

Unitarian Belief Among Early Quakers

PATRICK J. NUGENT, M. Div.
UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

While never holding an explicitly anti-Trinitarian creed or doctrine, the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) has had a powerful strand of non-Trinitarian belief since its earliest days. One branch of the Society maintains this belief today.

Three important periods of our history witness a flowering of what might be called “biblical unitarian” belief among Friends: the first generations, when unitarian belief was articulated in an essay by William Penn; the Great (or Hicksite) Separation of 1827 and the following years of the Hicksite movement; and the modern era, from the First World War to the present. This article will deal only with early Friends and will dwell upon Penn’s essay. I argue here that early Friends held a biblical unitarian view of God and Christ. The unitarianism of later periods will be treated in a subsequent essay.

I. THE SOCIETY OF FRIENDS: AN INTRODUCTION

Friends are peculiar enough that a brief introduction to their history and their faith and practice is in order and will elucidate the later discussion.

The Society of Friends grew up during the turbulent years of the Commonwealth in England. Its founder, the Yorkshire leathercraftsman George Fox, had a revelation in 1648 after several years of intense but fruitless spiritual searching among the different religious factions in his day, none of which measured up in his mind to the demands and testimony of Scripture. He recounted the experience in his *Journal*:

As I had forsaken all the priests, so I left the separate preachers also, and those called the most experienced people. For I saw there was none among

them all that could speak to my condition. And when all my hopes in them and in all men was [*sic*] gone, so that I had nothing outwardly to help me, nor could tell what to do, then, O then, I heard a voice which said, “There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition,” and, when I heard it, my heart did leap for joy. . . . For all are concluded under sin and shut up in unbelief, as I had been, that Jesus Christ might have the pre-eminence, who enlightens and gives grace and faith and power. Thus, when God doth work, who shall let [i.e., “prevent”] it? And this I knew experimentally. My desires after the Lord grew stronger, and zeal in the pure knowledge of God and of Christ alone, without the help of any man, book, or writing. For though I read the Scriptures that spake of Christ and of God, yet I knew Him not, but by revelation, as He who hath the key did open, and as the Father of Life drew me to His Son by His Spirit. And then the Lord did gently lead me along, and did let me see His love, which was endless and eternal, and surpasseth all the knowledge that man has in the natural state or can get by history or books; and that love did let me see myself as I was without Him.¹

This extended passage from Fox’s lengthy journal is worth reproducing in its entirety because it contains the rudiments of the uniquely Quaker experience which set so much of seventeenth-century England afire. Fox was admittedly eccentric, and Friends respect him as a founder but by no means revere him as a saint or accept his word as final. Yet his vision gave characteristic shape to the society and its faith and practice.

The central features of Friends’ faith are these. First, the primary way of knowing God is through direct, immediate revelation; Fox’s word “experimentally” would today be rendered “experientially.” Friends believe that the same Holy Spirit that inspired the authors of Scripture continues to inspire us today, in precisely the same way. The testimony of the Scriptures serves as a foundation for our faith, but does not override the direct experience of God’s presence to which each believer—indeed each person on earth, whether or not they have heard the Christian message—has access to God deep in the soul. “I knew [God] not, but by revelation,” said Fox.

Second, worship in the Society of Friends takes the form of waiting silently together upon the Lord until a member is moved to speak. One speaks not because one has a good idea, nor because one has a worry or a soapbox to stand on. One “ministers” when, having “centered down”

¹George Fox, *Journal*, ed. John Nickalls, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952.

