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Comments on "The Concept of Christ as Servant as Motivation to Quaker Service"

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And as we think with sorrow of Friends divided between those who support service and not missions, and those who support missions and not service, let us remember and determine to live by the words of the theme scripture of this paper: "Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

References
5. Ibid., p. 8.
6. Ibid., pp. 57f.
7. Ibid., pp. 61f.
8. Ibid., pp. 76f.
10. Ibid., p. 78.
11. Ibid., pp. 299, 303.
12. Ibid., p. 296.
15. Ibid., pp. 101-103.

Comments

ARTHUR O. ROBERTS

In a very helpful way Canby Jones reminds us that Christ is the standard against which we measure our motivation for service. My criticism aims only to sharpen the issue and to clarify the implications of the Lordship of Jesus Christ in the life of a believer — Quaker or otherwise — which Canby examines scripturally, theologically, and pragmatically.

At the outset I must question his use of the terms "Christ-centered Quakers" and "service-minded Quakers" by which he characterizes the divergent groups which may be reconciled through understanding Christ as servant. From what follows I doubt his intention to strike a mean between group "A" which is Christ-centered and group "B" which is service-minded, perhaps at point C, which is Quaker — some happy limbo between Christian and non-Christian. His purpose is deeper, to bring groups, each in its own way tangential, unto Christ in a new dimension of discipleship. Either his wording is imprecise or I failed to gather the full force of the quotation marks which surround the terms.

I am favorably impressed by the elucidation of Scripture showing the servant role of Jesus, both in Old Testament prophecy such as Isaiah and in the self-disclosures of Jesus as given in the New Testament. Certainly the Messiah of God's covenant people and the Lord of his church — this "light to the Gentiles" — conquers by love and self-abnegation. How refreshing to have presented to us the exemplary Christ who is also the anointed one who suffers vicariously for our sins and is our atonement. Such are the winds of Christian doctrine which will blow away the smog of vague romanticism which has nearly smothered our Society!

I wish more might have been said, however, about the difference between Christ's suffering and our own, between the Cross and our crosses. All service to another, all suffering, even that of comrades in arms, within a limited range of loyalty, partakes of righteousness; and yet the scriptural word is that our righteousness is as filthy rags, that none of the actions of man can atone for another. In contrast, Christ died for all. Both in theory and in experience the Cross stands as a scandal of particularity which offends the noble and the altruist.

The great kenosis passage from Philippians, which Canby Jones refers to, surely does support an attitude of self-denying service which is characteristic of our Lord's actions and descriptive of the meaning of his atonement. In determining what it
means to “let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus,” however, we must make sure that this attitude characterizes us as disciples, and not as saviors; for this passage also, and perhaps primarily, exalts the humbled conqueror, to whom is owed the bowing of every knee and the confession by every tongue “that Jesus is Lord.”

We cannot redeem others, but we can and must witness to them in word and in deed of Christ, the Risen One, who does redeem. Christ works through us; we exercise his delegated authority through the offices he bestows. Service is action designed to establish truth’s order among people. Broadly speaking, men serve one another (whether lovingly, fearfully, dutifully, or graspingly) through education, religion, and government. To the Christian, Jesus Christ is prophet — or teacher — before whom every thought must be brought into subjection; he is our great high priest who offered himself up once for all; he is the King of kings to whom we give supreme loyalty. Christian service, then, is action done in obedience to Christ and in his name. This understanding carries an acknowledgment of human limitation, warns of pride, and speaks of divine grace.

I like what Canby said about the consciousness of God’s forgiveness and atonement in Christ providing an incentive to our own love — so long as we do not substitute our works for Christ’s atonement. Overblown imitation may result in gross heresy, as with the Dukhobor’s election of a Christ from their midst, or even Naylor’s over-identification with Christ. J. S. Whale wrote that “the inner light may be the shortest way to outer darkness.” An acute sense of forgiveness and gratitude to God for grace protects from such heresy. The various parables of Jesus as recorded by Luke illustrate how the sense of pardon ought to characterize our relationships, otherwise enormous ingratitude obtains, e.g., the man graciously freed from a stupendous debt promptly dragged off to debtors’ prison the man who owed him a pittance.

