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The Relation between Content and Experience

*In George Fox's Theology of Encounter*¹

PAUL N. ANDERSON

The kerygmatic² message of George Fox may be described as a “theology of encounter.” Not only did it call for a transforming encounter with God through the pneumatic power and presence of the resurrected Lord, but Fox’s spiritual insights were gained largely by means of such encounters which he called “openings.” The focus of this paper is to explore the connection between salient aspects of Fox’s kerygmatic message and their epistemological origins within his spiritual experience; in other words, to assess the relation between content and experience in George Fox’s theology of encounter.

In order to investigate this topic we shall confine our study primarily to the events leading up to Fox’s 1652 sermon on Firbank Fell, considering first the contents of the sermon as recorded in his *Journal*, and second, Fox’s

1. An earlier form of this paper was delivered at the George Fox Tercentenary Conference in Lancaster, England, March 1991.

2. The reason I use the word “kerygma” here (from the Greek word, *keryssein*, “to proclaim”—see C.H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1936, reprinted in 1980, esp. pp.7-35). Fox considered himself in continuity with the original proclaimers of the Gospel message, and yet, his message focused not just on the eschatological events of the past (what God *has done* through Christ at the dawning of the New Age) but upon the eschatology of the **present** and impending future: what God *is doing*—and yet *would be doing*—through Christ in this new day of Visitation. To continue with Dodd’s language, Fox not only proclaims a “realized eschatology,” but he has experienced it, and these encounters form the content of his further proclamations.

antecedent openings which formed the experiential basis for his insights and convictions. Finally we shall make several observations regarding connections between the two and their implications.

I. Content

George Fox's sermon at Firbank Fell marked a turning point in the Quaker movement.³ Indeed, it was largely that event, holding an audience of over one thousand captive for three hours, that marked the transition from a cluster of isolated searchings to a groundswell movement endeavoring to influence the known world. It is also here in Fox's *Journal*⁴ where we find his clearest and fullest articulation of his message up to that point, and one of the clearest anywhere in his *Journal*. This being the case, Fox's sermon at Firbank Fell provides at least an adequate starting place for identifying some of the basic tenets of his kerygmatic message. These are as follows:⁵

1. Steeplehouses are "no more holy than that mountain;" temples (and "dreadful houses of God") "were not set up by the command of God nor Christ;" nor were their priesthood and tithing systems divinely ordained. Rather, "Christ was come, who ended the temple, and the priests, and the tithes, and Christ said, 'Learn of me', and God said, 'This is my beloved Son, hear ye him.'"

2. The Lord had sent Fox with "his everlasting gospel to preach, and his word of life to bring them off all those temples, tithes, priests and rudiments

3. Ernest Taylor (*The Valiant Sixty*, York: Sessions, 1947, third ed. 1988, p. 18) puts it this way: "These meetings at Firbank and Preston Patrick changed the whole prospect. Fox went up Wensleydale as a solitary enthusiast. The following few days gave him a band of zealous workers, who went forth on Gospel service in two's and three's."

4. Not only in Fox's *Journal* are the Sedbergh/Firbank Fell events reported as pivotal, but they are also described as highly significant to such formative leaders as Thomas, Ann and John Blaykling, Frances Howgill, Richard Robinson, Joseph Bains, John Auldland—and apparently *even* judge (Colonel) Gervaise Benson and Major Bousfield were somewhat convinced. Also, many others appear to have been reached as suggested by a letter from Sedbergh Meeting concerning Fox's arrival in the Northwest (reprinted in Hugh Barbour and Arthur Roberts, eds., *Early Quaker Writings: 1650-1700*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973, pp. 59-61). This letter describes the proclamation/event as follows:

And upon the first day following, G. F., being accompanied with the said John Blaykling, went to Firbank Chapel, where F. Howgill and John Auldland preached in the forenoon to a seeling and religious people there separated from the common way of national worship. The said G. F. bore till they had done, and when the meeting broke up, gave notice of a meeting afternoon the same day intended, hard by the said chapel; whither many did resort, and then and there the said G. F. was opened in a living testimony by the word of life to the reaching God's witness in many hearts and the said J. A. was then fully convinced of the Truth, with many more. (p.60)

5. Citations taken from *The Journal of George Fox*, John L. Nickalls, ed., London: Religious Society of Friends (minor revisions, 1975), p. 109.

of the world, which had gotten up since the apostles' days and had been set up by such who had erred from the spirit and power the apostles were in..." Rather, the goal is that they "might all come to know Christ their teacher, their counsellor, their shepherd to feed them, and their bishop to oversee them and their prophet to open to them, and to know their bodies to be the temples of God and Christ for them to dwell in."

