

RELIGIOUSLY-BASED PACIFISM

By

T. VAIL PALMER



SHREWSBURY LECTURE

“Now was I come up in spirit through the flaming sword into the paradise of God.” GEORGE FOX

8

THE SHREWSBURY LECTURES

In preparation for the tercentenary, in 1972, of George Fox's visit to America and to Shrewsbury Meeting an annual Shrewsbury Lecture is given on some basic aspect of Quakerism. A particular phase of the special emphasis which Quakerism gives to the Christian message is presented.

Number 1 - **Jesus and Judaism and The Emphasis of Jesus** by Henry J. Cadbury, member of the committee who prepared the Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

Number 2 - **The Religion of the Quaker Journalist**, as disclosed in the literature of spiritual autobiography, by Howard H. Brinton, Director Emeritus of Pendle Hill, an adult center for religious and social study.

Number 3 - **The Christian Mission**, the heart of evangelical faith and its relevance for those of other points of view, by Everett L. Cattell, President, World Evangelical Fellowship.

Number 4 - **Religionless Christianity of George Fox**, lifeless manmade religion replaced by obedience to the living God, by Lewis Benson, Sometime Lecturer, Woodbrooke, Selly Oak Colleges, Birmingham, England.

Number 5 - **Weeds Among the Wheat**, A Quaker approach to Christian relevance, by Arthur O. Roberts, member of the Administrative Council, Association of Evangelical Friends.

Number 6 - **The Prophets and Their Message** by J. Calvin Keene, chairman of the Department of Religion at St. Lawrence University, Canton, N. Y.

Number 7 - **The Christ of History and of Experience** by Maurice A. Creasey, Director of Studies at Woodbrooke, in Birmingham, England.

Number 8 - **Religiously-Based Pacifism**, by T. Vail Palmer, Assistant Professor of Religion and Philosophy at Kentucky Wesleyan College, in Owensboro, Kentucky.

Lectures Number 1 to 7 are available from the Quaker Book Service, 328 Fisk Avenue, Brielle, New Jersey 08730 at 25¢. Lecture Number 8 is 50¢.

Religiously-Based Pacifism

by

T. VAIL PALMER

- 1968 -

SHREWSBURY LECTURE

given at

Shrewsbury Friends Meeting

Highway 35 and Sycamore Avenue

Shrewsbury, New Jersey

Sixth Month, 16, 1968

Published by

Manasquan and Shrewsbury Monthly Meetings of the Religious Society of Friends

The Scripture quotations are from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyrighted 1946 and 1952 and used by permission.

- Preface -

The Historic Peace Churches¹ have been charged with over-optimism about human nature, simplistic application of a Love ethic, or impractical idealism, even by those sympathetic toward their objective of the elimination of war. Others have charged them with unwarrantedly giving societal and national dimensions to Christ's teachings which they maintain were intended only for personal daily encounters between individual human beings.

For their part the Peace Churches have frequently considered other Christians as evading their call to discipleship in the area of peace witness and testimony. Too often, they say, the demand of Reinhold Niebuhr and others for a more sophisticated theological approach to war has been used as an excuse to disavow any specific claim upon the church or its membership in relation to war. A retreat into pluralistic viewpoints was always an option for pastors whose congregations espoused a variety of views.

Yet America, once a haven for refugees from military conscription abroad, has seen an entire generation reach maturity without any experience of living in a conscription-free society. For the first time in her history the majority of her male citizens have had military training and are apt to analyze war in terms of military strategy rather than Christian responsibility. Ironically, this situation coincides with a war which no-one declared, no-one likes, and no-one has explained in terms of clearly defined or realizable goals. It bids fair to become a record in civilian-non-combatant butchery as well.

Yet out of similar butchery, undertaken in the name of a just God, the ancient Hebrews began to conceive of a more humane and holy war. Vail Palmer traces its development in the Old Testament and demonstrates the emergence of a sense of responsibility upon the part of the People of God that ran counter to their self-interest. Economic gain and the spoils of war were forbidden Israel if she would be faithful to God's will. And in the Scriptural development, the holy war became the Lamb's War, where suffering has a creative role for both society and the individual when it is endured rather than inflicted.

The ancient bugaboo of a just war, which antedates Christianity, needs no mention against this kind of perspective. The end no longer justifies the means. Instead, the Christian is under the imperative of recovering the ancient Hebrew vision of the day when men shall learn war no more and justice and mercy will prevail.

Then, to 'demythologize' Zech. 3:10; "every one of you will invite his neighbor under his beach umbrella and under his penthouse trellis."

Dean Freiday

T. VAIL PALMER, JR.

Vail Palmer, an Assistant Professor of Religion and Philosophy at Kentucky Wesleyan College, in Owensboro, Kentucky, will become an Associate Professor at Rio Grande College, Rio Grande, Ohio, in the fall. He has also taught religion as a visiting instructor at Wilmington College. A graduate of George School and of the University of Pennsylvania, he has a doctorate in Christian social ethics from the University of Chicago.

He is a member and recorded minister of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of Friends, and has been Recording Clerk of New England Yearly Meeting on Ministry and Counsel. He has served as administrative assistant in the office of the Central Committee for Conscientious Objectors, as pastor of the Gonic (New Hampshire) Friends Meeting, and as Assistant to the Executive Secretary of the Middle Atlantic Regional Office of the American Friends Service Committee.

He is author of the lead article in the Spring 1964 issue of **Quaker Religious Thought**, on "The Peace Testimony: Does Christian Commitment Make a Difference?" He is a member of the editorial staff of **Christianity and Current Thought**. As Treasurer of the Quaker Theological Discussion Group, he is also circulation manager of **Quaker Religious Thought**.

