



William Penn

Lecture 1963

*The Search
for a
Sense
of Unity*

Landrum R. Bolling

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The Search for a Sense of Unity

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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 Search for a Sense of Unity

Within every human mind and heart there lives, in some measure, the hope that somehow his life may be linked to a purpose, a person, a power which can lift him out of the prison of his own little self. Every individual knows that alone he is insufficient and incomplete. He senses that in union with others there is strength, perhaps security. A man cannot stand to be alienated from all other men, for he knows that his very survival, the satisfaction of his most elementary needs and desires require the cooperation of other human beings. Here we face a basic obvious biological and psychological fact about the human race. But this, of course, is only the primitive beginnings of man's drive for a sense of unity.

Within each human association, likewise, there is an elementary urge toward harmony, order, cooperation, solidarity. In that most fundamental of all human institutions, the family, there must exist some significant measure of united effort and concern else there will come a break-down in providing for food, shelter, and the care of children. There must be a certain amount of harmony within the family else the individual finds family life intolerable and either withdraws into silent isolation from those physically close about him or flees. All down through the ages, but never more than today, preachers, prophets and teachers have urged upon mankind a deeper, more persistent search for unity within the family.

In the building of our political and economic institutions, through the long evolution of organized society, we have developed a great variety of customs, procedures, laws and relationships designed to further cooperative effort toward such goals as the preservation of order, the defense of the tribe or the state against external attack, and the promotion of a fair exchange of goods and services. Whatever the political or economic system, whatever the underlying philosophy or theology, whatever the relationships of the people inside the given system there has necessarily been great concern for the means of promoting the broadest possible acceptance of the common goals. The purpose of modern politics, whether democratic or dictatorial, it has been observed, is to organize consent. The more deeply that consent rests upon understanding and agreement, the more genuine the sense of unity as to goals and methods, then the more secure and effective a government can be.

These, of course, are but elementary background observations about the universal urge toward unity in human institutions. We live in a day when considerations of human cooperation take on an urgency never known before. On the one hand, across the whole wide world we require a certain kernel of human understanding and agreement or we shall destroy each other on a scale which staggers the imagination; and we could conceivably destroy the very planet itself. Meanwhile, on the other hand, thanks to the revolution in science and technology, the world-wide population explosion, and the shift to an urbanized, industrialized society, we find ourselves, even at the lowest levels of the organized community, compelled to accept a measure of

discipline, orderliness, cooperation and control which in earlier, simpler times would have appeared intolerable. Whether in the operation of our automobiles or the disposal of our garbage, the building of our homes or the marketing of our goods, we need must have broad basic agreement as to policies and procedures. Most of all, we need an essential unity on the rights we accord one another, on the responsibilities we expect from one another, and on the means we shall regard as acceptable for making changes in our rights and responsibilities. A unity which rests upon acceptance of an imposed pattern or upon a pattern which cannot be changed is a frail and transient thing.

These rather academic socio-political comments may seem a curious beginning to a discussion of our quest for unity in the realm of the Spirit, in the world of the Christian Church, and within the family of a people called Friends. Yet their relevance may be more than casual. As individuals, in or out of the church, we share certain common human traits with respect to our sense of identity with people and causes. Moreover, the church, like other social institutions, at times succeeds nobly, at times fails miserably in drawing men into a meaningful dedication to its purposes. We are today deeply concerned about ecumenical trends, about the need for unity in the Christian Church and in the Society of Friends. What are the external factors which may influence our achievements of unity, any group's attainment of unity? There are many.

First, there is the shared sense of possessing some special truth unrecognized by others.

Second, there is frequently a shared loyalty to some great personality, living or dead, who draws followers to him and to his message.

Third, through history there has often been a shared persecution because of the shared beliefs and loyalties. Martyrdom wins converts and strengthens loyalties of a persecuted minority, whether they be Muslims or Jews, Quakers or Catholics, fascists or communists.

