

The Quaker Discovery

Room for the Infinite

from The Eternal Promise

by Thomas R. Kelly

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1966***

A great light and spiritual power blazed out in England, beginning about 1650, which shook thousands of their complacent formalism, which kindled men and women with radiant fires of divine glory and holy joy. It sent them out into the market places and the churches, ablaze with the message of the greatness and the nearness of God, His ready guidance and His enfolding love. The blazing light illuminated the darkness, the shams, the silly externalities of conventional religion. It threw into sharp relief the social injustices, the underpaying of servants, the thoughtless luxuries, the sword as an instrument of social or "Christian" justice.

You and I exist today as paled-out remnants of the movement which sprang out of that discovery and that light. Those fires of 1650 and 1660 flicker low. We are for the most part respectable, complacent, comfortable, with a respectable past, proud of our birthright membership in the Society of Friends which guarantees us entrance, if not into heaven, at least into very earthly society. The blazing, burning fires of three centuries ago are too generally sunk in us to a genial, mellow glow of historical sweetness and innocence and gentle beauty. And all too many of us, Quakers, near-

Quakers, non-Quakers, have become as mildly and conventionally religious as were the tepid church members of three centuries ago against whose flaccid mediocrity Fox flung himself with all the passion and the energy which a new discovery unleashes in an awakened soul.

But the blazing discovery which Quakers made, long ago, is rediscovered again and again by individuals, and sometimes by groups. The embers flare up, the light becomes glorious. There is no reason why it cannot break out again, today, with blazing power. The world needs it desperately. It is in the hope that you and I, today, may rediscover this flaming center of religion that those words are written—not in an historical interest in a charming past. All that I would say to you about the past is directed to you in the present. Ask yourself: Am I down in the flaming center of God? Have I come into the deeps, where the soul meets with God and knows His Love and power? Have I discovered God as a living Immediacy, a sweet Presence and a stirring, life-renovating Power within me? Do I walk by His guidance, feeding every day, like knights of the Grail, on the body and blood of Christ, knowing every day and every act to be a sacrament?

George Fox was like most of us in his youth. He was a good person. He was a conscientious person. In his teens he was so religious, according to ordinary standard, that people thought he ought to study for the ministry (perhaps "at Oxford or Cambridge"). He says in his *Journal*: "As I grew up, my relations thought to make me a priest, but others persuaded to the contrary,

whereupon I was put to a man, a shoemaker by trade, and who dealt in wool, and used grazing and sold cattle."

But something told him there was something deeper to be found than he knew and than many respectable Christians knew who took their religious profession so lightly. He tells how, at the age of nineteen, he was shocked and revolted by the crass beer drinking of some respectable Christians who tried to entangle him in an ale-drinking bout. I believe many young people of tender vision and fresh sense of lofty, holy claims of God upon their lives are shocked by some of us who have good reputations but who have adjusted ourselves to conventional ways, and lowered our standards of dedication to God, and are stained with the mud of mediocrity.

That night he could not sleep but "walked up and down, and sometimes prayed and cried to the Lord who said unto me, 'Thou seest how young people go together into vanity and old people into the earth.'" I take the phrase, "old people go into the earth," not to mean "go into the grave," but to mean, "go into earthiness." It is tragic to see middle-aged people "go into the earth." It grieved Fox's soul. Over the horizons of his consciousness he saw something, dim but glorious, that condemned his present state and the lethargy of his fellows, that led him on to deep questing for fuller life with God.

The quest so possessed him, body and soul, that he gave himself up wholly to it. "Then at the command of God, on the ninth day of the seventh month, I left my

relations, and broke off all familiarity or fellowship with old or young. I passed to Lutterworth, where I stayed some time; then to Northampton, where also I made some stay; then to Newport Pagnell, whence, after I had stayed a while, I went to Barnett, in the fourth month called June 1644. As I thus traveled through the counties, professors took notice, and sought to be acquainted with me; but I was afraid of them, for I was sensible they did not possess what they professed."

