



Lecture 1947

William Penn

*A Radical
Experiment*

D. Elton Trueblood

William Penn Lecture 1947

A Radical Experiment

Delivered at
RACE STREET MEETING HOUSE
Philadelphia

by
D. Elton Trueblood
Professor of Philosophy, Earlham College

Published by The Book Committee
Religious Society of Friends
Philadelphia and Vicinity
302 Arch Street, Philadelphia

The William Penn Lectures are supported by the Young Friends Movement of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, which was organized on Fifth month thirteenth, 1916, at Race Street Meeting House in Philadelphia, 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 thru the Society of Friends for the growth of the Kingdom of God on earth.

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.

Requests for permission to quote or to translate should be addressed to:

Pendle Hill Publications
338 Plush Mill Road
Wallingford, PA 19086-6023
Email: publications@pendlehill.org

Copyright © 2021 by Pendle Hill

ISBN:

ebook design by the [Quaker Heron Press](#)—2021

A Radical Experiment

I

Something has gone wrong in the modern world. Men and women, who are the heirs of all the ages, standing at the apex of civilization, as thus far achieved, are a confused and bewildered generation. This is not true merely of the vanquished, but of a majority of the victors. It is true, not merely of those who live in the cellars of bombed houses and ride in converted cattle cars; it is true likewise of those who live in steam-heated apartments and ride in Pullman drawing rooms.

This is not merely the old story of human sorrow or even the old story of human sin. Both of these we expect, and both of these we have, but even the most optimistic person is bound to note that today we have something else in addition to these. We have something very similar to the loss of nerve, so convincingly portrayed by Gilbert Murray and other analysts of the decline of Hellenic culture. The ancient loss of nerve we can understand, because of the flagrant inadequacies of the pagan faith, but the present failure of spirit is more difficult to understand; it has occurred in the heart of Christendom.

One of the major symptoms of our spiritual decline is the relative absence of joy. This is understandable in a country like Germany, which is defeated, impoverished and ashamed, but it is noticeable in Anglo-Saxon countries as well. Lacking the overflowing joy of unified lives, our modern divided and anxious personalities strive desperately

and pathetically for happiness. Lacking the real thing, we turn to substitutes. The continual demand for exhibitionist photographs in the popular magazines is an evidence, not of vigorous love between men and women, but of its absence. Our worst troubles, as so much of modern medicine testifies, arise primarily from psychological rather than purely physiological sources. The difficulties of modern woman, for example, some of which were almost unknown in earlier generations, have come, not from any physiological alterations in the human stock, but from unwillingness to accept major responsibilities, and from egoistic strivings after success which undermine the basis of real peace of mind.

The upshot of most careful analysis is that the central trouble is in our inner lives rather than our outer condition. The modern world is admittedly perplexing, but, with a sufficiently vibrant faith men could live as joyously and victoriously in it as in any other. In fact, they might live in a better way than mankind ever lived in all preceding centuries. But before there can be a good life at all, modern man must become possessed by a faith sufficient to sustain his life in these troubled times. Such a faith might be an old faith *recovered* or a new faith *discovered*, but one or the other we must have.

Because western man has largely failed either to recover or to discover a vibrant faith, he is perishing. Millions are fatalistic. They feel utterly powerless in the presence of forces which they can neither understand nor control. In spite of our proud achievements, including many in the various arts, there is a widespread sense that we are waiting for a

catastrophe. If we are capitalists we blame labor, if we are in organized labor we blame the capitalists, and, whoever we are, we blame the government. Meanwhile we sit back and have a drink or some other form of escape. We cultivate more and more the sensual arts, thereby enabling our minds to be free, for a little while, from the haunting sense of insecurity and bewilderment. If the advertisements in the popular magazines are reliable indications, we care supremely about three things — whiskey, perfume, and motor cars.

Life in the west seems to be marked equally by a clear understanding of what man needs and by a tragic inability to provide him with it. Where will men find a faith to sustain and invigorate them in these troubled days? In the Rotary Club? In the Labor Union? In the Farm Bureau? In Eastern mysticism? In national pride? In Free Masonry? In natural science? Not very likely! All of these have their place in human experience and all are capable of producing some spiritual resources, but, both separately and together, they are insufficient. They may serve as temporary substitutes for a living faith, but they cannot succeed in *providing* such a faith. It was not these or anything very much like them which brought the amazing recovery of spirit which occurred in the Greek and Roman world at the beginning of our era.

Most minds turn spontaneously to the church when the paramount problem of spiritual renewal is introduced. Isn't the church in that business? If it is a living faith that we need, let us turn to the church as the one institution which is dedicated exclusively to the perpetuation and promulgation of a saving faith. But here we are as bewildered as anywhere

else. The trouble is that so many in the modern world have grave misgivings concerning the ability of the church to provide a saving vision. There is a deep-seated conviction among our neighbors that the experts don't know, any better than do the amateurs, how the job is to be done. Thousands think of churches as stuffy places, concerned with respectability and the conventions, but with no conceivable part in the creation of courage and adventure and joy. Many of those who thus judge the church from the outside are both incorrect and uncharitable in their judgments, but there is, in what they say, enough truth to make their judgment profoundly disquieting.