He has been a non-registrant conscientious objector to the draft. The Federal District Court in Philadelphia sentenced him in 1950 to a year and a day in the Federal prison in Danbury, Connecticut, for his refusal to register. The same court sentenced him again, in a second prosecution in 1954, to a \$500 fine and three years on probation, for refusal to report for induction into the armed forces. He appealed his 1954 conviction, as a test case on the question of whether a conscientious objector must be required to "exhaust his administrative remedies" when he is religiously opposed to co-operation with the Selective Service System, within which his "administrative remedies" lie. His appeal was heard by an extraordinary panel of all the judges of the Federal Third Circuit Court of Appeals in Philadelphia. Although he lost his appeal by a 4-3 vote of the Circuit Court judges, the minority opinion, in support of his position, was written by Judge Albert B. Maris (who has since then served as Clerk of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of Friends).

RELIGIOUSLY-BASED PACIFISM

by

T. VAIL PALMER, JR.

Not all Quakers today are pacifists. But the Society of Friends is usually thought of as a “peace church,” and hardly any organized group of Friends would ever think of publishing an official statement in support of war. What is there in the religion of the Society of Friends, that convinces so many of us that we cannot, in good faith, go to war?

Clearly, Quakers do not all agree on the nature of the religious grounds for their pacifism. Yet a substantial number of Friends would be able to unite with Sidney Lucas in his claim that the Quaker attitude toward war is based on “the recognition of That of God in every man ... Belief in the existence of something of God in every man led Friends to renounce war and all violence.”² Many Friends would further agree with Robert Byrd’s interpretation of this belief as implying “a complete reliance on man’s inherent capacity to express and respond to goodness.”³

This understanding of the basis of Quaker pacifism—or the Friends’ “peace testimony”—has two glaring weaknesses. First, its key concept, “that of God in every man,” is derived directly from the language of George Fox, the founder of Quakerism. But recent research into the thought of George Fox has made it quite clear that most modern Friends badly misinterpret Fox’s use of this phrase. Careful study of Fox’s writings shows that “that of God in every man” was only a minor theme in his thought. Furthermore, Fox by no means believed in man’s inherent or innate capacity for goodness. Nor is there any evidence that Fox connected his references to “that of God in every man” in any way to his refusal to take up arms.

We most clearly see the second weakness of a peace testimony, based on “that of God in every man,” when we recognize that this view is closely related to, or even identical with, the liberal pacifism that was popular in the Protestant “social gospel” movement, particularly during the 1920’s and 1930’s. The religious thought underlying this variety of liberal Protestant pacifism has by now been largely discredited. Its most effective critic was Reinhold Niebuhr, who exposed its shallow optimism and its inconsistency with the fundamental assumptions of the Christian gospel. Niebuhr was correct in his insistence that, “presumably inspired by the Christian gospel, they have really absorbed the Renaissance faith in the goodness of man, have rejected the Christian doctrine of original sin as an outmoded bit of pessimism.”⁴

The beliefs that underlie the pacifist convictions of many modern Friends are simply inadequate. We will have to abandon any attempt to express in systematic form any sort of religious consensus regarding the basis for the contemporary Friends peace testimony. Instead, we will have to try to re-construct a more adequate religious foundation for this testimony. Many resources are available for this task. In this century remarkable advances have been made in Biblical studies, especially in the fresh understanding of Biblical theology. Quaker and Mennonite historians have provided new insights into Quaker and Anabaptist origins, and Mennonite theologians have produced a number of studies in the theology of non-resistance. On the other hand, these resources, have not yet been widely used by Quaker scholars in the task of formulating a distinctive theology of the Friends peace testimony. The time has not yet come, therefore, for a definitive work, which would sum up a completely reconstructed theology of peace. Our present task is to mine the available historical, Biblical, and theological insights, and to try-to organize them in some fresh way, in order to propose a significant starting-point for the reconstruction that lies ahead of us.

Continuing Revelation

Every theology must include, as one of its foundations, a doctrine of revelation, an attempt to answer the questions: “How can we grasp theological truth? How are God’s nature and reality, and his relation to men and to the world, made known to us?” Many would agree that a distinctive Quaker contribution, in this area, has been our belief in continuing revelation. This belief has, of course, been interpreted in many different ways. Let us begin with a new attempt to interpret the significance of this belief.

What is “continuing revelation”? Negatively, the Quaker belief immediately rules out two possibilities. First, our knowledge about God is not a set of propositions, written down in the pages of the Bible. The literal words and sentences of the Bible are not themselves the final authority. George Fox says that scripture is writing, and writing does not endure for ever, but the word of the Lord endures for ever.⁵ Second, when the Jewish Council of Jamnia and the early Christian Church set the limits of the canon, by deciding what books belong in the Old and New Testaments, they did not finally and completely close the door on the possible sources of authoritative knowledge about God and his relationship to men.

