

# An Examination of 'Quaker Christian'

by Peter Stevenson

*C-1: that Canadian Friends openly recognize the Christian tradition of our Religious Society of Friends and its continuing nurture for many of our members and attenders. We ask local meetings and Yearly Meeting to find ways to engage more deeply with the Christian roots of Quakerism. This does not mean overlooking the current breadth of belief and conviction among those who are not Christian - both Christian and non-Christian beliefs have a part in fostering the loving community and inspirational diversity we now experience and value corporately. (CnR Working Group Final Report)*

I grew up in a family that did not use Christian language. I learned about the life of Jesus from a comic book version of the bible that I read in my spare time. However, I did grow up in a firmly Quaker family, with the doctrines of strict truth-telling and non-violence.

We attended Meeting at every possible opportunity. Meeting was held frequently at our house, which was where the Meeting library was located. There were always old Quaker books around that didn't seem to get read, but always seemed so intriguing. Eventually I decided that I wanted to know those books and delve deeper into my faith. I picked up George Fox's Journal, steeled myself, and began. I had been warned that it would be a difficult read.

I made it through fine. The only difficult part was his travelog of crossing the Atlantic: each day the number of leagues traveled in such-and-such a direction, and who was sick and how sick he was. In the next few years I also read through Barclay's Apology, and the pastoral letters of my great-great grandfather, Archibald Crosbie, a minister in Iowa Yearly Meeting (Conservative).

Reading through these texts, I realized that these Friends were writing in a language that I did not understand. George Fox's spiritual turning point was when he heard a voice that said, "There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition". This sounds like typical Christian exclusivism. How then could William Penn, a close friend of Fox, have said: "...the humble, meek, merciful, just, pious, and devout souls are everywhere of one religion"? I struggled with the doctrine of perfection. Why did early Friends focus

so much on it? How can we be perfect, in this life, on this earth? Clearly early Friends were not speaking in the language of modern-day Christianity. What could these words mean?

Eventually I realized that there were specific Quaker meanings for these words, and I was learning not just Christian language, but 'Quaker Christian' language. And it was powerful. How many of us have heard ministry that referred to "God, or Spirit, or whatever you want to call it"? I am continually challenged by Canadian Yearly Meeting's former clerk Philip Martin's comment, that "...we need a common faith . . . otherwise vocal ministry with a cutting edge is hardly possible". Yet we all want to maintain our beloved diversity!

In future issues of the Canadian Friend I would like to explore this Quaker Christian language. Traditionally, what have Friends meant by the words Christ? Perfection? Justification? The Cross? Quakers have had a rich language that they've used to talk about their spiritual experience; a language that is dying out. By learning this language, we can better understand earlier Quaker writings; better engage with the Christian roots of Quakerism, and maybe even have a richer language to explore our own experiences of the Divine.

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