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"Continuing Revelation—Gospel or Heresy?" in Good and Evil: Quaker Perspectives

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Chapter 2

Continuing Revelation – Gospel or Heresy?

Paul Anderson

Sometimes evil results from seeking to do particular harm or general malevolence, but usually this is not the case. Evil, perceived or actual, is often a factor of moral compromises made in the name of furthering an alternate good. Deception, violence, incompetence, dishonesty, greed, coercion, intemperance, and such biblically-named vices as lasciviousness, concupiscence, and licentiousness, get rationalized in the name of good. Even such positive virtues as family, home, nation, religion, progress, defense, and liberation get yoked to questionable means, and this is the only way evil can be tolerated. It does not cease, however, to be evil, which is why this subject is vitally important. This chapter considers the role of appeals to continuing revelation in the furthering of good and the legitimization of evil.

Any type of authority will be prone to use, and also abuse,¹ but appeals to continuing revelation have a special set of vulnerabilities. Because personal inference is the primary means of discerning the Divine Will, other checks and balances are too easily forfeited. Innocent of historical awareness or theological sophistication, 'novel' understandings of the Divine Will are unencumbered by the wisdom of informed reflection; without Scripture as an objective referent, subjective impressions too easily become projections of personal needs and agendas; without corporate accountability, the individual too easily falls prey to myopic and autocratic perspective; and without rational analysis, flawed thinking too easily substitutes for critical reason. Apart from particulars of content, whether continuing revelation is gospel or heresy depends on how it is ascertained and attested. Where it aligns with other modes of revelation and is subject to corporate accountability, it is most often experienced as good news; where it goes against them – either by default or design – appeals to its authorization fall rather short.

A particularly deceptive feature of any claim to revealed authority is that its advocates feel their stance is divinely ordained, and thus immune to objection. Where the dogmatist often goes wrong is to assume the teaching of the organization stands above reason; where the biblicist often goes wrong is to argue a particular principle to the exclusion of experiential wisdom; where the communitarian often goes wrong is to refuse to listen to the leadings of the individual; and where the rationalist often goes wrong is to neglect the experiential element in aspects of theory and practice.

1 This thesis is developed in the author's essay, 'Religion and Violence – From Pawn to Scapegoat' (Anderson, 2004).

Likewise, where the appeal to personal revelation often goes awry is to raise the authority of internal and individual measures of truth above external and corporate ones. While Friends have long maintained the conviction that God still speaks to humanity, particular claims to personally revealed authority often result in trouble, and this can be seen throughout the history of the Quaker movement.

Continuing Revelation as an Aspect of Gospel among Friends

The Quaker interest in continuing revelation did not emerge out of a vacuum. It is deeply rooted in the experience and conviction that 'Christ is come to teach his people himself', and not only was this claim made by George Fox and early Friends: it is directly taught in Scripture. It was the rediscovery of this central Christian teaching, however, that became the hallmark of the Quaker discovery, whereby the immediacy of Christ was experienced powerfully and proclaimed faithfully. As Fox says in his *Journal* (1952) in 1647:

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 were gone, so that I had nothing outwardly to help me, nor could tell what to do, then, oh 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 (p. 11).

While the transforming reality of direct spiritual encounter with Christ is here juxtaposed to other forms of religious authority, Fox is at times wrongly understood to be posing the direct leadings of Christ against Scripture. At the occasion leading to his first imprisonment in 1650, George Fox interrupted a biblical preacher at the Nottingham church, saying: 'Oh, no, it is not the Scriptures...' but the 'Holy Spirit, by which the holy men of God gave forth the Scriptures...' that doctrines and judgments were to be tried. From the context of 2 Peter 1:19–21, however, it is evident that Fox was not disparaging the authority of the Bible; rather, he was *citing* it.² Fox was here correcting the speaker's exegesis based upon his having known the passage by heart. Rather than inferring here a Scripture-versus-revelation dichotomy, Fox opposed the supplanting of Spirit with Scripture *upon* biblical grounds, *not* against them.

Another point worth noting here is the explicitly Christological understanding of revelational immediacy. It is the Light of *Christ*, apprehended inwardly, that is referenced (John 1:9), *not* an inward source of enlightenment, proper. Likewise, it is the imperishable Seed of the word of God that stirs to spiritual life within (1 Peter 1:23; 1 John 3:9). Therefore, divine disclosure in the understanding of early Friends cannot be separated from its scriptural basis and from a Christocentric understanding of the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit. The Light is real because of Christ's working through the Holy Spirit involves an eschatological Visitation across the boundaries of time and space.

2 See Fox's *Journal* (1952, p. 40). References to this incident and its implications may also be found in the author's articles (Anderson, 1991; Anderson, 2001).