If we are to understand Quakerism as being fundamentally Christian, we cannot allow the doctrine of “continued revelation” to become a denial of the presence of authoritative revelation in the Old and New Testaments. Revelation is not in the literal words of the Bible, but it lies behind those words. Some Biblical theologians today are suggesting that we approach the Bible primarily as “the record of a religious encounter.”⁶ Revelation is the encounter between God and men in particular historical events, through which men of faith became aware of God’s nature and his purpose in history:

When we speak of “revelation” we are referring to a personal encounter in which God makes **himself** known. ... Revelation is not receiving ideas about God, but *is* rather to

meet God, to be introduced to God personally. And the meeting place is the concrete life-situations of history.⁷

The Bible is not simply a history of a particular people. Biblical history is what many theologians today call **Heilsgeschichte**—“salvation-history” or “holy history.” It is the record of events in which God acts with and for men. It is the story of redemption. God’s redemption of man is not a timeless reality, nor is it equally evident in all times and places, nor is it something that occurred only once. There is a history of redemption. Revelation is located in the encounter between God and men; but this encounter takes the form of a redemptive process, a “holy history.”

The men who wrote the books of the Bible had a variety of interests and temperaments, and they dealt with the divine-human encounter from several different points of view. But there is a unity in the Bible which reaches beyond all these differences. The basis of this unity is the Bible’s proclamation of the kingship, or reign, of God. The God of the Bible is the almighty majesty, and we are called to be his grateful and obedient subjects. In his awesome sovereignty he claims rule over the totality of our lives and relationships. All forces in the universe are ultimately subject to his almighty power. The Bible proclaims God’s kingship as his victory over the forces which oppose him, and this victory is won in a series of specific historical events, for the God of the Bible is a God who acts. He acts in human history.

The Bible is “the Book of the Acts of God.” Primarily, the Bible is the account of the mighty acts of God in history. In these mighty acts, God wins his victory over the forces of sin and darkness and establishes his reign on earth. Three events, in particular, are supremely worthy of the title, “mighty acts of God.” The first of these is the Exodus—the escape of the Israelites from Egypt. The second and greatest is the career of Christ, including his birth, ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection. The third is hardly a historical event in the same sense as the Exodus and the Christ-event; it is the expected final “Day of the Lord” or coming again of Christ as the end of the age.

In the mighty acts of God, God meets men in history; he reveals to men who he is and what his will and purpose are. These acts are events in which mighty work is done. God not only reveals his purposes to men; in these events he also begins to put these purposes into effect in history, “with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.” (Deut. 5:15) This knowledge of God and this work of redemption come not only in the three supreme acts of the Exodus, the Christ, and the last days. In a number of other events, God also makes himself known and works his deliverance, to a lesser but still significant extent. Thus God’s call of Abraham, the gift of the land of Canaan to the Israelites, the reign of David, the exile of Judah, the return from exile, and the first mission of the Church to the Gentiles can all properly be called “mighty acts of God,” subordinate to the three central acts, but still important events in “holy history.”

The Quaker idea of “continued revelation” can add an important dimension to this understanding of revelation as a “holy history” of the divine-human encounter in the mighty acts of God. The Gentile mission was not the last mighty act of God before the final end of the age. The eye of faith can see the arm of God mightily at work in at least a few events in the history of the

Church. In such times of creative renewal, new insights into God's purposes for mankind again became available to men and new power for redemption enters into the stream of history.

Divine Commandments

In the Biblical encounters between God and men, God not only reveals his own nature and purpose; he also makes men aware of the ways in which they should respond to his mighty works of deliverance. The proper human response is summarized in two or three astonishing passages: "You shall be holy for I the LORD your God am holy." (Lev. 19:2) "Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful." (Luke 6:36) "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect," (Matt. 5:48) We must be like God! But was not this the great temptation, in the story of the Garden of Eden? "The serpent said to the woman, 'You will not die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.'" (Gen. 3:4-5) Clearly there are ways in which we must be like God, and ways in which we dare not! We may, indeed, be forbidden to imitate God the creator; we are commanded to imitate God the redeemer. But the mighty acts of God are acts of redemption; what we learn about God, through these events, is his nature as the redeemer of all men. And so through these acts, and the response which men made to these acts, we can expect to find answers to the perplexing questions of human conduct: "He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you?" (Micah 6:8)

According to the Hebrew tradition recorded in the Old Testament, the Exodus was followed closely by a series of events at Mt. Sinai-events that we can think of as an extension of the mighty act of the Exodus. In the Exodus God revealed his triumphant power and his **hesed** ("steadfast love" or "covenant-love") to the people of Israel:

"Who is like thee, O LORD, among the gods?

Who is like thee, majestic in holiness,
terrible in glorious deeds, doing wonders? ...

Thou hast led in thy steadfast love the people whom thou hast redeemed ..."

"Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously."

(Exod. 15:11, 13, 21)

At Mt. Sinai, soon afterward, the Lord established a covenant or solemn compact with these people, welded them into a community based on this covenant with God and with one another, and set forth the terms under which this compact was to be fulfilled. According to the Hebrew writers, in establishing the covenant the Lord spoke directly to his people, "The LORD spoke with you face to face at the mountain." (Deut. 5:4) The words which he spoke, according to the Biblical tradition, were the Ten Commandments. "These words the LORD spoke to all your assembly at the mountain out of the midst of the fire, the cloud, and the deep gloom, with a loud voice; and he added no more." (Deut. 5:22) The rest of the commandments of the Law and the prophetic exhortations were given to the people of Israel through Moses and the prophets, as human mediators of God's will. In this concrete way the Hebrew lawgivers affirmed their con-

viction that the Ten Commandments are the central core of God's directions for community life, among the "people of God." All else is commentary.

