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**Quakers and Creation Care: Potentials and Pitfalls for an
Ecotheology of Friends (Chapter Five in Quakers, Creation Care,
and Sustainability)**

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5 | Quakers and Creation Care: Potentials and Pitfalls for an Ecotheology of Friends¹

By Cherice Bock

Abstract: *While Friends have a strong tradition of activism around the social justice issues of each era, we also tend to spiritualize our faith, disconnecting it from the material world. Environmental concerns are arguably one of the most important social justice issues of our time, and in many ways, activism, advocacy, and lifestyle witness seem like natural ways for Friends to engage in social justice in this time in history. This essay will explore some of the historical and theological strengths Friends can draw from our tradition that can help build a particularly Quaker ecotheology, as well as some of the portions of the Friends tradition that get in the way of practicing our faith in a more sustainable way.*

I. Quaker Context for Building an Ecotheology

“What is the social justice issue of our time?” I pondered this question for many years. Growing up a birthright Quaker in Oregon, I became a convinced Friend during my high school years as I learned the stories of historic Friends who stood up against injustice and actively worked toward peace in loving and courageous ways. And yet, I wondered which social justice issue to focus on now; there are many from which to choose.

I continued laboring with this question until one night in 2008, standing on a rooftop in the West Bank of the Palestinian Territories, I sensed the beginnings of an answer. I was a member of a Christian Peacemaker Teams

¹ With gratitude to Reedwood Friends Church (Portland, OR) and Berkeley Friends Church (Berkeley, CA) for invitations to serve as scholar-in-residence at their Center for Christian Studies (2017) and Quaker Heritage Day (2018), respectively, at which I presented these ideas and received feedback from the gathered communities.

(CPT) delegation, learning about their important work of peacemaking through accompaniment and nonviolent direct action.² Our group listened to stories about the conflict in Israel/Palestine and its history, visited and learned about the Israeli settlements in the West Bank, and heard about the unequal laws regarding water access, planting and harvesting olives and other crops, and permits to build and renovate Palestinian homes. We journeyed through West Bank checkpoints and roadblocks, our CPT hats and American or European passports allowing us relatively easy access to places Palestinians could not travel. It was easy to point righteous fingers at the Israeli government and its people for enforcing unjust policies, to see the settlers taking land that was not legally theirs, to condemn the soldiers who shoot holes in Palestinians' illegal water catch systems for fun.

But that summer night, standing on a roof in Dheisheh refugee "camp" near Bethlehem,³ overlooking the illegal Israeli settlement Har Homa, I realized there is very little difference between Israeli settlers and me, except a couple hundred years of settlement expansion and creation of laws. I, too, live on land systematically taken from its original owners through war and broken treaties; I, too, live in the midst of a culture that strategically hordes natural resources, enjoying flush toilets and water enough for lawns while others do not have enough potable water to drink. I felt overwhelmed and complicit in the injustice experienced by Palestinians. I also felt a leading that night to work on the many injustices in my own culture.

Continuing to discern about my particular calling, I became increasingly aware of environmental concerns and their impact on human and interspecies conflict in the present day, and in the future we are creating. As the context within which all other social justice issues take place, it became clear to me that caring for the planet is the social justice issue of our time. Resource competition, pollution, and climate change exacerbate all other interpersonal and international conflicts, and my understanding of social justice expanded as I recognized the Quaker call to peacemaking may also include reducing human conflict with other species and with future generations. Add to that habitat fragmentation and human population expansion, which make it difficult for other species to thrive, and I can imagine a peace testimony that attends to not only interpersonal

² "Palestine," Christian Peacemaker Teams, accessed January 2019, www.cpt.org/programs/palestine.

³ Refugee "camps" have existed since the 1948 Arab-Israeli War (Nakba), and families displaced from properties in what is now Israel have since built multi-story structures, each generation adding rebar and cement dwellings above existing levels.

conflict, but also to equitable treatment of other species throughout God's creation.

I share this story as part of the process of doing Quaker theology: as Friends, our theology flows out of our individual and communal lived experience of the Present Teacher, in line with understandings of what it means to be a follower of the Way across time, and responding to the particular context of the time and place in which we reside. Acknowledging my context is part of my theological reflection on what it means to be a faithful Friend here and now.⁴ My own sense of leading is that we as the Religious Society of Friends need to become more actively involved in the work of environmental care, for the sake of present and future human beings, as well as for the sake of other creatures. In many ways, our denomination is well situated to do this work, based on our heritage, but there are other aspects of our tradition that may hold us back from living faithfully and sustainably.

Therefore, in this paper, I will 1) share a bit more about my own Quaker background and my assumptions about the unifying factors of Friends theology (recognizing the difficulty or impossibility of doing so), 2) offer a brief explanation of the field of ecotheology and why it is important, 3) describe some areas of Quaker thought and practice that make it difficult for Friends to move in the direction of a more ecologically informed theology, and 4) focus on areas of potential Quaker strength when it comes to living out our tradition in ways that lead to addressing the environmental situation.

II. Central Tenets of Quakerism

My Quaker background falls firmly in the Christ-centered branches of Quakerism, and it is from this perspective that I will mainly speak in this piece.⁵ However, I hope that many portions of this essay will be applicable to any Friend. In that vein, I will name a few ideas that are central to much of Friends theology, while recognizing individual Friends' beliefs vary. The areas with strong agreement across Friends traditions include personal experience of the Divine, corporate discernment, testimonies centering around the idea of "that of God in

⁴ C. Wess Daniels, *A Convergent Model of Renewal: Remixing the Quaker Tradition in a Participatory Culture* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015).

⁵ For a perspective on an ecotheology stemming from Liberal Quakerism, see chapter 6 in this volume: Christy Randazzo, "The Divine Light of Creation: Liberal Quaker Metaphors of Divine/Creation Interdependence."

every one,” and the calling to direct action in this time and place to participate in the reconciling work of the Spirit in our time.⁶

The Religious Society of Friends began to coalesce as a movement after 1652, when George Fox experienced “one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition.”⁷ That direct experience gave him confidence and passion to encourage others to seek a similar experience themselves. He recognized there is no need for a priest or ritual sacrament in order to encounter the Present Teacher: each one has access to experiencing God. In several places, Fox emphasized: “Christ was come to speak to his people himself,” and many Friends recognize this as central to what it means to be Quaker.⁸ At the same time, early Friends on through the present day recognize the importance of collective discernment, listening together for the leading of the Spirit, and helping one another discern whether or not a word or idea is from God. Each one can encounter the Inward Light of Christ as mediated through our own conscience, and the interplay between individual and corporate discernment helps keep ourselves and our communities accountable.⁹

As the Friends tradition continued, consistent themes connecting belief and practice emerged and came to be called testimonies or distinctives. Though the particular practices change over the years, the main thrust of the actions to which Friends have consistently felt called have been grouped into testimonies, often referred to using the acronym SPICE(S): simplicity, peace, integrity, community, and equality or equity; some update the acronym to include a second S for stewardship (which includes stewardship of the planet) or sustainability.¹⁰

⁶ While it is true that not all Friends use the same language to describe the entity with whom we come in contact through direct experience, and indeed some Friends are non-theist, most historical and current Friends use language such as God, Christ, Jesus, Divine, and Spirit to describe the One they encounter. In this essay I will use these terms and write from a Christian Quaker perspective.

⁷ George Fox, *The Journal of George Fox*, ed. John L. Nickalls, revised edition (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, [1694] 1997), 11.

