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A Quaker Approach to Truth

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Sponsored by the Quaker Theological Discussion Group
(http://theo-discuss.quaker.org/)

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

On one hand, articulating a Quaker approach to truth seems unnecessary. Like the rosy-cheeked Friend on the oatmeal carton, the Quaker approach to truth may simply be conceived of as “nothing added.” It aspires to purity in the quest and endeavors to be faithful to the truth upon its discernment. Indeed, the conviction that truth should be sought and embodied in all ways and at all times is central to the Quaker way. Seeking the truth is the goal of all inquiry, speaking the truth is the heart of honest discourse, and living the truth lies at the center of authentic existence. Jesus said, “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free,” (Jn. 8:32) and Friends have testified that abiding in the truth is the key to liberation.

In one sense, uplifting the issue of truth serves simply as a reminder. It calls for a realignment of our ordered commitments and invites us to a renewed embrace of transparent and authentic ways of being. Beyond staying with what we already know, however, any worthy venture is well considered anew. Coming at the issue with fresh attentiveness may also yield fresh insights and unanticipated ways forward. As we consider, for instance, alternative ways of approaching the truth—each with its own strengths and weaknesses—we are helped in the seeking of truth...as well as in the finding of it. We also grow appreciative of the limitations of our own approaches to truth and respectful of the views of others with whom we disagree.

With the Apostle Paul in II Corinthians 4:1-7, we appreciate that there is no hope for humanity except the Light of God shine upon us, “extinguishing” our darkness. Indeed, the saving-revealing work of God is a treasure; and yet, it is a treasure contained in “earthen vessels” to show us that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to ourselves. In many ways, appreciating our inescapable blindness is the beginning of the quest for truth. When we become opened to the contingencies of our perception and understanding—our dependence upon the divine Source of truth—we come to see the quest as a deeply spiritual one. As Parker Palmer has reminded us (To Know as We Are Known: A Spirituality of Education, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), it is not only we who are seekers of truth, but it is we who are also sought by the truth. In that sense, the quest for truth transcends objectivism proper and extends to the living truth only subjects can apprehend.
The quest for truth, however, is also something of a paradoxical one. To seek it as a task-oriented goal, or as a means to an ulterior end, tends to corrupt the venture. We may approximate aspects of the truth, but authentic abiding in the truth requires givenness—abandonment and adherence to the truth whatever the cost. It is also the case that some of the greatest damage afflicted by well-meaning religious people has at times resulted from personal convictions that one’s sense of God’s truth is ultimate—the last word. To be a humble learner in the school of Christ, however, is to follow one who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life (Jn. 14:6), while at the same time acknowledging that we are learning of one whose manner is meek and lowly of heart (Matt. 11:29). In that sense, being a seeker of truth is as much a way of living and being as it is an aspect of thinking and knowing. Revelation and incarnation are thereby ground and pressed together in the crucible of human existence, and an adequate epistemology takes such glories and foibles seriously.

As a topic of interest, a Quaker approach to truth follows several of our recent discussions in QTDG and QRT. In general, the seeking of truth is essential to effective quests for the Jesus of history as well as the Christ of faith, and these subjects were explored extensively in the issues addressing recent Historical Jesus quests (QRT #94 and #98) and early Friends’ uses of the Bible (QRT #97). More particularly, as we discussed Rosemary Moore’s important book on the beginnings of the Quaker Movement (The Light in Their Consciences), it was Corey Beals’ addressing of her approach to historical inquiry—leaving God out of the picture as necessitated by modern standards of historiography (see the excellent exchange between Beals and Moore in QRT #s 99-100)—that led to our assigning Beals an additional paper on the topic of epistemology proper. This paper was then delivered at the 2002 Toronto QTDG meetings.

Our discussion of truth pertains centrally to our issue on Quakers and Science (QRT #’s 99 & 100), and Arthur Roberts brings the discussion of truth-seeking into direct alignment with the workings of Christ in our lives and the world. Roberts takes the subject further—beyond what can be known to considerations of what should be taught. This provocative essay was delivered at the FAHE conference at George Fox University as the opening plenary address, and his presentation engages our work as educators incisively. His contribution and that of Corey Beals below help us think about our ongoing
approaches to truth—its discerning and imparting—which is at the center of so much of what we do as Friends.

While happy to benefit from any serviceable approach to truth, the Quaker way is reluctant to ascribe exclusively to one approach over all others. Why? Because God’s truth will ever transcend our particular means of seeking it. Conversely, the more we learn about any subject, the more we realize how much we do not know. Presuppositional modesty thus becomes a direct consequent of post-suppositional reflection. In this life we “see through a glass darkly,” but it is that hope of encountering the Divine face-to-face, and “knowing fully—even as we are fully known” (I Cor. 13:12) that becomes the stuff of epistemic boldness, and humility, alike. These essays bring to mind the words of George Fox writing to ministering Friends from his imprisonment in Cornwall in 1656, inviting Friends to “… be obedient to the Lord God and go through the world and be valiant for the Truth upon earth; tread and trample all that is contrary under.” Perhaps our considering inquiry and instruction together will help us carry out that charge a bit more faithfully.

Following our discussions on truth-discerning and truth-imparting is an engaging review of Doug Gwyn’s recent book, Seekers Found. In the reviews by T. Vail Palmer and Stephanie Ford and in the author’s response, fresh considerations of the first generation of Friends come to bear upon present-day seekers, and profitably so. Again, truth-seeking and truth-living come into play centrally in these discussions as well. As we get a better sense of how the original Friends movement began—what issues they were addressing and how God was at work in and among early Friends—we get a better sense of what God might be doing in the world today. And, if any of us should come a bit closer to the truth in those sensibilities, not only will Doug Gwyn’s new book pose a worthy contribution to the world, but so will this issue of Quaker Religious Thought!

—Paul Anderson
Editor

QTDG Meetings—This year we will have two Quaker Theological Discussion Group meetings. The first will be held in conjunction with the Friends Association of Higher of Education and Friends Historians and Archivists on the campus of George Fox University
June 24-26, and the second will be held in San Antonio, Texas just before the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature meetings November 19-20, 2004. The November meeting will include a topical session on the theory and practice of Quaker decision making and a major review of nearly a half century of *Quaker Religious Thought*.

The following sessions will be held at a downtown location, to be announced later on the website:

Nov. 19, 7:00-8:30 pm; QTDG Session I

“Discernment—Individual and Corporate Considerations”
Chuck Conniry

“The Meeting for Worship in which Business is Conducted”
Paul Anderson

Nov. 20, 9:00-11:30 am; QTDG Session II

“*QRT* #s 1-50—The First Fifty Issues”
Shane Kirkpatrick

“*QRT* #s 51-100—The Second Fifty Issues”
Susan Jeffers

Further information is available on the website (http://theo-discuss.quaker.org/), and we appreciate Susan Jeffers’ willingness to keep it up to date. Come if you can, and join in on these engaging discussions!