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The purpose of the Quaker Theological Discussion Group is to explore
the meaning and implications of our Quaker faith and
religious experience through discussion and publication. This search
for unity in the claim of truth upon us concerns both the content and
application of our faith.

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ABOUT THIS ISSUE

This issue of QRT features the papers presented at the November 2007 QTDG meetings in San Diego, California, where we addressed “A Friendly View of the Sacraments.” While Quaker sacramentology is not often on the short list of issues unprogrammed Friends have dealt with historically, movement within the ecumenical world has called for a fresh articulation of the Friends Testimony on the Sacraments from British and American Friends, alike. Internally, it has been more of a contentious issue among programmed Friends. As the revivalist movement took root among Friends in the Midwest following the Civil War, and as pastoral systems emerged among Friends in the Ohio Valley and points beyond, sacramental forms came to be used among some Friends on the basis of biblical readings and liberty of conscience.

This, of course, became a matter of consternation among Orthodox and other Friends, and one of the motivating interests in gathering the Richmond Conference of 1887 was the hope of furthering doctrinal unity among Friends, rooted in Scripture and the historic testimonies of Friends. While a plenary gathering of American Friends was long overdue, the 1882 baptism of David B. Updegraff by a Philadelphia Baptist and his 1885 delivery of An Address on the Ordinances at Ohio Yearly Meeting, calling for greater liberty on the use of outward forms, created acute concerns. Some Ohio Friends called for his recording to be dropped, or for him to find fellowship among those more suited to his views. Externally, nine other American Yearly Meetings reaffirmed the Friends Testimony on the Sacraments the following year. In the Richmond Declaration, the sections on “Baptism” and “The Supper of the Lord” seek to lay out the biblical and historic testimonies of Friends as a furtherance of doctrinal unity, and the document continues to be a valuable articulation of Friends beliefs to this day.

Ironically, while the work of Joseph John Gurney contributed considerably to the development of the pastoral system, the use of music, the recovery of Scripture, and the evolution of programmed approaches to worship, some of his most incisive and theologically pointed arguments were in support of the Friends Testimony on the Sacraments. As a separate study, programmed and unprogrammed Friends alike might do well to take another look at Gurney and...
examine his biblical and theological grounds for maintaining the historical testimony along these lines, but also to ask what might be the implications for the needs of Friends and the broader Christian movement today. If understood correctly, the Friendly view of the sacraments might not simply pose a way forward for fostering greater unity among Friends, but it might also pose a way forward for restoring the unity of the Christian movement and a means of reaching the world beyond.

Over the last half a century, amazing advances have been made in the larger Christian movement ecumenically. Whereas in ages past, Christian groups might not have honored one another’s baptisms, this is largely no longer the case. If one has been baptized in another tradition, one is generally accepted as a Christian in joining another church. On this matter Friends might concur, while still testifying to the one true Baptism—the Baptism of Jesus, which involves a transformative immersion “in Spirit and fire.” So, if a devout Friend is asked if he or she was baptized, the answer is “Yes indeed!” and further, one is baptized if daily walking in an abiding immersion in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Less inclusive, however, are some denominations’ views of how Eucharistic fellowship is effected—claiming that the spiritual reality happens only within their settings. Here Friends would want to affirm that the word of the Lord is true: that he is indeed present (and sacramentally so) where two or three are gathered in his name (Matt. 18:18-20). As some traditions have begun to see the Lord’s Supper as an open table, however, welcoming all to share together in calling to present the memory of the Lord’s sacrifice, Friends may find that welcome more adequate—both biblically and experientially. Further, Friends may wish to call for extending the remembrance to every meal and to affirm the authentic koinonia fellowship that happens in the common breaking of bread among believers—even at a pot-luck dinner. That seems to be what was going on in the fellowship meals of early Christians in Acts 2 and 4 and in 1 Cor. 10. Likewise, that seems closer to the table fellowship that Jesus advanced—among his disciples, and even among known “sinners” as a celebration of God’s restorative presence and love.

Here the Friends witness to the essence of sacramental reality extends also to its true evidences. Parallel to addressing the high-church formalism of Catholicism and the Mainline Protestant traditions, Friends also testify to the spiritual essentials among our
charismatic sisters and brothers. Rather than focus on the expressive
gifts of the Spirit, it is the fruit of the Spirit that is most telling as
the true and outward evidence of the Spirit’s indwelling power and
presence. On matters of both formalism and charisma, it is not simply
the abuse of these means to which Friends have reacted; it is their
tendency to displace the rightful focus on the Divine, whose effective
works of grace are ever to be received by faith and embodied in
faithfulness that is the issue. And, this testimony goes to the heart of
the New Covenant effected by Christ on behalf of the Father’s love
for the world.

I recall what Elton Trueblood said when asked to wear a robe
when preaching at a mainline church. Upon asking if he were required
to wear the robe, the answer was “No.” He then replied, “In that
case, I shall.”

