

Session 5: August 19, 2018 – Meeting Others

Mike, Sean, Mary Elizabeth, Nathan, Meredith, Ginny (Mary & Bruce attended the potluck)

During potluck the question arose as what the Bible is. One person voiced objection to the culturally dominant “scriptural literalist” view, namely, that the Bible is all one work, dictated by God, with specific assertions of what is “right belief” and “right behavior.”

However, during the study group itself, we opened up broader possibilities that mesh with the Quaker principle of *continuing revelation*. We talked about the Bible as a *library of books*—books, furthermore, that originated in oral traditions of *sacred storytelling*. Even after the oral traditions were put into writing, they have continued to be reinterpreted, reedited, and retranslated from language to language over several millennia.

The audiences of such storytellers often already know the stories. They wait to see how one particular storyteller will recreate the story in the context of their own present situations, informed by her own style and, more importantly, her openness to allowing new revelation to come forth from old stories.

Quakers traditionally approach the Bible in this spirit, not as a fixed and final authority on religious and moral matters, but as a library of sacred texts, available for our shared inner light to use in bringing us new understanding.

Quaker Margaret Fell wrote of this new approach to scripture in her description of first hearing George Fox speak:

“[He] opened the Scriptures and said the Scriptures were the prophets’ words, and Christ’s and the apostles’ words, and what as they spoke they enjoyed and possessed and had it from the Lord. And said, 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 the Light and hast thou walked in the Light, and what thou speakest, is it inwardly from God, etc.?*”

“This opened me so, that it cut me to the heart, and then I saw clearly that we were all wrong. So I sat me down in my pew again and cried bitterly: 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* [emphases added].”

– from *The Journal of George Fox*

Several folks asked what reactions others had to Chapter 3 of Ambler’s book. We referred to printed copies of the Session 5 facilitator’s outline as a chapter summary, without strictly following that outline.

The group shared responses to several themes from the chapter:

- The traditional notion of “ready-made concepts” present in the theologies and doctrines of many religions, as contrasted with the Quaker preference for personal and collective “testimony.”
 - *When we do begin to get a sense of God we realize that it is quite different from what our previous idea of God might have led us to expect. This kind of reality will not fit into our ready-made concepts. (Ambler 37)*
 - *There is a risk that any such description might be taken as a belief, an idea that could be detached from the experience and regarded as true in itself. It would then defeat its purpose. But if it is taken as an expression or interpretation of the experience, it could indeed be helpful.*

We Quakers have a word for such talk.... It is ‘testimony.’ Our talk about God and other mysteries of life has the character of ‘testifying’ to our experience of these things. (Ambler 40)
- The importance of “reconciliation” in Quaker faith and practice, the special attentions that Friends give to addressing conflict, hurt, and anger. As part of this discussion, Mike introduced the use of *clearness*

committees and other forms of Quaker process that may be used for group problem-solving and conflict resolution. (See www.fgcquaker.org/resources/clearness-committees-what-they-are-and-what-they-do.)

During the latter part of the session, one of us described a number of life crises and growth that stirred a desire to explore the Quaker way. Other group members shared similar stories.

One of us described the sensation of both physical healing and inward awareness rising up from the center of her body. Another spoke of planning to attend a conference at which Western medicine practitioners will learn from practitioners of other healing traditions.

We also discussed the challenge of turning toward human suffering, instead of away from it, in order to become more open to dealing with those who suffer.

Session 6: September 16, 2016.

Homework

- Review the final sections on worshipping together from Ambler's Chapter 3 (pp. 58-63).
- Mike will send some additional readings on Quaker worship, as well as some handouts we did not use during Session 5.