What Fox described experientially, Barclay developed theologically. In his first book, *A Catechism and Confession of Faith*, Robert Barclay challenges the dogmatic character of the Westminster Confession with multiple biblical texts arguing for immediate revelation.³ He develops this conviction further in *An Apology for the True Christian Divinity*, where he argues that the fountain and source of revelation is prior to its collected pools in terms of purity and spiritual vitality. Especially in Proposition 2, 'Inward and Unmediated Revelation', Barclay argues for attending the human–divine relationship above focusing on either Scripture or church authorities, and yet he also acknowledges that Scripture serves as an authoritative referent by which to check subjective leadings. In that sense, Barclay maintains a high view of final biblical authority while emphasizing the priority of spiritual encounter as a first-order experiencing of ongoing revelation.

Barclay also lays out clearly the fact that immediate revelation is well supported throughout church history. Citing the writings of such Christian leaders as Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Augustine, Gregory the Great, St. Bernard, Melancthon, Luther, and Calvin, Barclay points out that the doctrine of continuing revelation is not only biblical, but that it is supported by the major leaders of the Church. In so doing, he first emphasizes that while the revelatory work of the Holy Spirit is infallible, humans are not. Therefore, discernment must be used in all humility and modesty. Second, authentic revelation will not go against Scripture or reason, so these are to be applied to the discernment process. Finally, in emphasizing the way the Spirit bears witness with our spirits (1 Jn. 5:6), Barclay declares, 'this inward, unmediated, objective revelation is the only sure, certain, and immovable foundation of all Christian faith' (1991, p. 43). Therefore, Fox and Barclay alike held up immediate and continuing revelation as a central feature of the Christian Gospel.

Continuing Revelation as a Factor of Conflict among Friends

In addition to being a central aspect of the Friends' message, however, appeals to continuing revelation and an inward locus of authority became a central feature of most of the major controversies and divisions among Friends. Where matters of faith are concerned, heresy is the charge; where matters of practice are concerned, the danger is sacrilege. Within the first Quaker generation, each of the four most notable crises involved some aspect of a claim to continuing revelation. Likewise, continuing revelation played a pivotal role in the three primary crises and separations of Friends in the nineteenth century. Understanding more about how this has been so might clarify the strengths and weaknesses of such a doctrine and its implications.

3 In the first two chapters in his *Catechism*, he outlines the 'true and saving knowledge of God', which is direct and unmediated revelation, followed by a treatment of the inspired character and basis of the Scriptures (Barclay, 2001, pp. 19–26). In his *Confession*, the two longest sections are Article 11, 'The Light that Enlightens Everyone' (ibid., pp. 121–2), and Article 16, 'The Church and Ministry' (ibid., pp. 125–6). The point is that immediate revelation, authoritative Scripture, reasoned thought, and corporate accountability are interwoven here, from the start. These are even more fully laid out interconnectedly in his *Apology* (Barclay, 1991).

The Nayler Controversy. The incident with James Nayler, who in 1656 rode into Bristol on a horse, as his followers sang 'Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Israel!' led not only to his arrest, but also to a trial before the House of Commons – the debates of which lasted for nine days. As punishment, he was beaten publicly in London and Bristol, his forehead was branded with a 'B' for blasphemer, his tongue was bored through with a hot iron, and he was imprisoned for several months. The Nayler incident brought a great deal of embarrassment to Friends, but several aspects of its development relate directly to aspects of continuing revelation. From a positive angle, Nayler appears to have been bearing witness to the conviction that Christ was indeed come to the world – in his own life and in the lives also of others – a testimony to incarnational Christianity.

Beyond that point, though, several other issues became problematic. Motivations surrounding this incident from the start appear suspect. First, Martha Simmonds⁴ and others, who convinced Nayler to stage the event and who laid their garments on the ground in front of the procession, were apparently motivated by something of a competition between Nayler and Fox. Second, in his defense Nayler was unwilling to question the women's motives or to disavow their having been led to ask him to do such a thing. Third, as proceedings continued, Nayler also claimed to be the Son of God, despite distinguishing himself from Christ as 'a sign of his coming' otherwise. While many were impressed with Nayler's witness, the ensuing events and his refusal to question their inspired character not only led to his torture and eventual death, but it caused Fox and other Friends leaders to distance themselves from this and other cases of enthusiastic excess.

The Nayler incident directly evoked intensive resistance to Quakers legislated over the next three decades. Boldness was taken for blasphemy, and because it was legitimated by appeals to continuing revelation, that part of the Quaker message was also subjected to even more rigorous scrutiny than it would have been otherwise. Quaker leaders were therefore forced to defend their orthodoxy and biblical soundness in far greater measure than is seen in the first decade of Quaker writings. It forced Fox, who had criticized the 'chapter-and-versing' of others, to cite biblical references explicitly as his engagements with Christian leaders developed.

