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A Dynamic Christocentricity -- The Center of Faithful Praxis

Paul Anderson
panderso@georgefox.edu

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A DYNAMIC CHRISTOCENTRICITY— THE CENTER OF FAITHFUL PRAXIS

PAUL ANDERSON

Thinking about the heart of Quaker faith and practice is a venture fraught with perplexities. Our models for analysis all have their shortcomings, but so does the refusal to address the issue or to employ a model if one does address it. One could approach the venture by identifying an outline of faith assertions, accompanied by a list of lifestyle commitments. Indeed, most of our yearly meeting disciplines do exactly that. In fact, many of them are called a given Yearly Meeting's "Faith and Practice." At least there's still truth in advertising somewhere!

Another approach, however, might be to construct a narrative approach to faith and practice—the story of how God has engaged the lives of Friends, collectively and individually—reminding future generations not only what we believe and do, but why.¹ Indeed, the Quaker devotional journal is something of a sacramental record of human-divine interaction,² connecting inspiration in one generation with that of another. Likewise, abundant treatments of Quaker history help us call to present the past, and even fictive story can convey lucidly the sorts of beliefs and practices we want to affirm in later times and settings.

Between linear and narrative approaches, though, the search for a "center" seems to be a fit way to proceed. Tenets will be involved, and Friends believe that while God's truth includes propositions, it also transcends them. One may therefore uphold tenets of faith without being propositionalistic, as though the ideas and notions were all that mattered. Likewise, while application is where convictions really make a difference, principle is also an interest, not just outcomes. Therefore, considering the heart of conviction—whence relevant application comes—is essential to considering both the elements of Quaker faith and the effectiveness of Quaker praxis. Searching for a Center is thus of first importance for identifying the elements and essence of Quaker faith and practice. The goal of the present essay is to describe the Center of faithful praxis as embraced by Friends, considering also key bases and their implications.

RAISING UP THE CENTER

Raising up the Center is itself an important aspect of the Quaker way, and Friends have long been inspired by the example of Jesus on that matter. In his day, Jesus challenged the legalistic approaches of Pharisees, the cultic prescriptions of Sadducees, the nationalistic aspirations of zealots, and the escapist speculations of apocalyptists—and he did so by *raising up the Center of the Divine Will*. “The heart of God’s Law is the love of God and neighbor,” we might paraphrase Jesus. “The attitudinal core of religious practice is authenticity and humility.” “The eternal Reign of God is furthered by truth and adherence to it, even in the face of suffering.” And, “the primary work of the spiritual life includes physical acts of kindness and caring for the mundane welfare of God’s beloved in the world.” In what he said and did, Jesus pointed to the Center of the Divine Will and God’s often unseen workings in the world. Likewise, Friends have sought to approach Christian faith and practice by abiding in the Center, living out of it, and testifying to its priority above all else.

By emphasizing the Center on many subjects of interest, Friends have been able to work ecumenically, and even interreligiously, helping persons of diverse perspectives and commitments come closer to what they can affirm together. By focusing on problem-solving instead of the blame-assigning (always the *real* issue at stake), Friends have helped individuals and groups resolve conflicts and work constructively in finding ways forward. In calling for faithfulness to standards of faith and practice Friends have used *Queries*—spiritual questions getting at the Center of our life commitments. Sometimes boundaries are important, but raising up the Center as an approach to life’s concerns bears a greater capacity for getting closer to the center of the target.

Building a fence around a target or value may exclude some who are closer to the center than others within the boundary, and it may affirm others, who, while distant from the center have met the minimal requirement for inclusion. While aiming for the pure center may result in fewer “hits” than attempting to fall within the margins of minimal acceptability, the quest for perfection requires it.³ The interest is not the setting of an arbitrary measure by which human success might be applauded; the goal is nothing short of faithful adherence to the Divine Will for the glory of God and the furthering of his Kingdom in the world. Therefore, when one’s prayer is for the will of God to be actualized on earth as perfectly as it is in Heaven, aspiring toward the Center is the only way forward.

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A further aspect of seeking a Center results in living a centered life.⁴ There will always be more to be done than can be done, and despite one's aspiration to abide in the perfect will of God, perfection itself will always elude us. What can be perfected, though, is one's *will*—given to God and dedicated to living in responsive obedience to the promptings of the Holy Spirit and the Way of the Kingdom. Abiding in Christ results in a centered way of being, wherein one's interests are changed as well as one's motivations, and one's reactions are as transformed as one's actions. Being able to rest in one's sense of leading and being able to live responsively to the One Voice beyond the many is the beginning of Christian freedom. It reflects a centered life rooted in the Truth, and it proceeds dynamically, rooted in Christ and furthering his work and way in the world.

