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INFLUENCES OF WILLIAM PENN

By Dr. William W. Comfort

Address before the Society in the Old Custom House, Philadelphia
December 9, 1944

Mrs. Huber, members of the Society of Schwenkfeldian Exiles: It is always a satisfaction to a speaker to be asked to speak twice before the same organization. The first time both he and they take a chance, but the second time the choice should be made with some intelligence.

The last time I spoke before you was when my friends Samuel K. Brecht and Dr. Anders were still living and prominent members of this Society. The meeting this year naturally recalls William Penn. The Pennsylvania public appears to have been insatiable in regard to William Penn and each group requires a slightly different presentation. This one this evening evidently requires quite a different presentation from that which might be made before a Kiwanis Club, for instance, or a women's club, let us say, or various other groups each having its special interest.

Now, of course, you and I have something in common; in fact, we have a great deal in common. We all belong to a Separatist group. You are familiar with the general tendency of these little Separatist groups of religious people, who, either in the late Middle Ages separated from the Roman Catholic Church or in the 16th and 17th centuries separated from the Protestant Churches. They are all marked by certain characteristics. They were convinced that the churches which we may call established churches, were in the apostasy. That was their word for describing that the established churches had gone astray from their original purposes and these groups strived to attain the beauty and individual responsibility of what they felt was primitive Christianity. The medieval groups are represented by the Poor Men of Lyons, the Waldenses and the Albigenses.

In the 16th and 17th centuries the separation was out of the Protestant Church and all of these Separatist groups are marked by the conviction that the Protestant Reformation had not gone far enough, that it stopped short of its logical goal. These Separatist groups are also marked by sharing in general certain convictions. They all represent a belief in a spiritual communion rather than in an external church. It is a spiritual communion, you understand, which means sincerity, individuality. So far as the sacraments were concerned they tended to interpret them spiritually. There were only two Protestant sacraments left of the seven

Roman Catholic sacraments. I refer, of course, to baptism, about which there was a variety of theory and practice, and also the Eucharist or Communion. Some of the Separatist groups observed these two sacraments, others did not, and others observed them only as symbols of an interior and spiritual state.

They were all keen students of the Bible at a time when it wasn't easy to have a Bible and less easy to read it if one did have it, and the Scriptures were second in importance only to the Spirit that had dictated them. You catch that distinction: the established Protestant Churches regarded the text of the Bible as something that was final, definite, never to be changed, an ultimate blueprint for not only church but also state. Calvinists and Lutherans very largely shared that conviction in regard to the permanent validity of the text of the Bible as they had it. There were a good many different texts but that didn't discourage them from having the most implicit trust in the text of the Bible as they possessed it.

But these Separatists were all waiting for further revelation of the divine will. Caspar Schwenckfeld referred to that period of waiting as "the Stillstond," a very keen and lively anticipation of further revelation which was to come in God's own time for these people who were dissatisfied with the fact that the Protestant Churches had established an alliance with the State. These Churches belonged to certain political groups which sometimes fought each other. But these Separatists didn't believe in fighting. They were men of peace. They didn't believe in taking oaths, either; they believed in the veracity and validity of the spoken word. Their yea was yea and their nay was nay.

They were simple plain people with ministers, both men and women, who had the gift of the holy spirit, not by being ordained by man's hand but by receiving the gift of the Holy Ghost. And these people communicated with each other, as you know, by itinerant ministers and by writing epistles from one group to another. Now, that is all characteristic of these little vital cells which in the 16th and 17th centuries were established by men like Boehme and Entfelder and Bünderlin and Schwenckfeld and Menno Simon and Denck and Franck and Castellio. Those are some of them—all of them very spiritually minded men, and all of them marked by some common characteristics to which I have very superficially and briefly referred.

Now, that was the situation amongst the forward-looking and waiting groups in the Protestant Churches by the early 17th century. England, too, during the first half of the 17th century, was full of people who had come to be called Seekers, because, though some of them didn't know

what they wanted, they all knew that they didn't want what was offered and were hoping and looking for something spiritually better, higher, more exacting, more personal, than the hypocrisy and insincerity and the gross immoralities that prevailed among church members in England in the 17th century.