deep into the soul where God is present, the place beneath and past all words, one feels “opened” and “led” by the Spirit to speak. While the water will always taste of the pipes, as it were, what is spoken should be what is given by God in worship. There is no place for prepared messages; there is no ordained clergy appointed to “lead” a service, because it is Christ himself who presides and guides in the gathered Meeting for Worship. Giving ministry in Meeting is, for Friends, a weighty and awesome experience. Many Friends tell of the great struggle they have before actually speaking, trying to discern whether the word they have is really from God or from their own will. This is all the more difficult because, in Friends’ experience, God is understood as the “still, small voice” that Elijah knew in the desert. Theatrical displays, tongues, self-assured oracles, and self-righteous, fiery sermons are out of place in Friends’ Meetings; combined with their conviction of God’s immediate revelation is the belief that no single person has the entirety of that revelation, and that all ministry must be evaluated by the discernment of the community. The Catholic mystic Thomas Merton, having attended Friends’ Meeting for Worship as a child, noted wryly that for a belief as dramatic as that of immediate revelation, ministry in Friends’ Meetings was pretty unimpressively modest. A Quaker would find no irony in this; a deep sense of humility and of the inadequacy of the “minister”—the one who speaks in Meeting—pervades the experience of worship, and it is our belief that revelation consists not in words, ideas, commandments, doctrines, and the like, but in the very presence and self-revelation of God which these other things seek to express. No human being will ever be able to articulate this presence completely or accurately, so humility, care, caution, and brevity are of the essence in ministry.

Third, Fox preached that there is “that of God” in every individual. This meant, for one, that each person is capable of knowing God immediately in the soul, and is potentially capable of giving ministry, though some may have greater gifts in the ministry than others. It also meant that no single individual could claim a monopoly on truth or on the experience of God. This has implications both for the way Quakers treat others—for instance, we refuse to kill any person at any time for any reason—and for how we treat other religions. As John Woolman, the great Quaker abolitionist, put it,

There is a principle which is pure, placed in the human mind, which in different places and ages hath had different names. It is, however, pure and proceeds from God. It is deep and inward, confined to no forms of religion

or excluded from any where the heart stands in perfect sincerity. In whom soever this takes root and grows, of what nation soever, they become brethren in the best sense of the expression.²

The third feature of Quaker belief comes into play here. Because of the insufficiency of any individual to give perfect expression to the presence of God, and because vital religion is found not in words about God but in the experience of God, Friends have always been deeply suspicious of theological debate and exposition—what Friends have traditionally called “notions.” Friends have throughout their history been painfully aware of the divisive nature of doctrinal rigidity. They have preferred to leave theological speculation alone and have been sorry when they did not.

Friends’ beliefs and experience of the divine have led us to a number of positions on religious and social issues that are referred to as “the Testimonies.” They form the heart of the Quaker witness to the world, though (predictably) their written formulation differs and there is no standard document. They are a way of life. For instance, Friends bear testimony against the use of outward sacraments and ordinances, believing that in biblical times, baptism and communion were outward signs of an inward reality. Such signs, Friends feel, are often confused for the real experiences they are meant to convey—transformation in the divine life and inward communion with God, for example. Friends bear testimony to a “free gospel ministry,” open to all and unpaid.³ We have from our earliest days borne testimony that women are as equally able and gifted to minister in Meeting for Worship, and to hold authority among us, as men are. While we have at times admitted functional distinctions between men and women (for example, in the family), Friends have always supported the ministry of women equally, including in the remarkable traveling ministry of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Friends also bear testimony against war; as Fox put it,

we utterly deny all outward wars and strife, and fightings with outward weapons, for any end, or under any pretence whatsoever; this is our testimony to the whole world . . . [that] the Spirit of Christ, by which we are guided, is not changeable, so as once to command us from a thing as

²John Woolman, “Considerations on Keeping Negroes,” *Works*, 1774, 325.

³A recently-republished essay by John Howard Yoder, *The Fullness of Christ* (Elgin, IL: Brethren Publishing House, 1987), makes a Scriptural argument against monopolistic professional ministry as precisely opposite to Paul’s intention and practice—an argument closely parallel to but more articulate than that of Friends.

evil, and again to move unto it; and we certainly know, and testify to the world 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 this world.⁴

Again on a Scriptural basis, Friends refuse to swear oaths, judicially or otherwise: echoing Jesus, Fox was fond of saying, “Let your yea be yea and your nay be nay.” Friends refused until about 1930 to use the plural “you” in place of the singular “thou” and “thee,” on the grounds that it was inaccurate and violated Scriptural equality of persons before God. Other characteristic habits bore witness to the testimony against hierarchical relationships, such as the refusal to remove hats (now in disuse), to bow, or to use honorific titles (many Friends still will not even use the titles “Mr.,” “Mrs.,” and the like, much less “Your Honor” or “The Honorable . . .”). Other testimonies followed, but these are the best known.