3. The work of those "who make a trade of their words and have put them into chapter and verse" is apostasy and is of the same fallen character as the false prophets, chief priests, scribes and Pharisees such as "the prophets, Christ, and his apostles cried against." Rather, Fox says, "I turned them to Christ the substance," expositing both the parables and Epistles to them.

4. People were turned from darkness and the power of Satan to the Light and the spirit of God, "that they might believe in it and become children of the light." Thus, Fox declares his hope that "with the spirit of Truth they might be led into all the Truth of the prophets', Christ's and the apostles' words."

Indeed, the program of Fox's ministry is largely represented in digest form within the outline of this important sermon, and from these motifs several observations may be made:

1. Within each set of points there are both *deconstructive* and *reconstructive* elements. Fox is called to bring people "off" their dependence on outward forms, institutions and leaders, turning them "to" Christ the substance and fulfillment of all religious convention.

2. The deconstructive emphases of Fox are set in clear contradistinction to conventional religious understandings and practices. Christocentric emphasis applies a radical interpretation of the past (the original, authentic church) in a way which corrects the present and prepares the way for the future. In this sense Fox advocates a *radical restoration* of basic and authentic Christianity.

3. Generally, the sermon falls into two halves (paragraphs) which address two kinds of authorities challenged by Fox: the *institutional priests* (advocating the authority of the church) and the *dissenting preachers* (advocating the authority of the scriptures). While the latter is more subtle, the two authorities of the church and the scriptures are seen here to be challenged by Fox in deference to the pneumatic power of the resurrected Lord. We see this agenda being hammered out before and after this sermon as well.

4. The issue at stake here, however, is not Christ *versus* the scriptures, nor the Spirit of Christ *versus* ecclesiastical authority. Rather, the issue is one of *Christocracy*: how the risen Christ leads *within* the church redemptively (not coercively) and how the leadings of the Spirit of Christ may be embraced and obeyed as discerned adequately *through* the scriptures—let alone through the personal leading and the sense of the gathered meeting.

Making these sources of authority truly dynamic—and thus truly authoritative—is the Spirit of Christ who works through them, but also beyond them. This eternal Christ is proclaimed to be present and available, waiting to be encountered and thus enlivening the church, teaching the reader of the scriptures and becoming the true Shepherd of the flock.

In these and other ways Fox's sermon on Firbank Fell represents in digest form an outline of his Gospel message, and in many ways the rest of his ministry reflects the unfolding story of how the message is delivered and variously received. One finds this story narrated in the *Journal*, but it also comes through clearly in his epistles. For the purposes of this essay, however, the discussion will be confined to treatments in Fox's *Journal*.⁶

II. Experience

As well as these motifs, summarized as the digest of a three-hour sermon, one may also trace their development within the experience of George Fox if his journal may even come close to a reliable guide.⁷ Obviously, there are problems with evaluating the veracity of any historical or literary document, especially an autobiographical journal which has been extensively edited. But even if there is only a literary relationship (and it is highly doubtful this is *all* there is) there still exists a suggestive connection between the content of Fox's message and the insights gained from his spiritual encounters. So, let's proceed with the exploration. In doing so, consider a terse digest of Fox's openings and reports of his ministry between 1643 and 1652, which begin with Fox's early searchings and debates with religious leaders. What we find in this, the beginning of his ministry, is that his experiential sojourn traverses at least five phases as Fox moves from seeker to an apostle with a message. What one also finds, however, is that *each* of the points articulated in the Firbank proclamation is anticipated in the prophetic openings of George Fox between 1635 and 1652. A selection of these are as follows:

Phase one: Fox becomes a seeker of truth; the Lord opens to him the way of truth. Here we see the young seeker exploring answers to his questions,

6. In that sense, the discussion limited to treatments in Fox's *Journal* offers clear parameters within which the discussion can be meaningfully confined and carried out.

