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Corey Beals
cbeals@georgefox.edu

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FRIENDS AND THE SACRAMENTS; EMERGING CONSENSUS AND ONGOING QUESTIONS

COREY BEALS

Our November 2007 QTDG meeting in San Diego was a highly energized gathering. After a series of engaging essays and a very lively set of replies to those essays, I stood up as moderator of the session and said, “I guess we don’t have anything to discuss.” The burst of laughter revealed that, of course, we did have much to discuss, and it would be difficult to know where to begin. With so much potential disagreement, perhaps a good place to begin is by locating whatever consensus may have been achieved. And, the next step might be to raise a few queries that could focus our continued discussion.

After listening to the papers, the responses, the charged interchange that followed, and then reading through the papers again, I was pleased to find more consensus than I had expected on this topic that is so important, and currently so controversial. So, these series of seven questions that follow start out “easy” in terms of how easy it might be to agree, and move to more difficult questions—that is, questions where consensus may take some more work.

Emerging questions, in order of increasing consensual difficulty, are as follows:

1. Can liturgical practices using bread, wine and water become empty of meaning and even inhibit encounters with the presence of God and transformation?

2. Can liturgical practices using bread, wine and water be meaningful ways to encounter God’s presence and transformation?

3. Have Quakers in the past made a prophetic stance to remind the rest of the Christian family that #1 above can be answered affirmatively?

4. Anderson mentions the difference between the Latin term sacramentum, which carries implications of Roman rites of membership, and the Greek term mystērion, which communicates
the idea that God’s presence among us is real, but mysterious. Angell quotes Barclay, who referred to the mystery of God’s presence. No one seems to disagree that *mystērion* is a more conducive term than *sacramentum* for expressing the heart of Quaker testimonies concerning God’s presence among us. How might it affect our discussions, internally and ecumenically, if we speak of “mysteriology” rather than “sacramentology”?

5. Johns identifies the dualism implied in the use of terms such as “inner/outer” and “unmediated/mediated.” Rejecting this dualism, he embraces a view of the soul referring not to one part of a person, but he sees the human beings in their created totality as “living souls.” If he rejects this dualism and these dyadic terms, then why does he use one of the terms that he says implies dualism? He may be right to say that “unmediated revelation is not possible” but only, perhaps, because using the term implies dualism, which he rejects. What would happen if we rejected, as Johns seems to suggest, the dualistic distinction between mediated and unmediated? What if we embraced, as I think many Quakers do, the sacramentology (or mysteriology) of all creation? This is potentially something we all can endorse. Walkemeyer, in defending the sacramentology of work, is not suggesting that work is the *only* sacrament. He is trying to broaden the scope of sacrament. And Johns too seems to be broadening the scope of what counts as sacrament (trying to include water Baptism and Eucharist with the elements). Anderson likewise moves in a broadening direction, by clarifying that Quakers are not *against* baptism and communion, but that these can be experienced through a meal, or better yet, through gathering with other human beings. Everyone seems to be moving in that direction, so what is to prevent us from saying that, because of the New Covenant all of life is sacramental—at least potentially a *mystērion* of Real Presence—to be encountered and celebrated?

6. Ann Loades, in her response (as an Anglican) to these Quaker papers on Sacramentology [note: her response was not able to be completed for publication in this issue], remarks that perhaps the Quaker’s central purpose—in the greater Christian Community—was a prophetic one. Namely, Quakers have prophetically shown that rituals can become dead and empty of meaning. Ann Riggs also shows that our discussion is one that has implications not just for Quakers but for other Christians.
worldwide. Tim Seid shows us in detail the importance of context—the prophetic message must be fitting to the given context. We can be inspired by Loades, Riggs, Seid and others to ask “What prophetic message do we need to bear today?” For example, what is a worse problem today—the dead formalism of liturgical rituals or the individualized and choice-centric egoism of western spirituality? Or, is it the idea that God is not present in this world? Consensus on this issue, I imagine, will require much more discussion.

7. Johns, Anderson, and Riggs emphasize the importance of the communal nature of the Quaker testimony and practice of communion. If this is true, and if communion includes the Real Presence of Christ in and through other humans, then how do we articulate that prophecy? And how, on earth, do we embody that mystery?

With these questions laid out, I’ll return to one point of broad consensus. As Johns and Riggs state explicitly, and all seem to agree, we hope this is not the end of the discussion, but the beginning.