⁸ Fox, *Journal*, 304; c.f. 8, 48, 80, 90, 98, 104, 107, 112, 149, 236. Examples of Friends emphasizing the centrality of this idea to Quakerism: Elton Trueblood, *The People Called Quakers* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1989), 64. Pink Dandelion, *The Quakers: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 2, 56. Margery Post Abbott, *To Be Broken and Tender: A Quaker Theology for Today* (Western Friend, Friends Bulletin Corporation, 2010), 29.

⁹ Robert Barclay, *An Apology*, ed. Dean Freiday (Manasquan, NJ: Hemlock Press, 1967). Rachel Hadley King, *George Fox and the Light Within 1650–1660* (Philadelphia: Friends Book Store, 1940).

¹⁰ The inspiration for these SPICE testimonies comes from Howard Brinton, *Friends for 300 Years* (Philadelphia: Pendle Hill Publications, 1964), 120ff. Not all Friends find it useful to codify our testimonies in this way, feeling it limits our understanding of what we might be

Central to the testimonies is the focus on equality and equity, and that is based on the idea of “that of God in every one,” as Fox described.¹¹ Further, this testimony is based on biblical passages such as Gal 3:28: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

Finally, Friends emphasize the importance of living out the good news of Jesus in the present day. Jesus described his mission as proclaiming good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, letting the oppressed free, and proclaiming the year of Jubilee (Lk 4:18–19). He talked about the Kingdom of God being “among you” (Lk 17:21).¹² It is not only something we experience after we die, but it is something we participate in as a community in this life. Early Friends talked about the Lamb’s War (Rv 14:1–5), which was the nonviolent struggle to enact the Kingdom of God in their collective lives in ways that impact the social and political world of their day.¹³

Having explored the grounding of the (nonviolent) Lamb’s War in the central Quaker ideas of individual access to the Divine, corporate discernment, and living out the good news proclaimed by Jesus through the testimonies, I will now briefly describe the field of ecotheology and why we need it. I will then discuss areas of weakness in Quaker theology and practice in relation to building an ecotheology from a Friends perspective, and the areas where Friends theology and practice can naturally develop in the direction of environmental care.

called to, but I find it useful to use these categories as long as we see them as descriptive of previous callings rather than prescribing or proscribing what we may be called to in the future.

¹¹ Fox, *Journal*, 263.

¹² NRSV. Various versions translate this passage differently: the New King James Version says, “the Kingdom of God is within you,” and the New International Version (NIV) and New American Standard Version (NASV) says “in your midst.” What is important to note is that the Greek word for “you” here is plural: the Kingdom of God is present in and among us collectively, and presently.

¹³ For more about the Lamb’s War, see especially: James Nayler, “The Lamb’s War” in *The Works of James Nayler* (Farmington, ME: Quaker Heritage Press, 1657), accessed January 2019, www.qhpress.org/texts/nayler. According to Barbour, many leading Quakers wrote about the Lamb’s War, and he has a useful chapter on this topic: Hugh Barbour, *The Quakers in Puritan England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1964), 33–71. George Fox often referenced the chapters about the Lamb’s War in Revelation in many of his writings (Rv 15:2, 17:14, 18:20), and referred to himself as the “Lamb’s Officer” (David Loewenstein, “The War of the Lamb: George Fox and the Apocalyptic Discourse of Revolutionary Quakerism,” in *The Emergence of Quaker Writing: Dissenting Literature in Seventeenth-Century England*, ed. Thomas M. Corns [Frank Cass and Company Limited, 1995], 25–41, at 26, 30). Gwyn discusses the connection between the Lamb’s War and sustainability at length: Douglas Gwyn, *A Sustainable Life: Quaker Faith and Practice in the Renewal of Creation* (Philadelphia, PA: QuakerPress of Friends General Conference, 2014), 113–127. See also chapter 23 in this volume, Walter H. Sullivan, “Earth Quaker Action Team: Reclaiming the Lamb’s War for Justice and Sustainability in the Twenty-first Century.”

II. What Is Ecotheology, and Why Do We Need It?

Ecotheology has emerged in the last several decades as a response to the environmental situation in which we find ourselves, looking for indications within sacred texts and church history regarding right relationship between humanity and the rest of creation. The term “ecotheology” appears first in publication in a 1973 review article detailing emerging directions in the religious academy relating to the environmental crisis: ecological theology, Christian environmental ethics, the Bible and nature or the environmental crisis, and practical or pastoral works geared toward ministers or Christian lay people in regards to their actions toward the Earth.¹⁴ Therefore, although the term directly names theology, it has been used as a catchall term to refer to the entire scope of environment-related fields within the Christian disciplines.¹⁵ Already in 1973, Gowan references “Lynn White’s famous article”: a 1967 paper entitled, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis” that critiques Christianity’s role in legitimizing the culture that created the environmental problems we now face.¹⁶ While theologians recognize the truth in much of White’s critique of church history, they also have been working to point out that this is not the only way to read the Christian tradition. Therefore, the work of ecotheology and biblical hermeneutics related to the environment has largely been to recover an ecological paradigm within Christian scripture and tradition.¹⁷ Within an ecological reading of Christianity, human beings are *part of* creation rather than *apart from* creation. People are charged with taking care of the environment, and participating in co-creation

¹⁴ Donald E. Gowan, “‘Ecotheology’: a review article,” *Perspective* (Pittsburgh), 14, no. 2 (1973): 107–113.

¹⁵ The term has also since been used by people of faiths other than Christianity to do similar work in their own faith traditions. For example: Kaveh L. Afrasiabi, *Mahdism, Shiism, and Communicative Eco-Theology: Selected Articles in Comparative Theology* (Scotts Valley, CA: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015). Soumaya Pernilla Ouis, “Islamic Ecotheology Based on the Qur’ān,” *Islamic Studies* 37, no. 2 (1998): 151–181. Lawrence Troster, “Tikkun Olam and Environmental Restoration: A Jewish Eco-Theology of Redemption,” *Jewish Education News* (Fall 2008): 1–6.

¹⁶ Gowan, “‘Ecotheology’: a review article,” 108. Lynn White, Jr., “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” *Science* 155 (1967): 1203–1207.

¹⁷ A few good resources on ecotheology and biblical hermeneutics relating to the environment include: Stephen Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care*, second edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010). Daniel L. Brunner, Jennifer L. Butler, and A. J. Swoboda, *Introducing Evangelical Ecotheology: Foundations in Scripture, Theology, History, and Praxis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014). Ernst M. Conradie, Sigurd Bergmann, Celia Deane-Drummond, and Denis Edwards, eds., *Christian Faith and the Earth: Current Paths and Emerging Horizons in Ecotheology* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015). Ellen Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

with God through that caretaking. Considered a form of contextual theology, ecotheology relates to the particular context of our world at this point in history, and it requires an awareness of one's particular time, place, and political and economic situation in historical reality.¹⁸

As it becomes increasingly impossible to ignore the reality of anthropogenic climate change, consideration of the environmental impact of our actions is of vital importance. Ecotheology is an attempt to identify parts of the Christian tradition that help us live in an environmentally friendly manner, and to critique ways the Christian tradition has promoted unhealthy actions. Much good work has been done in this area, showing that an ecological paradigm does exist within the biblical text and within some streams of church history. However, the Western church has much work to do in order to separate true and essential parts of Christianity from Western culture, and particularly from the aspects of Western culture that have tended toward empire building, colonization, and overconsumption of natural resources. While much of the work we need to do is very practical and relates to our actions and interactions in the world, much of the work is spiritual. For those of us in "developed" nations, it will require us to be transformed toward recognizing our place in the community of creation; it will require a hard examination of our actual needs; and it will require us to do the hard work of caring for those unjustly impacted by our lifestyle of overconsumption, including living human beings, future generations, and other species whose very existence is threatened by our current trajectory.¹⁹

Based on our heritage of standing up for social justice causes from a basis in contemplative spiritual grounding in the Inward Christ, Friends are in many ways well situated to do the work of cultivating a Quaker ecotheology that is not only written, but is also lived—that is not only made up of changes in outward behavior, but is primarily a conversion of the heart. However, given our tradition's roots in Western Christianity and our heritage in American and other colonies, those of us from the "first world" still have much work to do in order to live into this potential.

