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Paul N. Anderson  
*George Fox University*

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## REMEMBERING T. VAIL PALMER, JR.

PAUL N. ANDERSON

One of the premier Quaker theologians of the last half century or more, Thompson Vail Palmer, Jr. passed away on February 6th. Vail was one of the founding members of the Quaker Theological Discussion Group, contributing to its original vision and momentous significance. He edited issues 39–47 of *Quaker Religious Thought* (1974–78), and he co-edited issues 47–54 with Dean Freiday (1979–82), who then succeeded him as editor. In addition to over a dozen essays, comments, and reviews contributed to *QRT* over more than four decades, Vail also published several important essays and books.<sup>1</sup>

Beyond his scholarly work, Vail served as a recorded minister in New England Yearly Meeting and Western Yearly Meeting (FUM), Philadelphia Yearly Meeting (FGC), Northwest Yearly Meeting (EFI), Freedom Friends Church in Salem, OR, and most recently Sierra Cascades Yearly Meeting of Friends. He was pastor of Gonic Friends Church (NEYM, 1955–56) and served in a number of capacities at the Center for Christian Studies at Reedwood Friends Church in Portland, Oregon (NWYM, 1980–2015).

Born in Upland, PA (1927), Vail graduated from George School in Philadelphia (1944) and from the University of Pennsylvania (1948). His graduate studies in theology continued at Oberlin (1951–52) and Woodbrooke (1952), and he completed his PhD at the University of Chicago in 1965—his dissertation addressing “Eschatology and Foreign Policy in the Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr, William Ernest Hocking, and John Courtney Murray.” Vail taught religion and philosophy at Kentucky Wesleyan College (KY, 1965–68), and Rio Grande College—serving also as Department Chair (OH, 1968–76).

Before moving to Oregon in 1980, Vail served Friends broadly in a number of ways, including: delegate from Philadelphia Yearly Meeting to Friends World Conference at Oxford, UK (1952); Assistant to the Executive Secretary of the AFSC Middle

Atlantic Region (1961–63); and the T. Wistar Brown Fellowship (post-doctoral) at Haverford College (PA). At Haverford, he researched the religion and ethics of Edward Burrough, John Bellers, Jonathan Dymond, and Richard K. Ullmann, subjects he addressed more fully later.

As a committed pacifist, Vail was granted Conscientious Objection Status in 1945, but Selective Service was reinstated in 1948. Having torn up his 1944 draft card in 1946, Vail refused to register for the draft again. He was arrested in 1950, convicted, and spent 9½ months in prison. Vail refused to report for induction into the armed services in 1953, and he was sentenced to 3 years' probation and a \$500 fine by Judge Grim in 1954. That conviction was appealed to the Third-Circuit Court (Philadelphia), where it was upheld. A final appeal to the Supreme Court was declined. Vail served as Administrative Assistant to the Central Committee for Conscientious Objectors (1953–55).

As Vail's list of publications below reflect, his theological contributions to theological understandings of Friends and pressing issues of the day are highly significant. In my judgment, Vail's theological contributions deserving of ongoing consideration include the following.

First, his writings on pacifism and nonviolence deserve renewed focus year after year. Surely, the Quaker Peace Testimony commands consideration from age to age, even when its instantiations vary from one context to another. Vail also connected the Friends position centrally to Christian and biblical values, which make it compelling for all believers, and in that sense, his thought and his actions invite broader consideration—ecumenically and beyond.

A second contribution Vail has made involves his featuring the impressive-though-submerged contributions of important Quaker leaders and innovators—figures worth considering in fresh awareness and focus. These include his treatment of the likes of: Edward Burrough, John Bellers, Jonathan Dymond, and Richard K. Ullmann. I was personally inspired by his work on Bellers in the Arthur Roberts Festschrift that Howard Macy and I edited, and I too have sought to revitalize his memory.<sup>2</sup>

A third contribution involves Vail's challenging of status-quo views on aspects of history and theology. For instance, in his treatment of Bernstein and Communism, Vail challenged the view of Christopher Hill that Quakers were simply an early socialist movement working for socio-economic equity. Their concerns were more theologically and spiritually oriented than that. And, Vail sided with George Fox University (now Portland) Seminary professor, Larry Shelton, in his challenging Anselm's substitutionary atonement theory, siding more with Gustav Aulen in his *Christus Victor* monograph, finding covenantal themes—over and against violent theories of atonement—in the writings of early Friends, as well. And, Vail was helpful to me, as I wrote my epilogue to Walter Williams' *Rich Heritage of Quakerism*, pointing out the shift from thinking about Early Friends movement as a form of Continental mysticism (Rufus Jones), and seeing it within the context of Puritan (and biblical) England (Hugh Barbour, Henry Cadbury, et al).