Fourth, there have been on occasion shared peculiarities in dress, speech, diet, and personal habits which set a given group of believers apart, quickly and easily distinguishable from other men. These peculiarities are often, at least in the beginning, adopted on some rational basis of principle related to the central truth of the movement, though in time it may come to seem that they are merely whimsical idiosyncrasies.

Fifth, there is acceptance of a discipline which demands the imposition of certain controls upon ones daily life, the observance of times of prayer, fasting, abstinence from certain sensual pleasures, and the performing of acts of personal service. It is no accident, I believe, that in their periods of greatest forward thrust, Christians, Buddhists, and Communists have possessed an unmistakably Puritan quality.

Sixth, among religious and social movements which generate power, enthusiasm and loyalty there has usually been found a spirit of prophecy, a commitment to bear witness against the evils of the prevailing order, against the wrongs of man

and of society. Within most societies there are many and powerful forces which compel acquiescence and silence toward manifest wrong even large-scale participation, willingly or unwillingly. An individual or a group which will speak the truth about evil draws support. In the sharing of such a witness, whether given with compassion or with self-righteousness, there is unity and a sense of strength.

Seventh, there is a shared sense of great mission. The true believer within a movement which has high morale and unity knows that there is a world to be won, and he is committed to trying to help win that victory. Perhaps the greatest strength of the devout Communist today is his certainty that he is in tune with the inexorable forces of history which must inevitably make the whole world communist; and precious few of any other ideology or religion have that kind of certainty. However, let me quickly qualify that statement. Insofar as the Christian church still has power and promise it too is trying to win the world. Christians, from their beginning, have been the bearers of the Gospel, the Good News. Inevitably, they have been missionaries. The idea of a non-evangelical Christian is, on the face of things; an absurdity, though for our sophisticated day perhaps both “Christian” and “evangelical” are terms which need redefinition.

Eighth, within any movement possessing a high degree of unity there usually develops a warm-enveloping fellowship. It was written of the early Christians that they could be identified by the fact that they loved one another.

Down through the ages, whether in a small isolated Quaker meeting or in a far-flung Catholic order, in an old-fashioned camp meeting or in a Twentieth-Century work camp, we have had abundant evidence that somehow involved in the unity we seek has come a sense of belonging to one another, of knowing each other and sharing our common life on many different levels.

The eight points just listed, it will be understood, are not a prescription for achieving unity within Christendom or within the Society of Friends. They are at best descriptive of what has happened where unity has been achieved. They are set out partly to provoke some perhaps awkward questions about where we now stand as Christians and Quakers.

Someone has said that we are now living in the post-Christian era. Certainly there is little indication that very much remains of the once powerful optimism concerning the inevitable triumph of Christianity. Among Christian sects there are few which put very much conviction into any claim that they are the exclusive custodians of a special portion of the truth. The founding fathers of various Protestant denominations—Luther, Calvin, the Wesleys, George Fox—receive of course the veneration due to famous men long since dead. Yet much of what was central to their individual messages and to their personal behavior has been blurred over, explained away and, it would seem, happily forgotten. We would not expect to build any great sense of institutional unity by trying to appeal for widespread loyalty to these leaders of the past, especially if we really re-examined what they taught. George Fox would be a particularly awkward visitor if he should re-appear among American and British

Quakers today. I suspect he would be scandalized by some of the Quaker meetings I often attend in the Middle West, with their steeple houses, hireling ministers, and robed choirs. But I suspect he would be even more shocked by some of the unprogrammed Meetings in the East I have belonged to, or participated in, with their humanistic philosophizing which, at their worst, may seem to be a blend of high school social science discussion and group psychotherapy. And if he brought to our meetings the kind of earnest soul-disturbing message he carried up and down England of the Mid-Seventeenth Century, there would be considerable embarrassment.

External pressures and persecution are, of course, alien to our experience. These goads to unity are missing. Even concerning the persecution of the church about which we have heard for Protestants in Spain and for Catholics and Protestants in various communist countries we prefer not to know too much.

