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# WHITHER QUAKER THEOLOGY IN THE 21ST CENTURY? A RESPONSE TO DAVID JOHNS AND PAUL ANDERSON

STEPHEN W. ANGELL

It is delightful to have the chance to revisit the issue of a Quaker Apology on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Quaker Theological Discussion Group, and the one-third millennium (or 333-year) anniversary of the original publication of Robert Barclay's *Apology for the True Christian Divinity* in the Latin language. Anderson and Johns, like Barclay, are striving for depth of spiritual experience, clarity and well-informed scholarly excellence in the exposition of Quaker doctrine—this is a splendid combination that has not always been fully evident in Quaker discussions of theology. Also, it is quite evident that David and Paul have adopted two very different approaches, which creates a particular challenge for the respondents; we cannot simply compare the two presentations, outline point by outline point! Yet, it is something that the work of the Theological Discussion Group, in the aggregate, has accomplished well over its half-century of existence.

## DAVID JOHNS

Turning first to David's essay, I think David offers us some vital points of caution, even if I might end up endorsing a somewhat different twist on each of the points that he raised. With his remarks on dualism and ecumenism, one of the vital cautions he raises is for us *not* to idolize the theological thought of early Friends. Even for someone as capable as Barclay, there are areas where the thought of early Friends, and of Friends since, has been "inexcusably naïve." That is all the more reason that we need Friends of the caliber of David and Paul to re-examine the foundations of Quaker thought, and to re-articulate the experiences of Friends in a way that advances beyond the too-easy answers offered by previous generations of Quaker thinkers. And it really doesn't matter whether you call this exercise of theological re-thinking an *Apology* or not.

I will deal with the issue of “dualism” first. I would agree with David that if Friends are truly stuck in dualism, this would “betray a lack of deep encounter with the religious other.” But while our language, especially in many of our earliest publications as a religious society, has often been dualistic, our collective spiritual experience—our testimonies—our message to the world has usually not been dualistic, certainly not the extreme dualism of Manichaeism, for example. And in fact, Quakers have often found ourselves in deep encounters with the religious other. So what’s going on here? Look at Fox’s language of the “eternal” and “external,” to which I referred earlier. That sounds dualistic, and in some contexts, it may have been. But what Fox was really getting at—and I think Margaret Fell and Samuel Bownas and John Woolman understood this well—was the need in religious experience to go deep and deeper. Now, this is not at all a dualism. To plunge in is good; to go deeper is even better, but remember to come up for air from time to time! The reason that the Religious Society of Friends has put such emphasis on discernment and developed fairly sophisticated forms of discernment is precisely because we recognize that spiritual experience is not dualistic. Woolman reminds us that reaching for the eternal is a lifelong task. Expressing all of this in terms of a systematic theology is extremely daunting; that is probably why most of the accounts of what seem to be the deepest spiritual experiences find their way into journals rather than books of Quaker theological doctrine. There is something of a reinforcing dynamic, as we then value those journals more and are more reluctant to compose more works of Quaker theological doctrine. I would agree with David that we need to get away from, or drastically limit, the use of terms such as “inward” and “outward;” but we can still do that and meet the challenge of articulating spiritual experience in a vital and compelling way in a more systematic format.

Now I will come to David’s point relating to ecumenism. My view is that Quakers have interacted well in ecumenical and interfaith formats. I am certain that we could do more than we are now doing, but we also have no reason to be at all ashamed of what we have done in the past. It is important both to be open to the divine influences coming through the witness of others, and to allow ourselves to be channels of the divine to others. My experience is that Quakers are often highly valued in ecumenical settings, and others are keen for us to share authentically from our spiritual experience. The reasons that this is so are hard to articulate, but it may have something to do with the fact, that although we are few in numbers, we preserve aspects of the

core Christian vision, perceptible from the earliest Christians onward, which are not seen frequently enough in other denominational or non-denominational expressions of Christianity. We need not to keep our light under the bushel, but to place it on the lamp stand. I think that is what we are being led toward and asked to do.