This earnestness and thoroughness of search for that light, that religious depth which he glimpsed over the horizon, is something that needs to be engaged in. Almost all great souls have only achieved their illumination after a storm and stress period of the spirit. Yet we, many of us halt before we enter such a deeper quest, such as Fox's. Our families tell us, "Take it mildly. Don't get unbalanced." And who knows how many of us have been halted and choked by older people's counsel to sobriety? Heaven knows Quakerism in later years has become stuffy with sobriety! Or our own sense of conventionality, or the molds of society, or the demand for earthly security, for earning a living and being normally equipped with an automobile and a nice home keep us from following out, with all the sincerity of our souls, this search for the deepest depths of religion.

Fox's own friends and relations tried to get him steady and sober, so that he might be a good shoemaker and forget his passionate search. "My relations would have had me marry, but I told them I was but a

lad and I must get wisdom. Others would have had me into the Auxiliary Band among the soldiery but I refused, and I was grieved that they proffered such things to me, being a tender youth." Fox refused to be "toughened up" for the world's dullness by going into the army. He was tender, and he seemed to know, better than his elders, that the route to release lay in increase of that tenderness of spirit, not in its loss. And he was right. For sensitiveness to God's revealing Life requires a tendered soul.

In these years of deep searching Fox tried every spiritual guide he could get. Whenever he heard of a man, a minister or a layman, who had a reputation for deep religious insight, he went to see him, to find if he could give him help. Even London yielded him no great soul to guide him. "I was under great misery and trouble there; for I looked upon the professors of the city of London, and I saw all was dark and under the chain of darkness." He went to the parish priest of his birthplace, but soon found that he, Fox, was giving the priest material for his sermons, rather than being instructed by the priest. "He would applaud and speak highly of me to others; and what I said in discourse to him on the weekends he would preach of on the First days; for which I did not like him." Another priest to whom he went for help into the inner sanctuary of religion advised him to smoke tobacco and sing psalms. But, he says: "Tobacco was a thing I did not love, and psalms I was not in a state to sing." One man, he comments, proved to be a hollow cask, another grew angry when he stepped on the edge of a

flower bed, another told him he needed medicine and a blood-letting.

What was it that disturbed him during this period? It was not a deep sense of personal sin. He is singularly free from any feeling of sin. It was not the hounding of an evil conscience, the deep-voiced bayings of remorse. It was, I believe, two things. It was the deep God-hunger within him, on behalf of himself and on behalf of others. And it was the keen sorrow he felt at the sight of others, and himself, living in blindness and suffering, because they were missing the Way, dully unaware that there was a Way to seek. He saw professing Christians to be blinded, sinful, mediocre, walking habits, in a day when the fire had gone out of the church of Christ, and they were living, dead shadows, among the shadows of a past tradition, a past instruction, a past visitation of Pentecostal power and holiness.

Thus he was driven from all outer aids, and was forced back within himself for inner insights and guidance. The very first constructive insight, the first inward ray of light which he reports, has to do with the whole of Christendom, the entire Christian Church. "About the beginning of 1646, as I was going to Coventry, and entering towards the gates, a consideration arose in me, how it was said that all Christians are believers, both Protestants and Papists; and the Lord opened to me that, if all were believers, then they were all born of God, and passed from death to life, and that none were true believers but such; and though others said they were believers, yet were they not."

This was not a narrowing of the gate of Truth. Fox had no thought of or interest in founding a little sect which should play upon a single string and call its music the whole of truth. All are in the life of God, whether Protestant or Catholic, who have been "born of God," who have been brought into God's immediate fellowship, who have become sons of God (for whom, as Paul says, the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain, until such be born). And none who have never been brought into God's immediacy are even Christians at all, no matter if they are members of a church and have the best gilt-edged credentials of an outward sort. Religion is in nothing outward; no church can save us. Religion is inward, it arises in immediacy of relation with God. It involves new blood in our veins. It involves the lifeblood of each of us, so that we can say, "My Father. I am in His family. I have fellowship in His love."