Caspar Schwenckfeld owed, I suppose, his turn toward religion and religious life to Luther. He makes that quite plain, but it didn't take him long to drift away from Luther. Luther was too hidebound and too much mixed up in political affairs to have a free hand. Schwenckfeld kept his hand free even if it cost him exile from Silesia, even though it cost him a life spent in wandering up and down through the more favorably inclined provinces of Germany and the Low Countries, because that is where the Separatist movement has always been strongest, in the country they are fighting over now, between Holland and Southern Germany.

I want to point out what perhaps you have not thought of, that there was a great deal in common between Schwenckfeld and William Penn, though Schwenckfeld died almost a hundred years before Penn was born. They were both well-born men, they were both men of financial substance and they were both very well educated—university men, as they say in England. And I like to think, and I suggest it for your thought this evening, that if Caspar Schwenckfeld had had the opportunity to do what Penn did, the opportunity of founding this province of Pennsylvania in 1681, probably he would have produced a province not very unlike the province produced by William Penn. The two men had so much in common. They were not heterodox theologically. These Separatists held the same fundamental theology which all Christians hold and which William Penn once in a sermon that has been preserved very briefly put as follows: "God made all good and man made all bad; Christ came into the world to make all good again." I don't know that anyone could much improve for brevity on that orthodox statement, for all Christians have held that the only possible redemption for fallen man is through Jesus Christ. That is the program to which all Christians, with variations on the unessentials, subscribe. It took John Calvin four big volumes to say that, but, of course, he ran up every sideline and went into the whole question of the institution of the church, in that great work which we call, "The Institutes of Calvin." The difference then between these people that we are talking about this evening and the conformist churches was one of emphasis, one of practice and of worship, not of theology.

I thought you might be interested in hearing what I have come to think were the factors which enabled William Penn to do what he did.

They are factors for the lack of which no one else did what Penn did, for Penn is unique. He is the greatest colonial founder of the British Empire and the greatest colonial governor in America; there is no rival, there is no competitor. When you think of the Winthrops, and Endecotts and Smiths, and Stuyvesants and Calverts, they have said nothing that is important to posterity, whereas we are just catching up with William Penn. He thought and wrote and did so much for the future that we are not up with him yet. But these other men, they had their little day and only figure in books of history. They did nothing that concerns us; they did nothing to help us face the problems of human society.

William Penn was well born; he had a strong body which enabled him to do a big job, to travel four times on the Continent and twice to Pennsylvania with a hard life all the time in between. He was well educated, far better educated than the average gentleman of his day or of ours—two years at Oxford, practically two years on the Continent when he studied theology under Moïse Amyraut at Saumur in the Loire valley which was the great Protestant Seminary of France in the 17th century. In addition to that he studied law at Lincoln's Inn. He took charge of his father's estate for a time in Ireland, spent a little time in the militia. He had a good all-round education.

You can't do much in the way of founding colonies without some money. It is a large order to establish a colony 3,000 miles across the sea that you have never seen, to get people to go to it, to transport them, to transport yourself and your family, to make all the thousand and one plans that enter into setting up a commonwealth away off on the other side of the world, as it was then. Penn had the money. He used it all and died a comparatively poor man, so far as ready money was concerned. He still had landed estates both in the British Isles and, needless to say, in this country, an estate which was to have 45,000 square miles, a very neat little reserve in the pocket, but it didn't do William Penn any good at the time he died, a comparatively poor man, having put his money into this province of ours.

But he started well—1500 pounds a year from his father's estate alone. His first wife had money and estates; his second wife had money. While we are on the subject of wives, it is fair to say that Dr. Hull, of Swarthmore, in his comparatively recent book on William Penn, accounts for 14 children—7 by each wife, so it was perfectly fair! One may say in this connection that births were not in the 17th century the equivalent of full lives—50% of William Penn's children died in what the French call low infancy, some so low we don't know whether they were to be recorded or not, and I suppose there was a very general discount in all families as to the number who would grow up. But 14 children—if there

were 14—is a very patriarchal family, from our standards. He would have had enough money, however, for all of them to be educated and occupy the place that was the proper one for them in society if it hadn't been for Pennsylvania, which drained him.

