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SIGNS OF GRACE: A REVIEW OF BEN RICHMOND'S *SIGNS OF SALVATION*¹

JACCI WELLING

Duane Litfin, in his recently published, *Conceiving the Christian College*, suggested that those who labor at faith-based institutions of higher education would do well to become better theologians, as well as teachers and scholars.² His words struck me, a historian asked to review a soteriological work, as I find myself commenting on a topic that is beyond my area of expertise. Yet, as a practicing Christian and observer of the nation's political and religious landscape, I find that Ben Richmond's *Signs of Salvation* presents a refreshing and restorative conversation about the *biblical* meaning of "salvation." And, while Richmond is a Friends pastor, and I write this for a Quaker journal, Ben Richmond's book is intended for and will resonate with the larger body of Christ-seekers beyond the Friends movement.

Ben Richmond's scriptural study calls for a return to a more inclusive and communitarian understanding of salvation: one that is, in many ways, consonant with historic Quaker conceptions of salvation and sanctification. He argues that a biblical understanding of salvation is expansive. Richmond emphasizes that God's saving work is not merely "fire insurance," by which the sinner is assured a place in "heaven (and avoidance of hell) after this life." (11, 35) Similarly, Friends did not traditionally refer to salvation as an "instantaneous" conversion experience, as did many Protestant evangelicals over the last two hundred years and more.³ "Indeed," as Thomas Hamm wrote in his study of the influences of evangelicalism on American Quakerism, "in the eyes of many Friends, the evangelical claim of salvation based on a single event led to a dangerous false rest."⁴ Warned one Quaker in the nineteenth century, "Alas for that individual who relaxes in labour until safely landed on the shores of everlasting eternity."⁵ Richmond concurs; salvation "is not a one-time event, but a daily way of life based on the model of Jesus." (213)

Although it is beyond the scope of Richmond's study to trace the development of an increasingly narrow conception of salvation, I

have long been intrigued by the historic roots of the trend from a broader to a more limited interpretation of the meaning of salvation among evangelical Protestants in the modern era. Perhaps this interest is due to my membership in a decidedly evangelical yearly meeting, as well as my own Mennonite heritage that is quite different from the larger evangelical Protestant culture.⁶ Certainly, since the Second Great Awakening, if not the First Great Awakening, a number of evangelicals began to focus more exclusively on the personal “conversion experience.” Influenced in part by Lockean ideas about individualism and liberty, the expansion of the political franchise to the “masses,” and even the shift from a “moral economy” (i.e., a barter economy) to a free market economy, Christians moved inexorably, or so it seemed, toward a particularistic and atomized form of the faith—a trend that accelerated in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Richmond acknowledges the personal nature of God’s saving work in his discussion of the “new covenant” between God and His people of which the prophet Jeremiah foretold. Drawing from Jeremiah and Ezekiel, Richmond argues that the new covenant, granted through “God’s utter graciousness” rather than via any human deeds, “can now be accomplished through the radical gift of a new heart, a new divinely implanted human will that wills according to the will of God.... Because this promise is based on the healing of the perverted heart, the new covenant requires God to reach into the center of each *individual* personality” (my emphasis, 67). However, Richmond continues, God’s people “are saved into community,” rather than in isolation (92). Again, drawing from numerous passages from Scripture, he writes: “If salvation is a safe and abundant pasture, we enter it as members of a flock. Rubbing shoulders, learning to share, leaning to love, we are saved together by just one thing: listening to the voice of the shepherd.” (99)

Even so, Richmond reminds us, God’s gracious and merciful gift of salvation, while freely given, does not mean that the community of believers is absolved from living “rightly;” that is, living in ways that are inconsonant with the gifts of the Holy Spirit—such as love, charity, mercy, grace. “Having been freed from the burden of condemnation,” he writes, “the heart is free now to accept the gift of righteousness. It must have been infuriating to Paul that some would twist his teaching to imply that he believed that faith in God’s grace meant that righteousness is not necessary for salvation... Paul argued vehemently that the community must show evidence of righteousness in their lives.” (75) Here, then, is a conception of God’s saving grace

that goes beyond the single, born-again “event” to a more holistic and encompassing “conversion experience” in which God expects outward manifestations of the changed heart within.

