



Lecture 1916

William Penn

*The  
Christian  
Life*

*Elbert Russell*

William Penn Lecture 1916

## The Christian Life

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by  
Elbert Russell

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The name of William Penn has been chosen because he was a Great Adventurer, who in fellowship with his friends started in his youth on the holy experiment of endeavoring “to live out the laws of Christ in every thought, and word, and deed,” that these might become the laws and habits of the State.

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# **The Christian Life**

Human life is the highest form of life; the Christian life is the highest form of human life. Paul expresses it, "For the earnest expectation of the creation waiteth for the revealing of the sons of God," (Rom. 8:19). In dealing with the Christian life we are dealing with facts of human history and experience. We shall treat it as such; not theoretically, nor from the point of view of theological explanation. The Christian life was partially realized before the coming of Jesus in the prophets and Old Testament saints, but was given fresh impetus and greater definiteness by his life and teaching.

The two most important aspects of any form of religious life are its energy and direction. Any real religion evokes new enthusiasm and imparts new energies to its adherents. The first important consideration in regard to the Christian life is the sources and character of its spiritual energies. The second is the direction which this energy takes and the manner in which it expresses itself. The first brings us to the mystical and personal aspects of the Christian life; the second to its social and ethical content.

## ***The Mystical Aspect***

The power of the Christian life springs from its mysticism. Mysticism, as it is used in Church History, does not mean something mysterious or incomprehensible, but designates that type of religion which seeks for direct personal relations with God. Christian life is a form of mysticism. The possibility of a mystical relation with God springs

from the nature of God and of man. Lew Wallace in “Ben Hur” puts in the mouth of Balthasar, the Egyptian, this definition of religion: “In purity it has but these elements—God, the Soul, and their Mutual Recognition.” (Ben Hur, p. 23). This mutual recognition is possible because God is knowable and approachable, and men have the capacity to know and come to God. The author of Hebrews states this truth: “He that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that seek after Him.” (Heb. 11:6).

The Christian life, as Jesus taught and exemplified it, is based on the fatherly interest of God in men and His desire to have them in filial fellowship with Him. In its larger sense it began with Jesus’ own oneness with God and his efforts to teach and lead men into like fellowship. At the time of Christ the current idea among the Pharisees was that God was a distant and unapproachable King. He was believed to have his throne in the seventh heaven, and to be in communication with the world only by means of angels. There was an angel of the wind, an angel of the snow, angels of the stars, and of all natural objects and processes. Each person was supposed to have a guardian angel at the court of heaven who presented his needs and prayers to God and brought back to him God’s answers and provision for his needs. God took a direct share in the management of the world only on occasion of special providence or miracle. He had revealed His and observe it to be accounted righteous and will in the law and men needed only to read finally admitted to the messianic kingdom.

With such notions there would be little seeking for personal fellowship with God, and for the power that comes from personal relations with a great and dynamic Personality.

Jesus taught a different conception of God and sought to bring men into personal fellowship with Him. He insisted that it is God who makes His sun to rise on the evil and good and sends His rain on the just and the unjust. He feeds the birds and clothes the lilies. He works even until now. To Jesus the world is the Father's House with many abiding places for his children. Paul sums up Jesus' teaching: "In Him we live and move and have our being." (Acts, 17:28). A modern apostle expresses and applies the same truth:

"In Horeb's bush the Presence spoke  
To earlier faiths and simpler folk;  
Now every bush that sweeps our fence  
Flames with the awful immanence."

Jesus ordered his life according to this new conception; he knew no sacred places or seasons but sought strength and guidance in every place and time of need. He practiced the immanence of God. He taught the Samaritan woman that there is no special place of worship, but because God is a universal spirit, all that is needed for communion with him is a right spirit on the part of the worshipper. It is from the Ever Present Spirit of God that the energy of the Christian life flows into the souls of men:

"Speak to Him thou for He hears—  
and Spirit with Spirit can meet—  
Closer is He than breathing, and nearer

than hands and feet.”

Equally strong or stronger than Jesus’ assertion of God’s immanence is his assertion of God’s love and His eagerness to enter into fellowship with men and supply the needed power for the highest living. He marks the sparrow’s fall, numbers our hairs, and knows our needs before we ask Him. He is more willing than an earthly parent to give good gifts to His children. He grieves over the sins and sufferings of men; seeks like a good shepherd to reclaim the lost, and rejoices over their repentance. Jesus never states this immanent Fatherly care of God as an abstract doctrine, but he knew it as an experience and sought to bring other men to know it. Whittier voices this conviction:

“All souls are thine; the wings of morning bear  
None from that Presence that is everywhere;  
Nor hell itself can hide, for Thou art there.”

“I know not where his islands lift  
Their froned palms in air;  
I only know I cannot drift  
Beyond his love and care.”

