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Comments on "A Call to Perfecting Our Faithfulness"

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Comments

DENNIS DICK

First, I would like to thank the Quaker Theological Discussion Group for the privilege of being a commentator despite my glaring, possibly overwhelming, lack of credentials or external marks of ability. Here the untutored can address professors and Ph.D.s as equals. We are all students together — humble learners in the school of Christ. I admire this testament to equality and against the hat honor of credentialism.

Nancy Jackson deserves the gratitude of all of us for presenting such a finely balanced and well-argued paper. I agree with her at most points, and in this I rejoice greatly. Although I disagree almost entirely with her on one main point regarding the faithful community, I can rejoice in this also, for it may give occasion for Truth to prosper.

And, because I am grateful to Jesus Christ for drawing me to his church, I want to respond by trying to live a holy life, and by offering public testimony to his grace. Now I can say that I was chosen by God to be among the elect, to be set apart, one of the Holy Ones, and I know that I do not deserve it. I hope that all people are being drawn up to God by that same Spirit, and as I was emboldened and helped by many along my way, I feel led to share the Good News that I have heard, so that many others may live in that Spirit that takes away sin and enables us to live above it. Surely part of our call is to make disciples of all humankind, which we may do by the example of changed lives and sharing of the Gospel.

SIN

Perhaps at the risk of being almost obvious, and in the interest of getting to the more positive side of Christian living, it may be enough on the topic of sin to briefly raise the question: "How do we know what sin is?" I would testify from my own experience that the biblical witness is very helpful, and

that when the Spirit is working in one, one is drawn to the Scriptures and to a prayer group — not a study group only, but a prayer group.

PERFECTION

On the topic of perfection, it seems to me that Nancy Jackson has stressed the *reasonable* arguments in favor of perfection, following the style of Barclay the Apologist, and has slighted the *ecstatic* imperative for holiness felt by the early Friends. We all know that George Fox replied to those who wanted to make him a captain in the Congregationalist New Model Army: "I told them . . . that I lived in the virtue of that life and power that took away the occasion of all wars."[1] I live in it! It lives in me! To live in that kind of transforming experience is to be a Quaker who trembles before the Lord, and who becomes filled with the glory of God.

To the dismay of some who love me, I have described myself as a thorough-going mystic. By this I mean that the details of how Christ becomes our Savior are a mystery to me. I don't know exactly why or how it happened, but someday, we will all know face to face. Another aspect of my mystical perception of the Way of Christ is that I believe that when we are in the Spirit of the Lord, we do not always do what seems rational. "Woe to the bloody city of Lichfield!"[2]

There are times when the Holy Spirit will lead us into song or symbolic action just as much as to well-spoken prayer or testimony. And we know that sometimes we may, like Paul, be taken into the heavens and shown things — "inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell" (2 Cor. 12:4 NIV). "In the same way the Spirit comes to the aid of our weakness. We do not even know how we ought to pray, but through our inarticulate groans the Spirit himself is pleading for us" (Rom. 8:26-27 NEB).

And we must, as Nancy Jackson says, stress the present and active nature of salvation: Jesus Christ is perfecting us *now*! I am being lifted up now! Perhaps I ought properly to be labeled a neo-holiness Quaker!

This may sound dangerously like a reliance upon feelings and an encouragement of excessive pentecostal enthusiasm, but

I submit that a kind of excited joyfulness is one of the marks of an apostolic church. The way of the cross is a way of joy, and if over-enthusiasm should become a danger, certainly there are many Quaker structures capable of dealing with the problem: for instance, the recognition of elders and overseers should act as a check upon an overzealous ministry.

I want to add that I have come to appreciate the wondrous discipline of Friends worship, as compared to most other forms of Christian worship seen today. I heartily admire the readiness to listen and respond out of the silence, and the concern for a guided ministry shown by so many members, even members of what seem to be atrociously humanistic and secular meetings. Nevertheless, I think that our present-day Society needs more ecstasy, not less, and I believe that the Lord wants us to take the risk to pray in the Spirit for all the gifts and fruits of the Spirit.

THE FAITHFUL COMMUNITY

Now, Nancy Jackson, like Thomas Kelly and many others, has given us good reasons for joining together in faithful prayer fellowships, to become the New Israel, the new chosen people, the church. But on page 19 she says: "We cannot return to the days when the Quaker meeting was the central focus for members' lives." That is a cardinal heresy of our times, and one that should be renounced utterly. The desire of my heart is to be part of a community of the faithful where everything is submitted to God in prayer, where all the aspects of life are under the direct guidance of Christ, and where I, my family, and my loved ones may dwell and work in unity and joy in the felt presence of the Lord of life. I plead that it is the duty of the faithful church to create the opportunity for each human being to live in such a state.

Much more could be said on this topic, but it may suffice here to submit one of Nancy Jackson's queries (p. 20) for consideration:

> To what degree are we willing to commit ourselves to God and one another in a world so crowded with other loyalties — spiritual, moral, intellectual, social, material?

This is an excellent query for radical, revolutionary Christians, who ought to look at each of their so-called conflicting loyalties and shatter them into little pieces, just as the mighty stone in Nebuchadnezzar's dream smashed the giant statue (Dan. 2:34). As the old song goes:[3]

> I'm looking for the stone that was hewed out of the mountain,
> That's tearing down the kingdoms of this world.
> King Jesus is the stone that was hewed out of the mountain,
> That's tearing down the kingdoms of this world.

A rational, balanced attitude toward sin and perfection is undoubtedly the right one to take. There should be no static resting in some attained state of grace (or damnation, for that matter). But it seems highly improper to suggest that our response to the call to faithfulness should be nothing more than lukewarm compromise. This is an area where we should not settle for being a little bit faithful: we are clearly called to be as sharp as salt on the tongue, as startling as light in darkness.

Especially now, especially within this nation, the faithful community must be different if it is to make a difference (the Son of Man comes to bring a sword). There is enough of a discrepancy between the foreign policy and the economic order of the United States today, and the social order of the Kingdom of Heaven, that it might be appropriate to set these words of Jesus (John 14:15-18 JerB) against the reign of Mammon:

> If you love me you will keep my commandments.
> I shall ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate
> to be with you for ever, that Spirit of truth
> whom the world can never receive
> since it neither sees nor knows him;
> but you know him, because he is with you, he is in you.
> I will not leave you orphans; I will come back to you.
> In a short time the world will no longer see me;
> but you will see me, because I live and you will live.

When we are bold enough to become the faithful community, we may respond as John Audland did. In Bristol in 1654 "he

stood up, full of dread, and shining brightness on his countenance, lifted up his voice as a trumpet, and said, 'I proclaim spiritual war with the inhabitants of the earth, who are in the fall and separation from God, and prophesy to the four winds of heaven.' "[4]

When we are about the Father's business, I believe that perfection will come unasked for; then "let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream" (Amos 5:24 RSV).[5]

Notes

1. [George Fox], *The Journal of George Fox; Being an Historical Account of His Life, Travels, Sufferings, and Christian Experiences,* ed. Norman Penney, 8th (Bi-Centenary) Edn., 2 vols. (London: Headley, 1902), vol. 1, p. 68.
2. Ibid., p. 78.
3. "Looking for the Stone," traditional Appalachian gospel song.
4. *Early Quaker Writings, 1650-1700,* ed. Hugh Barbour and Arthur O. Roberts (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), p. 80.
5. Moffatt translates this: "let justice well up like fresh water, let honesty roll in full tide."

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