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QUAKERS AND THE BROADER CHRISTIAN MOVEMENT

ARTHUR O. ROBERTS

QUAKER THEOLOGICAL DISCUSSION GROUP

Keynote Address

Newberg, Oregon, June 19, 1996

WHEN THE QUAKER Theological Discussion Group began forty years ago, its organizers considered that “notional religion” was better avoided by engaging Quaker minds in thoughtful, prayerful dialogue on doctrinal issues than by spurning as non-spiritual the rational articulation of belief. Tides of theological reformulating, set in motion by the cataclysm of World War II, had surged upon Quaker shores. Wanting to avoid professional exclusiveness, these Friends named the journal, *Quaker Religious Thought*.

For many years annual conferences constituted the driving force. For various reasons the movement lost momentum and the organization floundered. At the 1990 conference it was agreed that the journal should be the major forum for dialogue, with conferences called when the editor and advisory council discerned a particular need.

We gather in Newberg, Oregon, on the campus of George Fox College, to discuss a topic deemed to be of crucial importance: “Quakers and the Broader Christian Movement.” Associate Editor Paul Anderson planned the conference program, assisted by Phil Smith, and in cooperation with Kathleen Kleiner and other officers of the Friends Association of Higher Education. It’s good to share venue with them.

Thank you for coming! We appreciate, too, the devoted efforts of paper readers and discussants. I am honored to be chosen for the opening address. I hope that by considering the Quaker relationship to the larger Christian community of faith we may understand better who we are and how together we may be more effective Kingdom witnesses. I first consider what it means to “do theology” and then pose some propositions about the relationship between Quakers and other Christians.

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DOING THEOLOGY THOUGHTFULLY

Theology is the study of God's attributes and relationships with the universe and its creatures. It is not a subset of philosophy, anthropology, sociology, psychology, or history, although these disciplines contribute to conceptualizing and communicating experiences with God. Some would limit theology to a descriptive level; for example, what people assert when they use God-talk. But Christian theology assumes a certain privileged character. It claims sources of truth (the Bible, the Church, the Spirit) and ways of knowing (intuitive discernment and leadings) interactive with, but not subordinate to, philosophical, scientific, and historical analysis. Theology seeks coherence at a spiritual level.

This requires humility. Arrogance can skew even logically compelling theological propositions. The light of Christ, as Paul said, is a treasure held "in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us." (2 Cor. 4:7 NRSV)

It isn't easy to interpret the work of God, whatever the modes of knowing. Truth may come through sensing, reasoning, and intuiting, but mystery remains at the horizon of each mode. And out of that mystery Christ is revealed, "our hope of glory." Whether through empirical data, logical entailment, or intuitive discernment; whether God be hidden, revealed, or glorified, good theological discussion requires a prayerful stance—a model for all disciplines of knowledge. In awe we stand before the Creator, whatever the paths and tools of our exploration. God is not ours to fashion but to worship and to heed. We understand in part. What God has revealed we share with others who also seek and are sought by God. We acknowledge with Augustine that God is greater in our thoughts than in our words, and greater in reality than in our thoughts.

How *do* we use words to articulate our thoughts and to share our experiences of the reality we name God? Let's look at some different approaches, each of which is, in Karl Barth's term, dialectical—reason and revelation in tension.

A basic approach is to do theology biblically.

Inductive Bible study organizes data into key concepts, from which implications and applications are drawn. Deductive Bible study expounds subordinate beliefs and practices. Church school writers do theology this way. So do most Bible scholars.

A compulsion to tear the Bible apart has gained certain scholars front-page publicity. Pulling down religious authority always gathers a crowd, and sometimes exposes hypocrisy. But what are Kingdom consequences of scientific reductionism when applied to our basic outward source of religious authority? What happens when “the only divinely authorized record of the doctrines which we are bound as Christians to accept” is gutted of truth claims? Do these challenges to central Christian doctrines really clarify truth? Or do they succumb to non-theistic worldviews? Obedience to Christ can be avoided by explaining away the supernatural as well as by specious citation. “Itching ears” don’t hear God clearly. Why do people resist or twist the Bible? Friend Peter Sippel thinks it may be “because the Jewish and Christian Scriptures are unique in their explosive power, and if they are not disarmed somehow they could rock the boat.” (E-mail Quaker Spectrum 4/25/1996)

Is it time for scholars to approach the Word of God written like parents seeking food for their families? A passion for wholeness impels Quaker scholars to combine academic rigor with humble discipleship. This is no easy task within a milieu that rejects revealed truth. We are taught that the Holy Spirit who gave forth the Scriptures should also interpret them. Does this principle guide Quaker scholars as well as Quaker worshippers?

