1-1-2001

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Juliet Dodds

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GEORGE KEITH: BIBLICAL APOLOGETIST FOR THE RELIGIOUS SOCIETY OF FRIENDS

JULIET DODDS

INTRODUCTION

As a Quaker, George Keith used the Bible to give words to a personal experience of direct revelation from God through the Spirit of Christ within. There is difficulty, however, in speaking of Keith as primarily a Quaker. He came to the Quakers around the 1660s from a Calvinist background, and throughout the 1670s Keith wrote extensive treatises, alone and with other weighty friends like George Whitehead and Robert Barclay, developing and defending Friends’ doctrine. After some struggle and controversy about the historical and spiritual nature of Christ, however, Quakers formally disowned Keith in 1695, and he became an Anglican in 1700. His later writings from the 1690s show Keith’s gradual departure from his earlier articulation of immediate revelation to an extended critique of Quaker views on the inner light at the expense of doctrinal standards. One might say that the earlier Keith employed Scripture in arguing the immediacy of revelation against entrenched Presbyterians, whereas the later Keith challenged the sufficiency of inward religion as a corrective to evolving patterns within the Religious Society of Friends. As an apologist for and against Friends, Keith resorted to Scripture.

Keeping in mind that George Keith was more complex than some simplistic presentations of him convey, this short survey of his works will provide an understanding of how Keith used Scripture as an early member of the Religious Society of Friends. After examining a variety of Keith’s works, two general observations emerge: first, Keith used a dogmatic approach to Scripture, as did most of his contemporaries. This is not to imply, though, any of the negative connotations of the word commonly associated with it. The description “dogmatic approach” means that those engaged in biblical studies were interested in making confessional claims about their faith. What Keith and
other Quakers attempted in using dogmatic approaches was the developing of apologetics for the truth as understood by Friends.

Interestingly, Keith’s primary focus of his dogmatic study was developing a theological and scriptural defense of immediate revelation. His writings, studies, and concerns as a Quaker examined in this essay begin with his experience of immediate divine revelation, and the rest of his theological inquiry can be seen to fall under this rubric. This being the case, a look at some of the Scripture Keith used to justify this Quaker doctrine of revelation will serve our inquiry well.

Although Keith’s main concern was establishing the doctrinal legitimacy of the Quaker stance on immediate revelation, he did not confine himself to the dogmatic model entirely. The second general observation emerging from Keith’s works regards his creative use of allegorical interpretation. When the text did not literally discuss the Light, the Seed, or inward reality of the Spirit, Keith used allegorical interpretation to construct biblical metaphors for the internal reality of immediate revelation. Within this approach Keith also used the biblical text as a resource for drawing analogies representing the historical events he experienced as a Quaker. I will examine a few familiar texts as examples of how he used allegorical interpretation.

**Quaker Dogmatics**

Many of Keith’s Quaker writings were in response to accusations of heresy raised by other Christians against Friends. Because of this, his work naturally developed an apologetic and dogmatic quality, and Keith’s responses to theological challenges launched his articulation of his personal experience of immediate revelation and its consequences. Using this experience as a hermeneutic lens, he searched the Scriptures looking for words and evidence to develop a doctrinal system supporting this immediacy of religious experience. From such doctrinal inquiries he produced his primary Quaker apologetics.

When Keith wrote about the doctrine of immediate revelation, the main components of his argument highlighted the importance of the Spirit and of Scripture. He never completely accepted the Protestant call for *sola scriptura*, Scripture alone, even when he published retractions of his Quaker beliefs in the late 1690s. This is significant because the issues upon which he railed most vehemently against included centrally the emerging tendency among Friends to value the Inward Light over the outward authority of Scripture. For
Keith, however, the work of God’s Spirit as a source of revelation was always an important part of his understanding. As a Friend, immediate revelation seemed to take the sacred place Scripture held in Protestant theology, and yet, the adequacy of all doctrines and leadings of the Spirit was also to be tested by Scripture. Note Keith’s combining of these two measures: “Now all doctrine which is contrary both to scripture and experience is not from the Spirit, but against it.”

The theology of immediate revelation developed by Keith and Whitehead rested on the concept of the light within derived from John 1:9, “The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.” The light of Christ serves as an internal guide, or seed, which allows humanity to receive direct guidance from God without any external means, such as Scripture or sacraments. Ironically, in forwarding such views, Keith and other Friends were closer to scriptural teaching than those advocating the limiting of revelation to the biblical text alone.

