

THE UNIVERSAL GOSPEL PREACHED BY EARLY QUAKERS

First, I'm going to try to briefly summarize and describe the overall scheme of this course and explain how the sessions have been planned to form a logical progression leading up to what is being done, at the present time, to recover and reproclaim the universal message preached by early Quakers.

In the first session we examined the claim that Christianity is "one of the expressions of a general phenomenon called religion." Those who hold this view see Christianity as a particularization of the general truth of religion. From this standpoint it can be argued that the claim of Christians to have a mission to gather all earth dwellers to Christ is a major obstacle to fulfilling the dream of a great world religion in which all the particular religions would decrease so that the universal ideal would increase.

But over against this idea of a universal world religion that would subordinate Christianity to something more universal than itself is the testimony of the Old Testament writers that the Creator of the universe revealed himself redemptively to Abraham and the fathers and to Moses and the prophets. The God of Abraham also revealed to the apostles in the New Testament that all that was foretold and foreshadowed in the Old Testament is fulfilled in Jesus Christ who is the consummation of all God's dealings with his covenant people. The apostles preached a universal gospel. They took Jesus seriously when he said: "I, if I be lifted up...will draw all men unto me." (John 12:32)

Those who first followed Jesus soon discovered that "the way of Christ" was distinct from the way of religion. Alan Richardson states this plainly when he says that the New Testament writers "do not think of the Christian 'way' as 'religion' at all -- or, if they were to think of it in terms of religion, they would say that it is the religion to end all religion. The faith of Christ is not presented as one -- even the highest -- in a series of 'religions of the world,' but as a unique and final truth with which no 'other gospel' (Gal. 1:6-9) may be compared." (1)

The history of Christianity from the age of the apostles to the present day is the story of how the "new thing" that Jesus Christ brought into the world was transformed into "a religion" and eventually became known as "one of the great religions of the world."

The Quaker movement of the 17th century was a movement to recover the power and simplicity of the apostolic faith and the apostolic vision of the church. The first Quakers ought not to be classified as belonging among the more radical sects within Protestant Christianity. Early Quakerism was not a spin-off from Puritanism. It was not

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the extreme left wing of Puritanism. It was not a species of Puritanism. In 1964 I wrote: "Quakerism differed radically from Puritanism in its view of the Scriptures, its conception of the nature of the church, its doctrine of Christian worship and ministry, its view of the "sacraments," its belief in the moral perfectibility of both the individual [Christian] and the church by the power of Christ, its view of the relation of the Christian to the state, and its understanding of the meaning of the cross. [The 17th century Quakers were] militantly engaged in...[attacking] Puritanism on all these points. This conflict was not an instance of the proclivity of sectarian Christianity to make a mighty controversy out of minor points of doctrinal difference. These were major points of difference and, for the Quakers, the controversy was seen as a struggle between two opposing conceptions of Christianity."(2)

The early Quakers maintained that the gospel worship, ministry, and church order that could be found among Christians in the age of the apostles had all been lost -- and that the reason for this great loss was that the gospel that the apostles preached had been lost. The Quakers claimed that they were recovering this lost apostolic gospel and were being called to preach this gospel again in all the world.

The early Quaker movement was not a splinter group. It was not an offshoot from some other group. It made the claim that it was restoring the primitive simplicity of the apostolic church by preaching again the long lost gospel preached by the apostles.

Near the end of Fox's life, a Dutch writer, Gerhard Croese, requested Fox to send him a written account of the rise of the Quakers. This request reached Fox about three months before he died. In response to this request, Fox produced his short history and this was one of the sources used by Croese to produce his General History of the Quakers which was first printed in Latin in Amsterdam in 1695. The English edition appeared in 1696. Gerhard Croese was what we would call today a religious journalist. He was not a Quaker and he regarded the Quakers as one of "an innumerable Company of Sects and factions" that proliferated in the Commonwealth Period. Nevertheless, he aimed to give an authentic portrayal of the Quakers and what they stood for. In his history he says that the Quakers preach up their religion as the most ancient and as being comparable to the faith and life that "flourished in the Golden Age of the Church: which was afterwards, from the very first rise of the Christian name, even unto this our age, miserably mangled and corrupted and...quite demolished; until, at

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length, it was retrieved and restored to its ancient purity by them...Wherefore..., in all their writings this is distinctly treated of...that they, as the Servants of Jesus Christ, are called and raised up by God for dispensing the gospel which, after so long and dark night of apostacy, is now again come to light, to be preached to all nations."(3)