Another approach is to do theology systematically.

Systematic theology is a rational approach to divine-human interaction. Doctrines are conceptualized using terms such as salvation, redemption, justification, and sanctification, with properly deduced subordinate principles. Fearing the dogmatic boundaries of systematic theology, Quakers, alas, sometimes have floundered in a bog of unsystematic theology. At worst, systematic theology traps God within an idolatrous verbal box. At best, systematic theology maps the divine-human landscape helpfully. People usually know that the map is not the territory. Over time Quakers have produced “road maps”

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that locate God's redemptive activities through Jesus Christ. Some eras seem more open than others to systematic formula. Quakers haven't been strong on this approach, although Robert Barclay and Joseph John Gurney come to mind, as does the 1887 Richmond Declaration of Faith. Following a New Testament model, Quakers wrote mostly apologetic literature, using systematic theology to defend and interpret contested beliefs.

Early Christians were admonished: "in your hearts [to] acknowledge Christ as the holy Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect...." (1 Peter 3:15) Let's face it, Quakers haven't always been prepared to give reasons for their hopes in Christ. Is a book of Quaker systematic theology somewhere on the horizon? If so, let it be done with Christian clarity, and with gentleness and respect.

A third approach is to do theology analogically.

Stephen Crisp's "A Short History of a Long Journey from Babylon to Bethel" is a singular example of seventeenth-century Quaker allegory. More frequently Bible metaphors constitute the analogical mode: Atonement is like blood shed for another, incarnation is like seed, Christ's presence is like light within. This is how Fox did theology. William Penn's phrase, "no cross no crown," uses political analogues to signify the redeemed life. Liberation theology bases quests for social justice upon the biblical Exodus.

Friends continue to depict doctrines analogically. Some Friends use Meeting (capitalized) to define a doctrine of the Church. At a recent Northwest Yearly Meeting gathering to identify what core beliefs needed reemphasis, a surprising number of Friends chose Christ as "present teacher."

A strength of the analogical approach lies in the evocative force of metaphor. Its weakness is a tendency for signs to get culturally obscured. Then verdant phrases wither into dry jargon, offering no lively analogues. Allegories are especially vulnerable to abuse. For example, the Scofield Bible imposed alien interpretations upon the text. Analogical theology works best when biblical knowledge is foundational to logical exegesis and linguistic creativity. Presently,

Christian allegory occurs mostly in fiction. Has Walter Wangerin blazed a path some Quaker writers might follow?

A fourth approach is to do theology historically.

Theology leaves a paper trail through time. Historians examine and describe such trails. This isn't easy. Circumstances obscure interpretation. Records get lost. Some Quaker historians, such as Larry Ingle, accent the social context of our movement. Wary of hagiography, they depict the earthy side of our heritage. In *The New Foundation Papers*, on the other hand, Friends zealously recover and distribute old documents for evangelistic purposes. Wary of contemporary culture they search old trails to recover spiritual vitality. This illustrates a tension between the historian as critic and as advocate. Within that tension historical theology takes shape in magazine and journal articles, combining analysis and advocacy in varying degrees. Books of Faith and Practice preserve a trail of doctrines that mark us as a people. In our many descriptive and interpretive histories theology appears in context. But a full history of Quaker doctrine? This requires a special sensitivity. Who will do it for us in the twenty-first century? The poem "The Professor" calls such an historian a "custodian of the maps/cartographer of the centuries/trustee of the mysteries," one who "knows where we have been" and can "tell us where we are going." (dedicated to Canby Jones by AOR, in *Practiced in the Presence*, ed. Snarr and Smith, FUM 1994)

A fifth approach is to do theology through narrative.

This is how we first teach children about God. Adults learn this way, too. Quaker journals used a narrative approach long before the current interest. Who can question the theological impact of George Fox's journal entry: "There is one Christ Jesus who can speak to thy condition." Woolman's story about visiting an Indian village teaches unconditional love: "my heart being enlarged in the love of Christ, I thought that the affectionate care of a good man for his only brother in affliction does not exceed what I then felt for that people." (*Journal*, Whittier Edition, p. 152)

What is the strength of narrative theology? It gives existential import to propositional logic. Its weaknesses? It can massage the ego, disguise unbelief, or succumb to hucksterism. In the future, look for

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narrative theology to be conveyed by non-Anglo Quakers such as Diego Chuyma, Theology professor at Bolivian Evangelical University, or David Niyonzima, Burundi Friends Church leader (currently under death threat).

