

It occurs to me that I may have been too hasty in my response to Dick's question about whether or not I thought it was possible to really be a Quaker if you didn't accept that the historical Jesus was more than a really good man. In the first place, the answer depends on whether or not I am in a position to decide who's Quaker and who isn't. Having heard people on both the Orthodox and the Hicksite side of the spectrum wonder with some despair why the other group doesn't just quit calling itself Quaker, I've decided, on the whole, to accept meetings or churches as Quaker if they say they are. What this means, practically, is that we wind up including as Quakers all those people and groups who trace their beginnings to the Quaker movement. This is far from a satisfactory definition of Quakerism, but it does prevent us from measuring other Quaker groups by a doctrinal or behavioral creed, and so it seems appropriate.

That said, here are some further thoughts:

My response that I thought you could be Quaker if you knew and experienced the Inner Teacher/Inner Light/Inner Seed/Inward Christ, whether or not you called it by the name Christ, seems in keeping with the early Quaker witness to me. It is congruous with their belief that neither Native Americans nor Islamic Turks nor any of the people who lived in regions or times where they had not had access to the gospel message would not be kept from the presence of God after death. They believed that these peoples had been given the opportunity to know the Inward Christ, and that their identification of that presence as "the Christ" was less important than their experience of that presence within.

Nonetheless, they also had a (hazier) belief in what they called "the day of visitation," when Christ would come to you, make himself known, and you would have to say yea or nay. This might be at the hour of death, as they believed it was for people in cultures where the name of Christ was never heard. It might be earlier. Something about this visitation would be a recognition of the power of the Christ (or denial of it). Whether this meant a recognition of the word Christ, I am not certain.

Clearly, the early Quaker emphasis on the inward Christ, or "Christ come to teach his people himself," is an indication of their belief in the specialness of Christ—Christ is something beyond the man, Jesus. But they emphasize the experience of Christ far beyond any theological belief or creed about who Christ is, and who Jesus is. Yet I think it would not occur to an early Quaker to equate that experience with any other power but Christ's or the Spirit's or God's. They are not terribly clear on the Trinity, but they are clear that the Inner Teacher is not the human conscience or psyche.

Their position on the atoning work of Christ is similar: experience is given greater precedence than theology or a belief system, but humanity is not capable of perfection without the work of Christ. So I don't recall particular statements about the function of Christ's blood in the forgiveness of sin. But the sense of the fall of humanity is everywhere (I recall George Fox crying out "woe unto the bloody streets of Leitchfield"), and, accompanying that sense of fallenness is the sense that we are gradually cleansed of sin by the transforming work of the Inward Christ. Early Quaker journals frequently talk about submission of the will. Yet the early Quakers also present a clearly rendered paradigm for individuals, acquiescing to the work of God within, to be able to grow away from sin. This differs from my understanding of the reformed traditions in which the atonement covers over one's sinfulness, but, because of the utter depravity of humankind, is not capable of mending one's sinfulness.

So it would not occur to an early Friend to assert that one could conquer sin on one's own, without the transforming power of the Inner Teacher. But it would also be out of keeping with the movement if one were to say that Christ's atoning work would have no effect on the believer's behavior.