In one of his epistles (1659), Fox declared: "I am not one of them, that call themselves Papists, Common-prayer-men, nor Presbyterians, Independents, nor Anabaptists, Puritans, nor heathens, which are out of the life of God; but that which God hath called me to, that I am..."(4)

Among those early Quaker missionaries who came to be known as the "Valiant Sixty," there was none more valiant than Edward Burrough, and in his account of the Quaker beginnings, he says: "As for our Original, It is the Lord God alone that hath raised us up, and planted us to be a People...and [we are] not from the Apostate Christians, neither of Papists nor Protestants...are we sprung; but are of the Apostles' Line, and of the stock and race of the true Christians, that believe in Christ, and follow him...and the Lord hath raised us up out of the Apostacy, into which all Christendom hath been fallen since the Apostles' days...and we are as the first fruits unto God...since the falling away from the true Faith; and Truth and Righteousness is our original, and Christ Jesus is our Foundation, on whom we are builded..."(5)

And Fox declares that "in this night of apostacy, the pure religion and worship in spirit...were lost; but now they [are come] to be set up again by Christ Jesus, [and] his messengers and ministers of the gospel, as in the apostles' days...So now again the everlasting gospel must be preached to all nations...that they may come to the pure religion, to worship God in spirit and in truth..."(6)

"The witnesses are rising and the everlasting gospel shall be preached again [to] all nations, kindreds and tongues of them that dwell on the earth..."(7)

The word "apostacy" occurs frequently in the gospel preaching of the early Quakers. To understand what early Friends meant by apostacy, it is important to remember that God had called them to preach a gospel that had gone into eclipse since the apostles' days. They believed that this gospel was truly the power of God and that by its power they would be enabled to receive and experience the new worship proclaimed by Christ and the new ministry and new church order that belongs to God's new covenant people and they would be gathered into the church of which Jesus Christ is the living head and living orderer.

Early Friends maintained that if you have lost the gospel, then you have lost gospel worship, gospel ministry,

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gospel righteousness, and everything that is included under gospel order.

Fox says: "Let your faith stand in the power of God,...which power of God is the gospel..."(8) And he enjoins Friends to keep in "the gospel, which is the power of God, which you have received from the beginning." When Christians failed to keep to the simplicity of the gospel then "the gospel order was lost amongst them, and the government of Christ, and his worship..." And therefore now "the gospel order is to be set up again, and the government of Christ, and so if you keep in the gospel order and government of Christ Jesus, you will keep out of the apostacy."(9)

Francis Howgill declared that the Quakers "are come out of the apostacy [and know that] the everlasting gospel of the son of God shall be preached again to them that dwell on the earth [and] are come to the everlasting gospel again and have received it, and it's the power of God, which...is to be preached again to the nations after the apostacy."(10)

In one of his unpublished sermons, Fox declares that "since the Apostles days they have lost the power and the life in the apostacy but now the gospel is preached again among you...that which was preached in the apostles' days in the beginning, the everlasting gospel and the everlasting order."(11)

Fox often compresses the whole story of the early Quaker movement into just a few words, as in his frequently repeated statement: "now the everlasting gospel is preached again after a long dark night of apostacy since the apostles' days." These 19 words sum up, for Fox, what the early Quakers were doing.

Fox mentions at least 15 things that Christians became apostatized from (see Appendix p.9). In Epistle 262 he mentions 13 essentials of the Christian way that were lost due to the apostacy (see Appendix p.9).

Fox maintains that everything that was lost because of the apostacy can be and will be restored when the apostolic gospel is preached again and when men and women receive it and come into obedience to it. The reason why the gospel preaching occupies such a central place in Fox's vision of Christian renewal is that this everlasting gospel is the foundation of everything else.

Concerning his own sense of universal mission, Fox wrote: "In the name and power of the Lord Jesus Christ was I sent to preach the everlasting gospel which...had been preached in the apostles' days, which was to go over all nations...For as the apostacy hath gone over all nations since the apostles' days, so the nations are become...unstable, being gone from Christ the foundation; so must the

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gospel, the power of God, go over all nations again. And now hath the Lord raised us up...so the everlasting gospel may be preached again by us to all nations...

