

Lewis Benson

# **Friends And the Truth**

**FRIENDS AND THE TRUTH**

LEWIS BENSON

1965

Published by Lewis Benson  
328, Fisk Avenue, Brielle, N.J., U.S.A.

Duplicated by Derrick P. Faux  
4, Brunswick Square, Gloucester, U.K.

Retyped Eighth month 2009

The first person to use the term “Quaker” was not a Friend and there is a strong probability that the first user of the term “Quakerism” was an opponent of Friends. The term “Quaker” soon came to be the name that was usually applied to Friends. But what did they call themselves and what did they wish others to call them? They answered to a number of names of which perhaps the most common was “Children of the Light” but they also called themselves “Friends in the Truth” and Fox uses this term at least a dozen times.

Early Friends did not choose the word “Quakerism” as the proper term for their faith. What term did they employ for that which today is known as Quakerism? They called it “Truth.”

For early Friends truth was the ultimate value. George Fox says, “prize the truth above all things”<sup>1</sup> and “love the truth more than all”<sup>2</sup> and in an Epistle to Friends he writes, “Let the weight and preciousness of truth be in your eye, and esteemed above all things by you.”<sup>3</sup> Truth is that which we are to love and prize and esteem above everything else. The truth, says Fox, “is that that is stronger than all”<sup>4</sup> and “do not think that anything will outlast the truth.”<sup>5</sup>

### Fox’s conception of truth

In New York City the most valuable real estate is on Manhattan Island and one of America’s great family fortunes was built on the formula, “buy property on Manhattan and never sell it.” Fox has a similar formula: “You are to buy the truth and not to sell it.”<sup>6</sup> And so he exhorts Friends, “you that have bought the truth, sell it not for trifles”<sup>7</sup> or “for changeable things, for things that pass away and subsist but for a time.”<sup>8</sup> He grieves over such as “settle their nests in ease. . .for such never knew the purchase of truth, and if they did they have sold it.”<sup>9</sup>

The term “truth” of which Fox spoke in such glowing superlatives has now disappeared from the Quaker vocabulary. How did this conception come to occupy the central place in Fox’s thought and what meaning did it hold for him? Fox’s conception of truth is grounded upon his belief that the life of man is determined by his relationship to his creator. He believed that the creator speaks to man calling for right action and for a community that lives under his rule. By listening to God and obeying his word man fulfils the basic law of his being. This basic conversational relationship between man and his creator is what Fox means by truth. Truth does not consist of particular propositions or a system of propositions. It is rather a dialogic relationship to God. When this dialogic relationship is broken man ceases to fulfil the purpose and destiny that God intended for him. This is the fall of man – the failure to hear and obey the creator. This is what Fox calls “the fall from the truth” and to his opponents he declares: “To the witness of God in you all, I speak; that you may

see your fall from the truth, out of the prophets' life, Christ's life, and the apostles' life; so you are out of the commands, and fallen from God..."<sup>10</sup> Truth is experienced as the vice of the creator whose word must be obeyed and so it is natural for Fox to speak of hearing truth's voice<sup>11</sup> and obeying the truth.<sup>12</sup> Truth comes by obedience in righteousness and therefore the wisdom of "Friends in the Truth" is not the wisdom of the wise but the wisdom of the just.

### Man realizes his manhood

The truth of God is not some propositional religious truth but rather the basic dialogic relationship to God through which man realizes his manhood. Fox says, "the truth makes a man a man."<sup>13</sup> Fox understands that the work of Christ is to restore the original dialogic relationship to the creator that was lost through disobedience. Jesus said, "everyone that is of the truth heareth my voice"<sup>14</sup> and Fox declares that the Friends "have heard the voice of the son of God, and deny all them that say they have not heard the voice of the son of God."<sup>15</sup> "We are come to hear our own prophet, which God hath raised up, Christ Jesus...and him do we hear in all things in our meetings."<sup>16</sup> He exhorts all Christians to "hear and obey him that God hath sent."<sup>17</sup> Truth is a person to person relationship to a living being — the risen and eternal Christ who made all things — and so Fox declares that the "truth is Christ by whom the world was made."<sup>18</sup> "To profess the truth," he says, "is to profess Christ."<sup>19</sup> Hearing Christ's voice and obeying his commands is that which restores man to his true relationship to God.

At the heart of the early Quaker message was the mighty proclamation, "Christ has come to teach his people himself." The messengers who preached this message were called "Publishers of Truth." Fox says, "I directed them to their teacher Christ Jesus"<sup>20</sup> and "turned them to their teacher, Jesus Christ."<sup>21</sup> In these and many similar statements in the early part of the Journal he tells us of the aim and content of his preaching. In reporting the settling of new meetings, Fox says: "they were settled under Christ's teaching,"<sup>22</sup> "they that were convinced came under Christ's teaching and were settled upon him, their foundation and rock;"<sup>23</sup> they "stand convinced of the Lord's everlasting truth and are gathered in to the name of Jesus, and sit under Christ their teacher."<sup>24</sup>

