

**DID GEORGE FOX GET IT RIGHT?  
Firbank Fell 1652**

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**The New Foundation**

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"For the Lord had sent me with his everlasting gospel to preach and his word of life to bring them off all those temples, tithes, priests and rudiments of the world that had gotten up since the Apostles days: and had been set up by such who had erred from the spirit and power the Apostles was in."

*The Journal of George Fox. Ed. Nickalls, Cambridge 1952. P.109*

As George Fox stood on the rock at Firbank Fell he could see about one thousand people, who had gathered to hear him. They had already spent the morning listening to their own preachers in the chapel close by, or standing outside it, and now they had returned from their dinners to hear him. They were, he tells us, "sober people" – good Protestant Christians who were well versed in the Bible. Most of them had supported the Parliament against the King in the recent civil war but like George Fox himself they were disillusioned by the outcome. They had a lot of questions and they did not think that the new, officially approved clergy were giving them the right answers. George Fox thought he had the answer and he gave it them for three hours. In later life he provided a one page summary of it in his Journal. The situation was quite different from ours in this country now and his language may seem very strange to most of us, Quakers or not. Yet it is my belief that he was saying something of universal significance and there may well be those in other countries and of other cultures who might recognise this sort of situation in their own experience. Some of them may be Quakers who know this biblical language even though they may not be familiar with Fox's interpretation of it.

As George was growing up the nations of Europe were engaged in devastating religious wars, nominally Catholic against Protestant, but it was all mixed up with self-aggrandizement and power politics. In his own country he had seen a Christian king who claimed to rule by divine right fighting against the representatives of his subjects who also claimed to be guided by God. On the Parliamentarian and Republican side there were many sincere idealists, who thought they were fighting to install the rule of God on earth, the Kingdom of Heaven promised by Jesus. What they got was a military dictatorship and more strife of all kinds. Sensitive young people like George were appalled by all the bloodshed and destruction. He had parents who were a pretty good example of what Christians should be like and he was a serious minded boy who tried to follow in their footsteps. As most of the people he knew professed a passionate belief in Christianity this should not have been a problem; but it was. Their behaviour did not match their profession of faith.

in measure there will be no occasion of stumbling, for all stumbling is being disobedient. Wait to find the Word in you, as the Scripture says – not to fetch it from above, nor from beneath. What does it say? 'It is nigh you, in your heart, for with the heart man believes and with the tongue confession is made unto salvation.' Abiding inwardly in the Light it will let you see one another and the unity one with another." *George Fox Doctrinals 4.43* )

### Is this a message for us now?

The effect of this message on those who listened to it on Firbank Fell is recorded in the words of Francis Howgill (Quaker Faith and Practice 11.18 & 19.08): "The kingdom of heaven did gather us and catch us all, as in a net and his heavenly power at one time drew many hundreds to land. We came to know a place to stand in and what to wait in.... And thus the Lord, in short, did form us to be a people for his praise in our generation." The heady enthusiasm of the complete passage is perhaps more suited to the young than to those approaching a comfortable middle age. This teaching is not for those who do not really want to be changed just yet, especially if they have status, wealth and power. Sin may be an unpopular word now but this inner sense of shame, blame and insecurity are as strong as ever, even though it is usually repressed. Whether or not they admit to being sinners most people do not like being told they can do something about bad behaviour; they are content to be "only human" and excuse a questionable action by saying "everyone else does it" and "if we did not someone else would." This is called being tolerant and realistic but when this attitude is officially condoned as public policy and multiplied on a global scale it threatens the future of us all. Of course we want the whole world to be more like the Kingdom of Heaven but if we are to do anything about it we must first change ourselves. As I have said, we can only expect to be able to do this as members of a supportive and like-minded community. It is also as a community that we have to demonstrate how it works in practice. This requires the kind of discipline and total commitment that Fox referred to as 'gospel order'. Only, then can we tackle all the external problem is brought about by our failings and those of others. Those who govern the world must also undergo the same inner change if they are to change their policies or make the right policies effective. Laws only work when those who make them and carry them out do so in the right spirit and we are called to remind them of that simple truth. The truth we seek can be done by anyone and is not an intellectual abstraction. We see this truth in one another and it reveals itself in what we are led to do as we live in the Life and Power of the Light of Christ.

human and being incomplete. Christ is always with us to offer us completeness in the Kingdom of God or Heaven on earth as he promised.