There is one great theme that runs through this "commentary," however, and clarifies the relationship between God's action and self-revelation and the response that he calls for: "You shall not pervert the justice due to the sojourner or to the fatherless, or take a widow's garment in pledge; but you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this." (Deut. 24:17-18) God's act, as redeemer, freed the Israelites from slavery. Therefore the members of the covenant community were commanded to release their own slaves after a limited period of service; "and when you let him go free from you, you shall not let him go empty-handed; you shall furnish him liberally out of your flock; out of your threshing floor, and out of your wine press." (Deut. 15:13-14) Hebrew justice was biased in favor of the slaves, the widows, the fatherless, and the sojourners—the groups of people who had no protection or security from the natural institutions of their agricultural, patriarchal, tribal society. The justice of the Hebrew law-codes was revolutionary justice; it upset the established social institutions of the day. The lawgivers rightly recognized that: "there will be no poor among you, ... if only you will obey the voice of the LORD your God, being careful to do all this commandment." (Deut. 15:4-5)

According to the Christian tradition recorded in the New Testament, the events of Jesus' life, death and resurrection have made us aware of the fullness of God's love and power. In Christ God has won, through the sharpest humiliation and defeat, the decisive cosmic victory over the forces of darkness. By this victory he has established his royal claim upon all mankind—not just the Hebrew nation—and given to us all the power to respond to his claim. In this Christ-event God has inaugurated his new covenant with his new people, brought them into the new covenant-community, the Church, and set forth the terms under which this new covenant or agreement was to be fulfilled. According to the New Testament, God's Word "dwelt among us, full of grace and truth," (John 1:14) in the person of Jesus Christ. The words of Jesus are thus the words of God, spoken directly to his people: "He who has seen me has seen the Father... The word which you hear is not mine but the Father's who sent me." (John 14:9, 24) In the whole body of Jesus' teachings, then, we see the commands of God which are based on the establishment of his new covenant. These teachings, especially those dealing with ethical issues, are closely related to the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments provide the basic subject-matter for Jesus' ethics. He reaffirmed some of them, increased the extent and the intensity of the coverage of some of them, and in at least one case, he re-defined the Sabbath commandment so drastically that it was in effect practically wiped out.

The early Church looked on Jesus as the one:

who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of man. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him. (Phil. 2:6-9)

Our action, as Christians, is to be like the action of God in this mighty act: “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” (Mark 8:34) Christ’s sacrifice was unique, once for all; and yet Christians and the Church are called to take part in his redemptive servanthood, to “complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body.” (Col. 1:24)

Jesus walked among us “when the time had fully come,” (Gal. 4:4) and the historical circumstances of his human life are decisive in their implications for Christian ethics. What Jesus affirmed has been affirmed for all time; what he rejected has been rejected for all time. The central affirmations and rejections of Jesus can be seen in his reactions to the major political and religious parties of Judaism in his day. He rejected the rigid legal code of the Pharisees: Christian ethics is not to be a code of detailed instructions that cover every possible situation and thus provide the comfort, security, and respectability of knowing in advance precisely what is to be done and to be avoided. He rejected the great material wealth of the Sadducees. And he rejected the dependence of the Zealots on war and on military preparations for establishing justice and liberating the nation from foreign oppression. Accepting these rejections and restrictions is a basic discipline of Christian freedom.

The form of the third great event—the final “day of the Lord”—has not yet been made known to us. It is to result in the establishment of the great City of God, “the holy city, new Jerusalem,” (Rev. 21:2) on earth. There are many visions in scripture of life in this future Golden Age. These visions provide something of a picture of the “good life” which God ultimately wants men to live. Then will the great multitude be able to sing, “Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns.” (Rev. 19:6) Then will all things—lambs and lions, angels and men—live safely together in the “peaceable kingdom.” “In that day, says the LORD of hosts, everyone of you will invite his neighbor under his vine and under his fig tree”; (Zech 3:10) “and none shall make him afraid,” (Micah 4:4) for all the swords shall be beaten into plowshares, and men shall “study war no more.”

On the other hand, there is no single, clear picture in the Bible regarding the way in which this city will come; nor has the time of this great event been told to us.

The relationship between the ultimate City of God and world history, however, clearly has two sides. There is, in the first place, a definite continuity between this world’s history and the goal to which this history is finally destined. In the world-situation in which Christians find themselves, the vision of the City of God sets before us a goal by which we can guide our work for peace and justice and community. This goal acts as a lure; it entices us onward to something better than the city and nation in which we now find ourselves, as “strangers and exiles on the earth.” (Heb. 11:13) It shows the final direction in which we are to try to move the institutions of our society. The ultimate goal is also a “new beginning,” here and now. The power of the New Creation has already come into play in the life of the Church. In this sense, the ultimate goal is already present in our midst, thrusting society forward toward renewal. In particular, the Church is entrusted with the responsibility of becoming a preliminary model of the social order pictured in the City of God. And the values we may achieve here and now will not be just temporary and

passing; “the kings of the earth shall bring their glory into” the New Jerusalem; “they shall bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations.” (Rev. 21:24, 26)

In the second place, however, there is an equally sharp discontinuity between the course of world history and its final consummation. The end-event, the Day of the Lord, is absolutely decisive. The initiative for bringing it about lies in God’s hands, not in man’s. We cannot, therefore, describe the good act, here and now, simply as a direct attempt to achieve the purposes pictured in the Biblical visions of the Age to come. Christian action must remain in the form of the humbled love of the servant of the Lord, even while it is directed with most acute concern toward those who themselves suffer some form of servitude.

From Holy War to Lamb’s War

In the mighty acts of the Exodus, the career of Christ, and the end of the age, God meets man and most fully makes himself known. In these acts he also sets forth his basic requirements for the life of the people that respond to his acts in faith and trust. The other mighty acts of God, the secondary events that mark important turning points in the course of “holy history,” are further sources that enrich our understanding. In them we gain a fuller picture of the activity of the Lord of history and many corresponding insights in to the style of life appropriate to the community of faith. In this lecture we will examine the meaning of a few of these mighty acts, which shed special light on the problem of war.