7. In many ways, the issue of the "historical George" is parallel to issues associated with quests for the "historical Jesus." While Fox was the primary writer of the *Journal* (as a contrast to Jesus' being represented later in the gospels by later writers), the three levels of original events, developing memory (tradition) and final writing/editing remain for both figures. Whether or not events happened entirely the way they are represented in Fox's *Journal* (and obviously *some* embellishment and stylizing must have occurred), certainly the ways they are portrayed are significant in and of themselves. They reflect at least the selective memory of highlights and their relation to events preceding and following. That relation in and of itself is significant, although such by no means affects the historical reliability between the events and their later reporting.

assessing the validity of posed solutions, and finally responding to the divine initiative experientially.

1635— Eleven years of age—“The Lord taught me to be faithful in all things...inwardly to God and outwardly to men, and to keep to ‘yea’ and ‘nay’ in all things.”⁸

1643— In response to coercive appeals to drink in excess and the disappointing example of “professors” of faith— “...the Lord...said unto me, ‘Thou seest how young people go together into vanity and old people into the earth; and thou must forsake all, both young and old, and keep out of all, and be as a stranger unto all.’”⁹

1646— “...A consideration arose in me, how it was said that all Christians were believers, both Protestants and Papists; and the Lord opened to me that, if all were believers, then they were all born of God and passed from death to life, and that none were true believers but such...”¹⁰

—Following earlier debates with four priests—“At another time...the Lord opened unto me that being bred at Oxford or Cambridge does not fit and qualify men to be ministers of Christ; and I stranged at it because it was the common belief of people.”¹¹

1647— “At another time it was opened in me that God, who made the world, did not dwell in temples made with hands...or dreadful places, and holy ground...but that his people were his temple, and he dwelt in them.”¹²

— Versus Nathanael Stephens regarding dependence on priests— “But I brought them Scriptures, and told them there was an anointing within man to teach him, and that the Lord would teach his people himself.”¹³

— “But 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 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 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.”¹⁴

8. *Journal*, Nickalls ed., pp.1-2.

9. *Ibid*, p. 3.

10. *Ibid*, p. 7, certainly a radical notion for its time!

11. *Ibid*, Fox describe how this opening “struck at” Priest Stephens' ministry (twice) and the ministries of the priests, but that it also went against the grain of the dissenting preachers.

12. *Ibid*, p.8; clearly a reflection of Fox's taking to heart the New Testament teaching on the theme, as Fox himself states within the above paragraph, “...for both Stephen and the Apostle Paul bore testimony that he [God] did not dwell in temples made with hands...”

13. *Ibid*. Notice that authorities of both church and scripture are challenged in the name of scriptural teaching on the authentic character of the church. In that sense, Fox is challenging these authorities in the name of biblical ecclesiology. Notice, however, that the “hollow trees and lonesome places” event serves in the ministry of Fox a function similar to the Temptations of Jesus in the wilderness (pp. 9-10), although the testing motif also continues later in his *Journal*.

Phase two: The seeker becomes a finder; encounter is transforming. At this point, Fox comes to see purpose in his search, which gravitates around the calling for all persons everywhere to come into full dependence on Christ and the saving/revealing initiative of God alone.¹⁵ During this phase Fox also reflects upon his own temptations and inclinations away from the truth. This phase furthers the “hollow logs and lonely places” motif as Fox’s wilderness experience in preparation for his public ministry continues.