II. A NOTE ON FRIENDS AND THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

The belief in immediate revelation convinced early Friends that revelation was an ongoing process, that the Age of the Apostles was not over. This developed into a belief in what has been called “progressive revelation.” Early Friends believed that when God’s will is revealed to the gathered community, and tested in community and with other Meeting communities, “new” revelation could be said to have occurred. This belief lent Friends’ controversial literature a degree of confidence that is striking and at times inordinate. Friends in later generations, while still holding to a belief in progressive revelation, have been much more hesitant in mistaking new and life-changing revelations of God’s *presence* for the revelation of new *information*. Early Friends distinguished clearly between these two things,⁵ though they believed firmly that new revelation could not contradict previous revelation, as experienced in the community and recorded in Scripture, though it might lead to new interpretations of old revelation.

⁴Fox, *Journal*, 1891 Bicentennial Edition, Vol. I., 315-316.

⁵See for example, Robert Barclay, *Apology for the True Christian Divinity* (Philadelphia: Friends’ Book Store, 1908; orig. pub. 1675): “these divine inward revelations, which we make absolutely necessary for the building up of true faith, neither do nor can ever contradict the outward testimony of the Scriptures, or right and sound reason. Yet from hence it will not follow, that these divine revelations are to be subjected to the examination, either of the outward testimony of the Scriptures, or of the natural reason of man, as to a more noble or certain rule or touchstone.” (Proposition 2, 13.)

In the earliest generations, Friends’ suspicion of theology was evoked more by university-trained theologians, and by religion which claimed that correct doctrine and not the direct experience of God and the transformation of the self was the key to salvation. They did not hesitate to argue their views theologically in public and with a degree of fury that later Friends have eschewed. The first generation of Friends argued a number of theological issues with polemicists of other churches, usually in defense of the Society of Friends and its practices. Attacks against Friends often came in the form of mistakenly deducing their belief from their practice, which forced the Society’s defenders to argue on the level of belief. Some Friends would then make a further step and argue with the theologians on their own turf, taking up constructive theological positions as well as defensive ones.

William Penn was probably the most prolific of these authors. His treatise “The Sandy Foundation Shaken,” like all of his writing, took the position implicitly that a doctrine should not be held if it is not to be found in the Scripture.⁶ Yet he argued unitarian belief because it was reasonable and compatible with revelation and therefore was in the Bible, not that it was reasonable and compatible with revelation *because* it was in the Bible. So to call him a biblical unitarian must be accompanied by a caveat on early Friends’ peculiar use of the Scriptures as grounding, confirming, and reflecting what we know to be true of God and Christ in our experience of the divine presence, not as a source of knowledge to which religious experience must be made to conform. A different way of making the same point, inspired by John’s Gospel, is something of a slogan among Friends; Christ alone is the Word of God, not the outward Scriptures. Nonetheless, early Friends were convinced that their beliefs, including their testimonies against paid and ordained ministry and their practices of worship, were vindicated by Scripture, and they knew their Bible as well as any. Modern Friends are gratified that in some respects at least the “scientific” or modern academic criticism of Scripture has confirmed many Quaker practices and beliefs, including the strand of unitarian belief which has always been present among us.

⁶Early Friends, like any other group of its time, were completely convinced that the New Testament could be shown to vindicate all of their beliefs, and that all their beliefs were contained there. Friends of later generations understood more clearly the dramatic novelty of George Fox’s teaching, and while using Scripture as a founding guide and resource for their faith, do not claim that the New Testament is a blueprint for the Society of Friends, or that we have a monopoly on correct interpretation of it!

