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Early Friends and the Work of Christ

ARTHUR O. ROBERTS

The Quaker movement during the tumultuous years of the Long Parliament, the Interregnum, and the Restoration in England constituted a religious answer to questions raised during a period of upheaval in which institutional and philosophical foundations for authority were shaken—a situation for which we are not hard put to find parallels today.

The doctrines of Christ which the early Friends preached were testimonies to the revelation of God within their own experience. Theirs was a revealed theology—revealed in the Bible and (to their supreme joy) in human experience; it was rich with religious language. Sometimes carefully ordered, as in Barclay; mystical, as in Penington; or fervently evangelistic, as in Fox, it conveyed conviction. The modes of their religious expression, however, should not be allowed to obscure the more important issues of theology to which their experiences testified, for those who participated in what Hugh Barbour aptly calls “The Quaker Awakening” claimed an encounter with Christ beyond all outward knowledge *about* him. Early Friends rejoiced to go beyond “notions” to Life itself. They accepted God and the Bible with its explanations about God and man and found in direct spiritual knowledge the meaning of the New Covenant which they had hitherto seen from afar. Thus the experiential theology of early Friends found its definitions in the revelation of God and not merely in religious inferences which natural man might draw.

As with Paul on the Damascus road, the enigmatic Christ who beckoned early Friends by the disciples’ testimony became known to them first as the One whom their sinful lives had “crucified afresh,” and then as the One who brought forgiveness of sins and the new birth. It is within such a context of superna-

turalism that William Penn writes of the state of devotion: “Religion fell from experience to tradition, and worship from power to form, from life to letter.”

Thus George Fox generalizes with perhaps more accuracy in his day than in ours, “that all Christendom believes that Christ is come, and is risen, and that Jesus is Christ the Son of God,” but insists that beyond this affirmation it is necessary that people ought all “to receive him, and to walk in him, and abide in him.” Robert Barclay lays the groundwork for his *Apology* by stating that the way to true knowledge of God and of Jesus Christ, whom he has sent, is not the testimony of man drawing religious inferences from his own actions, but is rather the testimony of the Holy Spirit within—a testimony which Barclay claimed was ultimately self-authenticating yet never contradicting “the outward testimony of scriptures, or right and sound reason.”

While not disdaining other forms of knowledge, nor their utility, Barclay stresses direct revelation as the right way by which God is known. The natural man “of the largest capacity, and by the best words, even scripture words” writes Barclay, cannot understand the mysteries of God’s kingdom as well as the weakest child who tastes them, having them “revealed inwardly and objectively by the Spirit.”

Our spiritual forebears represent a rebound from radical Puritanism in the direction of greater spiritual objectivity and its corollary, authority. They labelled as false such idolatrous images or substitutes for the true God as the Roman Catholic Mass and the Protestant memorial supper, the Fifth-monarchist task force which besieged London, the Digger’s Utopia, the New Model Army, and Cromwell’s Commonwealth. Their gospel was no “faith mediated by symbols,” but a faith mediated by the risen Christ who saves and leads the Church, which is his body. Early Friends intended the intensification of doctrine and not its diminution.

THE PERSON OF CHRIST

The Quakers accepted the deity of Christ in an orthodox Christian sense as a basic tenet of faith: God who reveals himself has done so supremely by his Son. They were confident regarding the Incarnation as well as the new birth. George Fox spoke

of two proofs given by the apostles to show that Jesus was the Christ, namely, the testimony of "Moses, and the law, and the prophets" and the personal spiritual examination to prove "whether or no Jesus Christ was within them."

Early Friends accepted the scriptural teaching that Jesus is the promised Messiah for whom the Jews waited, predicted in the Old Testament by promises, figures, types, shadows, and prophets, and so vindicated by the apostles. The events of his ministry likewise showed Jesus to be the true Christ—his preaching, doctrine, miracles, sufferings, death, resurrection, ascension, sending of the Holy Spirit, and appearing in his people in his saving work. This last is the response which the Quakers made to what seemed to them to be merely a professing church. In answer to the question, "What is the True Confession of Christ?" Isaac Pennington writes, "Friends, I witness it to be this; a confession of his life, a confession of his power. To confess the present living appearance of Christ, that is to confess Christ." This statement is followed by exhortations based upon the scriptural admonition in which Jesus says, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock."

