

Readings for “Quaker Basics”, Week 2

John 1:9 (NRSV)¹

⁹ The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. [a]

John 1:9 Or *He was the true light that enlightens everyone coming into the world*

Matthew 28:20 (NRSV)

²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” [a]

Matthew 28:20 Other ancient authorities add *Amen*

Isaiah 7:14 (NRSV)

¹⁴ Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman^[a] is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. ^[b]

Isaiah 7:14 Gk the *virgin*

Isaiah 7:14 That is *God is with us*

Matthew 1:23 (NRSV)

²³ “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.”

<http://www.pym.org/faith-and-practice/friends-beliefs-and-practices/the-light-within/>

The Light Within

The Light Within is the fundamental and immediate experience for Friends. It is that which guides each of us in our everyday lives and brings us together as a community of faith. It is, most importantly, our direct and unmediated experience of the Divine.

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Week2

Friends have used many different terms or phrases to designate the source and inner certainty of our faith—a faith which we have gained by direct

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experience. The Inward Light, the Way, the Truth and the Life, the Spirit of Truth, the Divine Principle, the Christ Within, the Seed, and the Inner Light are examples of such phrases. George Fox refers in his Journal to “that Inward Light, Spirit, and Grace by which all might know their salvation” and to “that Divine Spirit which would lead them into all truth.” He wrote: “There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition” and encouraged Friends “to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in every one.” Many Friends interpret “that of God” as another designation for the Light Within.

For Friends, the Light Within is not the same as the conscience or moral faculty. The conscience is a human faculty, which is conditioned by education and the cultural environment; it is not, therefore, an infallible guide to moral practice. It should nevertheless be attended to, for it is one of the faculties through which the Light shines. Friends are encouraged to test the leadings of conscience by seeking clearness, through direct communion in the meeting for worship, and through the clearness process. Such testing enhances and clarifies insight so that the conscience may be purged of misconceptions and become more truly obedient to the Light Within. When conscience has been transformed by experiencing the Light, it gives direction that is more reliable even though it may seem to point in a direction that is contrary to generally accepted authorities.

Friends’ experience has been that following an enlightened conscience brings a release of the spirit and also a state of peace that are independent of the tangible results of the action taken. Spiritual power arises from living in harmony with the divine will. George Fox often spoke of the power he experienced in times of need, and of that relationship between power and the Light. For instance, he writes that “the power of God sprang through me,” and, he admonishes us, “hearken to the Light, that ye may feel the power of God in every one of you.”

Continuing obedience to the Light increases our gratitude for God’s gifts. Among these are an awareness of enduring values, the joy of life, and the ability to resolve problems in accord with divine leading, as individuals or as a Meeting. Under the guidance of the Light, the monthly meeting is enabled to use and transform the aspirations and judgments of its members. This practice helps the Meeting make decisions and face undertakings in a spirit detached from self-interest or prejudice. Basic Quaker testimonies such as

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equality, simplicity, nonviolence, integrity, and community have arisen from a deep sense of individual and corporate responsibility guided by the Light Within.

Recognizing that God’s Light is in every person overcomes our separation and our differences from others and leads to a sympathetic awareness of their need and a sense of responsibility toward them. Friends believe that the more widely and clearly the Light is recognized and followed, the more will humanity come into accord. “Therefore,” writes George Fox, “in the Light wait, where unity is.”

<http://www.pym.org/faith-and-practice/extracts-from-the-writings-of-friends/belief/>

Belief

Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. (Hebrews 11:1).

Introduction

Quakers have traditionally been wary of creedal statements as limiting our understanding of God. Friends of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting have further avoided prescribed declarations of faith and statements of essential truths as hindrances to communication with the Divine.

The rejection of creeds does not imply the absence of doctrine or statements of belief. From the earliest times of our society, individual Friends, as well as small groups of Friends and Friends’ Meetings, have issued written statements of their beliefs to the world. Among the doctrines finding wide acceptance by Friends are a universal saving light and continuing revelation. The selections that follow explore these and other beliefs widely shared among Friends.

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3

What is the Quaker faith? It is not a tidy package of words which you can capture at any given time and then repeat weekly at a worship service. It is an experience of discovery which starts the discoverer on a journey which is life-long. The discovery in itself is not uniquely a property of Quakerism. It is as old as Christianity, and considerably older if you share the belief that many have known

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Christ who have not known His name. What is unique to the Religious Society of Friends is its insistence that the discovery must be made by each man for himself.

No one is allowed to get it second-hand by accepting a ready-made creed. Furthermore, the discovery points a path and demands a journey, and gives you the power to make the journey.

—Elise Boulding, 1954

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There is a principle which is pure, placed in the human mind, which in different places and ages hath had different names. It is, however, pure and proceeds from God. It is deep and inward, confined to no forms of religion nor excluded from any where the heart stands in perfect sincerity. In whomsoever this takes root and grows, of what nation soever, they become brethren in the best sense of the expression. Using ourselves to take ways which appear most easy to us, when inconsistent with that purity which is without beginning, we thereby set up a government of our own and deny obedience to him whose service is true liberty.

—John Woolman, 1774

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We need to guard against under-valuing the material expressions of spiritual things. It is easy to make a form of our very rejection of forms. And in particular we need to ask ourselves whether we are endeavoring to make all the daily happenings and doings of life which we call “secular” minister to the spiritual. It is a bold and colossal claim that we put forward—that the whole of life is sacramental, that there are innumerable “means of grace” by which God is revealed and communicated—through nature and through human fellowship and through a thousand things that may become the “outward and visible sign” of an “inward and spiritual grace.”