III. UNITARIANISM AMONG EARLY FRIENDS

Friends have always used the many different names of God, Christ, and the Spirit found in the New Testament—traditionally Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but also others including Word, Seed, Life, and especially Light. Early church tradition after the New Testament gradually discarded most names in favor of the first three, but Friends (and others) recovered these in their early days and have continued to use them. Until the evangelical revivals which swept through and transformed much of the Society in the nineteenth century, Friends never distinguished clearly between Father and Spirit.⁷ Certainly Friends did distinguish between the Father and the person of Jesus, but Christologies differed, ranging from adoptionism to a logically contradictory non-Trinitarian monarchianism. All believed in the pre-existence of the Word of God as part of the divine life, but there were varying opinions of the pre-existence of Jesus of Nazareth. Most would speak of the pre-existence of Christ, differentiating “Christ” as the saving power of God in Jesus, and Jesus as the man in whom that power was manifested, though such a characterization puts too fine a point on the matter. Many would not make this distinction. The profusion of the divine names and Christologies tended to yield theological fuzziness; when names such as Light, Life, Spirit, Seed, and others were used, it was clear that Friends were referring sometimes to the Father and sometimes to Christ, but how and to what extent was often uncertain. Hugh Barbour observes that “most Quakers were vague about the Trinity, and called the term itself unbiblical.”⁸ This ambiguity has its roots in the fact that religious discourse among Friends, unlike many of their opponents, was grounded not in a desire for orthodoxy but in a rich spiritual experience which they wished to describe and bear witness to. “What was being said in this rejection of Trinitarian doctrine was that you did not need to believe in an elaborate system of ‘persons,’ ‘essences,’ or ‘natures’ to have a saving faith in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”⁹ They used Scriptural names for God which reflected their experience with precision, rather than making precise theological distinctions. They

⁷Friends from the Hicksite (“General Conference”) traditions still do not generally make such a distinction.

⁸Hugh Barbour, *Quakers in Puritan England*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964, 145.

⁹John Punshon, *Portrait in Grey: A Short History of the Quakers*, London: Quaker Home Service, 1984, 96.

refused to use notions that did not appear in the Scriptures. What was clear, though, was their belief that Christ was living and present in their lives, mediating the power of God to the soul. Their favorite name for Christ was the “Teacher.”¹⁰

Some things can be said with a degree of accuracy about early Friends’ thoughts on the Trinity, usually by way of examining Christology. George Fox himself seems never to have used the word “Trinity” in his writings, either for or against.¹¹ His Christology, however, has a peculiar but strongly unitarian flavor. Perhaps his clearest words on the subject come in a pamphlet entitled “Saul’s Errand to Damascus,” a response to charges laid against Fox and his companion James Nayler at the Lancaster Assizes, 1652. In a section of “Queries Propounded to George Fox by Some of the Contrivers of the Petition, and by Him Answered,” we read not only of Fox’s views on the Trinity—slim as they are—but of his short patience with speculative theological controversy:

Query: Whether there be one individual God distinguished into the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, or not?

Answer: Herein thou wouldst know, whether God be individual, yes or no, which is but a busy mind; for hadst thou the witness in thyself thou wouldst know that he is; but the heathen know not God, and all that know him not, are heathen living in the wicked imaginations of their own hearts, and that is thy condition; for “God is a spirit,” and “none know him but the Son, and he to whom the Son is revealed” [John 4:24; Matt. 11:27]: the Son and the Word is one.¹²

This is Fox’s clearest statement on the subject. He rephrases the questions—is God individual, or not?—and responds that God *is* individual, but uses the word in exactly the opposite way as his questioner, probably not having understood the question precisely. For Fox, God—that is, the Father—was indeed individual, not triune; whereas the questioner meant to ask whether the three members of the Trinity constitute an individual God.

Even in the lengthy “Epistle” of Fox and his companions to the Governor of Barbados (1671), which takes the form of a creed or

¹⁰Excellent source reading for these topics is George Fox’s *Journal*, available in the excellent critical edition of John Nickalls, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952; and Hugh Barbour and Arthur Roberts, eds., *Early Quaker Writings*, 1650-1700, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1973.