As Nancy Thomas discerns, “narrative...is a valid vehicle of theological truth that Quakers would do well to reaffirm...a corollary to systematics, not a replacement.” (letter, 4/29/96) Notes on spiritual pilgrimage now appear on Quaker e-mail groups. Workshops on journaling help Friends share spiritual journeys. But to rekindle the Quaker vision we need narratives that show how God is in Christ reconciling the world. We want stories that flesh out our Christian doctrine of the Holy Spirit at work through the Church. We would hear of sinful people being brought into the Kingdom, back through the flaming sword, into the paradise of God.

THE INTERFACE OF QUAKERS AND OTHER CHRISTIANS

Several years ago the Oregon Department of Transportation posted three signs a few yards apart on a beach berm along Highway 101, north of where we live. Each carries the words “test sign” and the acronym ODOT. To the casual observer color and texture are similar. Presumably the one that weathers best will be a prototype for signs that really signify. But they’ve been there so long one wonders whether the differences really matter.

Are we more concerned about which Quaker or Christian group is best constructed, or how effectively they point the way to the Kingdom? Considering the Quaker interface with other Christians may help us answer that query.

Reflect upon an admonition by a well-known scholar, Geoffrey Nuttall, editor of George Fox’s *Journal*. Nearly forty years ago he wrote that Friends “need close touch with other Christians if they are not to dry up in the sand of their own peril, namely, a shallow humanism as much cut off from the fountain of life and truth as fundamentalism or ecclesiasticism can be.” (Pendle Hill Pamphlet #101 “To the Refreshing of the Children of Light”)

What do Friends hold in common with other Christians?

- A. With other Christians we face storms of countervailing culture:
 - 1. We seek to protect our children from anti-Christian influences.
 - 2. We struggle to accommodate social change without moral compromise.
 - 3. We resist attacks upon scriptural credibility.
 - 4. We face pressures to reduce to useful fiction Christian truth claims.
 - 5. We cope with technological disruption of community.
 - 6. We are scorned both for believing in Jesus and for not being Christ-like.
 - 7. We strive to overcome cynicism with hope.
- B. With other Christians we affirm certain doctrines [from NWYM F & P, p. 9]:
 - 1. The sovereignty of God the Creator (and the wonder of creation).
 - 2. The deity and humanity of Jesus Christ.
 - 3. The atonement through Christ whereby persons are reconciled to God.
 - 4. The resurrection of Jesus, bringing victory over sin and death.
 - 5. The gift of the Holy Spirit to believers.
 - 6. The authority of the Holy Scriptures.
- C. We share a common calling to witness the Kingdom Jesus proclaimed:
 - 1. We engage in Gospel proclamation.
 - 2. We provide for and sustain Gospel fellowship.
 - 3. We promote personal and corporate acts of love and justice.
- D. We cherish a godly hope for the future:
 - 1. For the power of love and truth, as Jesus taught and demonstrated.
 - 2. For the triumph, though through suffering, of good over evil.
 - 3. For personal overcoming of sin and death.
 - 4. For continued joy in the creation and wiser care of it.
 - 5. For the gathering of peoples to God's Kingdom.
 - 6. For a resurrection to life eternal.
 - 7. For a cosmos renewed in righteousness.

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What can other Christians contribute to Friends?

- A. An enriched understanding of the Church universal:
 - 1. Knowledge of Christian expressions different from our own.
 - 2. Appreciation for Christian continuity over the centuries.
 - 3. Awareness of different vocabularies of faith.
 - 4. Empathy for Christians who suffer for the faith.
- B. A renewed appreciation for Divine Grace:
 - 1. A reminder of the subtlety of sin.
 - 2. A check on a propensity to selective (and dour) legalism.
 - 3. A recollection of the joy of being a forgiven sinner.
- C. Perspectives on the work of the Holy Spirit:
 - 1. Other Christians practice guidance by the Spirit, too.
 - 2. The Spirit works in unpredictable ways and places.
 - 3. The gifts of the Spirit are variously deployed.
- D. Alternative forms of worship:
 - 1. Liturgies often sustain and communicate Christian tradition.
 - 2. Sensory expressions can offset incipient spiritual elitism.
 - 3. Non-verbal religious language can communicate the Gospel.

