1-1-2007

Signs of Salvation: Some Reflections on Friends' Proclaiming the Gospel to the World

Brian Drayton

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt

Part of the Christianity Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt/vol108/iss1/6

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Quaker Religious Thought by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University.
**SIGNS OF SALVATION: SOME REFLECTIONS ON FRIENDS’ PROCLAIMING THE GOSPEL TO THE WORLD**

**BRIAN DRAYTON**

*Signs of Salvation* is a valuable exegesis of the idea of salvation, broadened beyond any notions of personal preservation or safety here and hereafter, so that the notion of salvation is no longer a goal towards which to struggle, but a transformational process in which to participate. Ben Richmond confronts one pivotal ingredient in this vision, the nature of the atonement, when he effectively seizes on Jeremiah 31—that challenging bridge linking the religion of the prophets with the experience of God’s work through Christ. This serves as a source of unifying vision as he explores the implications of God’s salvific work as experienced and proclaimed by the patriarchs and prophets, the Gospels, Paul, and Revelation. Thus, Ben’s book represents a fresh, appealing, and very Quakerly view of the Gospel message.

**SOME STRENGTHS OF THE BOOK**

It has been a pleasure to read this book, and I expect it will be widely embraced by seekers who want to root their own experience in scriptural warrant. For one thing, we always need to hear again that an authentic encounter with the living God is evidenced by change. Furthermore, as he describes in valuable detail, these changes are characteristic, drawing us into a community committed to justice, living peaceably, and nurturing lives of simplicity, purity, and compassion. A religion bearing other fruits cannot be grounded in Christ, and this as much as anything must be our testimony to the whole world, however much we may argue about what precisely constitutes purity, simplicity, and the rest. Ben’s exegesis has been instructive to me, and I appreciate his directness in placing his meditations in the context of competing views of the Atonement.
I also want to say that I appreciate very much the way that Ben has written for the world at large, rather than for the Society of Friends in particular. It seems to me that we Friends must be seeking prayerfully and intelligently to encourage each other to speak to the world about the ground of our faith, and to proclaim the Gospel as we have come to understand it.

Of course some of this preaching—or writing—will be aimed at our own communities, but it is a sign of health when we can speak, not only of our testimonies, but of our fundamental commitments in faith and practice, to seekers outside the family circle. This aspect of Ben’s book, therefore, is very welcome. In this regard, his handling of the authority of Scripture, and its relationship to the authority of the Holy Spirit, is careful and nuanced. I would have wished that he had spent more time addressing this directly, perhaps in one of his very substantive footnotes, because there are several uses of the word “word” throughout, sometimes to mean “Scripture” and sometimes to mean Christ (which he very often denotes as “the living word”). His exposition of the implications of his understanding of Christ’s present work for worship is also welcome, and if it is taken seriously should be provocative to a wide range of readers, within and without the Quaker movement.

I cannot forbear commenting as well on the remarkable footnote (p. 119 et seq.) on the universal offer of salvation, which I wish had been part of the main argument, because of its simple clarity and solid logic. To some, the theology herein will be challenging or even upsetting; Quakers involved in the misconstrued debate between “universalist” and “particularist/Christian” camps will I hope take note.

**GOAL AND PATH: HOW DO WE BECOME WHAT WE ARE CALLED TO BE?**

In the rest of what follows, I will comment from the point of view of one interested in Quaker proclamation of the Gospel, for whom Ben’s demonstration of how wide “salvation” really is raised some important questions. While this might at first seem to wander widely from the text, I do not think so, as one of the book’s avowed aims is to help individuals and “provoke the formation of small groups to ‘walk in the Light’ together—opening up the inner places of their lives before God and one another.” (p. 11) My comments are stimulated by reading Ben’s book with this important end in view.
It seems to me that Ben’s account of newness of life under the Covenant, and the process of coming into righteousness, could be strengthened by joining with it a sense of process: How is this supposed to work? This is a place where Friends have something valuable to say, or so I have always felt—that is, it seems to me that the power of the Quaker understanding of conversion is that it describes a simple, yet profound mechanism for growth in faithfulness.