¹¹Barbour and Roberts, *Early Quaker Writings*, a 622-page volume, does not have entries for either “Trinity” or “unitarian(ism)” in the index; nor does the even longer *Journal of George Fox*!

¹²Barbour and Roberts, 298.

confession of faith, Fox avoids any discussion of the Trinity or of traditional Nicene or Chalcedonian language about the relationship between the “persons of the Trinity.” And as he does throughout his life, he distinguishes between “God” and “Christ.”

Edward Burrough, a companion of Fox and more articulate theological writer than he, makes somewhat clearer the terms in which Fox and his Quaker contemporaries thought. In “A Declaration to All the World” (1657), the masthead reads that “this is written that all people on earth may know by whom, and how we are saved, and hopes [sic] for eternal life; and what we believe concerning God, Christ, and the Spirit. . . .”¹³ The distinction between God on the one hand, and Christ and the Spirit on the other, is clear and gives evidence of nascent unitarianism.

But Burrough manifests a confusion similar to that found in other early Friends’ writings. He writes,

First, that there is only one God, who is a spirit; and his presence filleth heaven and earth; and he is eternal. . . .¹⁴

Further, he writes that “we believe that this God has given his Son Christ Jesus into the world, a free gift unto the whole world,” that “Christ . . . is the wisdom and power of the Father,” and that “all that receive him and believes [sic] in him are reconciled to God and are made alive to God.”¹⁵ These passages and others like them seem to demonstrate a belief that God refers to the Father and not to the Son and the Spirit.

Yet elsewhere he says that “the Father, Son, and Spirit are one,” and that “concerning Christ we believe that he is one with the Father, and was with him before the world was; and what the Father worketh it is by the Son, for he is the arm of God’s salvation, and the very power and wisdom of the creator.”¹⁶ These passages are rather less unitarian, yet the meaning of “one” is entirely open to question, and once again Burrough distinguishes between God and Christ. Despite the tendency toward Trinitarian thought one may note that nowhere is the name “God” used to refer to the Son or the Spirit. It is always interchangeable with “Father.” What remains, but will not be attempted here, is to determine what precisely Burrough (and others, such as James Nayler) meant by the “oneness” of Father, Son, and Spirit, and by the pre-existence of Christ or of the Word.

¹³*Ibid.*, 299.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 299.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 299.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 300.

The key to Burrough’s views on the subject are summed up, both in their clarity and their vagueness, when he asserts that “God and the Spirit hath no Person, nor cannot be truly distinguished into Persons.”¹⁷

What this scene reveals is that while Friends asserted that Cambridge or Oxford could not make one a minister, being called by the Holy Spirit did not make Friends particularly precise theologians. The strength of the early movement was in its preaching and its ability to transform lives, “gather a people” as they would say, and establish an enduring but democratic organizational structure. But it also reveals a consistently non-Trinitarian ethic and a consistent refusal to call Jesus by the name of “God.”

Even Robert Barclay, the only systematic theologian Friends ever produced, is entirely silent on the Trinity, being more concerned with *how* God is known through Christ and in the Spirit, and what the Church is called to practice in view of God’s self-revelation.

A hypothesis might be hazarded, but hardly proved, about why Friends did not seek greater clarity on the question of the relationship of God, Christ, and Spirit. In the days of the Commonwealth, a nascent unitarian movement did exist but was persecuted as bitterly as Catholics were. Despite their harsh treatment and imprisonment, no one was ever executed in Britain for Quakerism.¹⁸ It may be partly that Friends wished to avoid harsher persecution for a principle which was not central to them and for which neither Scripture nor their own sense of revelation provided an answer that seemed clear to them. It may also be said that Friends’ various and sometimes conflicting uses of ideas about God—whose source was Scripture and popular piety, not precise academic theology—reflect the varying and even confusing ideas in Scripture itself. In any case, with the exception of William Penn, Friends to this day, while often maintaining a theological unitarianism of greater or lesser strictness, have not found it to be important enough to engage in doctrinal controversy over it.¹⁹

But to the fundamental question of whether Fox and the early Friends were unitarians, one may answer a qualified “yes.” Calling Fox a “biblical

¹⁷Edward Burrough, *Works*, London: 1672, 484, quoted by Barbour, *Quakers in Puritan England*, 145.