¹⁸ Celia Deane-Drummond, *Eco-Theology* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2008).

¹⁹ Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone, *Active Hope: How to face the mess we're in without going crazy* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2012).

III. Pitfalls within Friends Theology and Practice for Developing a Quaker Ecotheology

Quakerism contains many helpful aspects that can lead us toward a more faithful relationship to the rest of creation, and I will get to those in the next section. However, I believe it is important to point out our areas of weakness as well. Most of these critiques are based on what I consider an incomplete expression of the fullness of what Quakerism is meant to be.

Friends came into existence in England scant decades following René Descartes's publication in France of texts which became foundational to the Enlightenment and the modernist worldview. While the Enlightenment did not come into full force until the middle of the eighteenth century, the premodern worldview was noticeably eroding, with its focus on divine right of monarchs and a strict hierarchy based on one's social position at birth. Quakerism emerged in the midst of political unrest: the English Civil Wars, the Commonwealth under Oliver Cromwell, and the Restoration of the monarchy with the return of Charles II to the throne. Whereas authority in a premodern worldview resided in tradition and established hierarchies, with ultimate authority to name divine revelation limited to those with the church-ordained right to speak for God, a modernist worldview shifted authority to the individual. This is evidenced in Descartes's famous dictum, "I think, therefore I am," and the move toward democracies rather than inherited systems of power.

Quakerism, emerging in the midst of this shift, retained some of a premodern worldview with its strong belief in divine revelation, but shifted the location of revelation from church hierarchy to the individual, or the community listening together. While this democratization of religion also occurred in many other denominations emerging during the movements making up the Reformation, Quakers took the idea of "priesthood of all believers" to an extreme not seen in other emerging denominations, eradicating church hierarchy and claiming God could speak to and through any individual.

While this is positive in many ways, it also opened Quakerism up to some of the more problematic aspects of Enlightenment and modernist thought: namely, too great a focus on objectivity and rationality, and with them, a propensity toward dualistic understandings of reality. As researchers began understanding themselves as a subject viewing a series of objects, way was paved for many advances in science. When done well, objectivity can be a useful tool. However, it also creates a false dichotomy between humanity and nature, with human beings as subjects in a world of objects—objects there for our use. Much of the resulting implications were based on a neoplatonic understanding of the

dualistic separation between matter and logic or reason, with the latter considered more godly. Thereby, a patriarchal hierarchy was also established: males were thought to be more rational and females more emotional (irrational), and women were more connected to the material world. Dualisms including nature vs. culture, indigenous vs. civilized, object vs. subject, and animal vs. human being were seen as forming a chain of being that represented one's place in relation to godliness. Following this line of thinking, pure reason and objectivity were extolled as closest to God, and connection to the material world was seen as ungodly.²⁰ Anything connected to the less important side of these dualities is still unconsciously considered more associated with the material world by those with cultural roots in the Western traditions, and this has major impacts on the way we treat the planet and creatures we consider less important. It also creates a situation in which we must always be trying to prove ourselves worthy of the more important sides of these dualities in order to be more godly, and to be worthy of being treated as a subject rather than an object.²¹

This neoplatonic dualism occurred throughout the Western church, and in some ways Quakers resisted this simple dualistic categorization, actively working to undermine portions of the hierarchy. However, this dualism creeps into Quaker practice in myriad ways.

The main way I see Quaker practice giving in to hierarchical dualism is in our treatment of the spiritual and the material. Since traditional Quaker worship takes place in silence and without the use of physical sacraments, this can come across as placing more importance on spiritual matters to the exclusion of the physical world. Worshiping in silence can feel like an attempt to transcend our physical bodies and their distractions in order to focus on what is higher, the spiritual plane. The original intention of getting rid of physical sacraments and worship aids such as stained glass and incense was to emphasize that all of life is a chance to encounter the holy: an authority figure in the church hierarchy is not necessary in order for us to encounter God, and being in a church building surrounded by particular smells or sights is not necessary in order to sense God

²⁰ Whitney Bauman, *Theology, Creation, and Environmental Ethics: From Creatio Ex Nihilo to Terra Nullius* (New York & London: Routledge, 2014). Heather Eaton and Lois Ann Lorentzen, eds., *Ecofeminism and Globalization: Exploring Culture, Context, and Religion* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003). The connection between the treatment of women, people of color, the natural world, and other oppressed and marginalized populations has given rise to the term "intersectionality," which describes the way all justice issues are connected because they are caused by the understanding of a dualistic hierarchy I have just described, based on the neoplatonic idea of a great chain of being, which supports an exploitative and extractive society and relationship to the rest of creation.

²¹ Sallie McFague, *Super, Natural Christians: How We Should Love Nature* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000).

at work. However, getting rid of these physical reminders also has the effect of removing any material objects or sensory experiences from our worship times. In this way, we unconsciously imply that our focus is on the interaction with God that happens on the spiritual level, and that the material world is only a distraction.

When not at our best, Friends tend to also infer rationality is a sign of closer proximity to godliness, distancing ourselves from emotional expressions of our experience of God. Rationality, intellectualism, and traits considered “masculine” are often conflated with spirituality. In Liberal Quaker circles, this can result in elitism, where Friends intellectualize Quakerism and valorize education, making it difficult to be a Quaker if one is not interested in or educated enough to participate in abstract conversations. Among pastoral Friends, the emphasis on rationality can be expressed in ways that lead to discrimination against gender, race, and sexual orientation: the more Western ideal of “masculine” forms of leadership are recognized and valued in “released” pastoral ministry, while nontraditional leadership gifts are not. In relation to the environmental situation, if Friends emphasize only rationality (to the exclusion of other types of leadership and spiritual gifts that are then termed irrational or emotional), this means that a) Friends have a vested interest in continuing the status quo because they are defining what they value based on the aforementioned dualistic hierarchy, and b) Friends miss out on creative and prophetic solutions to environmental concerns that require a broader range of skills, intelligences, and awareness of the relationships that make up the community of creation. In other words, when we spiritualize and intellectualize Friends theology and practice, we only reiterate the systems of power we say we stand against.

