Christ and the Holy Spirit: The Earliest Quaker View

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The turning point in the life of George Fox, the founder of the Quakers, came when he heard a voice which said, “There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition.”

Fox had lost all hope of finding help from men. Then he heard this voice. It changed him from a seeker to a finder. He devoted his life to proclaiming by word and deed the glorious good news that “Christ was come to teach his people himself.”

This is quite clear from his Journal. Anyone reading it with the purpose of determining whether or not Fox really means Christ when he says Christ will come to the conclusion that he does indeed mean Christ.

Why then has this view of Christ almost completely disappeared from present-day Quakerism?

I believe that there are two causes. The first is an attempt to interpret Quakerism in comparison with orthodox Christianity. The belief of orthodox Christianity that is most pertinent here is that Christ was born, died, rose from the dead, ascended into heaven, and sent the Holy Spirit to take his place on earth until his second coming.

This is a change from Fox’s view that God draws man to the ever-present Christ by the Spirit. In effect Christ is replaced by the Spirit. This changed view was expressed by some Quakers in the seventeenth century. For instance, Robert Barclay in his Apology almost always speaks of the Spirit and almost never speaks of the living presence of Christ.

The second cause is the reinterpretation of Quakerism in terms of philosophical mysticism that was undertaken at the
of any magnitude today in the United States or the world. Fourth, the ecumenical and interracial factors inherent in Pentecostalism may offer mainstream Christianity, both Catholic and Protestant, some direction in building a truly integrated church.

From here three theological issues have to come under urgent review. The first one is the tragic marriage between fundamentalism as a notional, rational language and Pentecostalism as a living liturgy and a spiritual witness within an oral-associative tradition. In fact, evangelical theology, with its individualistic hermeneutics and its social and political conservatism, has acted as the worst enemy of authentic liberation of the fullness of humanity. As Bishop Monroe Saunders from the First United Church of Jesus Christ in Baltimore said to me: "Where white Pentecostalism has been trapped by rigid fundamentalism, it necessarily will fail. Manna stinks when you preserve it. But fresh manna every day — this is Pentecost! Jesus Christ is a cosmic figure and his spirit is free, liberating, leading us into a whole experience."

The second question refers to the preoccupation with the tongues-phenomena inside and outside of historical Pentecostalism. Glossolalia, a "meditative, non-rational form of prayer,"9 highly appreciated by Paul for private prayer and used under certain conditions in the worship of the early church (1 Cor. 14), was totally rejected by established Christianity as being "unlawful" and "enthusiastic." Pentecostals therefore had to make a virtue out of necessity — to make a narrow doctrine out of a life-experience. Speaking in tongues as the "initial evidence" of "Holy Ghost baptism" became the only distinctive sign of "deeper depths and higher heights," of the real presence of a dynamic power in the service of the church. Where charismatic and pentecostal experience was never influenced by these rationalizations, speaking in tongues is still highly regarded and greatly appreciated as a spiritual gift but not as the essential sign of the outpouring of the Spirit. This is the case among African independent charismatic move-

beginning of the twentieth century. This was done in hope of revitalizing Quakerism. At first it certainly had that effect and also produced a renewed interest in the writings of the early Friends. Unfortunately, some aspects of early Quakerism were taken out of their original Christ-centered context. Thus the reinterpretation was done in terms of general (non-Christian) mysticism.

The central belief of general mysticism is that man can have direct communication with God. This view not only eliminates the living presence of Christ but also eliminates the Holy Spirit in the Christian sense. In general mysticism, Spirit means God. There is no mediator, human or divine, in general mysticism. Thus it is often said by Quakers who hold the viewpoint of general mysticism that there is something of God in every person and that this has been called by a wide variety of interchangeable names. These names would include the Inner Light, Christ Within, Spirit of God, Spirit of Christ, Seed, etc., but they all mean God who communicates directly with man.

It is almost impossible to understand the Quaker message about Christ and the Holy Spirit while holding either of the views outlined above. This is what makes it so difficult to get the full meaning of The Journal of George Fox. It takes a tremendous effort to set aside one's own view and to try to understand the almost unique view of George Fox.

Yet it should not be a surprise that the earliest Quaker view of Christ and the Holy Spirit should be radically different. After all, the Quakers were radically different in their actions from any other religious group, with the exception of the very earliest Christians. Isn't it logical to expect that their views would be as distinctive as their actions?

The key to the Quaker view of Christ is that he is a living presence. Thus where two or three or more are gathered together he is present in the midst of them. He instructs the group in worship and in knowing and doing the will of God. He is also present in each individual person as inward guide, teacher, overseer, and in many other ways.
Because of the continuing presence of Christ, the Quaker doctrine of the Holy Spirit is different. The Spirit brings people to Christ and shows them who he is. Fox's statement that "the Father of Life drew me to his Son by his Spirit" illustrates this. A similar biblical quotation is from 1 Corinthians 12:3 (RSV): "And no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit."

Fox never thinks of God without thinking of Christ and the Spirit. It is unfortunate that Quakers seem to have largely lost this belief and experience of the continuing presence of Christ. It was the source of their remarkable spiritual power and made them the most Christ-centered of any Christian group. It produced their unprogrammed worship, their meetings for business, and their belief that it is possible through the power of the living Christ to know and do the will of God in this life. The hope is that this present situation will change and Friends will be enabled to proclaim again that Christ has come to teach his people himself.

by respectable non-charismatic and charismatic Christianity, but naturally had no access to academic research on their own history, to financial resources, or to theological institutions. Thus their oral culture of songs and stories, parables and visionary hopes of freedom was preserved but was ignored by modern progressive and conservative evangelical theologies. And what was declared as genuine "Pentecostalism" was only the white, conceptual, abstract, fundamentalist rationalization of it — the categorical system of two- or three-stage crisis-experiences, which had historical roots in a certain interpretation of Luke's theology, in certain streams within historical Roman Catholicism, and in the Wesleyan explanation of holiness. This form of notional language nevertheless flooded the North American, European, West Indian, Latin American, and South African "pentecostal" market. James Tinney, teacher of black studies at Kansas University, himself white, makes a rather ironical statement: "Is it not strange that no one has inquired about the origin of the black Pentecostal bodies? Evidently popular assumption has it that the gift of tongues fell spontaneously and separately on the non-glossolalist black and white churches. However, this is far from the truth." He goes on to say that acknowledgment of the fact that Pentecostalism developed on the black scene and became a contribution of the ghetto to the Christian nation at large would have startling implications:

First, since scholars consider some elements of Pentecostalism to resemble closely the early Church, primitive Christianity is not foreign to the experience of American Negroes and hence is not totally a white imposition. Second, while it is true that whites have tended to impose certain aspects of a culturized religion on black churches, it is also true that blacks have given to more than a million whites a religious form that is significantly Afro-American. Third, since isolated incidents of glossolalia have appeared and disappeared at regular intervals in church history, it is not unreasonable to suggest that without the important role of blacks, there might be no Pentecostal movement