

WHAT IS IT TO WORSHIP?

READ AFTER A MEETING FOR SILENT WORSHIP, IN THE
MEMORIAL HALL, MANCHESTER, 3D SEPT. 1871.

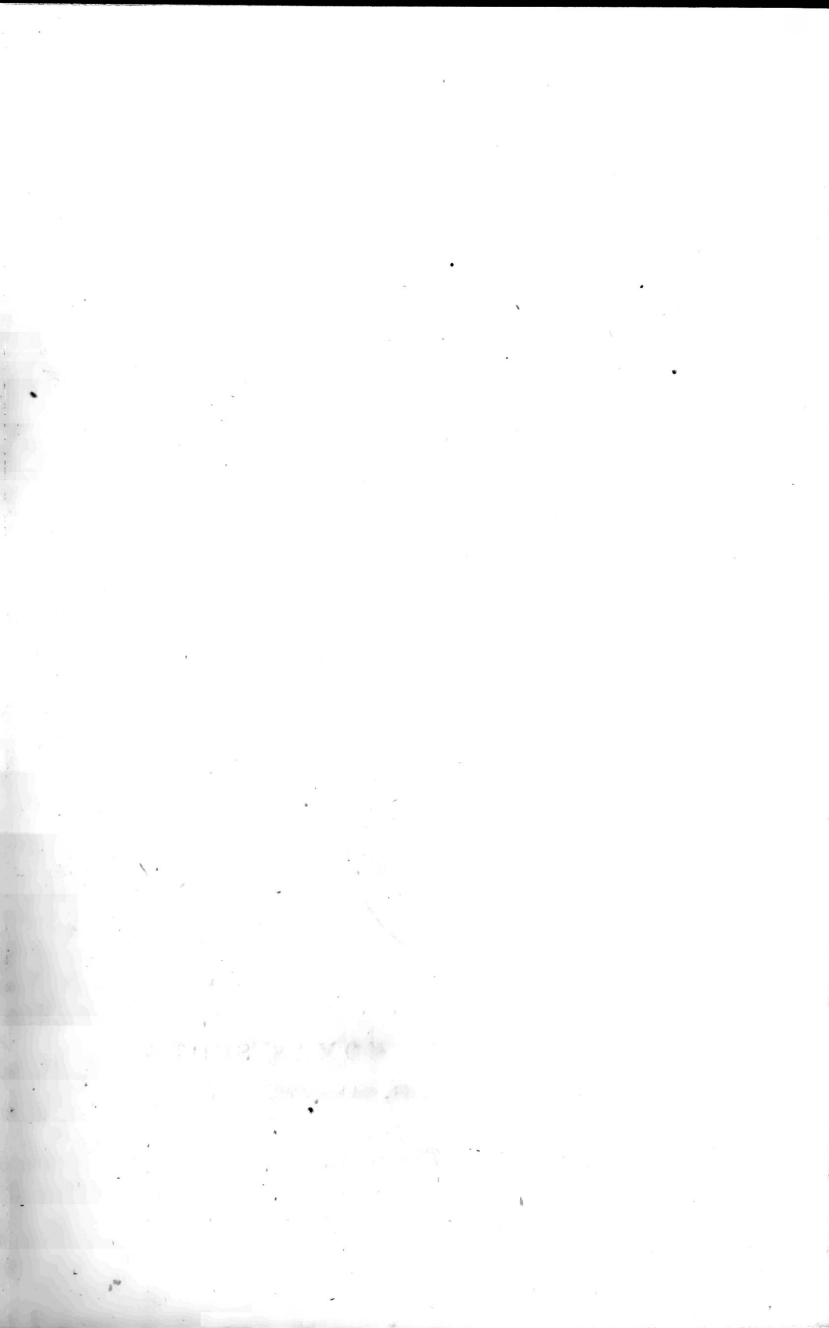
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P R E F A C E.

“Speech is silvern, silence is golden.”

IT has generally been supposed that the Society of Friends was unlike other sects, in that it had no defined creed. This is either a mistake, or the Society has changed its principles. A member was lately cut off, because he did not believe some doctrines which are considered essential by those who represent the governing power of the body. Others have in consequence withdrawn themselves from it, but meet after the manner of “Friends,” for silent worship, during which any of the company is free to speak in prayer or preaching. Afterwards, all have an opportunity to discuss any matter, whether of practice, or theory, that interests them. At one of these after-meetings the following paper was read : several of the company wished to have it printed, thinking it expressed their views.

I have often thought, while reading T. Scott’s Tracts, and kindred works, that the general dissatisfaction with Liturgies and forms of prayer cannot be allayed by changes in these alone, while the essential

faults of the system are retained. I may be still prejudiced in favour of the sect in which I had a birth right, and which I have only just left, but I cannot see anything better than a basis of silence for the meetings of the church of the future. To engage attention as to the practical working out of these ideas, this paper may be useful.

