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Gayle Beebe

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ARE EVANGELICAL FRIENDS “REAL” QUAKERS?

GAYLE BEEBE

The purpose of this paper is to offer a critique of John Punshon’s treatment of Scripture as well as his consideration of the use of Scripture by evangelical Quakers. Punshon’s consideration of both topics is carefully outlined in chapter four, “The Word of God,” in his book *Reasons for Hope* (hereafter referred to as RH). RH is both a thoughtful, provocative book and a forward-looking recap of our theological heritage. John has provided an indispensable resource and an important guide to the future of Friends. In writing chapter four, he wades into a nearly 200-year-old debate over what constitutes a “real” Quaker and whether or not evangelical Quakers can be considered real Quakers given the heavy emphasis they place on the authority of Scripture.

In considering the nature of Scripture, Punshon intends to show how evangelical Quakerism is both evangelical and Quaker.” While crafting his answer, John offers a *tour de force* of a broad range of both Quaker and biblical issues. What is an evangelical? What is a Quaker? What is the nature of inspiration, revelation and authority? And what of religious epistemology and biblical hermeneutics and their role in spiritual understanding? Ultimately, his responses are compelling, and yet some of them remain incomplete. To form my critique I would like to respond to the growing edges of chapter four.

WHAT IS AN EVANGELICAL FRIEND?

To begin this critique a working definition of an evangelical Friend is needed. In constructing this definition, two key sources and influences that have given rise to evangelical Friends include *evangelicalism* and *early Friends history and theology*. Evangelicalism, as a movement, has a rich heritage dating back to the Reformation, passing through the emergence of Puritanism, assimilating the dominant influences of Pietism and culminating with the spiritual uprising of the Second Great Awakening. The controlling convictions emerging

from this unique synthesis include the authority of Scripture, the Lordship of Jesus Christ, the active work of the Holy Spirit, the need for personal conversion, the priority of evangelism and the importance of the Christian community for spiritual nourishment, fellowship and growth. These priorities draw evangelical Friends toward the broader evangelical movement and offer evangelical Friends attractive resources for cultivating their core values.

The other contributing force, early Friends history and theology, has helped to recover a sense of the immediacy and presence of Jesus Christ. Drawing upon Robert Barclay, one realizes the important role several facets of theological reflection have played on the shape and force of Quaker theology. In essence, one can find in Barclay a theological quadrilateral similar in scope and magnitude to John Wesley's quadrilateral. Barclay begins with inward objective manifestations in the heart: *a living religious experience of God*. These are distinct experiences originating outside the self, yet realized within. No external mediator is needed to interpret these experiences, and they live beyond language, form, creed, or religious tradition. These experiences bring us into direct and immediate awareness of God.

Scripture, too, plays a primary role in religious understanding. Barclay states that Scripture is secondary to the Spirit, but for evangelical Friends, Scripture is equal to the Spirit, modifying and correcting the subjective inclinations of religious leadings. Scripture is to be read first in context, and then, in conversation with itself. Where Scripture seems to contradict itself we are to look for greater meaning and understanding beyond the text. This is where our spiritual experiences help to confirm the truth of Scripture, and they are also catalyzed in this process by our reasoning capacities. Human *reason* facilitates the reflective theological process, without which we could never gain understanding of Scripture or our religious faith. *Tradition*, then, rounds out the approach, and Friends have taken seriously the workings of God within the unfolding human stories of the church.

The twin influences of evangelicalism and early Friends theology have helped crystallize evangelical Friends into an attractive expression of biblical Christianity. Although there are trailing nuances to this definition these main tenets are evident throughout the various expressions of those Friends groups that identify themselves as evangelical.

PUNSHON'S VIEW OF SCRIPTURE

Having identified the framework by which evangelical Friends understand themselves, we can now consider the major issues John Punshon raises concerning Scripture. These issues include inspiration, revelation, and authority along with the issues of religious epistemology and biblical hermeneutics. Ultimately, all issues concerned with the nature of our religious faith. Often his treatment is careful, nuanced, and absolutely original and brilliant. Occasionally, however, his treatments are a bit narrow, lapsing into issues that are no longer relevant, although they dominated the evangelical agenda a generation ago. In fairness to Punshon, let's begin with his careful, nuanced and original contributions.

As he constructs his view of Scripture, Punshon is deeply and rightly influenced by Robert Barclay. Barclay, along with Fox and Penn, form the cadre of intellectual partners with whom John interacts as he crafts his own view of Scripture. Here, we witness Punshon's asserting the primary authority of the Holy Spirit and establishing this authority above and beyond Scripture.

John's reasoning in the first part of this chapter is both precise and noteworthy. He distinguishes between general and special revelation noting that special revelation contains those truths necessary to salvation. (RH, p. 122) He implies that saving knowledge is gained only from Scripture and only apprehended when the Holy Spirit who inspired Scripture inspires us during our reading of it. (RH, pp. 123-124) His discussion is extended by noting that religious knowledge is more than a mere intellectual apprehension of doctrinal principles (RH, p. 125) and elevates the unique role of Scripture when he points out the qualitative difference that exists between the Bible and the myths and legends of the surrounding cultures from which the Bible sprang. (RH, pp. 125-126) Punshon even provides one of the most original and creative reconciliations of the Spirit vs. Scripture debate when he critiques the "London Epistle" and "The Richmond Declaration of Faith." (RH, pp. 137-42) Finally, he captures the imagination of the reader by inviting us to join him in a deeper experience of God through reading Scripture. Nevertheless, although his careful and balanced argument is provocative, it is not convincing. Let us consider a few notable problems.