One other major way Friends theology and practice is often clouded by Enlightenment and modernist thinking and the unexamined participation in Western culture’s dualistic hierarchies is in our propensity to individualize our faith. While it is important and necessary, as Fox suggested, for us each to experience that “Christ is come to speak to his people himself,” it is equally important that we test our leadings with others and work together toward communal understanding of what we hear from God. It is one of our strengths that we work toward group discernment, and I will discuss that more in the next section, but we also strongly value the individual. Finding a balance here is of utmost importance. Individualism is a hallmark of Enlightenment thought; Cartesian thought is based on the premise that the only thing we can truly know is the existence of “I,” and everything else is formed around the self. The subject views objects, considered separate from the self, and it is very easy to slide into

understanding the objects in the world as present for the sake of the subject, the self. When placed in combination with the dualistic hierarchy, the individual who wishes to be understood as a subject, as an “I,” must be as high on the hierarchy as possible in order to not be understood within the system as an object, something to be used by and for the sake of the subjects. This creates a system of competition, where one must always be competing for the power to name who is a subject and who an object. Within Quakerism, when we use our individual understanding of our personal Light Within to compete with others for the power to name who is subject and object, we play into this same dualistic hierarchy. When we must compete for power rather than collectively humbling ourselves to listen for Divine direction, we miss the point of Quakerism, and yet this is a pattern I have seen occurring in many Quaker circles today (Liberal and pastoral) and across history. With our radical and core belief of that of God in every one, we must humbly listen to that of God in one another in our worshipping communities, and also recognize God may be speaking through those outside the group.

In relation to the environment, interestingly, the emphasis on individualism among (particularly pastoral) Friends can lead to anti-intellectualism, which seems contrary to the propensity toward elitism and intellectualism mentioned in relation to our emphasis on rationality, above. However, Friends in the pastoral tradition sometimes give extra weight to their own understanding rather than trusting experts in the field. This can occur in the case of interpreting the Bible and theology: Friends trust their own reading of scripture, hopefully inspired by the Spirit, and are at times skeptical of those trained in the history and culture of biblical times and languages. This can also happen in relation to people’s trust of those who talk about climate change. If Friends do not experience (or recognize) its impacts themselves and do not read the Bible in such a way that caring for this world is important to them theologically, they may trust their own individual understanding of what God is saying to them in relation to the environment rather than listening to the perspectives of those trained in climate science.

Additionally, Friends’ focus on individualism can lead to us treating one another and the planet as disposable, only here as objects for us to use and discard. If Friends treat one another as individuals with whom to compete rather than as a group with whom to work together, we reproduce the unhealthy patterns of our Western culture rather than the radically prophetic and communal message of early Friends, and of Jesus. This has implications for the way we imagine ourselves in relation to the economy: when we think of our economic status and choices as a mark of our individual achievements, when we think of our money and possessions in an individualized way, we uphold a system

that opposes Jesus's "good news for the poor." When we advocate for policies in which pollution happens "Not In My Back Yard" (NIMBYism), but support environmental degradation in other people's backyards by purchasing products that pollute and destroy land, water, air, and ecosystems elsewhere, we contribute to environmental injustice. This can only occur because we buy into an economic and social system offering more rights to some than to others. Collectively, first-world Friends are, quite frankly, not doing much better about resisting or offering an alternative to this system than many other groups.

IV. Potentials within Quaker Theology and Practice for Developing a Quaker Ecotheology

Although these problem areas exist within the Religious Society of Friends, largely due to our legacy in connection with Western culture, I am hopeful about the areas of positive potential within the Friends tradition that can help us move toward a more complete expression of caring for creation. The pitfalls mentioned in the last section stem from distortions of Quaker theology. While not limited to Quakerism, these pitfalls occur uniquely among Friends because of our particular emphases. When practiced well, these emphases can be positive. Indeed, when I presented on this topic to a group of Friends and said the pitfalls among Friends were our emphasis on spirituality, individual connection to God, and a focus on rationality rather than emotional religiosity, one Friend said these were the very things that drew him to Friends from the nondenominational Christian congregation in which he was raised. And I agree—the convictions that we do not have to be doused in hierarchically-blessed water and that God communicates with each one are of central importance to what it means to be Friends, and these are good and important ways to understand our relationship to God and one another. When this emphasis on individual spirituality is coupled with radical submission to our communal discernment, when the rejection of limited sacraments is enlivened by our experience of sacramental encounter with the Divine in and through all our embodied moments, these Friends convictions retain their power and call us all to a heart-opening expression of Christ's message.

The pitfalls described above stem from the strong tendency of human beings to desire power and control. This grows out of fear: fear that we are not worthwhile and lovable, and fear our basic needs will not be met—fear of not

having and being enough.²² We all experience fear, so it's a matter of how we deal with it. As Friends, when we are at our best, we face our fear with courage and vulnerability: we prophetically speak the truth we have found, and we listen with others, trusting that together we can hear the voice of the Spirit. Rather than making decisions that are easy or safe, we engage in the sometimes painful work of discernment. We open ourselves to the Inward Light, which shines on our individual and corporate places of darkness. We hold the tension of mystery and paradox, not creating creeds that can serve as a shortcut to nominal faithfulness, but practicing holy obedience one faltering step at a time. We do all this work from the location of belovedness, knowing there is that of God in every one: we do not need to prove ourselves to God or one another; we are already loved. Christ is already present to us, speaking to us—his people—himself. When we act out of a space of love, we no longer have to be ruled by fear and the desire for control. Instead, we can make choices that benefit the group, and we can let go of our own opinions and humbly listen together.

In relation to caring for the Earth, letting go of our fear and acting through love and trust helps us to attend to long-term implications of our actions, and to recognize the impact of our actions on other people, creatures, and natural systems. When reacting to the world around us out of fear, we tend to make decisions with short-term benefits for ourselves and our families, seizing the largest piece of the pie we can—but these self-focused actions can have detrimental long-term effects as well as unjust outcomes for many contemporary people and other creatures. The Quaker tradition of radical discipleship can help us acknowledge our fears, offer them to God and the group, and seek a way forward that is ethical and loving.

In that vein, I will describe eight ways in which the Quaker tradition holds much potential for developing and enacting an ecotheology with foundations in our denominational story and values: 1) our propensity toward mysticism and emphasis on the Spirit, 2) our focus on community, 3) the ability to strip away forms and get back to the heart of faithfulness, 4) the emphasis on taking the Bible seriously in many of our Quaker families, 5) our focus on reconciliation, equality, and peacemaking, 6) our testimony of simplicity, 7) our historical willingness to recognize the Spirit at work in other traditions, and 8) our vision of all of life as sacramental.

²² For a more complete treatment of this topic, see Cherice Bock, "Scarcity vs. Abundance: Moving Beyond Dualism to 'Enough,'" *Christian Feminism Today*, June 2015, <http://eewc.com/scarcity-vs-abundance-moving-beyond-dualism-enough/>.

1. Mysticism and Emphasis on the Spirit

The Religious Society of Friends sees as its starting point the mystical encounter George Fox had with “one, even Christ Jesus,” who spoke to his condition and filled him with joy. This unmediated access to the Divine became the heart of the Quaker message, and underpins the other testimonies; if all have access to the Divine, all are equal. If we can speak to that of God in one another, perhaps we can “take away the occasion of war.”²³

In relation to care for the planet, what happens when we imagine that of God not only in every one, but also in every thing? While in many ways we are just beginning to recognize this in the last century as we have become more aware of ecological concerns, we can see this idea already present in earlier Friends’ writings. Regarding Fox’s famous vision where he returned to the Garden of Eden “through the flaming sword,” Fox described himself feeling “opened” to the natural world even in his senses, and connected to the rest of creation. He describes a mystical union he believes other wise people have also experienced, and it is enacted through “the Word of wisdom, that opens all things, and [Fox and other wise people have] come to know the hidden unity in the Eternal Being.”²⁴ This “hidden unity in the Eternal Being” sounds very similar to the concepts developed in ecotheology relating to interconnectedness between God and creation, particularly through the work of the Spirit.

