

FOR SINNERS ONLY.

A QUEER chance brought to my desk, in the same hour last week, a sermon from the *Church Times* and a new book*, both on the Oxford Group Movement. The sermon, preached in the Keble College Chapel, bears the title, "The Dangers of Buchmanism: A Candid but Friendly Criticism"—surely more candid than friendly? Its atmosphere may be suggested by one quotation:—

"The course of Christian history is bespattered with the sad record of groups of keen men and women, who discovered what our friends would call 'a vital experience of Jesus Christ' in the circle of a small society who rigidly kept to themselves, and sooner or later abandoned the Catholic Church. Montanists, Quakers, Methodists, Moravians—they have all gone the same way. The same tendency is visible in the Oxford Groups."

On which a certain Philistine known to me made the irreverent comment, "Well, if that is how they write history in Oxford, thank God they specialise in dictionaries!"

The sermon concludes with advice to "someone . . . struck by the Groups." He is apparently not to join one. He is to draw up and adopt, under expert guidance, a rule of life, with regular confession and communion and a daily quiet time.

"Then let him go out to shine in the world, and reflect his fresh Christian convictions in his ordinary life; in the quality of his work, in ordinary acts of quiet kindness, in the pleasantness of his friendship, and in a few outward acts of Christian service in the world. Think of the quietly effective witness of such a life, based on a hidden inner discipline. Compare it with the often unhealthy ecstasy of conversion. Then ask yourselves, Is it reasonable to join the Groups in order to be a genuine Christian?"

The italics are mine. But they are not mine in the following passage from the book, to which I now turn. It is written by a well-known journalist, who is here describing his first contact with some Group members:—

"In short, the Cross was central in their teaching. At the Cross man reached a turning-point when he decided to live as God directed and guided instead of according to his own human standards . . . they were out to change lives on a colossal scale as the one solution of every world problem."

It is a really amazing book. For nearly 350 pages it travels on with a breathless rush, and at the end it is obviously unfinished. It will infuriate some people with its confident dogmatism:—

"When I asked one of the leaders of the Oxford Group who was the founder of the movement, he replied with simple conviction, 'THE HOLY SPIRIT.'"

But let them quarrel with it when they have finished it. Where in any single volume published during recent years can such a collection of spiritually challenging stories be found? They come from every stratum of society and from every continent. Bootleggers and College dons, atheists and Anglo-Catholics, "we do hear them speaking in our tongues the mighty works of God." We are not surprised to read of the increasing spread of the movement, of the extraordinary interest which it is arousing in the most unlikely quarters. So much of our modern hilarity rings false. As a working man said recently to a member of another Group, "Own it or not own it, the whole damned lot of us are missing the 'bus!'"

But not so the most typical figure in this book; coming into a friend's room early in the morning,

"His face was hidden behind a foam of shaving soap; yet merriment broke through. That morning Frank told me he not only believed in getting up when the cock crew, but he believed in crowing as well. He was crowing with joy that wet April morning. 'The Lord was so good to him,' he said."

Sin can be smashed and broken, my particular sins destroyed and banished. The Kingdom of God can literally be set up in my heart. And I may pass on the great secret to others. Is it not something to be happy about?

Social consequences of this life-changing are not wanting. In South Africa, for instance,

"Not only a new spirit between black and white, but a new fellowship between English and Dutch is apparent. Because of the Groups many Dutch are learning English and many English learning Dutch voluntarily. This new cordiality of feeling was epitomised at a house-party in Bloemfontein, when three hundred Dutch and English stood up and took this vow inspired by the inscription on the Christ of the Andes: 'Sooner shall this limitless veldt pass away, sooner shall this endless sunshine cease than we Afrikaans and English-speaking South Africans shall break the peace which we swear here at the feet of Christ the Redeemer.'"

Of course, criticism is possible. Is any movement above it? Certainly no vital movement escapes it. But, as one closes this book, it is with an awed thanksgiving that God is so wonderfully at work in the world. Here is to be found the answer to inquiries as to what these house-parties are all about. Much more, here is a glorious tonic for any Christian worker who has become unwillingly discouraged or defeatist.

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