The "Light" reveals the darkness in us and so may appear very frightening. In the Garden of Eden story the entrance is guarded by an angel with a fiery sword but passing through this fire is a purging and a cleansing and therefore a healing experience. Many prefer to turn away and be in self-denial of their faults and often take it out on others. Yet if we welcome it the fire of the Spirit is a light that floods through us and swallows up the darkness and this is "salvation". Then knowing what is right and doing it go together. We are no longer under the power of Satan and become "children of the Light", sons and daughters of God. For the faithful the new eternal life has begun and will not be affected by our physical death. The inward Christ shows us, in our present experience, what to do and what not to do and gives us the power to act accordingly. In our social life he will show us which forms of discipline and structures are still valid and which are not. To live in Christ, in this "Covenant of Light", is to know the new heaven and the new earth.

The original Christian and Quaker claim to be free of sin is often misrepresented as either arrogant self-delusion or blatant hypocrisy. Thoughtful critics accuse modern Quakers of having a naive trust in an inner and individual sense of goodness and they are probably right. Fox on the other hand was painfully aware of evil in human nature and he was to develop an idea of "gospel order" that answers the obvious objections if only we understood and applied it. True righteousness is a state of mind, and the temptations we face are specific to each one of us, depending on our natural endowments, temperament and personal circumstances. We are given the strength to do the things that we have to do and the gospel does not we are not asked to attempt anything that is beyond our strength. We must keep within our measure as Fox put it. Nor is it the case that we have to do this on our own. As part of the body of Christ we are surrounded and supported by the other members, and they can often do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Fox always laid great emphasis on the need to form regular meetings. If we are together in the same life and power that the apostles were in we can find an inner source of strength that enables us to do what might once have seemed impossible. The proof of this does not lie in intellectual arguments but in the results. A true Christian church, or Quaker meeting, can be a practical example of what Fox was talking about: **«Be not talkers of the Truth, nor followers of the 'blind guides' but mind the pure light of God in you, which shows your sin and evil, and how you have spent your time... If you love that light, you love Christ. And walking in the light**

Society was still grossly unequal and life in seventeenth century England was full of violence, injustice, cruelty and selfishness. Yet the British Isles were part of what was known as "Christendom" – the countries where everyone was supposed to be Christian and had been for hundreds of years. With only rare exceptions people were not free to decide for themselves whether they wanted to be Christian or not or what sort of Christian. That was decided for them by their rulers and enforced by law. George Fox came to manhood just when, for a brief period of fifteen years or so, many English men and women insisted on thinking and speaking for themselves. It was not at all safe to do so and the arguments were often violent but it was all part of a turbulent social and political revolution. England had not only rejected the authority of the Roman Catholic Church but for the time being had abolished that of the Anglican Church along with its bishops and rituals. The people had the Bible in their own language and those who could not read had it read to them. Every parish had a well educated "minister" who might know the original Hebrew and Greek and had studied the books of scholars who wrote in Latin. Unfortunately that did not mean that they were free from prejudice and centuries of false interpretation. George had lost faith in all of them and called them all "priests". Other respected preachers were educated laymen who "professed" Christianity and so were known as "professors" but George had no time for them either. He was not asking for more and better Reform. Instead he was turning centuries of Christian tradition on its head and demanding a completely fresh start.

#### *Down with outward religion*

**"I was made to open to the people that the steeple-house and the ground on which it stood were no more holy than that mountain, and those temples and 'dreadful houses of God', (as they called them) were not set up by the command of God nor Christ; nor their priests as Aaron's priesthood; nor their tithes as theirs was. But Christ was come, who ended the temple, and the priests, and the tithes, and Christ said, 'Learn of me: and God said, 'This is my beloved son, hear ye him.'"**

Fox began by pointing to the nearby chapel. It was their place of worship and they had asked him to speak from its pulpit. But he wanted them to understand that "the earth is the Lord's" and that no place or building is more sacred or holy than any other. The first Christians had used any convenient house or space and often met in the open. By addressing people on the hillside he was simply following the example of Jesus. Nor was it right to call any building a "church". The proper and original meaning of that word was "assembly", a group of people who get together for a common purpose – in this

case to form a God-led community. In fact, "meeting" is a perfectly good English translation of the Greek word used in the New Testament and that is why Quakers prefer it and call their buildings "meeting houses". There is more to this than just a quibble about words. "Church" has also come to refer to a particular kind of religious institution and to the men who control it. Once you have special sacred buildings, so-called "houses of God", you start filling them with supposedly sacred objects like altars and crucifixes. These are then associated with special rituals and a special class of priests or clergy who direct the worship and act as mediators between God and the congregation. So Christians ended up with temples that were essentially no different from the temples of other religions and with a priesthood to go with them. Fox was having none of it.

