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Christ and Truth: The Catholicity and Protestantism of Friends

HUGH S. BARBOUR

CHRIST IS TRUTH

The Christian witness that “Christ is Truth,” experienced deeply among Friends, can contribute to the life of other Christians, and may help even philosophers and scientists. Almost all Quakers would still link knowledge of Christ and inward truth, despite our major disagreements about the relation of the historic and the inward Christ. But to say “Christ is Truth” can merely be confusing until the terms are made clearer. The phrase is usually used to express two discoveries. First, when Christ meets men in history or within themselves, he shows them the truth about God and human nature. Or second, all inward experience of truth is found to be a meeting with the Spirit of God or the Light of Christ. One approach starts with Christ, the other with truth; one begins with revelation, the other with human discovery. But both these approaches were basic in Quakerism from the beginning; they do not simply reflect the variety within modern Quakerism, the unhappy and unbiblical distance between Philadelphia and Damascus, or between evangelicalism and rationalism. We must affirm both approaches as necessary and inseparable if Christ is to be truth for us.

I would like to suggest also that these two forms of our basic affirmation help to interpret our strange relationships with other churches and faiths. Starting from universal truth, Friends expect to share truth and religious experience with men of any faith. Yet Friends often refuse the name of Christian to many men who claim it, because true knowledge of Christ comes only, we insist, by inward experience. Both these outlooks, inclusive and exclusive, were as strong and interdependent among the first five generations of Friends as today.

THE KNOWLEDGE OF TRUTH

The ability of men to know truth is a key issue for philosophy as well as for religion. Truth has many aspects, demanding at this point a bold plunge into metaphysics. Modern schools of philosophy have turned away from discussing truth in the abstract absolute. Instead, logical schools try to analyze truths — i.e., general statements drawn from science or experience — and also the meaning of “laws” in science, and of cause, probability, and so on. Other schools of philosophers (semantic, operational, or existential) try in various ways to interpret man’s truthfulness, when his acts or statements respond to his environment in an inclusive, coherent, and appropriate way. Behind both efforts lie two deeper assumptions, unprovable but important, for us as well as for philosophy. Something is implied about a reality that exists whenever we assume significance for “truths” about it or when we describe even a man’s response as “truthful” or appropriate or effective. This leads us to ask what makes reality real: we cannot answer adequately, though we talk about Being and Non-Being. Something is also implied about a man’s inherent relationship with, or involvement in, a reality beyond himself, whenever we assume we can speak about his responses, and also when we discuss how a man can know anything at all. Thus we talk of experience, encounter, participation, and the meaning of symbols and ideas.

Both “reality” and “relationship,” though terms referring to no “thing” we can grasp or prove, seem to correspond to intuitive experiences which almost all men share. Experience includes for each of us “things” which share the character of “not-myself,” “not subjective,” not willed or controlled. Some men would say that these are in themselves religious experiences. Man’s ability to know reality (and to distinguish it from illusion, at least in principle) has been used as the starting point for the many forms of the ontological argument for God’s existence. Paul Tillich might call awareness of the “ground of Being” outside oneself the ultimately religious experience. In the same way, man’s discovery of his relationship of “absolute dependence” upon the “Wholly Other” has underlain theologies as different as those of Schleiermacher and Buber. Other men would say that these
are experiences of truth but not of God. These seem in any case not the same as the Christian's experience of salvation. But since these wider experiences and thought-patterns about truth seem to be inescapable for science, the arts, and daily life, as well as for philosophy, it is necessary for Christians to come to terms with them. Otherwise Christian life cannot be unified, and daily work and thought cannot be permeated by faith in God.