I would enthusiastically concur with David about the need for more global engagement. It is incredibly difficult, in part because of sheer physical distance, in part because of the importance of political, social, and cultural factors to which we, even through the Holy Spirit, are reacting to, as Paul mentions in his introduction. Nevertheless, in the large tasks of building unity among Friends and encouraging a vital witness, this is one that I hope we grasp, and work diligently on, and do not allow to fall through the cracks. We could certainly assuage any “misgivings about the implicit imperialism” associated with the missionary movement that gave birth to global Quakerism and Christianity were we to invite more Friends from the two-thirds world to provide leadership to North American and British Friends, as Yearly Meeting or Broader Friends Organization speakers and as retreat, workshop, and revival leaders and in other capacities.

David’s concern to flesh out a doctrine of creation for Quaker theology is a worthy one. It is true that seventeenth-century Quaker theology tended to downplay embodied aspects of Christian theology; the critique of at least one recent Quaker scholar that seventeenth-century Quaker theology had Gnostic tendencies is well taken.<sup>1</sup> Fortunately, the possible Gnostic trajectory was not the one that Quaker theologians have taken. The embrace of most forms of art, literature, music, sports, dance, and other endeavors our seventeenth-century ancestors might have considered “worldly” leaves us in a place where a more robust understanding of the place that the created order plays in our appreciation of the divine as we interact with it in the world-God-so-loves. David may not be quite so innovative as he thinks he is, in this context. I am especially mindful that Rufus Jones with his “affirmation mysticism” has plowed at least some of this ground before.

Anderson has consciously decided not to undertake the task of examining how the religious and political situation affects the theological task, either for Barclay or for ourselves. Perhaps I can be allowed the liberty of one brief note on Barclay. Barclay’s publication date of 1676-78 means that he has missed out on some of the distinctive emphases of the earliest Friends. Particularly striking is the

complete lack of emphasis on the eschatological themes of the Day of the Lord that was so typical of Friends in their first decade of existence. Nor, speaking of “authentic spirituality,” does Barclay display the depth of spiritual discernment of a John Woolman or Samuel Bownas. Consequently, I would advise a little more hesitation prior to adopting his theological outline. There should be other choices considered. For one thing, following Barclay so closely does not allow Paul to utilize effectively the insights into Quaker eschatology developed by Ben Pink Dandelion, Doug Gwyn, and others.

Barclay’s publications were all written from 1672 until 1679, in other words, from his 24th until his 31<sup>st</sup> year of age. His fifteen theses, published in 1674, showed that by age 26 he was already working on what would become the *Apology*. He wrote nothing for publication after 1679, it is suggested, because persecution of Scottish Quakers had ended, and his publications were not needed. This lends considerable support to David Johns’ point that the writing of an *Apology* was needed precisely in order to counter serious opposition. Barclay’s writing for publication, like much of early Quakerism, was the result of a youth movement. Robert Barclay was “convinced” to Quakerism partly as the result of the influence of his father, David, so there would seem to be some honor extended to the elder generation by his work. When Robert was convinced at age 18, it was said that he immediately showed a gift for articulating the experience of Quakerism.

I differ somewhat from David Johns on the issue of whether an *Apology* is desirable or necessary, but I would locate the desirability or necessity of Quaker apologetics in a somewhat different intellectual spot than those he considered. Quakers say we don’t have creeds; in some important respects, that statement is true. I would maintain that we have doctrines. The reason that Barclay’s *Apology* had such a long-lasting influence among Friends, well beyond the persecutions of Scottish and English Friends that had made the writing of the *Apology* so critical, is that it has articulated those doctrines more clearly and comprehensibly than any competing Quaker work, in the judgment of generations of well-read and thoughtful Quakers. We don’t say that it articulates Quaker doctrines well because we don’t want other Quakers to think that we are wanting to have a creed. We are definitely not looking to enforce these doctrines within the Quaker world; we want and believe in a society where truth prevails by conviction, not by anything that resembles coercion.

Is there a need to articulate Quaker doctrines anew after 333 years? That may well be true! In other words, what is being sought is a work around which 21st century Friends may coalesce; the goal of writing a Quaker apologetic would be to help to encourage that reasonably identifiable group to cohere. If the Society of Friends is to have a future, we must know who we are. This would be, I believe, in accord with the desires and plans of the dear Friends who gathered 50 years ago to start the Quaker Theological Discussion Group.