It is true that in time of Jesus the Jews had a temple in Jerusalem. Priests, descended from Aaron the brother of Moses, were the only ones allowed to perform the prescribed rituals. Practically all religions have temples or holy places of some sort but for Jews the temple in Jerusalem was the only one. There were Jews all over the world, but only one Jewish homeland and one Jewish Temple, which meant that Jews everywhere were still part of one single nation. Within the vast Roman Empire Jews were a nation second in importance only to that formed by Roman citizens, who might also be living anywhere but in Rome itself. The Romans had many gods but they all worshipped the idea of Rome as the embodiment of all their values. Jews however maintained that there was only one universal God for everyone. So, if the worship of the One God was centred in just this one place and just among this one people, this had to be part of a divine plan to extend God's rule over the whole world, beginning with Israel, the Jews. It would obviously be very tempting to see this as the promise of a future Jewish World Empire but the Bible points to the emergence of a universal People of God from every nation that will follow the moral example set by faithful Jews. Their prophets constantly remind the Jews that there had been nothing special about them in the first place, being "chosen by God" meant having a special job to do and it brought much suffering as well as reward. Ultimately, in a world where the whole human race formed one people under one God there could be no central holy place and no separate holy people. That is the clear message of the words of Jesus to the Samaritan woman in John 3:21-24: "...the time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem... God is spirit and those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth." Fox would certainly have quoted it on this occasion.

"So now people are to be brought... from their outward crosses to the cross of Christ, the power of God within them.... and to the light must they be turned, which answers to that of God in every one, before they come to feel Christ to rule and reign in them. Then the outward, dead crosses of stone, wood, silver, or gold they shall not need to put them in remembrance of Christ, or to bring him into their minds; for such as are come to the light which Christ has enlightened them withal, and believe in it, they feel the power of God, they feel Christ and his cross, which is the power of God" (Works 7.10:34 Epistle 100 1655)

#### Turning from Darkness to Light

«And so turning the people to the spirit of God, and from the darkness to the light that they might believe in it and become children of the light, and turning them from the power of Satan which they had been under to God, and that with the spirit of Truth they might be led into all the Truth of the prophets', Christ's, and the apostles' words.»

As we have seen Fox followed Paul and John by presenting the Christian life as a kind of resurrection, that is to say a new birth, in the world as it is here and now. One of his earliest "openings" was that being "a true believer" had nothing to do with theological disputes; it was what Jesus meant by being born again "from above". Turning to the Light is Fox's way of referring to an urgent need to examine ourselves and to question the personal and social norms by which we live. The Light of Christ in us is a creative power that changes lives. It is a process that reveals the changes we must make. It means a change of direction—a new life for a new kind of person. Like his opponents he made use of what was then the generally accepted view of human history: Adam and Eve had enjoyed a perfect life in an earthly paradise until they had fallen into Sin and all human beings, their descendants, had been sinners ever since. Fox however presented and interpreted the story very differently. Whether or not he thought it really was history, he treated it as a parable. The Garden of Eden, access to knowledge of good and evil and the tree of life are in our minds and the Fall and the Exile from Eden are phases that we all go through from birth. As we grow the way opens in us to a spiritual birth. At the time of Firbank Fell Fox was speaking in terms of a return to "the state that Adam and Eve were in before they fell" but he soon realised that this was not good enough. That state of innocence was also a state of ignorance and to be in Christ as co-workers with God would mean reaching a higher state than Adam and Eve were in to begin with. Primitive ignorance is not an option. The choice is between being fully