How disquieting the situation is may be shown in a recent pertinent illustration. A prominent physicist, long head of his department in a well-known American university, recently did some hard thinking on the problem of spiritual reconstruction. He came, finally, to two important conclusions:

We cannot have a decent world merely by scientific endeavor. In addition we must have deep moral convictions and a living religion to sustain them.

There can be no living religion without a fellowship. Because mere individual religion is parasitical, there must be a church or something like it, and people who care about the fate of our civilization will join it.

With these conclusions in mind the physicist set out to attend church in the town where his research was going forward. The first attempt was disappointing, so he tried another kind

of church the next Sunday, but it was equally disappointing. He had gone with high hopes and after rigorous thought, but of course his fellow worshippers could not know that this was the case. It seemed to him that these people were merely going through the motions, that they did not mean what they said, that the gospel was to them an old record, worn smooth with much playing. Here, said the physicist, was a world on the very brink of a new hell, and these people had no sense of urgency or of power. The scientist had hoped that at least the sermons would speak to his condition, but they did not. Both seemed trivial.

Here is a scene all too representative of our time. The hungry sheep look up and are not fed. But where would you have sent the physicist with confidence? Where can the requisite vision be found? We can convince the seeker's reason that mere individual religion is insufficient, and that a fellowship is required for the maintenance of man's spiritual structure; but the *ecclesia* to which he turns so hopefully may turn out to be disappointingly *ersatz*. The "sacred fellowship" may be so taken up with struggles for institutional prestige and personal power that the honest seeker is disgusted. There is no denying that many of the best people are outside the churches precisely because they are the best people. The fact that they have been disgusted is something in their favor; at least it shows that their standards are encouragingly high.

In the western world there are two main alternatives presented to the average seeker, Protestantism and Catholicism. *The tragedy is that millions find satisfaction in neither.* The evidence for this observation is provided in numerous ways, one of these being the remarkable growth of

new cults and movements. Though Protestantism is still the dominant form of Christianity in Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian countries, it is easy to see why the man who has at least seen the folly of his paganism may not be attracted. The two great evils of Protestantism are that it is *divisive* and that much of it is *insipid*. A man who, having felt the awful crisis in the spirit of man, is seeking the bread of life, too often listens to discussions of the every-member canvass. There are thousands of wonderful and brave men in the Protestant ministry, but far too many of them are practically forced by the organizational system to be promoters or business managers.

If Protestantism is uninviting to the average seeker, Catholicism is equally so. Though there have been some highly publicized conversions of former pagans to the Roman Church, this does not mean that the modern seeker is finding his answer in that quarter. The Roman Catholic Church is repellent to millions of moderns because of its exclusiveness and because of its bias toward totalitarianism. The thoughtful seeker looks at Spain and sees religious totalitarianism in practice. He knows that the Catholic Church does not really believe in freedom of worship. But freedom of worship seems of cardinal importance to the modern seeker who is acutely conscious that truth is complex and that the whole truth is not likely to be contained in any one institution. *Nobody has all the keys there are.*

Where then shall the seeker turn? He knows that both Catholicism and Protestantism include vigorous remnants, particularly among the neo-Thomists on the one hand and the neo-Reformation theologians on the other. But this is

theology, and the seeker is looking for something else. He is looking for what the late William James so happily termed, "A Religion of Veracity, rooted in spiritual inwardness." In short modern man is looking and longing for a New Reformation. He is looking for some new way in which the Eternal Spirit can be incarnated in a living fellowship in this our troubled day. He longs to see more light break forth from God's word.

Great numbers of observers in the western world give assent to every step in our reasoning up to this point, but here they diverge. This is the real crossroads in the thinking of our time. Some believe that the saving faith can come by a revitalization of the Christian gospel, but there are many others who, with equal sincerity and seriousness, do not believe that this is possible. A brilliant exponent of this latter conclusion is Harold Laski. Harold Laski agrees that apart from an inspiring faith we shall perish; he understands perfectly that the Christian gospel performed this function in the ancient world; but he holds that the Christian faith can do so no longer. The old fires, he thinks, are burnt out. His evidence for his conclusion, similar to that already mentioned, is profoundly disquieting. He says that we must have a new faith for the new day, and this he finds emerging from Russia, very much as long ago a new faith emerged from Palestine, the land of his fathers. What Laski dares to say openly is undoubtedly the real conviction of many others, including some who still pay lip service to the Christian world view. His is, of course, the flaming and avowed faith of millions in Europe and Asia who believe

that they have found a live alternative to the faith at the basis of western civilization.