A Quaker “apology” today can supply a concise statement of Quaker beliefs (or doctrines) coupled with a description as to the difference that these beliefs make in Quaker practice. There were at least three fine “apologies” of this sort published in the twentieth century: Wilmer Cooper, *A Living Faith: An Historical and Comparative Study of Quaker Beliefs* (Friends United Press, 1990, rev. 2001); Jack Willcuts, *Why Friends are Friends: Some Quaker Core Convictions* (Barclay Press, 1984); and Rufus Jones, *The Faith and Practice of the Quakers* (Methuen, 1927, many reprints). In the course of a conversation after picking up an incoming student at the airport, I asked him how he had become convinced as a Quaker. His answer was: by reading Wil Cooper’s *A Living Faith*. These works still can make a difference!

## PAUL ANDERSON

In his cover letter to Arthur Roberts and me, Paul apologized for a paper that is very long. I find it mercifully brief, briefer of course than Barclay’s *Apology* itself by a factor of about 40 and almost exactly the same length as, although both more readable and more consistently styled than, a work it occasionally echoes, The *Richmond Declaration of Faith* of 1887.

Paul’s first section on “the Immediacy of Revelation” speaks eloquently of what certainly has been a core doctrine for Friends, and it preserves Barclay’s emphases well. One question that I have had for Barclay, which applies equally well to Paul’s writing, is what is the relationship of the Holy Spirit and the Light of Christ? If they are both divine, do they function differently as aspects of the godhead? As I read Barclay and Paul both, I think that they are wanting to make a distinction, but in Barclay’s case, I find that whatever distinction he makes tends to break down every so often throughout his work.

By way of contrast, William Penn in *Primitive Christianity Revived* is quite clear in stating that the Light and the Spirit are just ways of designating one and the same divine reality, and he does not find meaningful distinctions between them. Paul, where do you stand on this question?

Paul's second section on the "Scripture" deals with one of the issues that has been most divisive among the various branches of Friends over the past two centuries. Like Fox, Penn, Barclay, and Bathurst, Paul speaks eloquently of the depths of meaning that are to be found in Scripture; Scripture is an "invaluable spiritual resource," and one that is of great benefit if used "prayerfully." I would challenge all Friends if they would not find Paul to speak to their condition at that point. However, I would also point out that Paul revises early Quaker theology on the authority of Scriptures, in a way that many other Friends are not aware that the early Quakers need to be revised. Fox put the point very simply: Scripture is not the "Word of God" (or the Inspired "Word of God" or the Written "Word of God," as Paul modifies that familiar phrase); rather Christ, the Christ who lived in Galilee 2000 years ago and the Christ who lives in our hearts, is the "Word of God." The Scriptures thus can only be the "Words of God." At one point Fox explains that the words of the Scriptures "end in Christ the word, who fulfils them."<sup>2</sup> As diligently as Fox, Barclay, and other Friends studied the Scriptures, and took their message to heart, it was Christ the Inward Teacher who was the ultimate authority. Barclay writes that Scripture is not the "principal fountain of all truth and knowledge," it is only the "declaration of the fountain." Paul is clearly alluding to this passage when he writes that "As the Holy Spirit is the inspiring foundation and source of Scripture's revelation, prayerful readings of Scripture insure its fullest authority." Some Quakers, one such having been Lucretia Mott, would want to elevate Reason alongside of Scripture as helping the Holy Spirit to attain its fullest authority, but that debate is probably not amenable to definitive settlement on this occasion!

It should also be noted that Paul's designation of the Scriptures as the "Written Word of God" is at variance with the "Letter to the Governor of Barbados," of which George Fox was the principal author. An excerpt from that letter is often found as an authoritative statement of doctrine in the books of discipline of Orthodox Yearly Meetings, including that of Northwest Yearly Meeting. In the Barbados letter, Fox wrote that "we call the *Scriptures* as Christ and the Apostles call'd

them, and as the Holy Men of God call'd them, namely *The WORDS of God.*” In quoting from Revelation 22:18 in this same letter, Fox glossed the Scriptural text as follows: “*if any man shall take away from the WORDS (not Word) of the book.*”<sup>3</sup> With that gloss, Fox’s intention was to show that, in his view, the title of “Word” should be reserved to Christ alone.

In regard to “the Human Condition and the Need for God,” Paul makes the interesting move of comparing humans to other species of animals. I would take a more sanguine view than Paul, I think, in estimating the ability of animals to partake in authentic spirituality; for instance, I have seen companion animals take part meaningfully in Quaker worship. I think waiting worship, or reverent silence, can communicate across species. I’m not sure if it is accurate to distinguish definitively between these different parts of God’s creation in regard to our spiritual abilities.

