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FOR SINNERS ONLY. By A. J. RUSSELL.
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In an age when the growing relaxation of religious practice had provoked the fears of some and the notice of all, it is almost startling to hear of young men and women of talents and sanity openly confessing the change wrought in their lives by Christ and zealously striving to effect a like change in others. This is what is happening in the "Groups" founded by Dr. Frank Buchman; and the inner story of the movement, now told with simplicity and freshness by Mr. A. J. Russell, is sure to be read by a large number of the admiring, the disapproving and the curious, however much they mitigate in their own case the severity of its title.

Mr. Russell is himself a convert to the movement in unusual circumstances, for his original interest, when manager of a Sunday newspaper, was purely directed to the religious "copy," in which he had made his name as literary editor of the daily newspaper owned by the same proprietors. It was the Keswick Convention that brought to Dr. Buchman the convictions that led to the organization of the Groups. He is an American Lutheran pastor himself, but the Groups are interdenominational and their leaders are insistent that they have no desire to found a new sect. In ten years groups have been planted in the United States, England, South Africa, China, Persia and other parts of the world. As a young man Dr. Buchman studied at Westminster College, Cambridge, and a Cambridge chaplain, Mr. Wade of Downing, is one of his right-hand assistants. With Mr. Loudon Hamilton and two Americans, Mr. Sherry Day and Mr. Sam Shoemaker, Mr. Wade assisted Dr. Buchman in a world-tour that did much to establish the movement in its present width. Another of the chief leaders is Mr. Garrett Stearley, and at Oxford the recognized leader is Mr. Ken Twitchell. Though the movement is commonly referred to as the "Oxford Groups," there seems no special connexion with the University; the movement is strong in Oxford, but it did not begin there, nor is the founder an Oxford man.

The inspiration of the Groups, as of most religious revivals, is "first-century Christianity." The essence of religion, it is taught, consists in surrender of the whole personality to the will of Christ. "The demand of God and Satan is identical—the whole heart." The readiness to make this surrender constitutes a change in life (conversion in the old phrase). The Groups hold up as their ethical standards honesty, purity, love and unselfishness; they believe that these ideals are latent in sinners, who have only to be "held up to their highest ideals" to be convicted of their sin. The movement works in small groups, as its name implies; it clearly does not agree with Dr. Whitehead that religion is what a man does with his solitude. The group often takes the form of a house-party for the weekend. The two chief religious features within the Groups are called "sharing" and "guidance." Sharing of experience involves the confession of sin one to another, and restitution so far as possible. Guidance is expected in Quiet Times, when the group will take out pencil and paper and note down ideas that come to them, on the principle that "the weakest ink is stronger than the strongest memory"; the ideas that come are taken as inspiration from God and are acted upon. A number of leaders of the movement live by "faith and prayer"—*i.e.*, without fixed salary but trusting to the gifts of those who have been helped by them.

These main practices of the Groups may be looked upon as a re-discovery of old religious principles in the light of modern psychology. Confession one to another, as Mr. Russell points out, was recommended by St. James and practised by St. Paul's Christians at Ephesus; and the relief it gives to the sin-convicted soul has been recognized by psychologists. Among Catholics, who confess not for testimony but to obtain absolution, this ancillary blessing is thoroughly appreciated. Guidance in meditation is another established religious habit, and the use of pencils and note-books is reminiscent of psycho-analytic practice. The Groups have found that old principles gain by being thus presented under new names.

There are obvious dangers in the practices of the Groups—dangers of scandal in group-confession and in well-meant efforts at restitution, dangers of acting on one's subliminal desires under the impression that they are God's promptings. But the greatest danger of the Groups is the narrowing of God's mercies to the upper classes. Mr. Russell's book, with its emphasis on "blues" and "firsts" and hints of princesses, reminds one at times of a Red Indian gloating over his scalps. The movement is strongest in the universities; and to get outside the classes from which the universities are recruited it might have to work out a new technique, for the house-party would not "cut much ice" in Clerkenwell. The leaders of the Groups are more familiar with evening-dress than the hair-shirt. But against these hypothetical dangers must be set the fact that the movement is changing lives from sin to radiance; and its dangers can be avoided by a resolute adherence to the ideal from which it took its inspiration, the Christianity of the first century.