

THE NEW RIGHTEOUSNESS

Fox taught that there were two major areas of loss that resulted from the eclipse of the everlasting gospel. One of these was the order and government of Christ in his church, which Fox called “gospel order.” The other great loss was the moral certainty and moral power that he called “righteousness”.

When Fox declared that “the righteousness hath been lost since the apostles’ days” (7:327), he was stating his belief that the Reformers of the 16th Century had separated salvation from righteousness. They had ascribed to Christ the power to save us from the consequences of sin, but not save us from captivity to sin. Thus he says that “there is a faith, which Christ is not the author of, and that faith giveth not the victory, nor purifieth the heart, neither do they in it please God” (8:56).

Fox believed that the primitive apostolic gospel he was preaching had the power to restore this lost righteousness, and that as people came to know Christ as their living prophet and teacher, they would be taught the principles of God’s righteousness and given power to obey. He declared that people should meet “in the name of Jesus, who is alive, and he, their living Prophet, Shepherd, and Bishop, is in the midst of them ... He is... their righteousness” (BII:442).

For Fox’s Puritan opponents, there was nothing more offensive in the Quaker message than the proclamation that Christ can do more than forgive sin, that he [can] free us from captivity to sin and give us victory over temptation. This was the main point of difference between the Puritans and Quakers. It was the issue most frequently mentioned in the voluminous controversial literature produced by the early Quakers. They maintained that, in separating salvation from righteousness, the Puritans were denying that Jesus Christ had been sent by God to fulfill the Old Covenant. In other words, the Puritans were denying that the purpose of Christ’s coming was to gather a righteous, holy people to live under the rule of God.

According to Fox, “the righteousness within and sanctification within have been lost since the days of the apostles, in the apostasy” (3:292). But “God doth draw people from their unrighteousness and unholiness, to Christ, the righteous and holy One, the great Prophet in his New Covenant and New Testament, whom Moses in the Old Covenant and Testament said, God would raise up, like unto him, and whom people should ‘hear in all things’” (BII:458, quoting Deut. 18:15).

At this point, we need to take a look at the biblical basis of Fox’s understanding of the nature of man and the human problem, as well as his understanding of what God has done to reconcile us to himself. Behind all of Fox’s teaching concerning God, mankind, and salvation, is the underlying

assumption that human beings were not created for a life of moral autonomy, or of self-directing freedom in discriminating between right and wrong. They were to be guided in these matters by taking counsel with the Creator, and their well-being was determined by their willingness to act in accordance with God's commands. The Genesis story of Adam and Eve is based on these assumptions.

Fox summarizes his understanding in such passages as "the Lord God that made ... man and woman in his image, ... was their teacher, their guide, and their orderer, who did teach them what to do, and what to leave undone; and as long as they kept under God's teaching, they were happy, and kept in the image and likeness of God, *and in his righteousness and holiness* ... But when they forsook God's teaching, and *disobeyed* God's command, ... they lost the image, and *righteousness, and holiness*, and likeness of God" (5:313, italics added). "The living God of truth made man to see and hear him, and in his image and likeness, holy, righteous, and perfect, ... but they disobeying the living God, ... came to be blind, imperfect, unrighteous, and unholy, ... and so fell from life into death" (6:13).

It is by *disobedience* that men and women lost the righteousness that comes from God. This is not disobedience to a code of morality, but *disobedience to the living God*. Emil Brunner refers to such disobedience as the "assertion of human independence over against God." When obedience is seen as conformity to moral law, Brunner adds, this "places between the Divine 'Thou' and myself ... a 'something', an abstract rule ... Attention is directed to this 'something', which is required to be done, through the law as 'law', and in so doing man's relation to God ... becomes rigid and abstract."³⁶

The Old Covenant was a covenant of limited objectives. The Mosaic law which symbolized this covenant was not God's final answer to the need of men and women to be restored to the image of God and righteousness of God. The foundation of this covenant was in the word of the Lord that came to Moses:

Thus shalt thou say to the house of Jacob, and tell the children of Israel: Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto myself. *Now therefore, if you will obey my voice* indeed, and keep my covenant, then you shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine. And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation (Exod 19:3-6 KJV, italics added).

