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Comments on "Early Friends and the Work of Christ"

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the tides of history, the historic position of early Friends has been weakened. The ultimate departure presents a picture in which God is given purely immanentist status, man's natural goodness is placed as the *sine qua non*, Christ is given purely symbolic meaning, and holiness is transmuted into schemes for social realignment.

But in recent years the turmoil of the world has helped men once more to see the otherness of God and to recognize sin in its ugliness and its endemic nature. Both conservative and neo-orthodox theologies have bared the root of sin which contaminates all man's best efforts and issues in pride. There is greater assurance today that man is sinful than that he can be redeemed, and greater confidence in God's grace than in his providing sanctification. It is certainly not clear that Bultmann or Tillich have cleared the field for an encounter with the risen, living Christ, who offers us his Pentecostal victory in the way in which Fox and Barclay testified. It is not clear that Carl Henry or Edward J. Carnell speak with comparable conviction about the sanctified life.

We do well to recognize the complexity of evil, the insidious nature of temptation and self-pride. We need to recapture the meaning of grace which protects from a sterile legalism, to recognize the broad implications of obedient discipleship, of living above the world while in the midst of it. But in so doing we ought to recognize the early Quaker positions and their claims for insight into the revelation of God through Scripture and through personal experience with Christ. There is "preaching up sin" today; and the warning of William Penn is appropriate, to be careful lest we "sin more freely because at his cost." Between legalism and self-indulgence winds the highway of holiness of which Isaiah spoke and which has been the desire of all true Christians. If our researches into early Quaker history are to afford us spiritual insights as well as historical knowledge we shall ask God to reveal his truth to us through Scripture and through Jesus Christ known within immediate experience.

**Comments**

**LORTON HEUSEL**

Arthur Roberts has presented a scholarly paper which reveals a comprehensive knowledge of the works of George Fox and other early Friends. A capable theologian and master of vocabulary, Dr. Roberts writes with artistic expression. It is with deep respect for him and his abilities and with sincere appreciation for his paper that I offer the following remarks.

It seems to me that Arthur Roberts builds his case on three affirmations: (1) Quakerism is Christian and "orthodox;" (2) Friends based their religious authority on personal encounter with the living contemporary Christ in the Pauline sense rather than on reasoning and theological formulations; and (3) the scope of the Quaker view of the Atonement involved not only divine forgiveness of the sinner but also his sanctification.

Regarding the first point Dr. Roberts asserts with finality that orthodoxy provided the early Quaker view of the person of Christ, but he allows for great diversity of belief and experience with respect to the work of Christ. It is difficult to see how Friends could agree upon "Who he is" without having found some measure of agreement as to "What he did" on the cross.

The cross stands as the lasting clue to Christ's person and his work, for who he is and what he has done for all men are there disclosed in clearest light. If early Friends had diverse interpretations of the Atonement as the writer suggests, then surely we have isolated a fundamental weakness in Quaker theology. The deity of Christ can hardly be defended as a more objective fact in history than the once-for-allness of what he did on the cross.

Furthermore, if Dr. Roberts is correct in his appraisal of early Friends' views of the work of Christ, it would certainly open the way for greater conversation between the various branches of Friends today. While Evangelical Friends have held
tenaciously to the divinity of Christ, it is largely not this fact that creates schismatic fervor among Friends. Rather it is the tendency on the part of the Evangelical to insist also upon the nature of Christ's work, which usually involves an interpretation of either the ransom or satisfaction theory or some combination of the two.

The second affirmation raises questions as to just what the content of an "experience of Christ" was or is and whether or not the Quaker experience of the living Christ was limited to the immediate disclosure or Damascus Road type of encounter. The Quaker emphasis on the "Light" available to every man and on the immediacy of the living Christ implies a coziness of man with Christ which may exaggerate the meaning of early Quaker imagery. Certainly we cannot discount the Pauline type of encounter of Fox and his associates on some occasions, but to suggest that the Quaker doctrines of Christ and his work hinges upon one Divine-human communication pattern would be to place serious limitations both upon Quakerism and upon the Holy Spirit as well. While Fox may have honestly believed that it was only "Christ Jesus" who could speak to his condition, it is obvious throughout his Journal that he himself became a medium through whom Christ spoke, acted, and became real to many of his contemporaries. Anne Wilson certainly was the vessel through whom Christ became real to Samuel Bownas.

