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Response to Comments

MAURICE A. CREASEY

Before dealing, both together and separately, with the main comments made by Floyd Moore, David Stanfield, and Lewis Benson, I wish once again to ask readers of this paper to take with full seriousness the points I have made in its introductory section. Nothing is further from my thoughts than to ask the Society, as a whole or in part, here and now, to abandon its historic testimony concerning Sacraments, and to adopt the sacramental teaching and practice of any church or association of churches. I accepted the Editor's invitation to write on this subject because I believe that neither we nor the majority of our fellow Christians have humbled ourselves sufficiently to accept, as little children, the profound simplicities of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. We all need, I believe, to enter together into honest and open dialogue; but neither they nor we can do this if we are convinced beyond gainsaying that our traditional beliefs, practices, and justifications are sacrosanct. My purpose in writing this paper is, therefore, to invite Friends to look as objectively as they can at our own traditional beliefs, practices, and justifications, so that we may be able to avail ourselves, with greater effectiveness, of the increasing opportunities for wider conference that are presenting themselves. The outcome of such wider examination of these matters none can foresee; but of one thing we may be reasonably certain — that no single Christian group will be confirmed in every particular of its present understanding and practice.

As a general comment on what my three critics have written, perhaps I may be permitted to say that I am both gratified and disappointed. I am gratified to find that the main positions I have sought to establish have not come under the heavy and concentrated fire I had expected. At any rate two of the three have agreed with me that it is right, at this time, that the kind of reappraisal I am inviting should be undertaken and they have

even conceded without a struggle some important points of principle. Thus Floyd Moore admits that "there is no inherent reason why an individual Friend, or an entire monthly meeting, could not or should not, after careful consideration and in a sense of unity, use either Sacrament." Similarly, David Stanfield says: "I support the author's plea that Friends not exclude the observance of the Sacraments, under certain conditions, as a *possible* means of God's grace. To shift the testimony of the non-necessity of the Sacraments to *the necessity of no Sacraments* reflects an ill-founded assumption that the Sacraments are always a hindrance, and may also imply a spiritual arrogance that Friends are 'above' needing any outward 'aids'."

At the same time, I am disappointed that none of my three critics seems to me to have grappled in a careful and detailed manner with the specific issues I have tried to raise. As it seems to me, each has, in the main, confined himself either to dealing with what appear to me to be peripheral or hypothetical questions, or else to restating in some form the traditional position without relating at all closely what they have to say to the considerations I have advanced.

I wish now to consider one or two points from each of the critiques in turn. Floyd Moore, after summarizing some aspects of the paper, asks whether I sufficiently recognize "that Quakerism is a positive witness to a truly spiritual experience of God in Christ, in history, in society, in the kingdom which is and the kingdom which is becoming." I believe I do recognize this very clearly, and it is because I do so that I am concerned to examine and clarify that experience, and to find a criterion for distinguishing between its true and false implications. The precise point at issue here is whether we rightly read the implications of our experience when we take it to involve the total rejection, on principle, of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Floyd Moore believes that, as a Society, we can best "serve creatively" the spiritual needs of men today by a "positive witness to a religious faith which, however imperfectly, aspires to reach directly to truth and love"; but he offers no grounds whatever for his opinion that we are in a better position to make this "positive witness" because we are without what he calls "the historical rituals." Moreover, I would ask him what he means by "directly"

in the sentence I have quoted. From his position as a whole it is clear that he does not mean "without mediation"; yet the question whether such necessary mediation can rightly include actions as well as words is not faced.

David Stanfield asks whether I have "given adequate attention to the limitations of human fallibility when attempting to use a symbolic observance to introduce the participant to a spiritual reality." My answer is that, as is increasingly widely recognized, symbolic acts, while certainly not exempt from misunderstanding by fallible human beings, nevertheless have a power to communicate truth at a deeper level, and more universally, than words alone can do — and, surely, words are no less liable to be misunderstood. He also thinks that, in my paper, "little credence is given to the validity of the early Friends' observations and personal experience in support of their testimony." But, as it seems to me, the question is not concerning the validity of early Friends' experience — this was unquestionably true and real. The question is whether they rightly understood their experience, whether it meant what they took it to mean, whether it carried the implications they thought it did.

Space forbids my dealing as I should like to with Lewis Benson's critique, which I feel to be the most weighty of the three. He claims that the attitude of the early Quakers to the Sacraments derives directly from their distinctive understanding of the "cultless, religionless covenant" inaugurated by Jesus as the Christ, and of the resulting "distinctive doctrine of Scripture." The truth of both these positions is axiomatic for Lewis Benson but not for me, and adequate exploration of this matter would require a lengthy essay. But since, for Lewis Benson, the permanent validity of the Quaker testimony regarding Sacraments is a necessary corollary of these axioms, there is little if any attempt in his critique to deal with the specific issues I have raised; these are seen by him as necessarily irrelevant, not being derived from an acceptance of these unexamined doctrines. It is regrettable, too, that, whereas my paper attempts to deal with the historic Quaker attitude to the Sacraments through three centuries, Lewis Benson gives much space to a statement of the teaching of George Fox on a number of matters on which I do not need to take issue with him. It seems to me, however, that Lewis Benson

does not sufficiently recognize the seriousness of his own admission that early Friends "rejected all theological distinction between 'church' and 'kingdom,' and also rejected the concept of the church as existing 'between the times.'" I would invite him to consider whether, if such was indeed the position of George Fox and the early Quaker leaders, there is not here one of the most potent causes of the Society's rapid loss of its early vision, a loss which Lewis Benson so deeply deplores.

After considering gratefully all that my three friends and critics have said, I feel confirmed in my opinion that it is timely to invite Friends to ask themselves with all seriousness this question: Do we, or do we not, still hold, as early Friends unquestionably did, that Christians who practise Baptism and the Lord's Supper are either spiritually less mature than we are, or, in this matter, are mistaken in their understanding of the nature of the Christian church and dispensation? If we no longer feel able to answer "yes" to such a question (and I believe many of us do not feel able to do so) then it seems to me that our "historic testimony" means no more than the assertion that, for some people and for various reasons of temperament or early experience, the most helpful mode of worship is one that has no place in it for such practices; and that, such is the willingness of God to meet us just where we are, we can nevertheless receive of his Spirit and enjoy communion with him apart from them. Such an assertion is by no means without significance; but it may be questioned whether it requires today either our traditional arguments or our distinctive practice to validate it.