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EARLY FRIENDS’ VIEWS OF THE SACRAMENTS

STEPHEN W. ANGELL

The subtlety and power of early Friends’ arguments against the use of outward sacraments has seldom been appreciated. It was a startling position for them to take, in the eyes of their mid-seventeenth-century contemporaries, and the controversy has never completely died down in succeeding centuries. The purpose of this brief essay is to give a holistic description of early Friends’ stance on the sacraments, exploring several types of arguments that they made against outward forms, in favor of an internalized and spiritualized interpretation of sacraments. These include biblical, church-historical, church-order, and experiential arguments, developed more fully below.

BIBLICAL

There was no question, for earlier Friends, but that the New Testament dispensation was a spiritual dispensation, characterized by simple waiting upon the Lord, and not on outward, prescribed rituals. In Mark 1:8, John the Baptist stated that his water baptism would be superseded by the baptism of the Holy Spirit yet to come. Early Friends identified this Holy Spirit baptism with Christ and also with their practice of waiting upon the Lord. Water baptism, according to early Friends, was one of the “carnal ordinances,” which would last only until “the time of reformation” came (Hebrews 9:10). It was clear, from such passages as Romans 2:25-29, that the apostles were stating that God intended certain outward rituals, such as circumcision, would not apply in the new covenant as they had in the old. Early Friends argued from such passages, by way of analogy, that God intended that all outward ritual to wither away as church practice in the same way that circumcision did, leaving only the spiritual forms such as baptism of the Holy Spirit. Outward rituals were a mere “shadow of things to come,” (see, e.g., Colossians 2:17), whereas what was important was the substance, Christ.

Isaac Penington wrote that “water baptism is an outward thing, an elementary thing, not able to reach the law of sin and death, nor
to be made free from it” (*A Reply Concerning Gospel-Baptism*, 1679).

In a reflection on Matthew 28:19 (often termed Christ’s “Great Commission”), Penington denied that the baptism referred to there was water baptism. Instead, he saw it as a spiritual baptism that he called “gospel baptism” (*Works IV*, 464):

For Christ saith, all power was given him in heaven and earth and bids them to go and baptize. Doth he say with water? Nay; doth he not say into the name of the Father, Son, and Spirit? So that now, when the gospel is preached in the Spirit and power of God, and his Spirit and power reacheth to our hearts, we are by that Spirit and power both taught and baptized inwardly, gathered into the name of the Father, Son, and Spirit, and baptized into their name. And he that doth this in the heart, teacheth the heart to call this the gospel-baptism.

The book of Acts presents baptism of the Holy Spirit and water baptism both as experiences and practices of the first generation of Christians, but early Friends saw water baptism as withering away. Thus, according to George Whitehead, the water baptisms in Acts had been performed “for the sake of some that were weak or young in the truth, and not wholly redeemed out of the state that such carnall [sic.] or weak ordinances related to, which were upheld in the time of the Churches infancy” (Underwood, 74). Similarly, the statement in John 3:30 that John the Baptist “must decrease” while Christ “must increase” was taken by early Friends to refer to the fate of the water baptism of John and the Spirit baptism of Jesus, not just to the fates of their ministry as a whole.

The “one baptism” alluded to in Ephesians 4:5 was understood by all first-generation Friends to refer exclusively to the Baptism of the Holy Spirit.

The arguments that early Friends made on the practice of the outward Lord’s Supper were quite similar to their arguments relative to water baptism. Ex-Baptist Hester Bird Andrews witnessed to members of her former faith community, “Your outward Bread and Wine satisfies not the Soul; I have had more peace when I did not touch your Shadows, than when I did” (Underwood 78). Friends utilized similar arguments to establish that the outward dispensation of the Lord’s Supper was also temporary, a shadow to be observed only until the “One Bread” had come. This was a reference to the Fourth Gospel, that of John. John’s Gospel has no outward baptism or Lord’s Supper, but it does identify Jesus as “the bread of life” (6:35). This “bread of life,” early Friends argued, was far more saving in nature.
than any outward bread that could be consumed in an ecclesiastical ritual.2

The second coming of Christ, inwardly in the hearts of human beings, definitively necessitated a change in the understanding of baptism and the Lord’s Supper to the spiritual realities spoken of in so many parts of the Scripture. According to George Fox, they that “sup with Christ, the heavenly and spiritual man, the second Adam” must have their “spiritual ear” keenly tuned to hear Christ’s “knocking at the door of their immortal souls and hearts,” so as not to miss sharing with Christ, “the spiritual and heavenly supper” (Fox, Works VI, 284, DQC). Fox refers here to the “spiritual marriage supper of the lamb, which the true Christians were called to, after Christ was risen and ascended.” (Rev. 19:9) The true sacraments were seen to be wholly spiritual realities in the fullness of the realized eschatology to which early Friends gave such eloquent witness. According to Fox, the marriage supper of the Lamb (slain before the foundation of the world) gives life eternal, but the “elements of bread and wine,” which comprise sacramental ceremony in most other Christian denominations, “have not life eternal, nor Christ in them,” and hence do not result in salvation (ibid, 288).