Fox explained to the Turks that Jesus Christ was born of the virgin Mary, to the "priest Stephens" that Jesus Christ suffered and died not as he was God but as he was man, and to Mohamet the Fourth (who had bragged to Emperor Leopold that he was "commander and guardian of your crucified God") that it was as a man that Christ was crucified.

In controversy, on the other hand, Fox denied the word "human" as applying to the nature of Christ. I agree with Canby Jones that Fox greatly confused the issue. Fox wanted to protect the person of Jesus Christ from allegations of sinfulness which in his mind the word "human" carried. Elsewhere he speaks of "Christ, according to the flesh, was of Abraham," i.e., a man, not just a body inhabited by the Christ. In the scripturally-loaded piece, "What we believe of Christ," Fox denies the *term* "trinity" but asserts that Friends *do* believe in the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, rejecting as false any charges to the contrary.

Docetism has been attributed to the early Quaker movement, and Rachel King suspects Fox of Apollinarianism with a ten-

dency to Sabellianism. Although excessive emotionalism produced much loose language and some loose conduct, from which heterodox views of the human-divine nature of Christ might be inferred, I think these charges cannot be taken very seriously.

As far as George Fox is concerned, his writings, although not systematic by any stretch of the imagination, do show a coherence to the principle that Christ really died for men and really does impart new spiritual life to those who receive his salvation. On this theme he hammers away with evangelistic exuberance! Some of the more characteristic terms with which he describes Christ are these: Christ the Light, Christ the Seed, Christ the Life, and Christ the Word. Concerning the first, he teaches that Christ is the one who shows up evil within a man and brings him into unity with God. The term Christ the Light (*never* "inner light") is his way of explaining the contemporary nature of Christ, and is predicated upon a view of spiritual illumination which is from God to man. Man by himself does not possess spiritual knowledge sufficient for salvation. The term "Seed" has reference to Christ as alluded to prophetically in Genesis 3:15. Christ is the seed of the woman who bruises the serpent's head. There are not many seeds but rather one issue in whom all of God's covenants with man find fulfillment, in whom election to salvation stands. The term "Life" conveys the existential quality of Christ within the experience of man. Christ is the New Adam whose real presence in the converted, communing heart renders both mass and memorial unnecessary—Christ himself is here. This is no theory of absorption into the Infinite, but rather a doctrine of adoption by the Living God.

The term "Word," reflecting the heavy Quaker dependence upon Johannine *logos* formulations, depicts the revelation of God as personal communication. However true the principles and statements of the Bible may be—and the early Quakers believed them to be true and inspired of God—they are verified ultimately in the heart by the revelation which God gives man through his personal Word, Jesus Christ. Such is the substance of the arguments which Fox makes in many a treatise and polemic and which Barclay argues out in terms of the "primary" rule for the Spirit and the "secondary" rule for the Bible.

Robert Barclay's significant contribution to early Quaker Christology lies in his explanation of Christ as the "universal and saving light." It is his link between special revelation and general revelation, an "evangelical principle" as he calls it, which guards against the "false doctrines of the Pelagians, Semi-Pelagians, Socinians," and others who exalt the light of nature and the "liberty of man's will" so as to claim an earned salvation. His view, to the contrary, "excludes the natural man from having any place or portion in his own salvation . . . until he be first . . . actuated by God's Spirit."

It is an anomaly of our history that a doctrine amplifying the meaning of "Christ dying for all," subject to man's acceptance by faith, should have been used in later years to support a theory of the natural goodness of man. Perhaps Barclay anticipated the abuse which might come, for he cautioned, "We do not hereby intend any ways to lessen or derogate from the atonement and sacrifice of Jesus Christ; but on the contrary do magnify and exalt it. . . . we firmly believe it was necessary that Christ should come, that by his death and sufferings he might offer up himself a sacrifice to God for our sins . . . so we believe that the remission of sins which any partake of, is only in and by virtue of that most satisfactory sacrifice, and no otherwise."