as a pictorial symbol or object, and said that traditional Christian teaching about the way we are saved by the crucifixion of Jesus was "apostasy from the cross of Christ, which is the power of God". Christ came to save us from sin but the generally received Christian teaching about the external "once and for all sacrifice of Jesus on the cross" does not do that. Apparently it will only take effect when we die or face a supernatural Day of Judgement and meanwhile we remain sinners. We can do our best to be good but can never entirely succeed. All sin, it is said, merits punishment in Hell but Christ has ensured that those who have believed in him will be forgiven. So Christ has not saved us from sinning but only from the future consequences of having done so. To this Fox retorted that the sin of a Christian would be as bad as anyone else's and would have done just as much harm. God is no respecter of persons and does not have favourites. Fox rejected any idea of a salvation that could not be experienced in this life. It followed that Christians who said they were still sinners were living in a state of apostasy because they were refusing the salvation that gave freedom from sin.

Christ and the apostles had in fact spoken of the Cross in a way that most theologians have chosen to ignore. In Gethsemane Jesus had submitted himself entirely to the will of God. Any personal desires and ambitions and fears counted for nothing and he asked no less from his disciples. The danger of physical suffering and death was real enough and it is now for Christians in some parts of the world but there is a "cross to the mind" that marks all true disciples. A line drawn across another line has always been a powerful symbol but it can be expressed verbally in many ways. As Fox puts it we must be "crucified to the world" but he does not mean the physical world. Excessive self-indulgence in bodily pleasure can be harmful to us and it is evil when it harms others or damages creation but to deny the beauty and glory of God's creation is another form of apostasy. It is in the human world of our everyday lives that we face many situations in which the path we thought suited us is barred by a higher consideration. It is right that we should want to fit in and be sociable but there are situations in which we have to be unpopular. This inevitably provokes an inner struggle as we adapt to the new reality that has taken root in us. It may also lead to a confrontation with prevailing social norms which, depending on circumstances, may cause discomfort, distress or even danger for us. On the other hand we are not just empowered to do what once seemed impossible but are filled with the joy that is such a marked characteristic of the first Christians and of the first Quakers. Merely assenting to and trusting in theological doctrines about the Cross in the hope that this will bring us a future salvation is, by contrast, a way of compromising with the World.

### The New Covenant

**"But Christ was come, who ended the temple, and the priests, and the tithes, and Christ said, 'Learn of me: and God said, 'This is my beloved son, hear ye him.'"**

Most Christians however did not think that this time had really come and they claimed that they were following Bible teaching by taking over some aspects of temple worship and the priesthood associated with it. George Fox could show that in the time of Moses and for long afterwards there had been no temple and no nation state with its capital in Jerusalem. The Hebrew Prophets who were the successors of Moses had always had doubts about the official structures and the official worship and they saw the Covenant of Moses as a preparation for something more universal. They had ended by looking forward to a New Covenant that would replace the framework of regulations and rituals called the Law of Moses. Jews remain faithful to these laws because they are still preparing themselves for that blessed time in the future and yet for 1,930 years they have been doing this without the Temple and its priesthood. Christians claim to have a New Covenant or "Testament" but most then contradict this by saying that it cannot yet be put fully into practice. Fox was accusing the "priests and professors" of replacing the former one and only temple by tens of thousands of their own, multiplying a separate, professional priesthood and copying any bits of the old Mosaic code and ritual that suited them. This brought him to the question of tithes which were a tax levied on all Jews to pay for the Temple and its priests. When Christianity became the only permitted religion of the Roman Empire this tax was imposed on its citizens. In the later kingdoms of Christendom you not only had to belong to the ruler's "church"; you had to pay for it in tithes as well. This is not an issue for us now but then it could be literally a matter of life and death. Because Quakers refused to pay tithes to support any state religion and its clergy they could have their possessions and property confiscated and even die from ill-treatment and disease in the terrible prisons of that time. If this is no longer a problem for us it is largely thanks to the stand taken by Quakers in the past but the underlying issues of freedom of worship and toleration have not gone away.