A DYNAMIC CHRISTOCENTRICITY

The heart of Quaker Faith and Practice is characterized by a *dynamic Christocentricity*. By *Christocentricity* I mean an approach to faith and life that is radically centered in Christ (*radix* in Latin means “root”). The example of Jesus and his teachings sets the pattern to be embodied; the work of Christ delivers the believer from the grip of self and the power of sin and death; the leadings of the risen Christ provide wisdom and guidance along the way; the empowerment of the Holy Spirit—the immediate workings of the present Christ—enables us to be his partners as “Friends” in knowing and furthering the Divine Will (Jn. 15:1-15). To be Christ-centered is to embrace the saving/revealing action of God, poured out eschatologically in love toward humankind, apart from human deservedness. This gift of divine grace is thus received by faith and embodied in faithfulness.

By *dynamic* I mean the converse of static—a relationship that is alive, engaged, and fluid—changing in an ongoing set of ways as required by life and Christ's active leadership in the world. A dynamic approach to Christ-centeredness thus has the capacity to be decisive without being dogmatic. It can be welcoming of diverse approaches to the human/divine relationship while at the same time being rooted in, and calling for, personal commitment. Believing that every person has access to the enlightening work of Christ (Jn. 1:9) affirms the potentiality of each responding to the Light and the inward witness of the Holy Spirit.⁵ Likewise, serving a living Lord involves a way of being that is responsive to the present work of Christ—a dynamic relationship of interactivity and connectedness.

It deserves mention that in recent years some Friends have become wary of Christ-centered commitments. Their concerns are several: first, one fear is that explicit commitment to Christ will exclude from fellowship those who do not share the same view. John 14:6 must be held in tension, though, with John 1:9, as the particular and universal aspects of Christ's saving revealing work must be held together in tension. If asking *why* Christ is both the only way to the Father and the source of enlightenment of all humanity, the answer is not to be found in God's restricting the road to eternal life; rather, it is that humanity has no hope but to trust in God's provision. No one *can come* (the text does not say no one *may come*) except being drawn by the Father (Jn. 6:44). The flesh and all that is of creaturely origin is profitless; the only hope for humanity is God's saving/revealing initiative—that which Jesus Christ eschatologically is (Jn. 6:63-5). Therefore, when understood correctly, commitment to Christ is *not* exclusivistic, but it is rooted in the indispensability of the human response of faith to the Divine Initiative, which is the only hope for humanity.

A second concern of some Friends is that commitment to Christ will lead to theological dogmatism and narrowness. Here the example of Jesus may help. Jesus dined with "sinners" and those who were rejected by the religious establishment of his day. Jesus also healed the sick and liberated the oppressed—challenging religious and societal authorities in the name of love and justice. Jesus himself challenged the legalistic dogmatism of his day and brought a message of love and inclusiveness. This is why a dynamic Christocentricity—one that remains inextricably connected to the example and teachings of Jesus—remains the best *antidote* to dogmatism and narrowness. Without a dynamic connectedness to Christ, one's faith is more likely to become dogmatic, not less.

A third concern about Christ-centeredness among some Friends in recent years lends itself to an attempt to resolve the issue by contextualizing the early Christian commitments of early Friends. Some have argued that because early Friends emerged from a Christian setting they had no choice but to couch their spiritual experience in Christian terms, but that the movement has "grown beyond" such provincial limitations. Some aspects of this perspective are valid—we all are formed in particular contexts—but the point has to be made that early Friends and most Friends since that time would strongly disagree with such a claim. On over-contextualization, early Friends would have said "No, this is *not* true." They would have affirmed that while the Eternal Christ may transcend Christian forms and expres-

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sions, this is not to say that the universally accessible Christ is transcended by an alternative spiritual reality. They may have been wrong, but they believed strongly that the living Christ transcended their own contexts, and they would have blasted polemically any parochial contextualization of their ultimate commitments. If anything, they would have sought to discern the active work of *Christ* within diverse settings rather than to celebrate diversity at the expense of the Power and Presence of the risen Christ.

All of these concerns are addressed by means of maintaining a dynamic and relational approach to Christ's leadership and work, and this is what a well-grounded Quaker approach to faith and practice attempts to do. The structure of a dynamic Christocentricity, then, has at its Center the *spiritual and unmediated work of Christ*. All of the Quaker Doctrines and Testimonies stem from this doctrinal and experiential Center. Quaker convictions about *worship, ministry, sacraments, conviction, peace and social concern, and integrity and simplicity* all are rooted in the conviction that Christ is accessible and wanting to lead humanity into liberating truth.⁶ Therefore, each of these elements radiates like a spoke connected to the hub of a wheel, as well as being connected to each other, and that Center involves the dynamic Power and Presence of the risen Christ.