This loving accessibility, however, on the part of God would not result in fellowship between man and God if man had no capacity to perceive the Divine Presence, no ability to understand His voice or to comprehend His will, no desire for His fellowship. Where low estimates of man exist, where his spiritual incapacity, inability and depravity are fully accepted, mystical experiences seem an impossibility; and religion tends to become a second hand

matter, mediated by priest or sacrament, or degenerates into mere formal belief or ritual. Such ideas of the innate moral distance between man and God were emphasized by the Pharisees in Jesus' time. Communion with God was thought possible only thru angel or priest. Even under nominal Christian teaching, in the decadence of the Roman empire, the world began to feel itself under the wrath of God. The church regarded art and learning and pleasures as sinful at first because they were of pagan origin, and then because they were human. The barbarians who overran the empire yielded to the church, and found their ideas, customs, and impulses so at variance with the church's teaching and demands that they acquiesced readily Augustine's doctrine of the depravity of human nature. Naturally they accepted also his doctrine of the impossibility of intercourse with God without the mediation of the church.

Jesus founded his work on the contrary idea. While recognizing the sinning and sinfulness of men, he emphasized the potentiality of divine sonship in all, and called them to direct intercourse and fellowship with God. He did not assert human capacity for the life with God as an abstract doctrine; he assumed and appealed to it. He addressed his teachings to the multitude, to outcasts as well as to Rabbis and saints, expecting them to understand. He invited men to come to God with "Our Father" on their lips. He cried, "Why do ye yourselves not judge what is right?" "He that hath ears to hear let him hear."

His disciples were ordinary men with passions like the rest. James and John wished to destroy the villagers who would



not receive him. Thomas doubted. Peter was a coward and denied him. Judas betrayed and sold him. Yet Jesus called on these men to love one another as He loved them; to forgive one another as they desired God's forgiveness; to become one, even as he and the Father were one; to be perfect even as God is perfect.

Jesus had conscious faith in the capacity of men for sonship with God. He committed his movement to them and left it, without seeking to safeguard it with any other buttress. "I came to cast fire on the earth and what more do I want, if it be once kindled?" he said. (Cf. Luke 12:49). He knew human nature was good fuel for the fires of love and the passion for righteousness. He compared his kingdom to a seed dropped in soil, which has the capacity to make the seed grow to fruition. "The earth beareth fruit of itself." He believed that human nature was fruitful soil for the truth and love of God. Jesus' faith in the potential divine sonship of man halted at no sort nor condition of men. It is comparatively easy for us to believe in the spiritual capacities of our own people, set, class, or race; hard for us to believe that any good can come from Nazareth or Africa or China or the slums. We are tempted to believe that the publican, the criminal and harlot are hopeless. Calvinistic England felt that the drunkard, thief, and murderer were certainly reprobate.

When George Fox preached the Gospel to them, he only revived Jesus' faith in the divine possibilities of all men. Slaveholding America believed that negroes lacked the higher human possibilities. Jesus had a larger faith, which Paul formulates: "The new man that is being renewed unto

knowledge after the image of him that created him; where there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, bondman, freeman; but Christ is all and in all.” (Col. 3:10-11).

These are the two great facts out of which the Christian life springs: God ever present, ever seeking to reveal Himself to men, and to bring them into a filial relation with Himself; and man, with capacity to know God, to share His purposes, and come into spiritual unity with Him; made for God and “restless till he rests in Him.”

It follows from these two great truths that only ignorance or sin prevent that “Mutual Recognition” which is the third element in Wallace’s definition of religion. We have seen that a vital conviction of God’s unapproachable transcendence or of man’s depravity make direct relations with God seem impossible. Religion can exist then only by means of mediaries. Communication can only be established thru angels or priests. God’s purposes and will can only be made known thru exceptional persons or means, and worship can only be performed in consecrated places by means of priest or sacrament or rite. These limitations vanish with the realization of God’s nearness and the potential priesthood of all men. Neither in Gerizim nor Jerusalem are we specially near God. Sinai’s summit is not nearer heaven than the summit of the Matterhorn. In these days when the telescope has banished the old spiritual geography, it is comforting to know that we are as near God here tonight as we would be if we took the wings of light and traveled to the most distant star of the firmament.

The fancied need of priests and sacraments vanishes with the realization of God's nearness. We need not deny that men have been helped at times by the cumbersome machinery of ecclesiasticism to the knowledge of God. Barclay in his "Apology" has an interesting and frank acknowledgment of such help before he learned the simpler way. When Columbus discovered America he went first over the known route to the Azore Islands before venturing into the unknown way. For a while afterward men thought the only route to America was by way of the Azores. But John and Sebastian Cabot, avoiding the long, southward journey, steered boldly westward from England and they too reached America. Naturally the more direct route quickly took the place of the roundabout way. God is in the so-called holy places and can be found as readily on "holy days" as on others; but when Jesus showed men that none of these is essential, that the way to God is always everywhere open to the earnest spirit, the paraphernalia of ecclesiasticism and priest-craft naturally fell into disuse.