There are many pertinent answers which might be given to Mr. Laski. One answer is that there is convincing reason to believe that the Christian gospel is *true* and not merely *useful*, its very effectiveness is the classic culture arising from its essential truth. What is objectively true at one time is equally true at another. If the Living God really is like Christ, that is a truth so paramount that changing patterns of culture make very little difference. Actually, of course, the essential human problem has not greatly changed in these centuries. A second answer to Mr. Laski is the historical observation that Christianity has demonstrated a remarkable ability to revive itself from within, by unflinching self-criticism. There have been many ages of revival and ours might be one of them. What has been, *can* be.

Important as these two answers are, the most convincing answer would be a contemporary *demonstration*. We cannot revive the faith by argument, but we might catch the imagination of puzzled men and women by an exhibition of a Christian fellowship so intensely alive that every thoughtful person would be forced to respect it. The creation of such a fellowship is the argument that can count in the confused world of our day. If again there appears a fellowship of men and women who show, by their vitality and moral sensitivity and overwhelming joy, that they have found something so real that they no longer seek means of escape, the seekers will have something to join without disappointment and without embarrassment. If there should emerge in our day such a fellowship, wholly without

artificiality and free from the dead hand of the past, it would be an exciting event of momentous importance. A society of loving souls without self-seeking struggle for personal prestige or any unreality would be something unutterably precious. A wise person would travel any distance to join it.

It is such a demonstration that is now required. We do not require any new denomination. To start a new denomination of like-minded people is conspicuously easy, but such an enterprise is almost entirely worthless. It is the whole lump that must be leavened, and the leaven cannot be efficacious unless it stays in close connection with the lump. There are several historical examples of such leavening fellowships, the work of St. Francis being one of the best. But how can its counterpart be produced now?

The way in which a humble yet leavening fellowship may be created and guided is a question of the utmost difficulty as it is a question of the utmost importance. It is far more difficult than are most scientific problems, because it deals with more imponderables. In short, wisdom in this field, like wisdom in any *important* field, can come only by a remarkable combination of careful intelligence and creative imagination. It is this to which we should now give our nights and days, and to which we *shall* give our nights and days if we care greatly about the fate of the human race at this juncture. The result might be something radically different from anything we now know.

It is good to remember that the revolutionary fellowship of which we read in the New Testament was a result of careful thought and much disciplined dreaming. In one sense the

entire burst of new life was seen as the work of God, a sheer gift of divine grace, but in another sense the work and thought of dedicated men and women were required. In any case, St. Paul and others actually put enormous effort into the problem. His inspired Epistles are given over very largely to his own creative thought about what the nature of a redeeming fellowship might be. In letter after letter the same criteria appear. The fellowship must be marked by mutual affection of the members, by a sense of real equality in spite of difference of function, by inner peace in the face of the world's turmoil and by an almost boisterous joy. The members are to be filled, not with the intoxication of wine, but with that of the Spirit, Such people could hardly avoid, as the sequence in the fifth chapter of Ephesians suggests, breaking out in psalms and hymns. In the early Christian community the people sang, not from convention, but from a joy which overflowed. Life was for these people no longer a problem to be solved, but a thing of glory.

We are so hardened to the story that it is easy for us to forget how explosive and truly revolutionary the Christian faith was in the ancient Mediterranean world. The church at first had no buildings, no separated clergy, no set ritual, no bishops, no pope, yet it succeeded in turning life upside down for millions of unknown men and women, giving them a new sense of life's meaning, and superb courage in the face of persecution or sorrow. It is our tragedy that we are living in a day when much of this primal force is spent. Our temper is so different that we hardly understand what the New Testament writers are saying. Once a church was a brave and revolutionary fellowship, changing the course of history by

the introduction of discordant ideas; today a church is a place where people go and sit on comfortable benches, waiting patiently until time to go home to their Sunday dinners.

One of the most hopeful signs of our time is that we are beginning to sense the wide disparity between what the church is and what it might be. This point is forced upon us both by contrast with early Christianity and by reference to the unmet needs incident to the crisis of our time. And always the most vigorous critics of the church are those on the inside, who love her. The worst that the outside critics ever say is more than matched by what the devout Christians say. The theological seminaries from coast to coast are filled with impatient young men, eager for internal revolution. Fortunately they are being brought together and given an effective voice in the Interseminary Movement which is producing a set of volumes on the point at issue and which will hold a gathering of about a thousand picked seminarians this summer.

It is good to see the evidence that Christians are already at work in this task of creative dreaming on the question of what a truly redemptive fellowship might be. New movements have been started already, both within the churches and outside them. For the most part, however, the people in these movements are separated from those in other and similar movements, with little sense of sharing in a worldwide enterprise. Some are lonely thinkers, almost unaware that others have had their same impatience with what is offered and the same high vision of what might be accomplished. Others are unaware of similar experiments which have occurred in the past, experiments from which

they might learn in planning their contemporary efforts. Success will not come except as we help each other.

