

1-1-1959

Comments on "The Quaker Doctrine of the Holy Spirit"

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Recommended Citation

Benson, Lewis; Brown, Thomas S.; and Thomas, Charles F. (1959) "Comments on "The Quaker Doctrine of the Holy Spirit"," *Quaker Religious Thought*: Vol. 1, Article 3.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt/vol1/iss1/3>

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Comments

LEWIS BENSON

Howard Brinton's paper on *The Holy Spirit* touches a wide variety of subjects such as the relation of early Quakerism to the Reformers of the 16th century and to the 17th century Puritans in England and New England. He deals with the relation of Quakerism to Methodism; religious individualism and modern Protestantism; the relation of the Anabaptists to Luther; and the relation of 17th century Quakerism to 18th, 19th and 20th century Quakerism. In our time when Quaker historiography is in transition, there is a strong temptation to comment on these matters but this would extend these comments beyond the space allotted.

Although the paper is headed, "The Quaker Doctrine of the Holy Spirit," it really describes two doctrines of the Holy Spirit, both of which are represented as belonging to the Quaker faith. The first doctrine is described as understanding the Spirit in terms of "personal encounter." It is an "I-Thou experience." It involves response to "the spoken words of the Word made Flesh." For those who take this approach terms like "Christ Within" or "Inward Christ" have a warm "personal quality."

The writings of Fox illuminate the master-disciple relationship that belongs to this first approach. Fox taught that the inward teacher is "the spirit and light of Jesus."¹ In his Epistles he exhorts Friends as follows:

. . . hear, obey, and follow him, who is the same today as he was yesterday, and so forever.² . . . speaking of God and Christ
. . ., signifies nothing, except they do his will; that is, practise it and be obedient to what he commands and requires.³

. . . it is good for everyone to have a sense of the resurrection of Christ, and not seek him below; but seek him above, for

1. George Fox, *Journal*, 1952, p. 20.

2. George Fox, *Works*, Vol. 7, p. 277.

3. George Fox, *Works*, 1831, Vol. 8, p. 122.

he is risen from the dead, and lives, and sits at the right hand of the living God.⁴

To the objection that "since his resurrection and ascension he doth not speak now; — the answer is, that 'as God did speak by his Son in the days of his flesh, so the Son, Christ Jesus, doth now speak by his Spirit'."⁵ "To preach Christ within does not deny him at the right hand of God for they that see him within, with Light and Spirit they see him at the right hand of God."⁶

Fox sees the Holy Spirit as a witness for Christ. It is with the help of the Holy Spirit that we relate Christ to Old Testament prophecy⁷ and know him to be our Lord.⁸ He directed people "to the spirit of God in themselves, which the Lord hath given them a measure of . . . that by the Spirit of God, they might know God, and Christ whom God hath sent . . ."⁹, and he claims that "the spirit doth instruct them to know their redeemer and their mediator. . . ."¹⁰

He testifies that in his own experience " . . . the Father of life drew me to his Son by his spirit"¹¹ and he exhorts, "Do not quench the Spirit of the Father by which he draws to the Son."¹² "Now what is the means by which God doth draw people to his Son, but by his Holy Spirit. . . . By this Holy Spirit, . . . God doth draw people . . . to Christ . . . the great Prophet in his New Covenant. . . . They that do not hear the Son of God, the great Prophet, do not mind the drawing of the Father by his Holy Spirit to his Son; but to them that mind the drawings of the good spirit of the Father to his Son, the Spirit giveth understanding Then they know that Jesus Christ is the way . . . and that none can come unto God but by and through his Son They know that Christ is their Mediator . . . and is able to the utmost to save all that come to God by him."¹³

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 169-170.

5. *Journal*, 1902, Vol. 2, p. 201.

6. Mss. bound with original Catalogue of G. Fox's Papers, p. 136.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

8. *Journal*, 1902, Vol. 2, p. 272.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 390.

10. Mss. bound with original Annual Catalogue of G. Fox's Papers, p. 37.

11. *Journal*, 1952, p. 11.

12. *Journal*, 1902, Vol. 2, p. 294.

13. *Journal*, 1902, Vol. 2, pp. 458-459.

The second doctrine of the Holy Spirit described by Howard Brinton is less personal. It is more theocentric than Christocentric. Here the terms "Eternal Word" and "Inward Christ" are identified with some operation or manifestation of the divine life in the soul of man, by whatever name this divine element may be called. Quakers who incline to this approach prefer abstract and impersonal terms such as "light," "life," and "authority of truth" and tend to avoid the personal "I-Thou" types of expression. In this view Christ, through his Spirit-filled life, leads us to the Spirit. He is the supreme example of the Spirit-filled man. In him the "culmination" of a "process" is "reached."