1647— Fox testifies: “My desires after the Lord grew stronger, and zeal in the pure knowledge of God and of Christ alone, without the help of any man, book, or writing. For though I read the Scriptures that spoke of Christ and of God, yet I knew him not but by revelation, as he who hath the key did open, and as the Father of life drew me to his Son by his spirit.”¹⁶

— Likewise—“And I found that there were two thirsts in me, the one after the creatures, to have gotten help and strength there, and the other after the Lord the creator and his Son Jesus Christ. And I saw all the world could do me no good.”¹⁷

— At another opening—“...I therein saw clearly that all was done and to be done in and by Christ, and how he conquers and destroys this tempter, the Devil and all his works, and is atop of him, and that all these troubles were good for me...My living faith was raised, that all was done through Christ, the life, and my belief was in him.”¹⁸

— “Then after this there did a pure fire appear in me; then I saw how he sat as a refiner’s fire and as the fuller’s soap; and then the spiritual discerning came into me, by which I did discern my own thoughts, groans and sighs, and what it was that did veil me, and what it was that did open me... The divine light of Christ manifesteth all things and the spiritual fire trieth all things, and severeth all things... Therefore, keep daily to the cross, the power of God, by which ye may witness all that to be crucified which is contrary to the will of God, and which shall not come into his kingdom.”¹⁹

14. *Ibid*, p. 11. This is the classic account of Fox’s encounter with the divine voice, and his ministry becomes irreversibly focused on the Christocentric heart of the Gospel. It begins a new phase of his experience and calling.

15. Fox puts it: “Then therefore the Lord did let me see why there was none upon the earth that could speak to my condition, namely, that I might give him all the glory; for all are concluded under sin, and shut up in unbelief as I had been, that Jesus Christ might have the pre-eminence, who enlightens, and gives grace and faith, and power... And this I knew experimentally.” *Ibid*.

16. *Ibid*. Notice the degree to which the medium and message are one.

17. *Ibid*, p. 12. Fox’s “temptations” here have to do with trusting in any means of human instrumentality instead of the saving initiative of God. It is the desire for certainty versus the calling to faith. The way forward for Fox is to “wait patiently upon the Lord, whatsoever condition you be in...”

18. *Ibid*, p.14.

19. *Ibid*, pp.14-18.

— “...In this I saw the infinite love of God. I saw also that there was an ocean of darkness and death, but an infinite ocean of light and love, which flowed over the ocean of darkness. And in that also I saw the infinite love of God; and I had great openings.

And as I was walking by the steeplehouse side, in the town of Mansfield, the Lord said to me, ‘That which people do trample must be thy food.’”²⁰

— “And the same eternal power of God, which brought me through these things, was that which afterwards shook the nations, priests, professors and people. Then could I say I had been in spiritual Babylon, Sodom, Egypt, and the grave; but by the eternal power of God I was come out of it, and was brought over it and the power of it, into the power of Christ. And I saw the harvest white, and the Seed of God lying thick in the ground, as ever did wheat that was sown outwardly, and none to gather it; and for this I mourned with tears.”²¹

This concludes the second phase of George Fox’s sojourn: his time of temptation and testing—even worrying that he may have sinned against the Holy Ghost. He reports triumphantly regarding such “buffeting,” “Thus, by the power of Christ, I got over that temptation also.”²² The third phase of Fox’s sojourn relates to the testing of the world, his ongoing transformation and his calling to turn people from darkness to light.

Phase three: Fox receives his calling to proclaim the Day of the Lord and to preach repentance. The year is now 1648, and the shift is clear between the Lord’s dealing with Fox personally and his awareness of divine visitation upon multitudes of others. In the following citation one can almost sense a new age dawning, as far as the eschatological awareness of Fox is concerned.

1648— “...I saw there was a great crack to go throughout the earth, and a great smoke to go as the crack went and that after the crack there should be a great shaking. This was the earth in people’s hearts, which was to be shaken before the Seed of God was raised out of the earth. And it was so; for the Lord’s power began to shake them, and great meetings we began to have, and a mighty power and work of God there was amongst people, to the astonishment of both people and priests...”²³

— to the assorted preachers in the steeple house of Leicester who were trying to silence a woman Fox declared, “‘Dost thou call this place... or mixed multitude a church?’ For the woman asking a question, he ought to have answered it, having given liberty for any to speak.’ ...I told him the church was the pillar and ground of Truth, made up of living stones, living members, a spiritual household which Christ was the head of, but he was

20. *Ibid*, p.19.

21. *Ibid*, p.21.

22. *Ibid*.