Baptism, for example, was more than just an outward formality and refusing it for children, as Quakers did, could make trouble for the parents and difficulties for the children when they grew up. There are still countries in Europe where "Christ-ening" by water baptism is a legal requirement for full citizenship. Baptism was, and is, the Jewish ritual by which converts are admitted to the faith. John the Baptist had used it as a sign that the Jews of his day had gone astray and needed to renew their faith. The Twelve Apostles used it as a sign that their converts belonged to the New Israel that had begun

with Jesus, the Messiah. Paul however did not use it much (1 Cor 1:14-17). He was more concerned with the spiritual baptism associated with Jesus (as in Mat. 3:11). He says in Romans 6:3ff that this spiritual baptism is the way in which we can share in the resurrection of Jesus in this life. So for Paul Christians already had the spiritual temple within them and the New Covenant was present in the community of the faithful which was Christ's body on earth and Fox was emphasising the importance of this.

#### **Christ has come**

**"...so that they might all come to know Christ their teacher, their counsellor, their shepherd to feed them and their bishop to oversee them and their prophet to open to them to know their bodies to be the temples of God and Christ for them to dwell in."**

Paul, like the other disciples, was still waiting for the return or "second coming" of Christ as some sort of supernatural event. Matthew 24, Mark 13 & Luke 21 says that the death of Jesus would be followed by a time of great trouble and destruction. Only then would he return as "Son of Man, with power" to establish the kingdom or rule of God on earth. This was coupled with his prediction of the physical destruction of the Temple and its restoration as a spiritual one. Only then would there be a general Resurrection of the Dead. George Fox had an answer to this. Jesus set a time limit; it would be in the lifetime of some at least of the original disciples. Forty years after the death of Jesus there was in fact a disastrous war with Rome ending with the destruction of the Jewish temple and state. Paul had not lived to see this but there was one notable survivor of those around Jesus -- John, the son of Zebedee. John, in his book of Revelation says that Christ came to him with "words for his churches" and that he was shown the New Jerusalem. This is a spiritual one, the community of the faithful, wherever they might be. It does not include everyone, because most still prefer a lifestyle that is incompatible with it; the gates are "open night and day" but many chose not to enter. This was the spiritual interpretation of the "second coming" of Christ preached by George Fox and adopted by the Quakers. Obviously this is an ongoing experience; Christ came, he has now come for us, and he is still coming for others. It cannot be in an outward physical way; this has to be an inward Christ, the Spirit of Truth of John 15:26. For Fox this was not just a mental fantasy; it was a real experience of being sustained, guided, taught and led by Christ. He called this, as John did, (Rev. 14:6) the "everlasting (or eternal) gospel". Most Christians are still, in theory, waiting for a future supernatural event but they have postponed it in a way that contradicts the expectations of the early church and the recorded words of Jesus. Fox was recovering a way of understanding

these practices because they allowed people to think that if they observed them, that was enough to make them good Christians. George Fox also saw that getting the faithful to say that they all accept same creed does nothing in itself to improve their lives. It is just another way of exercising social control and rival power structures. When Christians see themselves and define themselves, primarily in terms of these outward things they are what he calls "apostate". The same outward forms that were "good in their place" and "in time", as he puts it, can easily become the playthings of the "contrary spirit" that "has brought all Christendom into heaps and sects about outward things, out of the life and power that the apostles were in and so have brought all Christendom into heaps and sects about outward things, being out of the life and word." Outward forms are not apostasy in themselves but they can be evidence of it, and if left unquestioned may well lead to and sustain bitter divisions, quarrelling, persecution, oppression and even war. In no way can any of that be called Christian.

Traditional Christianity had not brought the "fruits of the Spirit" that Paul and John describe in their Epistles. Fox also liked the Epistle of James because of its clear and straightforward moral stance, especially on the issue of pacifism. Fox knew that James was a strict upholder of the Old Covenant Laws of Moses on the grounds that Jesus had not yet returned to abolish it but excused this by saying "James had forms enough but never persecuted any." Personally, I think that he was a bit naive about the peace and harmony in those earliest churches but his basic position is a sound one. When he says "there was then a glorious and pure Church of Christ upon the earth" he was thinking of a spiritual state of mind like that we now experience in a "gathered" Quaker meeting for worship and he had to admit that some of Paul's Corinthians had not yet reached that point. Quakers were often, to begin with, rather abrasive and unfair in what they said about other Christians but there really was a lot to criticise. In our own day the situation is very different and varies from country to country but George Fox's main points are solidly based on Scripture and supported by later discoveries and scholarly research. He was by no means a starry-eyed idealist who thought that every individual could "do their own thing." He could see the need for a coherent belief-system of some sort and for a collective discipline but these things are provisional and subject to trial and error. That which makes us divine by being fully human can only be achieved by living "in the power and spirit the apostles were in."