THE SPIRITUAL AND UNMEDIATED REALITY OF THE RISEN LORD'S POWER AND PRESENCE

At the Center of Quaker faith and practice is the spiritual and unmediated reality of the risen Lord's Power and Presence. From the direct experience of George Fox, who declared: "And when all my hopes in them and in all men were gone, so that I had nothing outwardly to help me, nor could I 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."⁷ to the declaration of William Penn, that "God, through Christ, hath placed a principle in every man, to inform him of his duty, and to enable him to do it; and that those that live up to this principle are people of God..."⁸ Friends have affirmed the real accessibility of the Divine in the world, mediated through Christ with total sufficiency.

Because Christ alone is the High Priest between God and humanity (Heb. 4:14—8:13) there is no need for human intermediaries; the imposition of such detracts from the singular role of Christ. Add any-

thing to Christ, and you diminish Christ. Humans testify to Christ and his work, and we become partners with Christ in reconciling the world to God. Because Christ himself is our Prophet, Priest, and King, however, those who attempt to assume those roles can only do so effectively by pointing to the work of Christ as his ministers and witnesses. Some religious groups emphasize the symbolization of spirituality or the means by which the life of the Spirit is experienced, but the Quaker approach is far more direct. It prioritizes the absolute immediacy of Christ's Power and Presence, and it emphasizes the spiritual and authentic character of that reality.

Another means of describing the impact of the “spiritual realism” of Friends is to say that knowledge of Christ and his work is to be experiential⁹ and personally engaging. It is the knowledge of intimate acquaintance, rather than that of notional familiarity, that determines one's spiritual status. Indeed, much of religious scaffolding and structure has to do either with manipulating a religious experience or keeping things going if spiritual encounter does *not* take place. Friends, however, have focused upon the directness and immediacy of the human-divine encounter, and this is rooted in the belief that Christ is indeed risen. The direct implication of this conviction, then, is that the Power and Presence of the resurrected Lord are available to all who will but open their lives to the possibility of Divine Visitation. This central conviction, that Christ is come to teach his people himself, thus forms the basis for all the Quaker Testimonies, and the first of these relates to authentic and transforming worship.

AUTHENTIC AND TRANSFORMING WORSHIP

Because Christ is present in the meeting for worship, the goal is not to invoke his presence; it is already actualized and accessible. The focus is to open our lives to the transforming workings of Christ, individually and corporately. Individually, Christ is at work in our hearts, through the Holy Spirit, convicting of sin and of righteousness (Jn. 16:8). Therefore, as we quiet our hearts in attentive waiting, our first concern is not what we should say in the meeting for worship, but what Christ might be saying to us and through us. Knowing the truth about ourselves—both affirming and disconfirming, is liberating. After all, the truth *always* sets us free (Jn. 8:32). Where we find ourselves affirmed, gratitude for God's empowerment abounds; where we find ourselves deficient, dependence upon God's grace and mercy

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arises with spontaneity. Believing that Christ is present, with eschatological immediacy, transforms individual and corporate experiences of worship into events of spiritual encounter (Matt. 18:18-20). This changes everything with relation to how we conceive of and participate in the meeting for worship.¹⁰

Authentic worship is both *expressive* and *impressive*. In the corporate meeting for worship we express our love for God and receive God's love for us. Where worship is authentic and centered on the Divine Presence in the midst, an informal approach to the experience allows the focus to remain on Christ and human responsiveness to Christ, rather than resting upon anything we might do. Meaningful expression may thus employ formal aspects of worship, but it is never to be limited to them or dependent on them. Further, the use of forms should be expressive and spontaneous rather than manipulative or coerced. It is not only dead formalism to which Friends object, but also lively formalism.

The goal, therefore, in worship is openness to the Divine—creating a responsive corporate experience wherein we attend, discern, and obey the living Voice of Christ in the midst. Silence allows us to create the space to attend the Divine Voice—the One beyond the many—but silence itself is not the goal. This would make informality into an obverse formalism, distorting silence into a liturgical element. Likewise, singing, and preaching (and even the unimpeachable priority of making announcements) are not to be seen as liturgical. No, the goal of authentic worship is, with the words of the hymnist, the tuning of our hearts to sing God's praise, for such is the beginning of the inward response of the heart to the truth of God's goodness, might, and love—that which is conveyed by the present Christ in the midst of all who gather in his name. After all, God is Spirit and those who worship authentically do so in Spirit and in Truth (Jn. 4:24).