The Hebrews affirmed that the Exodus was followed by another mighty act—God’s gift of the land of Canaan to the Hebrews: “The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror, with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.” (Deut. 26:8-9) Old Testament scholars insist that, in actual fact, the Hebrew occupation of Canaan was a “long struggle for possession of the land; a conflict whose most decisive phases were not military but cultural and religious.”⁸ What actually occurred was apparently a “gradual merging of the two peoples so that the Canaanites became Israelites.”⁹ Yet the Old Testament writers emphasized the military aspects of the struggle. They described it as a total conquest, in which the Israelites, led by their God, Yahweh, totally defeated the Canaanites.

Perhaps the oldest substantial poetic passage in the Old Testament is the “Song of Deborah” (Judges 5). This song was probably written just after a Hebrew victory over the Canaanites at Megiddo; it was “a battle ode composed in the flush of victory with all the exuberance of a primitive army.”¹⁰ In this poem, the Hebrews sang to Yahweh as a mighty warrior, who journeyed up from the south to lead his people in battle and who wielded the very forces of nature as weapons against the Canaanites and their general, Sisera:

I will make melody to the LORD, the God of Israel.
LORD, when thou didst go forth from Seir,
when thou didst march from the region of Edom,

the earth trembled,
and the heavens dropped,
yea, the clouds dropped water.
The mountains quaked before the LORD ...
From heaven fought the stars,
From their courses they fought against Sisera.
The torrent Kishon swept them away,
the onrushing torrent, the torrent Kishon.
March on, my soul, with might! (Judg. 5:3-5, 20-21)

The early Hebrews, responding to God's leadership at this stage in their history, came to know their God as "the LORD, strong and mighty, the LORD, mighty in battle! ... Who is this King of glory?" The LORD of hosts, he is the King of glory! (Psalm 24:8, 10)

And what was the command of this Warrior-God to his people? According to Deuteronomy, Moses reminded the Israelites:

Then we turned and went up the way to Bashan; and Og the king of Bashan came out against us, he and all his people, to battle at Edrei. But the LORD said to me, "Do not fear him; For I have given him and all his people and his land into your hand; and you shall do to him as you did to Sihon the king of the Amorites, who dwelt at Heshbon." ... And we smote him until no survivor was left to him. And we took all his cities at that time— ... sixty cities, the whole ... kingdom of Og in Bashan. All these were cities fortified with high walls, gates, and bars, besides very many unwalled villages. And we utterly destroyed them, as we did to Sihon the king of Heshbon, destroying every city, men, women, and children. (Deut. 3:1-6)

On numerous occasions, according to the Old Testament writers, the Lord commanded the Hebrews to carry out this form of "holy war." After their victory, the entire enemy city—all the buildings, all the people, often all the flocks—were to be totally destroyed, or "devoted to destruction." The laws in the book of Deuteronomy include a full chapter (Deut. 20) of detailed rules for waging the "holy war" against the Canaanite cities.

The Hebrews can, indeed, be described as blood-thirsty semi-barbarian invaders of the more highly civilized land of Canaan—bent on stealing a rich agricultural country from its rightful inhabitants. But there is another side to the "holy war." In ancient times, particularly, among nomadic, herding peoples, the primary motive for war was the hope of plunder. A victorious people could steal the crops and the herds of its victims. The defeated people would be taken into captivity, to serve as slaves and concubines. But "devotion to destruction" changed all this. In the "holy war" there was to be no private plunder and gain. The main reason for going to war at all was removed. War was to be waged only for a special purpose, on specific instructions from Yahweh. The Hebrews were to renounce their hopes for booty and quick profit. This point is most evident in the account of Saul's war against the Amalekites. This time, the command to wage the war came from Yahweh through the prophet Samuel:

And Samuel said to Saul, ... “Thus says the LORD of hosts, ... ‘Go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass.’ ...

And Saul defeated the Amalekites ... And he took Agag the king of the Amalekites alive, and utterly destroyed all the people with the edge of the sword. But Saul and the people spared Agag, and the best of the sheep and of the oxen and of the fatlings, and the lambs, and all that was good, and would not utterly destroy them; all that was despised and worthless they utterly destroyed.

The word of the LORD came to Samuel: “I repent that have made Saul king; for he has turned back from following me, and has not performed my commandments.” ... And Samuel came to Saul, and Saul said to him, “Blessed be you to the LORD; I have performed the commandment of the LORD.” And Samuel said, “What then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears, and the lowing of the oxen which I hear?” Saul said, “They have brought them from the Amalekites; for the people spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen, to sacrifice to the LORD your God; and the rest we have utterly destroyed.” (1 Sam. 1):1-3, 7-11, 13-15)

When Samuel caught Saul and the Hebrews in their disobedience, Saul thus tried to rationalize their way out; but Samuel was not taken in by this dodge.

And Samuel said,
“Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and
sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the LORD?
Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice,
and to hearken than the fat of rams.” (1 Sam. 15:22)

This magnificent prophetic passage leads up to the gruesome conclusion of the story: “And Samuel hewed Agag in pieces before the LORD.” (1 Sam. 15:33) But the point was clear: Agag was a valuable captive, and to keep him and the best of the captive herds alive would bring a nice profit to Saul and the Hebrews.

