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Reviews

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Reviews

GRACE AND FAITH: THE MEANS TO SALVATION, by Donald S. Nesti, C. S. Sp. Catholic and Quaker Studies No. 3, 1110 Wildwood Ave., Manasquan, N.J. 08736, 1975. Offset, 368 pp. \$7.50 postpaid.

We Quakers are in the debt of Donald Nesti for his excellent study of early Quaker "soteriology and sacramentality." Let me add quickly that the book covers considerably more ground than the title or sub-title indicate. In fact, this book comes close to being a systematic theology of early Quakerism and it is so well done that it deserves to be studied by all who are interested in the faith of early Friends, and should be on the shelves of all Quaker libraries.

Donald Nesti first places Quakerism in its religious setting in the seventeenth century and then develops, through broad and sound scholarship, the early Quaker understanding of: revelation, the means of salvation through grace and faith, the effects of salvation, Christology, ecclesiology, eschatology, church holiness, and spiritual ministry. Finally he presents briefly the differences and similarities between Catholicism and Quakerism in various of these areas. I wish that he had given more space to express his differences and so have opened the door to fuller dialogue. However, that was not a main purpose in his study.

It is challenging and stimulating to see ourselves through the eyes of an able scholar who comes from another tradition. The terminology — for example, the phrase "union with God" and even the word "salvation" — is at times out of the broader Christian tradition and causes one to ask if it truly expresses the Quaker meaning. More important, however, the insights of Donald Nesti often come with freshness and authenticity. With most of this presentation I can heartily agree and say "Thank you," and where there are questions I find myself so impressed by the scholarship that I am forced to re-examine my understanding of early Quaker thought. There is not room in this review to cover the whole of the book, so let me choose a few important areas to demonstrate both my agreements and disagreements.

Throughout the whole of the study Donald Nesti is clear and strong and correct in underlining the fundamentality and centrality of experience to the early Quakers. The primary concern of those Friends was a genuine experience of the living Christ and all that they did and thought stemmed from their own experience and their desire to bring others to that experience.

From this central point Donald Nesti develops the theology of the Friends, and his detailed presentation of Christology is one of the most important contributions of the study. He is right in showing how the concern for experience led to a Christology that emphasized the eternal Christ and de-emphasized the historical Jesus. He speaks of the near-docetism of early Friends, but shows that they drew back from too extreme a position in this matter. They did affirm the historical life of Jesus and the value of his death and resurrection, but these affirmations were not their main concern. That concern was to show the work of the eternal Christ at all times, in all places, and in all persons — the work of the universal, saving grace-light. From this concern, Donald Nesti rightly concludes, early Friends opened a door to the separation between the eternal Christ and the earthly Jesus, and between the eternal Christ and the inward Light. This separation took place later and was one of the fundamental causes of the schism of the nineteenth century and the continuing separation of Quakerism into two strands — the Christian and the Universal. I feel sure that we who are Friends today will come to understand better the dynamics of the divisions among us by studying closely and carrying further the work of Donald Nesti on Christology.

A separate note on Christology needs adding. Donald Nesti does point out the office of Christ as Prophet, but he does not appreciate sufficiently the importance of this role given by the early Friends, especially Fox. It is one of the major contributions made by early Quakers to the Christian understanding of Christ.

Another area that Donald Nesti explores with great care is that of ecclesiology. Here again he gives major prominence to the desire the Quakers had for personal experience. They believed that a person is a member of the church when he is "in possession of the Spirit within." The true church is made up of these living members, and there is no church where there are not these persons filled with the Spirit of Christ. Thus far Donald Nesti is correct. However, again and again he empha-

sizes that this is a personal experience, an individual experience, and that these persons are members of the true and universal church, a church that did not need to be visible even though it became visible. This emphasis does not ring true to me and so I am glad that Donald Nesti does indicate the value of the gathered fellowship. However, even in acknowledging it he makes it secondary, both in importance and in sequence. I would say instead that the two cannot be separated in early Quaker thought, just as sanctification and justification cannot be. The individual experience of the saving work of Christ and participation in the gathered fellowship of the church are united and of equal importance. The Society of Friends began with the gathering of a great multitude. It was in meetings that the Society was born, for there "the power of the Lord was over all." The visible church existed from the beginning and Quakerism was and is as concerned for the corporate as it was and is for the individual response to God.

Another of the major interests of Donald Nesti was an exploration of the Quaker view of sacraments. He rightly concludes that Quakerism was non-sacramental even in a broad definition of that word. He understands that this fact is rooted in the Quaker desire for experience. From his Catholic perspective he affirms that sacraments can be a means of experience and he speaks convincingly of the role of Christ in the flesh as the ground for true experience through the sacraments. In this discussion he touches on a matter that is by no means settled among Friends today. I can agree with him that there are real values in sacraments, that they can be a source of experience. I feel, however, that the early Friends made an important discovery — not only may the sacraments be hollow and empty, but it is possible to gain the experience of the Spirit of God directly, without the aid of sacraments. Donald Nesti affirms that Catholic doctrine always recognized that fact (although it may have been de-emphasized during the Reformation). However, to continue to witness to this truth is, I believe, one of the special tasks of Friends.

So much more could be said about the values of Donald Nesti's book and I feel so positive about it that it seems most inadequate to write a short review. I strongly urge others who would know the nature of our Quaker faith to study this fine book.

Francis B. Hall