NEEDED: A QUAKER "LOGOS-DOCTRINE"

The early church made a bridge of this kind by its theology, showing the relationships between Hebrew-Christian sacred history and the thought-patterns by which Greece and Rome understood the world. The greatest achievements of the early theologians were the doctrine of the Trinity and the idea of the Logos, or Word of God. Logos, as the Greek term for the ordering of nature which most of us would call the law of nature, was pointed to by Christians as the plan and word of God by which nature was created: this Word was also the message revealed to the prophets, and was embodied in the person of Christ. To equate the Logos with the Son, the actual divine nature in Christ, was a bold step. When taken seriously, as it was by Origen, it meant that the Spirit of Christ himself spoke by the prophets, and that Christ himself is the basis of the order we see in nature. This is still challenging: the Logos remains inseparable from the mathematical, astonishingly complex order of the universe, now known in atoms and galaxies, while we still know Christ almost entirely in the personality of Jesus. To clear up Friends' own thinking, and perhaps for what we can contribute to Christendom, we need a Quaker re-statement of the Logos doctrine.*

*The Logos or Spirit of Christ is not to be confused with Jesus, in whom nevertheless the Logos is fully revealed. The early church, in insisting that the Logos was co-eternal with the Creator in the Trinity, was not affirming that Jesus and God were co-equal. They were talking about the characters of God, saying that God as he makes himself known (in Jesus and even in nature) is in no way secondary to God the unknown, the source and abyss of Being, "God in himself," the ultimate mystery. This was bold doctrine; but how the self-revealing God could be fully united with the personality of the human Jesus was a separate issue. The theologians' use of "Father" and "Son" for the Creator and the Logos, the characters of God, was thus misleading.

The Quaker assertion that men know truth as Christ within themselves differs from the ancient Logos theology in two emphases. The first is the stress on inwardness, in our relation both to Christ and to truth. Thus the living presence of the risen Christ is more important to Friends than is the Christ of history; inward sanctification is more vital than historic atonement. In the same way, Friends mean by "truth" an inward relationship of truthfulness, more than a code of truths or creed. This Quaker idea of truth as true response is drawn from John's gospel: it fits creatively into much current thought in psychology, biology, and theology. Truthfulness is awareness - the facing of God, one's neighbor, or oneself with inward openness.

Secondly, Friends have emphasized more than have the early theologians the personal nature of reality (the "persons" of the Trinity were quite impersonal). If reality is undergirded by an active God, and pervaded by his personal spirit, man's true response is dynamic and ethical rather than intellectual. We try actively to obey God's will as the way to know him. Because truth is of this nature, early Friends assumed that it was in their consciences that all men could know God. They admitted that consciences were human and often distorted, obscuring the Light like a smoky lantern. But for better or worse, conscience was man's true way to know God.

Because early Friends knew truth as the will of God, Quaker doctrine is often elusive. When Quaker pioneers "preached Truth through the streets" of a town, or "published Truth" in new countries, their specific message was given on each occasion by the Spirit. Consistency of such messages with previous leadings of the Spirit, or with the Bible, was naturally expected, but was not essential. Yet Friends felt that truth, even in the form of the will of God, was objective: they assumed it would be self-evident when their hearers faced reality with open consciences. The Hebrew prophets had similarly proclaimed God's inspired word as self-evident (Amos 3:8-8, and compare 7:1-6 with 4:6-12). They too had called God's word both old and new, because the same God was ever-active:

Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? The LORD is . . . the Creat-
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JESUS CHRIST AND OUR TRUTHFULNESS

That Jesus Christ should be the center of truth cannot be proved. Wilmer Cooper and Chris Downing have spoken helpfully of our “moments of truth” reflecting our setting in time — our nature as creatures of history. Is this enough to say? Can we avoid being enslaved by the mere givenness of history, without escaping like Paul Tillich to the abstract idea of historicity, or other insights still more Greek and transcendental? Friends like Lewis Benson and Canby Jones witness to their meeting with the Inward Christ as a given fact, but other Friends regard early Quaker Christology, like their own, as merely the convenient use of Christian labels for their direct encounter with God. George Fox himself found it hard to show why the universal atonement of Christ’s death in history needed to be consciously linked with the inward Light of Christ in every man’s conscience.