23. *Ibid*, p.22.

not the head of a mixed multitude, or of an old house made of lime, stones, and wood.”²⁴

— “Now was I come up in spirit through the flaming sword into the paradise of God. All things were new, and all the creation gave another smell unto me than before, beyond what words can utter. I knew nothing but pureness, and innocency, and righteousness, being renewed up into the image of God by Christ Jesus, so that I say I was come up to the state of Adam which he was in before he fell.”²⁵

— “...The Lord opened to me three things relating to those three great professions in the world, physic, divinity (so called), and law. And he showed me that the physicians were out of the wisdom of God[,]...that the priests were out of the true faith which Christ is the author of, ...[and] that the lawyers were out of the equity and out of the true justice and out of the... perfect law of God.”²⁶

— “I saw also how people read the Scriptures without a right sense of them, and without duly applying them to their own states... They could not know the spiritual meaning of Moses', the prophets', and John's words, nor see their path and travels, much less see through them and to the end of them into the kingdom, unless they had the Spirit and the light of Jesus; nor could they know the words of Christ and of his apostles without his Spirit.”²⁷

About this time in the *Journal* one identifies a shift from clusters of insight-producing encounters to more of a programmatic phase of Fox's apostolic mission. This phase is characterized by Fox's awareness of his mission marked by the introductory phrase, “Now I was sent to...” followed by a statement of purpose. This marks a fourth stage in the religious experience and ministry of George Fox.

Phase four: Fox is sent as an apostle, commissioned to bring specific messages to particular audiences. Especially significant during this phase as it relates to the thesis of this essay is the fact that insights from earlier openings become the substance of later missions and commissionings. One is not surprised to observe George Fox seeking to be a steward of his understandings of truth, but one gets the sense that the openings themselves become factors in subsequent callings. More generally, every spiritual encounter becomes a spiritual calling as the individual lives out of the newness of transformation. Notice especially the interplay between the “I was sent...”

24. *Ibid*, p.24.

25. *Ibid*, p.27. Clearly one of Fox's most transformative openings until now, this passage represents the Quaker conviction that Christ not only saves but also renews the individual radically. See Arthur Roberts' important treatment of George Fox's message and ministry as understood through the lens of this passage: *Through Flaming Sword*, Newberg: Barclay Press, 1959. It was Roberts' first book.

26. *Ibid*, p.28.

27. *Ibid*, pp.31-32.

passages, implying apostolicity (meaning “sentness”), and the “I was to...” passages, implying the mission to be accomplished. Thus, Fox declares:

— “Now I was sent...to turn people from darkness to the light that they might receive Christ...And I was to bring people off from all the world's religions, which are vain, that they might know the pure religion, and might visit the fatherless, the widows and the strangers, and keep themselves from the spots of the world.”²⁸

— “And I was to bring people off from Jewish ceremonies, and from heathenish fables, and from men's inventions and windy doctrines, by which they blowed the people about this way and the other way, from sect to sect; and all...their vain traditions, which they had gotten up since the apostles' days, which the Lord's power was against...”²⁹

— “Moreover when the Lord sent me forth into the world, he forbade me to put off my hat to any, high or low; and I was required to 'thee' and 'thou' all men and women, without any respect to rich or poor, great or small.”³⁰

After these series of openings one detects a shift from Fox's perception of his calling and openings to the emergence of debates with others along the way. Clearly he responds to the situations and postures of those he meets, but he addresses them directly, and his formulation of his own message—derived from his experiences—becomes apparent. This leads to the final phase of his beginning ministry, from which his later service takes root.

Phase five: Fox engages those he meets along the way and begins the more public kerygmatic work of his ministry. All of this appears to be spurred on by the words of the Lord to Fox in 1649 regarding the “great steeplehouse” of Nottingham: “Thou must go cry against yonder great idol and against the worshippers therein.”³¹ This command from the Lord seems to begin a new stage in Fox's ministry as his message comes into dialogue with alternative views, and he declares his kerygma openly. He also spends time in prison for the first time, which sensitizes him to issues he later addresses during the Derby imprisonment. Notice the following episodes:

1649— Interrupting the preacher of Nottingham and correcting his exegesis of II Peter 1, “He took for his text the words of Peter...[and] the Lord's Power was so mighty upon me, and so strong in me, that I could not hold, but was made to cry out and say, 'Oh, no, it is not the Scriptures,' [that Peter alluded to as the 'sure word of prophecy' in the text] and was commanded to tell them God did not dwell in temples made with hands. But I told them what it was, namely, the Holy Spirit, by which the holy men of God gave forth the Scriptures, whereby opinions, religions, and judgements

28. *Ibid.*, pp.34-35.

