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William Penn and the Scriptures

EDWIN B. BRONNER

William Penn was a prolific writer, and, following the practice of the period, he drew upon countless authorities to support his arguments and strengthen the points he wished to make. While he is often remembered for his familiarity with the classics, with church fathers and political philosophers, we should remember that he referred to the Scriptures, and quoted from them more frequently than all other sources combined.

Penn was born during the Civil War in 1644 near the Tower of London and christened in October in All Hallows Barking, the Anglican parish church overlooking the Tower. His father, Captain William Penn, a naval officer, happened to be up the Thames that month having his ship outfitted for a new campaign. He was able to see mother and child, and take his son to the church for christening. His mother, Margaret Jasper Vanderschuren, was a well-to-do young widow who had fled to London when war broke out in Ireland between the Catholics and Protestants and had married the handsome captain in 1643.

The young officer in Parliament's navy, who was soon promoted to the rank of rear admiral, decided to move his small family out of London and obtained a house at Wanstead, in Essex, some ten miles northeast of the city. When he was old enough, young William was enrolled in the Latin school at Chigwell nearby, and studied there until the family moved temporarily to Ireland in 1656. He studied with a tutor during the next four years, and also heard his first Quaker, Thomas Loe, during this period.¹

In 1660 Admiral Penn took an active part in restoring Charles II to the English throne. He was knighted for his efforts and enrolled his son in Christ Church at Oxford, a stronghold of royalist sympathies. Young Will-

iam became involved with the nonconformist preacher and scholar Dr. John Owen who opposed the Anglican return to power with the Crown, and was sent down or expelled in 1662. When his father shipped him off to the continent, hoping he would forget his radical religious ideas Penn enrolled for a year in the Huguenot Academy at Saumur, on the Loire, where he studied religious and political philosophy and theology with Moses Amyraut. Thus, when William Penn joined Quakers in 1667 he had accumulated a wide classical and religious education which made him extremely valuable to the hated sect, for he was prepared to serve as a worthy defender of Friends against their religious opponents and persecutors.

His first publication as a Friend, *Truth Exalted* (1668), a fifteen page tract in which he rejected all other religious movements, and proclaimed the virtues of the despised Quakers, contained more than fifty references to the Scriptures.² His next publication, *The Guide Mistaken* (1668), a rejoinder to the Anglican priest Jonathan Clapham, who had said that Quakers and a list of other religious groups and churches, could never attain salvation, was strengthened by more than sixty references to the Bible.³ In his third publication, *The Sandy Foundation Shaken* (1668), written after he and George Whitehead (1635-1723) had debated the Presbyterian Thomas Vincent and several other clergymen, about the nature of the Trinity and the Atonement, got Penn in trouble with the authorities and he was imprisoned in the Tower of London for blasphemy. In the pamphlet he used the Scriptures to refute the doctrine of the Trinity espoused by Vincent, as well as the doctrine of the Atonement advanced by the Presbyterian preacher.⁴ After eight months in the Tower, Penn issued *Innocency with Her Open Face* (1669) by way of explanation that he had not meant to deny the Divinity of Christ in his earlier tract, and that he did believe in the Trinity, but not in the way his opponents had defined it. He referred to the Scriptures forty times in this pamphlet.⁵ Even in his early years as a Friend Penn was writing essays on

1. *William Penn* (1957), by Catherine Owens Peare, is the best biography for Penn, but it should be supplemented by the extensive annotations in *The Papers of William Penn* (1981-1987). The first four volumes of this set were edited by Mary Maples Dunn and Richard S. Dunn, and Volume 5, a bibliography of his published writings was prepared by Edwin B. Bronner and David Fraser. (Hereafter, *PWP*)

2. In 1726, eight years after Penn's death, Joseph Besse issued a two volume folio *Collection of the Works of William Penn*, which was reprinted in 1974. This contains 77 titles and includes all of Penn's important published writings. (Hereafter referred to as *Works*): *Truth Exalted*, 1:239-248. Volume 5 of *The Papers of William Penn*, an annotated, illustrated interpretive bibliography of Penn's published writings, including those volumes to which he contributed, 135 in all, will be used extensively in this paper. *Truth Exalted*, 90-93.

