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JOHN PUNSHON’S REASONS FOR HOPE: THE FAITH AND FUTURE OF THE FRIENDS CHURCH*: A REVIEW

ARTHUR O. ROBERTS

John Punshon, a British Friend and recorded minister (Indiana Yearly Meeting), recently retired professor of Quaker Studies at Earlham College and Earlham School of Religion, offers a perceptive analysis of the Friends Church as presently constituted. Setting contemporary Friends in historic and cultural context, the author calls them to Christian faithfulness.

In 1969 Elton Trueblood attributed the forfeiture of values in our culture in part to academicians and looked for recovery from the Christian intellectual who “has access to both the reasons of the heart and the reasons of the head” (A Place to Stand, p. 31). Friend John Punshon is such a Christian intellectual. His Reasons for Hope is a tract for the times. In language hortatory as well as analytical the book tugs at heart and mind. I found myself pondering it prayerfully as well as reading it critically.

Punshon puts his thesis plainly: The Friends Church must be true to its roots. Although Friends stand firmly within historic evangelical Christianity and have shared its various awakenings, including British evangelicalism and the holiness movement, there is a danger that the individualism now characteristic of some contemporary evangelicalism, if embraced by Friends, may weaken its witness. Quakers possess “a strong doctrine of the Church,” writes Punshon, which “can give breadth and depth” to shared evangelical principles (p. 19). A concluding statement gathers up a theme carefully developed throughout the text, “Renewing the Quaker vision is not a strategy for survival; it is a safeguard to that portion of his wealth entrusted to us by the Lord himself” (p. 371).

To reach that conclusion, Punshon devotes chapters to Christ as Light, Word, and Covenant. Other chapters deal with worship and discipleship, Friends holiness heritage and doctrines, eschatology, and finally prognosis for the future. Punshon’s admonition for a renewal of vision is directed most forthrightly toward North American Friends in the evangelical, pastoral tradition, most of them under the umbrella of Friends United Meeting or Evangelical Friends International. The book is also relevant for Quakers worldwide, as it reexamines our roots. Christ-centered non-pastoral Friends may appreciate his exhortation for silence in worship to become more central in pastoral meetings. Liberal Friends will be challenged to reexamine themselves against historic Quakerism.

Bill Samuel wrote a generally favorable review, but did criticize Punshon’s basis for hope as too restricted. Samuel suggests that for the future of the Friends Church, prayer and focus upon the Great Commission are more important than “correct analysis.” “It requires,” he writes, “a people earnestly seeking God’s direction and on fire for Jesus Christ” (Suite 101.com, October 8, 2001).

Punshon is gifted by the Lord as a scholar/teacher. We are in his debt for faithfully exercising that gift. Persons gifted as evangelists and pastors are challenged to be equally discerning and dedicated, to offer complementary ministry. Importunate prayer by contrite Quakers surely is a condition for renewal. Clarified theology can be a prophetic way to open doors for the Spirit to awaken a slumbering Church.

I agree with Samuel, however, that the term “evangelical” connotes evangelistic outreach as well as emphasis upon Scripture and coherent theology. Late nineteenth-century British/American cross-cultural evangelism built upon earlier Quaker missionary vision. Contemporary evangelistic efforts by the Friends Church continue to show obedience to the Great Commission; but now it is global and no longer mainly Anglo-American. Continuity of practice correlates with continuity of doctrine. Mission effort was not disrupted but enhanced by the nineteenth-century transition from traveling to settled ministry; and it is now more cross-cultural than ever and unburdened by colonialism.

Statistics compiled by the FWCC (1967-2000) show the results of seed sown by earlier missionaries, and also of the erosion of the “mother churches.” African Friends increased in membership from 42,000 to 154,000. Asia/Pacific from 3,500 to 9,500. Europe decreased from 24,000 to 19,000. North America also suffered a 25 percent loss, from
121,000 to 94,000. South and Central America Friends showed the greatest percentage gains, going from 5,000 to 64,000. Worldwide Friends recovered from a low of 195,000 to a high of 340,000, a net gain of 75 percent.

Obviously the future of the Friends Church must be considered internationally. Punshon acknowledges this briefly, but his focus is upon North America. The problem, as he sees it, is how pastoral Friends can understand and proclaim the gospel in a changing world, to “ensure that a common theological base unites all branches of the family” (p. 6). This changing world includes the ascendancy of formerly mission but now indigenous yearly meetings elsewhere in the world and the cultural impacts within North America. Punshon asks why evangelical churches generally are growing in numbers (in contrast with mainline denominations) but evangelical Quaker churches are not? His hypothesis: Our identity is “too fuzzy” to have general appeal. Would it help to ask why Friends Churches in Latin America are growing?

