Robert Barclay and Scripture

Dean Freiday
ROBERT BARCLAY AND SCRIPTURE

DEAN FREIDAY

The most concise declaration of Barclay’s attitude toward Scripture may be found in his Apology, Proposition 3, where he states:

From the revelations of the Spirit of God to the faithful have come the scriptures of Truth, which contain: (1) a faithful historical account of the behavior of God’s people in various ages and of the many unusual and remarkable acts of God they experienced, (2) a prophetic account of some things already past, and of others yet to come, (3) a full and adequate account of all of the chief principles and doctrine of Christ which were spoken, or which were written, by the motions of God’s Spirit at various times in treasured declarations, exhortations, and maxims which are given to certain churches and their pastors.¹

In his development, which follows immediately, Barclay adds: “We consider the scriptures undoubtedly and unequivocally the finest writings in the world. Nothing else that has been written is preferable or even comparable…(These) holy writings possess more than earthly beauty” and their “use imparts strength and hope.”²

“Whatsoever doctrine is contrary to their testimony may properly be rejected as false. We are very willing for all of our doctrine to be tried by them.”³ This reinforces the statement he made in a work, written five years earlier in his 1673 Catechism and Confession of Faith, that Friends’ principles “are found in Scripture, word by word,” as he proceeded to demonstrate, “without addition or commentary.” The only changes would be to substitute names for pronouns, “us” where more appropriate than “they” or “them,” and changes in tense.⁴

Barclay apparently gathered all the pertinent passages by memory, for he states: “No doubt this work could be improved by additional citations…omitted as not being immediately recalled.” But “God has assisted me thus far…by his Spirit, the good Remembrancer.” In the 1690 edition, the changes amounted largely to the adding of several passages on Worship.⁵
Even more remarkable than Barclay’s inspired memory was the organization of his citations. Often only a brief phase was used from one book of the Bible, followed by a selection from another, or perhaps by another passage a dozen verses later. The transitions are so smooth and the logic so sequential that his editorial work is hardly noticeable.

Friends directed a few charges against other Christians, and Barclay contributes to this set of critiques. In calling Scripture the Word of God, they said that others were committing bibliolatry—making an idol of Scripture. They were also displacing Christ from his rightful, central role in the church. In the words of Fox: as “an Enlightener, a Quickener, a Savior, a Redeemer, a Counselor, a Leader, a Captain, a Prophet to ‘open’ (i.e. interpret), a Shepherd to feed, a Bishop to oversee, and a King and Lord to Rule, Order, and Govern in his great Spiritual House, which he is the Head of.”

They reminded others that “while one tenth of Scripture contains the fundamental doctrines of the Christian religion, the rest is not impertinent or useless.”

The Relationship Between Scripture and Spirit

It was in stating the relationship between Scripture and the Spirit that Friends made some of their greatest contributions, but also had some of their greatest difficulties. Fox’s “frequent advice to Friends” was to “keep to Scripture language, terms, words and doctrines” and do not “be drawn into unscriptural terms invented by men.” But over and over again, in defending the role they accorded Scripture, Friends did get drawn into the use of unscriptural terms—particularly those of the Schoolmen (=Scholastics)—and also the stilted language of syllogistic reasoning.

Obviously, neither Scripture nor Inward Revelation stands alone when one looks at what we know, and how we know it; but precisely what that relationship entails is very difficult to state. Even “continuing revelation” or “inward Principle”—terms often used by Fox, Barclay, Keith, and other early Friends, are to be found nowhere in Scripture, and are far from describing the whole role of the Spirit.

In the dialogue with the students at Aberdeen, George Keith spoke creatively of “a twofold evidence,” and it probably would have been better if the matter had been left there. Fox had apparently...
enunciated, somewhere along the way, “our doctrine of the primacy of the Spirit.” If that weren’t bad enough, the discussion at Aberdeen had soon turned to subjective and objective evidence. Barclay not only called the spiritual revelation the objective one and the Scriptural subjective, but he also termed Scripture a secondary rule!

Needless to say, however, Spirit alone would be rather spooky or vacuous. Bible alone becomes mere poetry or other forms of literature, left only to be judged aesthetically rather than spiritually. The two need to be related in some way, but ranking one as primary and the other secondary is not it.

Barclay not only called the Spiritual revelation the objective one and Scriptural subjective, but he described Scripture as a secondary rule of value in its capacity to enhance the primary rule of the risen Lord. On technical matters of biblical criticism and hermeneutics, Samuel Fisher, with an Oxford M.A., was not only well equipped, but was one of the best Scripture scholars of his time, of any denomination. Barclay, nevertheless, in spite of the error on “authority,” had a particular gift for stating most scriptural matters clearly, readably, and inspiring.