Well, I haven't mentioned two other factors. Those first four were important but the next two are essential. He became a Quaker and that made him the kind of man we all think of him as being. And he might have been any one of 50,000 other Quakers in 1680 but he wouldn't have founded Pennsylvania unless his father, Admiral Penn, had advanced so much salary and wages to his crews that the Crown owed the Admiral 16,000 pounds at the time of his death in 1670. There was no prospect ten years later of that sum being paid. Charles II never had too much money for his purposes, and what he did have the ladies got, and William Penn stood no chance of getting this money in cash from Charles II. But he recalled that other people had asked for land across the seas for one kind of service or another, and he suggested, as you know, to Charles II and his younger brother, then Duke of York, that that might be a satisfactory way of paying the debt of the Crown of which he hadn't heard anything for ten years. As Pennsylvania didn't signify much to Charles II, he was glad to get out from underneath that debt in such a convenient way. And to make a long story short, it finally went through, with a very keen sense of responsibility on Penn's part not only to his fellow Friends but to God for the great possibility that was opened up before him in this country.

What are the four fundamental and distinctive features of Quakerism? We can ask Penn for them because he has told us what they were over and over again, not consciously for our purpose this evening, but because they were most upon his heart and you will see, if I am not mistaken, a great deal in them with which you have perfect unity and where your faith and William Penn's touch each other directly. First, there is something of God in every man, a divine light, witness, seed, inward Christ, called by various names but which makes man in part divine in accordance with the first chapter of St. John's Gospel. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. That was the true light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world." Those are the first few verses of the first chapter of St. John.

Those verses are key verses with Quakers, and St. John's is their Gospel because he, more than any other writer in the New Testament, seems to have sensed and expressed the essential unity that there is between divinity and humanity. There is a point where we can sense

and feel the presence of divinity. God reveals himself partly in us and depends entirely upon us for bringing what we call the Kingdom of God on earth. There are no other agents; we are sole agents. It isn't worthwhile to expect some other power or force in the universe to bring anything about; if we don't do it, it won't be done, and that is just as true of peace and ending wars as it is of anything else. You can pray all day long and it won't have any effect, because it is part of the divine plan that man shall do and get what he asks for, and if he asks for war he will get it until the end of time. It is our business to stop wars if we don't like them. But it is useless to pray about it and to exclaim with a helpless expression on our faces, "Oh, why does God allow this dreadful slaughter to go on." We hear people saying that all over the United States. There is nothing to it, friends. It isn't minimizing the power of God; it is making us realize that it is our essential business and that it won't be done under God's plan unless we choose to do it.

Well, that is the first fundamental of Quakerism: it is the divinity in man which makes all human life sacred and inviolable. The other three all derive, in a sense, from that. The next is the universality of grace. There, you say, is some theology at last, and it does sound like theology because in the 17th century men fought and died over the question: Is grace given to all men or only to some? The latter is called the doctrine of limited grace. John Calvin held it and his descendants held it. It is an extraordinary conception of the divine provision that some people, for reasons unknown, should be selected to be the recipients of grace and other people, no matter what they did, never have it. There was only one redeeming feature about it: anyone who held that belief always thought *he* had grace. If you didn't believe that, you were in a desperate state of mind, and William Cowper, the poet, was one of those unhappy men who had sat at the feet of John Newton, who preached that kind of gospel, and William Cowper came to believe he didn't have grace and he was damned for all time and eternity and that is not a pleasant thought, if you take it literally as he did. It drove him crazy at times, as it would anybody.

Universality of grace means that anybody can be decent if he wants to be, that the power is given you by God freely to resist evil and do right if you choose to use the grace; not otherwise; it's your choice. That is a distinguishing feature of Quakerism and I don't doubt it's a distinguishing feature in the mind of a great many of you tonight. It will affect your treatment of other people. You say if I am decent to him he will be decent to me, and that is the explanation of the whole treatment of the Indians by William Penn. You don't need to look for a theological explanation of that, but it is all part of his faith. Generally

speaking, you know, if you want to get something from a person, you approach him in a kind and pleasant spirit and you are more likely to get what you want than if you go up to him with your fists clenched and indicate you are going to hit him on the nose if he doesn't give it to you. Generally speaking—there are a few exceptions—you'd rather throw in your lot with people who hold the doctrine of universal grace—you'd get along more comfortably together.