The issue of sacramental practices will be discussed in another session. Dean Freiday and others have studied the issue in depth. I offer this preface. Water baptisms, the eucharist, dancing, foot-washing, paintings, statues, spires, crosses, cathedrals, icons, holy water, incense, litanies, and special garb—such symbols minister to many people. Some Friends occasionally participate in or permit the outward rites of baptism and communion. They believe it affirms Christian unity. Other Quakers are offended, reminding us that early Quakers believed these rites obscured the inward presence of Christ in the heart and in the gathered church. But does that mean religious language must be restricted to verbal communication? The senses are gates for the soul. How does God enter them? A British Friend, David Hitchin, recently shared (e-mail, Quaker Spectrum 5/9/96) a little parable in which the order of a silent meeting for worship was changed drastically, to the consternation of the faithful. The table was removed from the center and put in a corner, people were noisy instead of quiet, no one closed worship with a handshake, etc. Concluding the parable Hitchin wrote:

If...you believe that Christ is present in our meetings, you may prefer to reduce the number of symbols to the minimum, but ritual is always there. You simply have to decide what it should be, and be as generous in your interpretation of what ritual means to other denominations as you hope they will be to Quaker practices (dare I call them “rituals”?).

What can Friends contribute to other Christians?

A. We offer an inclusive doctrine of divine revelation:

1. Christ as Light shows the universality of God’s law and grace.
2. Christ as Light affirms the particular significance of the Incarnation.
3. Christ as Light offers a unitary context for the natural and the supernatural.

Two quotations add commentary to these principles. The first is from the Epistle of the 1985 World Gathering of Young Friends. It states:

Our priority is to be receptive and responsive to the life-giving Word of God, whether it comes through the written Word—the Scriptures, the Incarnate Word—Jesus Christ, the Corporate Word—as discerned by the gathered meeting, or the Inward Word of God in our hearts, which is available to each of us who seek the Truth.

The second quotation is from a paper presented to the Friends World Committee for Consultation, Miami gathering (1995). In describing “border crossings” for Friends into the Hispanic community, Arturo Carranza, an Iowa pastor, identified three important points: “The Quaker belief that all people of all kinds matter to God, our Quaker peace testimony, and our Quaker Vision of a great people to be gathered.”

B. We offer insight about the place of the Scriptures:

1. They are the Word of God written, as distinct from the Word Incarnate.
2. The Spirit who inspired them is also the interpreter.
3. The Holy Spirit does not lead in ways contrary to the Scriptures.

C. We provide insights about the nature of the Church:

1. Christ is present to lead and to guide.

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2. Worship is participatory and non-priestly.
3. Covenant characterizes church polity and decision making.
4. Integrity of speech and action marks Christ's followers.
5. Ordinary people may minister—young or old, male or female.
6. The Church is God's agent for peacemaking and reconciliation.

In measure Quakers have followed Christ in sacrificial, redemptive activity. We have tried to be light and leaven in the world. We have affirmed by word and deed that God's Kingdom transcends tribe and tongue and nation. The Church as agent for reconciliation is being demonstrated by Quakers in Rwanda and Burundi, as Hutu and Tutsi together courageously bring Gospel healing to a badly rent society.

How is ecumenicity occurring?

Quakers and the broader Christian community of faith interact on several levels:

1. The workplace offers a Christian and non-Christian mix. Friends don't live in colonies any longer.

2. In neighborhoods Quakers participate with other Christians in Bible or prayer groups, and with other churches in Easter sunrise services and Seder meals. Friends join other believers in service projects such as Habitat for Humanity.

3. At the cultural level, our theological ideas are shaped and tested by a wide range of religious literature—books, magazines, plays, and television.

4. At the family level, church mixing occurs in friendships and marriage. Quaker schools don't reinforce in-group views and foster endogamous marriage as much as once they did. For Quaker youth in public schools Christian clubs offer shelter in a secular storm. Emphasis on tolerance blurs denominational distinctions.

5. At the scholarly level, educational transfers occur. To illustrate from our century: Consider the impact upon Quakers by Reinhold Niebuhr and C.S. Lewis, and the impact upon non-Quakers by Henry Cadbury and Elton Trueblood.

6. At the religious level, cross-worshipping takes place: Quakers with other Christians, other Christians with Quakers. Affiliate memberships increase fellowship and understanding. Consequently, some Friends modify their beliefs or join other churches. The reverse is also

true. Social mobility leads to inter-church crossovers. Dilution of doctrine may result, but strengthened convictions may also.

7. At the level of organization, ecumenical activity occurs. Formally this involves the National or World Councils of Churches, or the National Association of Evangelicals. Few persons are actively engaged, however, and membership has low priority in allocations of time, energy, and money.