Turning to human beings, Paul’s second paragraph deals sensitively with the experience of sin and grace, which are at the heart of the early Quaker message. My one question there is how the Holy Spirit can illuminate for us, relative to our human condition, referenced to one of the central Scriptural texts that Paul cites, namely Rom. 1:16-2:29. That is a large chunk of text, including many verses much beloved by Quakers over three-and-a-half centuries (e.g., Rom. 1:16-19; 2:14-15; 2:27-29), but also three verses, Rom. 1:26-28, that unfortunately have been recently wielded in certain Quaker circles as a possible spiritual weapon against other Quakers. Rom. 1:26-28, and the other verses that Paul cites, indeed should garner (as Paul advocates) a prayerful reading, and our seeking guidance together under the influence of the Holy Spirit, in order that we may find helpful insights that can be meaningful across the various branches of Friends.

Paul captures well the inclusivist nature of Quaker salvation in his section on “the Universal Light of Christ.” He cites the Apostle Paul’s speech at Athens as an example of the danger of “reducing the Power of God to an idolatrous form.” Paul, I’ve re-read that chapter of Acts, and isn’t that chapter also conducive to an interpretation in support for the positive message of Friends concerning the Light of Christ? What the Apostle Paul is saying, it seems to me, is that the Greeks themselves were acquainted with the Light of Christ (they had after all an altar “to the unknown god,” and he quoted approvingly from Greek poets) and the Greeks had saving knowledge from it even before he, the Apostle, showed up in their city. So, in some sense,



was not the Apostle's message intended to remind them, to call them again to, what they had already known? In any case, there are Quaker works like William Penn's *Christian Quaker* that make this point at great length, and would be worth citing in a section like this. Paul, how do you define "Church"? Barclay gives a definition in his chapter on "Ministry" that is still appealing to many Friends (*Apology*, X, ii).

Paul's section on "Justification and Redemption" seems to move Barclay's discussion in a more Protestant direction. What Barclay had in mind, it would seem, was a happy medium between the "papists" and Luther. Barclay was concerned about Luther's denial that good works was necessary for salvation, and he wondered whether Protestants "have opened a door for the Papists to accuse them as if they were neglecters of good works, enemies to mortification and holiness." The debate between the pope and Luther built upon previous debates on the issue of atonement, between Anselm's emphasis upon the sacrifice of Christ on our behalf and Abelard's emphasis on the need to follow Christ as saving for us. Barclay's key statement (Section VII.viii) seems to incorporate both Anselm and Abelard:

I do boldly affirm, and that not only from a notional knowledge, but from a real, inward experimental feeling of the thing, that the immediate, nearest or formal cause . . . of a man's justification in the sight of God, is the *revelation of Jesus Christ in the soul*, changing, altering, and renewing the mind. . . . For it is as we are thus covered and clothed with him, in whom the Father is always well pleased, that we may draw near to God, and stand with confidence before his throne, being purged by the blood of Jesus inwardly poured into our souls, and clothed with his life and righteousness therein revealed.

I like the inward (we might say today, psychological, as well as spiritual) insight that Barclay showed with this passage. Paul, is there any way you can enhance this section to get more clearly at the inward transformation of mind and soul that take place in the person being justified? I am sure that you don't mean for justification to be perceived as an externalized transaction between God and human beings, so getting more clearly to describing the internal transformation would be helpful!

Paul's "Sanctification and Perseverance" is a better title for how, then, we shall live the life of faith in Christ than Barclay's "Perfection," especially since Barclay admitted that he himself had not achieved perfection, although he believed it to be possible. Paul hits the right

notes on sanctification with his mentions of “empowering grace” and “abundant life.” Similarly, Paul’s section on “Inclusive Ministry” presents the case that Friends have always favored for a robust “priesthood of all believers” in a convincing and inspiring fashion.

Paul’s characterization of authentic worship as standing “neither in the use of forms nor in their formal disuse” departs somewhat from Barclay but echoes the *Richmond Declaration of Faith*. There is some wisdom that has been granted to the position advocated by Paul and the *RDF* across the branches of the Society of Friends; in my unprogrammed monthly meeting, there has been expressed recently great appreciation for the practice of reading a query from *Faith and Practice* at the beginning of meeting for worship on the first First Day of the month. This is a form, albeit a peculiarly Quaker form; Friends were in full realization of this when they enthusiastically affirmed the practice. When Barclay, on the other hand, advised against doing anything in worship that humans have “set about in [their] own will and at [their] own appointment,” is he saying that the Holy Spirit cannot lead anyone ever to engage in anticipatory contemplation as to what they might want to say or do in an upcoming worship? Paul sidesteps this kind of challenge, and, from my perspective, appropriately so, but others may want to differ.