29. *Ibid.*, p.36.

30. *Ibid.*

31. *Ibid.*, p.39.

were to be tried [explicit in the Petrine text]; for it led into all Truth, and so gave the knowledge of all Truth."³²

During this next section of his *Journal*³³ Fox continues to engage religious and civil authorities, and especially prevalent is the phrase, "I was moved..." as related to specific confrontations and messages. While in jail at Nottingham, Coventry and Derby, Fox becomes moved with compassion for those forced to endure such conditions and becomes an advocate for more humane conditions. He writes to judges, priests and magistrates regarding the need for true justice to prevail and arguing the authentic (spiritual) character of authority. In these letters Fox also sought to convince authorities of the Gospel truth he had received, and in a very real sense, his Derby imprisonment gives rise to his expanding kerygmatic ministry by means of the written word.³⁴ This year of imprisonment must have also have given Fox much opportunity to reflect upon his openings and message, and the connections between his message delivered at Derby before his imprisonment and later proclamations are evident:

1650— At Derby, before the magistrates: "I said God moved us to do so [to come 'thither'], and I told them, 'God dwells not in temples made with hands.' I told them also all their preaching, baptism, and sacrifices would never sanctify them, and I had many words with them. And I told them they were not to dispute of God and Christ, but to obey him."³⁵

Between 1649 and 1652 Fox has several bouts with Ranters, "professors" (of faith), and the likes of Priest Nathanael Stephens and Judge Gervaise Benson and is given ample opportunity to sharpen his message—often out of the duelling of scriptural and theological debates characteristic of his adventures. Central to these debates, however, is the emphasis: "Nay, we are nothing, Christ is all."³⁶ Some of the more notable citations are as follows:

1651— In jail, Fox's response to Cromwell's offer to release him in exchange for his military service: "But I told them I lived in the virtue of that life and power that took away the occasion of all wars, and I knew from whence all wars did rise, from the lust according to James's doctrine."³⁷

1652— "As we went I spied a great high hill called Pendle Hill, and I went on the top of it with much ado, it was so steep; but I was moved of the Lord to go atop it...and there atop it I was moved to sound the Day of the

32. *Ibid*, p.40.

33. Chps. III-V; see pp. 44, 48, 49, 51, 62, 66, 73, 74, 79, 84, 95, 98, and especially 104.

34. *Ibid*, pp.52-70.

35. *Ibid*, p.51.

36. *Ibid*, p.56. Emphases on the Spirit who inspired the Scriptures and appeals to justice and righteousness are also directly Christocentric themes. The Spirit of Christ is the source of inspiration for believers, according to Fox, and his indwelling Spirit produces righteousness in the life of the believer.

37. *Ibid*, p.65.

Lord; and the Lord let me see a-top of the hill in what places he had a great people to be gathered...And the Lord opened to me at that place, and let me see a great people in white raiment by a river's side coming to the Lord..."³⁸

By now things are really coming to a crescendo. The authenticating role of the attestations by Robinson and Howgill are striking. Robinson declares that Fox "came from the Lord," and Howgill testifies with biblical overtones, "This man speaks with authority and not as the scribes." In between these testimonials Fox summarizes his message, which is indeed parallel to the Firbank Fell sermon, and a digest of his openings thus far. This is the "kerygmatic nugget" preached at the Sedbergh fair:³⁹

— "There I declared the everlasting Truth of the Lord and the word of Life for several hours, and that the Lord Christ Jesus was come to teach his people himself and bring them off all the world's ways and teachers to Christ, their way to God; and I laid open all their teachers and set up the true teacher Christ Jesus; and how they were judged by the prophets, Christ, and the apostles; and to bring them off the temples made with hands, that they themselves might know they were the temples of God."