Likewise, according to John Woolman: “true religion consist[s] in an inward life, wherein the heart doth love and reverence God the Creator and learn to exercise true justice and goodness, not only toward all [people] but also toward the brute creatures.”²⁵ Woolman here emphasizes that the inward spiritual life led him to outward action based in love for all creation. Woolman, discouraged on one of his journeys, found comfort and certainty that “Love was the first motion,”²⁶ propelling him on that journey. He sought to test whether his leadings derived from an experience of God’s love and called him to loving action.²⁷ He was not only concerned about being in right relationship with God and other people, but also “the brute creatures,” showing that his inward life, his mystical connection to the Divine, drew connections across all creation.

²³ Fox, *Journal*, 379.

²⁴ Fox, *Journal*, 28. Gwyn interprets this *Journal* passage similarly: Gwyn, *A Sustainable Life*, xxiii.

²⁵ John Woolman, “Journal,” in *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*, Philips P. Moulton, ed. (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1989), 28.

²⁶ Woolman, *Journal*, 127.

²⁷ Michael Birkel, *A Near Sympathy: The Timeless Quaker Wisdom of John Woolman* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 2003), 91.

The focus of these earlier Friends and Friends today on the movement of the Spirit among us connects easily to a major theme in ecotheology regarding the importance of the Spirit as a connector. In Hebrew, רוּחַ (*ruach*) means spirit, Spirit, wind, breath, or that which animates or gives life. The Greek word for spirit, πνεῦμα (*pneuma*), means wind, breath, or the creative force of a person. In both languages, the word used to denote the Spirit has to do with creativity and the force that enlivens. Since we share this breath with other creatures, understanding the Spirit as the breath of life, the One who creates and sustains, offers a vision for our interconnectedness with the rest of creation, and also the participation of God in every breath of creation history.²⁸

2. Communalism

This participation in the life of God helps move to the next point regarding a potential within Quaker theology: that is, the importance of community. “In the beginning was relationship, so says the Trinity,” according to Sallie McFague, referring to God speaking about God’s self as “us” and “our” in Genesis 1:26.²⁹ While the theological concept of the social Trinity is more associated with Eastern Orthodoxy than with Western theological traditions, it is an understanding of God that Friends seem to have also discovered. Rather than a linear (verging on hierarchical) understanding of the Persons of the Trinity as in Western theology, where the Father sends the Son who sends the Holy Spirit, or other variations on this theme, the social Trinity is all about interdependence and mutuality: there is movement between the Persons as they interact and work together, and they invite creation into their economy. When we think of the community of all life as participants in this mutual, creative, and interdependent relationship, the life-breath of the Spirit enlivens us all and we become co-creators with God of an emerging community.

This makes good sense alongside Quaker theology and practice. Historical Friends did not create clear distinctions in their writing regarding the work of each Person, but the different names for the Godhead were used interchangeably and various metaphors were created or discovered from the Bible and used, such as Seed, Light, Present Teacher, and so forth. The work of the Divine Being was seen as dynamic and present, with little emphasis on which

²⁸ Laurel Kearns, “Con-spining Together: Breathing for Justice,” in *The Bloomsbury Handbook on Religion and Nature: The Elements*, eds. Laura Hobgood and Whitney Bauman, Bloomsbury Handbooks in Religion series (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 117–132. Sallie McFague, *A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2008), 159–174. McFague calls this panentheism.

²⁹ McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 165.

part of God was in charge of which action.³⁰ Friends saw themselves as participants in bringing about the work of God in the world, not through creating a separatist city on a hill, but through active participation in government and in matters of social concern through speaking truth to power. William Penn attempted to create a place in which all were welcome to participate in forming a fair government in Pennsylvania, a community not limited to Quakers. Friends from the early decades of the movement attempted to advocate for more just laws regarding social status, ability to worship freely, participation in war, and the conditions of prisons. In this way, emphasis on communalism is two-fold in Friends tradition: the community of Friends who gather to worship and discern the voice and direction of the Divine, and the community of all humanity in which Friends are called to actively collaborate with God and others to usher in the Kingdom of God.

In imagining the potential for this aspect of Friends practice to be an asset regarding environmental concerns, I see that Friends already understand the Godhead to be participatory and dynamic, and see ourselves as co-creators with God of God's work in the world. I see that Friends are already concerned with collaboratively working toward a human community that is just and equitable, and so as Friends recognize the disproportionate impact of environmental injustice on marginalized populations, Friends are already well situated to care about this problem and to mobilize to do something about it.³¹ And finally, since Friends already have an understanding of who their community is that extends beyond the in-group of Quakers to include all humanity, it is possible that we can take the next step toward understanding ourselves as participants in the community of all life, seeing the work of God in the world as not only right relationships between people, God, and one another, but also the entirety of creation.

3. Ability to Deconstruct or "Remix"

While we have this potential to extend our understanding of who is included in our community to include all life, it will take a great deal of internal work individually and communally for Friends, particularly in first-world countries, to recognize our participation in a harmful system that perpetuates environmental

³⁰ For a more complete discussion of Friends' understanding of the Trinity, see Cherice Bock, "Quaker Pneumatology," in *T & T Companion to Pneumatology*, eds. Daniel M. Castelo and Kenneth M. Loyer (London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, forthcoming).

³¹ Gwyn also discusses the importance of community and corporate discernment in the Quaker tradition and their potential for aiding us in moving toward a more sustainable future; see especially: Gwyn, *A Sustainable Life*, 61–63, 69–72, 75–93.

injustice against people and other creatures, and to dismantle the pitfalls mentioned in section III. We have the resources within our tradition to do this work, but it remains to be seen whether we are willing to do so.

C. Wess Daniels explains the work of deconstructing tradition that Friends did in the emergence of the movement, showing how this process relates to the ideas found in twentieth century philosophies of deconstruction. Daniels shows historical Friends deconstructing their received tradition down to its essentials and “remixing” it with elements of their current culture.³² In the early years of the Friends movement, Friends stripped away all the non-essential elements of Christianity, rejecting the need for church buildings, hierarchically ordained leadership, rituals that had become dead, and the cozy mutual legitimization of church and state to prop up an unjust social and economic system. They did this by focusing on listening to the present Spirit and reading the Bible to discover the essential elements of “primitive Christianity.” Daniels suggests (and I agree) that while this work was important for that original generation, their work is not enough: the work of deconstructing received tradition and remixing it with current context must occur in each generation, and even in each individual Quaker. This does not mean the essentials of what it means to be a Quaker change from generation to generation or individual to individual, but that each of us does the work of knowing the Inward Christ experimentally, as did Fox, in order to discern our individual and collective calling based on the needs of our current time and place.

Early Friends removed the forms and trappings of organized religion that had built up around the essential parts of what it means to be a follower of Christ. In our own time, however, the rejection of physical sacraments, the importance of silent worship, use of Quaker terminology and “Quaker process” in business sessions, and a range of other practices depending on one’s branch of the Quaker family have often become our very own religious forms, often lacking in the essential ingredient of personal and corporate encounter with the Divine, and the impetus to following the direction we hear. Since we have this tradition of deconstruction and remixing with current culture in our denominational heritage, perhaps it is embedded enough in our Quaker DNA that we can again deconstruct the problematic areas of our theology and practice in order to course correct, focusing again on the essential elements of what it means to be Friends of Jesus in the Quaker way. This is a strong potential due to our particular history, and I hope we can use our collective story to build

³² Daniels, *A Convergent Model of Renewal*.

momentum for focusing on environmental justice and caring for creation as an expression of what it means to be Quaker now.