The Nayler incident also played a role in the establishment of corporate organization and structured order. As the movement continued to grow, Fox introduced structures of accountability and organization within the local monthly meeting, and elders were appointed to shoulder responsibilities of discernment and pastoral nurture. The first meeting of London Yearly Meeting was held in 1660, and quarterly meetings were also organized. Separate women's meetings were organized to insure their voices not be drowned out by those of men. The Kendall Fund was established to support travel in public ministry among Friends, and traveling minutes eventually became means of attesting the validity of the minister's message. In these and other ways, Friends developed means by which leadings and inspired ministry could be tethered to corporate accountability.

4 Martha Simmonds apparently had played early Quaker leaders against one another. According to William C. Braithwaite (1970, pp. 241–8), having been reproved by Howgill and Burrough, she sought to align Nayler against them, and later against Fox.

John Perrot and the Question of Authority. John Perrot illustrates another problem intrinsic to the Quaker emphasis upon pneumatism. If continuing revelation was to be the basis for the movement, and if Friends were to eschew all conventions and forms of worship, should they be tolerated *within* the Quaker movement? And, if Friends were to challenge human authorities as levelers of God, why should they tolerate some Friends being raised up above others?

As an Irish Quaker who had formerly been a Baptist, John Perrot traveled with John Luffe to Rome seeking to witness to the Pope. Luffe was sentenced to death in the Inquisition, and Perrot was confined to an insane asylum for three years – not exactly a missionary success story! When Perrot returned to England in 1661, he challenged Fox and his authority. Perrot refused to show deference to Fox, and he opposed the respectful removing of one's hat while others prayed, including Quakers.⁵ He objected to any sort of formality, including the shaking of hands at the close of meeting. He likewise opposed the setting of times for worship, to the effect that some Friends under his influence neglected to come together at all. The familiar Quaker challenging of conventions had now been levied at practices common among Friends, and his influence became a threat to the leadership of Fox and the unity of the Quaker movement. The Perrot controversy threw into sharp relief questions of authority and consistency when advocating continuing revelation. Therefore, the need for the establishing bases for Gospel Order and personal authority became evident to Friends, as it had to other Christian groups before them.

The Wilkinson–Story Separation. The Wilkinson–Story separation was an especially costly one for Friends. John Wilkinson and John Story had been leaders in the Quaker movement from the beginning and were numbered among the Valiant Sixty. They resisted the aggregation of authority toward particular elevated leaders, seeking to maintain egalitarianism as the norm. Seeing that local authorities come to use the Quaker Laws as a means of putting a damper on the movement, they also opposed the conviction of other Quakers that Friends should be willing to meet openly. They saw no point in setting themselves up for incarceration or programmatic persecution, and they also opposed the setting up of separate women's meetings. For these and other reasons, they and their followers began separating from the larger Quaker movement; they refused to be subject to the authority of Fox, claiming their own sense of leading and traditional correctness.

The Wilkinson–Story separation was especially poignant, as it involved a breach among the original founders of the Quaker movement. It was precipitated by reactions to structural and personal adjustments made in response to the Nayler and Perrot incidents, as letters of correction were sent by Fox and his supporters to those

5 D. Elton Trueblood's insight on the Perrot–Fox contention is significant, here (1980, p. 98):

'Because extreme spirituality makes public worship no longer possible, George Fox felt forced to oppose Perrot's supposed "revelation". The Christian ideal is not that of the elimination of forms.... The ideal, rather, is to know the difference between the forms and the reality, to be ever aware of the danger of allowing the forms to take the place of reality, and to employ only those forms which lead to reality.'

whose actions were thought to be questionable. Further, Margaret Fell's management of the Kendall Fund – supporting some ministry ventures but doing so selectively – provoked resistance among sympathizers with Perrot. A conciliatory meeting was called in April of 1676, drawing together leading Friends, including William Penn. It was held at Draw Well near Sedbergh, just a few miles from Firbank Fell – the place where Fox had preached to over 1,000 for three hours, marking the public beginning of the Quaker movement. Wilkinson and Story were later reconciled to Fox at Swarthmore Hall, but separations continued nonetheless.