The Hebrew prophets were the means by whom God kept reminding his covenant people that the condition which was the ultimate foundation of the covenant was, "if you will obey my voice." In the Old Testament the word "obey"

³⁶ Emil Brunner, *Man in Revolt: a Christian Anthropology* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1939), pp. 129, 158.

is most frequently associated with the word “voice.” One might think it would be associated with the “law” but it is always “voice.” Jeremiah prophesied:

Thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel ... I spake not unto your fathers, nor commanded them in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, concerning burnt offerings or sacrifices: But this thing commanded I them, saying, Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and ye shall be my people (Jer 7:21-23 KJV).

Jeremiah foresaw that the legalism of the Old Covenant would be transcended by another covenant. George Fox believed that the coming of Jesus Christ brought in this New Covenant, in which the voice of God would be heard through God’s son, and the true righteousness restored by Christ. On Firbank Fell, Fox cited the word of the Lord on the Mount of Transfiguration: “This is my beloved Son ... hear ye him,” (Matt 17:5) and in an epistle to Friends he says, “in the restoration by Christ ... you are brought into the image, likeness, righteousness, holiness and power of God” (8:135).

Fox speaks of men and women being “led by Christ ... into the Image of God as men and women were before they fell; and into that [original] righteousness by Christ the righteous one and holy one.”³⁷ And Margaret Fell writes that “the true Prophet is risen, which Moses said the Lord will raise, who teacheth his people himself ... whose name is the Lord of Righteousness, and whose Light leads into Righteousness and Purity.”³⁸

Thus Fox’s message that “Christ has come to teach his people himself” is a proclamation that God is now giving his covenant people the knowledge of his righteousness, apart from the law and legalism. “God is righteous, and he would have his people to be righteous, and to do righteously,” he declared (BII:457). In his vision near Pendle Hill he saw “a great people in white raiment,” who would be “coming to the Lord” (Ni:104). When he speaks of God’s people being “clothed in white raiment,” he means that they have put on “the righteousness of Christ.” The people of God, of whom Christ is the head, are to be known and recognized by showing forth his righteousness. Fox often speaks of this righteousness as “the badge and livery of Christ.” “All who profess themselves Christians,” he writes, “may come to wear the badge and livery of Christ, the heavenly man ... and to be clothed with the new garment, the righteousness of Christ” (5:369).

If this teaching is true, and Christ has indeed come to teach his people God’s righteousness and give them the power to obey, what is the basis of Fox’s complaint that “the righteousness hath been lost since the apostles’ days”? In dealing with this question, we must note that Fox maintained that, in both Roman Catholic and Protestant Christianity, God’s call for righteousness is

³⁷ AC, Cat No. 61E, p. 92.

³⁸ Fell, *Works*, p. 469.

muted, and Christ's power to teach us this righteousness and give us power to obey is neutralized.

In Catholicism, the church itself claims to be the definer of what is right and wrong, as well as claiming to have the power to grant remission of sins. Although the "indulgences" granted by the church were, theologically speaking, less than full pardon for sin, nevertheless in practice and in the popular mind they were treated as though they were full absolution from penalty and guilt. This claim to have power to define sin and wrong-doing led to the compilation of lists of sins, so that sin came to be regarded as a catalogue of particular "sins," thus creating a kind of new decalogue that stood between the Christian and God, and creating a new legalism. Thus, when many Catholics think of sin, they are not thinking of alienation from the Creator, or of declaring their independence from the Creator, but merely of violating something on this list of sins. Sin is thus not some thing that involves the whole being and personality.

Martin Luther seems even less concerned than the Roman Catholics about God's call for righteousness, for he taught a doctrine that makes Christ's power to forgive identical with his power to save. Luther calls us to know Christ as our savior, only as he is our forgiver, and not as our teacher who shows us what to do and what to leave undone. By faith in Christ who forgives us, we become accounted righteous in God's sight and become part of a church which is an association of justified sinners. The Protestant ethos of the 16th Century did not produce a church of the cross. On the contrary, the main-line Protestant churches have been the persecutors of the cross-bearing church, as they certainly were in England in relation to the Quakers of the 17th Century.