Arthur Roberts asserts that Quakerism represents an attempt toward greater objectivity in worship than was found in Puritanism or the Catholic Mass. While this may have been desirable, it is a question as to how free from personal feeling, bias, and prejudice any personal experience was or can be. If Willard Sperry is correct in his book Reality in Worship, the Catholic Mass is more objective than Protestant worship and may be near to Quaker worship in the mystical sense, i.e., at the point at which the Quaker completely immerses his mind and will in the Mind and Will of the Infinite. It is my conviction that an honest look at Quakerism reveals that the infallible Spirit has worked through fallible minds and finite vessels to accomplish his purposes and that the Spirit has not required transcendence of subjectivity in order to make holy obedience a possibility.

The third affirmation Arthur Roberts makes regarding the scope of the Atonement in terms of holiness, defines a Quaker emphasis which has needed clarification since the rise of the Neo-orthodox attack on the liberal view of man. Quakerism accepts the orthodox interpretation of the human predicament but it sees in God's action in Christ the redemptive power and grace which enable the believer not only to be forgiven but to live "above sin.

I place "above" in quotes because I believe the holiness emphasis has a tendency to get out of hand by being equated with some "humanly contrived moral code or standard of conduct," to use Wilmer Cooper's appropriate warning. Certainly Quakerism offers a corrective to any attempt to resign to a life of sin but it can never allow itself to become cloaked in a self-righteous, moralistic perspective which assumes that because perfection is possible, it is easily achieved through diligent ethical effort on the one hand or by divine action through sanctification on the other. Frankly, I have always been about as skeptical of the authenticity of those who claim to be "saved" and "sanctified" as I am of those who claim to have achieved through ethical striving. Luther's observation that "a Christian is one who under the Holy Spirit is continually becoming a Christian" is quite near to the Quaker view of holiness. There is always room for growth.

I appreciated Arthur Roberts' reference to William Penn's "A Tender Visitation" with its outline of the doctrine of salvation. But I do feel the need for more discussion of the meaning of the cross to early Friends, for the cross is the central fact of the work of Christ. Why was the cross necessary in order for man to achieve a life of perfection and holiness? Why was the cross necessary to heal the broken relation between sinful man and the Holy God? Is there a relationship between the redemptive work of God on the cross and Friends' "dogged assurance that man, if he does what he is supposed to do, will come out all right?" (a quote from Wilmer Cooper). And what in our religious heritage guides the individual Friend today to understand the relationship between God's redemptive act in Jesus Christ and his continuing action through his redemptive community, the church? And finally, can we find in these early
Quakers a clue as to whether the work of Christ, opening the way for holiness in time, has anything to say about rescuing man for eternity?

Friends' conviction that the Atonement empowered men to walk triumphantly over the earth represents a significant contribution, but the possibility for perfection must certainly be based upon prior assumptions as to how and why God effected the reconciliation of man to himself at Calvary, and it must further be supported by the subsequent assumption that the Christian hope transcends simple victory over sin in time. It seems to me that all of these are dimensions of the Work of Christ, and if our heritage shortchanges us on any in order to extol one (perfection) then we should be prepared to fill in the deficiencies. Harold Loukesh has well spoken to modern Quakerism: “When it began, Quakerism was an emphasis on a neglected aspect of the Christian faith; now it must assume a wider responsibility, and seek to transmit the faith (Christian) in all its fulness and depth. If it cannot do so, if it cannot sustain the Christian tradition and transmit the richness of Christian experience, then it has no right to exist at all, a stumbling block to would-be Christians and a source of weakness to the Church.”