The Keithian Controversy. While the first three crises among Friends reflect problems particular to the honoring of continuing revelation, the Keithian controversy betrays a reaction in the opposite direction. The concern was that Friends had moved away from the central tenets of Christianity, becoming an enthusiastic sect rather than an instrument of radical Christian renewal. While George Keith was at first one of the leading Quaker apologists, having even been something of a mentor of Robert Barclay, he later came to oppose Quakerism with equally apologetic zeal. Unlike most other Quaker leaders, Keith had a degree in theology, thus giving his arguments a theoretical foundation that his partners in dialogue did not possess. Despite the fact that Keith was disowned by Friends in Philadelphia (1692) and in London (1695), the issues at stake are perhaps the most misunderstood of any of the Quaker controversies.

Keith opposed the Quakers' embrace of continuing revelation because he felt it subjugated the authority of Scripture and the clear teachings of Jesus to secondary status. He railed against Quakers' appeals to the Inward Light, calling them heretics or worse. This led to counteraccusations that he was just the same. He was also accused of having a bad temper and of seeking to usurp the place of Fox as the leader of the Quaker movement. Keith's subsequent joining the Church of England and becoming the first traveling minister of the Anglican Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge, seemed to confirm suspicions of his closet Anglicanism. He moved back to America in 1702, and not only did he encourage others to withdraw from the Quaker movement, but he also wrote virulent apologetic tracts against it.

Keith has been roundly accused of lapsing back into the Established Church as one who never really was convinced of Friendly truth. According to Elfrida Vipont (1977, p. 131),

He held that by stressing the importance of the Light Within they were neglecting the historic Christ; moreover, he denied the possibility of salvation for any, however enlightened, to whom Jesus Christ had not been made known. Some of his suggestions for the improvement of the discipline were reasonable and might have been considered, had he not urged them in so contentious a manner; others involved the adoption of a creed which, however exemplary, can never be acceptable to those who believe in a continuing revelation.

Certainly, from the perspective of British Friends, Keith rejoined the adversary, which placed him in the camp of biblical and ecclesial authority versus continuing revelation – the lynchpin of Quaker conviction. Thus, in his disownment, continuing revelation 'won the day' within Quakerism against Scripture, credalism, and ecclesial

authority.⁶ From the perspective of David Holden, however, the political factors in the Keithian saga suggest a different narrative. First, Keith was the first among Friends to oppose the institution of slavery in written form,⁷ as he saw it as contrary to the Gospel – a factor of principle rather than outcome. Second, Keith's first major contention in Pennsylvania resulted from his opposition to the Quaker magistrates turning a blind eye to the use of force in putting down a pirate who had stolen a ship in Philadelphia and had raided sites in the Delaware Valley.⁸ He accused them of being unworthy of being called true Quakers because of their failure to live up to the Peace Testimony. On matters of social concern, Keith saw himself as *the faithful Quaker* against those who would compromise Quaker convictions, and technically he was correct. Third, it was these accused officials who then issued a statement in 1692 against Keith and had it signed by the Governor of Pennsylvania, seeking to discredit him as a means of justifying *their* conduct. From there the issue was taken up in the Yearly Meeting, and what was at first a largely political set of contentions became outlined in theological terms.

Ironically, the preliminary concern was not one of continuing revelation versus the Bible, but the political compromising of the Quaker Peace Testimony and the refusal to stand with the peaceable teachings of Jesus as revealed in Scripture. Keith saw his as the authentic Quaker position, and he challenged his opponents' appeals to continuing revelation as justifying the abandonment of Friendly principles for political expediency. From Keith's perspective, Quaker leaders' appeals to the Inward Light functioned to excuse their sacrificing of Quaker Testimonies in order to maintain worldly power, functioning to legitimate the endorsement of evil. This is why he challenged the divorcing of the timely teachings of Jesus from the timeless work of Christ. Without tethering the leadings of Christ to the clear teachings of Jesus, even such clear teachings as the nonviolent love of enemies, stand to be lost if it seems inconvenient.

The Hicksite–Orthodox Separation. The era of Quietism among Friends produced something of a classic Quaker culture. To maintain a number of Quakerly conventions, those who transgressed them were disciplined, even to the point of disownment. While most of the disownments of the eighteenth century involved matters of praxis, a few involved matters of faith. Particularly notable was that of John Bartram (1758)

6 Note, however, the particularly creedal character of the May 1660 declaration of a peace testimony to Charles II, where Friends declared the conviction that this revelation *would not be overturned by alternative claims to revelation*: '...The Spirit of Christ, by which we are guided, is not changeable, so as once to command us from a thing as evil, and again to move us unto it...' On this matter, Friends articulated a greater commitment to tradition, as a repository of faithful revelation, over and against a commitment to continuing revelation if it involves a departure from the former. This is not unlike Catholic and Protestant commitments to orthodox tenets of faith versus their more problematic alternatives. The difference, though, is that Friends maintained a self-perception of noncreedalism while creedal tenets were in the process of developing.