Another dawning insight which broke in upon him was that there is no substitute for *immediacy of revelation*. Each individual soul must and can have direct illumination inside himself, from the living, revealing Spirit of God, now, today, for He is active in the world. The form of this dawning insight in Fox had to do with what fitted a man to be a minister. He says, "At another time, as I was walking in a field on a First Day morning, the Lord opened to me that being bred at Oxford or Cambridge was not enough to fit and qualify men to be ministers of Christ." That is to say, in modern terms: You can go to theological seminary, and study about religion. You can learn the history of

the Christian Church. You can know all about the Synoptic problems of the Gospels and have your own theories about Q and the J, E, D, and P document of the Hexateuch, you can know all the literature about the authorship of the Johannine epistles, whether the author was John the beloved disciple or another of the same name. You can know all about the history of Quakerism, you can know the disputes behind the Nicene Creed and the Constantinopolitan Creed. You can know the Westminster Confession and the Augsburg Confession and the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England. You can know homiletics and rules of good sermon structure. You can know church symbolism and the meaning of the feasts and fasts of the church. You can know all this, and much more. But unless you know God, immediately, every day communing with Him, rejoicing in Him, exalting in Him, opening your life in Joyful obedience toward Him and feeling Him speaking to you and guiding you into ever fuller loving obedience to Him, you aren't fit to be a minister. There is so much that is wonderful in books. But he who relies for his sermons upon book-stuff about religion, and is not at the same time enjoying immediately and experiencing vitally fresh illumination from God, is not a real minister, even if he has a degree in theology from Oxford or Cambridge. Second-hand sermons aren't *real* sermons. Only firsthand preaching counts. He is a minister who is given a message within himself, as a fresh insight from God, transmitted *through Him* to others.

Another insight which came to him had to do with

churches and temples. The church building is not a church, the brick and mortar structure is not a church. God doesn't live in a house with a peaked roof. God lives inside people. And if God isn't inside you, you needn't expect to find him in a house with a peaked roof that is outside you. God is within. And where He dwells, there is a holy place. Fox was finding he had an altar inside his own soul. Inside him was a hushed and holy Presence, too sacred to be destroyed, too wonderful not to be visited continually. The holy Presence was Inward. Fox found Him there, and all life was new. It is a wonderful discovery, to find that you are a temple, that you have a church inside you, where God is. There is something awful, that is, awe-inspiring, down at the depths of our own soul. In hushed silence attend to it. It is a whisper of God Himself, particularizing Himself for you and in you, and speaking to the world through you. God isn't dead. "The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him."

All of these insights are such as wean us away from confusing religious information with external things, with external church membership, with external church doctrines, external church habitations. In place of these, Fox went inward, and there found resplendent glory of God's immediacy and love and power and guidance and sufficiency. And this is a true insight, which finds the inner sanctuary of the soul to be the Home of God. As long as outwards are counted as essential, we are no better than those reported by the Samaritan woman to Jesus: "Shall we worship in this mountain or in Jerusalem?" Shall we perform this cere-

mony or that? Shall we assent to this statement or a different one? Christianity needs to get behind its still lingering confusion about the essential character of any external, even as beautiful as that of dramatizing the Lord's supper with His disciples, and put first of all the sacrament of the heart, where God and man break bread together in the secret sanctuary of the soul.

Fox might seem to have retained reliance upon one outward guide, the Scriptures. He lived with his Bible. He studied it day and night. But the Scriptures, too, were no outward guide to him. He came to see that one needed to get back into that Spirit and that Life which the writers of the Scriptures knew and in which they lived. And when one gets back into that Life and Spirit in which the Scriptures were given forth, one understands them, as if it were, from within. Quakers make a special approach to the Bible. Not merely by exegesis, not merely by grammar and Greek lexicon do we squeeze out the meaning of the texts, not merely understanding the historical setting of a book like Amos or Hosea or Isaiah do we find its meaning. We can go back into that Life within whom Amos and Isaiah lived, that Life in God's presence and vivid guidance, then we understand the writings from within. For we and Isiah and Hosea feed on the same Life, are rooted in the same holy flame which is burning in our hearts. And we speak, each for his day, out of the same center, in God. "But I brought them Scriptures and told them there was an anointing within man to teach him, and that the Lord would teach His people Himself."

This last phrase might almost sum up the central discovery of George Fox. "The Lord has come to teach His people Himself." Like a refrain it runs through early Quaker literature: "The Lord has come to lead His people Himself." No longer do we rely upon creeds or priests to be our external guides. "The Lord has come to lead His people Himself." No longer are we shut up to exegeting passages from an ancient text. "The Lord has come to teach his people himself." No longer do we say that revelation is closed, that Heaven has finished her instruction to men, that God is absent and Christ is withdrawn. "The Lord has come to teach His people Himself."