INCLUSIVE, COMPASSIONATE, AND INSPIRED MINISTRY

Inspiring worship leads to inspired service, and such is the true measure of Gospel ministry. Given that the work and ministry of Christ is direct and unmediated, humanity has no need of a human priesthood. Worship leaders may effectively direct people to Christ, but he alone is the true priest, and his priesthood is an everlasting one. Nonetheless, the ministries of Christ are carried out within the church, and Friends have witnessed and recorded the special gifted-

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ness and divine ordination of those whose public ministries have been especially recognized and attested. The authentic character of Gospel ministry is inclusive in its scope, compassionate in its character, and inspired in its empowerment.¹¹

To say that ministry is inclusive in its scope is to affirm the belief that God may call any and all to Christian service—not just men, and not just middle-aged adults. With the confession of Peter in Acts 2, the prophecy of Joel 2:28-32 was fulfilled: that the young as well as the old, and women as well as men, were eligible for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon their lives, and that such is ever the basis for effective and divinely ordained ministry. Friends have continued in the experience of Pentecost to hold to the conviction that God still calls those who are open into Gospel ministry across lines of societal demarcation, and that recognition of effective ministry is a factor of giftedness above all else. Therefore, the ministries of women as well as men, the young as well as the old, and the alien as well as the familiar, deserve to be received and supported.

To say that ministry is compassionate in its character is to acknowledge the real ways effective ministry works. An office of ministry may help to organize the resources and energies of ministry, but such is not the determiner of a ministry's authenticity. Rather, extending the loving and healing work of Christ is the singular basis for effective Gospel ministry, and the question is how well this will be carried out in the world. Authentic Christian ministry identifies a human need and mobilizes to address that need, inspired and empowered by the love and leading of Christ. Therefore, in spoken ministry, the very words that Christ would be delivering should be sought and conveyed. In social ministry, the addressing of human needs should be carried out as the hands and feet of Christ. While some may be called to special ministries, all believers are charged with being extensions of the love and compassion of Christ.

To say that authentic ministry is inspired in its empowerment is to ascribe to the belief that unless God empowers one's ministry, it is little more than a human endeavor. Human endeavors are important, but Christian ministry—apostolic and divinely ordained—should bear witness to the workings of God within the minister's life. If ministry is not imbued with spiritual empowerment, it falls short of what basic Gospel ministry should be. Therefore, prayer and preparation for ministry are of paramount importance as factors of its effectiveness. A common mistake at this point deserves to be addressed. The point

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made by Fox and affirmed by others is that formal education (being “bred” at Oxford or Cambridge—or even at ESR, Woodbrooke, Pendle Hill, the Houston Graduate School of Theology, or the Friends Centers at Azusa Pacific or George Fox universities) cannot suffice when it comes to the most profoundly needed aspect of preparation for ministry—the *spiritual*. Some ministries, especially organizational, intellectual, and communicative ones, require sustained education and preparation, and any calling to serve is also a calling to prepare. The point, though, is that formal preparation will never be enough. There is no substitute for abiding *in* the streams of living water if such are to *flow forth from* one’s public ministry.

AN INCARNATIONAL SACRAMENTOLOGY

One of the most broadly misunderstood Testimonies of Friends is the Testimony about the Sacraments. Even among Friends, the non-observance of outward sacramental practices such as baptism and eucharist is at times construed as Quakers not having a sacramentology. This is far from the truth. Friends do have a considered and apologetic approach to the Sacraments, and it may be called an *incarnational sacramentology*. Put simply, if one asks how the inward and spiritual reality of God is communicated by outward and physical means—most powerfully and effectively—the answer can be none other than through the changed and changing lives of those who are being transformed by the living Christ.

This conviction also has a strong biblical basis for it, especially if one focuses on the ministry of Jesus. It is a mistake to infer that Jesus abolished Jewish forms of worship in order to set up “good Christian ones” in their place—the supercession of one religion over another. What Jesus was trying to do was to show that God’s favor is never conditioned by outward means of “doing it right.” God looks on the heart, and those who trust in God authentically receive God fully. Here the work of John the Baptist and Jesus are equally misunderstood by interpreters.