Punshon links missing Quaker identity to loss of a covenantal understanding of the church. He writes that recovering covenant does not require “a return to every detail of traditional Quakerism,” but that a sense of being a people of God in all aspects of life offers a key to our message and ministry. Punshon contrasts the historic Quaker sense of covenant with that of the Puritans from which they sprang. Puritans spoke of the “covenant of grace,” Friends of the “covenant of Light.” Punshon declares that “Our safeguard against antinomianism and works-righteousness lies in our direct experience of Christ the light” (pp. 168-169). What Bonhoeffer called “cheap grace” is a threat in every Christian era, ours included. Punshon describes such optimum connectedness in practical and theological terms. He urges Friends faithfully to submit to the “offices of Christ,” citing the familiar passage from Fox’s Journal about Christ in the midst of the congregation to exercise his offices as enlightener, Savior, redeemer, counselor, leader, prophet, shepherd, bishop, king, etc. (pp. 174ff).

Punshon underscores this admonition from Fox: “There is no True Church but where Christ exercises his offices in and amongst them” (Épis. 230). Acceptance of Christ’s direct leadership of the church provides the basis for Friends practices in worship, ministry, business, and service. It informs their reception of divine revelation: “though the canon of Scripture may be closed, Christ continues to guide us in his offices, and we can therefore be the recipients of his continuing revelation” (p. 186).
In reading Punshon on the offices of Christ I was reminded of a book by an earlier Earlham scholar, Dougan Clark, *The Offices of The Holy Spirit*. Clark emphasized the work of the Spirit in conversion and sanctification. Wrote Clark: “Justification is the beginning, and entire sanctification the completion of the work of inward holiness. But there may be an indefinite growth *in* holiness” (Spann ed., 1945, p. 71).

The present call to renewal is more historically normative than the one a hundred twenty-five years ago, but both posit a Christian doctrine of the Holy Spirit, a basic Quaker witness greatly needed in an age of neo-animism. The earlier book contributed to Quaker renewal, albeit with a troubling accommodation to general evangelicalism. Will Punshon’s book contribute to a more definitive Quaker renewal? The prospects are good, for among Friends today brokenness augers well for revival, and there is now a greater concern for continuity with our heritage.

I now comment upon a few selected issues. The first concerns the authority of Scripture vis-à-vis the Holy Spirit, the second the role of the Richmond Declaration of Faith in defining Friends’ beliefs, and the third holiness theology.

**SCRIPTURE AND SPIRIT**

Regarding the tension between Scripture and Spirit, Punshon reinforces a normative Quaker understanding of their mutuality—the Spirit as Inspirer is also the interpreter—and shows how this understanding has been conveyed historically and how it is central to Quaker thought. He faults Robert Barclay, however, for bequeathing to Friends “a highly unstable metaphysics”—distinguishing spiritual from natural truths—thus confusing “two kinds of truth with two modes of receiving one and the same truth.” (See the chapter on “Discipleship and Faith,” pp. 238ff. Future editions should remove a repeated line, top of page 245.)

I would say that *each of three* modes of knowing, sense, reason, and intuition may be a vehicle for receiving divine revelation, although we tend to associate immediacy with the third. In his emphasis upon direct and experiential revelation, Barclay may have overstated his case, but in drawing parallels between the logical progression of natural truths and inward revelations in the “well-disposed mind” may indicate an intent to posit an epistemic rather than a metaphysic dualism (see Proposition...
2, Apology). Perhaps he sought to avoid a Gnostic misapplication of the gospel (which has occurred in our times, e.g., a half-dozen Friends decide their consensus suffices for God’s will independently of scripture and church interpretation). In any case Barclay posited a harmony among inward revelation, Scripture, and right reason within the context of a covenant people collectively sensitive to the voice of Christ. Barclay wrote from a cultural perspective which had not, like ours, secularized reason and psychologized sin. Thus his theology reflected a worldview affirming unity in God’s acts of creation and redemption.