Several Scripture passages bolstered this doctrine of immediate revelation and testified to the Light and its internal quality. For instance, Keith used the book of Romans, one of his favorites, to show the internal character of faith and the passing of the outward law. In Romans 8, for instance, Paul’s discussion of walking in the Spirit and the law passing away were used by Keith to demonstrate that outward forms were not part of the Gospel dispensation, or the new age. What Keith did most often with texts like Romans was to use the Bible as a springboard into a discussion over theological issues. With this Romans passage, Keith explained how immediate revelation worked in this new covenantal stage, as well as how it manifested in the “first covenantal dispensation.”

Keith returned to certain books of the Bible like John, Romans, Galatians, and Isaiah, to name a few. It is interesting to note that the books he selected are all very theological, like the Pauline literature; abstract, like the high Christology in John; or already spiritualized typologically by the Church to read Christ into their message, like Isaiah. Keith used abstract books, rather than narrative, to orient them toward Christ. I imagine he did so because it was easier to use texts that are conceptual and abstract when developing a doctrine about the nature of the inward Christ.

This dogmatic use of Scripture was typical for Keith’s time period, before a sense of historical consciousness came to dominate
biblical studies. On the other hand, Keith did show astute attention to historical context, as well as textual issues, especially when it suited his purposes. What makes Keith’s Quaker writings different from other dogmatic theologians is that he started his doctrinal studies with his own personal experience of revelation. He did not make this explicit in his apologetic works, but testimony to his own experience rose out of his epistle he wrote to Aberdeen Friends during his imprisonment there:

…but as they find and feel in themselves the approbation and allowance of the Lord’s Spirit therein…even to take up the cross to every work and word, yea to every desire and thought of the heart, which is not manifestly known to be of the Lord, the blessed experience wereon, I have often found, and daily find, waiting and earnestly desiring of the Lord that the mystery of his Cross I may more and more learn, that I may become crucified even to all that is of the World, and alive in him, ceasing from my own works, not being able to do, nor daring to do any thing without him, which is not only my testimony, but the testimony of all that have come to live in any measure of truth.

This subjective account did not weaken Keith’s defense of Quaker doctrine; instead, it showed his personal experience as the starting point for his convictions. This emphasis upon experience was the crux of what he had to say about immediate revelation. What developed from this idea became the establishing point, then, for the larger outline of his theological understanding, including such topics as Scripture, sacraments, and ministry.

**Allegorical Interpretation**

When Keith was not directly building a case for immediate revelation in his hermeneutical, he often allegorized Scripture. In many ways, his creativity as a theologian can be seen most lucidly in his allegorical interpretations of biblical text (even though allegorical interpretation appears outdated to many modern scholars). His focus was to give biblical expression to the ineffable moving of the Spirit, but he also employed allegorical and analogical methods in his depicting of who was on the side of truth and who was not. Noting a few familiar passages illuminates what he did with these creative approaches to Scripture.
To give scriptural proof for the immediacy of God’s revelation, for instance, Keith took the familiar Genesis story of creation and made God’s command, God’s immediate and revelatory word, the fabric of the entire creation. He wrote:

For, by His Word, His Immediate Word, He doth all things, He speaks, and it is done: God made the Heavens and the Earth, and this whole Fabrick [sic] of the Creation, by His Word, His Immediate Word, and He upholds all things thereby.  

Thus, the sense of Quakers’ experience of revelation was not only a reality and part of the new dispensation, or new covenant, it was sketched as the very essence of God’s creation.

Likewise, the familiar story of Jesus calming the storm took on quite a different meaning when Keith used it to explain how the Christ within churned up the sea of consciousness to shine light on sin within the individual. Note the personal impact of such a move, as this churning of consciousness was a graphic descriptor of the way early Quakers felt themselves convinced of sin; likewise, the calming of life’s storms had powerful existential overtones to the imagery. The believer was helpless, just as the disciples found themselves helpless when faced with the force of the storming sea. The only means to calm the sea of inner turmoil was obedience to the inner Christ:

...could he be hid From the fierce Wrath of God, revealed against him in his Conscience; All the words of scripture, All the curses writ therin could not Move him; he hath oft heard them, and made light of them all. I say, as it is God alone who raiseth this storm, and bringeth their trouble upon him; so it is he alone who can calm and quiet it again; he must say to the wind and raging waves of the sea, be still, and they obey him; and that which brings peace and calmness, true calmness and stillness to a man’s conscience....

