

Spiritual Powerhouse: Sam Shoemaker

By Judith Wilmot

Spoons Costello, a former bootlegger, walked from the Bowery in 1935 searching for a drink. He “encountered Jesus Christ upon staggering into the Calvary Mission,” wrote *The New York Times*. The mission, founded by Sam Shoemaker, rector of Calvary Church, helped thousands including a man named Bill Wilson.

Tall, energetic, and jovial, The Rev. Dr. Samuel M. Shoemaker was a prolific writer, celebrated preacher, and longtime leader in the Oxford Group. Called a non-alcoholic founder of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), Shoemaker’s photo can be found in AA meeting rooms next to Bill Wilson’s and Dr. Bob’s. Some may wonder about the smiling man in a clerical collar.

Shoemaker’s role in the early days of AA had faded from memory still his spiritual guidance continues. Bill Wilson said, “It was from Sam that co-founder Dr. Bob and I absorbed most of the principles that were afterwards embodied in the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, steps that express the heart of AA’s way of life.”

Shoemaker accepted a call in 1924 to Calvary Church, near Gramercy Park on Park Avenue South and 21st Street. Earlier that same year, Sherwood Eddy had introduced Shoemaker and Reinhold Niebuhr at a retreat. Eddy, a talent scout for Christian power drivers, expected the two to form an evangelistic team. Shoemaker, who argued for personal salvation and less social gospel, and Niebuhr, who wanted “to help save the world” irritated one another. Eddy, though disappointed in his plan, remained friends with them both.

AA created another connection between Shoemaker and Niebuhr. Shoemaker’s keenness to change one person’s life resulted in the creation of Twelve Step programs, which has inspired a worldwide phenomenon and miracles of changed lives. Niebuhr freely gave permission for Alcoholics Anonymous to adapt his Serenity Prayer, which ends AA meetings.

Early AA members had great affection for Shoemaker. “Dr. Sam, you may not be an alcoholic, but by God you certainly do talk like one!” Shoemaker said about one AA's greeting. Bill Wilson wrote about his first sight of Shoemaker at Calvary, “I was still rather gun shy and diffident about churches. I can still see him standing there before the lectern. His utter honesty, his tremendous forthrightness struck me deep. I shall never forget it.”

Wilson found Shoemaker at Calvary Church through a series of coincidences and childhood friendships. Wilson tells his story in the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous. His doctor had warned him and his wife that another drunken spree might bring death, yet Wilson continued to drink. Then a friend from his youth, Ebby Thatcher, on a bleak November day paid Wilson a visit in his Brooklyn apartment on Clinton Street.

Thatcher wanted to pass on what he had received. He had been on his way to jail when two Calvary Oxford Groupers and old friends Roland Hazard and Shep Cornell took him under their care. Wilson described the sober Thatcher as “fairly glowing.” Wilson drank throughout the visit yet heard about Calvary and Shoemaker.

Hazard, a son of wealth, had been among the millions who before AA could find no solution to their drinking. He sought treatment in Switzerland from Carl Jung. The psychiatrist told Hazard only a spiritual solution could cure his type of alcoholism. Hazard returned to America and attended Oxford Group meetings at Calvary where Shoemaker had helped some alcoholics stay sober.

Later, Wilson took a subway to 23rd Street, and walked east to the Calvary Mission. He answered an altar call then went on a spree that landed him in Townes Hospital, a drying out institution on New York’s Upper West side. In A.A. Comes of Age, Wilson wrote about his despair, and says he called aloud, "If there is a God, let Him show Himself! I am ready to do anything, anything!" The divine response was

immediate, overwhelming and life changing. He describes the hospital room filled with a blazing light. He felt at peace, and thought, "So this is the God of the preachers!"

Wilson attended Oxford Group meetings, and Shoemaker recognized Wilson's skill in working with alcoholics. He wrote a letter to Wilson, sober only 60 days, and asked his help with an alcoholic in the parish. Shoemaker's awareness of his own sins, it seems, helped the shamed alcoholic talk about his own. Shoemaker's spiritual solution that Wilson later writes about had begun to work.

Seven months after his last drink, Wilson went on a business trip to Akron, Ohio. Worried that he might drink, he found an Oxford Group. She introduced him to Dr. Bob. Alcoholics Anonymous began with Dr. Bob's sobriety date in June 1935.

Wilson in a published talk to the Manhattan Group said, "Our debt to the Oxford Group is simply immense." He went on to explain, "We also learned from them, so far as alcoholics are concerned, what not to do. Fortunate for us was the fact that Groupers took special pains not to interfere with one's personal religious views. Their society, like ours later on, saw the need to be strictly non-denominational."

Shoemaker and Wilson met frequently in the days when the Big Book was written. Some histories say Wilson asked Shoemaker's help to write the steps, and the pastor declined. His words, though, come through.

Shoemaker in Faith and Freedom wrote, “They admitted there is a Power greater than themselves.” Bill Wilson may have heard those words in his heart as he composed the second of the Twelve Steps, “Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.”

“He is the connecting link: it is what Ebby learned from Sam, and then told me, that makes the connection between Sam, a man of religion, and ourselves,” Wilson said to the 1955 AA Convention.

Shoemaker replied, “The rest of us suffer from egotism just as much as any alcoholic does, and it’s just as bad for us, I’m afraid, to be flattered.” Then Shoemaker told the story of the healing of the lame man from Acts. “‘And beholding the man which was healed standing between them, they could say nothing against it.’ Now you can fight a theory about an experience, but you’ve got to acknowledge the experience itself. AA has been supremely wise, I think, in emphasizing the reality of the experience, and acknowledge that it came from a higher Power than human, and leaving the interpretation part pretty much at that.”

Books written by Shoemaker, long out of print, are hard to find. The parish archives of Calvary St. George’s Church hold a few along with copies of his sermons. Shoemaker said in one of his sermons given in the midst of the Great Depression, “I am

convinced that there is one step we tend to slur over when we seek help, human or divine, about our problems: and that is the element of our own faults, failures, failings and sins, as they create or contribute to our problems.” He told of a personal experience of resentment when nine-tenths of the wrong was the other person’s, but “God told me to face the one-tenth of wrong of which I was guilty. That set me free to build a real relationship, beginning with an apology.”

One enduring gift of Shoemaker to AA is the practice of meditation and prayer. He called it Quiet Time. “It is an important to listen as well as talk when we pray. That’s why it is good to begin these meetings with silence,” Shoemaker said. Bill and Lois Wilson followed this practice. In Language of the Heart, Wilson wrote that he wished more people would make use of the 11th Step, “Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.”

The Episcopal Church, perhaps in recognition of Shoemaker’s role in the founding of AA, is generous in its welcome of Twelve Step meetings in their basements and upper rooms. The church offers space for humankind’s eternal longing for a connection to a Higher Power, where the lost sheep receive an image of an acceptable Shepherd.

In May 2010, Calvary Church will host a conference in honor of its former rector, Samuel Moor Shoemaker, Jr. Please check www.shoemakeratcalvary.org to register and for conference information.