THE ROLE OF THE RICHMOND DECLARATION OF FAITH

Punshon rightly notes that this doctrinal statement, like others in church history, bears marks of temporal priorities. Neither its incompleteness nor its absence of positive affirmations of Christ as Light, however, has diminished its continuing value. The Declaration, Punshon writes, “is clear, concise, soundly based in scripture, and much more traditional, in Quaker terms, than some of its critics think,” exhibiting continuity with earlier London epistles (p. 137). The RDF, he writes, was “a line in the sand” against encroaching evangelicalism (p. 281). More importantly, I think, it marked a conciliar stand against an incipient modernism which threatened to weaken historic Quaker doctrines, which may account for its enduring use in Friends books of faith and practice.

Punshon devotes considerable space to issues of biblical authority, carefully distinguishing between inerrancy and infallibility. The first he finds congenial to fundamentalism but not to Friends; the second he finds congenial to evangelicalism, Quaker or otherwise. I agree, and I believe most evangelical Friends do, in thought if not in precise terms. Nearly twenty years ago Northwest Yearly Meeting began a thorough review of its Faith and Practice. Yearly Meeting representatives and elders discerned that inerrancy claims actually weaken scriptural authority (by presuming original but missing definitive autographs). Instead, they drew upon infallibility language from the Richmond Declaration of Faith, and found harmony in affirming about the Scriptures: “Interpreted by the Holy Spirit, they are an unfailing source of truth” (Northwest Yearly Meeting Faith and Practice, 1987, p. 10).
In a well-researched and insightful chapter, the author examines problems arising because of “unresolved tensions that the partial adoption of Wesleyan holiness principles bequeathed to Friends about a century ago” (p. 286). Friends held to holiness doctrines a century before Wesley, and despite differences both traditions coalesce in affirming sanctification as an essential aspect of justification. Punshon makes the case that “the collective sense” of Quakers is against the Wesleyan formula of two works of grace (I would add that Fox clearly speaks of one work of grace, embodying pardon and perfection). Punshon sees gradual instead of instantaneous sanctification as the Quaker model. So did Gurney, and so do many Friends today. But one can find eradicationist and punctiliar terms used by seventeenth-century Friends in respect to the purging of carnality and death to self. Punshon acknowledges this, citing my fifty-four-year-ago seminary thesis! There are experiential parallels between the seventeenth-century and the nineteenth-century holiness awakenings. Convincement for early Friends connoted an existential struggle with carnality, a yearning for inward holiness and outward moral obedience, a dying to self, inward assurance of salvation, an ecstasy experienced in the Holy Spirit’s baptism, and an empowerment for service. Punshon sees spiritual dangers in both traditions: “Gradual sanctification can open the door to spiritual sloth, and entire sanctification runs the risk of spiritual pride” (p. 292).

For some Friends Church readers, this chapter on holiness will seem dated—depicting where the Friends Church was a generation or so ago, not where it is now. For them Everett Cattell’s *The Spirit of Holiness* (Eerdmans, 1963) resolved the Wesleyan-Quaker tensions. They find a supporting holiness emphasis in various streams of Christian faith, and likewise, from the Christian classics. Their world is less formulaic. For others, Baptist evangelicalism, or Pentecostalism, may more significantly challenge or threaten their Friends’ heritage than does revivalist Wesleyan theology. In an ecumenical age transfers of faith and practice are more diverse than they were in the previous century, especially if the focus of the local church is fellowship or service rather than the proclamation of truth.

Punshon, however, rightly calls for reexamination of our holiness doctrines. So do I (my “New Call to Holiness” lecture, first given at Malone College, 1991, and variously printed, is one such summons).
Holiness is *central*, not peripheral, to the Christian faith. We are well admonished to recover our historic testimony to the world!

*Reasons for Hope* is a seminal book for Quaker ministers and elders. It offers a hedge against subtleties of cultural compromise. *Reasons for Hope* can be adapted for use as a study book in adult Sunday school and membership classes. It is a useful resource for persons planting and nurturing new churches, enabling them better to interpret to seekers the Quaker understanding of the church. It will help believers in newer churches to find fellowship with those in established churches, and to partner with them in spiritual renewal. Wisdom gained through this book may, under the leadership of the Spirit, contribute to a second Quaker awakening of the church.

Recently I read how Tigard (Oregon) Friends identify themselves: “a Christ-centered, Quaker community seeking to glorify God under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the teaching of the Holy Scriptures. We desire to know Christ and make Him known that we may love as He loves.” Yes, John Punshon, there are “reasons for hope” in the faith and future of the Friends Church!