*Signs of Salvation* certainly articulates some elements of this process, but the structure of the account is such that these elements do not come together in a way that could catch and engage the reader with the wonderful possibility that comes with the cycle of seeking the Light, seeing your condition in the Light, being freed by dependence on the power of God, accepted in our insufficiency, then waiting to be shown the path forward once the chains are broken, and being given the ability to take that path. This is the process by which we participate in the work of the Gospel, take our own part in the drama of salvation, and it is a method that Friends can never get too good at, nor ever neglect preaching as part of the Gospel.

In this connection, it is critically important, I think, to include the Quaker exposition of what the nature of this Christ is that we experience and come to trust, and which is so contrary to our expectation that we are constantly tempted to seek deliverance from some power that seems more obviously practical. Traditionally, Friends kept alive the paradox and scandal of the Savior’s actual appearance to us, lowly and like a babe, a little seed, too easy for us to discount and overlook, stepping over it in our haste to achieve our ends. As James Nayler says (Nayler, *A door opened to the imprisoned seed, or captives in the world*, 1659),

...let the little thing in you that is pure and simple, lead you, and there to bow and bend and confess; and this will be your restoration to God, to give all you have to the Holy, who when He has befooled and cursed your wisdom, and brought down your high conceits, and bound the strong man, and tied the colt to the vine; then will He arise in power, who is meek and holy, and rule in your strength, parts and wisdom, having purged the enmity out, and renewed your abilities and you will have all restored again manifold, all new, and clear, and able, by the power of the Holy One, who will reign and govern therein; and you shall know the Lord, whose off-spring you are; to be both root and head, and all in you. And you shall say no more, I am
weak and can do nothing, but all things through Him that gives you strength.

Friends at the start did not just exhort people to righteous and faithful living, they made the very practical assertion that you could recognize the Shepherd’s voice, and that faithfulness consisted at bottom in keeping within the sound of that voice, and not mistaking it (“Lo here! Lo there!”) for others. Nayler continues (Nayler, How sin is strengthened, and how it is overcome, 1657),

...as the Spirit sees your wants, your love will spring and move in you, and bring forth towards God and man upon all occasions; which if you willingly serve in its smallest motion, it will increase, but if you quench it in its movings, and refuse to bring it forth, it will wither and dry in you, not being exercised. And it is the like of gentleness, meekness, patience, and all other virtues which are of a springing and spreading nature, where they are not quenched, but suffered to come forth to His praise in His will and time, who is the Begetter thereof, and to the comfort of His own Seed, and cross to the world....

Parenthetically, it seems to me that the time has come to engage in a fresh examination of the early Quaker doctrine of the Two Seeds and the two births, and the resultant focus on the Christ life, “that of God,” “the life of God in all,” as the element which is pure, which is to be lived and acted from, and spoken to, rather than that which is born of the earth. This comes across as too dualistic for our pluralistic age, but it reflects key elements of New Testament teaching, and that is important because, while it has roots in John 3, it was also elaborated by Paul and others—and by Christians after them—on the basis of the experience of Christ’s growing in them, overspreading their inward territory. To quote Nayler, “The light says, Love your neighbor as yourself: This the first birth cannot do.”

The concreteness, the clear envisioning of this little, precious life, perhaps newly born of the divine Seed, may be a central ingredient in Friends’ ability to speak home truths in love, feeling the kinship that unites this life as it is begotten in any. Here is William Dewsbury, writing in 1655 from prison to Judge Fell, in a letter both loving and terrific:

Friend, that which calls for purity in thee is dear to me, and with it I suffer, which often secretly groans in thee for deliverance. And whilst thou lend thy ear to the pure counsel of the holy Seed, thou art almost persuaded to lay thy crown in the dust at the feet of Christ...and to follow him daily in the cross.... To the pure light of Christ in thy conscience I speak, which will witness me.
This dwelling humbly in a clear sense of the holy inward birth is a necessary step in becoming able to participate in the Lamb’s War, to which I now turn.