Stephen Grellet relates that when he visited Russia he got an appointment to meet with the Patriarch of Moscow, head of the Russo-Greek Church. He went in his plain Quaker suit and broad-brim hat and was surprised to find the Patriarch in his robes and tiara. But when they conversed about spiritual things, robe and Quaker coat alike lost significance. They found that underneath all, they both had been baptized into the things of the kingdom of God.

### ***The Personal Aspects***

We come now to the personal aspects of the Christian life. We are in danger of feeling that God's mere immanence

and our human capacity of themselves bring us into fellowship with God; but this is not the case. Mere proximity does not bring fellowship. The most lonesome day I can remember was a Fourth of July at Lake Chautauqua. There were ten thousand people on the grounds, but they were all strangers. I was literally jammed in the crowd and pressed against other people, but had fellowship with none. At a recent exposition a group of statuary was on exhibition. It consisted of three figures joined back to back, carved from the same block of stone, and sitting upon the same dais; but each looked with a faraway gaze toward a different quarter of the world. The sculptor named the group "Solitude of Soul." Fellowship is a personal relation, not merely a physical or spatial relation. It can only be entered into by a personal choice, by advances of spirit. We may be surrounded by air and yet suffocate. We may be immersed in water and suffer thirst. Though we "live and move and have our being in God," we may be strangers to Him. Therefore Tennyson must needs exhort: "Speak to Him thou," since He is near and spirit with spirit can meet. The Christian life which springs from the mutual recognition of God and the Soul must wait then, not for nearness and willingness in God, but for recognition and openness of soul on the part of man.

Similarly, our capacity for the Christian life, for fellowship with God, does not insure that the potentiality will be realized. All normal men and women are born with a capacity for married love, but not all experience it. We have a capacity for knowledge, but the attainment comes only with our choice and effort. The Creator has not forced goodness upon us. We are born with a capacity for divine

sonship, but we do not inherit virtue. We are not born good any more than we are born learned or loving. The Christian life, as a conscious relation with God, must have a beginning different from physical birth. To use Jesus' much abused phrase, men must be born a second time to enter the kingdom of God. New Testament writers use various terms to describe this personal change of attitude through which men come into a new life. The Baptist called it repentance, "a change of mind or purpose," Jesus says "a new birth;" Paul, "a new creation." If we try to describe the Christian life, especially in terms of the difference between one who possesses it and one who does not, we are face to face with the elusive mystery of all life. Just what is the tangible difference between an egg that will hatch and one that will not? One is alive and the other is not; but to all ready tests shell, lining, white, yolk, and nucleus are the same in both. The difference between a person who is spiritually alive and one who is not, does not lie in externals. It can only be discerned in its spiritual qualities, and known by its fruits. If we may risk an analogy, the change that takes place in one who "enters into life" is like the change that takes place in Congress when its political complexion changes. The capitol, rooms, furniture, rules, and most of the members remain the same, but the political character of its legislation becomes radically different. When one enters on the Christian life, the elements of his being, body, memories, faculties, social relations, remain unchanged. But the moral will is now identified with the highest and best within his own nature; with the will of God as far as known to him and in him. His moral character is now changed so that what he once loved he now hates, and his acts become conscientious, unselfish, Christlike.

In such complex and intangible matters as the life of the spirit it is impossible to draw hard and fast lines. We are all a strange medley of conflicting thoughts, impulses and purposes. All of us know from experience the conflict of “flesh” and “spirit” within us which Paul describes. (Rom. 7). Even in the Christian, these contradictions remain in some degree. It is impossible to draw an exclusive line between saint and sinner. Each will have traits that stick over on the other side of the line. There are some saints that dogs and children avoid. They make mighty uncomfortable neighbors. And there are some very lovable sinners. Whittier puts it:

“Never was saint so good and great  
As to give no chance at St. Peter’s gate,  
For the plea of the Devil’s advocate.”

Yet there is solid ground in their dominant purposes, in the fixed direction of the moral will for the distinction between saint and sinner, Christian and non-Christian. There are some who are willing to do right most of the time, but whose life rule it is to do wrong when it suits their selfish whim, or purpose, or seems to promote their interest to do so; these are the sinners. But those who have the Christian life are they whose set purpose it is always, at whatever seeming personal cost or sacrifice, to follow the Divine Light, to fulfill God’s will, and to let the Spirit of Jesus transform their character and direct their ways.

We must recognize the infinite individual variety in the beginnings and expression of the Christian life. There is as great variety in souls as in faces. Neither at the physical

birth nor at the spiritual are we fashioned in exactly the same mould. Each comes into unity with God in his own way according to temperament and training. Our immanent Maker has left for himself a myriad gates into our being, and He floods in whenever and wherever the soul unbars the gates, and in measure as they are opened. In this individual and personal way, to know, and trust, and love, and co-operate with the Infinite Father—this is Life Eternal.