For me a useful clue, that Christ is innately the way to truth, comes by analogy from Donald Baillie’s book, *God Was in Christ*. Baillie speaks there of the paradox of grace. The surrender of a completely humble human life to the grace and power of God makes that life itself into a source of power and grace to others. So also a man who is completely and reverently awake to truth makes us more truthful. Humility before God’s grace becomes itself grace incarnate. So truthfulness before ultimate reality becomes itself truth for us. This is so whether we are speaking of the scientist or the man seeking moral obedience. But the wholeness of reality explains why some people help us to be truthful: Saint Francis, Gandhi, and others we love have brought us back to the width and depth of reality. When the “rich young ruler” came to Jesus, saying “Good master, what must I do . . . ?” Jesus replied, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone” (Mark 10:18). This verse, which has bothered most Christians since Jesus’ day, surely means that Jesus was so aware of the goodness of God that he could not see any other goodness. Thereby he becomes for us the Word, “full of grace and truth.”

OUTCOMES: QUAKER UNIVERSALISM

Many implications come from this understanding of truth in relation to Christ. To accept men as themselves real, we must understand them as experiencing the same world and reality that we do. Thus they are actual knowers of truth and, in a measure, of God, however limited by climates, cultures, and languages. The early Quakers carried their message to “blacks and tawney Indians” and to the Sultan of Turkey, as well as to Christians. Fox’s letter to the Emperor of China, expressing his basic ideas, had it ever reached Peking, might have interested K’ang Hsi, the scholar Emperor:

For the Emperor of China and his subordinate Kings and Princes, from the People of God in England, in English called Quakers, by G. F.:

Friends: There is a Power above all Powers, and this Power is making itself manifest: and this is God, . . . who is an Over-ruler, the Creator, and former, and maker of all things in heaven and earth; and [he] gathered together the waters, and made the sea, . . . and placed man in the garden. But, this being lost, . . . yet God lives, who is the God of the spirits of all flesh, in whose hands is the breath and life of all mankind, . . . and [he] would have all to know him . . . . and to serve him in the spirit and in the light, for God is light, and this is the true light which doth enlighten every man that commeth into the world, which is Christ the son of God: now this is the light which Jesus Christ hath enlightened you withal, that doth let you see your evil thoughts, and naughty words, and the evil actions and deeds you run into . . . . If you receive this light, you receive Christ, you receive righteousness, and come from unrighteousness, and this is that which brings you into peace, and unity with God and one with another.

The religious character of responses to truth has been felt by non-Christians in our own day. Gandhi regarded his whole life under God as the story of his “Experiments with Truth,” and the phrase was picked up by Teresa Havens in a sensitive comparison of Buddhist and Quaker experiences. Such catholicity about truth is rampant among Friends of some circles. A friend of mine insists that he is simultaneously a Quaker and a Sikh; and every “college meeting” draws Seekers to its fringe, or even into its leadership. Some Wider Quakers may be as vague as the fellow-student at Harvard who put on his freshman

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enrollment blank: Religious preference, "Quaker, if any." Albert Fowler has discussed the "refugee psychology" of some liberal Quakers\(^3\) — men and women who come to Quakerism after having rejected the established truths of fundamentalism or Judaism. Such people may grope for a long time, and the integrity of their search for truth may seem disproved by their emotional recoil when they approach specific answers. Yet we each must know several or many people, who, in their honesty, humility, and alertness to human situations, seem to us "tender" in the Quaker sense, though they themselves think they lack faith. As Friends we have failed massively to go out and greet such people. If we can take hold of the remarkable hunger and respect for truthfulness in our day which penetrate piety and sham, and can turn and drive these men and women into unlimited search for inward truth and for Christ within, we may recover the missionary role of early Quakerism.

We ourselves, moreover, cheat Christ if we are not open to truth in any form or place. This does not mean that all teachings are equally true. But Christ, rather than our experience of Christ, is the center of truth, even in principle. In practice, all specific truths must be received by us with independent respect, since they come from God, not from our own faith. T. H. Huxley says that a true scientist must be willing to go down on his knees before a fact, like a little child — the kneeling posture is contagious. It is a waste of no one's time to sit with a Hindu philosopher or a Zen master, even if we say nothing, or if we watch a tree together.