John baptized in the wilderness *not* to set up a new rite—required by God for initiation into the family of faith as a new dispensation—no. John baptized in the Jordan and elsewhere to demonstrate prophetically the free-flowing availability of God’s purifying work and power. It is not constricted to the ritual cleansings of the religious leaders of Jerusalem, Qumran, or elsewhere. Rather, it is available to all who will

“sit down” in the immersion of the Spirit, repent of their sinful ways, and adhere to the ways God is working in the world. John 4:2 asserts that Jesus himself did not baptize—only his disciples did, and in all the references to the baptisms of John and Jesus in the New Testament the emphasis is made upon the continuity-and-yet-contrast between John’s baptism with water and Jesus’ baptism with the Holy Spirit.

Likewise, it is a profound interpretive mistake to infer that Jesus intended to set up a new ritual at the Last Supper—the Eucharist, which supplants Jewish rites with an authorized Christian one. Jesus did not come to replace one religion with another; he came to challenge religion proper with Revelation—the saving initiative of God. This is the scandal of Basic Christianity, that it bears little investment in being a religion; rather, it organizes around the religious quest of following Jesus, which gets at the heart of spirituality and social action alike.

When Jesus gathered his disciples for their last meal together around a Passover Seder meal and invited them to remember him and his sacrifice as often as they partook in such meals, he was saying something like this: “When you think of the lamb slain, the blood poured out and the matzo broken, focus not on what God did in the days of Moses, but remember my body broken and my blood poured out for you.” The focus is thus not just on what God has done; it is even more importantly to be staid upon *what God is doing* (Jn. 6:32). Interestingly, John leaves out the words of the institution at the Last Supper. What John does say, though, about the importance of ingesting the flesh and blood of Jesus (Jn. 6:51-58) is that embracing the flesh-giving example of Jesus on the cross involves the cost of discipleship. Willingness to suffer and die with the Lord *is* the “cup” that Jesus offers and the baptism with which he immerses (Mk. 10:38-40), and faithfulness to Christ—even at the cost of martyrdom—is the sacramental calling of *every* believer.¹²

This being the case, Friends believe that spiritual Baptism is *essential* for vital Christian experience. Without being immersed in the Power and Presence of the Spirit of the living Christ, one has no power to overcome the throes of self-oriented living, or sin, and one cannot claim to be born again, or born from above (Jn. 3:5). Being born from above (*anōthen* in the Greek) implies not merely a “second” birth—something of a crisis experience, as important as such may be—it refers to a *spiritual* birth—being born of the Spirit, rather than the flesh (Ro. 8:1-4), which is the only hope for victorious Christian living.

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Likewise, Communion is essential to Christian experience, but it should not be mistaken for something put in one's mouth and swallowed. Rather, spiritual Communion is the oneness experienced by those who gather in the name of Jesus—in openness to God's saving-revealing work in the world—and it involves a worshipful celebration of the Real Presence of Christ in the midst of the gathered meeting.

A further aspect of the Friends Testimony on the Sacraments is that the true outward evidence of spiritual reality is the changed and changing life of the individual.¹³ As opposed to ritual forms and cultic representations of the life with God, Friends have argued that the reality of the Spirit is most powerfully conveyed by the fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control; Gal. 5:22-24). This conviction also has applications for charismatic expressions of worship as well as liturgical ones. The *gifts* of the Spirit (evangelism, prophecy, apostleship, tongues, interpretation, knowledge, helps, administration, service, encouragement, pastoring, teaching, wisdom, celibacy, miracles, healing, leadership, generosity, mercy; Ro. 12:3-8; 1 Cor. 12:1-11, 27-30; 14:1-40; Eph. 4:11-13) can all be disguised or imitated, but the *fruit* of the Spirit are impossible to feign. In the crucible of real-life situations the true character of the person is revealed. Where one's life is being filled with the Holy Spirit, and where that person is abiding in Christ, the signs of one's transformed character will be evident. Conversely, if a person is not immersed in the Spirit, one's lack of authentic baptism will also be revealed. Sometimes a person's reactions speak more loudly and clearly than one's actions when it comes to sanctification. The transformed life can only be attested by the carriage and demeanor of the believer. It is out of such a knowing that George Fox exhorted his readers to let their lives speak incarnationally and sacramentally to the world:

And this is the word of the Lord God to you all, and a charge to you all in the presence of the living God, be patterns, be examples in all countries, places, islands, nations, wherever you may come; that your carriage and life may preach among all sorts of people and to them. Then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in every one; whereby in them you may be a blessing, and make the witness of God in them to bless you. Then to the Lord God you will be a sweet savour and a blessing.¹⁴

CONVINCEMENT OF THE TRUTH RATHER THAN COERCION

If indeed the conversion process is a factor of responding to the truth in faith and in faithfulness, evangelism must be considered a matter of conviction rather than coercion. This is what Friends mean when we say we do not proselytize. We do not try to coerce or to force others into an opinion we might hold, even if we believe it to be true. Rather, we testify to the truth as we have perceived it and experienced it, and we also listen to others' perceptions and experiences of truth because discerning and following the truth is our first priority. As the Holy Spirit works in our lives leading us into truth (Jn. 16:1-11), this work involves being convinced of both sin and of righteousness. This means that we are freed from feeling the need to make others or ourselves feel good or bad about who we are and what we do. We can trust the Holy Spirit to bring about conviction of the truth, and truth is *always* liberating.