3. *Works*, 2:1-31; *PWP* 5:94,95.

4. *Works*, 1:248-266; *PWP*, 5:96-99. Hugh Barbour discussed the biblical arguments used by Penn in his article "The Young Controversialist," 20, in *The World of William Penn* (1986), edited by Richard S. Dunn and Mary Maples Dunn. Melvin B. Endy, *William Penn and Early Quakerism* (1973), 297.

ethics such as *No Cross, No Crown* (1669) and religious liberty such as *The Great Case of Liberty of Conscience* (1670), in addition to religious tracts to defend Quaker beliefs against their opponents. He used the Scriptures to uphold his arguments in both of these essays, along with appeals to reason and to the writings of classical authors, to church fathers and seventeenth century authorities. In *No Cross, No Crown*, while opposing hat honor and other practices of showing respect, he referred to the Bible numerous times.⁶ His first comprehensive defense of religious liberty included numerous citations of the Scriptures in Chapter III: “[persecutors] oppose the plainest Testimonies of Divine Writ that can be, which condemn all Force upon Conscience.”⁷

Penn’s manuscript correspondence also contained many scriptural references, especially during the years when he spent much of his time defending Friends from their detractors. In Volume 1 of *The Papers of William Penn*, covering the years until the end of 1679, the index contains nine lineal inches of references to specific verses in the Bible. After listing two inches of references in Volume 2, covering the years 1680-84, the rounding of the “Holy Experiment,” the editors decided to omit references in subsequent volumes.

Many of the scholars who have written about Penn in recent decades, including Edward C.O. Beatty, *William Penn as Social Philosopher* (1939), Vincent Buranelli, *The King and the Quaker; A Study of William Penn and James II* (1962). Mary Maples Dunn, in *William Penn, Politics and Conscience* (1967), Joseph Illick, *William Penn the Politician* (1965), and Catherine Owen Peare, *William Penn* (1957), virtually ignored Penn’s use of the Scriptures. On the other hand, Melvin B. Endy, in *William Penn and Early Quakerism* (1973) devoted a good bit of space to studying the way in which Penn, and Quakers generally in his period, regarded the Bible and used it. Hugh Barbour has also written about Penn’s understanding of the Scriptures and his use of the Written Word, especially in his introductory material in *William Penn and Religion and Ethics* (1991).

What did William Penn believe about the Scriptures, and why were his beliefs, and those of other Friends attacked so relentlessly by other church leaders? The Quaker emphasis on the Inward Light meant that other sources of authority were given a secondary place. Catholics looked to Church traditions and the pronouncements of Church fathers for guidance

5. *Works*, 1:266-271; *PWP*, 5:100, 101.

6. The 1669 edition is not in *Works*, but may be read in Barbour’s *William Penn on Religion and Ethics* (1991), 39-113. *PWP*, 5:102-104.

7. *Works* 1:443-467; *PWP*, 5:112-117. This essay may also be read in the Everyman Paperback Classic, *William Penn’s The Peace of Europe, The Fruits of Solitude and Other Writings* (1993), edited by Bronner, 153-186. This new collection of ten of Penn’s most important and most readable essays, is available in an inexpensive edition in the United States as well as in Great Britain.

and authority. Protestants, rebelling against the teachings of the Roman Catholic faith, turned to the Scriptures as their source of authority. Friends declared that true authority was found by a personal encounter with Christ through the indwelling spirit, the Inward Light, not from the words of men or the words printed on a page of the Bible.

In *Primitive Christianity Revived in the Faith and Practice of the People Called Quakers* (1696) Penn draws upon the writings of John, what he calls "the blessed Scriptures of Truth," to prove the primacy of the Christ Within or Light Within. "In the Beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."⁸ More than two decades earlier, in *The Spirit of Truth Vindicated* (1672), written to defend George Fox who was in America, Penn had used the Scriptures to defend the belief of Friends that while the Light Within was the ultimate authority, the Bible was also an expression of the True Spirit.⁹