—A. Barrett Brown, 1932

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Quakerism in spirit and ideal is neither a form of Roman Catholicism nor a form of Protestantism. Protestantism in its original, essential features called for an authoritative creed, specific sacraments, and an authentic form of ordination. Quakerism at its birth was a fresh attempt to recover the way of life revealed in the New Testament, to re-interpret and re-live it in this present world.

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Its founders intended to revive apostolic Christianity. They did not intend to create a new sect. They carefully avoided calling themselves a “Church.” They were content to be a “Society of Friends.” George Fox said: “The Quakers are not a sect but are [a people living] in the power of God which was before sects were.”
—Rufus M. Jones, 1937

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If God ever spoke, He is still speaking. If He has ever been in mutual and reciprocal communication with the persons He has made, He is still a communicating God as eager as ever to have listening and receptive souls. If there is something of His image and superscription in our inmost structure and being, we ought to expect a continuous revelation of His will and purpose through the ages.... He is the Great I Am, not a Great He Was.
—Rufus M. Jones, 1948

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By ethical mysticism I mean that type of mysticism which first withdraws from the world revealed by the senses to the inward Divine Source of Light, Truth, and Power, and then returns to the world with strength renewed, insight cleared, and desire quickened to bind all life together in the bonds of love. These bonds are discovered by this process of withdrawal and return because the one inward Divine Source is itself the creative unity which seeks to bind all life together. But there is no necessary chronological order in the world of spirit. It may be that the desire to penetrate to the creative unity in the depths of the soul was first aroused by finding it in the outward affairs of daily life.
—Howard Brinton, 1967

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To say that Friends have no creed is not to say that each Friend has no belief. Far otherwise. Each one, and each group, has the responsibility to seek, and seek, and seek again where the Light is leading; to find what the life of God means in the life of man; to wrestle with the great facts and mysteries in the heart of our Christian experience, and to know what we believe about them. It is only when we have formulated our faith for ourselves that we can communicate it to others or know its incisive power in our own day-to-day discipleship.

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—Hugh L. Doncaster, 1963

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In this day and age the place where Friends find their unity is in the kind of God they worship. Their apprehension of the relationship of Jesus Christ to God embraces every orthodox and unorthodox shade of theology from unitarian to trinitarian; but whether we regard Jesus...as God himself or as the supreme revealer of God to man, it is the same kind of God: a spirit of peace, truth, love, and redeeming power. We need to feel the influence of this spirit in our lives rather than to argue about our different modes of apprehending Him. Directly we begin to chide each other for orthodoxy or unorthodoxy, we cease to be the catholic body we are; for the logical end of such chiding is sanctions and the excluding of the weaker body by the stronger. Let us keep our different modes of apprehension and remember always that it is the same God we serve, revealing Himself to each according to his faith, his openness, and his need.

—Beatrice Saxon Snell, 1961

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The primary doctrine of the Society of Friends declares that the Presence of God is felt at the apex of the human soul and that man can therefore know and heed God directly, without any intermediary in the form of church, priest, sacrament, or sacred book. As present in man, God is both immanent and transcendent: immanent because He is not mechanically operating on man from without but sharing in his life; transcendent, for the Divine Life extends infinitely out beyond and above all human life. Many figures of speech are used to designate this Divine Presence which as immanent in man is personal, and as transcendent, is super-personal. It is a “Light,” a “Power,” a “Word,” a “Seed of the Kingdom.” God dwells in man to guide him and transform him into the likeness of His Son. Man’s endeavor should be to merge his will with the Divine Will, as far as he is able to comprehend it, and by obedience to become an instrument through which God’s power works upon the world. To seek such a goal is to seek to be an embodiment of the Divine Life through unity with it. In this search man’s life acquires unity and purpose.

—Howard Brinton, 1940

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It is easy to misconstrue “Inner Light” as an invitation to individualism and anarchy if one concentrates on the subjective experience known to each one. But it is an equally important part of our faith and practice to recognise that we are not affirming the existence and priority of your light and my light, but the Light of God, and of the God who is made known to us supremely in Jesus.

—Hugh L. Doncaster, 1972

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As a black Quaker, I see the Inner Light as the great liberator and equalizer able to erase the psychological deficits of racism. The internalization of this divine principle has the potential to remove the sense of powerlessness that so often characterizes the thinking of the downtrodden. For if the Divine Light is the Seed of God planted in the souls of human beings, in that Seed lies all the characteristics of its source. Consequently, the Light within is also the Divine Power within. It is the indestructible power in us that is able to create from nothing, able to make ways out of no way, able to change what appears to be the natural order of things. It is the power in us that can never be overcome by the darkness of fear and hatred or altered by the might or money of people. It is the power in us in which lies unfathomable capacity to love and forgive even the most heinous of crimes.

—Ayesha Clark-Halkin Imani, 1988

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As a teenager I looked for proof of the existence of God, but soon realised that there would be none. I chose to adopt as a working hypothesis a belief in God, and to go on from there. I have not felt the need to revise that hypothesis—yet. I believe in a powerful, all-knowing God, but a caring and a forgiving God. I believe he says to us: “All right, you’ve got life, get on with it, live it! I am there behind to guide you, to help you live it; but don’t expect me to interfere to make life smooth for you—you are old enough to stand on your own two feet.”

