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Volume 28, No. 1

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May 1996

Sponsored by the Quaker Theological Discussion Group

The purpose of the Quaker Theological Discussion Group is to explore the meaning and implications of our Quaker faith and religious experience through discussion and publication. This search for unity in the claim of truth upon us concerns both the content and the application of our faith.

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ABOUT THIS ISSUE

VAIL PALMER'S INTEREST in the relationship of Quaker thought and twentieth-century social philosophy (including Marxian analysis) finds expression in a major article, "Religion and Ethics in the Thought of Richard Ullmann," and in his review of Douglas Gwyn's recent book, *The Covenant Crucified: Quakers and the Rise of Capitalism*.

Pertinent to the theme of the forthcoming conference, Paul Anderson reviews the essays of the 1991 Lancaster gathering, edited by Michael Mullett, *New Light on George Fox (1624-1691)*.

This issue also contains concerns of a more hortatory nature. Bill Samuel provides an invited response and Rob Tucker a proffered one to questions about the meaning of Quaker membership, raised by papers in the previous issue (#86). An editorial voices concern about the erosion of Christian faith within parts of Quakerdom and calls for penitence and reaffirmation of that faith.

AN EDITORIAL EXHORTATION

MANY YEARS AGO Lucia Beamish wrote in *Quaker Monthly* (April 1965) that "unless we seriously believe the apostles were liars, or that the Christian Church was founded on delusion, we must accept the history of that Church, with its millions of believers, as embodying a credible tradition." The author warned Friends, in rejecting church festivals and rituals, not to throw out the central truths signified by those symbols.

This admonition is timely. Some Friends are sitting loose to the Christian faith, or even rejecting it altogether, to the sorrow of Christian Quakers. Particularly troubling is the insinuation that Quakerism supersedes its Christian origins. In understandable reaction, some Quakers minimize historic Quaker testimonies, and consequently have difficulty defining who they are among the families of the Church. Others have forsaken Quaker fellowship.

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At the impending Quaker Theological Discussion Group conference (see announcement) Friends will look more closely at our relationship to the larger Christian community. This gathering addresses widely voiced concerns to recover normative Quaker witness to core Christian beliefs.

There are many causes why Quakers backslide from the Christian faith. Some defections arise simply from bad faith. Others evolve from sincere but misguided efforts at cultural accommodation, often in a context of caring. I will address some causes for defection, acknowledging how vulnerable we all are to temptations disguised as the apparent good and how graciously the Lord beckons us back, whether from unbelief or unrighteous conduct.

One cause of Quaker backsliding is an assumption that the cultural death we are experiencing requires new stories to replace traditional ones. There is a danger that in the search for contemporary spiritual stories some may substitute ego-messaging for walking in the Light of Christ. Celebrities such as Elvis Presley have become icons of secular salvation. This is unsettling. But is it more unsettling than Quakers worshipping at shrines of faddish, neo-animistic worldviews? Often “post-Christian” Quakers select admirable qualities from Quaker history only after stripping away foundational beliefs. Such deconstruction speaks much of human presumption but little about historical integrity and the continuity of Truth.

A second cause for Quaker backsliding is a feeling that Christianity is to blame for certain social ills and should be replaced by more tolerant universal religious expressions. These ills may be defined as patriarchal or ethnic domination, restrictive morality, or environmental abuse. Granted that persons within Christendom have been greedy, hypocritical, bigoted, ignorant, and fallible, to blame these ills upon biblical faith is irrational. The highest forms of toleration and the most significant concerns for justice arise when persons lovingly but tenaciously live by godly convictions. Such discipleship isn’t easy, but it is what Jesus taught and demonstrated, and what Christians at their best understand, and pray for the grace to achieve.

A third cause for defection is the view that Christianity is too parochial. The global village needs a more inclusive religion, some say, more compatible with science. What about the other religions? What about life on other planets? To such questions I respond that the Quaker understanding of Christ as Light offers good theological insight for a world knit together technologically and struggling to

affirm plural culture. It honors both the uniqueness and inclusiveness of God's revelation, both the universal and the particular motions of the Divine. In the Christian vision, after all, God's kingdom transcends tribe and tongue and nation. Why don't we just stick to our covenant mandate, in the power of the Spirit witnessing the good news that God was in Christ reconciling the world. Let God worry about the "sheep not of this fold," wherever they are found, whether on this planet or elsewhere in the billions of galaxies in the cosmos.

A fourth cause of backsliding is a worry that if we are too Christian we will lose our distinctive place to the world. There is a tendency for declining groups to become eccentric in order to survive. This is a very subtle demonic temptation. It's one thing to welcome into worship seekers and persons bruised by organized religion or social injustices. But it is another thing to abandon Christ the Incarnate Word of God as the cure for souls. The Quaker movement arose to heighten not diminish the Christian witness. Let's be true to those convictions.

Robert Barclay attributed the breakdown of Christian unity to persons who have departed from their first love and zeal for Truth but are ashamed to make open apostasy. So they become restless seekers of novelty, and use the excuse of personal liberty to cause divisions in the church (*Anarchy of the Ranters*, Sec. II). His words are pointed. Are they pertinent? I think so. As Barclay said, the Church is a gathering of persons for whom Christ is rightly the head, who share with conviction certain doctrines and principles of Christian faith.

I urge Friends to recover unity and joy in believing the Christian Gospel. Let the Incarnation, Atonement, and Resurrection be our lived-out, talked-about, faith stories. I urge repentance for sins of unbelief and unrighteousness. Let Christ be the presence in our midst, our central word of witness. Let's affirm the Church in its wholeness, following Jesus Christ boldly into the twenty-first century. In humility and prayer let us ask God to rekindle the holy fire!

—A.O.R.