7 This claim is made by David Holden (1988, p. 31).

8 For political issues underlying the Keithian controversy, see Holden (1988, pp. 25–33) and Dodds (2001).

of Darby Meeting in Philadelphia, who was accused of failing to believe in the humanity and divinity of Christ. Several decades later, although her home meeting in New York had at first provided a traveling minute, Hannah Barnard was denied a letter of endorsement by London Yearly Meeting for the support of further travel to Europe due to her refusal to believe in the inspired authority of Scripture. When she returned to America, her home meeting asked her to discontinue her public ministry, and when she refused she was disowned in 1802. She later became a Unitarian. According to Holden (pp. 52–3), within a few years others were being disowned for questioning the authority of Scripture. Traveling ministers from Britain visited America, and orthodox teaching was emphasized in the interest of correcting error.

Advocates of spiritual renewal saw their efforts as a progressive willingness to introduce new methods of education and fresh means of inspiration to Friends, and their efforts were received warmly by urban Friends. Some rural Friends, though, resisted the innovations as perceived departures from traditional Quakerism, and they were also offended at the ostentatious manner of Friends who were better off economically and who came across as denying Quaker simplicity. An elderly minister, Elias Hicks became the lightning rod for the great division that would ensue. He appealed to the interiority of authority rather than external sources such as Scripture, historic Quaker writings, and the Elders of the Yearly Meeting. Hicks had already begun preaching against wealth and immodesty in 1819. By 1823 'Extracts' from the sayings of early Friends were being used against him to emphasize the Christ-centered and biblically based character of historic Quakerism (Holden, 1988, pp. 54–6). The split in Philadelphia Yearly Meeting came in 1827, and splits in other yearly meetings followed the next year. At issue was the appointing of Clerks who would call upon some to speak, refusing others, especially those whose theology was thought to be questionable. Given that the Orthodox Clerk was up for a second term, the followers of Hicks rallied to the meeting in which the appointment would be made, and this led to an unfortunate set of events in which the two groups became irretrievably polarized.

Analyzing effectively the precipitating issues within the Hicksite–Orthodox separations is difficult. *Theologically*, the Hicksites advocated continuing revelation – the Inner Light as a trustworthy means of divine guidance; the Orthodox saw Scripture as both informing and confirming apprehensions of inspired leadings, and they emphasized submission to the discipline of the community and its leadership. *Sociologically*, the Orthodox were more progressive – seeking to engage Friends in the spiritual renewal that was happening around them; the Hicksites were more conservative – desiring to hold onto their understanding of conventionally plain Quakerism. Theologically, however, the poles were reversed. Hicksite appeals to continuing revelation were done in the name of traditional renewal, while Orthodox efforts to tether enthusiastic claims to Scripture were carried out in the name of spiritual renewal. The result was a division which has continued among North American Friends for nearly two centuries.

The Beaconite Reaction. The Hicksite separation in America caused a reaction among British Friends. Many saw the separations as a factor of giving continuing revelation precedence over other sources of religious authority, and markers of

Evangelicalism emerged within the London Yearly Meeting as a result.⁹ Out of a concern that 'Hicksism' might be headed down the slippery slope of emphasizing the Inward Light over the authority of Scripture, Isaac Crewdson published *A Beacon to the Society of Friends* in 1835. This book listed side-by-side many points made by Elias Hicks, countered by passages from the Bible, and it labeled the doctrine of the Inward Light a 'delusive notion' (Vipont, 1977, p. 182). As a result of Crewdson's challenge to the errant ways of Friends, a committee was appointed by London Yearly Meeting to elder the Manchester Meeting, and Crewdson was himself silenced. In protest about 300 Friends in Britain withdrew, forming a group called the 'Evangelical Friends'. In time, most of them joined other evangelical denominations, especially the Plymouth Brethren, who had many sympathies with Friends.

While the Beaconite reaction to Hicksism might be considered an extreme emphasis on the infallibility of Scripture versus continuing revelation, that assessment is too simplistic. Like the earlier Keithian and Hicksite separations, it was the silencing of a leading Friend that provoked much of the separatist sentiment. Among those who separated were 52 other members of Manchester Meeting, John Wilkinson (former Clerk of London Yearly Meeting), and Luke Howard (a leading figure in dealing with the Hannah Barnard controversy, earlier).¹⁰ As a result of the debate, however, London Yearly Meeting produced the following statement, siding with Crewdson and the authoritative place of Scripture versus appeals to the Inward Light:

