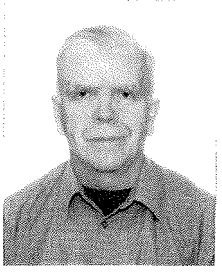
The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) Doing Doctrine in the World

Doing Doctrine in the World: A Quaker Approach to Ecumenism

Keith R. Maddock

Keith R. Maddock is a member of Toronto Monthly Meeting, within Canadian Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers). Holding masters degrees in Religious Education, Divinity and Theology from Emmanuel College, he has written articles for journals and anthologies, including The Canadian Friend, Friends Journal, and Spirituality (Dominican Publications). But his primary inspiration for "doing doctrine in the world" has been visiting prisoners in the Toronto (Don) Jail.



The principle source of truth must be the Truth itself. When we trace a stream to the place where it gushes from the earth we can go no farther. The wellspring has to be considered the source, for the interior of the earth cannot be plumbed and its ramifications are inscrutable.

Robert Barclay, *Apology* (1678) (*Barclay's Apology in Modern English*, edited by Dean Freiday (Newburg, OR: The Barclay Press, 1991), p. 46.

Having grown out of the radical reformation in seventeenth century England, the early Friends rejected the institutional trappings of organized religion, including what they called "steeplehouses," "hurling priests", traditional creeds, and most forms of liturgy. In Friends' tradition, the term "doctrine" has often been suspect, although it can be understood as the medium for passing on our faith testimonies to future generations. In this respect, the early Friends based their belief system on the essential teachings of Jesus, particularly those relating to such principles as peace, simplicity, equality and integrity pertaining to Truth as our standard of witness. The experience of God's presence, mediated through these teachings, can be experienced inwardly by anyone who is open to revelation in the present moment and who is prepared in heart and mind to test their experience through reading the Scriptures, seeking discernment in silent meetings for worship and actively striving to realize peace and well-being for all.

While ecumenical dialogues on doctrine tend to focus on formal creeds as common points of reference, Friends explicitly avoid formulas of belief. Continuing revelation of the Truth is the basic rule-of-thumb. This process is balanced through such disciplines as keeping personal journals and seeking discernment through the use of clearness committees, or small gatherings of Friends who encourage one another in discerning Truth through specific life challenges and openings for service.

How then is doctrine transmitted from generation to generation without distorting the original message? This is a continuing challenge, especially when Friends feel called to be responsible ecumenical, and now interfaith, partners in the mission for justice and peace. I suggest that being responsible partners implies being true to one's inherited tradition while open to the possibility that others may be equally true to their beliefs, though expressed in different terms. One aid to consistency is an elementary form of catechesis known as "Advices and Queries", traditionally developed independently by

each Yearly Meeting when moved to produce a unifying statement. An example, from the *Advices and Queries of Britain Yearly Meeting* (Canadian Yearly Meeting is in process of developing one of its own), is as follows:

> Do you try to set aside times of quiet for openness to the Holy Spirit? All of us need to find a way into silence which allows us to deepen our awareness of the divine and to find the inward source of our strength. Seek to know the inward stillness, even amid the activities of daily life. Do you encourage in yourself and in others a habit of dependence on God's guidance for each day? Hold yourself and others in the Light, knowing that all are cherished by God.

Query # 3, *Advices and Queries*, Britain Yearly Meeting (1995)

Flexing the Dogmatic Imagination

While completing a master's degree at the Toronto School of Theology, one of my final courses carried the intriguing title, "The History of Radical Protestantism". It seemed to offer something that had been lacking in my education up to that time — an integrative approach to Christian doctrine that would help to bridge differences among the various denominations.

Radical Protestantism covers a variety of belief systems, from the early Mennonites and Anabaptists to more contemporary forms of Methodism and Pentecostalism. The Religious Society of Friends, which I had already joined at the time, was itself a product of the spiritual ferment that spread throughout Europe during the seventeenth century. Friends shared much in common with Baptists, Pentecostals, Mennonites, Anabaptists and later movements, such as the Methodists and Salvation Army. Each of these denominations were well represented in the class, along with two Jesuit seminarians who reminded us of the ferment that also helped to reform the Roman Catholic Church during the post-Reformation era.