PAUL A. LACEY

Arthur Roberts' article has had two good effects on me: one has been to stimulate me to more consideration of the meaning of the work of Christ in the early Society of Friends and to modern Quakers; the other has been to remind me forcibly that I am the merest tyro in theological matters. The questions which follow may not be very significant to other readers, and I am sure they will offer Arthur Roberts no trouble, but their answers will be helpful to me.

My first question concerns a matter of emphasis. Arthur Roberts cites early Friends' belief in the primacy of the Spirit over the Scriptures, yet in his article he seems rather to reverse that order. Perhaps it is making too much of the order in which he places the two aspects of revealed theology: “revealed in the Bible and (to their supreme joy) in human experience,” but, if I understand the later reference to the Christ “who beckoned them by the disciples’ testimony,” this suggests a process of conversion which was not at all common to early Friends. In this they ran counter to the whole pattern of evangelism at the time. If we take Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress as the type of the conversion experience—as he meant it to be—we see that Christian's first step in his pilgrimage was to look into his Bible, where he learned that he must be saved.

But for Fox, what Arthur Roberts calls Christ's "appearing in his people by his saving work" came before scriptural teaching of that work. In fact, Fox repeats that he found confirmation of his experiences, after the fact, when he read the scriptures. One possible interpretation of this is that one cannot understand the scriptures' account of Christ until he is experienced directly. Fox suggests such an idea in reporting an occasion when he characteristically interrupted a preacher telling his congregation that the scriptures "were the touchstone and judge by which they were to try all doctrines, religions, and opinions, and to end all controversy," by shouting "Oh no, it is not the scriptures" but the Holy Ghost which is the touchstone. He says elsewhere that "the Gospel was the power of God, which was preached before Matthew, Mark, Luke and John or any of them were printed or written, and was preached to every creature who might never see nor hear of the four books aforesaid."

I have a feeling that our perspective on the early Society would change greatly if we examined closely the nature of the claims that Friends were in the spirit by which the scriptures were given forth. To be in that spirit would not make the scriptures any less precious, but they would then be by no means essential for a right knowledge of Christ. Of course, there is a certain unreality in arguing that Fox and early Friends generally did not know of the historical Jesus Christ through the Bible. But if the principle enunciated above is valid, we are then required to answer whether experience of the work of Christ within the heart of man is sufficient for salvation, or whether it is impossible to experience the work of Christ without knowing the works of Jesus Christ, for which the Bible would be indispensable. Or, to put it another way, does knowledge require...
information? How we answer this question may determine how serious we consider the "failure to transmit effective knowledge of the Bible," of which Arthur Roberts speaks. It may also help us determine how a vigorous Society of Friends should testify to the work of Christ in the modern world. Incidentally, I would like to have Arthur Roberts tell what he thinks caused the Society's failure in this respect.

In this connection I should say that I share Arthur Roberts' concern over the fact that Christ is given only a symbolic value in much contemporary Quaker thought, but I am even more concerned that the same allegorizing process has reduced Fox's Spirit—the Holy Spirit—to the spirit—meaning a kind of mood, tone, or emotional cast to principles. When this happens, the contrast between the Spirit of Christ and the historical Christ, which is made so often, becomes meaningless. Reducing the Spirit to a metaphor explains, I think, what Arthur Roberts describes as the "anomaly of our history" that doctrines affirming Christ's redemptive death for all men should come to support the idea of man's natural goodness.

For early Friends, however, to be in the Spirit which was before the scriptures constituted a claim that they were not merely in the apostolic tradition but that they were the Church. Fox seems always to have challenged "professors" to affirm that they had the same outpourings of the Holy Ghost as the apostles did. His satisfaction at their discomfiture indicates how strongly he felt that only Friends could honestly claim that there was no diminishing of the Spirit among them. It was this claim which gave substance to Friends' sense of being children of God. In this phrase, too, many Friends have seen an affirmation of the natural goodness of man, whereas Fox uses the idea to express a belief in the perfectibility of man through the work of Christ.