**CHURCH HISTORICAL**

In the Reformation, that period of Christian history that preceded the inception of the Quaker movement for almost a century and a half, disputes over the sacraments were a prominent part of the strife. For example, differences between Luther and Zwingli over the meaning of the Lord’s Supper at the Marburg colloquy in 1529 helped to impede any union of the Lutheran and Reformed wings of Protestantism. Robert Barclay observed (Apology, prop. 13) that differences over sacraments helped to fuel the virulent conflicts that resulted in immense loss of human life between the 1520s and the mid-seventeenth century: “There has been more animosity and heat about this one particular, and more bloodshed and contention, than about any other” (Apology, 383).

Quakers were quite aware of this history and were determined not to contribute to this intersectarian strife. In respect to the breaking of bread and drinking of wine that Christ shared with his disciples before his death, Robert Barclay (Truth Triumphant, 1692) wrote,
How strangely are [the various Christian groups] pinched, pained, and straitened to make the spiritual mystery agree to that ceremony? And what monstrous and wild opinions and conceivings have they invented to enclose or affix the body of Christ to their bread and wine?” He continued, “all of them [are] no less strong both from Scripture and reason, in refuting each their contrary party’s opinion, than they are weak in establishing their own.

Elizabeth Bathurst vindicated Quaker sacramental theory with a more strongly Protestant reading of Reformation history than that espoused by Barclay. She confessed that she had once thought that the witness unto death of the Protestant martyrs under the mid-sixteenth-century English Catholic monarch Queen Mary was a valid reason for continuing the use of the outward sacraments, but she had reconsidered this point. She subsequently came to the view that the Marian martyrs were faithful to the Light they had received, which was a great advance for their time, and which enabled them rightly to deny that there was any real presence of Christ in the outward bread and wine. But she also recognized that a fuller manifestation of the Truth had appeared since their time, and she was comfortable in her reliance upon that. Her analysis was not meant “to put a Slight upon the Sufferings of those Martyrs, who then were breaking through a Cloud of Apostacy [sic] and Errors, the bright Side of which (blessed be our God) hath since more fully appeared” (Truth Vindicated, 56).

Barclay’s views cohere in interesting ways with other Radical Reformation schools of thought. For about a century prior to the appearance of Friends, Christians from the Spiritualist wing of the Anabaptist movement—a tendency with which early Friends had many affinities, had argued that the unseemly contention over the administration and nature of the sacraments militated against the practice of any outward sacraments whatsoever. Most notable along these lines was the work of Caspar Schwenckfeld, who argued for a stillstand, or a moratorium, in the use of outward sacraments. He stated (cited by Gwyn, 52),

In the meantime we are zealous, by the grace of God, that we may observe the Supper daily, with the Lord Christ, be fed with His Body and refreshed with His blood, through the spirit of living faith. This eating is dependent on no external thing. We beg that we be not reproached nor molested, as though we rejected the Lord’s Supper, when for conscience’s sake we
abstain at this time in order that, having perceived the truth, we may not be a party to error, idolatry, and misuse.

While early Friends would not have placed as much emphasis on this particular argument as Schwenckfeld, they definitely recognized its force.

In recent decades, various groups of ecumenical Christians have produced proposals to move diverse theories and practices of sacraments toward convergence, but Barclay’s views on this matter are still worth considering. Barclay wondered whether the spiritualizing of the sacrament as practiced by Friends might be a suitable meeting ground for Christians of all persuasions. Barclay wrote, “There would be an easy way made for reconciliation, and we should all meet in the one spiritual and true understanding of this mystery” (Apology, 383). We may well feel that Barclay was too optimistic in his basing his belief on the contention that Friends had the truth on this subject, and that error on this matter was conspicuous in the position of other Christians. Still, Barclay and Schwenckfeld may well have been right in affirming that when Quakers (and like-minded Spiritualist Christians) abstain from the outward sacraments, we manifest a powerful reconciliatory potential in our stance toward other Christians. In fact, it is more powerful than it would be if we were to wade headlong into attempting to answer all of the questions about how outward sacraments would be properly administered.