As Friends have developed an understanding of our testimonies in the last century, we have worked to name that which is essential about our denomination. While the SPICES acronym may not sufficiently cover the entirety of what it means to be a Friend, it labels guideposts so each generation of Friends can learn from the wisdom of previous generations. The testimonies of simplicity, peace, integrity, community, equality, and stewardship are open enough that they can be adapted for the particular concerns of each time and place, but can help focus on what is and is not the work of the Quaker community. For those of us from Christ centered Quaker traditions, the Bible offers a foundational guidepost as well, with the testimonies emerging as threads of the biblical tradition that we as Friends have continued to carry forward. In this way, we can hopefully see care for creation as a concern that connects us to our Judeo-Christian and Quaker past, while remixing these important themes (testimonies) in a way that is novel in our own time and place as we face unprecedented environmental injustice, degradation of natural systems, and anthropogenic climate change.

4. Taking the Bible Seriously

Refocusing on the essentials of our tradition must take the Bible seriously, as Friends from Christ-centered traditions. Doing so can help us deconstruct our theology and practice responsibly, connecting us to the story of people of faith while allowing us to step faithfully into a new situation. Early Friends knew the Bible well, and used it as a measuring rod for any leadings they felt. Robert Barclay explained that all leadings should be tested based on what we learn from the Bible, but he also cautioned about reading the Bible without the inspiration of the Holy Spirit: he likened reading the Bible without the Spirit to examining a corpse compared to a living person.³³

As early Friends read the Bible in the Spirit, they recognized the main thrust of the biblical witness: love and reconciliation, living as a society tending toward equity and shalom. They named themselves the Religious Society of Friends because they understood their main role as Friends of Jesus, not servants (Jn 15), as disciples walking alongside a Present Teacher. They took the Bible at its word regarding the intention of Jesus to remove the legalism that had emerged within the Jewish practices of his day and to reclaim the heart of the law and the

³³ Barclay, *Apology*, 32, 40.

prophets, summed up in loving God and loving neighbors as oneself (Lk 10). They took Jesus at his word regarding peacemaking (Mt 5:9, 21–22, 38–48) and the integrity to always tell the truth (Mt 5:37). In short, they recognized his command to live out the Spirit of the law rather than the letter of the law. Because of this, they were able to discern through the reading of scripture in the Spirit that the letter of the Bible was not always literally true: for example, they understood that the passages interpreted to support slavery or the subjugation of women were not intended that way, as they read other passages supporting the equality of all people in matters both social and spiritual.

Taking the Bible seriously as we discern our role as Friends in relation to environmental concerns requires us to again approach the text seeking guidance from the Spirit. With our eyes opened to this new area of awareness, what do we see when we read about our spiritual forebears and their relationship to the rest of creation?³⁴ What portions of scripture might we be interpreting in unhelpful ways, and what parts might we find that help us see the intention of caring for creation that we might not have noticed when we weren't looking for them? Ecotheologians and biblical interpreters are helping us understand and uncover an ecological paradigm present in the biblical witness, reminding us that the cultures who produced these texts were agrarian.³⁵ Rereading the covenants between God and the people, we become aware that many of the covenants included right treatment of the land, and the health of the land was used as an indicator of how well the people were living up to their side of the covenant. When reading the Bible with this in mind, the land and other creatures become almost another character in the story. Romans 8:19–23 states in part: “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now,” reminding us that it is not only humanity involved in the story of salvation history, but the entire creation is participating with us in the birthing of the new creation. If we take the Bible seriously as Friends, we can attune ourselves to the Spirit speaking through these ancient texts to our current condition, inviting us to participate in that same story, and to recognize that reconciliation extends to God, ourselves, other people, and all of creation. We can listen to the Spirit regarding scriptural interpretations that have been unhelpful regarding our treatment of other parts of the natural world, and humbly invite the Spirit to redirect us into a more faithful path.

³⁴ *The Green Bible* highlights passages relating to creation in green, similarly to many Bibles' use of red lettering for the words of Jesus. It is instructive to flip through a copy of *The Green Bible* to get a sense for what is present in the biblical text that relates to the rest of the natural world, treatment of the land and other creatures, and so forth. *The Green Bible*, reprint edition (New York: HarperOne, 2010).

³⁵ Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture*.

5. Emphasis on Reconciliation, Equity, and Justice

The testimonies of equality and peacemaking form, perhaps, the clearest connection between Friends tradition and environmental concerns. A collective focus on reinterpreting these testimonies in light of the environmental situation could offer a unifying Quaker witness regarding creation care.³⁶ Four potential areas of crossover between the Friends traditions of peace and justice with environmental issues are worth mentioning specifically: 1) the ability to take away the occasion of wars and increasing conflicts over natural resources, 2) the conviction about the equality of all people and the problem of environmental injustice, 3) that of God in every one extending to that of God in every thing, and 4) the potential for nonviolent direct action and peacemaking tactics and networks already familiar to Friends to be utilized in the work of addressing environmental concerns.

In this historical moment, those of us who heed Christ's call to peacemaking must recognize the underlying issues in present global conflicts. Wars over control of natural resources and access to key geographical features such as ports or mountain passes are not new. What is perhaps new is our awareness of this underlying cause, and the fact that in previous centuries there were other areas into which to expand or escape when one's land was under threat or when one experienced climatic threats such as drought. Currently, refugees are attempting to escape from places that are unsafe due to war as well as a changing climate, leaving places such as Africa and the Middle East for Europe, and Latin America for the United States and Canada. The compounded problems relating to land loss due to multinational corporations' land grabs, environmentally harmful mining and fossil fuel extraction, destruction of rain forests for profit, and many other economic factors have created a situation in which people's homelands are destroyed and communities are fragmented. Peacemaking in this time, as I mentioned in the introduction to this piece relating to Israel and Palestine, requires us to work on the root causes of conflict: overuse and hoarding of natural resources by a few while many do not have what they need. This strategy is at the heart of the colonization process, which has been active in Western cultures for at least the past 500 years, but at this point, there is nowhere new to colonize.³⁷

³⁶ In fact, Gwyn suggests "that sustainability is not just one more concern among many, but the framework in which Friends today must contemplate, even rethink, every aspect of Quaker faith and practice," so that rather than seeing sustainability or stewardship as one more distinct testimony, it helps tie the testimonies together. Gwyn, *A Sustainable Life*, xii.