¹⁸Four Quakers were hanged in Boston Common, however, in 1660 by the Puritan authorities.

¹⁹An exception is the Christological controversies of the nineteenth century, which included the Hicksite Separation (1827-29).

unitarian” may be even more accurate. Fox and his companions certainly did not take the position of the Enlightenment Unitarians of Britain and America, that Jesus was no more than a human being of remarkable qualities, merely a prophet, an expositor of an enlightened reason against a repressive religious establishment. For the early Quakers, there was no question that Jesus was the Son of God, the Christ, and that in him something decisive and divine and dramatic had occurred. They affirmed that in Christ, they knew God through the Spirit. This, however, did not make them Trinitarians, and their avoidance of strict Trinitarian theology was as much intentional as imprecise. They embraced the biblical language about Jesus as the Christ, as the Son of God, and as one in whom the Word of God dwelt. But for better or for worse they embraced what modern Scripture scholars have affirmed is the plurality and ambiguity of titles for the divine and for Christ found in the New Testament.²⁰

IV. PENN’S “SANDY FOUNDATION SHAKEN”

What the consequences would be for fleshing out a more strictly unitarian position was left to William Penn to discover. Penn’s career was a varied one, and he is best remembered as a statesman, the founder of Pennsylvania, and the father of the modern practice of religious liberty in America. But Penn had a brilliant career as a Quaker controversialist while still in England. He was the most articulate writer and thinker of the first generation and a bridge to the second. His pamphlets and broadsides, all now out of print, were vastly influential both in forming the self-consciousness of the Society and in defending it against its orthodox and political detractors.

Penn’s most controversial pamphlet was first published in 1668 and earned him solitary confinement in the Tower of London. Its title is worth quoting in full:

The Sandy Foundation Shaken; or, those so generally believed and applauded Doctrines of One God, subsisting in three distinct and separate Persons, The Impossibility of God’s pardoning Sinners, without a plenary Satisfaction, [and] The Justification of impure persons by an imputative

²⁰An objective work on the Christology of early Friends would be a welcome addition to the study of Quaker history. Previous attempts have been, wittingly or not, profoundly partisan in nature and have had more to do with vindicating or refuting the evangelical theology and methods adopted by some groups of Friends in the nineteenth century than with elucidating the Christology of the first generation of Friends.

Righteousness, Refuted, from the Authority of Scripture Testimonies and Right Reason.

The first section of the treatise is the one most material to the discussion here. Penn takes one step beyond his contemporaries and argues for the first time directly against the Trinity. The first section is entitled “The Trinity of distinct and separate Persons, in the Unity of Essence, refuted from Scripture.” We may call Penn a biblical unitarian in the strict sense of the term.

Penn’s argument is at first scriptural. He cites 1 Kings 8:23, Isaiah 40:25, 45:5, 6, and 48:17, as well as Psalm 71:22 and Zechariah 14:9, all of which refer to the “Holy One of Israel” and the incomparability of God, “Which, with a cloud of other testimonies that might be urged, evidently demonstrate, that in the days of the first covenant, and prophets, but One was the Holy God, and God but that Holy One.”²¹ From the New Testament he also cites a variety of texts, referring to “the One God, the Father,” including Matthew 19:17, John 17:3, Romans 3:30, and others familiar to biblical unitarians.

He argues that if God is the Holy One, “then it will follow, that God is not an Holy Three, nor doth subsist in Three distinct and separate Holy Ones: but the before-cited Scriptures undeniably prove that One is God, and God only is that Holy One; therefore that he cannot be divided into, or subsist in an Holy Three.”²² Such a distinction, he writes, is “impertinent.” Trinitarians must either confess the truth of Scripture on these points or deny Scripture its authority.

