

“To be Quaker is, therefore, to be radically Christian.”

Excerpts from “The Inward Light”

**by Samuel D. Caldwell, General Secretary of
Philadelphia Yearly Meeting 1982-1990**

[The] Light is unequivocally universal. It is freely given by God to each and every human being who comes into the world, regardless of race, sex, nationality, philosophical orientation, religious creed, or station in life. It is the divine birthright and inheritance of all, not the privileged possession of a few. . . . Now it can readily be seen from these characteristics that the Quaker concept of the Inner Light is radically universalist in its thrust. As such, it offers a strong challenge to many of the exclusivist assumptions of conventional Christian faith.

It is hard to overstate . . . how radically different the Quaker view of salvation is from the popular Christian conception. According to our understanding of the Inner Light, any person of whatever religious persuasion, who turns in sincerity of heart to the Divine Light within, and lives in accordance with its promptings, will be saved [i.e., “drawn into fullness and wholeness of life and right relationship to God, ourselves, and one another.”] All of God's children, Christians and non-Christians alike, have equal access to salvation through the Light.

. . . Friends have [also] vociferously challenged the fundamentalist Christian assumption that the Bible is the Word of God, insisting instead that the Holy Spirit, the Christ Within, is the Word of God. The Bible is a declaration of the fountain; it is not the fountain itself. . . .

In a similar vein, the Quaker doctrine of “continuing revelation,” which says that God continues to reveal Truth to those who have ears to hear, directly challenges the fundamentalist Christian belief that God's revelation was completed when the books of the biblical canon were finalized by the Church.

Quaker Universalism also challenges the conventional Christian definition of the Church, insisting that the Church is not a building. Nor is it an identifiable group of confessing Christians. It is, rather, the universal fellowship of all those persons, of whatever background or persuasion, who know and live in accordance with the Living Witness of God's Light within them. Unlike the standard Christian definition, the Quaker definition of the Church embraces non-Christians, and even theoretically excludes professing Christians who have no real inward, life-changing experience of God.

This view constitutes an outright denial of the exclusivist Christian assumption that salvation comes only to those who confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and participate in certain established rituals of the Church. One need not be a professing Christian, in other words, to be saved; and many who are professing Christians are (apparently) not saved.

. . .

Quaker Universalism . . . is founded on the premise that there is one true principle of discernment, and that is the Inner Light. In addition, as we shall see momentarily, although Quaker Universalism radically challenges Christianity at many points, it also has historically accepted Jesus Christ and the gospel tradition as normative for faithful living.

. . . Christian Quakers have to accept the fact that Quakerism is radically universalist in its interpretation of Christianity. Universalist Quakers, on the other hand, have to accept the fact that Quakerism is radically Christian in its interpretation of Universalism. For, the truth is that, despite its somewhat testy relationship with conventional Christianity, Quakerism is and always has been decidedly Christian.

We have already sketched how the Quaker view of Christianity is distinctively Universalist. How is the Quaker view of Universalism distinctively Christian? It is really quite simple: Friends have always identified the Inner Light with the living Christ. Christ, in Quaker theology, is the Light. “There is One, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition,” said the voice to George Fox at the moment of his conviction. And this Christ Jesus, Fox perceived and subsequently preached, was the Eternal Risen Christ, the Light of the World, come to teach all people who would hear his voice, not just professing Christians. To be Quaker is to be a follower of Christ, Who witnesses within each one of us as we walk through life.

This strict equivalency of Christ with the Inner Light is the key to understanding how it is that Christianity and Universalism are so inextricably bound together in Quaker faith and practice. Not only is it possible to be both Christian and Universalist at the same time; it is the very essence and peculiar genius of Quakerism to marry the two in one powerful synthesis through the doctrine of the Inner Light. In the final analysis, the Quaker doctrine of the Inner Light is really a radically Universalist interpretation of the Christian doctrine of the Holy Spirit. To be Quaker is, therefore, to be radically Christian.