

Christ and Jesus in Early Quakerism

by David K. Leonard



Peter Fingesten

My perception is that most attenders of unprogrammed Quaker meetings in the United States today are uncomfortable with the Christian heritage of the Religious Society of Friends. If so, this is unfortunate, for that heritage is rich and has much to give us if we would only draw upon it. The problem, I propose, has much to do with the fact that we do not understand the distinctly Quaker approach to Christianity and instead accept the interpretations of other denominations as the only ones possible—so that when we reject these interpretations we also reject Christianity.

In order to help us to a new understanding, I'd like to revisit the early Quaker experience of Christ Jesus and discuss what is distinctive about it. I've deliberately used the inverted phrase Christ Jesus, because that was common among founding Friends and because it helps to alert us to the fact that a good part of our problem is one of language.

In the contemporary United States when someone says "Jesus Christ," implicitly embedded within this term is "my personal Lord and Savior." However, when we simply say "Jesus" we open the possibility that we mean the historical Jesus as understood from the last century of critical biblical scholarship on the Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. And when we invoke "Christ" we generally mean the universal presence of Christ, which was manifested in the historical Jesus, but also preexisted him and has continued to break in on the lives of peoples of all cultures since.

This universal Christ is announced in

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the Gospel of John 1: 1, 4-5 with:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

This is the origin of our phrase "Inner Light," and it testifies to the universal presence of God and its capability of breaking in on our lives. In *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ*, the lapsed Catholic Matthew Fox uses this Christ from the Gospel of John to argue for the universality of this aspect of the Christian experience.

Thus although unprogrammed Quakers may be uncomfortable with "Jesus Christ," I believe they are more at ease with "Jesus" and "Christ." I want to show that the implicit theology that underlies these distinctions is much the same as that of the early Quakers.

Quakerism arose out of the ferment that overtook England in the first generation after the Bible became widely available in English. In the period around the English Civil War most literate English men and women read the Bible avidly and studied it intently. They frequently were shocked to discover that the Christianity portrayed in the New Testament was quite different from the one presented by the established churches, both Anglican and Catholic. Quakerism was an attempt to recapture "primitive Christianity" as reflected in the Gospels and the Book of Acts. There is a gentle irony to the many Friends who strongly affirm the Quaker testimonies but distance themselves from Christianity—for virtually all of those testimonies are rooted in the Gospels. Do we not lose something when we accept these precious fruits and reject the roots from which they grew?

However, Friends did not and do not believe that the discovery of Truth, whether about Christianity or anything else, is primarily a matter of scholarship. Protestant theologians such as Calvin knew ancient Greek and Hebrew and devoted intensive

study to the early texts but came to very different conclusions than Friends did.

George Fox wrote that “though I read the Scriptures that spoke of Christ and of God, yet I knew him not but by revelation. . . .” Fox insisted again and again that he “knew experimentally” the fundamental truths about which he ministered. By this he meant that the Inner Light, the Presence of Christ, the Indwelling Seed gave him a direct experience that affirmed a particular insight for him.

Thomas Ellwood, another founding Friend, wrote similarly:

Now also did I receive a new law, an inward law superadded to the outward—the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus—which wrought in me against all evil, not only in deed and in word, but even in thought also. . . .

Quakerism is based on a quasi-mystical experience of the presence of God. Early Friends saw this presence as universally available in all ages and cultures. But they also recognized that this spirit was present in the historical Jesus, is what was resurrected after his crucifixion, and lives on today as the presence of Christ. They certainly believed in the Bible as it was written, and they felt that all the peoples of the world would benefit from accepting the Christian interpretation of the Living Christ, whom all experience. But this was the antithesis of a biblical literalism. The study of the New Testament is important because it helps one to access the Spirit of Christ—the Inner Light. At the same time the Bible can be interpreted validly only in the Light of that experience.

Until the last century Friends freely used the language of salvation. But they meant something quite different by it than what is usually implied by “Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Savior.” Many Friends had a deep sense of their personal failings—or sins. But they saw salvation as liberating us from those shortcomings so we can get on with doing better. As Job Scott wrote in 1792, “Christ has not conquered to excuse us but that we should follow in his steps.” When Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, “You therefore must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” they took him seriously. We are called the Religious Society of Friends because Jesus said that “You are my friends if you do whatsoever I command you.”

The testimonies describe steps necessary to follow that vision, as shown by the experience Friends have had with the Living Christ. It’s not that Friends are unaware of their many personal failings and the ways in which their aspirations exceed their performance; it’s just that they see no benefit in wallowing in their shortcomings and instead want to get on with doing better. To do otherwise is what George Fox criticized in the Calvinists as “preaching sin.” If one compares early Quaker writing to that of Martin Luther or of most Catholics from Augustine to Vatican Council II, the absence of discussions of Hell is dramatic.

For Quakers, becoming a child of God is a lifelong project. Perhaps one can be “saved” from guilt or can commit oneself to a new path in a single prayer meeting. When one reads the accounts of these

epiphanies among early Friends, however, one is struck by the long periods of seeking and threshing that preceded them. And being a “child of God” requires an ongoing series of breakthroughs that come from continuous living in the Light of Christ. Friends therefore have not been ones for altar calls but instead for gradually altered lives.

As a consequence, as William Penn observed of the early Friends:

They were changed men [sic] themselves before they went about to change others. Their hearts were rent as well as their garments, and they know the power and work of God upon them. . . . And as they freely received what they had to say from the Lord, so they freely administered it to others. The bent and stress of their ministry was conversion to God, regeneration and holiness, not schemes of doctrines and verbal creed or new forms of worship, but a leaving off in religion the superfluous and reducing the ceremonious and formal part, and pressing earnestly the substantial, the necessary and profitable part. . . .

A great many dreadful things have been and continue to be done in the name of Christianity. But this is not true of the Religious Society of Friends. Overwhelmingly the vision and good works of Quakerism have grown out of the understanding its founders had of Christianity. I, for one, have no wish to abandon Christianity to the fundamentalists. We Friends know experimentally that when we interpret the Gospels in the Light of the Living Christ, we have the capacity to make this troubled Earth a new creation. This is our testimony to the world. □

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