

# THE "OXFORD GROUPS" MOVEMENT

## Youths' Spiritual Adventure

By BRIAN PHILLIPS

THIS day twelvemonth brings us the centenary of a great turning-point in the history of the Church of England. At a moment when she was cross-sectioned with revivalism and rationalism, with Erastianism and academic orthodoxy and Liberalising influences, John Keble delivered, at St. Mary's, Oxford, his ringing sermon on "National Apostasy."

To enforce his protest Keble gave up brilliant preferment, and spent his long life in the seclusion of a country parsonage. His farewell was a letter of good wishes, with the warning that whatever good might be in store, it could hardly come by way of controversy. And that admonition is as true to-day as ever.

### No Doctrinal Test

Both Archbishops and a great number of the leaders of the Church are preparing to celebrate the centenary a twelvemonth hence, and some of them are deeply interested in an Oxford revival which has more than the coincidence of a century to make it noteworthy. This "Groups Movement," as it is called, originated five or six years ago with Dr. Frank Buchman, an American divine who entered the ministry of the American Lutheran Church, and after serving in Philadelphia a few years, began to travel on a self-imposed mission as a "surgeon of souls."

After a year in the Near East he came to this country and attended a religious convention at Keswick, which, he declares, produced a change of heart, and sent him forward with a new zeal and impetus. He was asked by two Anglican bishops he had met in the East to visit their sons at Cambridge and give them the benefit of his new ideas. Then came a return to the United States, and when back again in this country he found his chief mission among the young men of Oxford.

The method in vogue is practically independent of doctrine—that is to say, it appeals to earnest members of many denominations. Some of the "Buchmanites," as they have been sometimes called, have been Quakers; others have never actually entered the communion of the English Church. But, one and all, they profess to have received intensive benefit from the "house parties" at which they have listened to the "Group" teaching.

### Widespread Appeal

Those who have come under the influence of these "Groups" attest that one of the best evidences of the movement's reality was the miscellaneous character of the men it drew together. There were men who had done manly service in the war, or had figured in difficult professional avocations overseas. Some were popular university athletes, with here and there an international and a "Blue."

Others again were clergymen who had accomplished hard parochial work for years before discovering that this new movement was revealing to them new lights in Christianity. But more remarkable still was the medley of races, including Rhodes scholars from the States and the Dominions, Indians and men from

half the nations of Europe. The conception of Christianity presented belonged to a primitive type.

The elementals consisted in spiritual fellowship with the Holy Spirit; personal and collective salvation; re-birth of soul, with increase of faculty and wisdom; and an intense devotion in the form of personal religion. When it came to passing these benefits on to others—and this was imposed as a duty on all who had come within the circle of influence—the methods employed were simplicity itself.

### Methods Employed

They were chiefly the practice of "early morning listening," or "quiet times," as they were called, and of entering the results of these "listensings" into a "guidance book."

Other means employed were "Confession and Witness," meaning private confession to God or to any trustworthy individual likely to sympathise and yield wise counsel for the comfort of the soul. Argument was avoided, in the belief that "conviction must be left to the Holy Spirit." Any checking of faults was to be lenient, and not allowed to degenerate into "the sin of fault-finding."

In a book published to-day,\* Mr. A. J. Russell, who has constituted himself the chief chronicler of the "Groups Movement," tells how a trio of disciples, whom he calls "the Three Troubadours," came to his office and captured him by force of their personality and earnestness:

"My three callers were Garrett Stearly, John Roots (both clergymen of the Anglican Communion and sons of bishops), and Charles Haines, a bronzed and athletic young Quaker; all in mufti. Three exceedingly likeable young men, smartly dressed and radiating good feeling, kindness, and self-possession. . . . Their talk intrigued me. They had intelligence, zeal, culture, and good looks."

"They regarded the New Testament as not so much a set of rulings or arguments by the careful observance of which one acquired a safe seat in Heaven, but pictures—"movies" if you will—or revelations of what was bound to take place in any age, in any life entirely surrendered to the will of God."

### Women's Part

So far as the mission has as yet progressed, there is no mention of women. The strength of the "Groups Movement" has lain primarily in universities or colleges of men. But it was inevitable that any social reparation must affect the other sex. Mr. Russell gives us a glimpse of this aspect of its work:

"Undue possessiveness of husband towards wife, or wife towards husband, was condemned. Either should be free to do as either felt right, for the marriage relationship was not between two, but between three."

This is but another expression of the degree to which the Founder of Christianity is adopted into the daily life of the members. It is this ruling principle which has reconciled towards the movement many distinguished members of the Church. What its future is to be only time will show, but if it can continue to make converts and retain them, it must make its mark on the Church of England, and not the Church alone.

\* "For Sinners Only." By A. J. Russell. (Hodder and Stoughton. 5s net.)