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Thy Obedience Is Perfect Freedom

*1994 Indiana Yearly Meeting of
Friends Quaker Lecture*

T. CANBY JONES

I have gone through quite an inward exercise to come up with the organizing concept for this lecture. I daresay the Yearly Meeting Planning Committee was very pleased to find William Penn paraphrasing Jesus' words in Matthew 10:8, "Freely you have received, freely give," when they chose the theme for this Yearly Meeting, "As we have freely received from Christ, let us freely give." My first leading was to title this talk, "Thy Obedience Is Perfect Freedom." But that wonderful phrase is not from Scripture. It sure sounds like it should be, doesn't it? It must be from some one of my great spiritual friends and mentors from the Church through the ages, such as St. Augustine, *The Imitation of Christ*, or Jean Nicholas Grou. In any case that's the theme of this talk, "Thy Obedience Is Perfect Freedom."

In this talk I plan to examine freedom and obedience in Scripture, in George Fox, Thomas R. Kelly, William Penn; interpreting each with my own leadings and attempts to understand the relationship between freedom and obedience.

Freedom

Here are some Scriptures on what it means to be free:¹

Deuteronomy 5:6:

1. All quotations from the Bible are from the Revised Standard Version with the exception of two. One is from the King James Version, the other from the New English Bible.

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

Isaiah 58:6-9:

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry, and he will say, Here I am.

John 8:32 and 36:

And you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free. ...If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.

Galatians 3:28:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Galatians 5:1:

For freedom Christ has set us free: stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

Concerning Deuteronomy 5:6 George Fox loved to ask, "Have you been brought out of your own Egypt, out of the house of bondage?"² What does God's deliverance of his people from slavery in Egypt mean to us? Do we see it as the source of our freedom? If we do not, can we claim to be spiritual children of Abraham and heirs according to the promise? I love to make a litany of the Ten Commandments, Deuteronomy 5:7-21, using this marvelous verse six as a prelude to each commandment. For example: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me." Or, repeat the same sixth verse before "You shall not kill," "Neither shall you commit adultery," or "Neither shall you steal." Such repetition of verse six reminds me of my delivery from my own slavery in Egypt and that Christ has set me free. Out of gratitude for my liberation I don't *want* to do any of those things. From onerous requirements the Ten Commandments are transformed into counsels of life!

Concerning Isaiah 58:6-9 whenever George Fox was asked about fasting he always said Friends believe in the "true fast" as described in this

2. T. C. Jones, *The Power of the Lord Is Over All: The Pastoral Letters of George Fox* (Richmond IN: Friends United Press, 1989), 572 p. Ltr. #352, p. 365.

marvelous Scripture.³ After doing all those works of mercy we are promised that our light will break forth and the Lord will not only answer our prayers but manifest himself to us with a "Here I am." Try substituting the word *freedom* or the word *obedience* for the word *fast* in verse six. How do they sound?

We come to the big ones in John 8:32 and 36. Know the truth and it shall make you free. Pilate asked Jesus, "What is truth?" He should have asked him, "Are *you* the truth?" Truth is not a "what" or a "thing" but something alive which we can know. In its highest form truth is a "who," a person, and we know who that person is. Both George Fox and Thomas Kelly go to town on this Scripture so I won't say more here. How about verse 36? "If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed!" Not only free but we will hear the voice of our Teacher behind us saying, "This is the way, walk ye in it." (Isaiah 30:21).

Galatians 3:28 destroys the hierarchical distinction between Jew and Greek, races, tribes or nations. Gender discrimination or oppression becomes impossible. Slaves become free persons. Why? Because we are all one and all are set free by the unifying love of Christ Jesus.

Galatians 5:1 repeats the assurance that we have been liberated to freedom and calls us to stand fast, no matter what, in the integrity of that love-covenant relationship and to refuse to descend again into bondage.

George Fox

Now hear what dear George Fox has to say about true freedom for God's free men and free women. In 1668 George wrote this letter, number 260, telling how Truth makes us free.

Dear Friends: if the Truth makes you free, then are you free indeed? So then, there are none made free men but by Truth. All that are free men, they are made free by the Truth. They are God's free men. They are Free citizens. They are freeholders of an everlasting inheritance and free [in] an everlasting Kingdom. They are free heirs of salvation. They are free [in] the heavenly city Jerusalem, which is from above. And they are free [in] the Power of an endless Life, which was before death was.

So, they are not captives. They are not bondsmen. They are not servants, nor slaves. But, mark, free men and free women. And what has made them free men and free women, but Truth? For, if the Truth has made you free, then you are free indeed.

So, free to worship God in Spirit and in Truth...to serve the Lord God in the Spirit and in the new life...and to be members of the True Church, Gospel Fellowship and Power of God, which was before the devil was.