Besides this, the method for gaining victory, during the period of the Hebrew settlement of Canaan, were quite remarkable. Joshua captured the city of Jericho, but not by military might. The people obeyed Yahweh’s orders and kept marching around the city, with the priests blowing on their ram’s-horn trumpets, until the walls “came tumbling down.” All that the army had to do was mop up after the victory. Gideon conquered the Midianite invaders, but not by military might. Yahweh permitted him to use only 300 of the 32,000 men who volunteered for his army; their weapons of victory were trumpets, torches, empty jars, and a battle-shout. The terror of the Lord fell upon the enemy, who fled in confusion before any of them was touched by a Hebrew sword. Even Deborah’s victory at Megiddo seems to have been won primarily by non-military means; it was not the Hebrew army but the sudden rainstorm and flood of the river Kishon that mired down the Canaanite chariots and turned the tide of battle.

The Hebrews, during that ancient period of the so-called “judges,” were faced with a problem that has plagued nearly all peoples throughout history—the “problem of the enemy.” It became clear to them that they could not depend on the usual means of dealing with this problem; they were not to be “like all the nations.” (1 Sam. 8:5) In the final analysis, God alone was to be their king and leader, and he would give them victory, if they followed him in complete obedience. They were not to depend on any institution that would guarantee them leadership in advance. There was to be no hereditary king, nor even a constitution providing for regular, periodic election of a commander-in-chief. In each crisis they were to wait for God to act. God would raise up the needed human leader and make him known to the people by a manifestation of divine **charisma**. The Spirit of the Lord would take possession of one man, in a sudden, unusual burst of energy. Without advance warning, an ordinary-seeming man or woman would be able to perform superhuman feats—as with Samson: “The Spirit of the LORD came mightily upon him, and he tore the lion asunder as one tears a kid; and he had nothing in his hand.” (Judg. 14:6)

Nor were the Hebrews to have any standing army—professional or drafted. They were to wait until the charismatic, spirit-filled leader called volunteers to his standard. Later on, David did order his army commanders to take a census of the “valiant men who drew the sword,” (2 Sam. 24:9) and thus to institute a system of military conscription. But the Biblical writer made it clear that in this act David sinned grievously; and in spite of his repentance the Lord sent swift punishment.

The main point of the holy war was this: The nation was to be totally oriented toward God as its leader. The problem of the enemy was to be answered by an attitude of complete faith and trust in Yahweh. The Israelites were to depend so completely on Yahweh that they were to make none of the normal preparations for military defense, “lest Israel vaunt themselves against me, saying, ‘My own hand has delivered me.’” (Judg. 7:2) Only then would God give them victory.

After the period of the “judges,” things changed. Israel became a kingdom around 1000 B.C., and to that extent compromised her original faith. New ways of faithfulness had to be discovered in the new situation. A new type of charismatic leadership emerged. The faith of Yahweh was now expressed primarily by a succession of remarkable prophets. The early prophets were ardent supporters and promoters of the old practice of the holy war. But as the Hebrew nation became more highly organized and grew in commercial wealth, much of the original meaning of the holy war began to fade away. The last great holy war was a revolution stirred up by the prophet Elisha in 842 B.C. Ahab’s son, Joram, was king; Elisha ordered a young prophet to anoint an army officer named Jehu as king. The young man, obeying orders, said to Jehu, “Thus says the LORD the God of Israel, I anoint you king over the people of the LORD, over Israel. And you shall strike down the house of Ahab your master, that I may avenge on Jezebel the blood of my servants the prophets.” (2 Kings 9:6-7) Jehu drove furiously to Jezreel, Joram’s summer capital, killed the king and carried out his revolution by killing off all the king’s relatives and supporters: “So Jehu slew all that remained of the house of Ahab in Jezreel, all his great men, and his familiar friends, and his priests, until he left him none remaining.” (2 Kings 10:11) The holy war had degenerated into little more than wholesale butchery.

Ninety years later, during the reign of Jehu's great-grandson, Jeroboam II, a prophet finally repudiated the holy war of Elisha and Jehu. The prophet Hosea had a son, "and the LORD said to him, 'Call his name Jezreel; for yet a little while, and I will punish the house of Jehu for the blood of Jezreel.'" (Hosea 1:4) The message of the prophets had changed. From this point on, the great prophets began to speak out against the practice of the holy war, and in many situations they also condemned any kind of military preparation or alliance. Hosea spoke out against military alliances with Egypt and Assyria. Later, when the kingdom of Judah was largely under Assyrian control, King Hezekiah and his advisors sought to regain their independence, through a revolt which was to be supported by a military alliance with Egypt. Isaiah sharply denounced this plan:

Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help
and rely on horses,
who trust in chariots because they are many
and in horsemen because they are very strong,
but do not look to the Holy One of Israel
or consult the LORD: (Isa. 31:1)

In denouncing military action against Assyria, Isaiah was making the same point as had the earlier promoters of the holy war: The nation is to trust in Yahweh alone, and not in any form of military power!