CONCERNS WITH PUNSHON'S POSITION

To begin, Punshon vacillates between being an advocate of evangelical Quakerism and being an adversary. About the time he sounds convincing he veers off course, either asserting old Quaker conflicts and biases against evangelicals or committing the fatal flaw of invoking the inerrancy of George Fox. Consider these examples.

John writes, "Evangelical Friends have always had to steer a middle course between the two different schools of thought that they superficially resemble." (RH, p. 145) Superficially resemble? On what is this assessment based? From what norms could one be accused of deviating? Does any long-standing religious tradition still resemble itself in its origins, and is this the first, best or even final guide in our judgment?

Another troubling example is Punshon's reflex capitulation to George Fox. On the one hand, it is understandable, given George Fox's prominence in the origins and early development of Friends. But does this justify Punshon's assertion of final authority resting with George Fox's interpretation? Listen to Punshon's words here: "...evangelical Quakerism...will be unable to endorse George Fox, who stated the Quaker position classically in a sermon at Ulverston, in England in 1652." (RH, p. 144) But is this really the final word on this issue? Is there no additional room for theological development? Perhaps this accounts for the paucity of theological interest among Friends. Whatever the cause, the reality is that every dynamic religious tradition moves beyond its founder. This is the genius of evangelical Quakerism *and* its leading edge.

In addition to these challenges, Punshon's treatment of Scripture raises other questions as well. For example, his discussion of inspiration, revelation and inerrancy although interesting is generally misguided and misses several key points. One of his definitions of inspiration as "...that which arouses thought, feeling, or sentiment" (RH, p. 128) is simply inadequate for the way in which most theologians, including prominent evangelical ones, understand the inspiration of Scripture. His definition of revelation as "the communication of God's will to us in the form of human knowledge" (RH, p. 129) sidesteps the dramatic sense of God's previous and ongoing revelation in history. When he turns to inerrancy, he simply makes assertions that if true are not pervasive. Allow me to amplify by citing a telling example.

John extends his treatment of Scripture by noting, "However, it is a contemporary evangelical shibboleth that one should be able to assert that scripture is inerrant." (RH, p. 145) This is simply not the case. The word "inerrancy" is not a password connoting evangelical, as it is not even present in the Faith and Practice/Disciplines of any of the "self-proclaimed" evangelical yearly meetings. Take, for example, the Faith and Practice of Evangelical Friends Church Southwest, arguably the most conservative of the evangelical yearly meetings. Here is their statement, "We believe the Bible, the Old and New Testaments, is the inspired and authoritative written Word of God. We believe the Bible is entirely trustworthy in all that it teaches and reveals...." (*Faith and Practice*, Evangelical Friends Church Southwest, Whittier, CA: Evangelical Friends Church Southwest Press, p. 13)

Or, step outside the evangelical Friends' orbit to consider other evangelical organizations like the Free Methodist Church of North America and Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, CA. The Free Methodists write, "The Bible is God's written Word, uniquely inspired by the Holy Spirit. It bears unerring witness to Jesus Christ, the living Word...." (*The Book of Discipline*, 1995, Indianapolis, IN: The Free Methodist Publishing House, p. 10) And, consider the statement of faith of Fuller Theological Seminary, the leading evangelical seminary as we open the 21st century, which emphasizes the reliability of Scripture: "Scripture is an essential part and trustworthy record of this divine self-disclosure. All the books of the Old and New Testaments, given by divine inspiration are the written Word of God, the only infallible rule of faith and practice." (Hubbard, David. *What We Evangelicals Believe*. Pasadena, CA: Fuller Seminary Press, 1991)

My point in using each of these examples is to illustrate the specific non-use of the concept of inerrancy that John suggests is a part of mainstream evangelicalism. I will concede, however, that John's concluding distinction between fundamentalism and evangelicalism is important and should have been the place where the discussion of inerrancy was carried forth.

Let me conclude by raising two further questions before offering a final note of praise. When critiquing the Richmond Declaration of Faith, Punshon comments that it is both a statement of faith and a response to political realities. While this is a good point, upon further reflection it strikes one that this is true of *every* statement of faith.

Every attempt to make sense of our relationship with God includes both affirmations of this relationship and reactions to political pressures from the prevailing culture.

The second question arises from John's subtle-yet-consistent tendency to treat as normative a fairly narrow interpretation of Quakerism that at its core excludes evangelical Quakers. Although Punshon seems open to including them, his implication that evangelical Quakers are still on the margins is unfortunate. Certainly, practices of evangelical Quakers raise some questions, but no more questions than might arise by every other branch of Quakers about their core identity and its relationship with the original vision of the Friends movement.

In effect, it is no longer relevant to ask whether or not evangelical Quakers are "real" Quakers. They have self-identified as such, and they engage in consistent conversation with their tradition, expressing their Christian faith in explicitly Quaker ways. This should be sufficient. The fact of the matter is they *are* Quaker, and continual wrangling over this issue is simply misguided. It is akin to fringe Roman Catholic theologians who are always trying to decide whether or not Jesuits are "real" Catholics. We need to move beyond these long-standing family tensions and look outward to a world that continues to seek for an authentic faith that leads to real life.

Finally, I would like to conclude with a word of praise. Punshon's chapter on Friends and the Bible is part of a larger book that is one of the most original and helpful theological works of our generation. Ironically, where evangelical Friends might feel marginalized by some of Punshon's tone, non-evangelical Friends will probably feel totally excluded because this book is not about them! In its capacity to provoke and affirm in divergent directions, the genius of this book becomes evident. In the final analysis, one can only express gratitude to John Punshon for wading into theological discussions where Quakers have been sparse and contributions to our theological understanding have been rare. In this, we can only say *thanks*, so thank you, John Punshon!