3. Jones, *op. cit.* Ltr. 167, (1658) p. 127 & Ltr. 230, p. 188.

So, stand fast in the Liberty wherewith Christ has made you free, free from the devil, dragon, serpent and all slavery and servitude. For free men do walk in their freedom. It is the Truth that makes them free and so to triumph in Glory... .

So, it is plain, none are free but by the Truth and all in the Truth are free men.

All out of the Truth are slaves in old Adam, slaves to sin and Satan... and to their own self-righteousness...serving diverse lusts, ...serving the desires of their own minds. So, as slaves are kept in bondage. All in prison, all in the bonds of death and jaws of death; for [those] who are out of the Truth are not free men. ...

But Truth makes free from all these, free from the hypocrite's hope, which perishes and free from Nebuchadnezzar's fury. It makes free from the wild heifer's nature, from the dog, swine, horse, viper, cockatrice and serpent's nature, from the spider and his web, and from the oak and cedar, the bramble and briar, bear and lion. The Truth makes free men from all these and brings man and woman into the image of God. And so, if the Truth makes you free then are you free indeed.

And the Truth is Christ and Christ is the Truth...by which you come to be free men of the world which has no end.⁴

Oh, George, you speak so beautifully and powerfully about Truth making us free. What else can we say?

Thomas Kelly

Now let's look at an unpublished sermon of Thomas R. Kelly entitled, "Ye Shall Know the Truth" to see what we can learn from him about Truth making us free. This sermon was almost certainly first delivered in 1932 probably on Fourth of July Sunday. I express my thanks to Ronald Rembert, Associate Professor of Philosophy at Wilmington College, for bringing this and twenty-one other sermons of Thomas Kelly to light. Kelly's first point is that we live in an age in which "the general assumption seems to be that freedom is the normal state of men, and *restraint* is a violation of his nature." If that was true in 1932 it is even more true in this age of "If it feels good, do it." Or, "Don't tell me what to do. I'll do what is right in my own eyes." Freedom is believed to be living with no restraint whatever.

Tom Kelly then takes pains to show that such freedom never exists. We are in fact *slaves* to instincts, the rules of parents, the laws of nature and mathematics, laws of courtesy, fair play, the laws of the state and the laws of

4. Jones, *op. cit.* Ltr. 260 (1668), 1 p. 231-232.

God. "No," Tom Kelly goes on, "It seems clear to me that we are not born free, but that we are born in chains, and only gradually and progressively do we achieve freedom. Freedom is a task, not a gift, a goal, not a full possession." "When we submit to laws," he continues, "we *obtain* real freedom. Laws do not *diminish* our freedom. They are our *means to* freedom." A bit later Kelly says, "It's a great day when a person realizes that the real way to liberty is through the law. And it is a greater day when we begin to impose laws upon ourselves in order to be free."

Notice Tom's last sentence: "It's a greater day when we begin to impose laws upon ourselves." That's the moment when the freedom of obedience is born.

Kelly then interprets Jesus saying, "The truth shall make you free," by saying:

No life is free, no nation is free, no civilization is free, until it has built itself upon the eternal nature and pattern of things, and of God. This vast order is the Truth, fragments of which we call laws. Voluntary, free submission to this cosmic order, loyal devotion to it, passionate enthusiasm for its embodiment in the ways of men, these are the sound bases of freedom. Truth-seekers are freedom makers. The deepest citizenship we can know is devotion to truth. ... Democracy is founded upon the faith that the quest and vision of truth is in every heart.

Kelly was fascinated by Eugene Millikan's recent discovery of cosmic rays. He uses cosmic rays as a parable for God's almost imperceptible divine drift or wind. He says of it:

In this world there is a cosmic drift—a direction along which the winds of God blow across the plains of man. God's will, God's law, God's purpose and truth is the world's true order. That man and that nation is free which lines itself up with the winds of God. ... That wind is Love, and Truth. It is the cosmic order. Truth made living in love. ... This is the Truth *and the Truth shall make you free.*⁵

Do we really believe in Truth with a capital "T" that brings life, order, direction and unity to all things? If we do, we will know what it means to be free. Here's a lovely word from dear George Fox about it. "So in the Fear of God live, spread the Truth abroad and set the Truth over all...in which you have Unity. So my Love is to you all."⁶

5. Thomas R. Kelly, unpublished sermon [1932] "The Truth Shall Make You Free" (Haverford College, Quaker Collection).

6. Jones, *op. cit.* Letter #224 (1662), p. 183.

William Penn

Now we turn to see what we can learn from William Penn about freedom. I have used the Everyman Edition of *The Peace of Europe, The Fruits of Solitude and Other Writings*, by William Penn, edited by Edwin Bronner and published 1993, as my main source. I have found that Penn was most concerned about liberty and freedom of conscience to worship and obey God in whatever way or form we may be led to by the Holy Spirit.