**THE LAMB’S WAR: HOW DO WE WITNESS FOR GOD’S ORDER IN THE WORLD?**

This sense of *how it happens* is also something I longed for in Ben’s account of the Lamb’s War, a topic which (however worded) is an urgent one. He articulates very well the calling to respond with spiritual tools and weapons to the challenges and sufferings that may be our lot as we turn from idolatry and live in that newness of life.

Yet the reader is left almost with the sense that the witness of the Lamb is primarily by contrast, and not by positive engagement against evil outside the self; which if more fully articulated makes a stronger bridge, that can be crossed by the practicing Christian, between the inward experience of salvation and the outward fruits of justice. There is more to say on this head, and the relationship between the followers of the Lamb and the yet-unconvinced world makes an interesting parallel with the integral relationship between the individual and the faithful community into which she or he is saved.

Since we are talking about the Lamb’s war, I will go back to Nayler once more. Nayler’s treatment of the action of Christ in the world, while not political in the sense of participation in government, still articulates that, as the Lamb enables us to combat and overcome the Man of Sin as we encounter him in ourselves (the heir of the First Seed), we are gradually drawn into struggle against the manifestations of sin outside ourselves. Thus we are called by our heightened sense of sin, the power of God to help us enact our personal share of the Atonement, and the intensified knowledge of God’s Light and life as we come to experience it, to see and protest against places where we see evil still holding sway—in proclamation, surely, in earnest invitation to the suffering soul, and in practical suggestions for social reform.

I would suggest that the theology of “concern” is a characteristic and important part of the Quaker understanding of the process of salvation, and that the growth of the experience of concern, of feeling drawn to the oppressed Seed as it is perceived in any, and of encouraging the Gospel life in all—this, too, is an indispensable sign of salvation.
ON QUAKER THEOLOGIZING

Finally, therefore, I feel concerned to suggest that Quaker theology—not denominational or apologetic, but with a characteristic Quaker flavor because of what we have learned from Christ, or from our failures to follow his life by the Quaker method—should be done in a manner that is consonant with our experience of Christ at work among us, our understanding of how we have discovered that New Covenant envisioned by Jeremiah. In this, Ben succeeds very well, and his success will I hope open the path for others.

It is not new to point out that Quaker theology did not begin with Barclay, but there is sometimes an implication that the early theologizing, by Fox, Howgill, Dewsbury, Travers, Nayler, is somehow not up to snuff. As I consider whether Quakerism (as opposed to individual Friends) has a living witness today, however, I have come to think that Nayler’s Love to the Lost, his Lamb’s War, Fox’s Doctrinals and Epistles, Penington’s tracts and letters, exhibit essential, needed characteristics of a native Quaker theologizing, which other more systematic, scholastically rigorous studies can contribute to, but not substitute for. It may be better that Barclays are rare, and we should not apologize for the scarcity.

In this, I expect that Ben will affirm with me that we are called to teach and study, write and speak, with the aim of proclaiming the experience and implications of Christ’s life in us and among us—the consequences of unmediated discipleship—saying, however shyly, “This is the word of the Lord to you,” or at least, “We believed because of what you told us, but now we believe because of what we have seen,” however curbed round by humility and self-doubt this assertion may need to be, and even when we are deeply engaged in the intellectual work that good theology should also involve. Signs of Salvation, thoughtful and valuable as it is, may open the way to something more from its thoughtful, concerned, and tender author.

NOTES

1. While I found many of the footnotes instructive, I was often led to wonder what the point of references in the text to Greek or Hebrew words was. They had me running to the originals, but I was mostly not enlightened by the exercise, though I have had an enjoyable time trying to figure out Isaiah 40:2, especially the word tsva’ah, which clearly does not mean “host,” nor is it clear why “warfare” makes sense. It seems just a puzzle, since the Septuagint translates it as ταξινευος, and the Vulgate translates it as malitia.