Another mighty act of God was the return of the Jewish exiles from Babylonia to the holy land in 538 B.C. Shortly before that date, an anonymous prophet, whom we often call "Second Isaiah" for convenience, delivered his message of comfort and promise to the despairing community in exile. He brought good news: God is about to act again, just as he had acted in delivering their ancestors from slavery in Egypt! The Lord will create a miraculous road, straight across the desert from Babylon to Jerusalem:

In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God ...
And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all flesh shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken. (Isa. 40:3, 5)

This mighty act, in which the exiles will return to Palestine, will be a "second Exodus." It will be a new act of God, like the first Exodus, but even greater and mightier,

For you shall not go out in haste,
and you shall not go in flight,
for the LORD will go before you,
and the God of Israel will be your rear guard. (Isa. 52:12)

This new act of deliverance will come soon and speedily. Yahweh has “stirred up one from the east whom victory meets at every step,” (Isa. 41:2) the Persian emperor Cyrus. Cyrus will be the Messiah of the Lord. By his military conquests he will deliver the people of Israel from their bondage, and with them the Lord will return in triumph to Jerusalem:

How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of him who brings good tidings,
who publishes peace, who brings good tidings of good,
who publishes salvation,
who says to Zion, “Your God reigns.”
Hark, your watchmen lift up their voice,
together they sing for joy;
for eye to eye they see
the return of the LORD to Zion. (Isa. 52:7-8)

The reign of God, which will begin with the return of the exiles, will last forever:

My salvation will be for ever,
and my deliverance will never be ended ...
And the ransomed of the LORD shall return,
and come with singing to Zion;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads. (Isa 51:6, 11)

Second Isaiah’s joyous prophecy was only partly fulfilled. Cyrus did conquer Babylonia, and he generously let many exiled peoples, including the Jews, return to their homelands and re-establish their own national centers of worship. But only a few Jews took advantage of this permission; and life proved hard in Palestine for those who did return. Many economic, political, and religious difficulties faced the Jews there, and the results of their rebuilding satisfied few. Clearly nothing as great as the original Exodus occurred. But the return of the exile was a significant event, and Second Isaiah’s prophecy did give new insights into the action of God and into man’s response. Second Isaiah was wrong in believing that another event as great as the Exodus was about to take place; nevertheless we can judge that he was right in anticipating a new, if lesser, mighty act of God in his day.

Perhaps Second Isaiah’s greatest contribution was his picture of Israel and the ideal Israelites as the suffering Servant of Yahweh. The mission of the Servant is to “bring forth justice to the nations.” (Isa. 42:1) In going about this mission, the scope of his action is highly restrained, yet he persists: “He will not cry or lift up his voice; ... a bruised reed he will not break ... He will not fail or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth.” (Isa. 42:2-4) He is, as a result, despised, misunderstood, and humiliated; but through this he is able to bear the sins and griefs of others. Eventually, “they made his grave with the wicked, ... although he had done no violence”; (Isa 53:9) but the ultimate outcome is one of vindication and triumph at the hand of the Lord.

Six hundred years later, the early Christian Church took this figure of the suffering Servant of the Lord and made it even more vivid and personal by identifying the Servant with Jesus of Nazareth: "Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter and like a sheep that before its shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth." (Isa. 53:7) The Church saw in Jesus "the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing." (Rev. 5:12) And the Church itself was called to participate in both the sufferings and the victory of the Servant, the Lamb: "To this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps." (1 Peter 2:21)

We move on to the 17th century, A.D. This was a time of great religious excitement and enthusiasm in England. Many groups, like the Seekers, were expecting the second coming of Christ at any moment. In 1652 a traveling preacher named George Fox addressed a large group of these Seekers in northwest England. He brought them the electrifying news, "that the Lord Jesus Christ was come to teach his people himself!"¹¹ Fox had, indeed, a striking belief that the final day of the Lord was at hand: "Sound the trumpet of the Lord of hosts, whose terrible day is come and coming."¹² Fox sometimes identified the coming of the new age with the rapid rise of the Society of Friends. The spread of this movement was the occasion for the Lord's judgment: For those to whom Fox and his followers had preached their gospel, the Day of the Lord "is come"; for the rest of the world it was soon coming. "Now you are come before the bar of the Lamb, and his throne, and the bride, the Lamb's wife is come, the true church which was before and in the day of the apostles."¹³ At least some of the early Friends apparently agreed that the Kingdom of God, the final Day of the Lord, had begun to appear in England:

The Kingdom of heaven did gather us and catch us all, as in a net, and His heavenly power at one time drew many hundreds to land. We came to know a place to stand in and what to wait in; and the Lord appeared daily to us, to our astonishment, amazement and great admiration, insomuch that we often said one unto another, with great joy of heart: "What, is the Kingdom of God come to be with men? And will He take up this tabernacle among the sons of men, as He did of old?"¹⁴

George Fox and his followers were obviously mistaken. The new age did not arrive in the 17th century. But to be a Friend today is, in effect, to affirm that the beginning of Quakerism was another of the series of mighty acts of God in history. George Fox's error can be compared with Second Isaiah's miscalculation. If his meeting with the Seekers was indeed the occasion for a mighty act of redemption, then we have as much right to listen seriously to the message of the early Friends, as we have to include the message of Second Isaiah among the witnesses to divine revelation.

Hugh Barbour and Canby Jones have recently pointed out the importance of the idea of the "Lamb's war" in the writings of the early Friends. Seventeenth-century Friends such as James Nayler and Edward Burrough drew their idea of the Lamb's war from the images in the book of Revelation: "The accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death." (Rev. 12:10-11) The great per-

secuting kings” give over their power and authority to the beast; they will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful.” (Rev. 17:13-14) In still another picture of Christ, as the suffering and conquering Lamb:

Then I saw heaven opened, and behold a white horse! He who sat upon it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war ... He is clad in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, followed him on white horses. From his mouth issues a sharp sword with which to smite the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron; he will tread the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. (Rev. 19:11, 13-15)

For the earliest Friends the Lamb’s war was, first of all, a fierce inner struggle. “Its main weapon was the preaching of repentance and the light of Christ within men. The most direct effects of such preaching were inward battles against pride and self-will.”¹⁵ But when Christ had won the first, inward victory, the joy and power that were released sent them forth in a mighty burst of missionary activity, through all England and then to America and the continent of Europe. As Hugh Barbour sums it up:

There were about 500 Friends convinced before 1652, 5,000 by 1654, and at least 20,000 by 1657. Had the pace been maintained, the world would have turned Quaker within a generation. It was a glorious vision for which to live ...

