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# Foreword to A Catechism and Confession of Faith

Paul N. Anderson

George Fox University, [panderso@georgefox.edu](mailto:panderso@georgefox.edu)

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## Foreword

Robert Barclay is most widely known for writing the *Apology for the True Christian Divinity* (1676 in Latin; 1678 in English). But this was not his first important Quaker work. *A Catechism and Confession of Faith* was written in 1673, about seven years after his “convincement” of the truth, and when he was only 24 years old.

In his preface to the *Catechism* he writes that he envisioned early on that such a piece would be both possible and feasible. How right he was! Much of the scriptural foundation for the propositions in the *Apology* are clearly laid out in this important work. While the *Apology* argues Quaker assertions theologically, and within the realm of philosophic rational discourse, the *Catechism and Confession of Faith* is designed to walk the common reader into the spiritual faith and vital religious experience at the heart of early Christianity.

The editors and I believe that making it available again in this accessible form will not only provide Friends a useful tool for religious educators to use, but it will also magnify the center of “basic Christianity” in ways that could make a difference in the larger world.

Set against the backdrop of the Westminster Confession, the *Catechism and Confession of Faith* claims continuity with the Reformers in adhering to the authoritative teachings of the scriptures and the goal of recovering the heart of Apostolic Christianity. Critically engaging the various expressions of established religion, Barclay shows himself to be a religious sociologist ahead of his time as well as an astute biblical theologian. He criticizes not simply one group or another but points to the tendency of all religious organizations to “depart from the simple, pure gospel that had been delivered in its original splendor and integrity.” In this sense, Barclay sought to continue the reform begun by Luther and others by seeking to *reform the Reformation*, appealing to its original aspirations and callings, lest their successors establish and build up “what their fathers pulled down!”

While not all of these “accretions” resulted from “yielding to the inclinations of the ego,” Barclay effectively turns the Reformers’ criticisms of Catholicism against the Protestants’ own “substitutes for

the gospel” and tendencies to exalt opinions and notions “above the truth”—particularly as revealed in scripture. At this point, Barclay constructs his outline of the Christian faith upon the two foundational premises of the Reformation itself: that scripture should be held as the authoritative measure of all principles and doctrines, and that the plain and easily understood meanings of scripture are to be preferred over more convoluted ones. Barclay therefore constructs his approaches to central Christian doctrines in a question-and-answer format highlighting the teachings of scripture in response to questions of the day.

This approach was designed to provide instruction regarding the central teachings of scripture, but it also served an apologetic function. It defended Quakers against the accusations of some Protestant leaders that their views were either unorthodox or unscriptural. Barclay here points out the irony that those who claimed to reform the Christian faith on the basis of scripture were now persecuting a group whose principles “are found in scripture, word for word!” Here is a case where the basic Quaker faith is presented not as new revelation challenging scripture, but scriptural doctrine challenging the conjectures of those claiming to be biblical authorities, but who had denied central motifs within scripture: including the clear teachings of Jesus, the saving and sanctifying work of Christ, the authentic character of worship and ministry, and the ongoing leadership of the risen Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit. The appeal to the reader is put in most inviting terms:

*If you really love the scriptures and desire to hold the plain doctrines derived from them, rather than to far-fetched implications, you will easily observe there the complete principles of the people called Quakers. These views are clearly couched in scripture words, without addition or commentary, particularly in respect to what adversaries claim against them. On controversial matters the scriptures plainly decide. No quibbling, no academic subtleties (or worldly wisdom) that multiply words without adding knowledge and only obscure the meaning....*

*I shall leave it to the rational judgment of readers unbiased by self-interest (that great enemy of fairness) and willing to follow the light of Christ in their consciences to decide if the scriptures do not pertinently and aptly answer the questions!*

Barclay’s next move is a brilliant one. Rather than assert a confession and then back it up by scripture, he begins with the scriptural content

first. Only after the light of scripture has been cast upon fourteen topics central to the Christian faith does Barclay introduce the fifteenth and sixteenth chapters, which involve a Confession of Faith and its introduction. An interesting fact about the topics covered in the Confession of Faith is that nearly all of its articles relate to the authenticity of religious experience and its implications. From the immediacy of experiencing God to the possibility of perfection and sanctification, Barclay challenges the ways Protestants and others either lowered their standards for the normal Christian life or delimited its attainment to organizational means.

This is followed, however, by "A Short Discussion and Appeal to All Christians" (Chapter Seventeen) in which Barclay criticizes Roman Catholics for depending too heavily upon tradition rather than scripture, Socinians for denying the divinity of Christ, Arminians for not grounding optimism in "that spiritual force that enlightens everyone—the Light of Christ," and finally the Protestants again for their refusal to heed the very scriptures they claimed with such vehemence to be authoritative. He challenges their teaching that God has "committed his counsel wholly to writing" by citing clear scriptures which emphasize the ongoing revelatory work of Christ. Likewise, Barclay challenges wooden approaches to the Sabbath and unscriptural developments of the sacraments. Barclay chose these issues at least in part because Friends had been persecuted for not living up to Protestant doctrines, and yet Barclay exposes with ample clarity the weak scriptural bases of these dogmatic views.

The appendices and comments by Dean Freiday at the end of the volume shed valuable light on Barclay's work, including issues related to the producing of a critical text. Arthur Roberts likewise has added notes and applied his keen critical mind to many of the issues involved in producing this book. The use of the NRSV is important to the work, even though Barclay worked from the 1611 Authorized Version. The text-critical discoveries made over the last century and the overall adequacy of the NRSV translation serve Barclay's work well, and notes have been added when the reference to the earlier version, or other modern translations seems helpful. The teamwork of Arthur Roberts and Dean Freiday makes a winning combination here, and the world is indebted to their labor and astute judgment in preparing this reader-friendly text.

How will Barclay's *Catechism and Confession of Faith* be used? Only time will tell. For one thing, it makes an excellent discussion

resource and study guide for young people and adults alike seeking to be deepened in Quaker beliefs and perspectives. However, lest it be assumed that such a piece will be of value only to the family of Friends, it is my belief that the broader world will be challenged and inspired by this important volume as well. It will certainly instruct many about the character of early Quaker faith and practice, but more importantly, it will help all of us consider more carefully the character of authentic Christian faith and expression. After all, such is the central Quaker vocation.

—Paul Anderson

*Professor of Biblical and Quaker Studies  
George Fox University*