The professor offering the course was A. James Reimer, a faculty member from the Mennonite Conrad Grebel College in Kitchener, ON., whose book, *The Dogmatic Imagination: The Dynamics of Christian Belief* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2003), contributes to our understanding of doctrine in an age when words like "doctrine" and "dogma" are off-putting to many who feel alienated from inflexible religious institutions. When linked with the term "imagination", however, dogma or doctrine understood as traditional teaching is less foreboding. While many of us may have often felt like discarding the baggage of doctrine in our spiritual journeys, Reimer reminds us that theological language (which is also the language of the Bible) is "the rich and multidimensional language of the imagination, the language of transparency".

While the term "dogmatic imagination" may appear to be an oxymoron, it suggests that doctrine is a work (imitating Creation itself) in progress. Language and metaphor are cultural phenomena that enable people to communicate what they consider the most important (or ultimate) dimensions of their lives in community. Faith seeking understanding is never static, but constantly open to imaginative engagement with tradition *and* with the world we live in. In this respect, we can appreciate why Jesus, teaching profound truths to reanimate religious memory through the use of parables, cited the words of Isaiah: "...for they look without seeing, and listen without hearing or understanding (Mt 13:13 NEB)". How can we engage the world in dialogue for change without the tools to discern how the Spirit is already working in the world?

Reimer emphasizes that "the challenge is not to throw out dogmas (teachings) of the church, but to enliven our imagination concerning them — to go deeper by enriching our language". Friends, as we shall see, have benefitted from a similar approach. Being able to articulate shared beliefs with integrity involves resistance to the world's dualistic

pattern of segregating the religious and the spiritual from secular affairs, and faith from rational understanding.

Friends at the Well

Robert Barclay (1648-1690), was the first, and some may argue the only, systematic theologian in the early history of the Religious Society of Friends. He wrote his profound and influential *Apology* at a time when the Friends were recovering from persecution by the secular and religious establishment of England. The early movement was united in its belief that unmediated revelation of God's Spirit could be experienced inwardly. But, with the advent of the age of enlightenment, many Friends also felt there was a need for rational grounds to promote their understanding of "primitive Christianity", a faith closer to the original teachings of Jesus and the early church. While Barclay's work has never been accepted as a definitive statement of Quaker belief, it is true to Friends' conviction of inspired personal revelation, confirmed by Scripture and tested according to the evolving standards agreed upon by the faith community. For Barclay, it has also been described as a "thinking through" from the strict Calvinism of his youth, the Roman Catholicism of his theological education on the continent, and finally to his Quaker "convincement".

In his preamble to a discussion of Scripture, he wrote, "Because the Scriptures are only a declaration of the source, and not the source itself, they are not to be considered the principle foundation of all truth and knowledge. They are not even to be considered as the adequate primary rule of all faith and practice. Yet, because they give a true and faithful testimony of the source itself, they are and may be regarded as a secondary rule that is subordinate to the Spirit, from which they obtain all their excellence and certainty" (Barclay, 47).

Scripture is a form of testimony that reflects human limitations. This proposition should alert us to the fact that interpretation of the "good news" for our contemporaries is also subject to personal biases and cultural distortions. So anyone who approaches life from a faith perspective has a vocation and a responsibility for struggling with the questions that arise out of traditional teachings. While we do not all possess the tools for doing classical systematic theology, we may find assurance in the knowledge that Scripture speaks in different ways to different people — through our differently attuned faculties, interests and needs. Acknowledgment of our individual gifts for understanding also leads to a new level of interdependence and accountability.

John Barclay understood the Scriptures to be an incomparable looking-glass, "in which we can see the conditions and experiences of ancient believers." Finding our own experience to be analogous to theirs, we are comforted and strengthened in our hope for the same redemption they experienced. He continues, "Observing the providence that watched over them, and the snares which they encountered, and beholding the ways in which they were delivered, we may find ourselves directed toward salvation, and appropriately reproved, and instructed in righteousness" (Barclay, 59).