Hugh Barbour, in *William Penn on Religion and Ethics* calls our attention to a defense of the value of the Scriptures in Penn's volume *An Address to Protestants* (1679): "All Scripture is given by Inspiration of God and is profitable for Doctrine, for Reproof, for Correction, for Instruction in Righteousness, that the Man of God may be perfect, throughly [sic] furnisht unto all good Works." (This quotation is from II Timothy 3:16,17).¹⁰

At the same time, as Endy pointed out, the Bible was often misused by clergymen and others seeking to prove a particular doctrine or practice. "Scripture, according to Penn, had yielded so many contradictory answers to important questions that exegetes had been able to find there whatever they wished to discover. They seemed to devote most of their time to writing tracts to prove that Scripture contained only the answers which they had found."¹¹ Penn wrote in *Reason Against Railing* (1673), "That the Scriptures are Unintelligible without it [i.e., the Inner Light] is easily prov'd from the variety of Judgments that are in the World about most of the Fundamental Doctrines contained therein."¹² Endy went on to refer to *The Invalidity of John Faldo's Vindication* (1673), in which Penn wrote, "Wherefore since the Scriptures themselves testify to the Spirit, as the great Judge, Rule and Leader, especially under the New Covenant, when the Law is not written on Tables of Stone (much less Paper) but of Flesh, to wit, the Hearts of the Sons and Daughters of Men, the Spirit, and not the Scriptures must be the rule of Faith and Judge of Controversy."¹³

8. *Works*, 2:856; *PWP*, 5:434-437; Everyman, *Penn*, 231.

9. *Works*, 2:135ff.; *PWP*, 5:137,138; Barbour, "The Young Controversialist," 22, *The World of William Penn*.

10. p. 463. It may be found in *Works*, 1:756, and *PWP*, 237-242, which points out it went through two editions, seven printings in all by 1692. Barbour had written about this earlier in *Quakers in Puritan England* (1964), 157-159.

11. *William Penn and Early Quakerism*, 154, 155.

12. *Works*, 2:508; *PWP*, 5:160-162.

On occasion Penn went further in his comments about the Scriptures, suggesting inconsistencies and weaknesses in the compilation of the accepted texts and books in the Bible. Melvin Endy pointed out that Penn, from the 1670's wrote of "its contradictions and barbarities, the likelihood of lost books, textual corruptions, poor copying and translating..." He also pointed out that the writings in "the New Testament canon were scattered and uncollected for several centuries."¹⁴ Despite such criticism Penn strongly supported the use of the Scriptures, as long as they were measured against the Spirit. He rejected the Protestant idea that the Spirit was found in the Bible, that "one could buy the Spirit from a bookseller." He added, "one needed the guidance of the Spirit to ascertain the true meaning of the Scriptures because of its lack of clarity, its contradictions, and other characteristics making it unsuitable as a rule of doctrine."

In summarizing this section of his book Endy wrote, "Penn, then, emphasized at different times both the inadequacies of Scripture and its usefulness." He added, Penn believed "it was important to state clearly that the Spirit was the agent, Scripture the subordinate means, and that the Spirit could bring Christ to a man independently of Scriptures."¹⁵

In *A Key Opening the Way* (1692) Penn wrote that Friends regard the Scriptures as "given forth in former Ages by the Inspiration of the Holy Spirit...ey are profitable for Doctrine, for Reproof, for Correction, for Instruction in Righteousness, that the Men of God may be perfect." He went on to deny that the Scriptures were The Word of God, that is, the sole Word of God; that was to claim more than Quakers could accept.¹⁶ Penn's use of the Scriptures to prove the primacy of the Inward Light in 1696 in *Primitive Christianity Revived* has already been mentioned.

Three of Penn's best loved writings are *Some Fruits of Solitude* (1693), *More Fruits of Solitude* (1702), and *Fruits of a Father's Love* (1726, but probably written in 1699).¹⁷ These collections of aphorisms or maxims, some 900 in all offer good advice, pertinent observations on life, and in the third volume, extended advice to his children about how they should conduct themselves.

While he clearly relied on the Scriptures as an important source of his writing, he seldom referred directly to the Bible in his Maxims. In *Some Fruits* he called upon his readers to be like Christ, and suggested using the Scriptures as well as the Inward Light to gain a better understanding of God's Will in this regard.¹⁸ In *More Fruits* he used the familiar thirteenth

13. *Works*, 2:337; *PWP*, 5:167-169.