Quakerism has appeared and now appears in a wide variety of forms. Nearly all of these various forms are fed by two main streams of religious thought and experience. We might call these two streams the "Hebrew-prophetic-personal" and the "Greek-philosophical-impersonal." By whatever name these are called, they are the two main streams of religious thought and experience in the history of Western man. There has been tension between them ever since the first encounter of Greek and Hebrew religion over two thousand years ago.

Howard Brinton has given us a view of two doctrines of the Holy Spirit as they relate to these two streams. This kind of comparison could be extended to include correspondingly differing conceptions of God, Christ, revelation, ministry, worship, the relation of Quakerism to other religions, and many more that need not be mentioned.

These two doctrines or streams or interpretations have both appeared in Quaker history and our generation has inherited both of them. But until the 20th century the Hellenic stream was to be found as a speculative tendency on the fringe of a body of Quaker thought and experience which was firmly rooted in the prophetic Hebrew-Christian tradition. Today, due to an intensive Hellenizing process that has been going on for over seventy years, the relationship of these two streams has been reversed and we Quakers find ourselves in a new and vastly changed situation. We have now become largely uprooted from the soil of prophetic religion. The influence of the Hebrew-Christian tradition has never been weaker among us than it is at present. The dual character of Quaker thought that has developed out of

this situation has produced two communities within the Society of which there is evidence in nearly every local Quaker meeting and nearly every Quaker committee. It becomes increasingly difficult for these communities to communicate with each other as time goes on.

One reason why this situation has developed to its present proportions is that, until very recently, Quaker leadership has been extremely reluctant to recognize it and openly discuss it. A second reason is that the question itself has often been clouded by a basic misunderstanding. The pattern of this misunderstanding may be briefly outlined as follows. It is sometimes argued that these two streams of interpretation are merely two verbalizations of the same spiritual event. According to this theory, one stream tends to emphasize the inwardness of the experience and the other the outwardness of it. They therefore are said to complement each other and to be related to each other like the sides of a door.

The fallacy of this argument is that these two streams of thought, experience, and interpretation do not point to one single event but to two different events. Each has its own conception of inwardness and outwardness. They do not complement each other. They do not blend or harmonize. The most successful attempt to bring them into peaceful coexistence is to be found in the history of the Roman Catholic church. But in this case the result was attained in much the same way that tigers and lions can be forced to cooperate—by the authority of the whip.

Howard Brinton seems to be prepared to accept this duality as a kind of fixed pattern in Quaker life. He attributes our failure to be explicit to our "not daring to press the living spiritual event into the confines of a verbal formula." But we have not one event but two, and it is too late to plead that we remain in the innocence of unreflective experience (even if this were possible) because we have already constructed verbal formulas relating to both events.

This is a new situation in Quaker history and it is a situation that calls for decision. It may be that the Quaker mind of today has become so Hellenized that it is incapable of grasping the issues involved in this great question. In that case there will

be no contest and the vision of prophetic Quakerism will cease to be a force in Quaker history. What the future holds we do not know, but it is doubtful if the long hoped for renewal will come within our reach while this question remains unresolved.

THOMAS S. BROWN

I am grateful to Howard Brinton for his wise and irenic account of the Holy Spirit, especially in early Quakerism. It is interesting to note the steadily increasing number of articles and books by Protestant writers on the central importance of the Spirit in Christian religious life, recalling words of Paul and Calvin and Temple that give the same ringing honor to the Spirit that appears in Fox's writings. It is also interesting to note that "unprogrammed" Quakerism today has tended, I think, to move towards greater dependence upon the Spirit alone: "God is Spirit, and those who worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth." One finds also in the world of the unchurched intellectual a movement to explore the religions of the Spirit, especially Zen Buddhism and the more philosophical forms of Hinduism.

But the pitfalls of all religion are peculiarly acute for those who put primary reliance upon the Spirit, namely, idolatry and spiritual pride. An idol is a false god; is a projection of the self, and if primary attention is given to the Spirit experienced within one's *self*, idolatry is easy, if not inevitable. And furthermore it does not appear to me that the leading of the group is intrinsically more free from the danger of idolatry, for the group too has a self which invites self-worship. One has only to think of the idols which are nailed up in our Meetinghouses, beginning with those whose names are "Pastoral" and "Unprogrammed!"

Credos of the Spirit tend to be less specific in term, less concrete in commitment, less precise of eye and mind. Furthermore, in the present divided world, Friends who are committed to the ministry of reconciliation find in "the Spirit" a bond of language common to all the world. Some, however, in their enthusiasm for unity, have failed to acknowledge that the word "Spirit" may refer to essentially different realities or beings, and have fallen into a kind of universal spiritualism, which in my opinion,

finally destroys the living significance and power of both "religion" and "spirit."

