

Levi Pennington

People

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Pennington to The Cox Family, May 20, 1965

Levi T. Pennington

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May 20, 1965.

Dear Friends:--

It was good to get your letter of the 18th, and to know a bit about how things are going with you. I wish I knew how to help you, to a settled peace of mind about any theological problem and to a satisfactory position where you could carry out your ideals of service in a satisfactory way. It seems to me that you are really getting some fine work done through that Human Relations Council of which you write.

The Pacific Northwest Regional Office of the American Friends Service Committee has been seeking for months to find a Peace Interne to work in the Portland Area Program Council. We had such a man, who was working out his alternate service, or hoped he was, as the interne in the Seattle office was doing; but the Portland interne's local board would not accept this as meeting their requirements, and so he had to leave us and take service under the AFSC overseas.

I do not know how much salary you would need for your family of four, nor whether there would be employment part time by which the wife and mother could augment the family income if the husband and father were the peace interne. When nothing developed about this matter and the teaching job was taken on, we had not done anything toward such work for you. But if you feel interested, I think it would be wise for you to get an application to Charles Ludwig, Chairman of the Personnel Committee, 437 Fifteenth Street, Bellingham, Washington, 98225.

The views of Friends on the outward ordinances differ from those of every other denomination, so far as I know, and differ most widely from those of the Catholics. But even among Protestant Christians there is much difference in many cases. How many ordinances? Most Protestant churches observe two; some churches observe three, some four, and so on; baptism, communion, foot washing, the holy kiss, and so on. Some hold to certain prohibitions, such as the ban on the wearing of gold, on women speaking in the churches, women going uncovered in the churches (Paul said that was just as bad as if they bobbed their hair), and other things which, if taken literally, would certainly require great changes in the Presbyterian Church or any other of the prominent denominations.

You doubtless know that there are a number of "branches" of Friends, as the denomination had a big "separation" in the late 1820's, another in the 1840's, and others of lesser importance. There are wide differences in theology between General Conference Friends (Hicksites) and "Orthodox" Friends (the main body, sometimes called Gurneyites); but nearly all Friends agree on the non-essential character of the outward ordinances.

This largest body of folks who call themselves Friends and most of whom, practically all but ~~some~~ Ohio Yearly Meeting and Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, had a Uniform Discipline, which had as fuller statements of our faith George Fox's letter to the

Governor of Barbadoes, and the Richmond Declaration of Faith, adopted in 1887 by the conference of orthodox Friends out of which the Five Years Meeting subsequently grew. I thought that I'd copy the sections on Baptism and The Supper of the Lord, but it is more than two full pages and I did not learn typing properly (I use what is jestingly called the Hunt & Peck system); and I am sure you can get a copy of their discipline from the central office of California Yearly Meeting by writing to them at Whittier, California.

Personally I do not expect that Friends views on the ordinances will ever be widely accepted. There is too much love for outward show, too much difficulty in accepting the reality apart from its symbol.

Jesus did not originate water baptism. John the Baptist was baptising with water when, as he said later, speaking of Jesus, "I knew him not." Jesus himself did not baptise with water, though his immediate followers did. Paul used the ceremony very little, and declared that he was not sent to baptise but to preach the gospel. If Jesus had meant water baptism when he commissioned his followers to go into all the world and preach the gospel baptising them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, why would not Paul have been eager to carry out this part of the Great Commission?

As to the so-called Lord's supper, it was the Passover feast, partaken of by Jews, who would continue it, as some did other Jewish customs. To me there is much force in Jesus' statement to the Twelve, "This do, as oft as ye do it, in remembrance of me." "As oft as ye do it" -- as long as you continue this practice do it "in remembrance of me" -- the Jews had been doing it in anticipation of him; now that "Christ, our Passover" was to be sacrificed the next day, the feast was to be in remembrance.

To me the strongest evidence from the days when Christ was walking among men that the communion is an inward thing and not an outward is in his teaching when he said, "Except ye eat my flesh and drink my blood, ye have no life in yourselves." No wonder his hearers said, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" And Jesus replied, "Does this cause you to stumble? What then if you shall see the Son of Man ascending where he was before" -- when manifestly they could not have his flesh to eat and his blood to drink. "The flesh profiteth nothing" he said.

The Catholic is consistent; he believes in transubstantiation, that under the blessing of the priest the bread and wine do actually become the flesh and blood of Christ. The Friend is consistent in his belief that Jesus was speaking figuratively, meaning that just as food enters the body and presently is no longer food but is built right into the body structure, just so the spirit of Christ is to be received into the human soul and becomes a part of the very being of the Christian.

It ought to be said a great deal better than I can say it. I have no quarrel with the man who finds the outward ordinances a "means of grace" to him. But the Friend believes that religion is definitely an inward thing, and that no outward thing can produce a change in a man's soul. A man could go down to the River Jordan a dry sinner and come back a wet sinner; he could partake of bread and wine in a church a thousand times and never have communion with God. But a man could find acceptance with God while dying of thirst in a desert or while hanging on a cross; and he could

have communion with God while starving to death in India or China.

Here I've written hundreds of words, and if I had it to do over again I'd do it better or worse or maybe not do it at all; just refer you to Robert Barclas or the Richmond Declaration or the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Discipline or to some source provided by an authority.

I'm glad that your children are doing so well, and that the assorted birds, the puppy, the kittens -- now wait a minute. I know some birds that I'd be very glad to get along without. The California jays -- why didn't you keep them down there? -- stole half my filberts last fall; the man who brought the starling* over here, and the man who brought the English sparrow -- spiders, bugs, snails -- do you have scorpions, too?

The scorpion is the strangest bug you'll see.
How he ever happened puzzles me.
Claws in front, you mind,
And stinger on behind --
He's a cross between a lobster and a bee.

May I use your letter to give some other folks some idea of what sort of folks you are? If you don't want me to, better reply to this letter today -- and you'll have to hurry, for it is sixteen minutes to midnight right now.

With the hope that just the right service may be open to you before your patience wears out, I am

Sincerely your friend,

Levi T. Pennington.

The Cox Family,
532 Dahlia Place,
Santa Maria, California.

* That's a startling way
to spell it.