In England, the Puritans developed an excessive moralism that was based on the Old Testament, so that for them the Old Testament was the book of righteousness whereas the New Testament was the book of salvation. This way of dealing with the problem separated righteousness from salvation, and was a step backward into the legalism of the Old Testament. This division of righteousness from salvation is still obvious today, especially in such Old Testament-oriented Protestant churches as those in South Africa, [and] Northern Ireland, and [in] American fundamentalism.

Thus when Fox says that "the righteousness hath been lost," he is commenting on the failure of both Protestant and Catholic Christianity to bear witness to Christ as the one who fulfills the law, and who brings in a new covenant wherein men and women can be led and taught by him, and so fulfill God's call for righteousness.

This new righteousness that comes from Christ does not smother the human spirit with a tyrannical code of morals, but it brings people to know "the glorious liberty of the children of God." As Emil Brunner says, "Because the being of man is actually based upon man's dependence upon God [and] upon the call of God which chooses him and gives him responsibility, his

freedom is only complete where he remains in this dependence. Hence ... the maximum of his dependence on God is at the same time the maximum of his freedom.”³⁹

It is very important that we recognize that there is a freedom involved in this call to righteousness. I have had occasion to observe and to experience in a limited degree the kind of discipline and morality in which there is no freedom. Although I was never a part of the “Bruderhof,” the Society of Brothers, I had close relations with it both in England and in America. This is a group that is devoted to corporate righteousness, to being gathered together to answer God in righteousness, but the basis for its existence includes a kind of enforcement and hierarchy; that has done great damage to many people in the fifty or more years of its existence.

We have an alternative to this in the kind of community that learns together, obeys together, and suffers together. Fox preached that there is a way of answering God and being a church of the cross without destroying or putting too great a burden on the human spirit. He points out that a great benefit of the new righteousness is that Christ not only teaches us what God would have us do, but he gives us the power to do it. This is something that Protestant morality finds to be a problem. Very often in Protestantism the statement is made that “we know what we ought to do, and of course we would do it in a minute if we had the power, but we don’t, and so we will just have to wait for a better world. Perhaps after we die we will be able to conform to this higher standard of morality.”

This problem of knowing what to do but being powerless to do it is absent from the early Quaker message. Fox states clearly that “God is equal and righteous, and commands nothing but what is equal and just, and measurable, and reasonable, according to that which men may perform ... God is not unrighteous, or a hard task master, to lay more upon a man than he can do” (3:553).

Isaac Penington puts the case very briefly, “The power never fails the faith,”⁴⁰ and Fox says in a similar vein that Christ “will lay no more upon you than you are able to bear” (7:258-259).⁴¹ This unity of testimony of the early Friends seems to me a wonderful part of our heritage. They knew that there are a lot of things that we can’t do, but God knows this, and does not lay on us anything that we *must* do but *cannot* do.

After I had studied Fox for a number of years, it seemed to me that God’s call for righteousness was the primary or basic assumption of both Old and New Testaments. And so it was a great surprise to me, when I had occasion to

³⁹ Brunner, *Man in Revolt*, p. 263.

⁴⁰ Isaac Penington, *Works*, 4th ed. (Sherwoods, N.Y: David Heston, 1861), vol. I, p. 556.

⁴¹ See also I Corinthians 10:13.

use the library of Princeton Theological Seminary, to find that the section on “ethics and morality” was catalogued under *philosophy*. “Christian faith” and “salvation” were in one part of the library, but if you wanted to know about morality, you had to go to the philosophers. This is not the way Fox approached the subject. He believed that the knowledge of right and wrong comes to us from the Creator himself, and now comes to us from the Creator through his son.

Modern people have the dream of finding a “science” of morality, of applying the same disciplines to the problems of morality that we apply to our understanding of the natural order of the universe, and thus getting control over the moral problem. You can’t get more alienated than that from the God who seeks to be close to man and to be the author of his righteousness and morality. As Emil Brunner has said, “God has a different relation to men from what He has to other creatures ... He reveals His will to him and expects obedience and trust from him ... Man is designed for and called to a particular relation to God.”⁴²

⁴² Emil Brunner, *The Divine-Human Encounter* (London: SCM Press, 1943), p. 127-128.