The Cross has always been the main symbol of Christianity and at the heart of its theological doctrines. It was central for George Fox as well and yet he rejected the cross

stories, poetic images and instructions in the Bible that you find incomprehensible or repellent it is best to leave them alone, but do not arrogantly assume that others are deluded when they find a deeper spiritual meaning in them to which you are blind. It is also of no use to quote the words of Christ and the apostles when you are not in the life and power that they had. George Fox must have given over most of the three hours to "opening up" the Bible in some detail, to show how the ancient stories and sometimes weird images really do reflect something in ourselves and reconnect us to the universal "substance" that he called Christ.

#### **Apostasy:**

**«...and showed them the estate of the Epistles how they were written to the elect; and the state of the apostasy that has been since the Apostles' days....»**

According to George Fox, the true Christian gospel was that of the first apostles, and the innovations introduced by later generations were a betrayal of it. He speaks of a "long night of apostasy" that had lasted up to the time of the Quakers. "Apostasy" means abandoning ones former religious faith for a different new one but it is more than just a change of belief. It inevitably brings about changes in life-style, in the choice of friends and the breaking of family ties. This causes much bad feeling and makes the word a highly emotive one. So it is not surprising that most modern Quakers are not comfortable with Fox's strong language on this issue, especially in the context of the mutual love and respect that are such a feature of the present ecumenical movement. It is therefore important to understand that because Fox meant something different by Christianity he also meant something different by Apostasy. The religious forms and hierarchies developed by Christian leaders in the second and third centuries prepared the way for a power structure that was able to merge with the Roman state in the fourth century. "Christian" leaders were then able to abuse their power in struggles and arguments over doctrine and status. The losers were declared "apostate" and were persecuted by the victors.

For Fox, on the other hand, an apostate was someone who claimed to be Christian but perpetrated or condoned forms of inequality and injustice or acts of cruelty and persecution and unfortunately there had been all too much of that in "Christendom" for 1300 years. He knew very well that there had always been true and faithful Christians in spite of the superstructure of beliefs, rituals, human authorities and administrative structures that he so much objected to. He attacked

the Christian gospel that had always existed and can be found among some Christians in all ages (as in Augustine's "City of God" Bk.XX.11) but it is still rejected by most scholars who, like the scribes of ancient times, do not usually like or understand prophets. Nor do they understand Fox's inner psychological way of approaching prophetic utterances. George Fox was convinced that the churches as a whole had failed to take Paul's or John's words seriously. He rejected the absurd idea that John's Apocalypse can taken as literal or encoded predictions of the future. He believed that John's understanding of an eternal gospel had to be recovered so that men and women could be part of the New Jerusalem or Kingdom of Heaven here and now. He could see that the book called "Gospel of John" says the same thing in a different way when it speaks of the Light, the Word and the Spirit of Truth. "If you love me, you will obey my commandments; and I will ask the Father, and he will send you another standby, who will be with you forever, the Spirit of Truth. The world neither sees nor knows him; but you shall know him, because he dwells with you and will be in you" (John 14:15-20). Fox summed it up as meaning that "Christ has come to teach his people himself."

When the "stranger" spoke to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus he reminded them of what all the prophets, beginning with Moses, had said about Christ. Through Moses God had set the people of Israel free and brought them to the Promised Land but Moses had foretold an even greater prophet who would keep them free and secure in the land of promise for ever, always provided that they were faithful to the Covenant (Deuteronomy 18:15&18). More than once, Jesus was asked for a "sign" or miracle like the ones performed by Moses to confirm his authority as the Messiah or prophet of the End Time. For Jesus however the true Promised Land was the Kingdom of God on earth for everyone and it is "not of this world" of human power politics. His sign, so Christians believe, is the Resurrection and for George Fox, as for Paul, this means the new life we live now with Jesus as he is Christ. Fox taught that Christ is a living prophet forever and that his words for us now are those relevant to each contemporary situation as it arises. Jesus could not be all of that in his brief mortal lifetime. He had to die, but has returned in a way that means that he is with his disciples forever. That is the "gospel message" and so the book of Matthew closes with: "I shall be with you always, even to the end of time." In this way the particular Jewish Jesus of History becomes the Universal Christ.