It has ever been, and still is, the belief of the Society of Friends, that the Holy Scripture of the Old and New Testament were given by inspiration of God; that therefore the declarations contained in them rest on the authority of God Himself and there can be no appeal from them to any authority whatsoever; that they are able to make us wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus; being the appointed means of making known to us the blessed truths of Christianity; that they are the only divinely authorized record of the doctrines which we are bound as Christians to believe, and of the moral principles which are to regulate our actions; that no doctrine which is not contained in them can be required of any one to be believed as an article of faith; that whatsoever

9 Edward Grubb makes this point lucidly (1925):

Its main effect, from the point of view we are taking, was to intensify very greatly the Evangelical tendencies of the 'orthodox' Friends, both in Britain and America. Such would seem to be the inevitable result of a separation: each party is rendered more extreme by being deprived of the moderating influence of the other. From the accounts that reached this country, most English Friends were led to regard it as entirely due to an evil spirit of disbelief in the essentials of Christian faith on the part of Elias Hicks and his friends. This drove many to seek for safety in a clearer definition of those essentials, and in particular of the inspiration and infallible authority of Scripture; it even led some to question whether the ancient principle of the Inward Light was a safe foundation on which to build. There were not wanting those who pointed the moral of the Hicksite secession thus: 'See what comes of trusting to the Inward Light!'

10 See Holden (1988, pp. 70-71), and especially the longer analyses by Anna Braithwaite Thomas (1912) and Rosemary Mingins (2003).

any man says or does which is contrary to the Scriptures, though under profession of immediate guidance of the Spirit, must be reckoned and accounted as mere delusion (Holden, 1988, p. 72).

London Yearly Meeting also lost evangelical members as a result of the controversy. Three decades after the visit of John Wilbur to England (1831–33), Fritchley Friends Meeting broke off and sought to form a General Meeting of Conservative Friends, although they stayed in touch with London Yearly Meeting Friends. They were reunited with London Yearly Meeting a century later, in 1967. On the other end of the theological spectrum, David Duncan of Manchester Meeting challenged Christian orthodoxy in the name of modern liberalism. By his own analysis, the one thing common to his essays and teachings was the Inward Light (Holden, p. 100). That had become for him a trademark of essential orthodoxy to which he held at the expense of other Christian doctrines. Upon being asked to recant his questionable doctrine at the request of a Yearly Meeting-appointed committee, he refused and was disowned in 1871. A dozen or so of his followers also broke off and started their own meeting. In America, the divisions were more thorough, producing separate Yearly Meetings with at least three distinctive identities – Hicksite, Orthodox, and Conservative Friends. The Evangelical Friends movement developed in the twentieth century.

The Wilburite Protest. Two decades after the Hicksite Separations in America, protests against Orthodox Friends' abandonment of several Quaker conventions, including plainness of dress and speech and modesty of carriage, led to the Conservative separations. While Joseph John Gurney, arguably the most influential Friend of the nineteenth century, had come to America to travel in the ministry from 1837–40, his energetic endeavors were not equally appreciated by all. Despite having a traveling minute from London Yearly Meeting, some had opposed his travel, and John Wilbur was aware of that dissent. He also felt Gurney was too materialistic and 'creaturely' in his approaches to things, and he followed Gurney's ministry itinerary, preaching against what he felt were departures from the traditional ways of Friends – in particular, a high view of biblical authority.¹¹ In response to his sowing disunity, New England Yearly Meeting appointed a committee to silence Wilbur, but his home meeting, South Kingston, refused to do so. The Quarterly Meeting dissolved the meeting, but it reconstituted itself and refused to discipline Wilbur. Feeling disenfranchised, John Wilbur and about 500 of his supporters withdrew from New

11 The Wilburite opposition, however, largely overlooked Gurney's clear emphasis on immediate, revelatory work of Christ. In the 1834 edition of *Peculiarities*, Gurney adds a major contribution, 'On Universal Light' (pp. 49–74), in which he develops clearly the biblical basis for the universal access to the saving work of Christ, emphasizing that it comes from without, rather than from within the individual. On continuing revelation, Gurney describes the immediate work of the inward Guide:

Now, with Friends... it is a leading principle in religion, that the work of the Holy Spirit in the soul is not only immediate and direct, but perceptible. We believe that we are furnished with an inward Guide or Monitor, who makes his voice known to us, and who, if faithfully obeyed and closely followed, will infallibly conduct us into true virtue and happiness, because he leads us into a real conformity with the will of God (Gurney, 1834, p. 76).

England Yearly Meeting, and over the next nine years until Wilbur's death in 1854, separations transpired in several other yearly meetings, forming the Conservative Friends movement.

