

2014

A Review of Quaker Themes and Interpretations in Following Jesus: The Heart of Faith and Practice by Paul Anderson

Carole Spencer

Earlham College, cspencer@georgefox.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt>



Part of the [Christian Denominations and Sects Commons](#), and the [Christianity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Spencer, Carole (2014) "A Review of Quaker Themes and Interpretations in Following Jesus: The Heart of Faith and Practice by Paul Anderson," *Quaker Religious Thought*: Vol. 122, Article 2.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt/vol122/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Quaker Religious Thought by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University.

A REVIEW OF QUAKER THEMES AND INTERPRETATIONS IN *FOLLOWING JESUS: THE HEART OF FAITH AND PRACTICE* BY PAUL ANDERSON

CAROLE DALE SPENCER

My first response upon reading *Following Jesus* was, “Finally a book I can confidently send to my Baptist brother explaining the Quaker faith in language he would understand and appreciate!” Written by a New Testament scholar, Paul Anderson demonstrates the profound biblical basis of Quaker spirituality, yet keeps the language simple and straightforward, and largely avoids academic and Quaker jargon. By focusing on the biblical basis of the Quaker movement, *Following Jesus* recovers the heart and spirit of the teachings and testimonies of historic Quakerism reinterpreted for a post-revivalist, post-liberal, and what I would term post-postmodern Quakerism in a post-denominational world.

I appreciated the book’s opening with the words of Meister Eckhart, as quoted by Thomas Kelly in his chapter on “Holy Obedience” in the classic, *Testament of Devotion*. Anderson never uses the term “holiness” to describe the heart of Quaker spirituality, although I find it an apt term to capture the spirit of the early movement. Early Quakers were seeking to live in holy obedience, a living experience of union with God. William Penn sums it up: “Quakers teach that men (sic) must be holy to be happy” (Cope, T. P., 1882).

Today we might envision holiness as the second half of the spiritual journey, the deeper journey, the further journey, the recovery of the fullness of our humanity in Christ. The old-time revival language that appealed so forcefully to nineteenth century Quakers captured this deeper, fuller aspect in terms such as the “second blessing,” “entire sanctification,” or the “higher life.” Early Quakers did not use those phrases, but rather the classic medieval term, “perfection,” which refers to union with God, the goal of a spirit-led life. Anderson uses more conventional evangelical, but less mystical language, such as “the dedicated life.” But he is clear in his prologue that he means “holy obedience” which could be a modern equivalent of Quaker “perfection.”

QUAKER THEMES AND INTERPRETATIONS IN *FOLLOWING JESUS* • 5

Anderson claims that the central question for Quakers now and always, has been “How can we, most radically and faithfully, follow Jesus.” He links his Quaker roots to evangelicalism by using phrases like “following Jesus” and “radical discipleship,” although these, too, are not expressions early Quakers would have used. Yet without question, Quakers in seventeenth-century England practiced radical Christian discipleship and followed Jesus. Thus, first, and foremost, Anderson envisions a twenty-first-century Quaker spirituality as unapologetically and radically Christian as the seventeenth-century movement. There were non-Christian movements at the time, such as the Ranters, a “spiritual but not religious” group, but early Quakers took great pains to differentiate themselves from those kinds of radicals. Quakers were spiritual and religious, they were returning to ancient Christian roots, and an alternative orthodoxy, “Primitive Christianity Revived,” as well as forging a new emergent, non-institutional, counter-cultural spirituality.

The centrality of Christ, both his particularity in his historic humanity and his universality in his divinity as the Light, were non-negotiable beliefs for early Quakers. These paradoxical truths were held together for over two hundred years of Quaker history, but mounting tensions of enlightenment rationality eventually rent the seamless fabric of Quaker spirituality. Anderson wants to hold these paradoxical truths together once again, that Jesus Christ is the only way and yet the Light that enlightens all, in a similar manner to early Friends. His explanation of George Fox’s oft-quoted “that of God in everyone” as an acknowledgement of God’s presence in all humanity, yet also recognizing that every person must be awakened to that reality, hardly resolves all the divergent and contentious interpretations of Fox’s phrase. But is a reasonable interpretation that conforms to Quaker use of scripture, blending John 1:9, John 4:6 and Romans 2:14-16. Early Quakers held to the doctrine of the fall and understood “original sin” as universal. But they were not believers in total depravity or predestination. They taught a return to a pre-fall, restored state of unity with God. They were clear that a conscious choice to open oneself to the Light of Christ already within, a Light both convicting and healing, was a necessary precursor to the new birth and was available to all. The fall was universal but so was salvation, leaving room for varying degrees of universalism within Quakerism, which Anderson wisely avoids delineating.

