

THE SHADOW
AND THE
SUBSTANCE

John Punshon

“Christ is all and is in all” (Colossians 3:11). “For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2). These are bold statements of faith made by Paul to two of his most troublesome new churches. He does not mince his words when dealing with their shortcomings, but, on the other hand, he always leaves people with a vision of what he himself calls the unsearchable riches of Christ.

And the reason is a simple one. Christians have no other companion and example but Christ, who is judge over all the philosophies and values of the world, and they know the deepest truth of all, that it is by God’s grace that we live and move and have our being. It is this that gives us lives of praise and glory. These things breathe from every page of Paul’s letters, and his understanding and experience of the world make him proclaim them at every opportunity.

Traditionally, Quaker experience has followed Paul’s pattern closely, as can be seen in the pages of Fox’s *Journal* and other Quaker writings of that period. And it is grace that is the key, I am sure. The Quaker life is one of testimony and evangelism, and what also makes it remarkable is that it proclaims the possibility of a real victory over sin in the personal life of the believer. This is the fullest measure of salvation.

Consider the effects of grace, a central theme of evangelical faith. As a source of prayer and thanksgiving, it stops us from becoming preoccupied with ourselves. As a source of gratitude, it calls for action and leads to the struggle for personal and social transformation. As the root of the life of the church, it leads to continual renewal. Seen in this light, the rise of the Friends movement in the seventeenth century was a work of divine grace.

Joseph John Gurney was in no doubt that it was. "By Quakerism," he wrote, "I apprehend the teaching of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, without addition, without diminution and without qualification." Those are pretty strong words for a denominational leader to utter, but they come from a deep experience of grace that led the speaker to a particular understanding of the true nature of Christianity. It was based on grace, but it lacked two of the obvious signs the other churches had. It dispensed with the use of outward symbols for baptism and the Supper of the Lord. Friends retain this testimony today, and it is more than just a "distinctive." The disuse of ceremonies is a pointer to the way Quakers understand God's grace.

The most important reason for Friends testimony is to make it impossible for Christians to mistake a real experience for an unreal one. Ceremonies in themselves have no divine power to change us one way or another, as Paul warned the Colossians. In the second chapter of that letter, he says that they are "a mere shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ."

The distinction drawn in Scripture between the shadow and the substance is clear. Grace is invisible and unmistakable. We are baptized and called into communion in the Spirit, inwardly. Our baptism is an appeal to God for a clear conscience (1 Peter 3:21). The communion "bread" we eat cannot be purchased at the grocery store, because it is Christ, the Bread of Life (John 6:35). So it is also with the wine, water, flame, and fire of the Spirit. To be immersed in, and filled with, the Spirit of Jesus Christ is the real substance to which sacramental symbols point. The receiving of God's saving and empowering grace is always mediated through inward faith alone, not through outward forms of expression.

But it is a legitimate question to ask why Friends insist on keeping this testimony. Cannot we preserve our sense that baptisms and suppers are symbolic occasions that are important because they help us to see beyond the shadow to the substance? It would be quite wrong to say that they cannot do this in the face of many people's testimony that they can. Nevertheless, Friends testimony is not groundless, and has more to it than many people realize.

In the first place, we have to take a historical view. In the past Christians have fought, killed, and persecuted one another over who was to count as a Christian and what kind of worship Christians had to offer. The church has had long periods of intolerance because it elevated the shadow and lost the substance. Who is to say this will not recur? Whose witness will serve as a standing reminder of those unpleasant facts?

Practically, how could Christians be like that? The most straightforward reply is that they forget that the inward experience of grace issues in the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Galatians 5:22). The fruit of the Spirit offers a far surer indication of spirituality than tongues, ecstasy, or rites. It is not clear how participation in ceremonies necessarily promotes these attributes, but *they* are the true outward measures of the Christian life, and it is to their Author that one should look *directly* for transforming grace. The second consideration here is that special ceremonies can narrow our focus and make us overlook the multifarious channels God actually uses.

This is the source of the well-known Quaker phrase that all life is sacramental. It rests on the conviction that we should always be striving to listen, to widen our understanding of God's ways with us, and not let ceremonial restrictions tie down our imaginations.

Hence, the Quaker testimony leads to a particular way of life and a characteristic kind of discipleship—a continuing opening to grace. That is no mean claim, and it can be argued that the great reputation Quakers enjoy is vitally dependent on it. So also is the freedom and equality of our church government, and the vision we have of the People of God. You can scarcely have ordinances without ordaining people to do them, and that would be the end of historical Quakerism.

Finally, it needs to be reemphasized that one does not *choose* not to do what all other Christians do just to be awkward. The testimony Friends have they believe to be found in Scripture and they have set out their case in many books, most recently *Why Friends Are Friends* by the late Jack Willcuts. The testimony does not state what Friends think, it states their understanding of what God wants. Jeremiah looks forward to a time when there will be a new covenant written in the hearts of God's people, when that which is new comes (Jeremiah 31). Hebrews describes the shadow and the substance of this claim. In chapter 9 at verse 10 we read, "They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings—external regulations applying until the time of the new order."

And this is the simple point. We live in the new order, the covenant of grace. What more do we need in our heart of hearts than to know the fountain of grace, Jesus Christ—and Him crucified?

John Punshon is Professor of Quaker Studies at the Earlham School of Religion in Richmond, Indiana. Recently, he transferred his membership in the Religious Society of Friends from London Yearly Meeting to Indiana Yearly Meeting. He has served as Quaker Tutor at Woodbrooke College, one of the Selly Oak Colleges in Birmingham, England, and in 1990 he taught for a semester at George Fox College in Newberg, Oregon. John Punshon is the author of *Portrait in Grey*, *Encounter with Silence*, and *Testimony and Tradition*.

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