In his essay of 1670, *The Great Case of Liberty and Conscience*, William Penn defines liberty of conscience as “the free and uninterrupted exercise of our consciences, in that way of worship, we are most clearly persuaded, God requires us to serve him in.”⁷ In chapter III Penn marshals an impressive list of scriptures which support freedom of worship and oppose coercion in religious matters. Historic evidence confirms the fact that the struggles of Friends, Mennonites and Brethren to establish the practice of voluntarism in matters of religious faith succeeded through their suffering and witness and made such freedom one of the cornerstones of democracy wherever it is now found in our world. The Conventicle and Quaker Acts of the British Parliament of 1661 and 1662 made it illegal for more than five persons to worship anywhere in Britain except in a Church of England house or liturgy. Quaker Meeting Houses were locked, destroyed, and Friends arrested when they met for worship outside of them or on their rubble in contravention of those laws. Elsewhere in this same essay Penn states: “Force may make an hypocrite; it is faith grounded upon knowledge, and consent that makes a Christian.”⁸

The exciting essay by Penn in this book is his account of being tried in court in 1670 together with William Mead for having held a meeting for worship and preached outside the locked Quaker Meeting House on Gracechurch Street in London. Talk about “standing fast and refusing to submit again to the yoke of slavery”! Penn and Mead did so in dramatic fashion in their trial. The court accused them of unlawful assembly and creating a tumult and an uproar by their preaching. Penn, of course, had studied law at the Inns of Court. Penn demanded a fair trial, which the judge granted. Penn then demanded to know under what statute he was being tried. The judge, court recorder and mayor all spluttered and said “Common Law.” Penn wanted to know what provision of the Common Law and the judge could not answer. The judge, court recorder and mayor all severely told the jury that they *had to* return a verdict of guilty. After deliberation the jury returned and said William Mead was innocent of the charge and that William Penn was “guilty of speaking in Gracechurch Street.” That verdict

7. William Penn, *The Peace of Europe, Some Fruits of Solitude*, etc. F.E. Edwin Bronner (Rutland, VT: Tuttle), 1993. pp. 155-56.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 167.

represented no punishable offense and in effect meant "not guilty." Twice the judge sequestered the jury "without meat, drink, fire, and tobacco" until they returned a "guilty" verdict. Penn kept loudly objecting to this process citing English law and the *Magna Charta* to the contrary. Furious with the jury and with Penn and Mead, the judge ordered the two prisoners locked up in the "dock." Apparently this was a cell in the courtroom with which to control obstreperous prisoners. It must have been open at the top because Penn could hear all the proceedings from inside it and kept shouting out his objections to the proceedings during the trial. The court still refused to accept it. The judge brought the jurors one by one to the stand to try to pressure each one to change his verdict. Each one stood fast and refused to do so. From his place in the dock Penn urged the jury that "their verdict should be free, and not compelled." He further denied that Friends made a tumult in Gracechurch Street but that it was those "that interrupted us. The jury cannot be so ignorant as to think that we met there with a design to disturb the civil peace, since...we were by force of arms kept out of our lawful house, and met as near in the street, as the soldiers would give us leave." Penn followed with his most forceful statement, "The agreement of twelve men is a verdict in law...I require the Clerk of the Peace to record it...And if the Jury bring another verdict contrary to this, I affirm they are perjured men in the law. (And looking upon the Jury, said), you are Englishmen, mind your privilege, give not away your right." The final verdict of the jury both for Penn as well as Mead was, "Not guilty." As most of you know, this trial established once and for all the right of juries in English law to make free and uncoerced verdicts.⁹

What kind of freedom have we here observed? Obviously, the freedom to speak Truth to power. In an unjust situation we must stand fast and not "submit again to the yoke of slavery." Are Quakers quarried of prophetic flint? Penn sure proved it in this case. In Letter 35 (1653)¹⁰ George Fox shouts, "Stand up, you prophets of the Lord, for the Truth upon the earth." I love it when the unjust get told off and Truth triumphs. That is a victory in the Lamb's War which we are all called to fight.

What have we learned thus far about freedom? First, that God sets people free from bondage, whether actual in Egypt, the southern United States or the Soviet Union and from our inner slavery to ourselves and to our sin. Second, freedom means loosing the bonds of wickedness and letting the oppressed go free both in an outward and social sense and in an inward and personal sense. Third, freedom means a lifelong commitment to and knowledge of Truth. We are made free by practicing it. Our central Quaker testimony of "integrity" is a fruit of it. Obviously we know who the Truth is

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 147-151.

10. Jones, *op. cit.* Letter 35 (1653), p. 27.

and joyfully confess that it is the Son who makes us free indeed. Fourth, our free exercise of Truth destroys our ability to think small and to limit the grace, choice or compassion of God to genders, races or classes of people, "for we are all one in Christ Jesus." There is no limit to his love! Fifth, from Thomas Kelly we learn that freedom is a task and a goal toward which we struggle to discover that God's law pervades the universe and that it's a great day when we learn to interiorize those laws by inner discipline within ourselves. True freedom begins and ends in such inner discipline. Always respond to the winds of God. "That wind is Love, and Truth. It is the cosmic order. Truth made living in Love... This is the Truth [which] shall make you free." Finally from William Penn we have learned how tough and persistent freedom and the fight for it must be. Stand fast in the Truth! Fight for it with all the weapons of the Spirit, and the Lamb shall have the victory!