Penn also argues “from right reason,” using the philosophical categories involved in the original Trinitarian controversies in the patristic era, the literature of which he had some familiarity with. He argues, with varying success, on grounds of the indivisibility of substance, the nature of infinity, and the communicability or incommunicability of substance.²³ One interesting argument is that

if each person [of the Trinity] be God, and that God subsists in three persons, then in each person are three persons or gods, and from three they will increase to nine, and so *ad infinitum*.²⁴

The point of his ontological arguments, none of which is particularly original or sophisticated and all of which can be found in ancient Arian

²¹Penn, *Sandy Foundation Shaken*, 12.

²²*Ibid.*, 12.

²³*Ibid.*, 13-15.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 14.

and Nestorian texts, is to demonstrate logical inconsistencies in the Trinitarian position.

He continues his argument with an account of the historical background of Trinitarian doctrine. This may be his most powerful argument, and his most sensible. He questions the validity of a doctrine that is not ancient and that was established by violence and coercion. “Know then, my friend,” he writes,

it was born above three hundred years after the ancient gospel was declared; and that through the nice distinctions and too daring curiosity of the Bishop of Alexandria, who being as hotly opposed by Arius, their zeal so reciprocally blew the fire of contention, animosity, and persecution, till at last they sacrificed each other to their mutual revenge. Thus it was conceived in ignorance, brought forth and maintained by cruelty; for he that was strongest imposed his opinion, persecuting the contrary, yet the scale turning on the Trinitarian side, it has there continued.²⁵

Penn finally presents his own position: that

God, whom to know is life eternal, [is] not to be divided, but One pure, entire and eternal Being; who in the fullness of time sent forth his Son, as the true light which enlighteneth every man.²⁶

His rejection of the Trinity causes Penn to reject the “vulgar [i.e., “commonly believed,” not “repulsive”] Doctrine of Satisfaction, being dependent on the second Person of the Trinity.” The Doctrine of Satisfaction, he argues, proceeds on the basis that only a penalty inflicted on another member of the Trinity will satisfy the infinite wrath of God. The rest of his discussion of satisfaction, however, rests not only on his rejection of the Trinity but also on the nature of God as merciful and good. Remission of sins comes because of the sinner’s repentance and redemption by Christ’s blood, but not because God’s anger has been appeased by the crucifixion. But the anti-Trinitarian position remains important in his argument. Satisfaction, he says,

divides the unity of the Godhead by two distinct acts, of being offended, and not offended; of condemning justice and redeeming mercy; of requiring a satisfaction, and then making it . . . Because if Christ pay the debt *as God*, then the Father and the Spirit being God, they also pay the debt.

Penn paid dearly for his beliefs; he and his printer, John Darby, were prosecuted and imprisoned in the Tower. He had clearly struck at the root

of the dominant Puritan theological edifice, and had done so with the tools of Scripture.

V. CONCLUSION

It may be said that there is a sort of unity in the vagueness of early Friends’ anti-Trinitarian Christology. This unity consists in (1) rejecting the word “Trinity” as unscriptural and (for Penn) unreasonable; (2) employing the diversity of Scriptural language about God, Christ, and the Spirit; (3) not calling Christ or Jesus or the Spirit “God,” but affirming the activity of the Divine Life in the person of Jesus; (4) insisting upon the oneness of God; (5) refusing to say more than the Scriptures do about just how Christ participates in the Divine Life; (6) insisting that Jesus is, however, the Christ, the Messiah, and that salvation and redemption are wrought by God through him. Early Friends were not “Unitarian” in the liberal sense which, on philosophical rather than Scriptural grounds, saw Jesus as a prophet and moral teacher but not the Christ in whom God works salvation and who participates in the Divine Life in a unique and determinative way. They were at least “biblical anti-Trinitarians;” their insistence upon the unity and indivisibility of God, and their use of the word “God” to refer only to the Father warrants, I contend, the assertion that they were indeed “biblical unitarians.”

²⁵*Ibid.*, 16.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 17.