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# Letter to the Editor--Quaker Religious Thought, no. 81

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## LETTER TO THE EDITOR

PATRICK NUGENT

Lucy Davenport's article in *QRT* #80 was excellent and (no pun intended) enlightening. She lifts up George Fox's message and teaching in a way that corrects common misunderstandings and misappropriations of his message. But her account of Barclay seems less persuasive than her exposition of Fox. I liked her central distinction—between the light as the source of communion with God and the light as gathering a holy people in gospel order.

But two things trouble me. First, she does not sufficiently demonstrate that Barclay propounds a static notion of communion with God, as Plotinus does for instance, and ignores the saving action of Christ in the light. She criticizes Barclay—rightly—for using excessive ontological language in explaining what the light is, how it is divine, and how it dwells in the soul. She is also accurate in arguing that such an ontological conception risks leading to a static sense of communion that ignores the saving action of the light and overlooks gospel order altogether. But she imputes this conclusion to Barclay without demonstrating it from his work. The *Apology* concerned itself centrally with Friends worship and with the nature of “knowledge” of God. It does not expound the gathering of a people. Barclay's relative silence on this issue is no invitation to impute conclusions that cannot be demonstrated from text. Argument from silence gets scholars into trouble.

Lucy Davenport's conclusion troubles me because it reveals what seems to be an inaccurate understanding of the relationship between the two definitions of the light, Fox's and Barclay's. This is my second point of discomfort. In my opinion, to say that “if the heart of worship is communion, as Barclay sees it, worship is an end” (p. 18) is unfair and does not do justice to the experience of those who *have* known such communion. Minimally, if the heart of worship is communion with God, then communion with God—not the vehicle of worship—is the end! And if communion with God does not include the saving action of the light as Fox describes it, then there is not communion with God. By the same token, if one sees one's sins and feels guilty over them, and even feels liberated from them, yet if there is no communion with God, then there is no saving action of the

light—only a successful guilt trip and perhaps an illusion of escape from the human condition.

The two notions of the light need one another: We come to the saving action of the light of Christ through Friends practice of worship—through communion with God deep within. Worship leads us to the light, convicts us of sin, and leads us out of it, and leads us to communion with (Barclay would say “knowledge” of) God. And if the experience of communion with God does not lead to the gathering up of a holy and righteous people in covenant with God, if it does not empower us to “overcome sin in [ourselves] and in the world,” then we have truncated communion with God.

How could one have real communion with God as Barclay describes it and *not* know the saving power of the light as Fox describes it?

Finally, the author does not show that Fox does not believe that worship leads to communion with God, nor that Barclay does not believe that worship must lead to gospel order.

One feels almost petty voicing these criticisms of such a thoughtful piece. I could not have written it nearly as well.