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# (RE)VISIONING SACRAMENTAL THEOLOGY: A RESPONSE

DAVID L. JOHNS

It is both challenging and necessary to discuss the issue of sacraments and sacramental living. For centuries, Quakers' perspective on the matter has tended to be a defining characteristic. There are tensions and ambiguities evident in the biblical text concerning this issue, and that range of perspectives has been evident within the Religious Society of Friends. However, if ever there was unity on this issue there most certainly is not unity now.

Recent arguments for utilizing physical sacraments in Friends' meetings have been based upon the premises of consumer satisfaction, choice, church growth, or liberty of conscience. As such, they are often theologically weak and rooted in commitments of the dominant culture rather than the Gospel, or Gospel Order.

On the other hand, there are discussions concerning the sacraments among Quakers that are uncritical restatements of traditional positions that rally familiar arguments against opponents that quite possibly no longer exist. These perpetuate misunderstandings and problematic metaphysics centuries old. "Trappings," "mere," "dead formalism," "meaningless ritual"—this is reductionist rhetoric that maintains its position by dismissing what has been for many Christians a powerfully evocative vehicle for understanding and experiencing grace and community. Far too often this is done without a careful examination of the world of symbols, thought, and experiences which render such practice "meaning-full."

Paul Anderson calls to our attention persistent misconceptions concerning Quakers, chief among them being that Quakers have no sacramental theology. On this point I agree heartily with his assessment. Yet, in my view, some of the most problematic misconceptions are actually rearticulated and defended in the same essay.

Steve Angell's essay presents a fine and accurate summary of early Quaker thinking. Interestingly, the biblical hermeneutic evident in his primary sources illustrate how some early Friends constructed arguments from silence. This is most apparent in Pennington's remarks

concerning Matthew's Great Commission text. Because the phrase "with water" was not used, Penington concludes that the mode of baptism was unclear; the practice of the apostles in the book of Acts apparently was not worth noting. Angell notes that early Friends spiritualized the sacraments and that Barclay even held to the optimistic notion that by spiritualizing the sacraments inter-denominational strain could be alleviated.

Early Friends' experience of the world was apocalyptic. Tim Seid rightly notes that war and conflict tend to bring about renewal movements, and this is so in the case of Quakerism. What happens, however, after the initial cultural eruption subsides? Apocalyptic response to a world in crisis coupled with an entrenched dualistic metaphysic resulted in a religious movement dismissive of physicality, suspicious of creation, and largely hostile to beauty, the arts, creativity, recreation, and the imagination.

Quakers gave little attention to a doctrine of creation; there was no need to do so, given its apocalyptic vision. The consequence for following generations, however, has been an inherited difficulty with the full range of incarnated created existence. It is little wonder Quakers had trouble with something as concrete as wine and bread, or paint and canvas, and little wonder why even now there is so much confusion in the area of Christology: incarnated existence.

Walkemeyer's essay reminds us that Quakers' vision of sacrament has the potential to affect our work. Sacramental practice is practice that is sacramental. I agree that this potential exists when the presence of Christ is not metaphysically restricted to specific objects or to specific activities in worship. Walkemeyer helps us by moving the discussion of sacraments outside the meeting room. He uses the good example of Brother Lawrence. At the same time, we must bear in mind that Brother Lawrence's reflections about "practicing the presence" come from a member of a religious order whose entire life was textured by the rhythms of the liturgy, including daily participation in the Eucharist. None of this was "dead formalism," or "mere ritual" for him. Rather, all of it framed his life in such a way that he could recognize the presence of God even in the simple act of washing dishes.

Tim Seid's discussion of covenant is helpful in connecting Quaker language concerning the second covenant that they believed was, quite literally, unfolding in their experience and the understanding of covenant in the biblical text. Seid's essay provides, what is I believe, an

honest and straightforward acknowledgement of the questions many Quakers do not ask in discussions of sacraments. With Seid (27),

In the end, an explanation of why theological developments have come about does not necessarily prove their validity... How much are we to take into account the way in which religious groups respond to disenfranchisement by despising the forms of the larger group from which they dissent? Does it matter to us why Hellenistic Jewish Christians interpreted the modes of worship and liturgy as inferior based upon Platonic dualism and Stoic psychology and ethics? Developments in religious practice among Quakers continue to occur even while we try to stop and analyze where it comes from and where it is going.

I have no quarrel with the authors of these essays for identifying early Quaker visions regarding sacraments. However, my contention is that, at minimum, the present cultural, religious, political, and linguistic contexts are so dramatically different from that of the early Quakers, that it is reckless to appropriate and articulate their perspective on the sacraments without serious evaluation and significant modification.

The spiritualization of sacraments is inexorably linked to a dualistic view of existence: shadow and substance; form and reality; cultic practice and “the real thing;” mediated and unmediated; inner and outer. This perspective creates difficulties with regard to worship, to liturgical practices, to Christology, to theological anthropology, to language, to human imagination and culture, and of course to the sacraments and sacramental living.

Over forty years ago, Maurice Creasey published a brilliant study of early Quaker use of language, particularly the concept of “inward” and “outward.” In it he argued that Friends adopted a language that made sense in terms of *levels of apprehension* (first-hand and second-hand acquaintance) but mistakenly extended that to incorporate also *modes of revelation* (including at times, two distinct organs of reception—inward/spiritual and outward/carnal—with a decided preference for one over the other). “Retaining the words ‘inward’ and ‘outward,’ and emphasizing no less strongly the contrast between them, Quakerism, without being fully aware of what it was doing, came in many cases to set forth an untenable, quasi-philosophical dualism, the effects of which have not yet ceased to confuse our vision and impede our progress.”<sup>1</sup>

I ask with Seid: “Does it matter to us why Hellenistic Jewish Christians interpreted the modes of worship and liturgy as inferior based upon Platonic dualism and Stoic psychology and ethics?” I think it does matter, and this is one reason for reconsidering traditional Quaker teachings on the sacraments. Humans are not *physical beings* AND *spiritual beings*. Human beings *are*, and according to the creation narratives, human beings in their created totality are “living souls.”