Paul’s statements on Baptism and on Communion cover ground recently covered in a recent QTDG conference. Paul adds useful perspectives as to how one might justify the Quaker practices of spiritual baptism and communion from a biblical perspective. One of George Fox’s favorite word plays was on “eternal” and “external;” he supported an “eternal” salvation, not an “external” one; he heeds the “eternal” word, and does not recognize an “external” word; also, he advocates for us to worship in the eternal, not to follow external rites. Here Paul focuses clearly on what is transformative in our understandings of the Sacraments, what builds community—in Fox’s term, the parts of our life together when we partake of the eternal. We should note that there is nothing in Paul’s presentation that precludes a voluntary participation by Friends in outward sacraments, if I interpret him correctly, but he makes clear that the priority must always be on the spiritual sacraments; perhaps both his emphases and nuances on these two topics could unite all Friends.

The section that Paul has fashioned on “Liberty, Conscience, and Governments” seems to be well in line with the recent work of the QTDG, which has included examinations of the witness of Martin

Luther King, Jr., and William Penn, among others. There are strong lines of continuity between Barclay's work on this issue and Paul's, with the major difference being that suffering was then an imminent and pressing and present reality with most Friends, and it is probably more remote for most Friends today. Still, Paul states that "being willing to suffer for the sake of conscience is the calling of every believer," citing 1 Peter 3:14-17, and that is very much Barclay's message as well.

"Living with Integrity" (as a title for the closing section) is more inspiring and comprehensible to the modern ear than Barclay's anticlimactic "Vain and Empty Customs and Pursuits." In terms of sources for his approach, here I particularly recall Wil Cooper's contribution, especially with his Pendle Hill pamphlet on "Integrity," and I believe an article on the subject for *QRT* as well. Paul brings out the Holiness/Sanctification emphasis of Friends' theology very effectively in this section, appealing among other things to the Scripture passages on the Peaceable Kingdom which most other Christian denominations seek to relegate to a far-off future. Paul provides a clear testimony to the universalist principles of Friends in this closing section; our convictions arise from Christian and Jewish traditions, but aren't by any means limited to truth found in those religions. Rather, we seek truth wherever it is to be found.

Barclay, reflecting faithfully early Friends' practices, gives much emphasis here to externals, such as sports, plays, dress, and so forth, while Paul, I would argue, properly focuses here on the eternal, the orientation of one's mind and soul. This section successfully integrates his whole essay, beyond some of the nagging particulars of earlier sections of the essay. I am glad that Paul is publishing this work; with its compact yet very rich content and insights, this essay could have wide usefulness within the Society of Friends and beyond.

## CONCLUSION

These two essays have given us a tantalizing glimpse of the riches to be had by revisiting Quaker theology from the viewpoint of a more holistic vision. Hopefully, the promising, but still fragmentary, approaches modeled by David Johns and Paul Anderson here will lead to additional efforts in this area, and the twenty-first century will see a new flowering of Quaker theology.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Glen D. Reynolds, "George Fox and Christian Gnosis," in Pink Dandelion, ed., *The Creation of Quaker Theology* (Aldershot, England, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), 99-115.
- 2 George Fox. *The Great Mystery of the Great Whore Unfolded*. In *Works*, III, 171 (Philadelphia, New York: Marcus T. C. Gould; Isaac Hopper, 1831). Available at: [esr.earlham.edu/dqc](http://esr.earlham.edu/dqc).
- 3 George Fox. *To the Ministers, Teachers, and Priests (So Called and So Stileing Your Selves) in Barbadoes* (Wing F1957. London: s.n., 1672), 68. Emphases are in the original. I have developed a Quaker view of Scriptural authority more fully in Stephen W. Angell, "Opening the Scriptures, Then and Now," *Quaker Theology* 8:1 (Summer-Fall 2007-2008): 1-18. <http://www.quaker.org/quest/issue14-angell-01.htm>.