6 • CAROLE DALE SPENCER

Yet always more essential than any assent to a particular soteriology or Christology (which early Quakers, even Barclay the trained theologian, did not systematically develop) was the immediate experience of Christ and the transformative aspects of that experience that permeates early Quaker spirituality. In focusing on this empowering dynamic, Anderson captures a key element of the radical vision of early Quakers. Following Jesus, traditionally called “the imitation of Christ” was basic to all anabaptist, puritan, and pietistic movements of the time, but what made Quakers more distinctive was their claim to an even deeper “experimental knowledge,” a more mystical experience of participation in God, the experience of the divine indwelling. If a mystic is someone who has moved from “mere belief systems or belonging systems,” to actual inner experience of the Light, “mystic” in that sense would aptly describe early Quakers. Anderson never uses the term “mystic” or mystical to describe Quakers, though I would contend that mystical consciousness of union with Christ was, and continues to be, the bedrock of Quaker spirituality. Rowan Williams expresses the essence of the mystical in a way that fully identifies the depth of following Jesus that Anderson describes. Williams writes “the mystical begins when the self is surrendered at a radical level to the activity of God, so that it can no longer be thought of as acting from a centre separated from God. The mystical is the ‘supernatural’, and both mean simply the state in which what we are doing coincides--more or less--with what God is doing.” (*Teresa of Avila*, Continuum, 2004, p. 184). In theological terms, it is the formation of our selfhood in the likeness of Christ. This is not a seeking after “mystical experiences,” sensations, raptures or visions, as often construed, but a surrender and emptying of oneself to divine grace and love. Perfection is the term used in early Quaker discourse, but centuries of misunderstanding of that word make it unusable in that sense today. The word holiness, too, has often been misused in non-life-giving and unhealthy ways. Spiritual transformation is at best a modern equivalent, but I would hope that Quakers would not reject, but rather recover the words “holiness” and “mystic” to describe a person who lives fully “in Christ” even though they may disagree with Rufus Jones’ modern “inner light mysticism.” The early Quaker understanding of being “in Christ” was a far more mystical and supernatural experience than what most evangelicals mean by “a personal relationship with Jesus.” It is a knowing, a communion through union. It is becoming one with that which we seek to know, and that is the spiritual trajectory I see Anderson pointing toward.

QUAKER THEMES AND INTERPRETATIONS IN *FOLLOWING JESUS* • 7

For early Quakers, to follow Jesus meant to follow the risen Christ. To be honest, early Quakers did not greatly emphasize the historical Jesus of the Synoptics. Literal “what would Jesus do” kinds of questions are not typical of early Friends writing. The emphasis was largely on the journey inward, being indwelt and led by the Spirit (the risen, or cosmic Christ), though it would always manifest in ethical behavior. Quaker spirituality is centered on following Jesus on a journey of dying to self (our false self) to discover our truer and larger identity in Christ. To follow Jesus meant “to carry the cross” and to die with Christ, and rise with Christ, to “be born anew of the spirit” through a deep inner experience of union of wills. Anderson makes this point forcefully when he speaks of following Jesus by “living into the baptism of Jesus and drinking his cup” which he calls “an incarnational view of sacramental living,” and I would term “incarnational holiness.”

Hannah Whitall Smith, a nineteenth century “Holiness Quaker” in an astute critique of Quakerism of 100 years ago, made this observation: “A very wise thinker among [the Quakers] said to me lately that in his opinion Friends were meant to be a strong mystic society, but he feared they were degenerating into a weak evangelical one; and I could not but feel there was too much truth in his word.” (*The Unselfishness of God*, 1903, 281)

Anderson’s book is a strong antidote to Quaker degeneration into a weak (or generic) evangelicalism, but not quite strong enough to return Quakerism to its place as a strong mystic society. In that regard Thomas Kelly’s writing still speaks more explicitly and powerfully. But Anderson’s strength is his emphasis on another key element of Quaker spirituality-- its dependence on the Christian scriptures, which is less pronounced in Kelly (who was trained as a philosopher and not a biblical scholar). The Bible was vital to early Quaker spirituality and any attempt to offer a reinterpretation of Quaker spirituality for today must include a basis in scripture, which Anderson provides admirably as a renowned biblical scholar. My favorite line in the book is “The more I learn about the New Testament, the more Quaker I become.” This seems especially true for the Gospel of John, of which Anderson is a leading authority, and which has long been called “the Quaker gospel.” For myself I can truly say that “the more I learn about the Gospel of John, the more Quaker I become.”

