will, I can see ministers and people brought into a new fellowship, ministerial dignity and aloofness thawed away, snobbery of wealth or refinement or culture and all cliqueism eradicated as never before, congregations becoming one body, one organism, as in St. Paul's glorious vision, rifts in family life closed, friendships made immeasurably deeper and surer. I believe it may be destined to work nothing less than a revolution in our church life.

This is not mere hope. Never have I known ministers of different churches and different theological views brought into such oneness of spirit as under the "sharing" of the morning ministerial meetings. This blessed fellowship must not pass away. It must be perpetuated and extended.