A fourth theological contribution Vail Palmer has made to Friends and beyond involves his treatments of Quakers and the Bible. In his first book, *Face to Face: Early Quaker Encounters with the Bible*, Vail covers the field of early Quakers' uses of the Bible, featuring empathic readings of the text, showing how they took the bible seriously, putting their understandings into play personally and corporately. Embracing the Lamb's War as the ongoing struggle within society, they were moved to embrace nonviolence, justice concerns, antislavery, and the equality of men and women in leadership and public ministry.

The sequel to this book, *A Long Road: How Quakers Made Sense of God and the Bible*, continues the analysis by featuring the contributions of Quaker Bible scholars over the years. In this book, Vail compares and contrasts the theological and biblical views of Hicks and Gurney, in relation to those of Fox and Barclay, covering also leading Quaker biblical interpreters over the last two centuries and more. In so doing, Vail elucidates the ways Quaker approaches to God and the Bible have been responsive to the times, while seeking also to be responsible theologically

and exegetically—at times influenced by culture and at other times challenging it pointedly.

With great appreciation for the life and work of T. Vail Palmer, his influence and contributions continue with us, as we seek God's truth together, directed by the same Holy Spirit who inspired the Scriptures, and whom they remind us (literally) is an ongoing convincer, empowerer, and guide. Born on June 9, 1927 in West Chester, Pennsylvania, Vail is survived by his wife, Izzy Covalt of Albany, Oregon, as well as their families. A memorial was held on March 13th at Freedom Friends Church in Salem, Oregon, and friends participated both in person and on Zoom.

## PUBLICATIONS BY T. VAIL PALMER, JR.

### *Essays:*

Religiously-Based Pacifism (Shrewsbury, NJ: Shrewsbury Lecture, 1968).

“Religion and Ethics in the Thought of John Bellers.” *Truth's Bright Embrace: Essays and Poems in Honor* of Arthur O. Roberts, edited by Paul N. Anderson and Howard R. Macy (George Fox University Press, 1996), 61–74.

“A Revisionist Revised: A New Look at Bernstein's Cromwell and Communism.” *Practiced in the Presence: Essays in Honor of T. Canby Jones*, edited by D. Neil Snarr and Daniel L. Smith Christopher (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1994).

“Theorising a Quaker View of the Atonement.” *Quaker Studies* 16.1 (2011–12): 105–123.

Review of *Grace and Faith: The Means to Salvation*. *Quaker History* 65.2 (1976): 115.

*Contributions to Quaker Religious Thought:*

- 6:1, #11 (1964) “The Peace Testimony: Does Christian Commitment Make a Difference?”
- 7:2, #14 (1965) “Historic Quakerism and Mysticism,” Comments.
- 12:3, #25 (1970) “Teilhard de Chardin and the Aggiornamento of Quaker Theology,” Comments.
- 12:4, #26 (1971) “The Spirit of the Nation.”
- 13:1, #27 (1971) “Structural Incongruities in Quaker Service,” Comments.
- 13:2, #28 (1971/2) “Deeds and Rules in Quaker Ethics.”
- 14:4, #34 (1973) “Friends and the Sacraments: Some Critical Perspectives.”
- 23:2,3, #68 & 69) “Quaker Peace Witness.”
- 26:2, #80 (1993) “Early Friends and the Bible: Some Observations.”
- 28:1, #87 (1996) “Religion and Ethics in the Thought of Richard Ullmann.”
- 29:2, #92 (1999) “Some Issues from Nineteenth Century Quakerism.”
- #102 (2004) Review of *Seekers Found* (by Doug Gwyn).
- #111 (2008) “#s 39–71 (1974–1989; Palmer & Freiday, eds.)”

*Books:*

*Face to Face: Early Quaker Encounters with the Bible* (Newberg: Barclay Press, 2016).

*A Long Road: How Quakers Made Sense of God and the Bible* (Newberg: Barclay Press, 2017).

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Some of the content and language of this essay is indebted to the obituary written by Vail's son, Logan Palmer, as well as his vita, which Logan sent me. I also appreciate Logan's bringing me 13 boxes of Vail's books and files, which I sorted and passed on to the George Fox University Library and Archives and to Reedwood Friends Church.
- 2 See my essay, "John Bellers (1654–1725)—'A Veritable Phenomenon in the History of Political Economy,'" in *Quakers, Business and Corporate Responsibility—Lessons and Cases for Responsible Management*, edited by Nicholas Burton and Richard Turnbull (London: Springer, 2019), 153–81.