Believing that Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life—the one through whom all who come to the Father do so (Jn. 14:6-7)—is to uphold that not only is Jesus the revealer of truth, but also that approximating the truth brings one closer to Christ and vice versa. Likewise, to believe that the Holy Spirit—the Spirit of Christ, sent by the Father and sent by Christ—is also the Spirit of Truth who “convicts” the world of sin and of righteousness, is to affirm the power of truth to convince in the world. Knowing the truth is always liberating (Jn. 8:32), and Jesus' Kingdom is one of Truth—a direct contrast to those reigns that assert themselves by means of the use of force and violence (Jn. 18:36-37).

This set of convictions also has great implications for decision making. Friends believe that all have access to God's truth, but no one has sole access to it. Therefore, corporate decision making deserves to be a process of spiritual discernment within community, and we regard the business meeting as the meeting for worship in which business is conducted. Far different from a perfunctory invoking of blessing upon a creaturely and political endeavor, the Quaker business meeting regards the fact of community business as a genuine opportunity for seeking the leading of the Lord together. Again, the goal is not simply to achieve “consensus” as a factor of a political process, but to achieve unity around a common sense of Christ's leading. When this happens, despite the investment required, the assets of group ownership and a common understanding of mission make the

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larger process a worthy one indeed. All of the group's energy can therefore be applied in the direction of implementation and carrying out the decision of the group. This makes for great *effectiveness and efficiency* in terms of corporate action and follow-through, but the central interest is the seeking and obeying of truth together.

PEACE WORK, NONVIOLENCE, AND SOCIAL CONCERN

The absolute commitment to truth is likewise central to the Quaker commitment to pacifism and nonviolence. Because the reign of Jesus is one of truth, it cannot be furthered by violent means, and this is why his authentic disciples do not fight (Jn. 18:36-37). The way of Christ is also central to furthering his work in the world. One cannot imagine the Jesus of Scripture taking up spears and swords as a means of accomplishing his mission, and his followers cannot but join him if authentic discipleship is indeed their first priority.

Friends also believe that Christ calls us into partnership in bringing about the just and liberating Reign of God in the world. Peace and nonviolence are therefore the goal of God's working in the world, but they are also the means and character of that work. Therefore, resorting to violence or hatred actually involves a setback in the real war we are fighting, which is always a spiritual battle. There is no authority besides moral authority, and violence always diminishes the moral standing of the endeavor. On the political level, violence begets violence; on the moral level, would-be opponents of evil become exactly what they despise. Jesus, however, shows a more excellent way.

Not only does he call his followers to further his way and work by the ways we live, but he also calls us to be willing to lay down our lives if required by the truth. Good can never be accomplished by evil means, and the way of Jesus always poses a creative alternative to hopeless spirals of violence. Likewise, attentiveness to social concerns soon gives way to addressing the structures upon which justice is established, and Friends have always seen peace and prosperity as one and the same. Before God all are equal, and the establishing of justice, the loving of kindness, and the willingness to walk humbly before one's God fulfills the divine requirement for humanity (Micah 6:8). Peace work and social concern are not to be seen as the endeavors of a few eccentrics; they are to be raised up as normative for all followers of Christ and servants of the truth.

INTEGRITY, PLAIN SPEECH, AND SIMPLE LIVING

Friends have adopted a variety of testimonies to what it means to abide in the truth of Christ buoyantly in the world. In terms of integrity, one's outward actions and manners should be in keeping with one's inward being and convictions. "Integer" means "one," and the question is whether a person's behaviors are one with one's commitments. Friends have taken seriously the biblical injunction to let one's "Yes" be yes and one's "No" be no (Matt. 5:33-37; Ja. 5:12). An honest person should not have to swear that "this time" he or she was *really* speaking the truth. Rather, simply affirming that one was telling the truth should be good enough in a court of law or otherwise, and many a Quaker suffered time in prison over apparently small matters of integrity.