From what I have learnt as an astronomer I believe that the Universe evolved itself without any active participation from God, and it seems reasonable to me that the world continues, at least on a grand scale, to evolve by itself—that God does not directly interfere with the running of the world; but that he does through people and

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their attitudes....

I believe that we are God’s agents in this world and that he may require things of us. A lot of my effort goes into trying to understand what God expects of me. I do this by trying to maintain an orientation towards God—to live my life in the spirit—to bring my whole life under the ordering of the spirit of Christ—to acknowledge my discipleship.

—S. Jocelyn Burnell, 1976

<http://www.pym.org/faith-and-practice/extracts-from-the-writings-of-friends/worship/>

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And the scriptures—some of them are history done in their times when they were written, and some of them are shadows and figurative and typical of things in their times—of which Christ is the substance and end.

So the scriptures of truth is the best book upon the earth to be read, believed, fulfilled, and practiced. And Christ, the substance of them, is to be enjoyed and walked in....

Holy men of God spake them forth as they were moved by the Holy Ghost. So it is the Holy Ghost that leads into all the truth of them, in both the old and the new testaments.

—George Fox, 1689

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We find many renowned women recorded in the Old Testament, who had received a talent of wisdom and spiritual understanding from the Lord. As good stewards thereof they improved and employed the same to the praise and glory of God...as male and female are made one in Christ Jesus, so women receive an office in account of their stewardship to their Lord, as well as the men. Therefore they ought to be faithful to God and valiant for his Truth upon the earth, that so they may receive the reward of righteousness.

—Elizabeth Bathurst, 1683

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[The scriptures] are only a declaration of the fountain and not the fountain itself, therefore they are not to be esteemed the principal ground of all truth and knowledge, nor yet the adequate, primary rule of faith and manners. Yet, because they give a true and

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faithful testimony of the first foundation, they are and may be esteemed a secondary rule, subordinate to the Spirit, from which they have all their excellency and certainty: for, as by the inward testimony of the Spirit we do alone truly know them, so they testify that the Spirit is that Guide by which the saints are led into all truth: therefore, according to the Scriptures the Spirit is the first and principal Leader.

—Robert Barclay, 1678

97

The case of David hath often been before me of late years. He longed for some water in a well beyond an army of Philistines who were at war with Israel, and some of his men, to please him, ventured their lives in passing through this army and brought that water. It doth not appear that the Israelites were then scarce of water, but rather that David gave way to delicacy of taste; but having thought on the danger these men were exposed to, he considered this water as their blood, and his heart smote him [so], that he could not drink it, but poured it out to the Lord. And the oppression of the slaves which I have seen in several journeys southward on this continent and the report of their treatment in the West Indies hath deeply affected me, and a care to live in the spirit of peace and minister just cause of offence to none of my fellow creatures hath from time to time livingly revived in my mind, and under this exercise I for some years past declined to gratify my palate with those sugars.

—John Woolman, 1769

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Wait on the Lord, that thou mayst, from him, feel the right limit to thy mind, in reading the Scriptures. For the mind of man is busy and active, willing to be running beyond its bounds, guessing at the meaning of God’s Spirit and imagining of itself, unless the Lord limit it. Therefore, read in fear; and wait understandingly to distinguish between God’s opening to these words concerning the kingdom and the things of the kingdom, and thy own apprehensions about them; that the one may be always cast by, and the other always embraced by thee. And always wait God’s season; do not presume to understand a thing, before he give thee the understanding of it: and know also, that he alone is able to preserve the true sense and knowledge in thee; that thou mayst live dependently upon him for

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thy knowledge, and never “lean to thy own understanding.”

It is one thing to understand words, testimonies, and descriptions; and it is another matter to understand, know, enjoy, possess, and live in that which the words relate to, describe, and bear witness of.

—Isaac Pennington, c. 1670

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And the end of words is to bring men to the knowledge of things beyond what words can utter. So learn of the Lord to make a right use of the Scriptures: which is by esteeming them in their place, and prizing that above them which is above them.

—Isaac Pennington, c. 1670

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No sincere Quaker can entertain a doubt that the immediate influence of the Spirit was the moving cause which gathered our forefathers in the truth; and that it is the root of our peculiar Christian testimonies.... Here, however, I must observe in passing that our early Friends were not led into their spiritual views of the Gospel independently of Scripture, but in connection with the diligent searching of that blessed book. While they renounced all dependence on human wisdom and learning, it was their privilege to maintain a firm, unshaken hold on scriptural Christianity. The Bible, in their view, was not one of the “appendages” of religion; much less did they regard it as “the letter” which “veiled the mysteries of the kingdom.” On the contrary they hailed it as the divine record by which these mysteries are plainly declared to us; it was their treasure of knowledge, their storehouse of materials for the Redeemer’s service.

—Joseph John Gurney, c.1840

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As to John’s revelations, they are some of that apostle’s last writings, written at a time when he was far advanced in deep experience; and we find that the most deep and mysterious writings of the prophets and apostles are often couched in allegorical similes; therefore, it requires our coming to the same experience, rightly to comprehend or understand them; and hence, when I meet with parts or passages of scripture that I do not understand, I leave them until I may arrive at a state of deeper experience, by which means I have

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come clearly to comprehend and understand some things that, at a previous time, seemed mysterious to me.