Because the task before us has many elements in common with the task of architecture, it is relevant at this point to meditate upon the undoubted success of the modern architectural revival. Our contemporary architectural tendencies constitute one of the clearest evidences of cultural improvement in our generation. We have done very badly in other ways, but we have done remarkably well in this. Modern towns and cities are still ugly, for the most part, but those sections in which contemporary architects, from the recognized schools, have had a free hand, are often very beautiful indeed. Few can fail to be impressed, for example, with the architectural advance shown in Cleveland, whether in the Terminal Tower and its vicinity or in Shaker Square. Equally encouraging is the domestic architecture of the English Garden Cities, of the northern suburbs of Baltimore, and of many other communities.

What has been the secret of this new burst of life in the art of building? In every case the gain has come by a delicate combination of appreciation of past models, plus the boldness of real adventure. The boldness alone tends to produce the merely bizarre, while exclusive attention to past models produces the merely quaint, but the combination of the two may be genuinely creative. Dreaming *in vacuo* is usually not very profitable, but dreaming as an imaginative extension of known experience may be extremely profitable.

If we apply this formula to our creative dreaming about what the church might be and ought to be, we get something like

the following. We should note with care the principles which made the Christian fellowship so powerful in Philippi and Corinth and Ephesus; we should try to distinguish between the factors of enduring importance and those of local or transitory significance; we should do the same for the Franciscan Movement in the thirteenth century, the Quaker Movement in the seventeenth century, and so on with many more. If these turn out to have some factors in common, in spite of diversity of setting, such factors must be studied with unusual care. At the same time we must rid our minds of most current conceptions about what a church should be in order to try to see what the real needs of men are. Perhaps there ought not to be any distinction at all between clergy and laity; perhaps the life of the church could function better without the ownership of buildings or any property. Many of the early Christian groups met in homes and several met in caves, while some of the seventeenth century Quaker meetings were held in prison. Perhaps real membership should be rigorously restricted to the deeply convinced; perhaps the normal unit should be the small cell rather than the large gathering. Many churches would be ten times as influential if their membership were half as great.

This list of suggestions could be enlarged. It *will* be enlarged by any group of people who try to put into this question the same bold thinking that our best scientists have already put into the questions which they have been so extraordinarily successful in answering, and the same disciplined imagination that our best architects have put into new buildings.

We do not know what the church of the future ought to be, but we can be reasonably sure that it ought to be very different from the church as we know it today. "If something radical is to happen to society," says Dr. Oldham, "something radical must happen to the church." We are due for great changes and we must not resist them. Far from that, we must help to produce them. *No civilization is possible without adventure, and the adventure which our time demands is adventure in the formation of faith-producing fellowships.*

II

In the light of the paramount problem of spiritual reconstruction in our day the Quaker Movement suddenly takes on new significance. What if the Quaker Movement, for all its modesty and smallness, could give some lead to modern seekers, looking for light on what a redemptive fellowship should be or could be? All the effort that has gone into Quakerism would thus become worthwhile. Quakerism would not be an end in itself, but would be one means to a large and glorious end.

What is suggested is a new way of studying the history of the Quaker Movement. We should study it, not for its own sake as an inherited tradition, but in order to see what features of it may wisely be incorporated in the new society that is struggling to emerge from the church we now know. Quaker history as mere antiquarianism is very small business. It is about on a level, spiritually, with genealogy, the least profitable form of literature as well as the most snobbish. Quaker history can be examined, not for the sake of ancestor

worship, and not as a contribution to sectarian pride, but as an objective analysis of what all men everywhere can learn from one particular experiment of considerable duration.

The word “experimental” was one of the favorite words of seventeenth century Quakers, partly, no doubt, because of the growing scientific temper of their time. “This I knew experimentally,” said Fox, of his fundamental insight which came to him three hundred years ago this year. Though the word “experimentally,” in this context, means almost the same as “experientially,” it came to be used in the thought and writing of William Penn in our modern laboratory sense. Thus, as is well known, the deepest meaning of the Pennsylvania Colony in the judgment of its founder, was that it constituted an “holy experiment.” The principles so highly valued were put to the test where all might see whether they would really work in practical experience.

If we begin to think of the entire Quaker enterprise as one continuous experiment, lasting now for three centuries, we find that this conception is more satisfactory than are the other possible interpretations with which we have been familiar. The idea of experiment provides a particularly happy answer to the moot question of the relation of Quakerdom to the Christian faith and the Christian Church. The most common answers to this question in the past have been four, as follows:

- (1) The Society of Friends is what the Christian Church would be if rightly guided.

(2) The Society of Friends is one denomination among others, each of which has its valid contribution to make.

(3) The Society of Friends is not a Christian body, but involves the mysticism of the East as well.

(4) The Society of Friends is a philanthropic body concerned chiefly with the relief of suffering.

The third and fourth of these conceptions have not been held by very many within the Society of Friends, though they have often been held by outsiders. The fourth is a failure to understand the deep religious roots from which good works spring, while the third is a failure to recognize the degree to which the unique events connected with the historic Christian revelation have been stressed by most of the characteristic Quaker thinkers from the beginning.