Keith also applied negative and positive associations in Scripture to his adversaries and allies, respectively. In the aforementioned letter to Aberdeen Friends, Keith made an analogy between the contemporary church structures of his time and Egypt and Babylon, alluding to both the Exodus story as well as Revelation. From Keith’s perspective, the apostate church, metaphorically called “the Egyptians” and “Babylonians,” oppressed the Religious Society of Friends. Not only did Keith thereby explain biblically why the persecutions were happening, he also appropriated the powerful hope imbedded in these narrations of God’s intervention against such foes,
a reminder that carried great hope for Friends. Keith often allegorized Scripture in this manner to account for Quaker persecution and disappointing occurrences of his time despite a belief in a sovereign God. By means of establishing parallels within biblical narratives, Keith’s audiences were made to understand on which side of the fence they happened to be.

Keith also used this sort of allegorical interpretation to exposit the reality he faced, both inwardly and outwardly. While believing that many texts needed a literal interpretation, Keith’s looking through his hermeneutic lens of immediate revelation may have made it easier for him to spiritualize many parts of the Bible in bolstering this conviction. He also used allegorical interpretation to demonstrate scriptural proof for his leading concern, immediate revelation, and pejorative biblical references became readily associated with the adversaries he sought to overcome. Conversely, positive associations in Scripture became meaningful sources of encouragement, bolstering faithfulness to the cause and confidence in God’s being at work amidst the events of the times.

CONCLUSION

George Keith used Scripture to give words to his personal experience of the immediate revelation of God’s Light. He used the Bible to find proof and testimony to his own revelation, and he mined its content to give authority to the doctrine he developed out of his experience. For Keith as an apologetic Quaker, Scripture was secondary to the experience of the direct revelation of the Spirit, and yet he believed the Bible testified and mediated to the truth of God’s revelation.

With a great interest in propagating the idea of immediate revelation, Keith searched through the Bible looking for specific verses that seemed to bolster his position. When Scripture did not specifically speak to his condition, Keith either turned to a more useful passage, or he creatively used allegorical interpretation to spiritualize the Bible in ways relevant. In these ways, he showed how Scriptures testified to the revelatory work of the Spirit. In facing Protestant persecution, Keith also used Scripture as a legitimator of his experience, and that of Quakerism, by citing a supportive passage and then laying claim to the authority of the Bible.

However, Keith as a Quaker apologist seeking to offset the limitations of Presbyterian dogmatism was not the whole of who George
Keith turned out to be as an apologist. It is also important to remember that his views of Scripture and church doctrine changed as he more and more felt the need to confront what he felt were problematic tendencies within the Society of Friends. The catalysts for these changes appear to have sprung from two theological disputes within Quakerism. First, Keith argued against the tendency of some early Friends to negate the necessity of Jesus’ death and resurrection for salvation. Secondly, some early Friends denied the bodily resurrection of the dead. This point was more contentious, and yet, it seems to have been the strident character of Keith’s arguments in favor of bodily resurrection and his uncompromising spirit that eventually led to his disownment.  

What began for Keith as an apology for immediate revelation gave way to an emphasis upon the mediation of revelation through Scripture and church teaching. Keith’s apparent reversal is exemplified in his answer to Barclay’s *Apology*: “The Authority of the scripture’s Testimony to that truth, depends not on the Spirit’s testimony in me, but it is inherent in the scripture itself.” Keith, as a Quaker, placed the immediate revelation of the Spirit as primary over Scripture. As an Anglican, Keith reversed these roles and placed primary consideration of Scripture over the revelation of the Spirit. In both cases, he rooted his apologetic endeavors in Scripture.

NOTES

4. Robert Barclay and George Keith, *Quakerism Confirmed, or, A vindication of the chief doctrines and principles of the people called Quakers from the arguments and objections of the students of divinity (so called) of Aberdeen in their book entitled Quakerism canvassed* (London: s.n., 1676), 1-2.
5. NRSV
7. Barclay, 4-5.
9. Ibid.
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