A revival movement always suffers some loss of perspective, and in the case of the Quakers this involved failure to transmit effective knowledge of the Bible. The entire Puritan movement shared in this to some extent; many of the more radical groups disappeared entirely from the scene, but because the Quakers claimed direct inspiration and leadings, the calculated risk of their "enthusiasm" was even greater. They did not always realize that their treasure—Christ within—lay in earthen vessels. Richard Baxter, the worthy antagonist, accused the Quakers of denying any such person as Jesus Christ who suffered at Jerusalem, and asserted that Quaker usage of the name is speaking "allegorically and equivocally." The Quakers repudiated such a charge repeatedly. Actually, Baxter's words are truer of Winstanley than of the early Friends; for while they may have found it difficult on occasion to distinguish between the movings of the infallible Spirit and the inclinations of their fallible minds,

the Quakers certainly intended a deepening of the meaning of the Christ of history. Baxter's accusation may better apply to some modern claimants to the Quaker heritage who have fallen into the old Digger error of relegating the good-evil struggle to an entirely local cast, with the Gospel events providing symbolic staging for Everyman's psychological struggles in the process of coming into being.

In spite of distortions which may have arisen, the Quaker movement did give to the doctrine of the Holy Spirit and to man's spiritual experience a Christ-centered structure and authority. Many were the religious streams within radical Puritanism which dried up with the return to England of a tolerably stable monarchy. It is a testimony either to the integrity of their ideas or to the tenacity of their errors that the Quaker stream continued: I should like to believe that it is the former. To take seriously the self-disclosure of Jesus Christ when he said, "No man cometh unto the Father, but by me," is no small theological task. According to which answer is given, the stature of Christ is either reduced or enhanced. To the task of enhancing the meaning of Christ the Quaker ministers gave themselves assiduously as men themselves touched by the redeeming Christ. The unity of Jesus Christ in history and in experience is the foundation of both Quaker doctrine and evangelistic outreach.

THE WORK OF CHRIST

The One who spoke to Fox's condition as a youth is the real Pascal Lamb whose blood wet the hillside in Palestine. To Fox, Christ is the agent of redemption and his work is the transforming of the natures of men. The term "blood of Christ" appears often in early Quaker literature, conveying to the writers the same connotations of spiritual deliverance from the guilt and power of sin as it does to the Christian today. It is doubtless safe to say that the early Friends were eclectic insofar as particular theories of the Atonement are concerned. Their language was biblical and thus encompassed a variety of viewpoints. This may not work out neatly for the theologian but perhaps it testifies to the truer nature of Christianity as experienced. One might maintain that Fox holds to the "ransom theory" because he

makes reference to Christ having delivered us from the devil, or to the "satisfaction theory" because he speaks of Christ paying all our "debts of sin." In his *No Cross, No Crown*, William Penn gives words which imply the "moral influence theory" of atonement, as in the famous passage about Christ the "victorious captain of our salvation," greater than all the leaders of the world, "the most perfect pattern of self-denial" for us to follow if we would come to glory.

Beyond the particular biblical metaphors by which the Quakers described the Atonement stands their emphasis upon the scope of that redemptive action. The Puritan "wayfaring and warfaring" down through life to the Celestial City had for the Quakers a victorious arrival in this life as well as in the next. "Glory be to the Lord forever" writes Fox in an Epistle (sounding startlingly like a camp-meeting Methodist), "thousands of these way-faring men are come to find their way, Christ Jesus, and though fools, yet shall not err therein. . ." The theme of "possession, not profession" appears over and over again in Fox's *Works*. Christ had come to proclaim the year of jubilee within the hearts and lives of men gathered into his New Covenant. The revolution which the early Quakers found was a revolution of the Spirit, who baptizes the soul with cleansing fire. As William Penn phrased it, "the heart of man is the seat of sin, and where he is defiled, he must be sanctified; and where sin lives, there it must die: it must be crucified."