Obedience

I think that freedom is born of inner discipline committed to following and practicing living Truth. Inner discipline, in turn, is born of holy obedience, obedience to the voice of the Teacher within which it is our labor as Friends to bring all persons to be taught by.

So who wants obedience? And what is it? A very unpopular concept in our "self gratification" society. Rebellion and seeing how much you can get away with are norms for too many in our day. The claim that inner discipline or obedience to law leads to freedom is a flat contradiction to many ears. Webster's dictionary is of little help. It defines *obedient* as "submissive to the restraint, control or command of authority...subject, subservient."

We begin redeeming this term by looking at the Latin root of *obedience*. The verb to obey in Latin is *oboedire*. It means to give ear, hearken, listen to, obey, be subject to or serve. The verb is a compound of the preposition *ob*, which means before or in front of, with *audire*, which means to hear, listen to, learn from, hear with approval or to heed. Obedience then means to stand before someone listening with assent and approval and action.

The explosive fact about this root definition of obedience is that it is the central message of the Bible. The Bible's primary call and concern is that we should hear and obey the voice of Yahweh, the voice of the Lord. God's constant appeal in Scripture is that we appear before Him, listen and then carry out what we hear Him calling us to do. Jesus was in the habit of ending his important pronouncements with the words, "If you have ears, then hear!" Standing before the One Who Is, hearing, gladly accepting and doing what is asked; this is the meaning of free obedience.

I therefore define obedience as hearing God's voice and doing what He says. He calls us to renew humanity, restore the earth and live with one another in justice. Put very simply, obedience means doing God's will before our own. Such obedience is neither slavish nor coerced by externally

imposed authority. It is courageous, prophetic and free. In Thomas Kelly's words, "its joys are unspeakable, its peace profound, its simplicity that of a trusting child."¹¹

Obedience defies theoretical definition because to obey is to act. To obey means to do. Followers of Jesus and lovers of Torah are known best not by what they profess in words but by what they accomplish. Free obedience is a form of action.

As in the case of freedom it is time now to look at a very few select Scriptures that express obedience and disobedience.

Jeremiah 7:22-29:

For in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt...this command I gave them, "Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people; and walk in all the way that I command you, that it may be well with you." But they did not obey or incline their ear, but walked in their own counsels and the stubbornness of their evil hearts, and went backward and not forward. From the day that your fathers came out of the land of Egypt to this day, I have persistently sent all my servants the prophets to them, day after day; yet they did not listen to me, or incline their ear, but stiffened their neck. They did worse than their fathers.

So you shall speak all these words to them, but they will not listen to you. You shall call to them, but they will not answer you. And you shall say to them, "This is the nation that did not obey the voice of the Lord their God, and did not accept discipline; truth has perished; it is cut off from their lips.

"Cut off your hair and cast it away; raise a lamentation on the bare heights, for the Lord has rejected and forsaken the generation of his wrath."

What terrible words of judgment on our disobedient nation! Will we turn and listen? Notice how God, through the mouth of his prophet, begins by repeating His everlasting love covenant with His people: "Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people." But like us, they refuse to listen and stiffen their necks and refuse to obey. Therefore they (and we) incur the terrible judgment, "this is the nation that did not obey the voice of the Lord their God, and did not accept discipline; truth has perished..."

The three Scriptures I want to share from the New Testament all demonstrate the obedience of Jesus.

Luke 22:41-44:

And he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, and knelt down and prayed. "Father, if thou are willing, remove this cup from me; nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done." And there appeared to him an angel from heaven, strengthening him. And being in an agony he prayed more ear-

11. Thomas R. Kelly, *A Testament of Devotion* (New York: Harper, 1941), p. 54.

nestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down upon the ground.

The word *agony* became a Christian word and is defined by this scene. Notice that one of my two definitions of holy obedience is: "Doing God's will instead of our own." This scene of our Lord in agony to obey is the source of the definition.

The Letter to the Hebrews interprets this scene.

Hebrews 5:7-8:

Because of his humble submission his prayer was heard: Son though he was he learned obedience in the school of suffering, and, once perfected became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him. (NEB)

When we consider the agony he endured in order to obey, what else can we do but gladly obey not only His commandments but His faintest nudge or whisper? What a promise at the end of that passage. Whew!

Having taught Scripture for over thirty years there are dozens of passages that I love to meditate on and quote, but Philippians 2:5-11 is one of my most frequent favorites. For our purpose I quote only verses five through eight.

Philippians 2:5-8:

Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus, 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 men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.

We are constantly called into God's presence and with loving attention: we are asked freely and willingly to do what He says. This is free obedience.