—Elias Hicks, 1820

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In making a comparison of the blessed spirit of the gospel with the Scriptures of truth, there is nothing lost to them; for placing it above them is no diminution of their excellency, nor of their character; nor can there be any dishonor brought to the sacred writings, by placing the all-manifesting spirit, and light, and grace of God, through our Lord Jesus Christ, over and above them in the rightful order of God’s manifestations and provisions for the children of men. Nay! truly, it cannot be derogatory to the Scriptures, nor to any other creature here below, to place the second Adam, the Lord from heaven, the quickening spirit above them.

—John Wilbur, c.1850

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I absorbed a great deal about Jesus and the Bible in my upbringing. But I was late in coming to a personal sense of the reality of God and later still in coming to a personal sense of Jesus. I believe it was a combination of the difficult Christian ethic I had absorbed together with the strong scientific temper of the twentieth century that led me to put the demands of truth very high and made an affirmation of belief in something ultimate not easy for me to make.

So, in my thirties, with the spiritual world beginning to open in a surprising way, I was trying, with my twentieth century mind, to understand the role of Jesus in truth and reality. The Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount had been a hero of mine right along. But I was troubled about much that was claimed concerning the Jesus of Christian tradition and also, in some respects, the biblical records. I was particularly puzzled, at this time, by the image of Jesus which comes through in the last part of Matthew 25. Was this merciless judge and dictator—the “Son of Man” now come into a strangely asserted personal power and glory—the same as the Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount, of the prayer shared with his disciples (“thine be the power and the glory”), of the prayer made on his very cross for those who “know not what they do”?

Whatever the merit of my puzzlement—and I believe it had merit—it was at this time that I received an impression of Jesus as a

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personality as distinguished from a figure fixed in the records. I could elaborate on the details of the occasion. Suffice it to say, this living Being seemed to be asking me—somewhat humorously, I thought—whether I imagined that he was any less humble and earnest in seeking truth than I was. He himself—so I understood him to be telling me—is a living Being and need not be thought of as fixed, like a dead specimen, within certain pages of a book.

From that time on I have not been troubled about the credibility of the figure of Jesus, whose meaning in my own life has grown steadily more vivid and present now than ever.

—Ferner Nühn, 1974

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Perhaps you, like me, have had trouble with the ancient laws handed down by Moses. I accepted the Ten-Commandment-core with a Sunday School deference which could never quite make the laws of Moses as real or as important as the laws of science. For me, this began to change when I began to read the Bible in what I sometimes call the Quaker way—that is, reading with both the analytical mind and the intuitive mind leaving plenty of space for the Holy Spirit. On the one hand Biblical scholarship and all the light science can provide; on the other hand, savoring and resting in the meaning, pausing from time to time to stare off into space....

As I reread the Old Testament laws in this more meditative way, two recognitions helped open my understanding. First, I realized, as did George Fox, that most of the laws of Moses were designed for a specific culture of long ago.... Then I began to face the cultural trappings or rubbish with which I had surrounded the concept of law; I realized that I had connected “law” with fallible legislators, judges, policemen, and childhood memories of adults who ruled my life. Even so there is a living core of the Law of Moses which remains as vital as it ever was.

Moses like all true prophets was a seer, for like Newton and Einstein he saw or felt the law as a vital force, not merely as a string of words. I have little doubt that he actually heard the words of the Commandments on Sinai. I also believe that he could not have done what he did if he had not also seen how these laws were an indispensable part of the fabric of the new age fellowship he was to build.

—William Taber, 1984

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What kind of approach to the Bible leads to ... discovery? An intelligent analytical and critical approach has its rightful place. We then stand over the Bible as subjects investigating an object. An inversion of this subject-object relationship is, however, possible. We then approach the Bible not mainly to criticise, but to listen; not merely to question, but to be challenged, and to open our lives penitentially both to its judgments and to its liberating gospel.

Pathways to God are many and varied. Friends, however, along with a great company of other seekers, have been able to testify that this receptive personal response to the biblical message, and especially to the call of Jesus, leads to joyous self-fulfilling life, and to a redemptive awareness of the love and glory of God.

—George Boobyer, 1988

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How much the Bible has to teach when taken as a whole, that cannot be done by snippets! There is its range over more than a thousand years giving us the perspective of religion in time, growing, and changing, and leading from grace to grace. There is its clear evidence of the variety of religious experience, not the kind of strait-jacket that nearly every church, even Friends, have sometimes been tempted to substitute for the diversity in the Bible. To select from it but a single strand is to miss something of its richness. Even the uncongenial and the alien to us is happily abundant in the Bible. The needs of men today are partly to be measured by their difficulty in understanding that with which they differ. At this point the Bible has no little service to render. It requires patient insight into the unfamiliar and provides a discipline for the imagination, ... a crying need of our time.

Further the Bible is a training school in discrimination among alternatives. One of the most sobering facts is that it is not on the whole a peaceful book—I mean a book of peace of mind. The Bible is the deposit of a long series of controversies between rival views of religion. The sobering thing is that in nearly every case the people shown by the Bible to be wrong had every reason to think they were in the right, and like us they did so. Complacent orthodoxy is the recurrent villain in the story from first to last, and the hero is the challenger, like Job, the prophets, Jesus, and Paul.