14. *Penn and Early Quakerism*, 207-215.

15. *Ibid.*, 215.

16. *Works*, 2:778-791, particularly 781, 782; *PWP*, 5:387-395. This popular tract went through thirteen printings during Penn's lifetime.

17. These three titles are included in *Everyman's Penn*, 23-118.

chapter of I Corinthians, about the importance of charity or love to emphasize his points. He paraphrased this passage rather than quoting it exactly, a practice he often followed.¹⁹ In *Fruits of a Father's Love* Penn gave many scriptural references in addition to strongly recommending the daily reading of the Bible.²⁰

While seeking to emphasize the importance of the Bible to his children Penn told them that "from my youth I loved to read [the Scriptures, and they] were ever blessed to me." He added that they should read "the Old Testament for history chiefly, the Psalms for meditation and devotion, the prophets for comfort and hope, but especially the New Testament for doctrine, faith and worship..."²¹ He continued by referring to the source of the Scriptures and their importance in revealing the Will of God.

When Penn was asked by his young friend John Rodes (1670-1743) to suggest readings in various areas, Penn mentioned the Bible before any other titles in several categories, particularly in the area of ethics and international policy.²² His other suggestions included classical authors such as Seneca, Plutarch, Epictetus and Tacitus, scientific writers such as Francis Bacon and Robert Boyle, and renaissance authors such as Thomas More and Machiavelli.

The second, and completely revised edition of *No Cross, No Crown* (1682) has been read by Friends and others more frequently than any other of Penn's titles, though it has not been as popular in the present century as earlier. We are told that it sat on shelves in meetinghouses and in Quaker homes along with Fox's *Journal* and Robert Barclay's *Apology*.²³ It is often remembered because Penn quoted from nearly 150 men and women in the second part of the book, more than half of whom were from the classical period, including twelve women. The balance of the authorities Penn quoted were early church leaders before the Reformation, and political, philosophical and religious figures from the period after that earthshaking event. However, it is worth noting that Penn cited more than 600 scriptural passages in the first half of the book. More of these references were from the New Testament than the Old, but he referred to many of the books in the Old Testament from Genesis to Malachi.

While William Penn had a broader educational experience than any other seventeenth century Friend, and also moved more freely in all circles of society than any other member of the new sect, he kept in the main-

18. *Ibid.*, 56; *PWP*, 5:401-409; *Works*, No. 469, 1:840.

19. Everyman, *Penn*, 86; *PWP*, 5:493, 494; *Works*, No. 295, ff., 1:858.

20. Everyman, *Penn*, 89-118, especially 94; *PWP*, 5:514-516; *Works*, 1:893-911, especially 896.

21. Everyman, *Penn*, 94.

22. *PWP*, 5:42, and Sophie F. Locker-Lampson, editor, *A Quaker Post-Bag* (1910), 4-6.

23. *PWP*, 5:287-294; *Works*, 1:272-439; *No Cross, No Crown* (1981), introduction by Norman Penney, and foreword by Barbour.

stream of Quaker belief and practice. His familiarity with classical authors, with church history, and with contemporary thought did not keep him from remaining thoroughly familiar with the Scriptures, and from using the Bible in most of his writings. Even though he had become familiar with some of the inconsistencies in the Scriptures which makes him a forerunner of what was to be called "Higher Criticism" in the last century, this did not deter him from extensive use of the Bible, nor did it diminish his deep appreciation for it.

His last recorded words, found in the biographical notes prepared by his editor, Joseph Besse (c.1683-1757), were delivered to two friends who went to visit Penn in Ruscombe in 1716, four years after his serious strokes. As they were leaving he bade them good-bye with these words paraphrased from the Scriptures: "My Love is with you; The Lord preserve you, and remember me in the Everlasting Covenant."²⁴

24. *Works*, 1:150. The phrase "the Lord preserve thee" is in Psalms 121:7,8 and the words "Everlasting Covenant" are found in several places in the Old Testament as well as in Hebrews 13:20.