Quaker catholicity has been strong enough to accept one area of new understanding outside Christianity, namely, psychotherapy and psychiatry. The main doctrines of Christianity and psycho-analysis have been compared by theologians such as Albert Outler and David Roberts.\(^4\) The special witness of Friends has been that true self-knowledge can be inwardly a religious experience: the psycho-therapist can be seen, by his patient and even by himself, as fulfilling a Christian ministry. Among early Friends the experience of the Light was mainly a self-discovery of what they actually were, in the Light of Christ. To face "the Light which shows a man evil" could be as harrowing an experience as that of a modern psychiatric patient. Francis Howgill of Westmorland was already a Separatist leader of deep religious experience before Fox came there:

But all was laid down in sorrow when the Day of the Lord was made manifest, for I was overthrown, and the foundation swept away, and all my righteousness and unrighteousness was judged and weighed and found too light. And immediately, as soon as I heard one declare the Light of Christ in men was the way to Christ, I believed. . . . And then my eyes were opened, and all things were brought to remembrance that I had ever done . . . The Ark of the Testament was opened, and there was thunder and lightning, . . . and the dreadful power of the Lord fell upon me, . . . fear and terror, sorrow and pain. . . . All that I had ever done was judged and condemned. Mine eyes were dim with crying. . . . And as I bore the indignation of the Lord, something [within] rejoiced, . . . and the captive came forth out of the prison, and the new man was made. And so peace came to be made, and so Eternal Life was brought in, through death and judgment.\(^5\)

**TRUTH IN THE LIGHT OF CHRIST**

Friends could trust the Light, however painful, because for them it was the gift of the loving God, who was known in Christ. All truth can be trusted — this was the contribution of free-church Protestantism to our culture. The Greeks had affirmed this of the natural world, and the Puritans of the theological; Quakers applied this even to the illusory world of inner experience. Truth there is also "God's truth." However painful it seems, it is to be accepted as God's Light shows it.

But the affirmation that "Christ is Truth" changes the meaning of truth itself, as well as its impact on us. Friends have sometimes been content to accept Christ and truth separately, or to ignore one or other. In a powerful little book, translated as part of *A Christian in East Germany*,\(^6\) a Lutheran pastor asks what it means to speak the truth there. When questioned by the Secret Police, he agrees, it is better to be loyal to one's friends, rather than honest. But Johannes Hamel simultaneously warns his East German students that "lying has become almost our flesh and blood." It is more important to be true to people than to be true to ideas only, because reality is always more than ideas. Truth responds to the actual present situation, with all the facts and people involved in it. "Face to face with each man, we have to ask ourselves, what kind of act and what kind of word
is demanded of us, directly in relation to him." This means that 
"the way to spoken truth is love." Responsible love frees us at 
certain times to say even bitter truth. Thus in differing settings, 
truthfulness may be best served by silence, by simple affirmation, 
by admitting one’s ignorance, or by explaining carefully all one 
knows.

But this awareness of the total situation, so as to respond 
to it “truly,” is meaningless for Pastor Hamel without Christ:

Truth is not the same thing as my knowledge of the truth. 
What I know, believe, suppose, think, feel or want, perhaps 
serves truth, or gives room for Truth. But not more. Truth 
itself can only be revealed in the meeting of God with man. 
Wherever the true God places men before him, there truth 
takes place about these men; there they stand, just as they are, 
without mask and covering before God ...

And with this, what it means to lie is already defined. 
It means ... to deny this living God practically and theoretically, ... not to love, praise and worship him. ... It is a lie to live otherwise than as a man who has been freed by Jesus from sin, death and the devil. ... To speak the truth means ... that we recognize ourselves as sinners before God and stop making ourselves the judges and dividers of good from evil. ... Our concern is whether we speak to the men about us the truth from God, who has had mercy on us in Jesus Christ.

OUTCOMES: QUAKER EXCLUSIVENESS AND PROTESTANTISM

Our uneasiness as Friends with Pastor Hamel’s Christ-centric 
truthfulness springs only partly from our being less intense 
about the centrality of Christ. The inwardness of Quaker experience has itself made us stress integrity about ideas and statements more than loyalty to people. Inwardness also makes us hesitate to speak objectively of Christ’s mercy except to those who have inwardly known it.