Most members of the Society of Friends have held either (1) or (2) of the four propositions given above, the earlier generations leaning toward (1) and the later generations toward (2). Neither, however, is wholly satisfactory. The difficulty with the first formulation is that it appears to be lacking in a graceful humility. The trouble with the second formulation is that it appears to be so modest and tolerant that it is almost innocuous. This suggests that both formulations involve important insights but that each is insufficient and that, consequently, it would be desirable to combine them if that were possible. Now the merit of the experimental formula is that it does combine them. If we are asked what the experiment is in, we must answer that it is an

experiment in radical Christianity. This keeps the vigor which mutually tolerant denominationalism lacks, but it also keeps the desired humility, in that we point to an experiment and not to a wholly accomplished demonstration. Furthermore, there may be other experiments which can go on concurrently and with great mutual gain.

One of the notable merits of the experimental conception is that it makes impossible a retired and complacent sectarianism. Friends have been guilty of this at various periods, but fortunately we have seldom been entirely lacking in forces of criticism which have sought to destroy such complacency. If ours is an experiment, then it continues, not for our sakes, but for the sake of the entire Church and for the sake of mankind. The experiment is made in the hope that lessons may thereby be learned for the use of all devout men much as an experimental farm produces lessons for all intelligent farmers.

This means that no part of Quaker life is *private*. Friends have sometimes allowed themselves to refer to their schools as “private schools,” but this expression is rapidly coming to be seen as a mistake. Such language suggests an ingrown and self-satisfied minority, providing superior privileges for its own children. Quaker schools, if they are true to the major conception, are *public* schools in the sense that they bear a responsibility to the public good, but public schools differently financed and directed than those which are tax-supported.

This means that *Quakerism, when its true vocation is followed, is at once both supremely narrow and supremely*

ecumenical. It is narrow in that it makes strict requirements; it is ecumenical in that it exists for the sake of the revivication of the entire Body of Christ. Quakers have failed in their vocation whenever they have descended to the level of one sect among others or when they have intimated that those outside their circle were not Christians. The experimental idea provides an escape from this dilemma.

It cannot be too clearly stated that what early Friends intended was a truly *radical* experiment. George Fox proposed to cut straight through all the religious red tape. If anything seemed artificial and unnecessary, the young shoemaker's apprentice determined to dispense with it, no matter how precious it might have been at other times or how glorified by tradition. Naked reality was what he sought. It is to this that William James was referring when he said, "The Quaker religion is something which it is impossible to overpraise. In a day of shams, it was a religion of veracity rooted in spiritual inwardness and a return to something more like the original gospel truth than men had ever known in England."

George Fox was not a learned man and knew very little about Christian history between the first and seventeenth centuries, but he did know the difference between essentials and non-essentials. Consequently he paid no real attention either to sacraments and liturgical forms made impressive by long usage, or to a priesthood claiming apostolic authority by a succession secured through episcopal ordination. Much as Doctor Johnson later "refuted" Bishop Berkeley by kicking a stone, Fox refuted the sacerdotalists by the direct appeal to experience. He saw unordained men and even women

ministering with apostolic power. What other evidence could be required?

Though Fox did not claim to know the fine points of the theory of ordination and apostolic succession, he did know that men might be perfectly regular on these points and yet grossly lacking in the evidence either of love of the brethren or of closeness to God. He was aware that men might cling to these externals of the faith when the life had departed from them. He saw that men could easily be meticulous about these matters or even about dogmatic formulations of faith and yet be careless about the weightier matters of mercy, justice and truth. What did he care about the external credentials of the “true church” when he knew in his own soul the kind of illumination that placed him in the order of prophets and apostles? What he proposed, quite simply, was an experiment in veracity.

The experiment has been useful chiefly because it has constituted a direct and open challenge to dogmatic exclusiveness, wherever found. Through three centuries Friends have been a problem to the creed makers. Here are people who give considerable evidence that they are Christians, but they break the neatly stated rules. How can you define Christians as baptized persons when some whose Christianity is everywhere recognized have never been baptized, at least not in the sense intended? *Thus experience, produced by experiment, checks dogma. This truly is scientific method.*

There is in the world today a great deal of fruitless argument, especially between Protestants and Roman Catholics, over

the question what the true church is and who is in it. The Quaker experiment cuts straight across this argument by the application of the experimental test. Do you want to know whether a group is part of the true church? Very well, note whether they love each other; note whether their hearts are quickened by the love of the Living God; note whether they show that they have the mind of Christ in them. No other credentials are needed. If these are lacking, all reference to historical origin and development is meaningless anyway. Ask, of any group, not how it got here, but where it is now. The golden text of all this emphasis on radical veracity is found in a memorable sentence from the pen of Robert Barclay who, like Fox, was impatient of artificiality.

“It is the life of Christianity taking place in the heart that makes a Christian; and so it is a number of such being alive, joined together in the life of Christianity, that makes a Church of Christ; and it is all those that are thus alive and quickened, considered together, that make the Catholic Church of Christ.”¹

Such a sentence suggests nothing to be added or taken away. Anyone can use this test now, for it belongs to all. It is one of the best fruits of the experiment.