While Conservative Friends still maintained a fairly orthodox approach to matters of faith and practice, embracing Scripture and Christ-centered living, their approach to the Inward Light was less suspect to evangelicals than that of Hicksite Friends. In that sense, rather than being excluded from the Orthodox Friends movement because of unsoundness of doctrine or praxis, the Wilburite Friends withdrew from the Orthodox Friends movement as a protest against perceived worldly and modern life-style compromises. They opposed the building of railroads and canals, as the Quaker industrialists were prone to do, and they sought to reverse the social progressivism of the Gurneyites. Departures from plain dress and the introduction of music were opposed by Conservative Friends on the basis of traditionalistic interests.

The first four crises of Quakerism reflect the struggle for leadership-clarification in the first generation of Friends, and the three crises in the nineteenth century led to the four separate Quaker associations in America. While the separations themselves need not be regarded as evil, they nonetheless betray a painful set of realities within a movement otherwise dedicated to consensus and unitive corporate decision making. David Holden identifies five factors contributing to divisions and separations among Friends, including a) socially important issues, b) two groups taking different sides, c) links within groups growing to outweigh links between them, d) the introduction of a new issue that divides the groups acutely, and e) a concerted effort to justify one's position and to garner support from others (1988, p. 148). It is characteristically on this final point that appeals to continuing revelation have become instruments of leverage, and thus factors of harm or even evil.

Analysis

In the light of such developments, an analysis of continuing revelation as a reality and an appeal lends itself to the following impressions.

1. When the theme of continuing revelation is applied to other Quakers as a challenge, it is often with divisive results. Rather than coming together and seeking a common way forward, leading Friends such as John Perrot and Elias Hicks posed their convictions in divisive ways. The likes of George Keith and Isaac Crewdson responded in equally divisive ways. In all of these cases, other significant issues deserved to be addressed (preferential honor, forsaking the Peace Testimony, materialism, heretical teaching, etc.), but appeals to continuing revelation or the Inward Light had polarizing effects. Forcible appeals to direct revelation are always problematic. When one's position is rooted in a privileged ascertainment of the Divine Will, alternative views get regarded as going against God, inevitably resulting in division.
2. Appeals to continuing revelation that are used to defend sacrilege force a choice between one's belief in spiritual leadings and a shameful or questionable action. Numerous factors affect the dilemma: especially the

spiritual groundedness of the individual and the character of the action. In the case of Nayler, the fact that Martha Simmonds and others saw Nayler as competing with Fox cannot but have tainted the purity of the leading. And, since Nayler failed to explain the basis for the leading, his maintaining the revealed character of the action set up a dichotomy between his appeal to continuing revelation and a blasphemous act. In the larger public, continuing revelation lost, and this set back the advance of the Quaker movement. It certainly suffered embarrassment in the larger world, and later appeals to spiritual leadings could always be tempered by the memory of the Nayler incident.

3. When appeals to continuing revelation are used to excuse heresy and ignorance, it comes across as shallow and theologically irresponsible. Appeals to continuing revelation have greater weight when seasoned with wisdom and knowledge. In the case of Hannah Barnard, her rejection of the Bible was at least in part due to her rejecting the wars of the Old Testament. Rather than work through the exegetical difficulties, acknowledging the many appeals to peace and nonviolence in the Old and New Testaments, she disparaged the Bible claiming a superior revelation. In the case of Elias Hicks, his Christology was adoptionistic – an early heresy rejected by the Church for considered reasons. In these and other instances, appeals to continuing revelation fall flat when perceived to be excusing theological inadequacy – intentionally or unwittingly.
4. When appeals to continuing revelation are used to defend personal autonomy at the expense of corporate accountability, unity is forsaken, and fellowship is damaged. If one is genuinely led by God, that leading will be confirmed by others who are also in touch with God. Therefore, if one is unwilling to submit to the discernment of the group, one cannot be said to be seeking first the Divine Will. Even if one believes that God's revealing work is unailing, human apprehensions of it are not. The absence of shame or guilt does not mean an action is the right thing to do. While Paul believes the Gentiles have 'a law unto themselves', he also claims God sometimes 'gives people over' to their lusts and wicked ways so that they feel no conviction against their sinful practices (Ro. 1:18–2:16). Inspired individualism can be a reality, but it is extremely vulnerable to self-deception and to mistaking advantage, actualization, lust, greed, and pride for the good. This is where Quaker commitments to corporate discernment should indeed be put into practice.
5. Ironically, one of the most divisive appeals to continuing revelation has been in the defense of traditionalism and sectarianism. The Wilkinson–Story separations sought to preserve some of the earlier vision of Friends, and their concerns are well taken, as are those of the Wilburite challenge to the materialistic inclinations of wealthier Friends at the expense of modesty, accompanied by their testimony to plain living. Leading Philadelphia Friends wrongly opposed Keith, however, in his challenge to their compromising the Peace Testimony, and his well-founded critique was pilloried on the basis of his having departed from the 'traditional' Quaker stance on continuing revelation. His intemperate actions and attitudes, of course, aided his critics.

