

THE SPIRIT AND THE SCRIPTURE

John 15:26-27, 16:5-15

What makes Quaker theology different from other understandings of the divine? We read the same bible as other churches. We pray to the same God and we recognize Jesus Christ as the divine person who embodies God in the world in human form. What makes us different? Why does this small group, usually about 20 in the meeting house on Sunday morning, and 8-10 on line, come together every week when it would probably be easier to go to a larger church with more people and more resources? What, or who, energizes us to pursue Quaker faith and practice?

Maybe many of us, perhaps most of us, find ourselves in the a similar situation to George Fox was in himself in the 1650's, 380 years ago. He longed to find out who God was, who he himself was, what did God want, and how he could be delivered from a nagging sense of his own inadequacy and his sin. He tried and failed to get satisfactory answers from religious teachers and philosophies of the day. There were plenty of theoretical 'head' answers, but in these he hadn't found the life and power he was looking for.

One day walking alone, he heard the Spirit of God tell him in what might be the signature Quaker theological statement, "There is one, even Christ Jesus, who can speak to thy condition." And Fox, when he heard that, testified, "My heart did leap for joy." He had met and heard the voice of the Savior. That was the moment ignited our movement.

Spirit and Scripture

Fox and his collaborators, Margaret Fell, William Burroughs, Francis Howgill, James Naylor, and others in the first generation, then William Penn, Benjamin Lay, Elizabeth Fry, John Woolman, Elias Hicks, Lucretia Mott, John Gurney, William Cadbury, Rufus Jones, Thomas Kelley, John Punshon, and many others down to us here today know who we believe in has more weight than what we believe in. Of course what we believe is important, but it is the WHO, the personal knowledge and experience, that is key. Creeds, statements of faith, and doctrines that seek to crystalize and freeze people's experiences and understandings of God, I suppose have their use. But much more is the experience itself, that has the power to energize and reorient lives to bring them in tune with the God of love and of light.

This understanding of faith is not the only distinctive of Friends theology. We are also known for peace, for quiet, and other characteristics. But the Quaker understanding of how one experiences and relates to God is a core characteristic and the one I want to talk about this morning. Ours is a radical emphasis on direct, unmediated experience of God has been a source of vitality, service, and power for Friends, but has also to some fraught and sometimes cases tragic controversies and schisms over the centuries about the roles and primacy of the Spirit and the Bible. How do the two relate? Which is the most important? Which do we ultimately follow when push comes to shove?

It's reasonable to say that the scriptures were written by people under the influence. That is, under the influence of God's Spirit, a.k.a.

the Holy Spirit. They recorded as faithfully as they could what they felt they heard the Spirit communicate to them. Some claim that every single word of scripture comes infallibly from the mouth of God, that God dictated it verbatim and people just wrote it down. However, a review of both the Old and New Testaments will raise this objection: it's hard to see how passages advocating genocide, subordination of women, slavery, and condemnation of gay and lesbian people as coming directly from the mind of a loving God.

The vast majority of scripture, especially in the New Testament, expresses God's love, God's light, God's truth. And the teachings of Christ himself in the gospels, though maybe sometimes a bit hard to understand, invariably shows God's love. I conclude that Jesus is infallible, but the scriptures were written by humans who were not. Cultural bias sometimes crept into the texts as the writers expressed how they understood of the Spirit.

That said, the scriptures are the best outward resource we have that tells of the nature and intent of that 'higher power' we call God. The 19th century Quaker minister Elias Hicks put it well in a letter in 1829,

"First, as to the scriptures of Truth as recorded in the book called the Bible, I have ever believed that all parts of them that could not be known but by revelation were written by holy men as they were inspired by the Holy Ghost and could not be known through any other medium. And they are profitable for our encouragement, comfort, and instruction in the very way that the apostle Paul

testifies. And I have always accounted them, when rightly understood, as the best of books extant.”