Verse two of Whittier's hymn, "Dear Lord and Father of Mankind," beautifully describes such obedience:

In simple trust like theirs who heard,
Beside the Syrian sea,
The gracious calling of the Lord,
Let us like them, without a word
Rise up and follow thee.

Again we are all called to empty ourselves of self, pour out our lives in service to others and obey God regardless of cost, even unto death. Jesus not only paid the price for us, His inward voice and power enable us to do likewise. Such is the nature of free obedience.

Fruits of Obedience

There are at least four qualities of or fruits of free obedience which we will now examine. They are humility, purity of heart, covenanting together and taking the form of a servant.

I define humility as seeing God in all events and having such a complete awareness of God that we lose all consciousness of self. Psalm 34 expresses it, "I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth." Nothing can happen in the life of a humble person in which they do not see the hand of God either in blessing or correction. I once took a class to visit a Trappist monastery. We were told of a choir monk whose byword was "*Dominus est!*" "It is the Lord!" No matter what happened to him, good or bad, beautiful or tragic he always responded "*Dominus est!*" After thirty years of silence and serving as a novice master in that Iowa monastery, the brother received a letter from the Minister General of the order asking him to go to Indonesia to be a novice master of a new monastery being founded there. His response was "*Dominus est!*" "It is the Lord!" And he was ready to go. Seeing the Lord in all events, blessing Him at all times, this constitutes true humility.

There are many types of false humility, most of them forms of inverted pride. I will list a few types. There is the "Uriah Heep type," proudly confessing the lowliness of one's position. There is the "door-mat type," which expects, even enjoys, being run over by everybody. There is the "co-dependent type" in which a person depends totally on others to define and defend his or her personhood. There is also the "I resign because I can't make a difference type." Each of these illustrates a Thomas Kelly dictum. "Oh, how slick and weasel-like is self pride."¹²

But humility has great strength. Seeing nothing of self but the power of God in all events, we are not affected by what other people or the polls may say. With the clear discernment born of a life of prayer we are emboldened to stand for Truth no matter what. Humble prophets of God join with Paul in shouting, "The weapons of our warfare are not worldly but have divine power to destroy strongholds." (2 Cor. 10:4).

Paradoxically humility involves a kind of pride as well as self-effacement. Dag Hammarskjöld, in his book, *Markings*, describes this paradox. He says:

Except in faith, nobody is humble. The mask of weakness or of Phariseism is not the naked face of humility. And, except in faith, nobody is proud. The vanity displayed in all its varieties by the spiritually immature is not pride. To be, in faith, both humble and proud: that is, to live, to know that in God I am nothing, but that God is in me.¹³

12. *Ibid.*, p. 62.

13. Dag Hammarskjöld, *Markings* (New York: Knopf, 1964), p. 92.

The other half of humility, to which Hammarskjöld points is confidence in the power of God to carry out His purposes. In Psalm 37:5 we read, "Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him, and he will act." Such trust breeds great confidence that the power of God will conquer all evil. So the humble take pride in the power of God aware that they can do nothing without Him. In the process we become meek, God-blinded, humble.

Jean Nicholas Grou in his *Manual for Interior Souls*, expresses this paradox:

By resigning ourselves entirely to God and leaving all our interests in His hands, we can *give* ourselves. And when this gift is made entirely and irrevocably...He will give us...that perfect humility which is so deep, so generous, so peaceful, so unchanging, which on the one hand makes us, as sinners, less than nothing, and on the other hand, raises us above the world, above the devil, above ourselves, and makes us great with the greatness of God. This humility is an infused humility; it grows in proportion to our temptations, our sufferings, and our humiliations. We have it, but we do not know that we have it...¹⁴

Another characteristic of humility is a remarkable buoyancy and resilience. Since we no longer feel vulnerable or insecure we bounce back quickly from failure, insult, humiliation and even persecution. Insults roll off the person who has crucified self like balls of water bouncing off a hot griddle. Jesus' most difficult yet most glorious beatitude says it, "Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad for your reward is great in heaven." (Matt. 5:11-12). I find it really difficult to act out this beatitude. Do you? Yet each time we find the grace to forgive an insult, love an enemy or see humiliation as God's gift, the miracle of exceeding joy occurs.

A further characteristic of humble persons is their childlike simplicity. Old corroded persons, set in their way like you and me are the ones Jesus had in mind when he said, "Verily I say unto you, Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein." (Mk. 10:15 KJV). Such persons wear no masks of self-deception. Authentic and simple trust in God shines through every attitude and deed. Without words humble persons radiate the presence of God. We can see at a glance the fulfillment in their lives of Psalm 34:5, "Look to him, and be radiant!"