WHAT IS IT TO WORSHIP?

I THINK we were speaking of some minor arrangement, with regard to the use of this room, when I undertook to write this paper. It may seem at first to wander far from the subject, but this is in order that my reasons for what I would say, may be understood.

It is frequently asserted that people who differ greatly in their religious belief, cannot rightly worship together. I think this assertion is a result of wrong ideas about worshipping; and I have tried here to set down my own views on this point—"What is it to Worship?"

It is this—to be willingly subject to a power superior to self, superior to everything self can perceive. To have the whole of our existence in harmony with whatever self *can* perceive of the way in which the superior power acts, or causes action. To observe, and carefully reason upon such acts, in order to discover their principle; and thenceforward to let that be *our* principle, wherever our will appears free: assured that it *must* be *the one* principle in all other cases.

Some believe that the superior power is a Being whom they call God, and who, as they believe, privately instructed men a long time ago to write, or tell to other men his laws, with such a description of his nature that thereby he could be imitated,

or obeyed. Those who imitate or obey, believe that they thereby worship the greatest power existing.

Others believe the power to be constantly manifested in the nature of all mankind, in all the arts and sciences, in all the natural processes of mental and material development. And, thinking that complete knowledge would show all the apparent diversities of things to be harmonious, and therefore right, these also being consciously and willingly in harmony, worship the supreme power, though often without knowing by what name to express it. They are like those wise Athenians who erected their altar "to the unknown God." They acknowledge that power beyond that of human beings, beyond their action and comprehension, exists, and the deepest wisdom of the present and past ages unite to aver, *that power is good*. Good and God appear to be almost identical words. So it seems those, who endeavour to make their whole lives good, are worshippers of good or of God; we may express the same fact in either way.

I think the men who joined George Fox in his seeking for truth, were right in supposing that worship was a feeling of the soul; a desire for, and reaching out unto God, quite distinct from any use of words or actions.

Also, I think, they had perceived a grand truth when they announced that the Almighty, who had created the spirits of men, had made it possible for all those spirits, that is, for each individual spirit, to communicate with the Creator. This truth does not apply only to those who are acquainted with it; it reaches also to those who have the most vague and imperfect notions as to the power they desire to worship, and as to the nature and benefit of a worshipping effort.

In the earlier ages, the idea seems to have been general, that gifts of a part of a man's property,

were to be occasionally offered to God by being entrusted to those who, calling themselves priests, undertook to interpret between mortals and immortals. A very gradual change had been developing some minds out of this feeling, when the early Friends found many to unite in their views.

Now, some think that all we have, or do, or are, is due and owing to God; and can no more be given to him by us, than heat could be bestowed on the sun by any fire we could kindle. Devotion, therefore, does not consist in giving part of our goods to a representative God; but in spending the whole of our lives in accordance with his will. His will, that is revealed by the course of natural events, and in the best thoughts of every human being. The experience of many shows that a man's best thoughts can be most readily perceived in complete solitude, or in silence in a crowd, when usual occupations are set aside for a time.

It is obvious that if worship be a feeling towards God, an intention or desire in the soul to do his will, it can be exercised in solitude. But it is also found that when a number of people meet for a common purpose many are strongly helped by the feeling of fellowship in aim. Men like to act in communities, and where more intense feeling is aroused, more intense effort is the result.

So the early "Friends of Truth" met, to seek silently after God, with the intent to obey him. The more energetic, or more spiritual, who became the leaders, felt themselves compelled to do or to avoid certain things, and taught the rest that the spirit of God must lead in that direction. Gradually this loosened their grasp of truth, thinking that those who differed, were not lead by the right spirit. Thence arose the difficulty of worshipping together. Not content with asking, Do we in a similar mode seek help for our guidance? "Friends" have asked

—Do we believe the same tenets?—Do we uphold the same testimonies?—Do we adopt the same forms?—and when *no*, is the answer to all these, they have decided, in such case, we cannot worship together.

But, with the wider interpretation of what it is to worship, I believe this difficulty would never be felt; and that no form of government is wanted, no limitation of tolerance needed, and no especial name required, when people wish to meet in a room to commune with, or worship their creator, and to feel the influence of the sympathy of others. Having a room cared for by respectable residents, paid for on some simple system enabling all who wish to do so to share in the cost, we should meet, knowing that we were not responsible for the conduct of any one of the company, except in that mutual regard for the general comfort, influencing civilized people who meet for any other temporary association; such as travelling in one carriage, or doing business in one exchange.

I think this social courtesy would suffice to prevent any such disturbance of our comfort, as we have any right to strive to exempt ourselves from; and that if we are to be *free*, we must beware of any other restrictions, though we may have to suffer slight inconvenience occasionally, during our meetings.

The meeting for public worship is but a small part of a man's religious life; and should not be raised into undue importance.