Now I was sent to turn people from darkness to the light that they might receive Christ Jesus, for to as many as should receive him in his light, I saw that he would give power to become the sons of God, which I had attained by receiving Christ.

I have only one other question, and it is less substantive than semantic. Arthur Roberts speaks of a rebound among early Friends in the direction of "spiritual objectivity and its corollary, authority." He ends the same paragraph by saying that early Friends intended the intensification of doctrine, not its diminution. I do not understand the phrase "spiritual objectivity." I wonder, too, what relation authority has to doctrine. Certainly the early Quaker attitude toward the Holy Spirit establishes it as the source of authority, as the passage quoted above emphasizes. Friends did not intend to diminish authority by a process of leveling-down, though that is what seems to have happened. But is this the kind of authority—the authority of the person led by the Holy Spirit—to which the paragraph refers? If so, how does this intensify doctrine?

If we apply to Arthur Roberts' article his own criterion, that historical research should bring spiritual insights, we realize how well he has fulfilled his purpose.

T. JOSEPH PICKVANCE

Before reading Arthur O. Roberts' very interesting contribution, I refreshed my memory of George Fox's teachings on the same subject by reading the classified extracts I made some years ago while studying Fox's interpretation of Christianity. I considered it important to see whether Arthur Roberts' account tallied with mine because we need as many independent contributions as possible to the debate about whether there was among the early Friends a coherent body of doctrine and of testimonies arising therefrom, about which they had a common understanding and agreement and to which we can refer as the early Quaker Christian message.

The existence of an ordered message is questioned by some Friends on both sides of the Atlantic. It has been suggested to me that the orderliness I believe I have found in the many letters, epistles, and tracts of Fox is not in fact there, but only "read into" them. Henry J. Cadbury, commenting on Lewis Benson's essay in Quaker Religious Thought on "The Early Quaker Vision of the Church" says much the same thing. He questions whether "behind Fox's thought there is an impeccable coherence." He has the feeling that in Fox and other early Quaker writers "the discovered coherence is superimposed by the
modern student.” Lewis Benson does not report impeccable coherence but claims that “Fox’s thought has coherence and unity.” In the same issue, I notice that Canby Jones gives his opinion that Lewis Benson’s was “an essentially true and accurate account of the concept of the Church, held by George Fox and the early Friends.” May I add here that I agree completely with Maurice Greasey’s lucid account of the 17th Century Quakers’ understanding of the significance of Christ.

It was reassuring to find Arthur O. Roberts confirming the views of other students of Fox’s thought both by implication and by statements such as: “His writings, although not systematic by any stretch of the imagination, do show a coherence to the principle that Christ really died for men and really does impart life to those who receive his salvation.” There appears to be a growing consensus of opinion that there was in fact a common core of early Quaker Christian fundamentals. If those of us who believe this are mistaken, and if the truth is that there was no unified Quaker message, then the practice, which is not just a modern one, of soaking the label off and applying it to any brand of Christianity or universalistic religion to which we ourselves adhere, is hardly one to which we can raise strong objection.

We should not expect to find an impeccable coherence. Some development in every man’s thought is to be expected, and some variety of view is inevitable in every group, however closely knit. Modern students will hold various views too. To illustrate the last point: I agree with Arthur O. Roberts that “Seed” is a synonym of Christ. It should be given a capital “S.” In my reading of Fox, I have never noted it as referring to spiritual growth, although some students apparently believe it does.

Turning now to deal with particular points in Arthur Roberts’ essay, I should like to endorse fully the stress that he lays in his early pages on the Christ-centeredness of early Quaker Christianity. His general conclusion: “The unity of Jesus Christ in history and in experience is the foundation of Quaker doctrine and of their evangelistic outreach,” is, I believe, a true generalization about Fox’s Christianity. My own studies have perforce been very largely confined to George Fox’s writings and I am grateful to Arthur Roberts for relating them to those of Penn, Penington, and others.