—Henry J. Cadbury, 1953

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I think that we suffer from lack of biblical study both individually and in groups; I do not urge that this should be done in the regular gatherings for worship, but rather in groups during the week. To restrict our fellowship to the single hour on Sunday mornings is, under ordinary conditions, to impoverish our times of worship. The over-busyness resulting from the changed and difficult home conditions has, I fear, told on this side of our lives and does need distinct attention.

—Joan Mary Fry, 1947

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Though I am not an assiduous reader of the Bible, its wisdom and its cadences are bred in my bones and deep in the fibers of my mind. “The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away.” I can write the words without hesitation, but must look in the Concordance to see where they come from. (Psalm 90, that wonderful one, which begins, “Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations,” and ends, “And let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us; and establish thou the work of our hands upon us; yea, the work of our hands establish thou it.”)

—Elizabeth Gray Vining, 1978

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It makes me sad when I hear discussions about not introducing children to “God” until they’re old enough to understand. I grew into the Lord’s Prayer, and am still growing into it. All religious language, all devotional books, and particularly the Bible, provide growing room for young minds and spirits. Because they have sometimes been used as straitjackets by adults who did not understand, does not mean that they are straitjackets.

—Elise Boulding, 1975

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My own vital relation to the Bible actually began during my early association with Quakerism. One elderly and wise Friend habitually used sections from Psalms in his messages. Some of these fragments began singing through me, and I started using them in my daily meditations. Their value for me then as now is that they

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address the Divine directly rather than talk about Him. At their best, they gather the depth and breadth of Person into an interplay of I and Thou. During one of my early Meetings, a woman, describing Jacob wrestling with an angel, equated this to her own struggle, and pleaded with this angel not to let her go until it blessed her. She lent imagery to a nebulous, inarticulate process going on within me, and her image became permanent equipment of my religious life.

—Dorothea Blom, 1967

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But as I had forsaken all the priests, so I left the separate preachers also, and those called the most experienced people; for I saw there was not one 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 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. Then the Lord did let me see why there was none upon the earth that could speak to my condition, namely, that I might give him all the glory; for all 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. Thus, when God doth work who shall [prevent] it. And this I knew experimentally.

—George Fox, 1647

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My health now in a measure restored, I felt that I should do something for others. No way seemed open that met my desires. I searched my Bible and soon settled it in my own mind, that if I followed Christ I must of necessity live as He lived, and as I traced His life, I learned that it was in doing good, helping the poor, visiting the sick, comforting those in sorrow, lightening the burdens, and increasing the joys of the world. There were at that time few poor families in Richmond (Indiana). These I sought out and aided.

—Rhoda Coffin, c. 1850

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I cannot see the life of Jesus as other than God trying to disclose his love for us and his attempt, at any price, to show us that the cosmos is grounded in love. All hate, all sin, all discord, all clefts, all

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ignorance, all confusion will finally give way to love. But this love, like a strip of wood, has its grain which must be followed. If we follow this grain we will find that we must change the patterns in which we have previously cast our lives. And I do not see how God could have made this disclosure more effectively than by placing his love in the body of a child who was to become a man, and letting this cosmic message shine through the material envelope of a human life.
—Douglas Steere, 1965

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Fox is not interested in drawing people into an assent to a set of propositions about the life of Jesus sixteen hundred years before. That was the cultural norm of seventeenth century England. His mission is to bring people into a possession of what they profess—to help them incarnate the life of Christ as well as to speak of it. That was far from the cultural norm.
—Douglas Gwyn, 1986

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Our growing, mystical consciousness shall transform us into evangelical Christians, bursting to share what we have learned about living in the Kingdom from Jesus of Nazareth, through the gospels, and from our personal discovery of the Christ within—a Christ who is not limited to Jesus and can therefore be good news to men and women of other living religions and to countless humanists who, in being true to themselves and their own sense of honesty and wholeness, will never be able to accept the Christ myth in its traditional form.
—John Yungblut, 1974

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Thousands [are] now mistaken as to the dignity and origin of God’s Spirit in them; they think it is of man, a part of his nature and being; whereas it is of the very life, power, and substance of God. Its descent is as truly from heaven as was that of the Lord Jesus. He came in that low, mean, and ordinary appearance as to outward show and accommodations, teaching us thereby not to despise the day of small things, nor to overlook the littleness of the motions of divine life in our own souls. And when he compares the kingdom of heaven, which he expressly says is within, to outward things, he very instructively inculcates to us that the beginnings of it are small—“a

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little leaven ... a grain of mustard seed ... least of all seeds” (Matt. 13:31-32). This is true in the inward, whatever it may be in the outward, for the seed of the kingdom is the least of all the seeds in the field or garden of the heart.

—Job Scott, 1765

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Jesus’s question in the Sermon on the Mount: “If ye salute your brethren only, what do ye to excess?” What do ye to excess? How often he showed his approval of extravagant generosity when it arose from a simple and pure impulse of the heart. He defended the act of the woman who broke the alabaster box of precious ointment so that she might pour it over his feet. “If thy brother ask of thee thy coat, give him thy cloak also”—in other words, more than he expects to receive. In his parable of the Prodigal Son, the father does not wait to welcome his son at the door of the house; he runs to meet him, and it is the best robe which he puts on him. It is this excess, this extravagance, which we find in God’s love for us, that for me shows the meaning of the word “Grace”.