On the building of a social fellowship the modern church, at least in America, does rather well. These activities are, of course, easily satirized, and the Jewish humorist Harry Golden has done a skillful job of poking fun at the club-like qualities of many Protestant churches. Yet, on the whole, here is a positive achievement and a significant contribution to the creation of a sense of belonging and corporate unity, to religious education, and to wholesome recreation. This (need it be said?) is not enough!

As a prophetic witness against the evils of an immoral society, as a voice of conscience against poverty, racial

discrimination, injustice and war—here, too, the record of the church, though spotty, is a constructive one. The expression of social concerns by the church has, over the past 50 years given considerable impetus to a variety of needed social reforms. Church members who have given themselves unstintingly to social action have found in this service new meaning and purpose to their lives; and in their comradeship with other like-minded souls they have discovered a kind of human solidarity, a personal involvement in the life of the world, and a sense of unity with the forces of good in life that many others search for but never find.

Yet the issue of our search for unity is not disposed of by recounting the ways in which the modern church or other institutions may provide or fail to provide occasions for evoking loyalties, for inspiring a set of beliefs, or for creating socially-worthy activities and involvements. Let us turn aside from these broad social and institutional issues—real though they are—to confront the simple, yet terribly complex, question of the individual's own personal search for unity, his search for his own personal beliefs and commitments.

Here I should like to suggest that sooner or later each one of us must face up to his need for four kinds of unity: 1) unity within himself; 2) unity with God; 3) unity with the Family of Faith; 4) unity with human kind.

These, of course, do not represent four different and separable stages in human spiritual development. Nor is there a special starting place for our quest. Nor a point of

ultimate earthly achievement. We each must start where we are. We proceed as we are led. We go as far as our insight and our strength of will may carry us.

As we find who we are and come to terms with the totality of our self we also are able to come into a greater sense of unity with God. As we achieve certain glimpses of what it means to have some sense of oneness with God we are drawn into a deeper awareness of our unity with others in the Family of Faith. As we come to discern both the good and the evil in all men we come to understand our own self better. As we attain a closer fellowship with God we are somehow filled with greater understanding of and compassion toward all of His creation, whether they share or do not share our faith. Each step toward one kind of unity can help us toward the realization of other kinds of unity.

Where do we start? It does not greatly matter. What matters is that we start—that we accept the need to relate ourselves openly, freely, warm-heartedly with persons and purposes beyond the immediate confines of our little selves, that we actively seek a sense of unity with individuals, with groups of men, and with God.

For most of us it probably works out that we start with an examination of our individual self. Socrates anticipated something of the Christian quest when he said that the “unexamined life is not worth living.” Paul, stern self-disciplinarian that he was, looked at his life and found that much of what he once regarded as good was, at worst, evil, at best, inadequate. Even as a follower of Christ he was able to look at himself and recognize the impulses which warred

within him and to confess: “the good I would, I do not; but the evil which I would not, that I do.” But Paul went on to affirm that it was possible for a man to become a new creation, that through Christ there was salvation available to sinful man.

George Fox recorded in his *Journal* his agonizing struggle to find himself, the pain he suffered as he really confronted himself:

“I was still under great temptations sometimes,” he wrote, “and my inward suffering was heavy, but I could find none to open my condition to but the Lord alone ... I cried to the Lord, saying ‘Why should I be thus, seeing I was never addicted to commit these evils?’ And the Lord answered that it was needful I should have a sense of all conditions, how else shall I speak to all conditions, and in this I saw the infinite love of God.”

And it was out of this contemplation of himself, of the evil within himself and within all men, that he went on to say that he saw “an ocean of darkness and death, but an infinite ocean of light and love flowed over the ocean of darkness.”

But for Fox and for ourselves today the question is “How do we plunge into that ocean of light and love?” Fox went here and there to great numbers of supposedly wise and pious men in search of an answer. In one of the most widely quoted passages from his writings he wrote:

“But as I had forsaken the priests, so I left the Separate (Dissenter) 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... (for all, he declares) ...are concluded under sin, and shut up in unbelief, as I had been, that Jesus Christ might have the pre-eminence, who enlightens, and gives grace and faith and power."