Barclay followed Fox in stating that Revelation continues, and yet this does not imply the introduction of any “other doctrine or Gospel than that which was delivered by the Apostles,” or by Christ while he was on earth. It does mean that the Holy Spirit who inspired the Scriptures continues to unfold added insight “on the matters for which the foundations have already been laid.” Further, if the same Spirit who inspired the Scriptures is the source of continuing revelation, that revelation will not contradict the written witness.

Very clearly, the Scriptures bear witness of Christ, but Friends refused to believe that they were “the one and only rule of faith.” Revelation, according to Barclay, is knowledge, and religious experience provides a tested witness. On this point Friends were more accurate biblically than the would-be biblical reformers who tried to limit the revelatory workings of God to the written text (and especially their interpretations of it). As well as going against the experiences of the saints, such doctrines go against the plain teachings of Scripture, and Barclay spells out his critique of this unbiblical tendency brilliantly in his Catechism and Confession of Faith.
Central to Barclay’s concern, however, is the transformative role Scripture plays in the reader’s life: “The Scriptures are sufficient to move us to an historical faith,” but not to a “saving faith without inward objective revelation.” Further, “Regeneration is the great work of religion…the very purpose of Christ’s coming. We can not be saved…without being born again, washed and renewed by the regenerating Spirit of God.”

Of final importance in the relationship between the Spirit and Scripture is the role it plays in the human-divine relationship. The following beautiful thumbnail account of Friends’ beliefs alludes to the life-changing work of Scripture without getting explicit about exterior and interior, subjective and objective, primary and secondary:

They that have been taught by the Grace of God, what to deny, and what to do: and to look and live above the world…wait for the glorious appearing of the great god, and their Savior Jesus Christ…the blessed end of their hope. Obedience and sufferings are but temporal, but the recompense everlasting (Isa. 64:4. 1 Cor. 2:9-10. Psalm 84:1, 10). The true followers of Jesus come through the man tribulations—from conviction to conversion to consummation, the end of all.

NOTES

1. John Punshon pointed this out at a retreat along with Howard Macy on Scripture, June 2-4, 2000, at the Conservative Friends Center in Barnesville, OH. The wording is that of Barclay’s Apology in Modern English ed. by Dean Freiday (Newberg, OR: Barclay Press, 4th printing, 1991). To facilitate reference by those who believe that Christ spoke King James English, and Quakers should too, the citations in addition to page references to the above—here p. 46—will give the Proposition and Section [¶] no. The reference here is the Statement of Proposition III.

2. Apology III, p. 46; and III, ¶2, p. 50.

3. Ibid., ¶6, p. 60.


5. Ibid., p. 113.


7. Apology, III, ¶9, p. 64.

8. Fox Doctrinals, Epistle/Preface, first page (unnumbered).
9. Although “inward Principle” doesn’t offer a very clear image in today’s usage, the Oxford English Dictionary’s Def. I is sufficient: “Origin, source, source of action.”


11. Apology, III, Proposition III Statement, p. 46; and also last line p. 64, where Barclay refers to “our doctrine of the primacy of the Spirit.” And in the Postscript to the Aberdeen “Dispute,” it is said that: “The Spirit is the Principal Rule of Faith,” p. 592.

12. Scripture is called “a secondary rule” in the Apology, Proposition III Statement; III, ¶4, p. 56 refers to “Christ’s Spirit the principal guide.”

13. Regarding hermeneutics, a brief essay is appended.

14. It is very gratifying to see Samuel Fisher’s work have a place on this program. In spite of Edward Grubb’s 1912 article calling attention to him, surprisingly in the Cambridge History of English Literature, in an article on “The Early Quakers,” he has been sadly neglected by Quaker scholarship.


16. Ibid.


18. Experience, now an epistemological category in many denominational theologies, was first given major attention by Friends. Testing, or Discernment, characterized an appeal to the Christ Spirit as the criterion for Truth or action, either by the group or the individual. An unusually fine study of the way in which it functions in Quaker decision-making is Michael J. Sheeran, S.J. Beyond Majority Rule: Voteless Decisions in the Religious Society of Friends (Philadelphia: Phila. Yearly Meeting, 1983) done originally in studying for a Ph.D. in political science at Princeton University. Fr. Sheeran is now president emeritus of Regis College, Denver, CO. In reference to the present study, cf. also T.T. Preface, p. xxxiii.

