

Faithfulness & the Inward Light

"Dwell low in your minds, as it is only in the valley of humiliation that we can have fellowship with the Oppressed Seed." (Letters, p. 23)

Elias Hicks believed God owes humanity nothing, but provides everything anyone has and everything anyone needs. All things, however, are granted in stewardship – not as possessions to be used or misused, abused or discarded as we see fit. They are under our care for a short while and then we will give them up again. Some are enjoyed for a lifetime, others briefly.

"All our rich blessings are but the goods of our kind and gracious Benefactor and are only loaned to us during his good pleasure. So when he calls for them – as they are his just right – we ought cheerfully to surrender them with due acknowledgments and gratitude for the unmerited favor in suffering us to enjoy them so long as we have." (Letters, p. 182)

In his journal (p. 14), he speaks of humanity as "limited, borrowed beings" – recognizing our very being, even our bodies, are ours only temporarily. In the end, each person will have to account for how those loans were managed – what value they produced for their true owner.

Free Will

Of the many precious gifts humanity received, the greatest is free will. Each person has an absolute right to choose what to do with the abilities and material goods granted to her or his care, but in return for all these gifts, each person owes complete and utter obedience to divine direction. Not as a puppet – fidelity is only real when freely chosen and freely given. In 1820, William B. Irish, a non-Quaker who was questioning his faith, exchanged a pair of letters with Hicks, asking for advice. In his first response, Hicks presented his views on the purpose of human life and the importance of free will in achieving that goal:

"I believe that the Almighty Creator of the universe never had but one sole purpose and design in creating man and placing him on this terraqueous globe – and that was to do his will and thereby to continue in a state of happy union and communion with him through the Spirit... but only in his own free and voluntary choice to attend to and do his holy will in all things, and thereby glorify and enjoy him – which all agree to be the chief end and design of man's creation." (Letters, pp. 79-80)

Soon after receiving a reply to his second letter, Irish requested membership in the Religious Society of Friends. His son, born in 1830, was named Elias Hicks Irish.

The Inward Light of Christ

If they are to fulfill this purpose, people need to know what God requires of them. Without some guidance, how could people fulfill their obligation? In 1826, Hicks received a letter from a man advocating for the establishment of a common wealth society (i.e., a community that held all its wealth and material possessions in common). In his answer, Hicks advised the society's adherents to first put their lives under the guidance of the Light Within. Only then would they be able to enter into a true and just commonwealth:

"But did we all as individuals take the Spirit of Truth, or Light Within, as our only rule and guide in all things, we should all then be willing and thereby enabled to do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. Then we should hold all things in common and call nothing our own, but consider all our blessings as only lent to us – to be used and distributed by us in such manner and way as his Holy Spirit, or the Inward Teacher, may from time to time direct. Hence, we should be made all equal, accountable to none but God alone for the right use or abuse of his blessings... And as this order in society becomes established, each individual would be left in the enjoyment and possession of true liberty and independence, and every social obligation be justly and amply fulfilled." (Letters, pp. 209-10)

The Ultimate Rule and Guide

For some, the Bible is held to be the ultimate rule and guide in all things. Others look to specially designated individuals – a priest or minister – to discern God's will and convey it to them. Friends have taken a very different route. From the beginning, Quakers have claimed immediate divine guidance constantly streams into the heart and soul of

each person. In a letter to a skeptical neighbor, Elias Hicks asserted his place in that tradition.

“George Fox was raised up to bear testimony to the Light and Spirit of Truth in the hearts and consciences of men and women as the only sure rule of faith and practice – both in relation to religious and moral things – and which was complete and sufficient without the aid of books or men.” (Letters, p. 55)

This guide was called by a variety of names. Hicks referred to it as the Light of Christ or Christ the Light, the Holy Spirit or the Inward Teacher, the Light of the Spirit of God, the Inward Light and Law, the Light Within, the Spirit of Truth, and more. Borrowing from George Fox, he wrote, “Christ by his Light and Spirit was come to teach his people himself” (Journal, p. 276). Hicks made no distinction between Light, Spirit, and Christ – all referred to the same divine being. The significance was not in the name used, but in the infallible guidance provided.