Although his subject is the work of Christ, less than half the essay is devoted to it. Probably the assignment was too large for the space available. Certainly the section on the person of Christ was needed by way of preface. With preliminary and concluding sections, it forms the bulk of the matter. It must be said, therefore, that the treatment of the subject can be regarded only as introductory.

Perhaps I can indicate the wide scope of Quaker thought on the work of Christ by listing the topics mentioned by Arthur Roberts and comparing them with my own analysis of Fox’s teachings. He refers to: Christ, the Light that shows us evil and brings us into unity with God; Christ, the universal and saving Light, that is able to save completely. Christ the Sanctifier, who is able to sanctify wholly; and Christ the Baptiser of the soul with cleansing fire. These are supported by illustrations from the writings of various early Friends.

Fox deals with the following additional topics. In a full treatment of the subject, space would be required for a discussion of their inter-relatedness and yet more for a comparative account of the same topics in the writings of other Quaker leaders. My list, which is probably not exhaustive, runs as follows: Christ, the Way and Door to God the Father; Christ, the Inward Teacher; Christ, who gives hope; Christ, who gives grace, sufficient in deeps and weakness; Christ, who is our Anchor in times of trouble; Christ the Mediator—“None other to be set up;” Christ, the Prophet, who speaks to his Church now, who opens the book of conscience; Christ, the Bishop, who oversees his Church; Christ, who orders, rules and governs; Christ, the heavenly and spiritual Head of his spiritual members, the Church; Christ the Priest who sanctifies and offers up his Church; Christ, who restores man into a state greater than Adam’s, into himself—Fox’s most daring flight, this! All of these topics recur many times in Fox’s writings. True, they touch and sometimes overlap as would be expected when life in a spiritual fellowship is under examination. Yet such is the respect I have come to entertain for George Fox’s deep and penetrating spirit and mind that I
would maintain that in each of those mentioned Fox clearly distinguished particular aspects of the work of Christ in the individual or the church. We must, I believe, accept that in Fox we are dealing with a great religious genius and not a muddle-headed enthusiast who embroiled intellectually able and cultured persons like Penn and Penington in the tangles of his thought. Obviously, Quaker Religious Thought must return at some time in the future to develop further the great theme that Arthur O. Roberts has so usefully opened up for us.

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Response to Comments

ARTHUR O. ROBERTS

The comments are helpful in sharpening up the topic, and I am grateful for them. Joseph Pickvance rightly judges that the main topic, “The Work of Christ,” lacks sufficient elaboration. I appreciate his concurrence, however, regarding the importance of the early Quaker view of the person of Christ as basic to an understanding of his work. The two aspects are difficult to separate.

Aside from this matter of imbalance in presentation, I should like to touch on five issues alluded to in the various comments: 1) the nature of early Quaker coherence in regard to Christian fundamentals; 2) the meaning and extent of the diverse interpretations of the atonement held by early Friends; 3) “spiritual objectivity” and the integrity of personal experience of Christ; 4) the relevance of the early Friends’ view of holiness; and 5) the relationship of the Holy Spirit and the Scriptures to each other.

Obviously, I agree with Joseph Pickvance that George Fox was no “muddle-headed enthusiast” and that we do not impose a unifying coherence upon him by categorizing his writings along theological lines. Pickvance’s delineations of the terms by which Fox showed the continuing grace of God are helpful so long as one neither exaggerates metaphor nor disregards a proper use of synonyms. Fox’s logic consists of an intuitive centering of biblical truths about which dependent ideas “orbit,” in contrast to the more propositional and syllogistic style of Barclay. Quakerism found its unity as an evangelistic awakening within biblical orthodoxy—a revival which centered about the experiential meaning of the atonement of Jesus Christ. To suggest that “true” historic Quakerism consists of a sort of pure religion discoverable when the husks of orthodoxy are removed is to per-