This was the common understanding of earlier Quakers whose descendants later evolved into today's three main friends groupings: the Friends General Conference, Evangelical Friends International, and our group, Friends United Meeting.

In the same letter Hicks goes on,

“But at the same time, I prize that from whence they (the scriptures) have derived their origin much higher than I do them. And no man (I conceive) can know or rightly profit by them, but by the opening of the same inspiring Spirit by which they were written.”

This is exactly in line with views of the earliest Friends. In Robert Barclay's Apology, or systematic explanation of Friends' theology published in 1676, Barclay writes:

“Because they [the scriptures] are only a declaration of the fountain, and not the fountain itself, therefore they are not to be esteemed the principal ground of all truth and knowledge, nor yet the adequate primary rule of faith and manners. Yet because they give a true and faithful testimony of the first foundation, they are and may be esteemed a secondary rule, subordinate to the Spirit, from which they have all their excellency and certainty: for as by the inward testimony of the Spirit we do alone truly know them, so they testify; That the Spirit is the Guide by which the saints are led into all truth; therefore, according to the scriptures, the Spirit is the first and principal leader.” (Barclay, Apology, 72)

In today's Gospel from John, Jesus on the last night of his earthly ministry during what is called the 'Last Supper' gives final instructions to the disciples for how they are to carry on following his immanent departure. They are to await the arrival of the Spirit that is to be given who will in the future guide and instruct them in all that Jesus taught, and will reveal things that they were not yet ready for just yet. We note that his final instructions are not for more effective study and meditation on the scriptures, valuable though they be. His final instructions are to wait for and pay attention to the Spirit of Truth.

The scriptures were generated by the initiative of the Spirit. They are a record of the writers' personal experience of God. They are valuable and profitable above other writings, but secondary to the Spirit that gave them. From the beginning Quakers were Pentecostals in this way - they understood that the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost in Jerusalem shortly after Christ's suffering and resurrection was not a one time event, but the start of the Spirit's continuing ministry to the church. The Spirit of Truth continues to explain and amplify what Jesus taught and to guide believers into a fuller understanding of Jesus' teaching and God's grace. This is what Friends have also called "continuing revelation."

Friends did not see the Spirit's ministry primarily as one of outward miracles like healing or speaking in tongues. Rather, they experienced the Spirit's power and guidance to empower lives

embracing honesty, truth, peace, and works of mercy. We affirm the Spirit's guidance and power today, as we place our wills daily in submission to God's will, and find therein the strength and joy to live in love as the Spirit guides. This is what Jesus meant when he told the disciples to take up their cross, follow him, and experience that His yoke is easy and his burden light! Paul puts it this way in Galatians, Ch.2:20,

"it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me."

As we read and digest the scriptures, as we pray, as we meet together in fellowship and worship, as we enjoy the wonderful fruits of the Spirit, among which are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, we find the Spirit gives us work to do through leadings of mercy, love, and truth. Each of our calls will be a little, sometimes very, different, according to each one's , talents, and interests. But the same Spirit empowers us all.

We meet here together every week so that like logs on a fire we stay hot and energized, encouraging one another. God calls us each individually, we belong to a community. That community is vital to keep us focused, to give mutual help and advice, and to provide accountability and, when necessary, loving correction. Nobody has the complete picture and we need each other to really see the fullness of what the Spirit has to offer.

I can and do affirm, through personal experience, that both the scriptures and the Spirit who gave them are true and sure guides. The Spirit offers great blessings of serenity and the certainty of God's love and care for us and for all creation. When I am weak the Spirit gives strength to persevere. When I am perplexed, as happens often, if I pray and wait with patience, then answers do come. This world is full of troubles and evils, but it is also full of grace, light, and blessing. It's our job to stay close to and in tune with the Spirit, to listen for and act on the Spirit's leadings that accentuate the grace and love of God.

So let us stay awake, enjoy and revel in the blessings of the Spirit of Christ, and find mutual energization in Spirit's direction for us as individuals, and as a meeting.