“I was led to call upon Friends to rally to our standard, the Light Within, which is a principle of perfect rectitude and justice, and if rightly attended to, will lead us to withdraw from all kind of conduct and commerce that is in the least degree tinged with injustice and oppression.” (Journal, p. 343)

Moreover, its content is unique to each person. For Hicks, this divine director was what Jesus referred to when he challenged his disciples to “take up the cross daily” (Luke 9:23). In the last letter written before he died, he offered this definition:

“Some may query, what is the cross of Christ? To these, I answer, it is the perfect law of God that was written on the tablet of his heart and on the heart of every rational creature in such indelible characters that all the power of mortals cannot erase nor obliterate. Neither is there any other power or means given or dispensed to the children of men, but this Inward Law and Light, by which the true and saving knowledge of God can be obtained. And by this Inward Law and Light, all will be either justified or condemned. And all will be made to know God for themselves and be left without excuse.” (Letters, p. 265)

This “Inward Law” is engraved on “the heart of every rational creature.” Divine guidance is universally available – not just to Quakers or to Christians.

Living Faithfully

Individuals aren't called to follow the guidance of the Light of Christ only in "the big things." Everyday life presents an unending series of little opportunities to embrace or to turn away from God. The goal is to choose God deliberately, and to make that habit virtually automatic.

"And even when we proceed in his [God's] counsel, and enter into concerns either of a temporal or of a religious nature, he does not leave it for us to judge how long or how far we may proceed therein, but he keeps the reins in his own hand. Like the well-advised husbandman when breaking the horse, that noble and – when well broken by his will being fully subjected – useful and docile quadruped. His first business is to learn him to lead, so as to follow his master cheerfully – contrary to his own will." (Letters, p. 151)

From his own painful experiences, Hicks knew it is human nature to take the easy way – to do the things that give personal pleasure – rather than choosing submission to the divine will.

"Let neither trials, afflictions, nor any other thing that transpires hinder us or turn us aside from that necessary daily labor in surrendering ourselves up fully to the operation of that purifying, cleansing baptism that makes the heart clean from all the dross and tin of our fallen, corrupt natures." (Letters, p. 69)

This "cleansing baptism" was not, of course, accomplished with water. When Friends used the term, baptism, they were referring to an inward, spiritual event – the baptism "with the Holy Ghost and with fire" from the gospels (Matthew 3:11 and Luke 3:16). Likewise, it was not something that occurred once in a lifetime. Hicks referred in letters and his journal to "deep," "trying," and "excruciating" baptisms – times of trial and testing he endured as part of the ongoing process of working out his salvation "in fear and trembling."

Many of Hicks' greatest trials came when he traveled in the ministry. From a twenty-first-century vantage, it might seem like fun to get off the farm and take a little trip. But the roads were rough and harsh two hundred years ago, the food of indifferent quality, and the beds he slept in – whether at an inn or staying with a family – were likely to be hard, narrow, and often shared with other itinerant men. He frequently wished he was free to return home, but didn't feel released by God to do so:

"I hope thy patience will so hold out as not to think the time too long, as it respects my absence from thee, as no doubt, the Lord's time is always the best time, and to know this is my principle care. And I feel abundantly

thankful that thus far I have got along in the clearness, which produces sweet peace of mind – a blessing not to be equaled by any temporal blessing.” (Unpublished letter to Jemima Hicks, December 9, 1817)

More than once, Hicks reflected on twin stories about Moses leading the children of Israel through the Sinai desert. In chapter seventeen of Exodus, the people needed water and God commanded Moses to strike a rock with his staff. When he did, water flowed from the rock. In chapter twenty in the book of Numbers, there is a similar story of thirst and divine intervention, but this time, God tells Moses to speak to the rock. Instead Moses repeats his earlier actions – he strikes the rock and water gushes out. It is a minor act of disobedience, but the punishment for it is dramatic. Moses will be permitted to see the Promised Land, but will never enter it. In considering these stories, Hicks never questioned whether this penalty was just – all God’s acts are just – but instead applied the lesson to himself:

“Sometimes we are commanded to smite the rock and sometimes, only to speak to it. And we have nothing to do but to mind our leader and obey the word of command... when he says, ‘Smite the rock,’ smite it. And when he says withhold, always obey. And then it will go well with us – let others do as they will. And he will lead us in the way everlasting.” (Letters, pp. 113-114)

Challenges

This chapter began with a quote about being “in the valley of humiliation.” This was at the core of Hicks’ sense of what it means to be faithful – to freely enter the valley of humiliation. He strove to live always in that valley.

His use of the word “humiliation” should not be taken as a sanction for belittling others. To Hicks, humiliation is humbling oneself. Faithfulness comes when a person is willing to take up the daily cross she or he is asked to bear – to answer God’s hopes and dreams written in the heart, rather than one’s own.

Are we prepared to give up our hopes and dreams if the Spirit of Truth calls us elsewhere?