Perhaps the most delightful characteristic of humility is its ability to laugh. Humility is slightly crazy. You hunger for it. You long for it. But it's like chasing a frog. You sneak up on it and pounce, and it's gone. It's even more like chasing a loon. The loon dives and you paddle your canoe madly in the direction you think he's going to come up, and pop! He comes up sev-

14. Jean Nicholas Grou, *Manual for Interior Souls* (London: Burns & Oates, 1955), p. 141.

enty feet away in a direction you never dreamed of. Maybe that's why loons laugh! Humility is like that, elusive. The moment you think you've achieved it you find you have come up with pride instead. Or humility can turn on you, when you intentionally pursue it and say, "Now look, didn't you make a fool of yourself?" But that's the way it is with anything that is alive. The closer you come to its essence or the center of its life the harder it is to define precisely what you have found. A person who is blind to all else but the living word and power of God is vibrantly alive, like an artesian well pouring forth an endless supply of life-giving water.

Before he committed himself to a life of voluntary poverty and free obedience to God, St. Francis of Assisi was known as a great practical joker and a lover of laughter. He carried over this same spirit into his new life in God. There is something insecure or even sick about over-serious commitment to any cause. One gets too much involved in the success of the venture to risk ridicule. The ability you then lack most is the ability to hang loose and laugh at yourself. The humble person is saved by humor. Life is such fun, and we are its fools. The Lord would have us enjoy it as fools for His sake!

Thomas Kelly expresses the spirit of such laughter in this unforgettable passage: "I'd rather be a jolly St. Francis hymning his canticle to the sun than a dour old sobersides Quaker whose diet would appear to have been spiritual persimmons." Like Thomas Kelly in his own life we should learn to laugh at ourselves and our foibles "with the rich hearty abandon of the wind on the open prairie."¹⁵

The next major quality of free obedience we need to consider is purity of heart. This means a hunger for freedom from sin, a hunger and thirst for righteousness, a longing for purity of intention, the power to obey, clear guidance, and assurance that the good we attempt to do will bear fruit.

The moral degradation of the people of our world and their psychopathic addiction to violence, inter-tribal genocide and a host of other sins beggars description. Appropriate to our situation is the lament of Jeremiah:

Be appalled, O heavens, at this, be shocked, be utterly desolate, says the Lord, for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns, that can hold no water (2:12-13).

Facing the enormity of our own sin and our inescapable responsibility for the sins in our own nation and in the world, persons committed to hear and obey God in all events, hunger to be pure as He is pure with all the energy of their souls. Thomas Kelly expresses this burning hunger:

15. Thomas R. Kelly, *Testament*, *op. cit.* p. 97 & E.M. Root describing Kelly's laugh, *ibid.*, p. 7.

One burns for complete innocence and holiness of personal life. No man can look on God and live, live in his own faults, live in the shadow of the least self-deceit, live in harm toward his least creatures... . The blinding purity of God in Christ, how captivating, how alluring, how compelling it is! The pure in heart shall see God? More, they who see God shall cry out to become pure in heart, even as He is pure, with all the energy of their souls.¹⁶

Such purity and righteousness is not achieved in our own strength even though we must “work out our own salvation with fear and trembling.” (Phil. 2:12). Purity of heart means to will one thing, God’s will above our own. We read in both Leviticus and in First Peter God’s command, “Be ye holy as I the Lord your God am holy.” Before we cringe at our inability to heed this command we hear another word from Leviticus chapter 22. It promises, “I will be hallowed among the people of Israel; I am the Lord who hallows you...” (22:32). The rest of the Philippians passage quoted above fulfills the same promise, “For God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” (Phil. 2:13). God intends for us, fallen creatures that we are, the gift of holiness and innocency of life.

Purity of heart is another way of expressing those difficult words of Jesus with which he concludes the commandment that we are to love enemies, namely, “You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Matt. 5:48). In the light of the fallible, fallen sin-filled performance of human beings and the fact that Jesus “knew what was in man,” how could He call us to perfection? “Come on, Jesus, be reasonable!” Isn’t that our reaction to His challenge to us to be perfect?

A major reason we have a problem with perfection, I believe, is because of our mechanical, abstract concept of perfection. We think of perfection as one hundred percent absolute, static purity to which nothing can be added and to which no further development is possible. In science and mechanics such abstract goals are logical and serve as goals to work toward but mechanical, electronic or scientific perfection is unattainable.

But human beings are no mere mechanisms. We are organisms with clear limitations. We are divinely created, divinely purposed, Spirit-inhabited organisms. Reborn persons are really something to get excited about, even if they cannot achieve mechanical perfection. Such abstract perfection was never God’s intent for us anyway. An organic, growing spiritual kind of human perfection or purity of heart is made possible through the gift of God’s grace by which He hallows us His human creatures. When the Lord hallows us He instills in us both a standard of purity and righteousness toward which we strive and grants us the grace to live in that condition of free obedience. George Fox got very hot under the collar toward those who

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 65-66.