A few pages later, then, his sermon at Firbank Fell is quoted in digest form.

To summarize this section, Fox's openings from 1643-1652 suggest a five-phase progression by which content and experience are interwoven and intricately related to each other: In phase one, the seeker phase, young Fox can be seen as exploring his understanding of truth in dialogue with religious authorities who ought to know better but don't. He becomes distrustful of conventional answers to spiritual questions and finds himself directed again and again to Christ Jesus. Phase two begins when the seeker becomes a finder. His full dependence is on Christ, but he undergoes difficult testing and temptations. He weathers these successfully by the power of the Seed who bruised the serpent's head, and phase three shows Fox experiencing the sanctifying, or transforming work of Christ, simultaneous to the testing of the world. Phase four begins Fox's apostolic mission whereby he is called to turn people from their false securities to the spiritual presence of Christ, and we can identify the planks of a platform being laid and refined for further use. Phase five begins, then, with the kerygmatic aspect of his message and the fulfillment of his envisioning a great people to be gathered. The digest of the three hour sermon at Firbank Fell serves literarily as the ideological manifesto which launches the neo-apostolic movement.⁴⁰

38. *Ibid*, p.104.

39. *Ibid*, pp.106-107. In this passage especially the heart of Fox's emerging kerygma becomes apparent. Themes sounded beforehand and in the forthcoming sermon here come together with terse clarity.

III. Interpretation

Now for interpretation. The above openings and reports document in clear ways some of the specific occasions and contexts within which Fox's kerygmatic content has come together prior to his Firkbank Fell proclamation as described in his *Journal*. Nearly every phrase in the reported Firkbank Fell sermon appears within the previous hundred-plus pages of his *Journal* as having reflected either openings received from the Lord or discoveries made out of debates with others and from personal experience. This fact suggests implications not only about the content of Fox's messages, but also about the epistemological origin of that content, which also relates to the message itself. Not only is his message *about* human/divine encounter, but it also *arises out of* human/divine encounter, and it is designed to *lead the hearer/reader into* such a reality as well.

Finally, a bit of brief analysis deserves to be rendered regarding the ways in which these knowings are formed. Fox's openings appear to emerge from basically three kinds of dialogues, the first two involving a thesis-antithesis-synthesis dialectic (the root of "dialectic" means "dialogue") and the third involving another kind. Especially during phase one, the *external and conversational dialectic* is clear between one of Fox's emerging beliefs (thesis), opposing views often represented by priests, preachers or conventional assumptions (antithesis), and the Truth made manifest by Fox's convincing argumentation or a divine opening (synthesis). Or at times, the dialectical roles are reversed. Here the conventional view of another is the thesis, to which Fox's "opening" or insight becomes the antithesis, leading to further deliberation as part of a synthesizing conversation that ensues.

A clear example is the section where young George, who already knew pureness and righteousness, was challenged sequentially by four priests. At the end of it Fox saw that his answers were often better than theirs, and one First-day morning the Lord "opened to him that being bred at Oxford or Cambridge was not enough to fit and qualify men to be ministers of Christ." This is an experiential dialogue, whereby Fox's belief that trained priests ought to know something about the ways of God was severely challenged by his experience. Out of this crisis came the opening that Christ was sufficient. Fox had similar socio-religious dialectical encounters with dis-

40. More could be done here by applying James Fowler's six stages of faith development (*Stages of Faith Development; the Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981; and *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984. See also Craig Dykstra and Sharon Parks (eds.), *Faith Development and Fowler*, Birmingham, Alabama: Religious Education Press, 1986; and Jeff Astley and Leslie Francis (eds.), *Christian Perspectives on Faith Development; A Reader*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), especially regarding the moves from synthetic-conventional to individuative-reflective faith and on to conjunctive and universalizing stages of faith development, but we'll leave that for another exploration.

senting preachers and the conventional notions of his contemporaries, and at times he found himself being opened to new understandings precisely because conventional answers seemed lacking.