"This message of the glorious everlasting gospel was I sent forth to declare and publish, and thousands have...received it...and come into the holy order of it."(12)

Writing to the Quakers, he tells them that "you...have seen the everlasting gospel and know the everlasting gospel preached again which was among the apostles, and [you] have been reaped out from among the apostates, got up since the apostles' days..."(13) [And] "now you are coming to the dawning of the day, and the ending of the night of apostacy, happy and blessed are you."(14)

The restoration of true worship, true ministry, true fellowship, and true church order is not a matter of launching a massive effort to reform all these good things that were corrupted in the apostacy, but it is rather a much less complicated operation and consists in making a fresh start and preaching the everlasting gospel again to the inhabitants of the earth. The power that brings about renewal is not the reforming power of reformers but it is the power of the gospel. Fox had unlimited faith in the power of the gospel. He seldom used the word "gospel," without adding the words, "the power of God."

At a General Meeting of "Friends in the Ministry" held at John Crooks house in Bedfordshire in 1658, Fox spoke for some length on the nature of the Quaker cause, the Quaker message, and the Quaker mission. Among the things that he dealt with in this long sermon are the following. He says:

"These things were largely declared of;...the state of the false church since the apostles' days; and how the true church fled into the wilderness...In this night of apostacy, the pure religion and worship in spirit which was in the apostles' days...were lost, but now they come to be set up again by Christ Jesus [and] his messengers and ministers of the gospel, as in the apostles' days. For as Christ sent his disciples to go and preach the gospel in all the world ...so now again, the everlasting gospel must be preached again to all nations...that they may come into the pure religion, to worship God in spirit and in truth, that they may know Jesus, their way to God, and the author of their faith...

"Christ Jesus...was the foundation of the prophets and apostles, and the rock of ages, and is our foundation now."(15)

Fox taught that "the first work is to convince people of God's truth, and turn them from the power of Satan to the power of God,"(16) and he stated that "the gospel foundation ...is to be declared in all the world."(17)

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Now we have come to the most important part of these seminar sessions, namely, the actual content of this gospel. What did George Fox actually say when he preached the gospel message to groups of non-Quakers for the first time? It is not a complicated message. It is, first of all, a proclamation that Jesus Christ is alive and that he can be known as a living reality as he is present in the midst of all who gather together in his name.

Jesus is not only alive and present, but he is actively present. He is present in a functional way. We can know who he is by what he does when he is present in our midst. He is present as a teacher of righteousness, as a counsellor to counsel us, as a leader and a prophet to lead us into all truth, as a governor to order us, and as a king to rule in hearts by faith. He is not merely passively present but he exercises his authority as he is head of his church. And as his church's shepherd and bishop he keeps it from going astray from God.

Fox says that all are "made alive by Christ, (even all the living) meet in the name of Jesus who is alive, and he their living Prophet, Shepherd, and Bishop, is in the midst of them; and is their living Rock and Foundation, and a living Mediator between them and the living God. So the living praise the living God through Jesus Christ...These meet in his name [and] are gathered in him...So all the living worship the living God in his Holy Spirit and truth ...This is the standing worship that Christ set up in his new covenant."(18)

"Christ Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever ... he is the same in his offices in his church; he is the same head of his church, and mediator and prophet to teach, and shepherd to feed, and bishop to oversee, yea, even Jesus ...who suffered...without the gates at Jerusalem"(19) (emphasis mine).

I hope that what has been said so far about the content of the gospel has called to your mind Fox's two summaries of his sermon on Firbank Fell in 1652. On this occasion, Fox preached for three hours in the open air to about 1000 people and his gospel message was so convincing that many who heard him became "outstanding missionaries and leaders of the early Quaker movement" and spent the remainder of their lives in the service of truth. Fox says that "many hundreds were turned from darkness to light...and received the grace and truth that comes by Jesus, and by it received Christ in their hearts." But in both his accounts of this sermon the heart of his message is what he has to say about the "offices" or functions of Christ. He says that the aim of the apostolic preaching was to bring people to "Christ the Substance, for he was come and is come, the same today as he

was yesterday and so forever, a Teacher, a Governor, a Prophet, a Bishop, a Shepherd, and a Priest to exercise his Heavenly Offices in his People, his living members, his Church which he is the holy head of." In the Journal account of this sermon he spells out the functions of these offices of Christ, viz., "their shepherd to feed them, their bishop to oversee them," etc. But in an evangelical epistle addressed "To all the Kings, Princes, and Governors in the whole world..." he gives a very full treatment of these functions of the offices of Christ.

The chief distinguishing mark of Fox's gospel preaching is what he has to say about the offices of Christ. Modern Biblical scholarship is confirming Fox's claim that he was preaching "again" the gospel that was preached by the apostles in the apostles' age. He was reviving the "functional Christology" that most modern biblical scholars agree was characteristic of the apostolic age.