Quaker commitments to plain speech and dress were also examples of seeking to abide in the truth. In addition to the refusing of oaths, Friends have also proposed the use of strong language in authentic communication. Positively, Friends have refused the issuing of lofty compliments and manipulative flattery. They likewise have opposed bribes and enticements and simply have emphasized giving generously to those in need with no expectation of return. Negatively, Friends have opposed the use of profanity and strong language because it demeans the sacred and makes a mockery of meritorious argument. If a case is not compelling on the basis of evidence or reason, its being accepted should not be leveraged by means of manipulation. Again, truth is the goal rather than rhetorical triumph. To win an argument at the expense of truth must be regarded an essential failure.

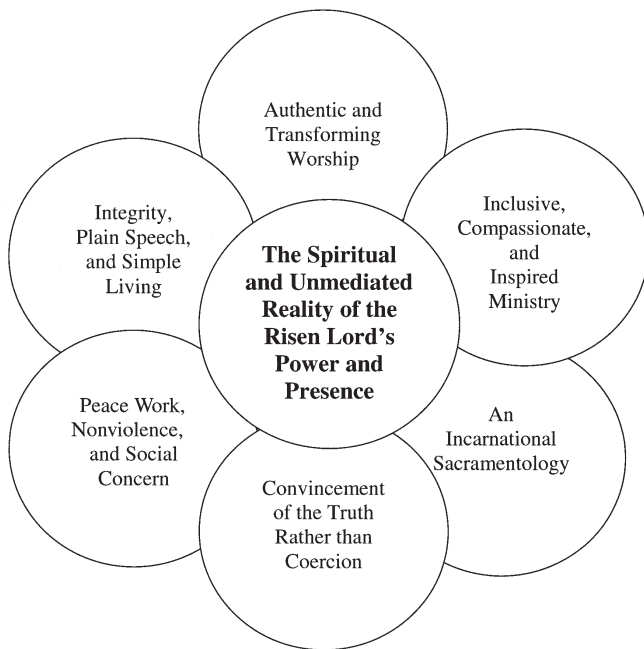
Friends have also sought to live simply in order to save resources for the most important things of life. Therefore, Friends have balked at ostentation, placing a higher value on function and efficiency. In that sense, stewardship extends beyond one's possessions to a calling to care for the earth's resources and their proper development and distribution. Where resources have been garnered, Friends have also sought to use them responsibly and redemptively. This has led to Quakers' being pioneers in education, social work, business, industry, accounting, banking, medicine, discovery, and development.¹⁵ Each of these concerns is a factor of the others, and all of them orbit around the central conviction that the risen Christ is dynamically at work in the world, calling humanity to be receptive and responsive to his present and unmediated workings within and among us. This is the Center of Quaker faith and practice.

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THE ESSENCE OF FAITHFUL PRAXIS

At the heart of Quaker faith and practice is the conviction that the unmediated Power and Presence of Christ is at work in the world, inviting humanity into world-changing partnership. This partnership begins with the faithful response to the divine initiative, and it continues in expressions of faithful practice in the world. As the goal of Christian discipleship is following Jesus and furthering the active Reign of God in the world, the essence of that relationship is one of holy attentiveness and obedience to the Divine Will. This, of course, also involves the authentic discernment of the Divine Will, but we do not embark on that process out of a vacuum. We benefit and learn from those who have gone on before us, and we seek to put into practice the best of what we have seen and heard. And yet, the process comes full circle in that the message we proclaim is also the reality we encounter, and out of which we live, move, and have our being (Ac. 17:28). To encounter the unmediated Power and Presence of the Resurrected Lord is already to be moved from believing experience to faithful praxis, and such is the Center of authentic faith and practice—Quaker and otherwise.