The Quakers linked their victories with the final crisis in which God would judge and transform the world. They formulated no political doctrines, for the whole world was being brought out of darkness into light by the Spirit’s power, and the future of governments was simply a part of this process. The kingdom of this world would become the kingdom of our God and of His Christ ...

Friends knew they lived in time and space. Though the spiritual enemy, and even the battle and the bloodshed, were described symbolically, the Lamb’s victory was an event expected within English history.¹⁶

The Lamb’s war had a number of direct implications for Christian living. Friends testified to the victory of the Lamb in mighty sermons and in their whole style of life. Among other such “testimonies,” many Friends from the beginning renounced war. By 1660 Friends as a corporate body had become convinced “that the spirit of Christ, which leads us into all Truth, will never move us to fight and war against any man with outward weapons, neither for the kingdom of Christ, nor for the kingdoms of the world.”¹⁷ **Never!** Friends were not simply stating their intention of living peaceably under the rule of Charles II. They were declaring their “testimony to the whole world.”¹⁸ Anyone who seriously takes the rise of Quakerism to be a mighty act of God will recognize in these words a final, permanently binding ethical command. These men and women had met the Lord of Hosts, the conquering Lamb, in his mighty, historical act of redemption. Out of this encounter had come a fuller, more definite insight into God’s requirement for Christian living. The Church is not to retire from the world; neither is it to fight with the weap-

ons of war. A great battle against evil continues; its weapons are the preaching of judgment, deeds of suffering love, and firmness in standing fast against all tyranny and persecution.

Revolutionary Faithfulness Today

What does this mean for us today? This review of the record of God's continuing revelation in history has suggested a number of guidelines. The first steps in applying these guidelines may be the most difficult. What must come first is the gathering of a disciplined people of God, committed to a Christian understanding of history, which is grounded in the revolutionary justice of Hebrew law and culminates in the peace testimony of the Lamb's war. Such a movement, as Hob Tucker suggests,

would of course be pacifist, but pacifism would not be the highest principle to which everything else had to be subordinated, any more than it was to our forebears. The central principle was and should be faithfulness, private and corporate, and its corollary, an openness to the unexpected.

The central **social** principle would be the principle of revolution: that is, a radical apprehension of how minimally Christian the present social order is, and how urgently it needs to be revised.¹⁹

If such a Christian movement is to take seriously its involvement in holy history, it will have to come to grips with the really tough and emerging social problems of our day, such as: the quest for younger, urban-ghetto Negroes for a fair share in the power to shape their own destiny and that of their society; or the increasing frustration of the African people of Rhodesia, South and Southwest Africa, and the Portuguese African colonies, over the failure of ordinary political protest and even United Nations economic sanctions to loosen the iron grip of their white masters in their homelands. Something more imaginative than pious admonitions on the immorality of violence, uttered from the comfort of our suburban sanctuaries, is certainly called for in these situations. What answers will we find? How can we know, until we put our Christian faith on the firing line, and ourselves become deeply involved in the life-situations of even "the least of these my brethren" (Matt. 25:40)?

This PDF is Copyright 2010, The Shrewsbury and Manasquan Monthly Meetings of the Religious Society of Friends (Quaker). Views expressed by the author may not be held by either Meeting.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 United States License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/us/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 Second Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA.

- NOTES -

¹ Mennonites, Brethren and Friends are generally grouped under that heading even though their histories have been independent and largely unrelated, except for their interest in peace.

² Sidney Lucas, **The Quaker Story** (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1949) p. 59.

³ Robert O. Byrd, **Quaker Ways in Foreign Policy** (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1960), p. 4.

⁴ Reinhold Niebuhr, **Christianity and Power Politics** (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940), p. 5.

⁵ George Fox, **Works** (8 vols.; Philadelphia: Marcus T. Gould, 1831), IV, 91.

⁶ Norman K. Gottwald, **A Light to the Nations: An Introduction to the Old Testament** (New York: Harper & How, 1959), p. 12.

⁷ Bernhard W. Anderson, **The Unfolding Drama of the Bible** (New York: Association Press, 1957), p. 38.

⁸ Gottwald, **op. cit.**, p. 145.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

¹⁰ Harry M. Buck, **People of the Lord: The History, Scriptures, and Faith of Ancient Israel** (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1966), p. 28.

¹¹ George Fox, **The Journal of George Fox**, ed. John L. Nickalls (Rev. ed.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952), p. 107.

¹² Fox, **Works**, VII, 93.

¹³ *Ibid.*, IV, 180.

¹⁴ Francis Howgill, as quoted in **Christian Life, Faith and Thought in the Society of Friends** (London: Central Offices of the Religious Society of Friends, 1950), p. 18.

¹⁵ Hugh Barbour, **The Quakers in Puritan England** (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), p. 40.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 181-183.

¹⁷ **Declaration** of 1660, in George Fox, **Journal**, p. 400.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 399.

¹⁹ R. W. Tucker, "Revolutionary Faithfulness," **Quaker Religious Thought**, IX Winter, 1967-(8), 28-29.