At first the experiment had no name and needed none. Fox simply declared what his own experience showed to be true and a few listened. The beginning of ordered preaching, confined to the English Midlands, occurred in 1647. Fox was only twenty-three, but it was a great year in his life. It was just three hundred years ago that this serious young man, disappointed at what the recognized clergy were able to give

him, realized, with the suddenness of revelation, that, since he was a child of the Living God, he was not dependent on what these men could or could not do. He saw that there were other sources of the knowledge of God than those provided by a conventional education and that such knowledge was, indeed, open to every seeking spirit. Because the passage which describes this opening is crucial to the radical experiment, and because we are standing now at the tercentenary of this experience, the familiar passage from the *Journal* should be quoted in full:

“Now after I had received that opening from the Lord that to be bred at Oxford or Cambridge was not sufficient to fit a man to be a minister of Christ, I regarded the priests less, and looked more after the Dissenting people. Among them I saw there was some tenderness; and many of them came afterwards to be convinced, for they had some openings. But as I had forsaken the priests, so I left the separate preachers also, and those called the most experienced people; for I saw there was none among them all that could speak to my condition. And when all my hopes in them and in all men were gone, so that I had nothing outwardly to help me, nor could I tell what to do; then, oh! then I heard a voice which said, ‘There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition’; and when I heard it, my heart did leap for joy. Then the Lord did let me see why there was none upon the earth that could speak to my condition, namely, that I might give Him all the glory; for all are concluded under sin, and shut up in unbelief, as I

had been, that Jesus Christ might have the preeminence, who enlightens and gives grace and faith and power ... and this I knew experimentally.”

In the year 1648 the experiment got its first name, Children of the Light. The small community was so called because Fox was directing his hearers to the living experience of Christ as the Light available for all. This was in no sense a denial of the importance of the Christ of history, but rather an identification of the Light with the Christ of history. William Penn noted later that Friends preferred to speak, not of the “light within,” but of the “light of Christ within.” It has been well said that “the crux of Fox’s discovery was that in the present spiritual reality he was aware of the same living Christ to whom the scriptures and the doctrines bore witness. It was a mystical apprehension of the fact that the person of Christ belongs not only to history at a given time and place, but also to an eternal world into which Fox and his friends knew that Christ had brought them.”²

This emphasis on the Light, which gave the experiment its first name, was a sound beginning, though alone it was not enough. It is always a sound beginning, because it starts with experience, and all knowledge rests ultimately on experience of some kind. That direct, immediate experience of God, as objectively real, is possible, and that such experience is not a delusion, has been verified by countless men and women throughout the three hundred years of the experiment’s duration. The chief means of verification has been the evidence of changed lives. William Charles Braithwaite once wrote that the chief enrichment of Christianity so far made by the Quaker movement consisted in the production and

24

training of a type of character which “goes through life trying to decide every question as it arises, not by passion or prejudice, nor mainly by the conclusions of human reason, but chiefly by reference to the Light of God that shines in the prepared soul.”³ Here is another contribution to the Church Universal which a restricted but radical experiment can make. All Christians now have more reason to trust both corporate and group guidance as a result of the experimental approach.

The second name attached to the experiment, quickly supplanting the first and continuing to this day is the name of *Quaker*. This name, first used in 1650, was clearly given in derision. We have two somewhat different accounts of the origin of the name, though the two accounts are not irreconcilable. According to the *Journal* of Fox, the name was first given by Justice Bennet at Derby, where he was imprisoned for twelve months in 1650-1651, originally on a charge of blasphemy. “Justice Bennet,” wrote Fox, “was the first that called us Quakers, because we did bid them tremble at the word of the Lord. This was in the year 1650.”

The other account is that of Robert Barclay, who says the name was given because of the trembling which Friends sometimes experienced in their meetings.⁴ Apparently the nickname of the Derby judge stuck because it matched an already recognized situation. What was most striking to outside observers was that these people took their faith so seriously that they were shaken to the very center of their lives. The most important thing to be said about their religion was that it *shook* them. They accepted the gospel, not as dull

information and not with mere intellectual assent, but as a message marked by terrific *urgency*.

The third name attached to the experiment is equally revealing. If the first name stressed immediate experience and the second name indicated the mood of urgency, the third name was a testimony to the fact of a genuine fellowship. The name which the experimenters came to love most and which they officially adopted was *Friends*. They were, they said, Friends in Truth and Friends of one another; they were therefore the Religious Society of Friends.