³⁷ "There is no Planet B" has become a catchphrase in environmental circles, and is the title of a helpful book about the problems facing us and what we can do to ameliorate

Current economic models, as I allude to in the section on pitfalls above, are based on objectifying human beings as interchangeable and disposable parts of a labor pool, and seeing natural resources as interchangeable inputs in a linear system of consumption that does not have a plan for what to do with the outputs (waste and byproducts). The Quaker testimony of equality, however, invites us to resist the dehumanization necessary in this economic system: people are not interchangeable cogs in a machine of production, but are beloved individuals with gifts, talents, and that of God in them. No one is more deserving of the basic necessities of life than anyone else, including breathable air, potable water, healthy soil, a loving community, and the opportunity to engage in meaningful work. The wealthy and powerful are no more worthy of a tip of the hat or honorific language than anyone else; each person is deserving of respect and care. As already mentioned in subsection 1 on mysticism and the Spirit, a deeper interpretation of our testimonies on equality and peacemaking needs to occur in order for this potential strength of Quakerism to help us in relation to the environmental situation. Friends already do well at emphasizing the importance of social and economic justice as an expression of our faith (although we do not always do well at living out our ideals). We see peacemaking as a process of reconciliation between God, ourselves, and other people. Adding the dimension of reconciliation with the land to our call to peacemaking helps bring in the material world and nonhuman creatures to our thinking—and hopefully our action—toward right relationship. In Quaker language, we are extending our understanding of that of God in every *one* to include that of God in every *thing*.³⁸

As Friends with a call to peacemaking, reconciliation, and equitable treatment of all, we hold great potential for moving into a new understanding of

them: Mike Berners-Lee, *There Is No Planet B: A Handbook for the Make or Break Years* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

³⁸ I was already aware of this idea of “that of God in every *thing*” popping up in various Quaker settings, and as editor of this volume, I noticed this seems to be an emerging theme in this volume. See particularly the essays by Laurel Kearns, S. Chagala Ngesa, and Shelley Tanenbaum. The concept of watershed discipleship may also be helpful to Friends as we re-envision our understanding of where we encounter “that of God.” Mennonites Ched Myers and Todd Wynward describe one aspect of watershed discipleship as seeing the elements and creatures in the world around us as potential rabbis, intentionally learning from creation as from a respected teacher who knows more about God than we do, and through whom God chooses to be embodied. Early Christians such as Augustine referred to the “book of created nature,” stating that while the written Word is important, we also learn about God through the world God created and placed us within. Augustine, “Sermon 68,” in *Sermons III* (51-94), ed. John E. Rotelle, transl. Edmund Hill (Brooklyn, NY: New City, 1991). Ched Myers, ed., *Watershed Discipleship: Reinhabiting Bioregional Faith and Practice* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2016). Todd Wynward, *Revivling the Way: Break Free to Follow an Untamed God* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2015).

our own testimonies, seeing the natural world not simply as the stage on which salvation history happens to occur, but as an integral set of subjects with whom we are called into reconciling relationship, as partners and even teachers along the Jesus Way. The final area of potential relating to these testimonies is the years of community organizing, nonviolent direct action, civil disobedience, and advocacy for more just laws in which Friends have engaged in the past. If we can offer what we know in those areas, holding to our commitment to nonviolent resolution of conflicts and our commitment to working toward a more equitable civil society by protesting unjust laws, we may have something to offer to the broader environmental community. When we do this work well, it is steeped in the strength of individual and corporate contemplative practices, offering an undergirding of spiritual depth that can, perhaps, help ease the tendency of activists to burn out. By offering with humility the truth we have found as Friends, that we believe all people have access to that of God in themselves and can recognize the Spirit at work in others, Friends have the potential to be vibrant members of an Earth community tending toward shalom.

6. Emphasis on Simplicity

A final Quaker testimony I will mention is that of simplicity. The Friends emphasis on plain language and plain dress has a long history with the purpose of focusing Friends on following God rather than being distracted by the latest fashions or giving different amounts of honor to people based on class and wealth.³⁹ Although plain dress has at times been used legalistically and hypocritically (my favorite is Elizabeth Gurney Fry adhering to the letter of the law regarding Quaker grey by wearing fashionably cut grey dresses made from the finest fabrics),⁴⁰ when done as a personally chosen testimony rather than a collectively enforced marker of inclusion in the community, it can be a powerful witness. Friends famously began wearing clothing that had not been dyed by slaves, and some Quaker businesses sold only products that had not been procured by slave labor.⁴¹ Quaker chocolatiers were some of the first to find

³⁹ Fox, *Journal*, e.g. ch. X where Fox describes the problem with hat honor and his refusal to swear oaths.

⁴⁰ Elizabeth Gurney Fry, *Memoir of the Life of Elizabeth Fry: With Extracts from Her Letters and Journal*, eds. Katharine Fry and Rachel Elizabeth Cresswell (Philadelphia: H. Longstreth, 1847).

⁴¹ John Woolman's testimony against using products requiring slave labor was inspirational in changing Friends' beliefs and actions regarding their consumption patterns, and his witness is dealt with masterfully in the chapters in this volume by Mike Heller, "John Woolman's Environmental Consciousness," and Jon R. Kershner, "Woolman and Wilderness: A Quaker Sacramental Ecology."

alternatives to slave-produced cacao.⁴² When simplicity is practiced collectively based on each person's conscientious choice, Friends can embody a collective witness that is visible and that encourages more just practices in social and economic spheres. In these and many other ways, the Friends testimony of simplicity has been a way to signal and enact the testimonies of equality, peace, and integrity.

The testimony of simplicity has at least as much to do with our spiritual state as it does with our outward actions, and it is this work of simplicity that many of us as Friends in "developed" nations need most. The inward work of allowing God to remind us what we truly need and to receive satisfaction from the joyful state of having enough sounds so easy and yet it is incredibly challenging and often painful to our egos. In a culture in which bigger (or smaller, in the case of technology), better, more, and newer is advertised continually around us, it is difficult to know where to draw the line between that which is necessary, that which is a luxury offering joy and meaning to life, and that which is taking us too far into materialism or greed. While it is not easy, the work before us is spiritual in nature, with practical implications: working to not feel guilty for all we have, to not judge others who have more than us and see ourselves as pious in comparison, and to not rationalize our need for more stuff. Instead, this work of simplicity invites us to open ourselves to trust God, recognizing we are interdependent with one another as creatures embedded in the natural world, and to learn to celebrate joyfully that our needs are met collectively.

Relating to the environmental situation, the testimony on simplicity takes on even more important dimensions. In our time, plain dress might mean only wearing clothing acquired secondhand so as not to support companies with unjust practices and to keep useable items out of landfills. Or it might mean purchasing only a few items of high quality from companies with good labor and environmental practices and wearing one's small wardrobe for years. Ambitious Friends with the knowledge and means to do so might make their own clothing or purchase it from local clothiers. Likewise, the testimony of simplicity could be utilized as we make choices regarding the food we eat. Perhaps we select mostly foods grown in our local region, with only a few favorite items imported from other parts of the globe. Maybe we grow our own food, or support local farmers. We can become involved in gleaning groups that pick fruit from abandoned fruit trees or pick produce left behind in fields already harvested and take it to food banks so that not only the wealthy benefit from local food. We can focus on eating foods that are in season, not requiring extended storage in refrigerated

⁴² Deborah Cadbury, *Chocolate Wars: The 150-Year Rivalry Between the World's Greatest Chocolate Makers* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2010).

facilities or shipping from another part of the world using fossil fuels. Our testimony of simplicity may extend to advocacy for organic agriculture or small-scale farming, emphasizing simple methods for pest control and honoring the work of small, local growers who invest in the land using methods that can continue for generations.⁴³

Many of us in the global north are accustomed to the false “simplicity” of not knowing where our food and other items come from. Rethinking our testimony of simplicity, therefore, means recognizing the complexity of the global systems in which we are participating. It means opening our hearts to the painful work of letting the Spirit simplify our lives so that we focus solely on God for validation, and not on others who judge us based on what we wear or where we live. It means humbling ourselves to remember that each person is equal to us, and we do not have a right to products requiring practices that are unjust, inequitable, or unhealthy to current and future generations.