### ***Social Aids to the Christian Life***

The Christian life is no more solitary in its beginning and progress than is the physical life. The idea of the old French philosophers that human society is the result of a free contract between individuals who surrender part of their rights for collective advantages is an utterly inadequate description of social origins. We are not first of all individuals and then members of society. Each of us begins life as a member of a family and, thru the family, of larger social groups. We have our chance at life, learning, and property because of what family, school, and state do for us. We become individuals because of their aid. The same is true of the religious life. We must not forget that our ideal of personal and immediate relations with God is realized as the result of a social process. We are accustomed to think of George Fox's initial religious experiences as that of a normal man. It showed the possibility of direct relations with God unmediated by book, priest or church. But it would be an inadequate understanding of his experience to ignore the social factors that led up to it and made it possible.

His mother was of the “seed of the martyrs.” Among his early influences had been the story of her ancestors who had paid with their lives for the right of private judgment in things religious. His father was a “Righteous” Christer—a Puritan. He was brought up under the doctrinal preaching of Priest Stephens; and he knew his Bible almost by heart. These things turned his attention to spiritual things, helped to create a hunger for God, that none else could appease, and opened his ears to hear the divine Voice. Without them it is quite unlikely that he would have had his epoch-making experience in the fields where he heard the assurance within that Christ could speak to his condition.

We see from this, in the first place, that there is a social side to the knowledge of God. The ideal state would be that described by Jeremiah (31:34), in which men no more need to say every man to his neighbor, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know Him. But that state is not yet realized. All men have the *capacity* to recognize spiritual truth. The Inner Light lights every man; but the actual spiritual perceptions of men differ in remarkable degrees, because their capacities are very unequally developed.

As a boy, I went squirrel hunting with an old hunter. I had as good eyes as he did; I had as much innate capacity for seeing, but he would see a squirrel where I saw only limbs, moss or leaves. But after he would point it out to me, I could distinguish the squirrel myself, and gradually, by his aid, I got able to see them by myself. On the one hand, I did not give up the attempt to see the squirrels by myself and simply depend on his eyesight. On the other, I should have failed to see it. And even after I became fairly expert, both



of us together were more apt to find game than either of us alone would have been. So it is with the knowledge of spiritual things. We must not press the precious truth of the universal Light beyond the facts. In a telegraph system the resistance of the line so weakens the line current that it will not work the “sounders” in the operator’s office. It is necessary to put in a very sensitive “relay” instrument to respond to the line current and use a local battery to work the “sounder.”

For the great majority of men, the voice of the Spirit is so muffled and the Light so dimmed by grossness, greed, inexperience and sin, that they miss or misread the message. But there are specially sensitive souls who give earnest heed to the voice of the Spirit; who purify their hearts, and so attune them to the Divine that they surpass their fellows in the knowledge of God and become God’s prophets and spokesmen. Thru their voices, the Inner Voice in their fellows is reinforced and clarified. For this reason the outward revelation is practically needed. Without the accumulated experience and spiritual wisdom of the great body of believers; without the Scriptures of the prophets, apostles, and the Great Teacher, few of us would get beyond the A. B. C. of the knowledge of God. In this lies the supreme need of the outward revelation in Jesus Christ. The same passage in John (1:9,10,14) that tells us of the “Light that lights every man that comes into the world,” also tells us how the Light shone in uncomprehending darkness, so that it became necessary to have an outward corroborating reinforcing word in flesh, expressing the Divine grace and truth.

In our search for guidance as to our everyday practical duty, our fullest and clearest knowledge is not attained alone. Robert Barclay was not sure that he ought to act on an impression until he had laid it before the elders of his meeting. When we talk over and pray over such matters together we get surer light. Barclay puts it beautifully: "As many candles lighted, and put in one place, do greatly augment the light, and make it more to shine forth, so when many are gathered together into the same life, there is more of the glory of God, and his power appears, to the refreshment of each individual; for that he partakes not only of the light and life raised in himself, but in all the rest." (Barclay's Apology, XI., 17.) These outward manifestations do not supersede the direct and inward knowledge of God and His truth; they are simply aids to it.

In these facts lies the need of carrying Christian truth to the non-Christian peoples of the world. Since the Inner Light of Christ is given to all races alike, we might conclude that any missionary work from one people to another is unnecessary. Conceivably the world might rise by a uniform movement to the knowledge of God. But as a matter of history, such is not the way of human progress. All races have a capacity for truth, beauty and justice, but to the Greeks was given in an especial degree the knowledge of art and philosophy; and to the Romans the knowledge of legal right and civil justice. The rest of the world has come much more rapidly and accurately to a knowledge of beauty, philosophical truth and civil justice because of their influence. Likewise "Salvation is of the Jews;" the circulation of the Bible and the spread of the

gospel of Jesus has helped and will help the non-Christian world to an earlier and surer knowledge of God.