That this emphasis on fellowship has been crucial to the entire experiment is easy to see. The inner illumination alone might produce the self-centered and the bizarre, with no outside checks on either ideas or conduct. The sense of urgency alone might produce unbalanced fanaticism. But men and women who submit to the disciplines of fellowship, recognizing the authority of group experience, are largely saved from these extravagances. The lesson of the Quaker experiment is that, while individual mysticism may be dangerous, group mysticism tends to be wholly beneficent. They mistake the meaning of the experiment greatly who suppose it has been primarily a glorification of individual religion, necessary as that may sometimes be. Few phrases were as common to early Friends as the words "one another" and "together." They found that a serious attempt to practice radical Christianity makes men and women temper their own wishes by the wishes of their fellow members. The great mystery, they discovered, is the mystery by which we become "members one of another," not merely in meetings for worship, but also in meetings for discipline. It is very

26

important to note that the fellowship realized in the experiment under scrutiny has not been the fellowship of *individuals*, but the fellowship of *families*. It is therefore radically different from the Shaker movement, which was partly inspired by our experiment, but has now practically come to an end in essential failure. The Shaker movement had no place for families, but the Quaker Movement has always glorified the family. In the days of persecution the children carried on the meetings while the parents were in prison. The Fellowship, then, has kept close to common life with its heavy responsibilities and its opportunities. The fellowship has never been that of the monastery or that of the spiritually elite, but that of common families including men, women, and children devoted to common pursuits.

Though these are the chief names by which the experiment has been known, the names as actually given in history do not exhaust the list of primary features of the movement. One remains to be mentioned, and may best be understood by reference to the word *concern*. Good as the fellowship is, the fellowship would have been a failure if the enterprise had ended there. Friends soon saw that the final justification of the fellowship was the creative way in which it led people into the service of their fellow men. A concern arises when the deep experience of the knowledge of God as revealed by Christ, and especially that knowledge which emerges in the minds of a genuine fellowship, leads those thus shaken to perform deeds of mercy to their neighbors wherever found. Thus the concern accomplishes the marriage of the inner and the outer; it joins, in miraculous fashion, the roots and the fruits of religion. Above all else the experiment has

demonstrated that equal attention to both the roots and the fruits is possible and that spiritual health is found wherever this situation obtains.

Where only the roots are emphasized, we have a situation in which people luxuriate in their own religious emotions, developing their inner experiences for their own sake. It is easy for religion to stop here, but when it does, we have little more than spiritual sensuality. It is fundamentally self-centered. Where, on the other hand, only the fruits are emphasized, we have mere creaturely activity, the kind of worldly philanthropy which eventually is little more than professional social service. Friends, in their long history, have often made both of these mistakes, but the major tradition has been the avoidance of both by keeping the connection close. Worship of God is one thing and service of mankind is another, but the first is dishonest unless it eventuates in the latter and the latter is superficial unless it springs from the former. A realization of this has led many Friends to think of John Woolman as our best exemplar. In his experience, more truly than in that of most, great sensitivity to social wrongs stemmed directly from a sense of God's presence and sovereignty. The world is helped whenever any man or any group of men demonstrates the power which this close connection makes possible.

As we analyze the radical three-hundred-year-old experiment in this fashion we come to see it as something in which the separate features are united in one sequence of ideas and events. The order in which the main characteristics of the movement appear is both logical and chronological. There are five steps in the sequence and these constitute the five

28

most important contributions of the movement to the rest of mankind. These can be denoted by the use of five words.

Veracity is the first word. The lone, struggling George Fox was indeed seeking what William James called “A Religion of Veracity.” He could not be content with shams; he saw through the artificial. This drove him beyond the conventional aspects of Christianity. He was impatient of all unreality. This was not the end of the matter, but it was a grand beginning.

Immediacy is the second word, following directly from the first. Far too much religion is a matter of what people take at second hand from others, without a sense of first-hand knowledge. Radical Christianity necessarily makes men dissatisfied with that knowledge which is “knowledge about” and leads them to seek that knowledge which is “acquaintance with.”

Urgency is the third word in the series. Those who have had a direct sense of the divine presence cannot stand idly by while other men and women go on in relative darkness. Those who seek to experiment with radical Christianity are bound to be shaken out of all easy respectability, shaken to the middle of their lives. It is inevitable that they, in commitment to the will of the Living God, became evangelical in mood and missionary in intention.

Fellowship is required in such an experiment, especially as an antidote against unprofitable excess. The experiment, to be worthy of attention, must be deeply social. The veracity, the immediacy and the urgency, are all disciplined by the

reality of group experience. The radical Christian always recognizes that his fellow members have a stake in his own undertakings and that the normal religious unit is the group.

Concern brings the entire series to a climax. Even with the fellowship, the movement would fail apart from a strong sense of service to needy men and women. So long as the fellowship is the fellowship of the concerned, it is saved from becoming self-congratulatory and self-regarding. This is the completion of the experiment. It is the *Religion of Veracity*, it is the *Children of the Light*, it is *Quakers*, it is the *Society of Friends*, but still, more truly and more comprehensively, it is *The Fellowship of the Concerned*.