This too is the “heart” of Richmond’s meditation—the “signs” of salvation made manifest in the community of believers. What does that community look like? Richmond devotes much of his essay to four signs—the inclusive community, the bountiful community, the peaceable community, and the community of grace and truth. As already implied, Richmond argues that the community of believers is characterized by inclusion, love, and equality, instead of exclusion and hierarchy. Furthermore, this inclusive community is held together by mutual submission to ensure “the rule of the living word of God” rather than “human rule.” Indeed, all members must “yield to God the right to judge good and evil.” (108-9, 117) Richmond holds that “[all] views are heard. There can be no prior assumption that one group or another has all—or none—of the truth.” (116) While this seemingly smacks of moral relativism, Richmond notes that the early church discerned truth through the authority of the Holy Spirit, the Scriptures, the decisions of “weighty” elders, and the larger church community (116).

The second sign is a community which feasts at the “banqueting table,” enjoying God’s bounty and abundance. This is not another version of “prosperity theology,” however. To the contrary, Richmond notes, while wealth is indicative of the “blessings of God,” it is also “points to the exploitation of the poor by an oppressor class.” (131) The “heavenly banquet” of Christ is intended for all, including the poor. This is a continuation of the theme of economic restoration found in the Old Testament, when God added the year of “jubilee,” the fiftieth year in the Hebrew calendar when debts were forgiven and property redistributed so that all could prosper and share in the bounty of God. Similarly, the teachings of Jesus Christ require the inclusive community to be a community of “economic justice” (137-8). Richmond argues that the bountiful community lives in simplicity, trusts in God’s ability to provide “daily bread,” shares its wealth with others, and savors the abundant feast collectively (138-41, 151).

The third sign is a community which depends upon God to act as its “warrior on behalf of the oppressed,” rather than upon its own devices (155). Of course, as a member of one of the historic peace churches, it is not surprising that Richmond would address this issue. Yet, he offers a thorough exegesis, drinking from Old and New

Testament passages, to argue that the community of righteousness is also a peaceable community. Does Richmond call upon believers to ignore oppression and injustice? No, Richmond embraces a “combination of practical love of enemies while ‘leaving room’ for God’s vengeance;” for the real enemy is not the person who oppresses us, but “the Evil One who blinds the mind, who hardens the heart, and thus deprives us of communion with God.” (182, 183)

Finally, “the community of grace and truth” is the final sign of the “new covenant” community illuminated in this meditation. I find this portion of the discussion among the most powerful. Richmond speaks of the tension—between God’s grace, by which we are made “righteous,” and God’s truth, by which we are held accountable for our actions—that the “community of salvation” must reconcile. Richmond argues that “the community must reflect both God’s grace and God’s truth.” (197) Thus, he notes, “For the Evil One to be bound, there must be truth speaking as well as grace.” (203)

This book resonated with me in two ways—first, as nourishment to my soul; and second, as a subtle critique of the larger Christian community, especially the evangelical branches (whether Quaker or not), of which I am a part. This is not to suggest that all or even most evangelicals (or non-evangelicals) are (or were) not concerned about community, ignore signs of righteousness, or adopt a narrow interpretation of salvation. The biographer of the great evangelist of the First Great Awakening, Jonathan Edwards, affirms this. The preacher chided those parishioners who thought of salvation merely as an escape from eternal punishment, imploring them not to “content yourself with that that you think you are willing to have Christ for your savior unless you are willing of free choice and not forced with the threatenings of hell.”⁷ Sounds like another admonition that salvation not be reduced to “fire insurance.” Furthermore, Edwards held to the principle of Matthew 7:20 (KJV), “Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them.” The ultimate “sign,” Edwards claimed, was that of love: “There in heaven this fountain of love...is set open without any obstacle to hinder access to it.”⁸ Drawing from Edwards’ idea of “universal benevolence,” nineteenth-century revivalist Charles Grandison Finney similarly held, through the ideal of the “Benevolent Empire,” that equal weight be given to “reform and benevolence” as to evangelism.⁹