This was a burning experience to Fox. He had a teacher within him. He found God alive, at work, a living, pulsing, soul-enlarging, holy Life within him, guiding and instructing, not in general terms, but in specific terms, for him, George Fox. This is so different from the generalized instruction of universal truths. Here we have divine guidance particularized for you, for me. The Quaker discovery includes the fact of immediate guidance, possible to be experienced within each of us. But until each of us can say, "The Lord has come to lead His people, and *He is leading me*," we are merely reading about an interesting historical event in the life of Fox.

Fox was pretty well through with his agony of search. God, immediate, amazing, radiant, was dawning in some of His matchless glory. But he still had his ups and downs, of sorrow and joy, depressions over deficiencies and elations over the light and glory of

God. "I kept myself much as a stranger, seeking heavenly wisdom and getting knowledge from the Lord; and was brought off from outward things, to rely wholly on the Lord alone. Though my exercises and troubles were very great, yet were they not so continual but that I had some intermissions, and was sometimes brought into such heavenly joy, that I thought I had been in Abraham's bosom."

But there must have been some last lingering reserve within him which had not yet yielded to the divine Light. Somewhere he must still have kept some hope of help from outside himself, still hoping someone would give him the great advice, would speak the solving word which would lead him fully into the divine Center of life in the presence of God. But finally the last vestige of external hope was gone. Like so many great religious souls, he had to be brought to utter exhaustion before the complete filling by God could set in. Too many of us have never pursued after God till we are at this point of utter exhaustion. Too many of us have easily stilled the God-hunger in our hearts. Too many of us rely upon God to do a few things for us, while we feel able to take care of the rest. But Fox followed clear to the end of complete disenchantment. He found nothing in the outer world, nothing in himself as a man, to bring him to his Home. And when he surrendered, God came in wholly and in flooding love and joy and peace. "When all my hopes in them and in all men were gone, so that I had nothing outward to help, nor could I tell what to do, then, O! 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."

This was the final release, the entrance upon the full, amazing life for which he had yearned as a nineteen-year-old boy, for which he had sought for seven or eight years in increasing inwardness. At last it was not he that searched; it was God who was active in him. The center shifted from himself to God. He passed out of subjective yearning into energizing from beyond, yet a beyond that was within. "Thus when God doth work, who shall let it? And this I knew experimentally." He knew experimentally what it meant to find that God invaded the soul with a breath-taking rush, crowding all else out, leaving no room for any but Himself. "This I knew experimentally." This, I take it, was an experience of power, the irresistible power of God. It comes to us at last, at the end of the search. When He comes in, power comes in. And when He came in, fully, when the last reserve in him was gone, Fox knew a new power in living. He became a triumphant, victorious, conquering personality. Men cowered before his piercing eyes as before the penetrating eyes of God, that look through all shams. The heaven-guided life is a life of power, triumphant, amazing, victorious power. Fox discovered it himself; he saw that power working outside him, in others. He relied upon it.

His experience of power was tempered by an overwhelming experience of the love of God. "At another time I saw the great love of god, and I was filled with admiration at the infiniteness of it. . . . One day I was walking solitarily abroad, and was coming home, I was

taken up in the love of God, so that I could not but admire the greatness of His love."

And in the power and the vigor and the confidence of the Apostolic days, he and his followers set out to restore the Christian Church to its lost vigor and life. The early Quakers were founding no sect; they were reforming Christendom, that had slumped into externals and had lost its true sense of the immediate presence and the creative, triumphant power of the living God within us all. They had a message for all, for they had discovered that "the Lord Himself had come to lead His people."

And in that same way the Quaker discovery, not of a doctrine, not of a belief, but of a Life, a life filled with God a life listening, obedient, triumphant, holy—in that same way the Quaker discovery was only a rediscovery of the life and power and fellowship and joy and radiance which moved the early Church. Its rediscovery today is desperately needed, for the fellowship of believers has grown dim, and only a few clear voices ring out in the twilight. You and I can be the instruments of the opening of God's life. But it is heroic work, not work for the milder Quaker. The fires of God burn bright. In their light we are judged or consumed, in their light the world is condemned. In their light we may discover what so many have really lost, namely, God Himself. And what is a greater discovery?