Ecumenism: A Flea in the Ear

Friends in Canada do not identify themselves as a "church". I should add that this is not the case for all Friends around the world, many of whom identify with the Christian Church and who hire pastors to lead them in worship and pastoral care. However, all continue to avoid formal statements of belief and outward forms of the sacraments, testing individual leadings through a "gathered silence" in common worship; as well as encouraging the practical disciplines of journaling and meetings for clearness. There have been periods in our history when Friends were either hostile toward other

religious groups, or withdrew into quietist isolation. These characteristics have not made Friends easy partners in ecumenical endeavours. Yet, in spite of this, Friends have been continually challenged by the affirmation that there is "that of God" in all persons regardless of the outward forms of their beliefs, and there is a need to be open to "Truth" from whatever direction it may come.

To be honest, as a relatively small organization in dialogue with larger institutional churches, we sometimes feel like the family of fleas that lived in the elephant's ear. The fleas politely ask the elephant's permission before taking up residence, and when the elephant says nothing, they take its silence as a form of consent. Much later, when the fleas decide to move to other accommodations, they assure the elephant that moving is in no way a reflection on the elephant's hospitality. Again the elephant says nothing, so the fleas assume that no offense is taken. Such silence is seldom interpreted as indifference, although we sometimes wonder if our presence has been noticed.

With this parable in mind, we hope you will not be offended if we occasionally seem lukewarm to religious doctrines and creeds as topics for dialogue. At this time in our history, Canadian Yearly Meeting is honestly struggling to come to terms with the "Christian roots" of our tradition while adapting to the multifaith and secular challenges of the twenty-first century. While cherishing the unique origins of our movement, we are more than ever aware of the enormous gap that exists between the radical reformation of the seventeenth century and the radical reformation still unfolding in the twenty-first. Continuing to be partners in dialogue with institutional and credal churches may offer consolation by reminding us of our family of origin. In return, however, we can only hope that we have given our partners an itch to reflect on the importance of humility and being open to the ineffable motions of the Spirit.

As Friends reflect on the wellhead of their faith, the words of George Fox (the original founder of our movement), written from the Launceston Jail in 1656, inspire us with this ecumenical model for "doing doctrine in the world":

> This is the word of the Lord God to you all, and a charge to you in the presence of the living God: Be patterns, be examples in all countries, places, islands, nations, wherever you go, so that your carriage and life may preach among all sorts of people, and to them. Then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in every one. Thereby you can be a blessing in them and make the witness of God in them bless you. Then you will be a sweet savour and a blessing to the Lord God.

Canadian Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends

Buckley, Paul & Angell, Stephen W., Editors. *The Quaker Bible Reader*. Richmond, IN: The Earlham School of Religion, 2006.

Freiday, Dean, Editor, *Barclay's Apology in Modern English*. Newberg, OR: The Barclay Press. 1991.

Maddock, Keith R. *A Rainbow of Opportunity: Friends and the Ecumenical Spirit*. Canadian Quaker Pamphlet Series No. 61, 2005.

Steere, Douglas V., Editor, *Quaker Spirituality: Selected Writings*. NY: Paulist Press (Classics of Western Spirituality Series). 1984.

License and Permissible Use Notice

These materials are provided to you by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) in accordance with the terms of ATLA's agreements with the copyright holder or authorized distributor of the materials, as applicable. In some cases, ATLA may be the copyright holder of these materials.

You may download, print, and share these materials for your individual use as may be permitted by the applicable agreements among the copyright holder, distributors, licensors, licensees, and users of these materials (including, for example, any agreements entered into by the institution or other organization from which you obtained these materials) and in accordance with the fair use principles of United States and international copyright and other applicable laws. You may not, for example, copy or email these materials to multiple web sites or publicly post, distribute for commercial purposes, modify, or create derivative works of these materials without the copyright holder's express prior written permission.

Please contact the copyright holder if you would like to request permission to use these materials, or any part of these materials, in any manner or for any use not permitted by the agreements described above or the fair use provisions of United States and international copyright and other applicable laws. For information regarding the identity of the copyright holder, refer to the copyright information in these materials, if available, or contact ATLA at products@atla.com.

Except as otherwise specified, Copyright © 2016 American Theological Library Association.