

1-1-1975

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Recommended Citation

Curtis, John H. (1975) "Christ and the Holy Spirit: The Earliest Quaker View," *Quaker Religious Thought*. Vol. 41 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt/vol41/iss1/5>

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Christ and the Holy Spirit:
The Earliest Quaker View

JOHN H. CURTIS

The turning point in the life of George Fox, the founder of the Quakers, came when he heard a voice which said, "There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition."

Fox had lost all hope of finding help from men. Then he heard this voice. It changed him from a seeker to a finder. He devoted his life to proclaiming by word and deed the glorious good news that "Christ was come to teach his people himself."

This is quite clear from his *Journal*. Anyone reading it with the purpose of determining whether or not Fox really means Christ when he says Christ will come to the conclusion that he does indeed mean Christ.

Why then has this view of Christ almost completely disappeared from present-day Quakerism?

I believe that there are two causes. The first is an attempt to interpret Quakerism in comparison with orthodox Christianity. The belief of orthodox Christianity that is most pertinent here is that Christ was born, died, rose from the dead, ascended into heaven, and sent the Holy Spirit to take his place on earth until his second coming.

This is a change from Fox's view that God draws man to the ever-present Christ by the Spirit. In effect Christ is replaced by the Spirit. This changed view was expressed by some Quakers in the seventeenth century. For instance, Robert Barclay in his *Apology* almost always speaks of the Spirit and almost never speaks of the living presence of Christ. This is a view which is congenial to many Friends today.

The second cause is the reinterpretation of Quakerism in terms of philosophical mysticism that was undertaken at the

beginning of the twentieth century. This was done in hope of revitalizing Quakerism. At first it certainly had that effect and also produced a renewed interest in the writings of the early Friends. Unfortunately, some aspects of early Quakerism were taken out of their original Christ-centered context. Thus the reinterpretation was done in terms of general (non-Christian) mysticism.

The central belief of general mysticism is that man can have direct communication with God. This view not only eliminates the living presence of Christ but also eliminates the Holy Spirit in the Christian sense. In general mysticism, Spirit means God. There is no mediator, human or divine, in general mysticism. Thus it is often said by Quakers who hold the viewpoint of general mysticism that there is something of God in every person and that this has been called by a wide variety of interchangeable names. These names would include the Inner Light, Christ Within, Spirit of God, Spirit of Christ, Seed, etc., but they all mean God who communicates directly with man.

It is almost impossible to understand the Quaker message about Christ and the Holy Spirit while holding either of the views outlined above. This is what makes it so difficult to get the full meaning of *The Journal of George Fox*. It takes a tremendous effort to set aside one's own view and to try to understand the almost unique view of George Fox.

Yet it should not be a surprise that the earliest Quaker view of Christ and the Holy Spirit should be radically different. After all, the Quakers were radically different in their actions from any other religious group, with the exception of the very earliest Christians. Isn't it logical to expect that their views would be as distinctive as their actions?

The key to the Quaker view of Christ is that he is a living presence. Thus where two or three or more are gathered together he is present in the midst of them. He instructs the group in worship and in knowing and doing the will of God. He is also present in each individual person as inward guide, teacher, overseer, and in many other ways.

Because of the continuing presence of Christ, the Quaker doctrine of the Holy Spirit is different. The Spirit brings people to Christ and shows them who he is. Fox's statement that "the Father of Life drew me to his Son by his Spirit" illustrates this. A similar, biblical quotation is from 1 Corinthians 12:3 (RSV): "And no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit."

Fox never thinks of God without thinking of Christ and the Spirit. It is unfortunate that Quakers seem to have largely lost this belief and experience of the continuing presence of Christ. It was the source of their remarkable spiritual power and made them the most Christ-centered of any Christian group. It produced their unprogrammed worship, their meetings for business, and their belief that it is possible through the power of the living Christ to know and do the will of God in this life. The hope is that this present situation will change and Friends will be enabled to proclaim again that Christ has come to teach his people himself.