The need of social aid to religious life goes deeper than mere knowledge of spiritual truth. Barclay says that he was convinced of the truth of mystical Christianity because in the silent assemblies of the Friends, he felt the evil put down and the good raised up within him. Social influences powerfully affect our religious impulses, decisions and purposes. There is a phase of the priesthood of believers which Protestantism has not sufficiently recognized. It is the privilege of every person not only to come to God directly himself, but to assist others to come into conscious fellowship with Him—not officially as appointed and indispensable mediators but as personal agents. The great spiritual forces—truth, love, faith, the passion for righteousness, the hunger for fellowship with God—are able to make their greatest impression upon our double nature when the inward direct impression is reinforced by the influence of a human personality. The electric current affects us little unless it be rendered luminous in the arc light or converted into power in a motor. We breathe volumes of nitrogen in the air daily, but it can only nourish us, when other more capable organisms first assimilate it and convert it into herbage or flesh fit for our food. So we live and move and have our being in God, but His power touches our spirits more powerfully when translated into the ideas, conduct and character of persons who are bound up with us in the bundle of life. We need not try to explain this mystery; we need only recognize the fact and profit by it.

I remember clearly my childish fear of the dark. I could not bring myself on winter nights to go thru the dark kitchen out to the pump on the porch to get a drink of water. But if my little sister, who could scarcely toddle by my side, would go with me and hold my hand, I was able to go. Her presence gave enough strength to my will to enable me to do the otherwise impossible. It is said that Wellington did not begin the battle of Waterloo until he had Blucher's assurance that he would come to reinforce him. Blucher's troops had been engaged in hard fighting the day before and had suffered reverses. On the morning of the battle, they were twelve miles from Waterloo and the heavy rains made the country a morass in which the soldiers sank boot-top deep. The hours wore by, the men's spirits sank, and it became evident that they could not reach the battlefield in time to save the day. Then Blucher began to exhort his men; he told them the necessity of arriving in time, pictured the glories of the fatherland freed; infused into them his own indomitable spirit. Their strength came again, and they reached Waterloo and at the critical hour of the battle.

Jesus chose the method of personal contact to extend and deepen the influence of the Divine Spirit. He kindled twelve men with his ideas and spirit, and sent them out to set other souls on fire with his truth and love. In our everyday experience how often some triumph over evil comes; some vista of new truth opens or genuine worship begins because of another's life, or word, or prayer. This is the larger priesthood of believers. George Fox once said his mission was to lead men to Christ and leave them there.

The neglect of this element of religious life lay at the root of the controversy which Perrot, Wilkinson and Story had with George Fox over the organization and fixed order of the Society of Friends. They stopped with the theoretic possibility of individual revelation and fellowship. Fox recognized the practical fact that perceptions are clearer, worship truer, and impulses purer and steadier, when saints walk and talk and worship together in an organized society.

We must notice two other phases of these social aids to the Christian life. One is an extension of this personal power. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews says of righteous Abel, that being dead he yet speaks (11:4). There is a marvelous power by which the message and influence of a human life may be stored in a book and released again to the reader. Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Catholic Jesuit Order, was a Spanish soldier of fortune who was wounded in the wars with the Moors. As he was convalescing, one of the Sisters who waited on him gave him a book of "Lives of the Saints" to read. Through the medium of the book, the faith and devotion to the church of these medieval saints, long since dead, entered into the spirit of Loyola and turned him into another man. He left the hospital to become the fanatical servant of the Church, the founder of the Jesuit Order, the greatest single religious influence in European religious history of his time.

The author of Hebrews (12:1-2) represents us as athletes running a race. He knows that every athlete runs better under the eyes of sympathizers; and reminds his readers that the benches of the stadium are filled with a "great cloud" of expert and sympathetic witnesses—the heroes

and martyrs of the faith recorded in the Old Testament, gathered to cheer and encourage them in the contest. Reading the Bible not merely gives us religious information; it brings us into a bracing spiritual air and gives us the stimulus of contact, thru the proxy of the printed page, with noble and inspiring personalities. If their influence is a little less direct and vital than those with whom we sit in the meeting for worship, the company is more select and the range of character greater.

The other point has to do with the intensifying of this personal power thru the self-sacrifice of Jesus. A person's moral influence is usually in proportion to his ultimatum to the world when it would turn him from his purpose. His ideals gain power not only by their truth but by his sincerity. Other things being equal, convictions are contagious in proportion to men's willingness to suffer for them. More than anything else, voluntary suffering for the good of others makes personality dynamic and fruitful.

It was the sight of Garrison's glorified face in the "broad cloth mob" of Boston with a rope around his neck that made an abolitionist of Wendell Phillips.

Between the teachings of the Roman philosopher Seneca and those of Paul, there are enough resemblances to give rise to the fiction of the correspondence between them. But Seneca's lofty ideals were singularly barren. He wrote beautiful essays on simplicity though he lived in luxury. He taught purity while living in notorious immorality. He exhorted to poverty but accumulated a vast fortune within a few years. He gave no evidence of sincerity in his

teachings. He did not show his faith by a simple self-denying life like Tolstoi, nor was he willing to suffer rather than be false to his beliefs. Socrates, on the contrary sustained by his belief in immortality and his conviction that no real harm can be done to a good man in this life or the next, drank the poisoned cup rather than try to escape from prison or deny his teachings. His ideals “bit into” the life of his followers, and his influence still lives. Plato was his great pupil. Seneca’s fine phrases have an insincere ring; he suffered only for disregarding his own precepts, and was ordered to commit suicide for his speculations and conspiracies. Nero was his star pupil.