A Dynamic Christocentricity: The Center of Quaker Faith and Practice



NOTES

1. Among the eleven Christian traditions producing peace statements in the 1980s in North America (an unprecedented development in the history of Christianity since before the era of Constantine in the 4th century!), the ways the “Historic Peace Churches” (Quakers, Mennonites, and Brethren) approached the issue was by means of a *narrative* approach to the Bible. This feature is pointed out by Howard Loewen in his essay, “An Analysis of the Use of Scripture in the Churches’ Documents on Peace,” in *The Churches Peace Witness*, edited by Marlin E. Miller and Barbara Nelson Gingerich (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), pp. 18-20.
2. This point is well made by Howard Brinton, *Quaker Journals; Varieties of Religious Experience Among Friends* (Wallingford: Pendle Hill Publications, 1972), p. ix.
3. According to Robert Barclay, perfection is the achievement of spiritual maturity, and it is the direct and intended purpose of the Gospel for every believer, not just a few (*Apology*, Prop. 8). To ignore the call to holiness and to deny the Holy Spirit’s empowerment to attain it is to sell humanity out to sin; rather, the Light of Christ overcomes the world.
4. This is the thrust of Thomas Kelly’s most enduring essay, “The Light Within,” in his *A Testament of Devotion* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1941)—probably my all-time favorite book.
5. William Penn begins his important essay, “Primitive Christianity Revived,” *The Peace of Europe, The Fruits of Solitude and Other Writings by William Penn*, edited by Edwin B. Bronner (London: J. M. Dent, 1993), pp. 227-66, with an emphasis on the divine principle, or the light within, or the manifestation of Christ that guides every person, at least potentially, to a place of awareness of and sanctification from sin to a place of faithfulness and obedience to Christ (pp. 229-31).
6. Other themes and Testimonies could be added as well, but these six are found in all the standard Quaker theological and apologetic works, ranging from Barclay’s *Apology* to Gurney’s *Observations*, to Penn’s and Pennington’s works, to modern treatments including Rufus Jones’ *Faith and Practice of the Quakers* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, repr. 1980), Neave Brayshaw’s *The Quakers; Their Story & Message* (London: William Sessions Ltd., 1953), Dean Freiday’s *Nothing Without Christ* (Newberg, OR: Barclay Press, 1984), Wilmer Cooper’s *A Living Faith; An Historical and Comparative Study of Quaker Beliefs* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1990), Jack Willcuts’ *Why Friends Are Friends* (Newberg, OR: Barclay Press, 1984), Elton Trueblood’s *The People Called Quakers* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1985), and John Punshon’s *Reasons for Hope* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 2001).

See also the author’s revised edition of the *Meet the Friends* series (Newberg, OR: Barclay Press, 2003), including such titles as “Quaker Beginnings,” “Quaker Testimonies and Distinctives,” “Friends and Worship,” “Friends and Ministry,” “Friends and Sacraments,” “Friends as Peacemakers,” and “Friends and the Kingdom of God.” Put otherwise, a full two thirds of the first 100 issues of *QRT* addressed directly one or more of these subjects.

7. From the *Journal of George Fox*, edited by John L. Nickalls (London: The Religious Society of Friends, 1975) describing his 1647 transformational encounter, p. 11.
8. This is part of the first point in William Penn’s outline of Quaker convictions in his essay, “Primitive Christianity Revived,” *Peace of Europe*, p. 229.
9. As Fox said about Christ speaking to his condition, “And this I knew experimentally” (Fox, *Journal*). To encounter Christ experientially is the basis for authentic Christianity, and an emphasis upon the experimental character of the venture keeps the focus on the

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freshness of discovery and the inductive character of the quest. This is why the thesis of Dean Freiday's book, *Nothing Without Christ* (Newberg, OR: Barclay Press, 1984) is compelling—if Friends have diminished all else for the sake of prioritizing Christ, to disregard Christ is to diminish the historic and experiential core of Quakerism.

10. Consider, for instance, the great emphasis upon humanity's Day of Visitation in the writings of first-generation Quakers; see *Early Quaker Writings, 1650-1700* (edited by Hugh Barbour and Arthur O. Roberts, Wallingford: Pendle Hill Publications, 2004), especially the first fifteen or so tracts by leading Friends that proclaim the immanent and existential Day of the Lord (pp. 49-148).
11. A similar outline is developed in the author's essay, "Friends and Ministry," in the *Meet the Friends* series (revised edition, Newberg, OR: Barclay Press, 2003).
12. For a full exegetical treatment of the issues, see the author's monograph, *The Christology of the Fourth Gospel; Its Unity and Disunity in the Light of John 6* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1997, pp. 110-251).
13. The finest treatment of this issue is Alan Kolp's 1984 *QRT* #57 essay, "Friends, Sacraments, and Sacramental Living," where he argues convincingly that the dynamic human life bears an ontologically greater capacity to convey the Divine Presence than inanimate objects and rites. It was so with the Incarnation; it is likewise true regarding sacramental reality.
14. Fox was moved in ministry along these lines in 1656 after enduring time in prison and upon engaging others in dialogue about the charges against Friends whereupon some were convinced (*Journal*, p. 263).
15. Take note of *QRT* #s 31, 39/40, 54, 58, 66, 74, 83, 86, 87, 96, 99/100, 101, 102, 103, and 104, as issues that contain articles addressing matters of simplicity, ethical, and social concern. Especially the issues on Quakers and simplicity (#31), Quakers and science (#99-100), and economic factors of war (#101) speak to these issues with pointed significance.