The need of inward encounter for real knowledge of Christ is a Protestant doctrine. The Roman Catholic church has always insisted that the crucial or saving encounter of men with Christ comes through the sacraments, and to a lesser extent through the witness of the church in its apostolic teaching and authority. Catholic daily life, in the outward world and in the heart, are also sacramentally sanctified, but grace and salvation do not begin there, but from the church. The effort to describe Quaker thought as equidistant from both Catholicism and Protestantism is thus misleading.

Christ-mysticism can and does break through in any church, but the Quaker doctrine of the Inward Christ is not simply the awareness of inward presence or companionship. It involves inward salvation. It is thus best seen as a form of the basic Protestant doctrine of Justification by Faith, and it leans to the Puritan form of it: conscious inward conversion. Salvation is itself complex. The discovery of God’s forgiveness, which Luther so richly lived and preached, was in Calvinism made secondary to the inward power of God to transform men morally. Quakers are children of Calvinism at this point; most early Quaker leaders had begun historically as radical Puritans, though as English Baptists they had blended several traditions. Puritan influences on early Quakerism were however more direct, continuous, and widespread that all influences from Catholics, Anabaptists, and mystics combined.

But the Lutherans and Puritans themselves refused to separate inward knowledge of Christ and salvation from the outward Bible, sacraments, and preaching. “Ordinarily the Spirit maketh use of the written word in this way of witnessing,” wrote Petto, the radical Puritan, about the Bible, “he maketh the word without a voice within, by the effectual application of it to a particular soule.” The newly-won Baptist, John Bunyan, went home to listen for the voice of God while he read the Scriptures. Luther also expected God’s Word to reach men through the sermon and the Lord’s table. But Friends were ultra-Protestant in rejecting the need of these outward means altogether: the sacraments were popery; well-written sermons were intellectualism and the price of making ministers at Oxford and Cambridge; Bible-reading for its own sake was worship of the letter. As Canby Jones has well shown, Friends even though they read the Bible constantly and fully accepted its inspiration, often reduced it to a mere witness and test of inward revelation. The saving inward experience, in other words, was not linked necessarily to Bible, sermon, or sacrament, among the Quakers. Even Quaker preaching, therefore, was not thought of as the instrument of salvation, but only as the preliminary turning of men to the Light of Christ within:
It is a mightie thinge, to be in the worke of the ministery of the lord god, & to goe forth in that, for it is not as acustomary preachinge, but to bringe people to the end of all preachinge. . . . People com into the chinge yee speake of: . . . now if words be rashd out againe unsavour, [this] may hurt againe that which . . . gott upp: soe, friends, yee must all come into the thinges that is spoken, & soe walke in the love of god.10

Only inward knowledge of God could save. Early Friends were thus exclusive, even in relation to other Protestants. They saw themselves everywhere as the only true church. There were other issues to support this claim: in the backwaters of the English Lake District or the Maryland settlements they found no other vital Christians, or recognized few. The rapid growth of Quakerism in its first years made them expect to sweep the world within a generation. Yet even after Quakers had accepted the limited hopes of a sect in eighteenth-century England, they still regarded all other churches as in apostasy, and shared little with them. In the first 150 years of Quakerism, only William Penn broke through these walls except for purely social reformers who met non-Friends on limited issues. Joseph John Gurney and other nineteenth-century Friends knew non-Quakers like Simeon who had deeper experience of Christ than their own: isolation slowly broke. But as late as 1847 Friends refused to join the World Evangelical Alliance because that group opened its meetings with prepared prayers.11

THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT

In the twentieth century, Friends have begun to enter inter-church organizations. It is ironic that the National and World Councils of Churches, now under fire from irresponsible conservatives, were slow to break down the resistance of British and General Conference Friends to the Councils' basis: formal acceptance of Jesus Christ as God and Savior. These inter-church councils, with their heavy weight of Lutheran, Reformed, and Evangelical churches, still seem theology-ridden to many Friends. But many of us have shared in the challenging sequence of experiences likely to arise in such groups.