If Jesus had merely taught in friendly Galilee; and when opposition to him grew murderous, had avoided the Jewish leaders and found refuge among the Gentiles or Dispusion, he might have been regarded as a prophet or the founder of a new Jewish sect. But his love for his people was not limited by any consideration for himself. Moreover, he knew that unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains fruitless. Only by being lifted up on the cross could his life find power to draw all men to himself. His self-denying love thru the dynamic leverage of the cross, touches, redeems and transforms men’s lives, so that an ever-widening stream of righteousness and love has flowed from it thru the centuries. He became not only in his words and character the embodied and dynamic Truth of the Christian life, but his divine love, focused in the might of the cross opens the Way of Life to those his spirit reaches.

## ***The Ethical Direction of the Christian Life***

We have now to speak of the ethical direction of the Christian life and its social manifestations. At the beginning I mentioned the fact that we may draw a distinction between the power a person's religion brings to him, and the direction in which this power is expended. All great religions have been able to evoke new enthusiasms and to release moral energies in their devotees. Christianity is hardly distinguished by the religious energies it evokes in its adherents. Every great missionary religion has its martyrs. The Hindu mother who sacrificed her child to the Ganges and the Hindu *guru* or holy man who sits with arms extended until the joints grow together and the finger nails grow thru the palms have a power of renunciation and physical endurance equal to that of the Christian martyrs. The utter abandon with which the fanatical soldiers of the Mohammedan Mahdi threw themselves on Kitchener's squares and machine guns in the Sudan can hardly be surpassed.

Christianity is distinguished from these other religions by the ethical direction of the powers which come into the soul thru the Divine Spirit. The first fruit of the Spirit of Christ is not philosophic insight, nor ecstatic speech, nor physical mutilation, nor martyr courage; but altruistic conduct—not knowledge or tongues, nor giving the body to be burned, but love. (Cor. 13; Gal. 5:22).

The conception of God's character, which a religion teaches, determines the ideal of conduct in its followers. Among the many courses of conduct that seem to promise larger life, among the many opinions that seem plausible,



among the many impulses that struggle for our acceptance and express the desire of some part of us, we must make choice in order to attain unified character and effective action. The effort to choose among these is powerfully aided by general standards of right and truth. The historical revelation of God's character and will in Christ form for us, in so far as we have accepted it, the criterion by which to distinguish true from false and right from wrong in the maze of voices and impulses within our complex and divided spiritual being. There have been many forms of mysticism in the world and many of them are not Christian at all. Many of them have notions of God's will quite at variance with Jesus' revelation of them, and consequently many of them take for movings of God's spirit impulses and feeling quite incompatible with the character of "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." Herrmann, in his "Communion with God," calls attention to the distinctive character of the communion through Christ. A few years ago an ecstatic mystical sect arose in this country that called itself the "Holy Ghost and Us Society." (Cf. Acts 15:28). Because one of the members was disobedient to some requirements of the sect, the leader believed he was led of God's Spirit to starve the young man to death. Fortunately he was prevented from doing so; but no one who knew and accepted Jesus' conception of God could believe that God willed such a thing or that the impulse to it was a leading of God's spirit.

The pattern which the Christian seeks to weave into his character is found in the character of God. The aim of the Christian life is to fulfill the will of God. The activities of the Christian life will be directed toward what we conceive

God to be most interested in. There have been times when men thought God's will chiefly turned to the condition of men's souls in the next life. Religious devotion then led them to renounce the world, to mortify the flesh and undergo spiritual discipline to prepare them for saintship in the next world. Other men have identified God's will primarily with the welfare of the Church. The chief product of their religion became the building of hierarchies and the practice of ritual. If men identify the will of God chiefly with individual salvation, then the chief interest of religion is in one's self, in his own emotional experiences and beliefs, or in self-culture.

But Jesus identifies the will of God with the love of men. The first commandment, he says, is to love God whole heartedly. This with slight modifications is the first commandment of all great religions. But Jesus immediately gives practical content to the idea by identifying love to God with love of men. A second is like unto it, he says, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." (Matt. 22: 37-39). He puts brotherhood above ritual: "If therefore thou art offering thy gift at the altar and there rememberest that thy brother hath aught against thee, leave there thy gift before the altar and go thy way, first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift." (Matt. 5: 23, 24). He puts it above church membership: "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another." (John 13: 35). He centers his ideal in this world, rather than in the next. In his parable of the Last Judgment, he makes the blessedness of the future life conditioned on practical love to men in this life. (Matt. 25: 34-46). Jesus gave a principle of social life as the essence of religious life, but

he did not embody it in an institution nor fix its expression in any social organization. He left love to work itself out by the dynamic of religious devotion in whatever form best expresses it.