7. Willingness to Recognize the Spirit at Work in Other Traditions

At times in our collective history, Friends have been cognizant of the presence of the Spirit already at work in people of other traditions. John Woolman felt called to visit the Delawares, and encountered the same Spirit in their gathered meetings as he knew.⁴⁴ Friends have often partnered with those from other denominations or religions to do the social justice work to which they feel led. Barclay assumed that God is at work and speaking to all people, whether or not they know the name of Jesus or have access to the Bible.⁴⁵ We can answer that of God in every one, meaning that we can trust that God is already at work in others’ lives.

This practice holds potential for Friends to learn from others regarding how we are to live in light of environmental problems and climate change. If God is at work in other cultures and religious communities, perhaps we can learn from those who have traditional practices that lead them to care for the planet and its creatures more directly than does our understanding of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Perhaps we can find areas of common ground such as the concept of shalom and find groups whose care for the land on which we reside was more skillfully honed, and we can learn from them how best to care for the

⁴³ Further thoughts on the connection between the testimony of simplicity and the practice of sustainability can be found in Gwyn, *A Sustainable Life*, 129–146.

⁴⁴ John Woolman, *The Journal of John Woolman*, ed. John G. Whittier (Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1909), 201.

⁴⁵ Barclay, *Apology*, Propositions 5 and 6.

places we now inhabit as an act of faithfulness.⁴⁶ Further, we may be able to listen to and learn from those Friends in the two-thirds world who are drawn to the same Spirit and now share much of our religious tradition, and who may be able to teach those of us from European backgrounds how to live in greater harmony with the rest of creation.⁴⁷

8. No Strict Delineation Between Sacred and Profane: Sacramentalism

The final area of potential I will point out in regards to Quakers and the environment is the flip side of our de-emphasis on physical sacraments. While it can be a problem that we do not practice the physical sacraments because we may tend to spiritualize everything, the Friends teaching regarding sacraments is not that there are none: instead, it is that everything is a potential sacrament. Every moment and each relationship is a chance to encounter the Divine at work in and through the world around us. To the extent that we approach life with this sacramental mentality, our de-emphasis on particular physical sacraments can be an asset rather than a drawback.

How do we keep ourselves focused on the sacramentality of all life and each moment when we do not set aside particular days or rituals to remind ourselves? This is an important question Friends need to ask ourselves if we hope to build on this potential as a denomination. For programmed Friends, we can build in reminders of the importance of partnering with creation and hearing God through other created entities through our programmed elements. While most Friends do not adhere to a liturgical calendar, we can pay attention to the seasons, listening to God through the rhythm of the world around us. As programmed Friends, we can look intentionally for ways the other-than-human world shows up in biblical passages we feel called to give messages about, and we can sing songs and offer prayers that remind us of our connection to the rest of creation as an important aspect of what it means to be a Friend of Jesus. While most of us do not practice communion with physical elements, Friends of all types do often share food with one another, and we can express gratitude for the food, drawing our awareness to the ways in which the food was produced and brought to us, and recognizing who derives economic benefit from our food purchases, deciding to support sustainable and local food systems. All Friends

⁴⁶ Randy S. Woodley, *Shalom and the Community of Creation: An Indigenous Vision*, Prophetic Christianity series (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012).

⁴⁷ The essay by S. Chagala Ngesa in this volume is an excellent example of the rich wisdom we may learn from if we ask these kinds of questions of worldwide Friends and are willing to listen.

can be stewards of our buildings and grounds in ways that recognize the sacramental spaces in which we gather to worship: yes, our buildings and grounds are not *more* holy than other places, but they are *as* holy, and perhaps we can spark a sacramental reverence for the places in which we connect with God through intentional care of our spaces, and through talking about the reasons why we are doing so.

The list of ways in which we can draw our attention to the holy in each moment and place could continue through many more examples. The overall point is that this piece of the Quaker tradition can potentially serve to connect us with the work of God in the world, as long as we invite in the mystery, the wonder, the curiosity, the extravagance of being alive in this miraculous world, and the joy of participating with the Spirit who gives us breath in the process of co-creating a reconciling, shalomic community of all life. If we can simultaneously hold the Quaker truth that no one day or place is more sacred than another, with the constant state of holy expectancy that God shows up in each moment, our small but feisty denomination has immense potential to step into an environmentally aware moment in our shared history with grace and Spirit-deepened power.

V. Building a Quaker Ecotheology

Imagining the work before us as Friends feels daunting, and at the same time I am hopeful that it is possible. If we wish to make this transition to a Friends theology and practice that meets the environmental challenges of our time, we must find our anchor in the true Light which gives light to everyone (Jn 1:9), the One who became flesh and dwelled among us (Jn 1:14), the same One who spoke to George Fox's condition and can speak to ours.

In building a Quaker ecotheology, we can gain much from grounding ourselves in our denominational tradition, particularly the testimonies we have found useful and meaningful across time.⁴⁸ We have much in our history upon which we can build in a positive direction. Many of the pitfalls in our theology are shared across the myriad denominations formed out of the Reformations and Awakenings: they arise out of a shared value system loosely defined as Western culture. We have our own particular pitfalls as well, our particular brand of emphasis on the spiritual over the material and rationality over other ways of knowing such as spiritual wisdom.

⁴⁸ Gwyn, *A Sustainable Life*.

The strengths we have developed as a spiritual community, however, far outweigh the weaknesses, if we can avoid falling to one side or the other on the areas of our tradition that can cause us problems. We are from a spiritual tradition that values each one's access to the Divine. We believe God can and does speak to us today, and speak to us about our particular situation. We believe we are called to live in a way that takes away the occasion for all wars—a way that actively works toward reconciliation and shalom. Our tradition requires each person and generation to deconstruct the trappings of religion and focus on the essentials of deep connection to the everlasting wisdom and creative power who sustains us through a current of love, lavished on all. When we become convinced Friends, we are participating with God and with people from all times and places whose lives center around co-creating this loving and just community with our relational God. We recognize we do not have all the answers or understand the fullness of God, but we each have our own valuable piece to offer, and we can learn and grow from attending to the wisdom of others.

To the extent that we as Friends have allowed our cultures to cloud our understanding of God and what loving community looks like, we have much work to do. Many the world over are calling this work “decolonizing,” and Friends from the global north must engage the practice of decolonizing Quaker theology and practice with humility and tenacity. I fervently hope we can learn from the wisdom of our Quaker siblings in the global south as we delve into these topics, as well as Friends of color and from other marginalized populations in our own countries. The way we treat “others” is integrally connected to the way we treat the planet and non-human creatures.

To the extent that Friends have continually worked to break free from religiosity and unjust cultural norms, to the extent that we have listened for and followed the still, small voice speaking to us individually and communally, to this extent there is hope for our denomination yet. When we remember to live with the expectation of the holy breaking through at any moment, when we attend to the ways God works through us as physical bodies embedded in ecosystems and interdependent with other creatures for our shared survival, we live out a Quaker ecotheology.

Uncertainty exists regarding how Friends received our pejorative name “Quaker,” but it is clear that early Friends were experiencing a response to the intense work of the Spirit in their bodies as they worshiped and testified. I hope and pray we can likewise pay attention to the Spirit at work in us as embodied beings. May we extend our awareness of our communal work beyond economic and social equity to include the environment in which we reside, participating in the breath of the Spirit enlivening all creation.