And how did he come to these ideas? He makes a very simple declaration: "And this I knew experimentally."

As a person made whole, illumined in his understanding, unified in his purposes, brought into communion with a Divine Center of life and power, George Fox went out to stir a nation and to gather around him men and women who walking in the same light were able to create a fellowship which transmitted a power that enabled individuals and groups of individuals to transcend the quarrels, the struggles, the evil which invade man and surround men.

The testimony of Fox about what he came to know experimentally finds corroboration in the insights and experiences of the modern psycho-therapists. Though they may not speak as did Paul and George Fox about sin and redemption, they do make clear that the beginning of a cure for the troubled is his recognition of need to be helped and a desire to be helped. Alcoholics Anonymous, which, though

by no means a cure-all, has had a remarkable record of achievement with men and women in dire straits, insists that it can do nothing for a person until he accepts the fact that his own strength is insufficient, that he is, as it were, at the end of his tether, and that he must call upon some up-lifting power beyond himself.

It may sound terribly old-fashioned to say these things in this day, but I am persuaded that unity within the church, effective, creative unity with that Divine Center of Light and Power which can enlighten every man that cometh into the world requires that we come to terms with the central, traditional insights of the Christian faith, with an acknowledgment of our sin, with an affirmation of our need of salvation, with an act of faith and will to claim the help of a God of forgiveness and compassion and love. This is still the freshest, most daring, most revolutionary doctrine ever preached among men—that every one of us, however weak, however confused, however evil can be transformed into new creatures of strength and goodness and truth. “There is one—even Christ Jesus who can speak to our condition.” And this men and women still to our day have come to know experimentally.

It does not matter, I believe, whether these views are labelled conservative, orthodox, neo-orthodox, evangelical, or what. All such labels are inadequate and may be misleading and outdated. But what is perfectly clear today—after World Wars I and II, after Hitler’s extermination camps at Auschwitz and Buchenwald, after Stalin’s slave labor camps in the Arctic, after French terrorism in Algeria and American atomic bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, after corruption

and dishonesty in government, business and labor, after endless experience with man's inhumanity to man—what is perfectly clear is that the wonderful, just, peaceful world which the optimistic, democratic, social gospel idealists of the early Twentieth Century were going to build through education, reform legislation and international conferences has not come to pass. Moreover, on the individual level, modern psychology has revealed to us the deep, dark, subterranean forces of evil which are buried, and not too deeply, within each one of us. Yes, education and social reforms command our support, social institutions need to be improved, but also individual men and women need to be made over—and they can be re-made through self-discovery, self-acceptance and re-direction under a faith that promotes wholeness and unity in a person's life.

In this month in the year 1939 Thomas R. Kelly gave the William Penn Lecture to this Yearly Meeting on the subject of Holy Obedience, later to be incorporated in *A Testament of Devotion*. In that lecture, Tom Kelly said: "One comes back from Europe aghast at having seen how lives as graciously cultured as ours, but rooted only in time and property and reputation and self-deluded by a mild veneer of religious respectability but unprepared by the amazing life of commitment to the Eternal in bold obedience, are now doomed to hopeless, hopeless despair. For if you will accept as normal life only what you can understand, then you will try only to expel the dull, dead weight of Destiny, of inevitable suffering which is a part of normal life, and never come to terms with it ... or enter into the divine education

and drastic discipline of sorrow, or rise radiant in the sacrament of pain.”

Tom Kelly died before he had a chance to see how thin indeed was the pale veneer of religious respectability in the Germany he loved and in the America to which he belonged, and how inadequate that religion was for the calamitous evils of our day.

The quest for unity with God is an endless search, not a prize to be possessed. That search may involve extensive reading and study. It may involve consultation with many others who give evidence of having attained some personal acquaintance with God, in addition to knowledge about God. It may come in part from frequent attendance at meetings for worship, or as with George Fox, from turning away from the accustomed services of the church to search in silence. It may come in the service of the poor, the lonely, the afflicted. It will surely come in part through withdrawal, meditation, through opening oneself to God. What we must never forget is that God is searching for man, even as man searches for God.