At the point of practical application, I admire Canby’s pointed words telling the humanists to come to Christ, and the “Christ-centered Quakers” to do service. Certain things are not clear to me, however, in his presentation. For one thing, is he implying that by virtue of their works service-minded humanist Quakers are Christians without acknowledging it? It is instructive that John, who wrote so winsomely in his old age about loving our brother, also said, “who is a liar but he that denieth that Jesus is the Christ” (I John 2:22). A humanist may participate in the by-products of Christianity such as concern for the poor and kind treatment of the mentally ill, he may even transmit certain values, but his denial of Christ is a step downward in the direction of idolatry.

In his interpretation of the parable of the two sons, Canby is, in my judgment, guilty of misplaced analogy in regards to missions vis-a-vis service. As shown clearly in the context in Matthew 21, the primary teaching of the parable is that the Jewish leaders agreed to God’s covenant but did not carry it out, especially in receiving the Baptist’s witness and following Jesus, their Messiah; whereas the “publicans and harlots” repented of their wickedness and accepted God’s revelation to them, first in John and then in Jesus. The force of this teaching appears upon recognition of the fact that the parable answered the Pharisees’ challenge to Jesus’ authority. A second parable, about the husbandman who sends agents and finally his own son to collect the rent, is a deliberately transparent judgment upon those religious leaders who rejected God’s revelation in Christ.

Christ’s own words at the beginning of his ministry were “repent, and believe the gospel”; his closing commission, to “make disciples.” Within the early church the duties of caring for the widows and collecting for the poor in Jerusalem were clearly subordinated to the service of preaching the resurrection and Christ’s power to save. Even the American Friends Service Committee, which was established as a vehicle for deeds of compassion, has deliberated over the insufficiency of “stop-gap” relief and has enlarged its activities in the area of government lobbying, religious worship (often syncretistic forms), and education.

One who evangelizes on behalf of Christ the prophet, priest, and king, is not unmindful or neglectful of service; indeed, in bringing one to conversion he confers upon the evangelized the most beneficent form of service, setting up a whole chain of favorable circumstances whereby many are helped to freedom and

creativity. I hope we are all thankful enough to acknowledge our debt to Christian evangelists and witnesses. I want to establish a priority for evangelism; otherwise service becomes utopianism, which after a serious brush with the ugliness of man's nature, compromises with evil and settles for some form of social manipulation and a kingdom of this world.

Of course, all Christians need a tender conscience and sensitivity to the Holy Spirit in following after Christ and living by his ethics and his gospel. Instead of a tug-of-war between missions and service, our call is to witness Christ, whether through one gift or another. Is the man who repairs automobiles “serving” the Kingdom only if he is sent as a missionary or joins the Peace Corps? Is the poor Quaker youth who works summers picking beans among the transients denied service in favor of the more prosperous youth who goes to Mexico to teach village children how to play softball? Is service done only when organized by a committee? Are we not to serve in the normal vocations of life? It is true, of course, that the deprived need the special mercy which it may take organization to provide. In our reaction against “service-minded Quakers” who scoffed at missionary evangelism some of us evangelicals may have shut our eyes to possibilities for corporate acts of mercy or suffering on behalf of the victims of man’s sin or discrimination. But it has happened that the young man who did not feel clear to join a peace march which seemed compromised by materialistic ideas quietly served a C.O. term being a male nurse for two years in an old people’s home.

Having spoken thus with candor, I would acknowledge that no Christian should hesitate to discover new and effective ways of witnessing Christ and his kingdom. Perhaps the youth of California Yearly Meeting showed us a way, several years ago, when a team of them went to Alaska for a summer’s work camp, during which time they also did personal evangelism and preaching in connection with the mission on Kotzebue Sound. Evangelism can use more tools than the ability to lead a song service and to preach the spoken word. With Canby Jones, I, too, hope that we might find wholeness in our Quaker witness and new forms whereby our gifts might be used to testify of Christ.

Contributors

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