The Quaker awakening was a holiness movement and must be so considered. Quaker sermons and writings sound forth the news of an atonement which can lift a man above sin. Fox considered it a travesty upon the grace and power of Christ for Christians to be resigned to a life of sin while upon the earth. He charged bluntly that the doctrine which teaches such resignation to sinful living "nullifies the sacrifice of Christ, makes Christ's dying in vain, the one offering of no value, and his blood of none effect which cleanses from all sin." No Catholic plea for purgatorial purging nor Calvinist plea for perfection at the grave can be sustained in the face of the more ample provisions of the grace of God.

Along with Barclay and others, Fox shared the orthodox concept of the moral depravity of man, but insisted that grace was not only imputed in forgiveness but also imparted in sanctification. Man's sinful nature may be changed. It is instructive that after George Fox was released from a six months' jail sentence at Derby, on charges of blasphemy because he testified to being sanctified, he was put in again for refusing to accept a command in the army of the Commonwealth. His pacifist statement at that time, "I lived in the virtue of that life and power that took away the occasion of all wars," reflects his understanding and experience of the sanctifying power of Christ's baptism. The whole episode stands as a parable for today: our evangelism should take into account the implications of holiness for practical life, and our pacifism should recognize carnality as the source of evil and should be aware of the less violent or even non-violent weapons with which carnal man fights to secure the objects of his will.

Christ's baptism with the Holy Spirit was conceived of as that which makes the outward sacrifice of Christ significant inwardly through God's grace and man's faith. Justification is complete in sanctification. In speaking of redemption as "one work of grace" George Fox shows holiness to be an integral part of salvation rather than something tacked on as an extra benefit for the more particular believer. The experiences of Fox and others demonstrate how this grace was received through inward crises until assurance of victory was given. Isaac Pennington wrote: "There is a power in Christ to perfect the work of redemption in the heart; to sanctify the creature wholly, in body, soul, and spirit. . ." He testified that one can know when this redemptive grace has completed its leavening force and declares that "this is not the voice of deceit, but of truth."

In "A Tender Visitation," William Penn exhorts those who are tired of their sins to keep "the holy watch of Jesus" until "the wicked one be rooted up and burned in the baptism of Christ." The New World colonizer has left us an excellent outline of the doctrines of salvation "in their natural and experimental order." This order he describes as consisting of repentance and perfection, the two basic doctrines of the work of

Christ in the heart of man. The first is comprehended by man in three "operations": "sight of sin," "sense and sorrow" for it, and "amendment" for the time to come. By this sort of repentance God's forgiveness may be received and the soul may come to be purged of its sinful nature. "None can come to know Christ to be their sacrifice that reject him as their Sanctifier."

Penn's second doctrine is perfection, or the life of holiness. Such is the purpose of Christ's coming and pertains to the life which belongs to Christ. It is ours not by nature but by faith and adoption.

Robert Barclay has been attacked as the theological villain who ruined a lovely non-doctrinal movement by his scholastic formulations. Fox may have been less precise than Barclay but he was surely just as doctrinal. Barclay describes salvation thus:

The first is the redemption performed and accomplished by Christ for us in his crucified body without us: the other is the redemption wrought by Christ in us, which no less properly is called and accounted a redemption than the former. The first then is that whereby man, as he stands in the fall, is put into a capacity of salvation, and hath conveyed unto him a measure of that power, virtue, spirit, life, and grace that was in Christ Jesus. . . . The second is that whereby we witness and know this pure and perfect redemption in ourselves, purifying, cleansing, and redeeming us from the power of corruption, and bringing us into unity, favour, and friendship with God.

Concerning holiness he speaks of the crucifixion of the "body of death," i.e., the carnal nature of man, wherein the heart becomes so subject to truth as to be "free from actual sinning and transgressing of the law of God and in that respect perfect." This state, however, admits of growth and of the possibility of sinning "where the mind doth not most diligently and watchfully attend unto the Lord."