While Anderson highlights the Quaker emphasis on the immediacy of Christ and firsthand spiritual experience, he is careful to clarify

8 • CAROLE DALE SPENCER

that he does not mean *replacing* scripture with immediacy, but that scripture is to be read in the same spirit in which it was written. And while he doesn't explicitly say this, reading in the same spirit, means an opening to reinterpreting scripture, or rereading in the spirit, which early Quakers amply practiced. They could read concretely and literally—as in “going naked for a sign,” and “letting your yea be yea.” but also revise and reread scripture through community discernment in their own socio-political context, for example in their support of women as ministers, and their understanding of an inward baptism and communion, rather than a symbolic meal of bread and wine as “instituted” by Paul.

I appreciated Anderson's pointing out that other spiritual movements share their roots in the Quaker awakening – the Wesleyan movement, the Salvation Army, Pentecostalism, and the Vineyard Fellowship. Such connections are not always recognized by most Quakers.

Anderson's idea of Quakers as “a religious order within the larger church,” rather than a separate denomination is an intriguing perspective. One could imagine the Quaker movement as having been given a particular “charism” similar to a Catholic order. Perhaps ours might be “silence, discernment, witness, or mission” or “holy obedience.” Seen in this perspective, individuals who are from other traditions, but are drawn to the Quaker way, could be like “oblates” following the Quaker “rule” (our faith and practice) to whatever degree they are able, in whatever context they find themselves. The early Quaker movement could be called a “new monasticism” for its time—a this-worldly monasticism, lived in the world and in families rather than the cloister.

Thankfully Anderson does not minimize Quaker testimonies as some evangelical Friends tend to do to be more attractive to mainstream evangelicalism, but instead he rightly claims them as central to Quaker identity and calling. He names these as: peace, simplicity, spiritual worship and sacraments, inclusive and empowered ministry (equality), and integrity, (a list that would unite most Quakers across the branches). But then adds one that might cause discomfort among more liberal Quakers who do not normally consider it a Quaker testimony, and that is the “e” word: evangelism, which Anderson describes irenically as “by conviction rather than coercion.” The centrality of evangelism in historic Quakerism cannot be downplayed or considered an accident of history. Evangelism and mission were

QUAKER THEMES AND INTERPRETATIONS IN *FOLLOWING JESUS* • 9

not characteristic of the puritan movement out of which early Quakers arose. Yet early Friends were evangelistic to the core. They were a missional movement, which desired to spread the Quaker gospel around the world. Anderson also reminds the reader that evangelism and social witness went hand-in-hand; the spiritual and the political were not separate spheres or entities. In that regard, *Following Jesus* includes a strong and passionate section on nonviolence and the peace witness. Anderson touches lightly on gender equality, and simple living, but more intentional focus on the integration of spirituality and social justice, and how that might be voiced and practiced more faithfully within an evangelical context would strengthen this book. Early Quakers read the bible in a mystical and empathetic way, but also as a liberationist text, written for oppressed people, women and those on the margins. A stronger emphasis on how following Jesus includes identification with the poor and marginalized, and right relationship with the limited resources of our fragile and plundered planet, would help to recover the prophetic edge and counter-cultural stance of the Quaker way, which is often muted in contemporary Evangelical branches of Friends.

At the heart of Quaker spirituality is their distinctive form of worship to which Anderson devotes a significant portion of his book. As a listening community, worship and prayer are of extreme importance as are discerning and preserving the Quaker tradition if there is to be a continuing future community. Anderson offers a balanced reflection on both tradition and innovation in Quaker worship within a Christian framework. Unlike most denominations, the form of worship does not unite Quakers, but has caused us to be uniquely divided by two distinct styles. Anderson's deep appreciation of both silent waiting and expressive, even "prepared" worship, is a refreshing balance.

In my reading of *Following Jesus*, I see a contemporary reinterpretation of Gurneyite evangelicalism, which was the nineteenth century version of an emergent and ecumenical Quakerism. *Following Jesus* offers an "insider" appreciation, and also a valuable critique, of classic Orthodox-Gurneyite Quaker spirituality.

I would propose that Anderson's *Following Jesus* be read in tandem with Michael Birkel's *Silence and Witness* for a complete picture of the values, principles, and practices of contemporary Quakerism. Together they show a wholism that bridges programmed and unprogrammed, evangelical and liberal Friend. Read together these

10 • CAROLE DALE SPENCER

two books could be the impetus for both a renewal among, and reconciliation between, long divided Quaker branches, as well as a model for emerging churches in the twenty-first century. If Quakers wish to have a significant voice in the emerging movement of inter-faith dialogue, they must first learn to dialogue with their own co-religionists with empathy and appreciation. Anderson's book is an important step in this direction.