The second kind of dialectic may be seen especially clearly during the second phase of Fox's sojourn. It involves an *inward and reflective dialectic*, involving dialogue of mind and soul, juxtaposing personal expectations and their failure to actualize. Such is the essence of theological reflection, and followed by this sort of dialogue is often a transforming spiritual encounter in the experience of George Fox. This sort of dialogue is an existential one because it deals with the essence of the human struggle to maximize the good, tempered by its frustrations and its learnings. After encountering the risen Christ, and feeling his heart leap for joy, Fox sinks into an abyss of depression and frustration. Parallel to the Apostle Paul in Romans 7, Fox believes he is called to a life of purity and righteousness but finds himself sorely tested and tempted to despair—especially in the face of his religions opposition. However, in the midst of his struggles it is opened to him that the head of the serpent was bruised by Christ the Seed and Word of God. Thus, "And this inward life did spring up in me, to answer all the opposing professors and priests, and did bring in Scriptures to my memory to refute them with."⁴¹ Within this sort of cognitive dialogue Fox comes to a spiritual conviction as a result of experiencing spiritual triumph over temptation in his own life, and this knowing enables him to proclaim its veracity to others.

The third dialogue may be seen especially clearly in Fox's third and fourth phases, but it is also common throughout his Journal. This is a *revelational and unmediated dialectic*, and it involves a human/divine dialogue whereby God, or Christ, or the Holy Spirit initiates, humans respond, and that response produces an effect commensurate with the faithfulness of the response.

Like the other dialogues, the revelational dialectic is precipitated by crises which call for resolutions, but as Fox matures in his spiritual sojourn the means by which this encounter happens become more finely tuned. Whether attending the living voice of Christ personally, or reading the scriptures prayerfully, Fox comes to know "experimentally" what he has encountered and proclaimed: *Christ is come to teach his people himself*. There is no need for human or conventional mediation, and this is where experience leads to content—and back to experience again. Fox also facilitates this movement for others by creating an experiential dialectic in the lives of his hearers/readers by means of his written and spoken ministries.

Challenging the conventional notions (theses) that God's Truth is disseminated solely through the priests and the preachers (the church and the scriptures), Fox declares antithetically that these are insufficient. Rather, the

41. *Ibid.*, p.13. Notice the clearly antithetical corrective, characteristic of this sort of dialogue.

true source of Christ's leadership is through the Holy Spirit. Christocracy (the leadership of Christ) *may* be effected through the church and the Scriptures, but only if Christ's Spirit is at work within and through the leaders and the led, as well as the writings and the readers. And Fox pushes forward, lest such a synthesis become just another conventional notion needing to be overturned by new revelation. He calls seekers to encounter the risen Christ in their own lives as the experiential test of his kerygma's veracity.⁴²

Therefore, as all three of these dialectical processes suggest, George Fox's theology of encounter arises out of the experiential character of his own religious sojourn, and this essay seeks to demonstrate something of the way his testimony to that effect may have occurred. Virtually all tenets of his message have been discovered by means of Fox's own spiritual openings, which emerged as the insights gained from socio-religious, existential and revelational dialogues. Challenges produce crises which lead to synthesizing discoveries, and yet discoveries also lead to new crises and further conversations and openings. Not only does Fox's message call for a transforming encounter with the risen Christ, but such encounters serve as the epistemological origin of the message, and expectant waiting before the Lord provides the experimental laboratory wherein the potentiality of the message becomes actual. Thus, the human-divine dialogue continues as believers become open to the transforming Word of God.

Experience and content go hand in hand in George Fox's theology of encounter. Content emerges from experience and literally becomes a spiritual calling to reproduce that which it represents: a transforming encounter with the resurrected Lord. This is both the content and the experience underlying George Fox's theology of encounter. Not only does this relationship demonstrate Fox's claim, "this I knew experimentally," but it also evokes such experimentation in the hearts and lives of others. It thus becomes that which it proclaims.

42. More could be done here, applying James Loder's five steps of any knowing event (see *The Transforming Moment; Understanding Convictional Experiences*, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981) to the epistemological character of Fox's openings. Any knowing event, says Loder, begins with a crisis, a jolt which is followed by a time of scanning. When the mind locks onto a suitable image this produces a constructive act of the imagination, which is then tested and confirmed. Confirmation brings the "aha" experience of verification, and this leads to reflection.