Quakers have understandably been drawn to the Johannine literature. There is a long and established relationship here. Among the Gospels, the Fourth is clearly the most platonically textured. Additionally, it represents a community that was in many ways cut off from and to a significant degree, hostile to Jerusalem, cult, and Temple. As such, the Gospel of John reflects the political alienation and cultural disenfranchisement that was also the experience of early Friends. But the canonical text includes the Synoptics as well as John.

Again I will ask with Tim Seid: “How much are we to take into account the way in which religious groups respond to disenfranchisement by despising the forms of the larger group from which they dissent?” In other words: would a Quaker sacramentology look different were Friends to address honestly their sense of alienation and disenfranchisement without recourse to rejoinders such as “our influence has always been disproportionate to our numbers?” Against whom, or against what, or against what group do Quakers continue to define themselves?

Along with the spiritualizing of sacraments is the problematic notion of “unmediated revelation.” Whatever early Quakers meant by this idea it surely cannot mean that revelation is *unmediated*. More than likely, it is a further expression of disenfranchisement from the power of ecclesial offices. Thus, for Friends, the revelation of God is not contingent upon the ordinary channels of established ecclesial operation; even those outside the offices of influence and power can be witnesses to and proclaimers of revealed truth. Stated thusly, this continues to be a valuable and truthful witness.

However, “unmediated revelation” cannot mean, as is sometimes suggested in discussions such as this, that revelation does not come a mediated fashion. In contrasting God’s ability to know with human knowing, Aquinas stated: “things known are in the knower according

to the mode of the knower.”<sup>2</sup> This assertion acknowledges the human embodiedness of knowing and helps us understand the necessity of God’s incarnation in Jesus the Christ. Revelation must be mediated, or it is not revelation; if not mediated in some manner intelligible to the recipient—individual or community—whether in language, images, sensations, etc., it will not and cannot be known.

I will state this as clearly as possible so as not to be misunderstood: unmediated revelation is not possible; attempting to build a sacramentology upon such a notion is counterproductive to the desire to be incarnational. Incarnational suggests embodied and concrete. “Unmediated” takes us in epistemologically impossible directions and away from incarnationalism. Even the claim of something being “spiritually known” is, nevertheless, something known through a channel of mediation, of symbol, language, intelligible impression—if not, it would not be revelation and would not be possible to know and name an experience as an experience.

Two final remarks concerning context:

First: many Quakers overlook the *communal function* of the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist. Quaker apologists frame the matter incorrectly: “Quakers don’t need a sip of wine to commune with Christ.” “*They* communed for a few seconds, while *we* commune always,” or something of the sort. This is an unnecessary argument. The eucharistic question is not whether one is communing with Christ. Today, more often than not, there is no question that a believer from another Christian tradition participates with Christ. Quakers can worship with Roman Catholics and, according to the theological documents of Catholics themselves, they will be recognized as members of the household of God. The issue is not whether there is a communion with *God* or with *Christ*. The issue is whether there is communion with *each other*, whether the churches and the ecclesial communions are in fellowship with the Catholic Church. This is another matter altogether, and it requires a different level of conversation.

The communal function of the Eucharist, therefore, is as a *ritual of inclusion* or a *ritual of participation* that highlights fellowship and communal identity. Thus, it continues to be an important issue for ecumenical conversation. Too often Quaker discussions of the sacraments miss this crucial angle.

While I agree with Anderson's remarks concerning the recognition and appreciation of authentic ministries of other Gospel ministers, his remarks concerning ecumenism are incongruous with the tone of the argument. There are so many misconceptions and old covenant practices among Christians that one wonders how fellowship with others is possible. Quaker sacramentology is a "central core," a testimony and not a "pick-and-choose distinctive." How then, even at an open table, could a Quaker of conscience participate in what is regarded to be a shadow, a mere form, without sacrificing his or her integrity? At the level of ecumenicity, we either lose the courage required by our convictions, or, as I suspect is the case, the weakness of a traditional Quaker view of sacraments is inescapably evident.

Second, during Quakerism's rise it was reasonable to assume that enormous portions of the population knew the fundamental contours of Christian faith, that is to say, there was a large-scale shared frame-of-reference. This being so, Quakers could nuance language and modify practice in such a way as to highlight abuses, misunderstandings, etc. In such a context, this practice (or in the case of the sacraments, this *non-practice*) had the potential to be prophetic, "make a point" and, most importantly, to have that point be intelligible.

However, in a post-Christendom era such as our own, particularly in Europe and parts of North America, this assumption is dangerous. The same practice/non-practice, the same turn of a phrase, play on words, etc., once prophetic is now confusing. Contexts are considerably different; a frame of reference necessary for intelligibility does not exist at the scale it did in the moments of Quakerism's birth.

For this reason I say again, it is reckless to appropriate early Quaker perspectives on the sacraments without qualification and modification. A Quaker sacramental theology is indeed a worthwhile undertaking, and I thank the writers of these essays for their contributions. But there is much more work to do.

## NOTES

1 Maurice A. Creasey, "Inward' and 'Outward:' a Study in Early Quaker Language," *Journal of the Friends' Historical Society*, supplement no., 30 (1962): 22-23.

2 *Summa Theologiae*, II/II, Q.1, art 2.