The terms "convince," "convinced," "convincement" belong in a peculiar way to the Quaker tradition and in their original Quaker usage they signified convincement *of the truth* and the truth was contained in the message that Christ has come to teach his people himself. Of one who was newly convinced Fox writes, "he was convinced... receiving the Truth and owning the Lord Jesus Christ his teacher."<sup>25</sup> The response that early Quaker preachers sought to evoke was called "receiving truth" or "receiving truth in the love of it."<sup>26</sup>

## Walking in the truth

Convincement is only the first step. We must not only receive truth in the love of it but we must “walk in the truth...in the love of it.”<sup>27</sup> Fox mentions some “who had been formerly convinced of truth, but were not come into obedience to it.”<sup>28</sup> And so, he says, “it is not he that only talks of truth, but (mark), he that doth truth.”<sup>29</sup> Walking in the truth or doing the truth means acting in obedience to Christ’s teaching.

Fox says, “obey the truth”<sup>30</sup> and he intends this to apply to the Christian fellowship as well as to the individual Christian. It is by coming into corporate obedience to Christ’s ethical commands the church finds itself gathered into the “perfect oneness.” They that walk in the truth, says Fox, are “in fellowship one with another.”<sup>31</sup> Church fellowship is not a mere byproduct of obedience but there is a distinct and unique community pattern that is given to those who take the path of discipleship. Fox called this unique community pattern “the gospel order” but he also called it “the order of the truth.”<sup>32</sup> He declared that “they that do receive Christ in his grace and truth...they know his government in the truth...and his holy and heavenly order.”<sup>33</sup>

Robert Barclay describes the true church as a “people gathered by God’s spirit...to bear a joint testimony for truth.”<sup>34</sup> How can we bear a joint testimony for truth without setting up objective moral standards enforced by legalistic church discipline? The answer is that when our moral standards are received from Christ himself as we know him in the master-discipleship relationship then we are delivered from the tyranny of an externalized legal code. Fox says, “It is Christ the truth that doth make free”<sup>35</sup> and “by the grace and truth which is come by Jesus Christ...all may be made God’s free men and women...for all the true liberty is in the gospel, and in the truth that makes free... and in Christ Jesus.”<sup>36</sup> This gospel freedom is, for Fox, a major part of our heritage in the gospel order, for, he says, “whom the Lord hath called are the Lord’s freemen.”<sup>37</sup> “So they are not captives, they are not bondmen, they are not servants, nor slaves. But (mark) free men and free women. And what hath made them free...but truth?...And the truth is Christ, and Christ is the truth.”<sup>38</sup>

For early Friends truth was something far greater than the message they preached. It was for them a comprehensive term that embraced publishing truth, receiving truth and being gathered into a fellowship of Friends in the Truth. They believed in the greatness of their cause and the name that they gave this cause was “the cause of truth.” Speaking of the first beginnings of the Quaker movement, Fox says, “the Truth sprang up first...in Leicestershire”<sup>39</sup> and one of the earliest Queries asks, “How doth the truth prosper?”

## “Be valiant for God’s truth...”

Fox says, “be valiant for God’s truth upon the earth, and spread it abroad, preach Christ and his kingdom, his light, his grace, his truth to men; that all should walk in it”<sup>40</sup>. He exhorts Friends to be “valiant for truth” not less than seventy nine times and he pleads that “all God’s ministers and his church...will stand valiant soldiers in Christ.”<sup>41</sup> Fox believed that only through valiant effort could “that of God” in all men be reached.<sup>42</sup>

As Fox understood it, truth does not signify the opposite of ignorance but the opposite of deceit. He always assumes that truth is encountered as the sound of a voice that must be obeyed because it is the voice of the creator. According to the third chapter of Genesis man’s undoing was not only in his failure to take counsel with God nor yet in his asserting his independence of God but it came from listening to the voice of a false spirit or false god. God, says Fox, “made man and woman in his image and likeness, in righteousness and holiness, he was their teacher: but when man and woman forsook God and disobeyed his voice and command, and hearkened unto the serpent’s teaching, and followed him, they came to bear his image and do his works”<sup>43</sup> “for they thought they should have been wiser than God taught them...and were brought into the fall by hearkening to this false spirit...And so by their fall they came under another power, another image, another likeness, and another God, even the God of the world.”<sup>44</sup> The word that comes from the creator is truth but the god of the world is one in whom “there is no truth.” We are called to be valiant because we must deal with the arch enemy of truth and overcome him. Fox said, “they that obey the truth...they walk in that which condemns the prince of the air, the god of the world, and all them in whom he rules. And so...they walk over the head of him in whom there is no truth.”<sup>45</sup> “Walk in the truth,” he wrote, “and it will lead you out of the world.”<sup>46</sup> The choice is between truth and the world. This is a hard choice for many and we cannot but sympathize with the couple of whom Fox said, “if they could have had the world and Truth together they would have received it.”<sup>47</sup>