This leads back to the first problem, though, in that when previous discernings of continuing revelation are contravened by later ones, the group faces a conflict in knowing how to proceed.

Ways Forward

In the light of the above analysis, several ways forward present themselves.

1. To deal with conflicting appeals to continuing revelation within the movement, Friends must develop means of testing leadings and subjecting them to evaluative criteria. Not all claims to religious authority are equally valid, and just as biblical and traditional Christian groups must find ways of reaching unity within their movements, so must pneumatic groups. The belief that, because Divine Guidance is indeed a reality everything done must be done on the basis of immediate revelation, is exaggerated. If revelation in the present is valid, so is revelation in the past. The new wine and new wineskins of today become the old wine and old wineskins of tomorrow, and this will always be so (Mk. 2:22). The point is to appreciate the practical-but-limited value of the wineskins, as the stirrings of the Spirit always have conventional implications.
2. To avoid excusing unbecoming actions performed in the name of continuing revelation, Friends need to distinguish between a genuine leading and appeals to such. What might have been perceived as a leading in the first instance is often regarded differently upon reflecting on the outcomes. The same Spirit who inspired the Scriptures will not lead in ways counter to them, either historically, or with immediacy. Therefore, such objective referents as Scripture and church history avail community and individual alike with appropriate resources for testing present leadings and particular actions. Even if there is no prohibition biblically, however, an action demeaning the worth of others or bringing embarrassment to the larger group cannot be regarded an authentic leading.
3. To deal with the problems of biblical ignorance and theological inadequacy, there is no substitute for acquiring the skills and knowledge required for religious leadership. This is especially compelling for those who feel inclined to claim access to continuing revelation. Fox was right in declaring that theological education in itself (being 'bred at Oxford or Cambridge') is insufficient for acquiring spiritual empowerment for ministry. He was not advocating, though, the willful neglect of Scripture, nor was he endorsing theological illiteracy. He knew the Bible by heart and was thus able to challenge those whose interpretations were wrong-headed despite formal education. Biblical, historical, and theological foundations for the discerning of continuing revelation are vital if those leadings are to live up to their fullest authentic potential.
4. If a leading is a true one, it should be able to be discerned equally by the individual *and* the group. The individual must therefore be willing to submit

his or her sense of leading to the larger community. Only when one's life is given totally and unreservedly to God can one expect to be in a trustworthy place for discerning continuing revelation, and only from the foot of the Cross can the way of Christ be discerned. This is also required of the community. Therefore, when conflicts arise, rather than allow individuals and groups to polarize and for discussions to evolve into win-lose situations, the discussion must be brought back to the singular aspiration of individual and community alike – minding the Divine Will. When minding the Light and following Christ is the common goal, all become equally involved in helping one another get there. Win-lose discussions are thus transformed into win-win explorations, providing a way forward without dissention or division.

5. Friends have rightly embraced the biblical and traditional good news that Christ leads authentic seekers of truth in life-producing ways, and this is a tenet of faith worth maintaining. Timeless truths, however, are expressed in timely ways, and distinguishing the value from the application is essential to retain the relevance of each. It is vital to refuse to allow appeals to continuing revelation, or accusations of its denial, to be employed rhetorically in the interest of an ulterior motive. Not all appeals to Scripture or theology imply dogmatic creedalism, and not all appeals to continuing revelation imply an authentic leading. Addressing *why* something is a concern, however, is helpful. A proper understanding of tradition distills the larger concern from its applications, and the distinguishing of the two maintains traditional vitality – even in terms of the traditional valuing of continuing revelation.

Conclusion

Although continuing revelation is a central part of the Christian Gospel recovered historically by Friends, it can also become a factor of evil. Where the Divine Will is discerned authentically, the result is life producing. Where continuing revelation is inadequately discerned or employed rhetorically as a means of furthering another agenda, however, suspicion and distrust are created. This is especially the case when continuing revelation is employed to excuse or legitimate heretical teachings or sacrilegious actions. Given the high value of continuing revelation within the Quaker movement, distinguishing its flawed inferences and rhetorical appeals from authentic discernment is essential. This can be done by testing subjective leadings against Scripture, historical tradition, theological reflection, and corporate accountability. The life dedicated to minding the Divine Will above all else will be willing to subject its impressions to other measures; the lack of willingness to do so negates the credibility of the professed leading. Despite its vulnerability to misconstrual or falsification, continuing revelation continues to be gospel where it is approached authentically. Anything less, while not necessarily heresy or sacrilege, can become a factor of evil, diminishing the authority of such appeals for future generations.