The third thing is the belief in perfection. That is a little discouraging at first sight because you say you can't be perfect. No, we can't be perfect but it makes a great deal of difference if we try or not. If you don't try you won't get very much above 50, but if you try you'll make a right good mark. Now, the Anglicans in the 17th century in England were not striving notably for perfection. They were easily satisfied with a very slight gesture in the direction of perfection, and then they were through for the day. George Fox says nothing made the professors—that doesn't mean us faculty people, it means members of the churches—nothing made the professors more angry than to talk about perfection. They wouldn't hear of it. Nobody wants to hear of it today so long as he is the victim of pleasant vices which hold him in their grip. But the Puritans were perfectionists with a vengeance and the Quakers were perfectionists without quite so much vengeance, but still to a very marked degree. So they were opposed to all these Restoration recreation and amusements which were not very edifying. They are the equivalent of horse-racing and bingo and so on today, but they were cock-fighting and bull-fighting, bear-baiting, gambling, cards, dice, dancing—all those things which were proscribed both in Massachusetts by the Puritans and Philadelphia by the Quakers in their earliest days of authority. Why? Because those things interfered with the welfare of the soul which in those days was the exclusive business of upstanding Christians. They weren't taking any chances on an eternal future. Their business was to guarantee salvation and anything that interfered with that by distracting their mind from the continuous prosecution of that purpose was to be avoided.

And fourth, the belief in a continuing revelation. Does that mean anything to you? A continuing revelation of God's will. I think that makes more difference to us individually here tonight than anything else I have said, although you may not realize it. If you think of the Christian dispensation as having finished, as far as revelation is concerned, 1900 years ago, if you feel that the curtain was rung down on the Christian stage, that the personality that had founded it had withdrawn from sight, had ascended, as the creed states, into heaven and sitteth at the right hand of the throne of God—you ask naturally, where is it? And

you can't say where. In heaven above? In the earth beneath? Or in the waters under the earth? Who knows? Well, William Penn said, and he was quoting another Quaker, it is only fair to say, although he believed it himself, "if you confine Christ's dwelling to a local heaven you are ignorant of that which is the greatest joy that can be, Christ dwells in the heart."

Now, if you feel that it is all over, as a matter of fact, and that all we can do is for an hour on Sunday morning to try to whip ourselves into a kind of retrospective admiration, faith, and worship for something that is gone forever, why, our faith doesn't amount to much and we belong in the class of people who say, "Well, Christianity isn't practical, of course, in our day," as if our day were something to be proud of as a human accomplishment. That little country at the eastern end of the Mediterranean—what is that in comparison with our great country? It is all old-fashioned, out of date, impossible of application. If you believe that, I don't see why you hold on at all. But if, on the contrary, all of us little Separatist groups believe what was essential in all our founders, that Christ dwells in the heart and it is there that he must be sought and cherished and worshipped, we sit in the quiet of our less ornate meetings and services and wait for the spirit which dwells in our heart to speak and to tell us what our duty is, to comfort us when we are in sorrow, to lead us by this inner light, the Christ within—then it seems to me, we are not perfectly alone and out in the cold, we have a companion, and can speak of practicing the continuing presence of God.

Now, those are some of the things that William Penn believed in and they are some of the things Schwenckfeld believed in, they are what kept our ancestors going under persecution and imprisonment. They can keep us going, too, although in many ways, friends, it is very difficult to maintain the kind of life those men led under the conditions that prevail today—when we are soft, lacking in backbone, seekers of pleasure, mistaking a good time for happiness.

It only remains for me to point out in conclusion that we live here in Pennsylvania under laws which were devised by a man who held essentially the faith that we hold here tonight—essentially, historically. He belonged with us and he would have understood us here this evening. And what was it he put into these early laws. I made a list of what seems to me the most characteristic of his provisions for us, his later citizens. Almost every one of them can be traced back directly to the experiences of the Quakers in England, experiences which were sad indeed for 30 years of persecution and torment, plus the hopes and expectations of these same Quakers in a new world under a new deal with William Penn as their leader. And the reason that your ancestors came to Pennsylvania

early in the 18th century was precisely because these things did prevail. Although he was dead and gone after 1718 Penn had set up certain principles that your ancestors believed in, and here are the political and social provisions of our early constitution.