Institutions so often outlive their original circumstances and become means of tyranny, cruelty and selfishness. Jesus left us to adjust them to the expression of love, because all institutions whether religious, political or industrial, like the Sabbath, are made for man, not man for the institution. Our loyalty to state, church, school and business must be an expression of love to men; a loyalty that endures only because they are the most efficient instruments available for making that love effective. All other goods must be secondary to human welfare, in a Christian life. Men are to be loved and protected not only above the institutions of men, but above cattle, machines or property.

### ***The Social Expression of the Christian Life***

The practice of this ethical principle brings us to the social aspects of the Christian life. Love is a social force. It cannot be practiced by an isolated person. The solitary man; he was not a Christian man who,

“—lived for himself and thought for himself,  
For himself and none beside;  
Just as if Jesus had never lived,  
As if he had never died.”

The supreme realization of the Christian life is in social relations. Jesus had no ascetic ideal; he approved marriage,

blessed little children, recognized duties to the state, and told how wealth could be made to serve spiritual ends. His life was in conscious contrast with the Baptist's austere ways and lack of social ties. "The son of man came eating and drinking." He associated with all classes; dined with publican and Pharisee, sinner and saint alike. Much of his recorded teaching is table talk. Peter characterizes his life (Acts 10; 38) as that of one who went about doing good. His aim was to restore men to their normal selves and relations; he healed the sick, taught the ignorant, reclaimed the sinful.

There are two ways in which men attempt to practice Christian love. One is to make the existing social relations as helpful and agreeable as possible. This is practically all the apostolic church undertook. Paul believed the time was short until the return of Christ and, therefore, advised each to remain in the position in which he was called. (1 Cor. 7; 17-24). He was also fearful of the consequences to the Christian movement, if it became known to the Roman authorities as a social revolution. (1 Tim. 6; 1-2). It was a great gain to have a spirit of Christian kindness, self-denial and brotherly love determine the conduct of husbands and wives, masters and slaves, employer and employee, even in an essentially pagan form of society. Today it is great gain to have a Christian spirit animate men and women in their personal relations in our complex and partially Christianized society. Faithful husbands, loving wives, self-sacrificing parents and loving obedient children; unselfish physicians and teachers; benevolent employers and conscientious workingmen; honest business men and truthful advertisers; philanthropic millionaires and

statesmen who are really servants of the people; society women, who in honor prefer one another; and ministers who are humble—all these are part of a Christian social life.

But Christians early came to feel that no amount of personal conduct could make polygamy, slavery, and militarism square with Christian love. These forms of social life had to be abandoned by the post-apostolic church. This shows us the second way in which Christian love seeks expression: by changing the social order so that it may be a fitter vehicle for the Christian spirit.

Any serious attempt to practice Jesus' second commandment finds that the very structure of society is often an effectual barrier to doing it. Mr. Ford happened to be in a position to raise the wages of his employees to the level of a comfortable life for a family. But he threatened to demoralize the automobile business by doing so. A man in close competitive business often cannot give his employees a human living wage without destroying his business. Many of our worst wrongs are so firmly entrenched in our business and political system that they can only be righted by changing the system.

William Penn hoped that in his new colony in America there might be room as there was not in England for a holy experiment in free conscience and free government. We need to ask ourselves today whether in our present social order there is room for the Christian life fully to express its neighborly love.

We may be sure that nothing in our existing social order will pass unchallenged by the Christian spirit. Nothing can permanently remain that cannot square itself with the Golden Rule. I have heard many discussions of Women's Suffrage by Christian men, but I have never yet heard an attempt to decide the question by the Golden Rule. If women had the ballot and we men, with equal intelligence and educational opportunities in our own sphere, were disfranchised, how would we wish them to do unto us? I am not trying to answer the question. It is conceivable that if we men had been shut out from public experience and responsibility for centuries, and had been carefully taught that we were not competent to vote because our sphere lay elsewhere, we might not want the ballot. But no answer to the question can be final among a Christian people that does not spring from loving our women neighbors as we love ourselves. Is our prison system Christian? No, if its object is retribution; if it is only an impersonal way to taking vengeance; and inflicting loss for loss, pain for pain, and life for life. Yes, if it is the best way we know to reform and help the criminal and to restore him to his place in the world.

Is our wage system Christian? When it gives men for their work not what they and their families need to care for body, mind and spirit, but what their hunger and helplessness compel them to take? If slavery was wrong, tho it gave the slave a living for his work, can a wage system be right that compels children and women to work for less than a living wage, and men to work for a single man's sustenance tho he must support a family on it?