#### **Opening the Prophets, Figures and Shadows**

**"And so I opened the prophets and the figures and shadows and turned them to Christ, the substance, and then opened the parables of Christ and the things that had been hidden from the beginning...."**

8

Prophets do not predict the future. They say what is expected of us if we are to have a worthwhile future and they may have a pretty good idea of what will happen if we make the wrong choices. They are farsighted but at the same time very much concerned with practical matters and the challenges of the present situation. In the Bible a comment on a contemporary situation is very often worded in a poetic and figurative way that makes it applicable to similar situations in the future and relevant to people of all countries and cultures. Whatever their style of language may be, Prophets insist that we act in accordance with the intention behind any words. Here are words attributed to Moses:

"For this commandment, which I command you this day, is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up for us to heaven, and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will go over the sea for us, and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' But the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it. See, I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil.... Therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice, and cleaving to him; for that means life to you and length of days, that you may dwell in the land which the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them." (Deuteronomy 30:11ff)

Moses the political leader had to provide an agreed set of moral requirements, symbols and procedures and the Old Covenant gives these in great detail. Moses the legislator had to compromise, for "the hardness of your hearts" as Jesus puts it, but Fox, like the Apostles, was concerned with Moses the prophet who spoke to God "face to face" and the God of Jesus is still the self-existent reality symbolised in the Bible by the letters JHWH – the God of prophets and mystics.

Religious leaders have often declared that because people now had them as the experts who could explain the Scriptures the time of prophecy was over. Fox, like the first apostles, thought that we are always going to need prophets to remind us of the fundamental truths that require a practical response from us now. George Fox viewed the Bible as a whole and because he could see how it relates to something universal in human consciousness he was able to see the same universal inward teacher at work in all religions and cultures. The highly pictorial and figurative language of the Bible makes it easier to translate so that it "speaks to" those of other cultures where people do not have the literal and pedantic mindset that is such a marked feature of our "Western" civilisation. The Exodus story, in particular has a special resonance for there

9

are many forms of captivity. Good Christian preachers have always been able to retell the ancient stories as parables that have a personal and collective application to their own time, whether or not they take them as literal history. Fox was not alone in finding deeper levels of meaning in the Old Testament stories. When he says "these things are to be found in a man's heart" he was echoing Gerard Winstanley:

"... mankind, the living earth, is the very Garden of Eden, wherein that Spirit of love did walk and delight himself... in this garden, mankind... there is a tree of knowledge of good and evil, called imagination, and the tree of life called universal love or pure knowledge in the power.... You need not look back six thousand years to find it; for every single man and woman passes through it; and when the Restorer rises up, they shall be able to say, 'This is truth.... And whether there was ever such outward things or no, it matters not much; if thou seest all within, this is thy life...' (from "The fire in the bush") Fox called this "reading the figures":

"As the night without thee and darkness, so there is night within: and as stars without thee, so there are stars within thee; as moon without thee, so there is moon within thee and as clouds without thee, so there are clouds within thee. These are all figures: and as the sun without thee, so the sun of righteousness arising with healing in his wings within thee... Now the light will show you these figures: here thou mayest read scriptures thou that lovest the light; thou that hatest the light cannot see these figures. But it is the invisible that opens these, that gave them forth, hearken to the light within thee; and it will let thee see the secret places, where the retired place, the secret chambers are:... wherein all may come to read themselves through the Parables, and see where they are." (Doctrinals 1.p36)

George Fox applies the same principle to the regulations about ritual washings and clean and unclean food. We should understand them as externalised symbols of inner states of mind. The detailed descriptions of priestly garments and seemingly arbitrary regulations as to what can be eaten can be seen as evidence for an innate human longing for beauty, classification and orderliness but instead of dressing up in elaborate religious costumes we are to be "clothed in righteousness." Any human society will always need some external rules and conventions and it would be dishonest to pretend otherwise. George Fox understood that some "outward forms" are needed as a personal and collective training and discipline but they are always provisional and adapted to particular social cultures. The Bible itself calls these conventions "shadows of the truth" and we must not mistake them for reality. We can do entirely without them but it is the inner discipline and moral sensitivity that really matter. If there are