First, there were to be meetings of the Assembly on a certain date and it could adjourn when it got ready to adjourn instead of waiting to be called and to be sent home at the will of a sovereign as Parliament was treated at this time, and it had power to amend the constitution. You can see at once in the provision for amending the constitution a belief in a continuing revelation. That is the political interpretation of a continuing revelation, an amending of the constitution as new conditions arose and as more light appeared.

Second, the avoidance of war through the Assembly control of tax legislation. The Assembly consisted of Quakers. They wouldn't pass any bill taxing the people for military purposes; consequently, there was no military; consequently, there was no war—until 1756.

Restriction of capital punishment. Why? Because of the sanctity of human life. Restricted from what is alleged to have been 200 capital crimes to 2, where it still is. Murder and treason alone out of 200 were capital crimes. I don't know how it is with your people, but a great majority of Quakers would still refuse to go on a jury where capital punishment is involved.

Next, complete liberty of conscience and freedom of worship, as you know, was provided for from the start as the most sacred right that any man could have. William Penn said once in his letter to the Council and Senate of Emden, the city in Germany: "Conscience is God's throne in man and the power of it his prerogative." A magnificent statement which explains why he stuck to conscience right through his mature life as the one thing which was to be preserved under all conditions—conscience, over which neither state nor church had any control whatever. It was man's individual affair with his God. It was God's throne in man.

Next, the affirmation was treated as the equivalent of an oath for legal purposes. That attitude toward the oath was characteristic of many of the Separatist sects. They wouldn't take an oath. Again, and here's an echo of Quaker persecution in England: "All persons wrongfully imprisoned or prosecuted at law, shall have double damages gainst the informer or prosecutor." That was to discourage the business of the informer which had been active in England. The legal validity of Quaker marriages was established. The humane treatment of the Indians was established because they had grace as well as William Penn's Friends. Education of children over 12 "in order that there may be none idle

amongst us." A public employment bureau over 250 years ago! The abolishment of imprisonment for debt, which didn't take place in England until way down in the 19th century, and the abolishment of jailer's fees—jailers who got fat on the requirements of these people who were sentenced, some of them, to 10 or 15 years for not having attended services in the church. Workhouses were substituted for dungeons in a penal system which made Pennsylvania famous in the 18th century. Punishment of scandalmongers was provided for and was kept until recently in our old Quaker query against "tale-bearing and detraction."

Then there were laws against gaming, cock-fighting and all those unedifying pursuits of Restoration England, and finally, a representative government, an almost real democracy was provided for by permitting voters over 21 to have the suffrage provided they were possessed of a minimum landed property. They were called freemen.

There, my friends, are a few of the Quaker principles which stand out in the early charters, privileges and laws, of this commonwealth, the only State that bears in its name the family name of its founder. And if I am not mistaken it is some such generous and forward-looking provisions as those indicated in these early laws which attracted your ancestors and mine to this province.

All of Penn's business has been finished. Everything important that he suggested has been accomplished except one item of unfinished business on his agenda and that refers to international wars. There he has spoken a word which I hope you know, which you could read in ten minutes, important still today not for the details, because, of course, the conditions of the world have changed, but for the spirit applicable today. He said all wars are caused by three causes: either you want to hold on to something you own which someone else is trying to take away from you; second, to get back something which someone has taken from you; third, to get hold of something to which you have no right and which someone else has. He meant territory. That was what people fought for largely in his day. We mean ideologies, freedoms, privileges, which we feel are sacred, which we want to hold on to if someone wants to give or quit in order that he may keep the rest and by this establish- to get them back. That goes a long way to account for wars, but what I think is the golden text is this—"something everyone must be willing to give or quit in order that he may keep the rest and by this establishment be forever freed from the necessity of losing more." It's the spirit of being willing to meet around a council table in a league of nations, in a European diet as Penn called it, and be ready to contribute to a solution which shall be of benefit to the whole world, for the world is too small now for any to hold off and say the welfare of the world doesn't concern us.

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