The discovery that such a group shares a basic kinship of commitment to Christ comes quickly to many individuals from all churches. Friends, once they have learned to handle rapid-

fire theological jargon, also feel at home. A Quaker may feel, as do the Greek Orthodox members of such groups, that this is inexplicable: that God's grace must be given despite — not because of -- the absurd and unchristian churchmanship of other churches. Yet while such an inter-church group faces together the need of presenting Christ to the world, members will not dare to hold back, feeling the risk of rejecting the Holy Spirit. If Christ is one, are not his people one?

An ecumenical group is then faced, even if it was not first called for this purpose, with the need to look together at the bases of the Christian community: creeds, sacraments, church institutions, and Scripture. If a Quaker member is still not convinced at this point that there is genuine Christian community between churches, I think he should go home. Within such a discussion, a Quaker's only fruitful witness is likely to be the "necessity" of each particular Christian institution. Baptists and High Anglicans, for instance, will often argue the various forms of the sacrament of Baptism. After stalemate becomes total, the Quaker is able to witness effectively that no outward form of baptism is necessary for salvation. When Lutherans and Dutch Calvinists wrestle about the Creed, Friends are able to witness that no form of words can itself create our relationship to God.

But the Quaker doctrine of inward salvation by Christ's Spirit still turns out to be exclusive. A Friend may not intend to insist that all Christians must give up outward means of knowing Christ: creeds and sacraments can help or hinder the inward Spirit. Christians of all churches, says a Quaker, are still united, since all know Christ's inner work in various ways. "Nonsense," says the Presbyterian, "you are trying to make us all Quakers at heart. The truly basic unity is the Bible we share." But the Episcopalians disagree, and bring the discussion back to the sacraments and creeds again. Even the efforts to build Christian unity usually focus on one issue: to concentrate on creeds, sacraments, or the shared inward experience in each partisan approach, even if a particular interpretation of these is not demanded.

Just at this point such an inter-church group finds it has no answer, no formula, no intellectual way out. Yet each church is
still not willing to retire to its own Noah's Ark, and leave the rest of Christendom to sink. Friends cannot escape either. Yet our exclusiveness turns out to be as inherent as that of other churches, and cannot be broken down by our own efforts. An ecumenical group usually responds to such an impasse by a great silence. Then recognition returns that Christ has not and will not let us go. The members of such a group are still sure that Christ's power has somehow been at work within the ecumenical circle and in many of its member churches. So the Council goes soberly back to attempt small steps of practical cooperation or limited union.

Friends have a special need to respond truthfully in such unexpected moments of impasse, and to understand our own exclusiveness. To many Friends,12 our role within the world Christian movement is best seen as a special calling; the orders of Trappists and Franciscans within Catholicism feel each an absolute call and accept a corporate rule without demanding it of all Christians. So a Friend can simply say, "This is where we have met Christ; this is what he seems to demand of me." Yet this approach is in constant danger of sliding into individualism and relativism, if we do not recognize God himself behind our call. Truth as it comes to us is not only a private command; so far as we understand it, it is true for all men. This universalism was tied up with our basic witness that Christ himself lies behind all truth. How can Christ and Truth, exclusive and inclusive approaches, be really fused?

We cannot jump out of our human skins into God's perspective. We cannot therefore tell whether the "Callings" and "Holy History" of other men and groups are distorted, or are equally valid with our own. Part of our own Quaker witness includes urging each man to respond directly to God as he finds he is able. As long as our own truthfulness can transcend itself, we can be led back to Christ and to new truth, and are free to go forward as he leads us. Our affirmation that Christ is truth must keep us continually re-thinking the meaning of scientific truths and how we may be true to our inward experience of Christ; it should also keep us endlessly open to being increasingly truthful in response to all of life and all men.

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4. Albert Fowler, Two Trends in Modern Quaker Thought, Pendle Hill pamphlet.
9. Ibid., pp. 91, 92, 94, 95 (slightly modified from the English version).
10. The fullest recent statement of this, though carefully qualified and factually accurate, is in Howard H. Brinton, Friends for 300 Years, Harper and Brothers, 1952, pp. 2-4, 44-46, 57, 83-89, etc.
14. See Percy Bartlett, Quakers and the Christian Church, Friends Book Centre, 1942.