Is competitive business Christian? Can a Christian desire to succeed in business, if success means that his neighbor must fail? Jesus' ideal was brotherhood, and a family is maintained on the principle that the strong ought to help the weak, not on the principle that the strong may seize what they can and leave the weak destitute. Professor Rauschenbusch says: "It is impossible to have a man sit by you as your brother and let him go hungry while you feed. Therefore as a usual thing we do not let him sit by us or we deny that he is our brother." (Christianity and the Social Crisis, p. 123).

Is private property in land Christian? Our land laws came mostly from aristocratic England, or from pagan Rome. Are they best suited to express the spirit of brotherly love, in a country where the landless can only get house or field if he can find owner or landlord who finds it in his own interest to rent or sell house or field on his own arbitrary terms?

Are our social standards Christian? Jesus said: "the greatest among you shall be servant of all," but we pay our servants least while we accord fortunes to idlers. Manual laborers are lowest in the social scale as in the industrial. Work is still considered a disgrace to be avoided or a necessity to be endured by all classes.

I need not multiply examples. My purpose is not to answer these questions. I am not sure myself how all of them should be answered. I am only sure the Christian life must include the Christianizing of our social order so that Christian brotherhood is possible in it, for the Christian life must find expression in love, service, and brotherhood.

## About the Author

Elbert Russell (29 Aug. 1871–21 Sept. 1951) was a noted Quaker teacher, minister, biblical scholar, social reformer, ecumenical leader, and university administrator.

Following brief periods of study at Chautauqua, N.Y., and in the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, Russell was governor of boys and head of the Bible Department at Earlham College from 1894 to 1901. He studied in the Divinity School of the University of Chicago from 1901 to 1903 and was awarded a Ph.D. in 1919. After returning to Earlham as head of the Bible Department in 1903, he finally resigned in 1915 because of a divisive controversy over his views on modern biblical scholarship and their role in a Quaker college.

From 1915 to 1917 Russell lived in Baltimore, where he taught at Johns Hopkins, studied Semitics, and gave wide leadership to the Society of Friends as a resident minister. In 1917 he was invited to become director of the new Woolman School, founded by Quakers at Swarthmore, Pa. He continued in the post until 1926, giving much time to adult education, speaking, writing, preaching, traveling among Friends, and visiting many churches, colleges, and universities. For fifteen months during 1925–26 he studied, lectured, and represented the American Friends Service Committee in Germany and other parts of Europe. He was closely associated with both Orthodox and Hicksite Friends, Haverford and Swarthmore colleges, and the many Friends schools in the Philadelphia area.



In 1926 he was appointed professor of biblical instruction in the new School of Religion at Duke University. In 1928 he became dean, and for the next thirteen years in that position he helped to build the school into a widely recognized, accredited, and influential institution. After retiring as dean in 1941, he continued for another four years as professor, giving a total of nineteen years to Duke University and the Divinity School (1926–45). He served for the next year as professor of religion and college pastor at Guilford College, where he had also been a trustee, and taught for two terms early in 1951 at the College of the Gulf States in Mobile, Ala.

<https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/russell-elbert>

## About the Lectures

The William Penn Lectures started as a ministry of the Young Friends' Movement of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. In the beginning of the last century, "Young Friends" was the community of young adults from both the Hicksite and the Orthodox Philadelphia Yearly Meetings, which reunited in 1955. The Young Friends Movement began the lecture series "for the purpose of closer fellowship; for the strengthening by such association and the interchange of experience, of loyalty to the ideals of the Society of Friends; and for the preparation by such common ideals for more effective work through the Society of Friends for the growth of the Kingdom of God on Earth." The name of William Penn was chosen because the Young Friends Movement found Penn to be "a Great Adventurer, who in fellowship with his friends started in his youth on the holy experiment of endeavoring 'To live out the laws of Christ in every thought, and word, and deed; and that these might become the laws and habits of the State.'"

The first run of William Penn Lectures were given between 1916 and 1966, and are warmly remembered by Friends who attended them as occasions to look forward to for fellowship with our community, inspiration, and a challenge to live into our faith. The lectures were published by the Book Committee of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting. Philadelphia Yearly Meeting has granted Pendle Hill and Quaker Heron Press permission to reproduce the lectures as free ebooks.

Although it was [announced](#) in 1960 that the series would be discontinued several lectures were published in the early '60s. It appears that the lectures given between 1923 and 1931 were never published. If we come upon manuscripts of these lectures, we hope to publish them in future.

In 2010, the Young Adult Friends of PYM revived the series, officially launching the second run of the William Penn Lectures in 2011. [The series was renamed](#) the *Seeking Faithfulness* series in 2016, as part of the Young Adult Friends of PYM's concern for dismantling racism within the yearly meeting and the wider society. It no longer felt rightly ordered to have a major event named after a slaveholder. The [Seeking Faithfulness](#) series is hosted by the Young Adult Friends for the benefit of the whole yearly meeting community, and invites a Friend to challenge us all to explore new ways to practice our Quaker faith. The Seeking Faithfulness series seeks to nourish our spiritual lives and call us to faithful witness in our communities and throughout the world.