There were two major consequences of this kind of gospel preaching. Where this gospel was preached people were exhorted to "receive Christ," and this was understood to include an experience of personal encounter with the living Christ. This encounter with Jesus Christ as a living reality was experienced as the sound of a voice. Fox declared that "after Christ was risen and ascended, he saith...if any man will hear my voice and open the door... I will come in...and sup with him." And Fox asks: "Can any that do not hear the voice of Christ...sup with him?"(20)

"Since he is risen and ascended, they must have their spiritual ear to hear the spiritual voice of Christ."(21) So Fox declared: "Sound...the trumpets...that all deaf ears may be opened...hear the voice of the great Prophet and King [and] Shepherd and Bishop...Hear his voice who is risen from the dead."(22)

And concerning the Quakers, he wrote: "we are come to hear our own prophet, which God hath raised up, Christ Jesus, to open to us; and him do we hear in all things in our meetings."(23) At Firbank Fell he reminded his hearers that God said, "This is my beloved Son, hear ye him."

Another major result of Fox's gospel preaching was that those who heard it and "received Christ in their hearts" began to practice Christian worship in a way for which there was no precedent in British Christianity. He opened his sermon on Firbank Fell with the proclamation that "Christ has ended [the Jews] temple and worship and set up a Worship in Spirit and in Truth." And he announced that "The Lord... sent me with his everlasting gospel to preach and...to bring people off all those temples, tithes, and priests...that had gotten up since the apostles' days, and had been set up by those who had erred from the spirit and power the apostles

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were in..." Fox's gospel preaching frequently included a call to the new worship that Christ "set up."

Fox taught that "there is no true church but where Christ exercises his offices in and amongst them"(24) (emphasis mine). His preaching about the offices of Christ gave people a new insight into what Jesus meant when he said: "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."(Matt.18:20) Fox writes to Friends to keep all their meetings in the name of Jesus "that you may feel him in the midst of you, exercises his offices; as he is a prophet that God raised up to open to you, and as he is a shepherd who laid down his life for you...",(25) so "hear Christ's voice for he is in the midst of you a teacher."(26)

Many who heard Fox's gospel preaching were filled with an urgent desire to gather together in the name of Jesus to feel his presence and hear his voice. As the number of such worshipping fellowships increased, the Quaker movement grew. Fox called these groups "gospel fellowships" and the worship they practiced he called "gospel worship." Fox called these gatherings "meetings in the name of Jesus," and gradually this phrase became recognized as referring to the distinctive kind of worship practiced by the Quakers.

I have collected 25 references where meeting in the name of Jesus, the Presence in the midst, and the Offices of Christ are all linked together by Fox and shown to be all related to one worship experience.

The editor of the "Friends Journal" extracted two sentences from my April 1st, 1985 article ("The Concern of the New Foundation Fellowship") which he put in large type, and they may serve to sum up what I have been saying here. I wrote: "The early Quaker movement revolved around one steadying central purpose, namely, to preach the everlasting gospel to the inhabitants of the earth," and "The gospel that Fox preached brings with it a new church order, a new worship, a new ministry, a new way to answer God's call for righteousness."

Everything that I have been saying in these seminar sessions have aimed to portray the early Quaker movement as a genuine revival of apostolic Christianity. I believe that the kind of study that we are doing in this seminar may be the shortest route to the revival of apostolic Christianity in our time.

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APPENDIX

"The Quakers are risen up in the night of apostacy, and discover you all what you are in, and what you went from, and what hath been lost since the days of the apostles." (Fox, George: Works of, 1831, Vol.3, p.99)

A. The Apostacy was from:

1. The everlasting gospel,
2. The cross of Christ,
3. The true Church (the church of the cross),
4. The divine Light of Christ,
5. The Holy Spirit,
6. The Holy faith (which Christ is the author of),
7. The prophets' life,
8. The apostles' life,
9. The pure life of God,
10. The apostles' doctrine,
11. The apostles' practice,
12. The power the apostles were in,
13. The Spirit the apostles were in,
14. The Word of God,
15. The grace of Jesus Christ.

B. That which was lost in the apostacy since the apostles' days:

1. The true hope,
2. The true cross,
3. The true faith,
4. The true religion,
5. The true way,
6. The true fellowship,
7. The true ministry,
8. The true praying,
9. The true righteousness,
10. The true image of God,
11. The sanctifying belief,
12. The gospel order,
13. The everlasting gospel.

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