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REVIEW OF ANDERSON, FOLLOWING JESUS: THE HEART OF FAITH AND PRACTICE

Ruth Pitman

Following Jesus: The Heart of Faith and Practice (Barclay Press, 212 pp., $17) is Paul Anderson’s first book for the popular market. It is written for Friends and others, for Quaker consideration and as a contribution to ecumenical dialogue. The author aims to describe what he sees as Quaker insights that he would be of benefit to all denominations. Although not intended as a scholarly book, it shows the author’s wide reading, biblical scholarship and deep thought about the topics with which he deals.

Drawing in part on editorials Anderson wrote while editor of the Evangelical Friend, he organizes his work into seven sections: 1) Following Jesus, 2) Evangelism and Convincement, 3) Worship and Transformation, 4) Ministry and Christian Service, 5) Sacraments and Sacramental Living, 6) Blessed Are the Peacemakers, 7) Testifying to the Truth, and an epilogue, Humble Learners in the School of Christ. Most sections consist of five short essays or meditations, though they are more nearly reflections on the topic of the section than dialogues with God. These essays generally do not present a logically argued position; they tend to examine the subject from different angles, so the structure is loose.

Quotations from Quaker writings and sometimes other sources punctuate the book, giving it a slightly disjointed appearance, consistent with the book’s meditative purpose. Section 6, the peace section, contains a thoughtful list of questions on violence at home and within us that should provoke introspection or discussion.

Anderson writes from a centrist’s point of view. He is an Evangelical Friend, who is old enough to remember Gurneyite Friends before the extreme had moved so far away, and is well enough traveled to have lived with British and Latin American Friends. Consequently, his argument will not seem heretical to any branch of the Society, even in places where things might be explained differently or with different emphasis.
Who should read this book? Anyone with an interest in Quaker faith, outsiders who are curious about Friends, prospective members, and Friends who want to reconsider the faith at a deeper level. The work lends itself well to reading aloud in a group, or to discussion, as well as to quiet reading at home. Friends at the extremes of the Quaker spectrum will want to explain away parts of the book, but in so doing, consciences should be quickened. Therefore, the Quaker extremes should read it, too.

Some Friends will be happy that Anderson omits all of the hard questions, such as, What justifies singing and paid preachers? What justifies a claim to Quakerism without God, or without the God of the Bible? How did we get so lax about marital issues, when we were once stricter than anyone? What about the other sexual issues? How do we deal with sin? Is the process of discernment more than a strong feeling? Where does prayer fit in and what sort of prayer should it be? How did meeting for discipline become meeting for business or disappear entirely? Can we still talk about evil? Or Truth? Is talk of Rights consistent with Quaker/Christian faith? But these are questions for QRT!