—Phyllis Richards, 1948

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Perhaps a shortcoming of modern Quakerism can be traced to the great revelation of early Quakers who acted to replace outward cult and ceremony in religious worship with inward spiritual relationships. As the concrete manifestations of inward spirit, i.e. water baptism, laying-on-of-hands, taking communion in bread and wine, were eliminated, an outward, physically present and actively manifested spiritual energy was called for as a replacement. That alternative replacement was, as Jesus described, the baptism and spirit of fire. He called for a physical witness, a continuous entry in the Temple to upset the on-going corruptions of the money changers, the on-going rebuilding of the institutional secular structures of wealth and power, political domination, sexism, and the other demons which interfere with a life of love in practice. A physical, spiritual activation of the inward Light was imperative. Without it we would simply be left with a passive, inward spirit with no function but to nourish our own individual idiosyncrasies. Without the outward expressions of the inward spirit, the fire would be truly only a moderate one, if a fire at all. The loss of the outward witness in turn reduces the flame which kindles the inward spirit as well.

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Inward revelation cries out for the outward spiritual witness of pacifism and nonviolence, which leads to courtrooms and prisons when practiced before the bastions of power. It cries out for corporate radical community, which characterized the first meetings.
—William Durland, 1988

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To allow [the] inward work to take place is to allow the universal Light of the eternal Christ to reveal our sundered and separate individualism, our own areas of darkness and sin, and then to cooperate with this Light as it seeks to transform, guide, gift, and empower us....

This inward work takes time and may cause us to make painful changes in our life as we become more and more sensitive and obedient to the inward guide....

It is this inward work of Christ, and not our verbal statements about Christ, that can produce that amazing unity in a gathered meeting for worship, a gathered meeting for business, or a gathered opportunity between two people. And finally, it is this inward work of Christ that leads inevitably to the important outwardness of Quakerism; to a life able to behave in all those ways which Jesus taught and in which he led the way, to a living equality of men and women, to a radiant and supple pacifism that comes not merely from books or movements or anger but that wells up from deep inner springs.

—William Taber, 1984

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It is not enough to hear of Christ, or read of Christ; but this is the thing—to feel him my root, my life, my foundation; and my soul ingrafted into him, by him who hath power to ingraft. To feel repentance given me by him, faith given me by him, the Father revealed and made known to me by him, by the pure shinings of his light in my heart; God, who caused the light to shine out of darkness, causing it to shine there; so that in and through him, I come to know, not the Son himself only, but the Father also.

—Isaac Penington, 1670

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Perhaps what we are now considering is the question: What was the central concern of Jesus? I may say quite simply, The

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answer to that question is: human conduct.... [For Jesus there] are not primarily questions of religious ritual... [nor] questions of philosophy, or theology or belief. There are rather questions of how you should behave.... Jesus, in his teaching, would not be asked ... abstract questions nearly as much as ... questions about the will of God for our conduct.

—Henry J. Cadbury, 1961

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Consider now the prayer-life of Jesus. It comes out most clearly in the record of St. Luke, who leaves us with the impression that prayer was the most vital element in our Lord's life. He rises a great while before day that he may have some hours alone with His Father. He continues all night in prayer to God. Incident after incident is introduced by the statement that Jesus was praying. Are we so much nearer God that we can afford to dispense with that which to Him was of such vital moment? But apart from this, it seems to me that this prayer-habit of Jesus throws light upon the purpose of prayer.... We pray, not to change God's will, but to bring our wills into correspondence with His.

—William Littleboy, c.1937

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I do not know if Jesus is God, or the divine son of God, or the only mediator, or a saint among other saints. I don't claim to understand those things which only God can know, but I sense the reality of this Christian mystery that makes God's promise and requirements more than words. This Jesus offers his life as a ransom for many. He dies for the multitudes. He gives himself to draw all into salvation. In his life and death we sense the love and power of God. We are called to follow. We are called to do the same for the sake of all.

—Carol Reilley Urner, 1994

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Pain isolates one. It pervades everything; blackens the sky, pushes other humans away, reduces music and poetry and the outside world to dullness; grinds on and on endlessly.

Some say Christianity is a morbid religion, over-emphasizing a Christ tormented on a cross. I can only say that even as a child I could sometimes comfort myself in pain by remembering his

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suffering.... It was Jesus the man, enduring agonising pain in terrible loneliness, who spoke to my condition and brought me sometimes much needed consolation.

—Joan Fitch, 1988

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The resurrection, however literally or otherwise we interpret it, demonstrates the power of God to bring life out of brokenness; not just to take the hurt out of brokenness but to add something to the world. It helps us to sense the usefulness, the possible meaning in our suffering, and to turn it into a gift. The resurrection affirms me with my pain and my anger at what has happened. It does not take away my pain; it still hurts. But I sense that I am being transfigured; I am being enabled to begin again to love confidently and to remake the spirit of my world.

—S. Jocelyn Burnell, 1989

<http://nevm.org/faith-practice/part-2/chapter-1/light-within>

The Experience of the Light Within

Early Friends referred to their inward experience of God in several ways. They spoke of the Seed, the Divine Principle, that of God in every one, etc. But their most common title was the Light of Christ Within or simply the Light Within, a metaphor probably suggested by the gospel of John (John 1:4-9²). The important thing is not the name but the experience of divine guidance which if faithfully followed leads to growth in Christian living.