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Chinese landscape paintings frequently puzzle Western observers. They seem to be so bare, so simple. A jutting crag, a tumbling waterfall, a brook flowing out of illimitable distance, a moving tree overhanging the brook. And between and around the objects lie vast spaces, unbroken stretches of uniform background out from which these few powerful hills, or swinging brooks, or rhythm-filled trees project. Can it be that the Chinese artists have only rudimentary skill and artistic sense and can proceed no further in their painting? Did they not know how to fill the surface to the full? Yet critics tell us they are the world's masters of landscape.

There is a profundity and a subtlety in such pictures that we never should have missed. Such painting carries the universe in its bosom. It sets forth the Infinite, the Everlasting Background and Source of all things, and shows us the infinite particulars as outjutting revelations of Itself. Out from It they came, back into It they retire. There is no disconnection; the finite is a fragmentary disclosure of the Infinite, a rhythm-filled continuation of that unspeakably full Life which gives it birth.

There is no barrenness in the picture. For those open spaces are the fullest part of the scene. Space surrounds and embraces the rock and wind-moved trees in its tender, mighty clasp. It extends behind all objects as their common background. All spaces are one Space. All things have a final Environment and Mother. Sit before a painting of a few bamboos, a few joints that are resolved, here and there, out of the undifferentiated background. It is enough; one worships; one cannot ask for more.

For the open spaces are the analogue of the silences in a meeting for worship. Too full for articulate expression, the glory and fullness of the Infinite can only be portrayed by the unbroken silence. Unhurried, unhurried, we feel our way back to the world's Mother, as the child feels its way to its parent's arms. And there the Unspeakable is enough, fuller than expostulations and assurances. Yet again and again from out that background emerge words, outthrusts of the Divine Life, a few sentences uttered in time yet pronounced from Eternity, a daily matter is set in cosmic frame. Resumption of silence is but the continuation of silence; unbroken space extends behind crag and cascade and river. To crowd the canvas full with finite figures—that were a calamity indeed, that would be to miss the most important part of the picture.

We live in a secularized culture. And what does that mean? It means that we do crowd the canvas full. We leave no room for the Infinite. The daily affairs are—just the daily affairs. No awareness of the background of the Infinite Life, outthrusting, inbreathing, self-

revealing, sets off the day's experience and gives it cosmic sweep and dignity. The primrose by the river's bank is—but a primrose. There is no room for wonder, for glory, for worship in the secular mind. A spade is a spade, a saint is a collection of atoms, the Cross is made of cellulose.

The secular mind of our day lacks depth, it lacks that dimension whereby the finite is bound to the Infinite. We crowd the canvas full. We must keep the radio going, or hurry away to the movies, or the next committee, or hunt for conversation, or figet till we find three more for bridge. Laurence Binyon, in his *Spirit of Man in Asian Art*, says we Westerners are afraid of space, of all-filling, all-embracing space. Awful, awe-inspiring, it engulfs us all. But we dare not become aware of it. We cover it over with the near, the local, the detailed. And, filling the canvas with such, we say there is no Infinite Background, when we have blotted it out. The secular mind is too much ours, as individuals, as a culture.

But now and again one finds a life so lived that its daily deeds are set in a frame of Eternity. There is a spaciousness about such a life. Majestic space is its aura. Unhurried and sure, it breathes forth out of the Everlasting. The odor of the Ageless is upon it. By its serenity we are shamed and recalled. Shuddering and quieted we turn again Home.

Like personality ringed by Eternity, Quaker worship has gigantic meaning. Like the Chinese landscape it portrays the Infinite and its relation to the finite, the Unspoken and Unspeakable and its relation to the

spoken and the thought. It is an acted drama of the true nature of things, of man and God. It is the antithesis of the secular mind. It holds the secret of Reality in itself, that secret after which a semidiscontented, semi-disillusioned secularity is seeking, yet knows not what it seeks. For it restores wonder, glory, radiance, worship, the deepest responses of men to the deepest secrets of God and of His world.

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