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Scripture – a Uniting Gift?

Quakers and the Bible

We should not underestimate the influence of the King James Bible. Read daily in homes, it led by the 1640s to a whole generation familiar with its language, stories and concepts. It was said of George Fox that if the Bible were lost it could be reconstructed from his mind. His language, and that of other early Friends, is redolent with the language of the Bible, not so much quoted as used afresh.

"The kingdom of Heaven did catch us and gather us as in a net..." (Howgill).

"Sing and rejoice, ye children of the Day and of the Light for the Lord God is at work in this thick night." (Fox)

The words of the Bible were the clay from which they formed new vessels, the ocean in which they swam.

However, they were not averse to taking the words literally, when needed. Fox reports hearing a preacher say 'that women had no souls, no more than a goose!' He corrected him by quoting Mary, My soul doth magnify the Lord... Friends took very seriously and literally the injunction to swear no oaths, and this resulted in imprisonment and loss of property when they would not swear allegiance to the king.

There was also a very careful reading of detail. Fox, looking at the suggestion that a wife should defer to her husband, said that this meant each wife deferring to her own husband and not to any other man: unmarried women had no one to whom to defer! Margaret Fell in 1666 published a theological tract, 'Women's Speaking Justified, Proved and Allowed of by the Scriptures.....', arguing that on the testimony of women depended the knowledge of the resurrection.

Such detail included careful retranslation: 'meeting' for $\epsilon\kappa\kappa\lambda\eta\sigma\iota\alpha$ and 'elder' for $\pi\rho\epsilon\sigma\beta\upsilon\tau\epsilon\rho\omicron\varsigma$ for example.

It has to be noted, though, that though scripture was important it was secondary to the Spirit. Fox reports how he received an insight through the Light of Christ, but "afterwards, searching the scriptures, I found it". On another occasion, after a thorough review of all the scripture he could find to support separate business meetings for women, he concludes, "if there were no scripture.....Christ is sufficient". What was primary was the Spirit that gave forth the scriptures.

As an aside, until the twentieth century Friends did not have a Bible available to read from at meetings for worship, believing that 'the Spirit that gave it forth will give it forth again!' This of course depended heavily on familiarity with the text!

Friends have a favourite story, told by Margaret Fell, of how Fox on his first visit to Swarthmoor Hall spoke in Ulverston church.

"Then what had any to do with the Scriptures, but as they came to the Spirit that gave them forth. You will say, Christ saith this, and the apostles say this, but what canst thou say? Art thou a child of Light and hast walked in the Light, and what thou speakest is it inwardly from God?"

This...cut me to the heart: and then I saw clearly that we were all wrong....And I cried in my spirit to The Lord, 'We are all thieves, we are all thieves, we have taken the Scriptures in words and know nothing of them in ourselves.'

This illustrates the basic principle that what comes first in understanding the Bible is the spiritual state and way of life of the reader. We are to walk in the Light, listening for the Word in the heart. As Margaret Fell says, we have to know the scriptures in ourselves.

Quakers tend to do theology by story rather than by proposition, but our major early systematic theologian, Robert Barclay, summed up the position of the scriptures as '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.....Yet because they give a true and faithful testimony of the first foundation they.....may be esteemed a secondary rule subordinate to the Spirit from which they have all their excellence and certainty... According to the Scriptures the Spirit is the first and principal Leader.'

We end up with the paradox of a very heavy dependence on scripture to explain the work of the Spirit. There is enough in this foundation to explain and support the wide variety of current Quaker practice in the world. Where worship is semi programmed the Bible features regularly: where worship is unprogrammed there is the risk that the Bible may be unmentioned for weeks. In Britain we are in danger of being thieves of the tradition.

Nineteenth century Friends were evangelical and Bible-literate in both Britain and the States and it was this tradition that largely undertook the missionary work. But at the turn of the twentieth century, Friends in the unprogrammed tradition largely moved to a more liberal theology. The admission of dissenters to theology departments in British universities and the foundation of Quaker colleges of Higher Education in the USA saw the emergence of Quaker Biblical scholars, such as Rendell J Harris and Henry J Cadbury. Critical scholarship sits well with an approach that sees the Bible as a record of spiritual discovery, and often illuminates meaning in new ways.

Like all communities of interpretation we have our hermeneutical keys which for us come primarily from the gospels. When I asked a group of Bolivian Quaker pastors what they made of commands to fight in the Old Testament, they were clear that the teaching of Jesus about love of enemies overrode any contrary teaching.

A key to understanding Quaker thought and practice is realised or realising eschatology, that the Kingdom of God is now, that the risen Christ is present in the midst, that the Spirit is the sign and gift of that Day. Fox saw the resurrection as a restoration of all things to the way they were before the fall, and beyond that into the new creation. The form of worship, the organisation - gospel order - the way of life - walking in the Light -, all bore witness to the Kingdom. The marriage of two equal people is a sign of paradise. And scripture is part of this witness. It bears testimony to the word of God. Like all witnesses it is partial and needs to be questioned. But it provides experience of Truth against which our own experience can be tested and by which it can be challenged.

It is with the help of scripture that we can meet the incarnate Word, be challenged by the prophetic word, and hear inwardly the creative word that transforms us until we too become a vessel through whom God may speak.

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