It is the directness, the freedom from intermediaries, that constitutes one of the major appeals of spiritual religion. Yet a person who claims direct, unmediated contact or communication with the living God is making an appalling claim, and it is one which many thinking men and women today regard as idolatrous if not actually blasphemous. If I suggest that two human beings have direct, unmediated communication with each other, I thereby presume an extraordinary identity of nature and experience; and I am, therefore, led to suggest also that such contact between man and God presumes a like identity of nature and experience. This is a position which I find it impossible to accept in the light of experience. Men are not God. It is my observation, however, that the loose use of such phrases as "that of God in every man" and "the immortality of the soul" invites such confusion and contributes to the growth of idolatry.

Granted that such idolatry is innocent, yet innocence of itself is no guarantee against wickedness or destruction, as any study of history will verify, beginning with the innocent practice of human sacrifice in primitive fertility cults and rising to an innocence far more terrible among stern pietistic communities such as the Shakers.

This brings me to the second pitfall, which is spiritual pride. The essence of such pride is that because of some highly desirable virtue, some great religious good, I am closer to God and know more clearly his will than others not so fortunately endowed. Friends' attitude toward the sacraments, creeds, scripture, formal prayer, and "hireling ministers" has sometimes given the impression that Quakers have been granted an unusually direct, unmediated telephone connection with God and hence can almost infallibly inform others of his will. If we feel some hesitation about granting infallibility to the Pope and the Church, shall we claim such idolatrous infallibility for ourselves?

Turning back now to Howard Brinton's article and to his description of the tentative Quaker attitude toward the symbol of the Trinity, I find myself wondering if this does not touch the heart of the weakness of the emphasis on the Spirit alone? Is there not in stepping lightly past this great symbol the danger

either of a "Potherb Religion" or of a religion so pure, so free from symbols, so removed from the concrete, so "spiritual" in fact, that it has no relevance to the life we lead, no life in itself, no blood relationship to history, and so becomes one of the polite accoutrements of gracious, simple living?

The function of a symbol is to remind and to stimulate. The Trinity has been for many Christians a symbol of their experience of the presence of the living God. That men have disagreed about the symbol is perhaps more revealing of the quarrelsome nature of men than of the inadequacy of the symbol. Failure to wrestle with the symbol of the Trinity, failure to be reminded and to be stimulated has, I think, impoverished our religious life.

In reaction against the tumults over doctrine some Friends have abjured the term "Trinity," and some have moved swiftly and intently toward mystical monotheism. But monotheism in this mystical sense is "unthinkable" because it is an abstraction from life and from the concrete experiences of life, the raw material of thought, language, prayer; and so the tendency is either to conceive of God as the famous "faint, oblong blur" or to indulge in what one may call "Potherb Theology." By this latter phrase I mean the tendency to think of God in abstract terms and to introduce nouns to suggest what God is like (or is not like) almost at random until the brew is seasoned to taste. And the next step, because of the Aristotelian mind-set of the times, is to treat, though unconsciously, the various taste-producing ingredients as separate entities, i.e., as gods under God. This is the only way I can understand the use of the phrase "The Inner Light" in some contexts.

But neither such abstraction nor such idolatry is so likely to occur, it seems to me, within the full framework of the symbol of the Trinity, which keeps, as Tillich says, "The unity between the ultimacy and the concreteness in the living God."

If Quakerism is to be strong in its heritage from the Spiritual Reformation, it must keep its roots in the Bible, which is a living record of the struggle between God and man, between monotheism and idolatry, between fulfilment and pride, and which is a record from beginning to end of the urgent work of the Holy Spirit in admonishing, redeeming, empowering men in the great work of the Kingdom of God. Here is the record of an

"experimental" relationship with God far older and far more inclusive than anything in the brief life of Quakerism. Yet more important than mere age is the strong bond of human kinship we feel with those men and women who live in our concrete, historical world, rising to meet specific religious and ethical problems in ways that wring from us both our admiration and our assent.

The dangers to religious life in Fox's time were rigidity of form and fanaticism of spirit: in our day they are vagueness and flaccidity. The very forts which he stormed may well prove to be the ramparts from which we shall have to defend the great truth of Quaker experience that "Christ has come to teach His people Himself."

CHARLES F. THOMAS

Howard Brinton has shown effectively how the doctrine of the Holy Spirit is the "root of the tree" of Quaker faith and practice. It is encouraging to see the interest Friends are showing in the subject, and though we may not be able to systematize the experience of the Spirit into doctrine, discussing it is highly desirable. A doctrine of the Spirit can be a means of keeping Friends to the heart of religious experience as personal and group encounter with God. It could conceivably be a unifying force within the Society, because it unites us at a deeper level, one where we have not been too seriously divided.