This inward revelation has not been thought of as opposed to God’s outward or historical revelation in Jesus. The two have been considered as different expressions of the same reality. Friends experience God both inwardly and outwardly, both in the “inward

² John 1:4-9 (NRSV)

⁴ in him was life, ^[a] and the life was the light of all people. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. ⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸ He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹ The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.^[b]

- a. [John 1:4](#) Or ³through him. And without him not one thing came into being that has come into being. ⁴In him was life
- b. [John 1:9](#) Or He was the true light that enlightens everyone coming into the world

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vision” and in history.

Friends feel that this experience of inward guidance not only leads them into right paths; it is also the basis for Friends coming together as a Society. In a gathered group it is the basis of their unity. They feel that as they follow divine guidance, they are bound together in a loving fellowship, that the Light Within brings them into relation with One who is greater than any individual. In this respect early Friends were to be distinguished from similar movements of the seventeenth century, such as the Ranters, for whom any individual leading was valid. Because Ranterism was extreme individualism, it could find no basis for unity and did not continue as a movement.

Friends also feel that God gives light “in some measure” to each of us. George Fox called upon Friends to “answer that of God in every one.” By this he meant that in dealing with others we should be aware of the Light which God has placed within them and should respect it. In the Quakers’ experience this is likely to lead to a response in the same spirit. At least this has been the Quakers’ faith as William Penn and John Woolman approached the Indians, as Mary Fisher approached the Sultan, Elizabeth Fry the inmates of Newgate Prison, Samuel Tuke the mentally ill, and Rufus Jones the Gestapo.

In the following selections Friends have endeavored to portray this experience.

Every Man Enlightened By Christ

Now the Lord God hath opened to me by his invisible power how that every man was enlightened by the divine light of Christ; and I saw it shine through all, and that they that believed in it came out of condemnation and came to the light of life and became the children of it, but they that hated it, and did not believe in it, were condemned by it, though they made a profession of Christ. This I saw in the pure openings of the Light without the help of any man, neither did I then know where to find it in the Scriptures; though afterwards, searching the Scriptures, I found it. For I saw in that Light and Spirit which was before Scripture was given forth, and which led the holy men of God to give them forth, that all must come to that Spirit, if they would know God, or Christ, or the Scriptures aright, which they that gave them forth were led and taught by.
—George Fox: *Journal*, ed. John L. Nickalls, 1952, p. 33 (entry for 1648).

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Present Experience

The Light Within, which is the central Quaker idea, is no abstract phrase. It is an experience. It is a type of religion that turns away from arid theological notions and that insists instead upon a real and vital experience of God revealed to persons in their own Souls, in their own personal lives. Christ no longer stands for a Being who came to the world to effect a mysterious scheme of salvation, a scheme to be mediated henceforth by men by an authoritative church, after He Himself had withdrawn into the heavens from which He came. Christ is God eternally revealing Himself. God in immediate relationship with men. Christ by his coming did not change the divine attitude; He revealed God as He essentially was and is, and made the fact forever plain that He is self-revealing and inwardly present wherever a human life is open and receptive. We no more need to go somewhere to find Him than the fish needs to soar to find the ocean or the eagle needs to plunge to find the air. If that is true, it is a great and momentous truth, worth struggling for and suffering for. The pioneer Quakers believed with all their mind and strength that something like that *was* true, that they had discovered it, tested it, and were themselves a demonstration of it. I feel as sure of it today as they did in their day. It is not an outdated faith. It is a present experience. There are many of us who can say today: “This is what I have waited for and sought after from my childhood. This is He. There is no other. I have met with my God; I have met with my Saviour.”

We shall do well to proclaim with conviction and demonstration this main truth that God is not absentee, not unknowable, but already revealed, as truly as light or electricity or gravitation or life are revealed, and revealed in the only way in which He could be fully revealed, namely, in a Person. And furthermore we shall do well to declare, so that men will believe it, that the revelation of Him is still proceeding, that we have found Him ourselves and have living relationship with Him and are sure that the spiritual nature of man has access to Him. This kind of experience, the very basis of religion is what “Inner Light” means to us now.
—Rufus M. Jones: *An interpretation of Quakerism*, 1936, pp. 1, 2.
(Wayfarer series, no. 1.) Home Service Committee, London Y.M.

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A Measure of God’s Light To All

And this I declare to all the inhabitants in England and all that dwell upon the earth, that God alone is the Teacher of His people and hath given to everyone a measure of grace, which is the light that comes from Christ, that checks and reproveth for sin, in the secrets of the heart and conscience; and all that wait in that light which comes from Christ which is the free grace of God for the power of Jesus Christ to destroy sin and to guide them in obedience to the light, so shall they come to know the only true God and Father of Light, in Christ Jesus who is the way to Him. And this I witness to all the sons of men, that the knowledge of eternal life I came not to by the letter of the Scripture nor hearing men speak of the Name of God. I came to the true knowledge of the Scripture and the eternal rest...by the inspiration of the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

—William Dewsbury: *Works*, 1689, p. 54.

Known By Those Who Are Obedient

The main differences between ourselves and most other bodies of Christians arise from the emphasis we place on the Light of God's Holy Spirit in the human soul potentially in all human souls, and known in actual experience as these are turned towards the Light and are obedient to it. This direct contact between the Spirit of Christ and the human spirit we are prepared to trust to, as the basis of our individual and corporate life.