“roared it up for the power of sin in this life.” He firmly believed that it was the work of Christ to restore us as humans to the image of God we possessed in the Garden of Eden before the Fall. Here’s how he expressed it:

But now Christ was come to redeem, translate, convert, and regenerate man...up into the light, life, and image, and likeness of God again as man and woman were in before they fell. ...And Christ saith, “Be ye perfect even as my heavenly father is perfect,” for he who was perfect comes to make man and woman perfect again and bring them again to the state God made them in; so he is the maker up of the breach and peace betwixt God and man. ...But I told them Christ was come freely, who hath perfected forever by one offering all them that are sanctified, and renews them up in the image of God... . And this, Christ the heavenly man has done freely. And therefore all are to look unto him, and all that have received him are to walk in him, the life, the substance, the first and the last, the rock of ages and the foundation of many generations.¹⁷

Dynamic perfection or purity of heart springs from purity of intention. In the words of James Nayler, “As it bears no evil in itself, so it conceives none in thoughts to any other.” Purity of intention is characterized by growth. Because it is not mechanical, purity of intention is something we learn by experience and grow up into. We grow by practice, by long agonizing experience. We try, we fail, we try again until we develop a skill. Like Brother Lawrence if we fail we spend no time in self-recrimination but breathe a simple prayer, “This is what I am except thou aid me,” and get with the task of freely obeying Him. Jean Nicholas Grou states that “Purity of intention is having God alone as our object free from all self-interest.”¹⁸

Purity of intention results in pure love for God, love for His children and an everlasting love unfeigned. Without deceit or dissimulation the love of God flows through us and we accept and love other persons as God loves them with no “ifs,” “ands” or “buts.” We no longer love others for the love we will receive in return. We love for love alone out of the inexpressible gratitude we have to God who first loved us and gave Himself for us.

Purity of heart also instills in us the power to obey. The atoning death of our Lord Jesus did not just *impute* righteousness to humanity; it *imparted* righteousness to us. The same Power which raised Jesus from the dead raises us from enslaved disobedience into active free obedience and to keeping of His commandments. Again George Fox has a wonderful word about this:

17. George Fox. *Journal*, J.L. Nickalls ed. (Cambridge University Press), 1952. pp. 367-368.

18. J. N. Grou, *Spiritual Maxims* (Springfield, IL: Templegate Press, 1961). #7, p. 78.

And God is equal and righteous, and commands nothing but what is equal and just, and measurable, and reasonable, according to that which men may perform; and such as he gives the law to, he gives power...and ability...and they were then to love God with their strength, and their souls, and their neighbors as themselves.¹⁹

In another place George Fox celebrates the sense of fulfillment we experience as we seek to live in purity of heart and to be perfect as Jesus called us to be. George says:

And the Ministry of Christ is for the perfecting of the Saints, till that all come to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, to a perfect man...praises to the Lord forever, who hath sent forth his son in the likeness of sinful flesh, to condemn sin in the flesh, that in him we might be made the righteousness of God.²⁰

Out of free individual obedience, humility and purity of heart grows group commitment or covenanting together. There is serious doubt whether isolated individuals can sustain free obedience without group support. Commitment together means joining the family of Christ, living in blessed community, a mutual experience of confession, worship, disciplines, a radical caring for one another and a going forth to witness and serve. In such a fellowship we share the astonishment of early Friend Francis Howgill, when he said:

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 to one another with great joy of heart: "What, is the Kingdom of God come to be with men? And will he take up his tabernacle among the sons of men, as he did of old? ..."²¹

At Sinai God having brought Israel out of Egypt pledged to be their God, to love them, to dwell with and guide them and be faithful to them forever. The people responded, "The Lord our God we will serve, and his voice we will obey." (Josh. 24:24). Such was the love covenant between them.

In the New Testament God expresses his covenant through the spiritual Israel, a household of God which brings into being a new humanity. It is a

19. George Fox, *The Great Mystery & Collected Works*. Vol. III (Philadelphia & New York M.T.G. Groul, 1831), p. 538. "In answer to Henry Foreside."

20. George Fox. *A Paper Sent Forth into the World & C.* (London: G. Calvert, 1652), p. 7.

21. Francis Howgill, in *Christian Faith & Practice in the Experience of the Society of Friends* (London: London Yearly Meeting), 1960. 15 chapters, 677 selections.

spiritual kingdom of priests promised in Exodus 19:6 and realized in the radical caring fellowship of the New Testament church. The nature of this covenant group is powerfully expressed in two Scripture passages. In the first one Peter calls us to be built into:

A spiritual house...a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ...a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light (I Pet. 2:5, 9).

In Colossians Paul describes the quality of life in the covenant fellowship:

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness and patience, forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as you teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Our covenanting together results in radical caring, creative worship, mutual discipline and leads us out in witness and service.

Free obedience issues in humility, purity of heart, commitment to one another and service. Service is closely connected to humility. The one who sees God in all the events of life will live not to serve oneself but others. That quality of humility which causes us to become instruments of purpose larger than ourselves, in which we lose all consciousness of self, is the chief source of our service to God and our fellow human beings.