There are two points at which our consideration of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit ought to give guidance to Friends. One is in helping our generation to give a rationale to the nature of personal encounter with God as Personal Reality, which involves a clear doctrine of man. We have mixed our metaphor in such a way as to confuse many people regarding encounter with God. By emphasis upon the Spirit it should be possible to clear the air. Let us hope in the second place that it will bring together a personal religious vitality with a courageous practice of the social testimonies, a reunion which is much needed. Surely it was direct encounter with God that produced this unity in the experience of early Friends.

It appears to be a reasonable generalization that neither the so-called evangelical Friends nor those who would not so designate themselves have really worked out their faith from the central doctrine of the Holy Spirit. This is particularly evident when we begin to talk about what makes a religion spiritual. Ideas seem to range all the way from mere enthusiasm to the highest functions of human reason. A doctrine of the Holy Spirit should give us God in his creative initiative and Self-disclosure as the heart of spiritual experience. Intimacy and potency are the most descriptive of the results of the Holy Spirit.

Howard Brinton has given us an inclusive survey of the doctrines and practices affected by the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Now let us become more explicit in the implications of the Spirit in formulating our doctrine of God, man, sin, Christ, the church, and the world. We have tended to work from the traditional experiences of Friends to our doctrines. Can we now assume that these experiences give us, supported by our own experience, the basic evidence that the doctrine of the Holy Spirit is central, and from that doctrine interpret these others in fresh language? Granted that early Friends were ambiguous in their doctrines and used multiple expressions and analogies, this only increases the necessity for a restatement today.

While I find myself in genuine unity with the interpretation which Howard Brinton has given, some of the references made with regard to church government, manner of worship, and the nature of ministry are not fully satisfying. In the first place these are in areas of practice more than they are in the areas of doctrine. They will vary according to situations and background. They will be varied even as the leading of the Spirit is unpredictable. The same importance cannot be attached to the practice of these matters as to the doctrines mentioned earlier. I think we would be put to it to try to prove our faith by these practices.

For example, Friends have not convincingly demonstrated much success at avoiding religious anarchy and confusion. If we had to prove our doctrine of the Spirit by the way we have handled church government the outlook would be disquieting. It is true to say that individualism is controlled by group precedence, but by group we usually mean our Monthly Meeting.

Meetings tend to resist any such authority being in larger organized groups of Friends, such as the Quarterly Meeting, Yearly Meeting, Five Years Meeting or General Conference, and the World Committee. The individualism of a Meeting can be a source of anarchy as well as a person can be. How far up the scale does the idea of control by the inspired group go? What Yearly Meeting has a way to deal with local Meetings which it feels are out of line? It is true that most Disciplines provide for a genuine discipline of subordinate meetings, but we fail to use it because of general resistance to any superior body of Friends.

The relation of the Spirit to ministry is another area in which we have difficulty. What, for instance, do we mean when as Friends we say the "worship of God requires no human leadership"? As far as individual worship is concerned, such a statement appears obvious enough, but can it apply to group worship without qualification? Participation in group worship through a vocal act is a form of leadership whoever the participant may be. Participation in group worship in a vocal way is a priestly or prophetic function, and is to be done under the direction of the Holy Spirit, to be sure. But only in a worship without any vocal expression could it truly be said that there is no human leadership.

Another ambiguity arises in the not uncommon statement that "man is not in a position to designate in advance the types of action or appointed speakers" if worship is to be under the direction of the Spirit. The implication is that there can be only one condition, time, and place suitable for the "call" of the Spirit. That is the present moment and in the gathered meeting for worship. Rather than liberating the Spirit this might be a dictation to the Spirit. His direction is neither limited to the hour of group worship, nor to forms and appointments. There could be, and surely are, times when the group should invite leadership and appoint acts of worship simply because the Spirit directs them in such action.

When is the vocal ministry "under the fresh and immediate anointing of the Spirit"? Is it a matter of time or of fact? Is what the Spirit inspires on Wednesday fresh for Wednesday and unfresh on Sunday? We have to be guarded in implying that the Spirit can or will inspire ministry for a worshipping group

only on the scene and at the hour of worship. The Spirit is not so limited. Some early Friends were under the urgings of the Spirit for months before they could bring themselves to speak in meeting.

The Spirit is a gift of God to those who respond to Him. It is the gift of Himself. It is not a likeness of God in man, but the visit of God to man. The gift is for personal salvation through the light of truth, judgment, love and comfort, or companionship. The Spirit is given to groups for the same purposes. It is a gift for the building up of the "body of Christ." The gifts are varied as to the nature of ministry in the group and the law governing their use is the law of love.