In the end, we shall come to know God only as we come really to believe that it is of the highest importance that we know God. In the feverish, restless ordering of our daily lives it is so easy to convince ourselves, from the best motives and with the best intentions, that all kinds of activities and duties, deeds done and words spoken, must claim priority in our lives. To approach a significant sense of unity with God it is required that we want this more than anything else for our lives.

What of our quest for religious unity?

The Family of Faith, as I see it, is a vast and heterogeneous family. Within that family communication and cooperation can and should take place on three different levels: first, with all men everywhere who stand in awe before the creation, who affirm the mystery of life, who sense its spiritual dimensions as well as the physical, and who search somehow to come into touch with that spirit which does indeed “enlighten every man that comes into the world.” Christians of all sects, Hindus, Buddhists, Jews and people of assorted other religions belong to the Family of Faith. We have a duty and a need to have a closer fellowship with them than has ever been achieved heretofore. This does not mean that we should ignore the differences among us. It does not mean that we should try to induct them in some artificial way into Christianity or specifically into the Society of Friends.

Rather we should seek to develop a lively, continuous inter-religious dialogue around the world. We should seek to bring about occasions for shared worship. We should seek for inter-religious expressions of social concern in behalf of peace and racial harmony, in opposition to injustice and inhumanity. Within the Broader Family of Faith there can be established a fellowship from which we can all benefit and through which we can gain a wider human understanding.

Within the Christian grouping of the Family of Faith there are great stirrings. Formal church unions have already taken place among large Protestant denominations, and others are in process or are being discussed. Who can tell where these moves toward organic union will lead? One thing is certain:

we are on the way toward eliminating many of the now meaningless divisions within Protestantism. Already we have seen in this past year the early tentative gestures toward an ecumenical spirit embracing both Catholics and Protestants. Here, obviously, the difficulties are enormous. Any kind of organic union is so far off as to be invisible.

Yet there are conversations in a local community, like Richmond, Indiana, where we have recently had a friendly sharing of beliefs and concerns among local Protestant ministers, including Quakers, and the local Catholic priests. We are also having deeply searching theological discussions at the college and university level—as some of our Indiana protestant teachers of religion, including Earlham, have recently experienced with Catholic theologians at Notre Dame. And these conversations extend across the nation and the world to the Vatican itself. To be sure, there are many fears and misgivings and suspicions. But there are hopeful evidences that we all can gain by revealing our deeper feelings, beliefs, and experiences to one another, regardless of the history of our respective traditions or the variety of labels we wear.

And what of unity within the Society of Friends? Here no-one dare be so rash as to hazard precise predictions. There are deep differences among us. We serve no good purpose by pretending that the serious divisions which separate us do not exist. Some differences of belief and practice we shall have to accept, or go our separate ways.

Above all else, two things we must remember. First, we must practice no pleasing deception upon one another. We must

be honestly what we are and we must try to honor one another in our differences. Secondly, and above all, we must go forward in the faith that we all desire to be lifted out of our littleness and pettiness and loneliness, that we all search for union with a Divine Center.

The search for Unity as individuals, as members of a fellowship, as a portion of the human race requires submission to a Light and Power which our finite minds and wills cannot wholly grasp or control. But it is there, available to every one of us, and it can make of us, singly and together, more than we have ever dared to dream.

About the Author

Landrum Rymer Bolling (November 13, 1913 – January 17, 2018) was an American journalist and diplomat and a noted pacifist who was a leading expert and activist for peaceful resolution of the Israel-Palestine conflict. He first worked as a war correspondent during and after World War II. He taught at Beloit College and Brown University before serving as president of Earlham College from 1958 to 1973. He was actively involved in the foreign policies of several presidential administrations, serving as an unofficial communication channel between the U.S. and the Palestinian Liberation Organization in Jimmy Carter's administration. He was honored with many awards for his work to promote peace, and in the fall of 2002, Earlham College named its new social sciences building after him.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Landrum_Bolling

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.