The essays in this volume make timely contributions to the other
excellent treatments of Friends and the Sacraments in other issues
of Quaker Religious Thought, and readers are especially encouraged
to take another look at issue #s 9, 34, 57, and 76. In my view, these
are some of the finest treatments of the Friends Testimony on the
Sacraments written within the last half century, and treatments of
a Friends view on the work of the Holy Spirit and the workings of
Christ should also be considered anew (#s 1, 7, 24, 37, 39&40, 41,
42, 62, 70, 71, 72, 80, 91).

Steve Angell’s essay leads off the discussion by calling our attention
to how early Friends worked with sacramental issues and themes. Of
course, things developed from there, but his noting some of the original
concerns is foundational for understanding the Testimony of Friends
as it developed. Tim Seid’s essay goes deeper into the spiritual heart of
Friends’ understanding of the New and Inward Covenant that comes
alone through Christ. As an expert in the book of Hebrews, Seid’s
work is worth considering, not just as a Quaker theologian, but also
as a biblical exegete. My own essay seeks to develop an incarnational
approach to sacramental reality, especially as rooted in the ministries
of John the Baptist and Jesus, as their memories developed in the early
church and within gospel traditions. Kent Walkemeyer then develops
a sacramental view of vocation as a means of taking the Friends
Testimony further—toward its implications for discipleship and living
out the Good News in the world.
These essays are responded to by David Johns, who raises important questions for Friends. He rightly points out that “dead formalism” too easily becomes a “straw man” among Friends who advocate an “uncritical” propounding of a Friends Testimony, and he raises valuable questions with the four essays here presented. As David was unable to attend the sessions, his paper was real in his absence. The discussion, though, was highly engaged. Especially valuable is Johns’ challenge to think of “communion among believers” and how Friends might contribute to that venture. I concur entirely, and would agree that important constructive work needs here to be done.

For this reason I invited Ann Riggs, who read David’s paper for us, to sketch a view of how Friends might engage the large ecumenical movement constructively on this important matter. Ann has just completed six years of service as the Director of the Faith & Order Commission of the National Council of Churches, and her insights on these matters bring exceptional authority in terms of engagement and understanding about the sacraments and Christian unity ecumenically. As an ecumenical response was presented informally by Ann Loades, Professor of Theology (emeritus) from the University of Durham in England, Corey Beals was also invited to summarize her response (which is unfortunately unavailable in print) as well as our general discussion, which he moderated. In so doing, the reader is pointed not simply to the essays and responses themselves, but to the larger set of issues within the Christian movement and beyond.

Just over twenty years ago, while doing summer doctoral research at the University of Tübingen, I attended a presentation on the state of Christian unity at the Ausländer Kolloquium (a seminar for international scholars) by Günter Gassmann. As the Director of the World Council of Churches Faith & Order Commission, Dr. Gassmann described the progress the world Christian movement was making in overcoming the Protestant-Catholic divides, presented in the *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* document. What this 1982 pamphlet (Faith & Order Paper #111, finalized in Lima, Peru) advanced was an affirmation of outward and visible Christian unity, where the Word is aptly preached and the Sacraments are rightly celebrated.

When I spoke with him after the session, introducing myself as a Friend, he threw up his hands in dismay. “You Quakers are impossible!” he exclaimed. Apparently, the London Yearly Meeting document, *To Lima with Love*, had seemed to throw a wrench in the
works, experienced as a hindrance to Christian unity just when real advances were thought to be made. While it affirmed the outward bases for unity laid out in *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* as potentially helpful measures for other believers, the Friends’ response resisted the supplanting of inward and spiritual bases for unity by outward and formal ones. The point, however, is not to diminish the place of outward measures; it is to bolster the importance of essential realities, which in Gospel terms are spiritual, experiential, and relational. So the ecumenical conversation continues.

I had the opportunity to witness to a Friendly understanding of the sacramental reality of the Church at the 50th anniversary of the American Faith & Order movement at Oberlin College last July. In sharing within a panel discussion on “Full Communion,” I mentioned the concern that the *BEM* document functioned to exclude not only Friends, but many millions of charismatic believers and new Christian movements from Christian fellowship. I was asked earnestly how this might be rectified. I responded that finding a way to celebrate the *Real Presence* of Christ, at least potentially present in every authentic gathering of believers, should be the ecumenical heart of *Koinonia* fellowship. Further, finding ways invite a spiritual and abiding immersion in the transformative love and power of the Holy Spirit is the only way to encounter the power of the Gospel and to live out of its newness of life.

If that happens, matters related to baptism and communion will take care of themselves; if it does not happen, among Friends or otherwise, the whole point of the Friends Testimony on the Sacraments will have been missed—particularly, by Friends. Of course, this is the point of the Good News, which all Friends testimonies seek to embody and advance.

—Paul Anderson
Editor

Quaker Theological Discussion Group 2008 will be held at the Boston Convention Center on November 21, 2008 from 4:00-10:00 pm. More information will follow in the May issue. We are also hoping to plan a residential Quaker Theological Discussion Group set of meetings in the Midwest during the third week of June, 2009. More information will follow on those developments, as well.