Covenanting together in community also results in service. Jesus sent out both twelve and seventy to witness and to serve. They preached the immediate coming of the Kingdom of God; they challenged people to enter it. They healed the sick and cast out evil spirits. They returned to Jesus jubilant. Jesus exulted that he saw the power of Satan failing as a result of their witness and service. (Lk. 10:1-12, 17-20)

We have previously examined the great self-emptying Scripture Philipians 2:5-11 to show Jesus' humility. We now stress that it also emphasizes his taking on the form of a *servant*. His chief act of service was becoming obedient unto death on the cross, but he also met personal needs in dozens of other ways. In Mark 10:43-45 he tells us: "Whoever would be great among you must be your servant and whoever would be first among you must be the slave of all. For the Son of man came not to be served but to

serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." What should this mean for us? It means that we must become the willing slaves of all and to serve with no thought of reward as he served. In the Gospel of John Jesus' final great sign, demonstrating who he is, is his washing his disciples' feet. He concludes the event by saying, "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet." (Jn. 13:14). Jesus' humble action calls us to wash the feet of all humankind even as he has done.

In addition Jesus' whole life acted out the role of the suffering servant of mankind prefigured by the prophet Isaiah. In I Peter we find the clearest command that we should follow Jesus' steps into this kind of service.

For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. He committed no sin; no guile was found on his lips. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but trusted to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed (I Pet. 2:21-24).

In the light of these Scriptures real service can mean many things. It means we must suffer on behalf of others. It means we must follow in Jesus' steps, always seeking to act with redemptive love. Conscious of his forgiveness for our wrongdoing, we must seek in some measure to bear the sins and violence of others thereby through grace of our Lord bringing the hostility to an end.

Like the twelve and the seventy whom Jesus sent out, service means in the first place preaching the good news that God has begun the fulfillment of his promise that the reign and rule of God has begun. Calling for repentance we minister to the deep spiritual hunger of all. We are also called to heal the sick, feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, offer hospitality to the homeless and visit the widows and fatherless in their need—these commands of our Lord reflecting the true fast called for in Isaiah 58, fill out the picture of what it means to serve.

Living to serve others and not ourselves also means faithfulness to the Christian peace testimony, the practice of nonviolent resistance to evil. It is inconceivable that the humble servant of Christ who seeks to freely obey him in all things, who has found purity of heart and who asks for no right save to serve the needs of others should sanction or participate in war or violence in any form.

For example, in 1536 four survivors of a Spanish expedition to Florida arrived on foot in Mexico after eight years of travel, during which time these former soldiers had become faith healers of the diseases of the hundreds of Indian tribes they had passed through on their way. The first signs

of white men they came across were burned and empty Indian villages destroyed by Spanish slave catchers. The first group of Spaniards they encountered were such slavers. The slavers wanted, of course, to enslave the Indians who had accompanied the Florida survivors. Alvar Nuñez, one of the survivors, relates the incident:

They had their interpreters make a fine speech. He told our Indians that we were as a matter of fact Christians too, but had gone astray for a long while, and were people of no luck and little heart. But the Christians on horseback were real Christians, and the lords of the land to be obeyed and served. Our Indians considered this point of view. They answered that the real Christians apparently lied, that we could not possibly be Christians. For we appeared out of the sunrise, they out of the sunset; we cured the sick, while they killed even the healthy; we went naked and barefoot, while they wore clothes, and rode on horseback and stuck people with lances; we asked for nothing and gave away all we were given, while they never gave anybody anything and had no other aim than to steal.²²

Rarely does the contrast between the nature of the true servant of Christ and the nominal Christian hypocrite get so sharply defined.

A humility which is self-effacing and yet exhibits assurance and boldness derived from the greatness of the One who involves us in His tasks; a purity of heart which is not only aware of the filth of humanity, but also hungers and thirsts for righteousness and finds, through grace, that a life of dynamic and free obedience is possible here and now; a commitment together in voluntary covenant with people of God who care radically for one another and witness gladly to others; plus the deep desire not to be served but to serve, meeting the spiritual and physical needs of others by methods consistent with the spirit and example of the one who came to wash the feet of all humanity—these are the fruits of free obedience.

Free obedience, then, means hearing God's voice, doing what God says and doing God's will before our own. Set free from bondage, we commit ourselves to liberating others. Within the limitless love of God's bountiful care we learn that doing the Truth makes us free. With inner discipline we learn to stand fast for Truth. Prompted by Christ, our Teacher within, and in process of being perfected toward our full potential as children of God, we exhibit the fruits of free obedience.

Put succinctly, obedience means to hear, to heed and to act upon the instruction of true authority. To do so voluntarily, from inner constraint and without coercion is free obedience. As we practice it we thankfully confess, "Thy obedience is perfect freedom!"

22. Haniel Long, Tr., *Interlinear to Cabeza de Vaca* (Santa Fe: Writer's Editions, 1939), pp. 35-36.