Testimonies from other Friends confirm the perfectionist nature of the early Quaker movement. As a youth of seventeen, William Caton testified to "the cleansing, purging, and sanctifying;" John Audland, who had been an Independent preacher, heard Fox declare that it was the present portion for believers to know the indwelling Christ and to have their bodies "prepared, sanctified, and made fit temples." It reached his heart. Francis Howgill, hearing that same three-hour sermon at Firbank Fell,

was made to realize his own dissatisfaction with accepting Christ's bearing of our guilt upon the cross without allowing Christ to do something to remove the "root of sin" remaining to plague the conscience and enfeeble the will of man. The same note of victory sounds from the testimonies of Edward Burrough, John Crook, Stephen Crisp, Thomas Story, William Dewsbury (who is careful to date his experience of victory), and others. These endured public ridicule, lost their possessions and their legal privileges, and sometimes their lives, to preach to others about the work of Christ which they had experienced. To them non-holiness teachings were, in the phrase of Isaac Penington, the "dark doctrines of the night."

RELEVANCE FOR TODAY

Despite a diversity of expression and conduct among early Friends, despite cultural and social differences, despite extravagant claims, there yet remains a steady testimony to the nature and work of Christ which commends itself to our serious review, a central conviction that Jesus Christ confronts man experientially, offering the pardon of God for sins and the power of God to cleanse from sin. Sometimes we read in popular articles (as if it were a point in our favor) that one may be a Quaker and believe anything or nothing. Perhaps such notions are to be expected from the public when we have sometimes become unsure or even silent concerning our beliefs, or have left only a testimony that man has religious feelings which should be respected. The relevance of this review of our doctrines concerning the person and work of Christ may be illustrated as follows. A few years ago, in response to a comment of mine appearing in connection with a magazine article about Friends, to the effect that according to widely-used disciplinary provisions, people are admitted to membership among Friends on the basis of belief in Jesus Christ and evidence of their union with him, a Friend active in one of the larger monthly meetings in America rebuked me, stating that in their meeting belief in Jesus Christ was neither *the* basis nor even *a* basis for membership. The task of relating the principle of universal light to the person and work of Jesus Christ has been a difficult one for Friends. Under various theological pressures, aided by religious romanticism and

the tides of history, the historic position of early Friends has been weakened. The ultimate departure presents a picture in which God is given purely immanentist status, man's natural goodness is placed as the *sine qua non*, Christ is given purely symbolic meaning, and holiness is transmuted into schemes for social realignment.

But in recent years the turmoil of the world has helped men once more to see the otherness of God and to recognize sin in its ugliness and its endemic nature. Both conservative and neo-orthodox theologies have bared the root of sin which contaminates all man's best efforts and issues in pride. There is greater assurance today that man is sinful than that he can be redeemed, and greater confidence in God's grace than in his providing sanctification. It is certainly not clear that Bultmann or Tillich have cleared the field for an encounter with the risen, living Christ, who offers us his Pentecostal victory in the way in which Fox and Barclay testified. It is not clear that Carl Henry or Edward J. Carnell speak with comparable conviction about the sanctified life.

We do well to recognize the complexity of evil, the insidious nature of temptation and self-pride. We need to recapture the meaning of grace which protects from a sterile legalism, to recognize the broad implications of obedient discipleship, of living above the world while in the midst of it. But in so doing we ought to recognize the early Quaker positions and their claims for insight into the revelation of God through Scripture and through personal experience with Christ. There is "preaching up sin" today; and the warning of William Penn is appropriate, to be careful lest we "sin more freely because at his cost." Between legalism and self-indulgence winds the highway of holiness of which Isaiah spoke and which has been the desire of all true Christians. If our researches into early Quaker history are to afford us spiritual insights as well as historical knowledge we shall ask God to reveal his truth to us through Scripture and through Jesus Christ known within immediate experience.