## Counterfeit Christianity

One reason it is difficult to choose between truth and the world is that, by the time truth reaches us, it has sometimes become mixed with the world. The strategy of the god of the world is not to destroy truth but to corrupt it. Therefore the Friends in the Truth must be able to distinguish the true from the false and genuine Christianity from its counterfeit. Pennington gives this description of counterfeit Christianity: Satan, he says, “gets some false brethren out of the church; these he cloathes as angels of light...endues them with an excellent taking knowledge of life and spirituality in appearance; forms in them in image of the truth, and inspires this image with the spirit of his own

life...for this is that the world would have, an appearance of religion, an image of Truth, but their own spirit in it. The worldly spirit...can readily close with this, because it is its own...The world can swallow and digest anything but life...but the life, and Truth, the Spirit, Christ in his true and living cross, this will not down with the world.”<sup>48</sup>

Men would still rather have the appearance of truth than truth itself and churches and religious organizations employ Public Relations Counselors to manufacture a public image toward which the public will be favorably disposed however far it may be from reality. Truth has become less important than the appearance of truth.

In this age of relativism the modern mind rebels at the suggestion that there is one truth of God which is for all men to share if they will receive the spirit that Christ sends. Fox says, “there is but one spirit of truth, which leadeth into all truth”<sup>49</sup> and he asks, “Now, what is the matter...that your old men and young men...have not their dreams and visions of God? Is it not because vex, and quench, and grieve the spirit of God, and rebel against it in your hearts.”<sup>50</sup> He laments over those who “rebel against God’s good spirit, and err from it, and quench it, and vex it, they...have neither true visions, nor true prophecies, nor true dreams, and are as Babylon, all in heaps and confusion.”<sup>51</sup>

There is one truth which is Christ and one spirit that Christ sends to lead us to the one truth. Is there any greater need, then, than to receive the baptism of Christ’s spirit and be brought out of the many ways into the one way and out of confusion into the knowledge of truth?

#### REFERENCES

- (1) Fox, George, *Works* (Phila.: Marcus T. Gould; N.Y.: Isaac T. Hopper, 1831) VIII, p 30.
- (2) *Ibid.*, VII, p 78.
- (3) *Ibid.*, VII, p 109.
- (4) *Ibid.*, VIII, p 248.
- (5) Fox, George, *Journal of* (Cambridge: Univ Press, 1952) p 574.
- (6) Fox, George, *Works*, 1831, VIII, p 48.
- (7) *Ibid.*, VII, p 247.
- (8) *Ibid.*, VII, p 92.
- (9) *Ibid.*, VII, p 302.
- (10) *Ibid.*, VII, p 542.
- (11) *Ibid.*, VII, p 225.
- (12) *Ibid.*, VI, p 27.
- (13) Richard MSS, typewritten transcript, p 221
- (14) John, 18:37 (quoted by Fox in Headley MSS p 49, Cat. No. 8, 65F.
- (15) Fox, George, *Works* (1831), III, p 401.
- (16) *Ibid.*, VI, p 245.
- (17) *Ibid.*, V, p 170.
- (18) Headley MSS, p 151, Cat. No. 17, 111F.

- (19) Ibid., p 45, Cat. No. 8, 57F.
- (20) Fox, George, *Journal of* (Cambridge, 1952) p 93.
- (21) Ibid., p 97.
- (22) Ibid., p 218.
- (23) Ibid., p 223.
- (24) Ibid., p 241.
- (25) Ibid., p 409.
- (26) Fox, George, *Works* (1831), VI, p 26.
- (27) Ibid., VII, pp 78, 88, 148.
- (28) Fox, George, *Journal* (Bi-Cent. Ed. 1902), II, p 282.
- (29) Fox, George, *Works* (1831), VI, p 172.
- (30) Ibid., VI, pp 25, 27; VII, p 251.
- (31) Ibid., VI, p 27.
- (32) Ibid., VI, pp 183, 231.
- (33) Ibid., VIII, p 205.
- (34) Barclay, Robert, *An Apology etc.*, Proposition X, Section III.
- (35) Headley MSS, p 315, Cat. No. 8, 90F.
- (36) Fox, George, *Journal* (Bi-Cent. Ed. 1902) II, pp 338, 339.
- (37) Fox, George, *Works* (1831), VII, p 88.
- (38) Ibid., VII, pp 311, 312.
- (39) Fox, George, *Journal* (1952), p 709.
- (40) Fox, George, *Works* (1831), VIII, p 91.
- (41) Ibid., VI, p 427.
- (42) Ibid., VIII, pp 37, 126, 146.
- (43) Ibid., VI, p 31.
- (44) Ibid., VIII, p 136.
- (45) Ibid., VI, p 27.
- (46) Ibid., VII, p 22.
- (47) Fox, George, *Journal* (1952), p 113.
- (48) Penington, Isaac, *Works of* (1761) I, pp 206, 207.
- (49) Fox, George, *Works* (1831), VIII, pp 57.
- (50) Ibid., V, p 321.
- (51) Ibid., VI, p 335.

Also by Lewis Benson

CATHOLIC  
QUAKERISM

“For the Quaker vision which is the vision of the disciple church this is the winter season. But I believe the end of this winter may be already in sight.”

Price 7s. 6d.  
Plus postage

Available from  
Friends Book Centre