**Church Order**

One of the bedrock principles of Friends’ Churches and Meetings is our staunch adherence to a priesthood of all believers. It is clear in the writings of early Friends that spiritual forms of baptism and communion are far more appropriate to a religious community based so firmly on a universal ministry, than would be the administration of outward rites. Fox wrote, in regard to Friends’ Meetings, that

here is a unity and a fellowship in the spirit; and the saints know by what they are baptized into one body, and into what spirit they do drink, though they be absent in the flesh, or outward body, from one another. And to this heavenly and spiritual fellowship and order, the able ministers of the spirit brought the saints, the church of Christ, to behold one another in the
As Fox repeatedly stated, the time of the first priesthood, associated in Scripture with Aaronites and Levites, and by Friends with outward ritual, has come to an end, and the new priesthood of Melchizedek (that Christ has inaugurated to replace it) is based on an entirely spiritual order. If we would require a specialized class of ministry to handle all of the complexities that administering outward rites would involve, then our adherence to the principle of universal ministry would suffer.

**Experiential**

Barclay referred to a pre-existing definition, traceable to Augustine in the fifth century, of the word “sacrament,” as an “outward visible sign whereby inward grace is conferred” (*Apology*, 346), and observed most aptly that many other experiences than water baptism and the outward Lord’s Supper would meet this definition. For George Fox and other early Friends, the most obvious outward sign of an inward grace was a life well lived under the guidance of Christ and the Holy Spirit. A 1661 letter of Fox contains the phrase, “Let your lives preach” (*Works* VII, 194), and that phrase occurs with minor modifications in other writings of his. Isaac Penington observed that the outward baptism can have no positive effect, if it is administered while “the inward man [is] living in disobedience” (*Works* IV, 479). What is necessary is the baptism of the Spirit which will “enlighten, quicken, lead, touch, wash, or sanctify, purge out the old leaven and leaven with the new leaven of the Kingdom.” When one is “filled and clothed with [Christ’s] righteous Spirit, life, and nature . . . the true circumcision and the true baptism is witnessed” (*ibid*, 480-81)

Contemporary Friends often refer to the time of expectant, waiting worship upon God in our Friends’ Meetings and Churches as a period of “communion after the manner of Friends.” This verbal rendering is true to the intentions of the earliest Friends. For Barclay, Penington, Fox, and others, waiting—expectant worship upon God—was the center of a life well lived: a life that would preach meaningfully. It is there that they expected to experience the inward spiritual baptism and the marriage supper of the Lamb. Barclay testified to
being secretly reached by this Life [of Christ]: for when I came into the silent assemblies of God’s people I felt a secret power among them which touched my heart, and as I gave way unto it, I found the evil weakening in me and the good raised up, and so I became thus knit and united unto them, hungering more and more after the increase of this Power and Life whereby I might feel myself perfectly redeemed (Apology, 300).

The concentration on the spiritual, and away from the visible manifestations of relating to God, was, in Barclay’s view, most appropriate. “Our work then and worship is, when we meet together, for everyone to watch and wait upon God in themselves & be gathered from all visibles thereunto. And as everyone is thus stated they come to find the good arise over the evil and the pure over the impure, in which God reveals himself and draweth near to every individual.” The result of such worship, wrote Barclay, is that each has “joint fellowship and communion with all” (ibid, 301).

Experientially, through our worship and work, we witness and respond to the presence of Christ, the Inward Teacher, in our midst. Christ’s presence is especially evident whenever two, three, or more are gathered together in his name. We require nothing more to guide and protect us than Christ, our Way, Truth, and Life. Let us continually remind other Friends and inquirers that no outward means are needed in order for Christ’s presence to be made real to us. As George Fox wrote to imprisoned Friends in 1683, you

are believers in the light, which is the life in Christ, and are become children of the light and of the day, grafted into Christ, the second Adam, the Lord from heaven, and are gathered in the name of Jesus, in whom ye have salvation, and not in any other name under the whole heaven. For Christ Jesus saith, ‘Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.’ Matt. 18:20.

...Therefore ye that are believers in the light, and are become the children of light, walk in Christ, your way, life and salvation. Works II, 260, 263).

SUMMARY

In the words of Joseph John Gurney, “it is our belief [i.e., the belief of Friends] that we have been led out of the practice of these rites [i.e.,
baptism with water, and what is usually called the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper] by the Spirit of Truth; that we could not recur to them without grieving our heavenly Monitor; and that, in fact, they are not in accordance with the entire spirituality of the Gospel dispensation” (Gurney, Works I, 100).

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NOTES

1 An earlier version of this paper was prepared in 2005 for the discussion on sacraments in Indiana Yearly Meeting at the request of Jay Marshall. In this revised version, I have benefited from the helpful comments of Paul Anderson, Jay Marshall, and Ben Richmond.

2 Much more can be said of the relevance of the Fourth Gospel to early Quaker views of the sacrament. I highly recommend Paul Anderson’s and Lloyd Lee Wilson’s analyses of this topic. Both Friends have contributed much to our understanding of how an in-depth reading of this Gospel supports the early Quaker claims relative to the spiritualizing of the sacraments.