III

Here, then, is one experiment which, by its own inner logic, has shown what the essential elements of a living witness are. As developed in history these elements are five, and they are five which can be applied to any serious undertaking anywhere. They are not the unique possession of one particular movement. We may go farther and express the serious doubt that any redemptive movement can be efficacious *unless* it involves these five elements no matter how much more it might involve. Thus we are helped, by one historical experiment, in the creative dreaming demanded by the needs of the modern world. Whatever a redemptive movement may be called, wherever it may be produced and whatever its external form, it cannot be truly effective unless it includes *Veracity*, *Immediacy*, *Urgency*, *Fellowship*, and *Concern*.

The actual Quaker Movement has often been a poor thing. It has advanced and receded many times in three hundred years of tumultuous history. Seldom have all five of the vital elements been equally incorporated in the Movement. Frequently Friends, who began by cutting the ecclesiastical red tape, have been unhappily successful in producing their own variety. Friends have failed on several occasions to maintain the sacredness of their own fellowship. Sometimes they have forgotten what it is to be *Quaker*, persons utterly shaken in their lives, and have settled back with a complacent sense of superior virtue or attainment. But in spite of all these failings, many of which continue to this day, the movement has, from the beginning, carried within it a singular promise. The deep inspiration has always been the ideal experiment, by which current failures have been judged, and this ideal experiment is that which requires the five names for its adequate depiction. The Fellowship of the Concerned has not been fully realized in the historic Society of Friends, but there has always been this haunting vision, inherent in our Quaker life.

Sometimes Friends have allowed themselves to become a mere sect, with little interest in other Christians, but this was not our first position nor is it our last. Quakerism, when true to its own genius, has been ecumenical in spirit, concerned with the entire human family and mindful of the words of our Lord when He said, "Other sheep have I which are not of this fold." It is worthwhile to remember that the experience of George Fox on Pendle Hill, in 1652, was interpreted by William Penn in a wholly ecumenical manner. Penn said that Fox "had a vision of the great work of God in the earth, and

of the way that he was to go forth to begin it.” This is precisely the vision which each one of us craves for himself. Fox, as Penn interpreted him, was not thinking merely of those who might be called Quakers, but of all men everywhere, made in God’s image even though they know it not.

“He saw people as thick as motes in the sun, that should in time be brought home to the Lord; that there might be but one shepherd and one sheepfold in all the earth.”

This is the ecumenical ideal; this is the Christian ideal. At this juncture of history it seems far from realization, but it is eternally valid. This is the clear vision which makes us know how imperfect our present condition is. Perhaps it is the vision without which a people will perish.

What we seek, then, is the emergence of the true church, the company of loving souls, exhibiting the mind of Christ. Our fondest hope is that our own modest experiment of a few centuries may facilitate the emergence of this sacred fellowship. We do not seek to make all men Quakers. Quakerism, as we have known it, is not good enough. What we desire is that all men be brought into a far more ideal society than any we have known. If Quakerism ever helps to usher in that larger and more ideal society, it will have done its peculiar work. What we seek is not, therefore, merely our own perpetuation, but that Fellowship of one Shepherd and one sheepfold. But, since that Fellowship is still in the making, our modest testimony continues to be needed. The best thing we can do for the modern world is to demonstrate

32

to all that a Fellowship of the Concerned is actually a live possibility. Our function, in the church Universal, is to help keep alive the faith in this possibility.

Notes

- 1 Apology, X, 10.
2. *The Nature of the Church*, p. 19.
3. *Spiritual Guidance*, p. 82.
4. *Apology, XI*, 8.

About the Author

Elton Trueblood (1900-1994) was graduated from William Penn College in Iowa in 1922. He did graduate study at Brown University, Hartford Seminary, and Harvard University before finishing his PhD at Johns Hopkins University in Philosophy.

During his career, Trueblood held faculty and chaplain positions at Haverford College, Guilford College, Harvard University, Stanford University, and Earlham College. He then settled in the Quaker community of Richmond, Indiana intending to help spur the growth of Earlham College from a small regional religious school into a nationally recognized institution of higher learning. He was a founder of the Earlham School of Religion, a Quaker seminary in Richmond, and contributed to a renaissance of American Quaker thought and action spurred on partly by the common experiences of Quaker intellectuals as conscientious objectors during World War II (although Trueblood himself was not a pacifist). He actively sought to mentor younger Quakers into his nineties. Trueblood also founded the Yokefellow movement and supported Stephen Ministries. His Yokefellow funders included some of his past students, such as planned community developer Charles Samuel Coble, whom Trueblood taught and also coached in track in the late 1920s at Guilford College.

He was a political conservative who supported Nixon's foreign policy, including the Vietnam War, and gave the invocation at the 1972 Republican National Convention.

Nonetheless, he was known for maintaining an internationalist perspective, serving for many years as the permanent representative from the global Quaker community to the World Council of Churches, an organization he helped bring into being. In the 1950s, he served as a senior advisor to President Dwight D. Eisenhower, who created a post for him as Director of Religious Information at the U.S. Information Agency (formerly the Voice of America). Time magazine profiled him in this role on March 15, 1954. During the Nixon Administration he again served as an adviser to the President.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/D. Elton Trueblood](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/D._Elton_Trueblood)

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.