Parachurch movements elicit wider participation. Youth may participate in Young Life or InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. Work camps are often ecumenical. The New Call to Peacemaking movement brings peace churches together. Mission programs share leadership training. Political and logistic necessity induce cooperation in humanitarian projects. Professional guilds provide Christian fellowship for groups as diverse as motorcyclists, athletes, and historians. The Society of Christian Philosophers, begun only twenty years ago, now has a thousand members, including several of us Quakers.

Promise Keepers is giving a spiritual boost to thousands of Quaker men (after some initial skepticism). Renovaré brings together Christians from all theological traditions. Richard Foster's leadership of this movement reminds us of Douglas Steere's ecumenicity in earlier years.

Will these inter-church relationships weaken or strengthen Quakers? Will they weaken or strengthen other Christians? More importantly, will the Body of Christ have a more effective witness in the world? Are these two goals compatible: a stronger Quaker witness and greater Christian unity? Yes, if we are more zealous for Christ as the head of the Church than we are for our place in the sun.

What can Friends and other Christians do together?

1. We can offer corrections to unbelief. In *Glory Season* (Bantam, 1993) David Brin describes a "sort of epoch in which questioning becomes almost a devotional act. In which all of life's certainties melt, and folk compulsively doubt old ways, heedless of whatever validity those ways once had. Ego and 'personal fulfillment' take precedence over values based on community and tradition. Such times bring terrible ferment" (p. 376). Reaffirming central Christian doctrines offers correction to such an epoch. Thomas Oden, of Drew University, has

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written a three-volume study (HarperCollins) reaffirming central doctrines about God. Is he showing us the way?

2. We can offer a credible and well-articulated Christian worldview. Science and religion ought not be estranged. The Templeton Foundation is investing heavily in studies aimed at ending that estrangement. Two George Fox professors, Bob Harder and Phil Smith, are among recipients of these grants.

3. We can nurture each other's families in worship. It is likely that inter-church mixing will continue. Affiliate membership offers a way to honor both basic Christian faith and the covenant of Quaker beliefs.

4. We can overcome parochialism through world Christian fellowship. Organizations fulfill a servant role. The Friends World Committee for Consultation does this for Quakers. Isn't it reasonable that all Friends should support this world fellowship?

Some Quakers are still uncertain about membership in the World Council of Churches. Some groups belong, others don't. It is presently a bone of contention in the Friends United Meeting. Is the Council too orthodox, not orthodox enough, too sacramental? Dean Freiday and other Quakers have sought to overcome the Council's insistence on ritualistic sacramental unity. For years WCC (and the NCC) has been spurned by evangelicals, including some Quakers. They considered it theologically fuzzy and captive to left-wing social agendas. But now some evangelical organizations are deemed theologically shallow and captive to right-wing social agendas. A passion for Christian unity is more difficult in practice than in theory! In a recent Council magazine, *Together*, however, is a statement many Friends just might find unity with:

Conversion is turning away from all that is opposed to God, contrary to Christ's teaching, and turning to God, to Christ the Son, through the work of the Holy Spirit. It entails a turning from the self-centeredness of sin to faith in Christ as Lord and Savior. Conversion is a passing from one way of life to another new one, marked with the newness of Christ. It is a continuing process so that the whole life of a Christian should be a passage from death to life, from error to truth, from sin to grace. Our life in Christ demands continual growth in God's grace. Conversion is personal but not private. Individuals respond in faith to God's call but faith comes from bearing the proclama-

tion of the word of God and is to be expressed in the life together in Christ that is the Church.

How can Friends be good stewards of our covenant?

By reaffirming our Christian faith and by stressing what unites rather than divides. Quakers can interact with each other and with others in a Christ-like manner. We can use words with integrity, resisting stereotypical labels. “Liberal” isn’t a synonym for unbelief. “Evangelical” isn’t a synonym for intolerance. “Fundamental” isn’t a synonym for bigotry. “Conservative” isn’t a synonym for backwardness.

Friends constitute one of the Christian families of the Church. Does this make us “sectarian”? No. It is not that Catholics are the Church and Quakers a sect; or that Quakers are the Church and others are sects. Quakers aspire to be faithful servants in the household of God. We can cooperate with other Christians on projects of international mission and service. We can pray with and for other Christians more, and carp at them less. At local, regional, and world levels, Quakers can demonstrate the wholeness of the Church by sustaining the three essential aspects of Christian witness: Gospel proclamation, fellowship, and service.