From this source all our special “testimonies” flow. The Light of Christ in the soul may be experienced by all: no form of the Divine Grace is the monopoly of priestly caste, through whom alone it can be ministered to others; all believers are called to be priests and in this as in all the service of the Church men and women are equally called to partake. Anyone may experience “the anointing,” and, if this is known, may be called to minister to others of what God has given. We believe in the ministry as a spiritual service for God and men, free and open to any, whether men or women, who are truly followers of Christ, who know His Life in their souls, and hear His inward call. While the Life will necessarily find expression in some kind of human organization, this must not be allowed to cramp the freedom of the Spirit. It is not the organization, but the Life, that will safeguard the Christian community from error and schism. As the Light of Christ is known and followed, as men and women truly live

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their own life with God, they will be kept in unity with Him and with one another.

—Paper presented to London Y. M., 1920, by a commission in connection with the World Conference on Faith and Order.

Not a Substitute for Christianity

The actual mystical *views* of any given period, the symbolism through which these inward experiences are expressed, the “revelations” which come to mystical prophets, all bear the mark and color of their particular age. There are no “pure experiences,” i.e., no experiences which come wholly from *beyond* the person who has them.

The greatest danger from mysticism, and there are dangers, is just *this* of becoming relatively detached from the experience of the race, the illumination of the great revealers of the past. To sever one’s roots in history and in the slowly-gathered content of religious faith, “to build all inward” and to have no light but what comes “pure” by the inward way, is to suffer shrinkage, and to run the tremendous risk of ending in moral and spiritual bankruptcy, with only vagaries and caprices for assets. The sane mystic does not exalt his own experiences over historical revelation, he rather interprets his own openings in the light of the master-revelations. He does not foolishly conclude, because he has a vision of his own, that “the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” is out-dated and unnecessary, any more than the artist, with a “gift” of his own, concludes that he had no need of the inspiring guidance of the old masters. Mystical religion, instead of making the soul independent of Christ and of earlier revelations, rather insists that every hint of the Divine meaning that has come in any age, through any person, is precious, and that the supreme unveiling of the nature and character of God, the highest exhibition of the range and scope of human possibility in the person of Jesus Christ, is unspeakably important for anyone whose main concern is to be a son of God. This religion of first-hand experience is not a substitute for Christianity; it is Christianity alive and vocal in personal experience and in individual love.

—Rufus M. Jones: *Studies in mystical religion*, 1909, pp. xxxiii-xxxv.

Faithful in Humble Stations

To most of us are given some common little jobs every day of our lives. To a very few comes the call to do something

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extraordinary, some great task. The world abounds in men and women who find happiness and opportunities for self-expression in being faithful in the humble stations of life which are theirs at a given time. If we are loyal to the truth as we see it, and respond with our might in the “common” situations in day-to-day living as we face them, the glow of the grace of God deepens and nurtures our faculties for insight and for recognition of the true worth of things and of men.

—Ranjit Chetsingh, “The ground on which you stand is holy ground,” in *Friends World News*, Spring 1975, p. 2.

The Spirit’s Guidance is Consistent

Friends have been convinced that our God is a God of order and not of confusion. As George Fox wrote to King Charles in 1661 about Friends’ attitude to war: “The Spirit of Christ by which we are guided is not changeable, so as once to command us from a thing as evil and again to move unto it.” That is, the Spirit’s guidance is consistent, not leading one person to follow one path and another person an opposite path. Thus, one person’s guidance may be expected to supplement that of another. As we learn to trust one another’s perception, we discover that guidance may be a group experience as well as an individual one. The testimony against war was an early example of this.

—George A. Selleck, “Four questions for Quakers.” Address at N.E.Y.M., 1978. *Quaker Life*, February 1979, pp. 18-19.

A “New Man” Was Born Within

By 1660 [Fox] had taught some 50,000 Friends, as he called them, to sit in silence under the inwardly searchlighting truth which showed up every act or impulse of self-will or self-righteousness. Naturally, they quaked, struggled and despaired for months, upheld meanwhile by fellow-quakers alert to self-made escapes, until finally a “new man” was born within, able to respond freely to positive leadings of the Light, and joy broke through. The Light was also the Spirit of Christ, whose power and judgment Friends had found to be loving.

—Hugh Barbour, “William Penn, model of Protestant liberalism,” *Church History*, June 1979, p. 158.

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The Light Becomes Glorious

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. 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?

—Thomas Kelly: *The eternal promise*, 1966, p. 48.

Living From the Center

THE HOLY SPIRIT is a mighty, rushing wind, and the river of life. It is the pulsing, moving, living, vibrant flow of the power of God. When we are caught up in it we feel the ecstasy of heaven and know that all things are possible, even to the moving of mountains. We know as well that in most of our living we are separated, even alienated, from this power of God and that the very purpose of life is to come ever more fully into harmony with Him so that we rest in the strength of His Being and move in the joy of the flow of His Spirit. When we have become one with His Spirit, it is no longer we who live but the power of the Spirit that lives through us. This is the Kingdom of God, union with God, life in the presence of God, and this is the richness of God’s infinite love. This is living from the Center.

—Francis B. Hall: *Living from the center*, 1980, p. 6.