

Levi Pennington

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Pennington to American Friend, 1947

Levi T. Pennington

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ON THE BASIS OF SILENCE

By Levi T. Pennington.

American Friend,
Richmond, Indiana.

Dear Friends:--

It isn't the usual thing, I am sure, but I am sending the enclosed article to the Philadelphia Friend, the Friends Intelligencer and the London Friend. If any or all want to use it, that will be all right with me. If none of them use it, and if you do not think it suitable for The American Friend, that also will cause no hard feelings. I am writing this because I feel that it needs to be said by somebody. Perhaps it would carry more weight if it were said, in better form, editorially. In any case I recognize that I am not the editor, to accept or reject, modify or to say the thing better in the editorial columns.

Sincerely your friend,

Levi T. Pennington.

I submit that the true seeking for worship is not on the basis of silence, but on the basis of spiritual liberty for all the children of God gathered together in a "meeting." Who are we, that we should tell God whether there shall be silence or speech? Who are we that we should tell God's servant to be silent when God bids him speak, or to speak when God bids him be silent? He who is still, receives the value of the seeking for worship; no one else. The true seeking for worship is neither "on the basis of silence," nor is it, as that same expression would seem to indicate of any other kind of seeking, "on the basis of noise." The true seeking for worship is on the basis of spiritual guidance and spiritual liberty.

On the other hand, there are on the basis of silence; meetings in which there seems to be a feeling that God cannot speak through human organs. He has first been given twenty minutes to prepare, as if He had given His messenger that long to prepare or be prepared.

To say we will face the facts. We as Friends refused in our first generation to use a special language, a plural pronoun for a singular, for instance; and later we did insist on a special language, and discovered those who failed to use "the plain language." We revolted against following the styles in dress; and then we made ourselves the slaves of style to such an extent that the man or woman guilty of transgression of "the plainness of dress" was disowned, while many a supposed "Abner in Israel" was as proud of her plain silk bonnet as other and "worse" women were of their Paris gowns or their Gaißborough hats. Rebelling against form and ritual in worship, some of us have made a form of our thoughtlessness and a ritual of our lack of ritual. Silence has become for some as much of a ritual as the elevation of the host in Catholicism.

There are not easy nor pleasant things to say, especially of a practice so blessed as "the silence of the seeking soul." But a small number of us have seen positive desperation manifested on the part of those who insisted on silence while some full heart was being poured out in fearful prayer or praise to God. Perhaps a sense of humor would help us.

In a recent gathering in which a number of Friends had spoken on a

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"Meeting on the basis of silence" is an expression that has so entrenched itself in the Quaker vocabulary that it is not likely to pass out of Friendly language at any time in the near future. But in several ways it is so lacking in accuracy and adequacy that it seems it should be subjected to some critical examination.

In a restaurant where the writer used to take his midnight lunch while working on a morning daily paper was a sign which read, "We can't trust you for two reasons. First, we don't know you. Second, we do." My chief objections to the expression, "meeting on the basis of silence" are along the same line. First, it is not a meeting on the basis of silence. Second, it is.

I submit that the true meeting for worship is not on the basis of silence, but on the basis of spiritual leadership and of spiritual liberty for all the children of God gathered together in a "meeting." Who are we, that we should tell God whether there shall be silence or speech? Who are we that we should tell God's servant to be silent when God bids him speak, or to speak when God bids him be silent? No one will question the value of silence in the meeting for worship; no one will question that God also speaks through human lips as well as in the silence. The true meeting for worship is neither "on the basis of silence", nor is it, as that smug expression would seem to indicate of any other kind of meeting, "on the basis of noise." The true meeting for worship is on the basis of spiritual guidance and spiritual liberty.

On the other hand, there ^{meetings} are on the basis of silence; meetings in which there seems to be a feeling that God cannot speak through human lips unless He has first been given twenty minutes to prepare, or at least has given His messenger that long to prepare or be prepared.

We may as well face the facts. We as Friends refused in our first generation to use a special language, a plural pronoun for a singular, for instance; and later we did insist on a special language, and disowned those who failed to use "the plain language." We revolted against following the styles in dress; and then we made ourselves the slaves of style to such an extent that the man or woman guilty of "deviation from plainness of dress" was disowned, while many a supposed "mother in Israel" was as proud of her plain silk bonnet as other and "worldly" women were of their Paris gowns or their Gainsborough hats. Rebelling against form and ritual in worship, some of us have made a form of our formlessness and a ritual of our lack of ritual. Silence has become for some as much of a ritual as the elevation of the host in Catholicism.

These are not easy nor pleasant things to say, especially of a practice so blessed as "the silence of the seeking soul." But no small number of us have seen positive exasperation manifested on the part of those who insisted on silence while some full heart was being poured out in tearful prayer or praise to God. Perhaps a sense of humor would help us.

In a recent gathering in which a number of Friends had spoken on a

matter of deep concern, another Friend spent more time in insisting on silence than any of the previous speakers had used. In a great conference of Friends there was a "pastoral" meeting held on the first day of the week, in which there was a considerable time of worship; and at the same hour there was a "meeting on the basis of silence in which there was very little silence and not too much "basis", many Friends speaking in quick succession, some of them two and even three times. In one of the American yearly meetings a minister had been asked to speak daily in the devotional meeting at the close of the morning business session. In one of these business sessions the gathering became much moved, and came into a spirit of great unity and deep devotion. The speaker assigned to that hour expressed his conviction that nothing he could say would be so profitable as for the company to sit in silent contemplation and worship. As he took his seat, a Friend arose and spoke for the full period and for fifteen minutes on into the lunch hour on the importance of silence in the meeting for worship.

There are meetings that resemble heaven in at least one respect, for there was silence in heaven by the space of half an hour. There are meetings in which if the Lord wanted to speak someone would have to be interrupted, for somebody is speaking all the time. There are meetings in which there is so much effort to secure vocal participation that one is forced to think of the well that is "pumped" so hard that the water that is raised is decidedly muddy. And there are meetings with silence as dead as that of the graveyard, and times when men refrain from "the word fitly spoken", to the impoverishing of their own souls and the robbing of those who should have been enriched by the words that God had given to those who kept silence when God bade them speak.

Let us seek to have our meetings not "on the basis of silence" nor "on the basis of noise", but on the basis of spiritual guidance, spiritual liberty, and obedience to the voice of God in silence or in speech; as He directs, and not as tradition or prejudice dictates.

BY LEAT L. BOWENSON

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