However, by the early twentieth century, when evangelicals no longer represented the larger mainstream religious culture in the

United States, evangelicalism, suggests Arthur Roberts, “became shallow in its Kingdom focus and increasingly legalistic.”¹⁰ The social and economic dislocations associated with industrialization and urbanization, the horrors associated with wars and the nuclear age, and the rise of mass consumption contributed to this shift. Political scientist Alan Wolfe recently chided evangelical Christians who, despite their long history of social benevolence dating back to the eighteenth century, abandoned biblical precepts for the “culture of narcissism.”¹¹

Yet there is now a growing movement among Christians, evangelicals and others, imploring members of the “community of salvation” to apply biblical truths about God’s saving work more broadly, and less individualistically. Richmond’s meditation reflects that trend toward a more holistic and broader understanding of “the work of salvation,” away from the narcissistic and stultifying hyper-individualism that permeates much of Christendom. Salvation, Richmond reiterates throughout his book, is not just for individuals, “it is also a community enterprise.” (11) It is the graciousness with which he writes this biblical study, even as he speaks truth, that will hopefully encourage those who read this meditation to “break down the barriers” between the community of salvation and the world in which they live (231).

NOTES

1. Ben Richmond, *Signs of Salvation: New Life Where Grace and Truth Meet; A Biblical Meditation* (Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 2005).
2. See A. Duane Litfin, *Conceiving the Christian College* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004).
3. Evangelical and evangelicalism are elusive terms. Hugh McCleod suggests that evangelicalism refers to a deeply emotional conversion experience whereby one recognizes his or her wickedness and the need for God’s forgiveness. The means by which men and women are made acceptable, or “justified,” before God is through Jesus Christ. His death serves as the substitutionary atonement, or payment for their sins. Evangelicals believed that the act of accepting Jesus as one’s savior assured eternal salvation. Unlike early Quakers, Protestant evangelicals believed salvation was immediately available, by the grace of God, to any who claimed it as an act of faith. See *Hugh McCleod, Relighting and the People of Western Europe; 1789-1970* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981) 37. Although he offers a limited and incomplete conception of the word, Grant Wacker’s broad definition of evangelicalism in which “the sole authority in religion is the Bible and the sole means of salvation is a life-transforming experience wrought by the Holy Spirit through Faith in Jesus Christ” could apply to most evangelical Protestants’ understanding of evangelicalism. See Grant Wacker, *Augustus H. Strong and the Dilemma of Historical Consciousness* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press,

- 1985) 17. Also, George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991) 4-6, 62-65, 125.
4. Thomas D. Hamm, *The Transformation of American Quakerism, 1800-1907* (Bloomington, Indiana: University of Indiana Press, 1988) 3.
 5. Hamm, 3.
 6. Thomas Hamm differentiates between the four major strands of contemporary Quakerism in the first chapter of his work, *Quakers in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003). Even with their differences in sacramental theology, Mennonites' understanding of "salvation" is probably closer to that of Quakers than many evangelicals. See Donald B. Kraybill and Carl F. Bowman, *On the Backroad to Heaven: Old Order Hutterites, Mennonites, Amish and Brethren* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).
 7. George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2003) 190.
 8. Marsden, 191, 505.
 9. Keith J. Hardman, *Charles Grandison Finney: Revivalist and Reformer* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1987), 255. Finney held to a postmillennial eschatology, believing that reform was necessary to usher in the thousand-year peaceful reign of Christ (Revelation 20). Therefore, he argued, it was the "great business of the church...to reform the world—to put away every kind of sin" (254, 255).
 10. Arthur O. Roberts, "Introduction," in *J. Walter Malone: The Autobiography of an Evangelical Quaker*, edited by John W. Oliver (Landham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1993), xii. See also Arthur O. Roberts, *The People Called Quakers* (Newberg, Oregon: Barclay Press, 1965); Margaret Lamberts Bendroth, *Fundamentalism and Gender, 1875 to the Present* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1993); and George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984).
 11. Alan Wolfe, *The Transformation of American Religion: How We Actually Practice Our Faith* (New York: Free Press, 2003).