

THE EVERLASTING GOSPEL PREACHED BY GEORGE FOX

At the funeral of George Fox in 1690, Robert Barrow gave the following testimony: “God hath made him the apostle of our time ... And there are many hundreds of people ... having the seal of his apostleship in their hearts, amongst which I am one.”¹³

An apostle is one who is *sent*, and Fox’s consciousness of being sent is clearly evident in his writing. For example, “We have received grace and apostleship [by Jesus Christ, our Lord], through which we are witnesses, and are called and made to declare and confess to the name of Jesus ... For we are not ashamed of the gospel of Christ.” (5:94) At Firbank Fell he declared that “the Lord had sent me with his everlasting gospel to preach.” (Ni:109) Similar statements are made in the *Journal*: “The Lord God and his son, Jesus Christ, did send me forth into the world to preach his everlasting gospel” (Ni:34-35); “The everlasting gospel must be preached again to all nations ... And in this message of this glorious and everlasting gospel was I sent forth to declare ... and thousands by it are turned to God and have received it” (CI:249-250).

Fox believed that he was one who was sent, and sent with a message to proclaim. He was not simply a reformer connected with some Christian group that he was trying to persuade to accept certain articles of reformation, but God had called him and given him a message to preach.

Fox claimed that he was preaching a long-lost but newly-recovered gospel. His frequent use of the word “apostasy” is directly connected with his claim that the primitive apostolic gospel had been lost, soon after the apostolic age. Thus he says in his *Journal*: “There hath been an apostasy since the apostles’ days (which gospel is the power of God)” (BII:270).

If a motor-car is equipped with everything but a motor, we know it is useless. It’s completely non-functional. In like manner, Fox regarded the established forms of Christianity as lacking in the one thing needful. If they didn’t have the gospel, how could they claim to be functioning as a true church, a community of witnesses for Christ? He calls these established forms of Christianity “apostates from the gospel that the apostles were in.” In one of his longer sermons, toward the end of his life, at Kingston, Jamaica in 1689, his subject was “the gospel preached by Christ Jesus and his apostles and the apostasy from it since the apostles’ days” (SJ:197).

When Fox used the word “gospel” he almost always added the words, “the

¹³ Quoted in John & Isaac Comly, eds., *Friends Miscellany* (Byberry, PA, 1836), vol. 8, pp. 363-364.

power of God.” The phrase, “the gospel, the power of God,” is used almost as if it were one word in his vocabulary. He also refers to the cross as “the power of God,” and we will explore his teaching on this subject later in this series.

Fox believed that there had been many other losses as a result of the loss of the gospel foundation and its power. These included gospel church order, gospel worship, gospel ministry, and the church of the cross, which is always found where the everlasting gospel is preached and received. It is very seldom that Fox sits down and writes a paper on one subject and sticks to it all the way through, but he does have such a paper on the subject of what was lost, Epistle 262 (7:320-328). I have made a collection of passages that have the word “lost” in them, and there are 48 different things Fox says were lost because the gospel was lost. In other words, we lost everything when we lost the gospel.

Fox believed that by the re-proclamation of this everlasting gospel, a whole new era in Christian history would be inaugurated, bringing with it a new church order, a new worship, a new ministry, and a new righteousness, and so he proclaimed that “the gospel foundation ... is to be laid again in all the world.” (BI:349)

From 1650 to 1660 Fox gave absolute priority to the preaching of this gospel. Here again, he felt he had been *sent* or called to this mission. While he was in Derby jail in 1650-51 it was revealed to him that the message should be carried into every Christian congregation in the British Isles and presented on Sunday morning in the presence of the priest and people. Both Fox and Edward Burrough claimed that practically every congregation had been so visited by Quaker missionaries in that decade.

Many of the parish ministers published anti-Quaker writings, which was probably a natural result of the missionary campaign. In 1659 Fox wrote his only full-length book, *The Great Mystery*, replying to a hundred of these anti-Quaker books and tracts. His book is prefaced by a short history of the first seven years of the Quaker movement, written by Edward Burrough who had been convinced when he was a teenager. Rufus Jones has said that all Quakers should read this preface, because it breathes the spirit of the earliest years of Quaker history more than any other document.

In this short sketch, Burrough makes us feel the world-overcoming spirit of those first Quaker missionaries. Speaking of the commission that the “Valiant Sixty” felt they had received, he wrote:

Then [the Lord] having thus armed us with power, strength, and wisdom, and dominion, according to his mind, and we having learned of him, and been taught of him in all things, and he having chosen us into his work, and put his sword into our hand, and given us perfect commission to go forth in his name and authority, having the word from his mouth what to cut down and what to

preserve, and having the everlasting gospel to preach to the inhabitants of the earth, and being commanded in spirit to leave all, and follow him, and go forth in his work, yea an absolute necessity was laid upon us, and woe unto us if we preached not the gospel.¹⁴

Now we come to the specific content of this gospel. The everlasting gospel is, first of all, a proclamation concerning Jesus Christ. "Christ is the glad tidings which was promised," says Fox, "... and this we witness to be fulfilled" (4:42). It is a proclamation that Christ is alive and present in the midst of all who gather in his name. Further, he is present in the midst of his people in a functional way, and we can know him in these functions or "offices."

In a paper addressed "To all the Kings, Princes, and Governors in the whole world: and all that profess themselves Christians..." written in 1676, Fox asks:

"So now Christ is come, and you that are called christians will confess him; but does he exercise his offices in you, or amongst you? ...

Now consider, doth Christ exercise this office of a shepherd amongst you? do you follow him? do ye know his voice? and doth he lead you in and out into his pastures of life? or do you know the voice of the hireling and stranger, and follow them? which his sheep will not.

And likewise, how doth Christ exercise his office, as he is a bishop to oversee you, who is the heavenly and spiritual man, with his heavenly spirit, light, and grace, and the head of his church.(sic)

And how does Christ exercise his office, as he is a priest amongst you, who has died for you? do ye feel his blood sprinkling your hearts, and his pure water washing you, and he sanctifying of you, that he may present you holy, without spot or wrinkle, and without blemish to God. (sic)

And how do ye feel Christ exercising his office as a prophet amongst you? do you hear him in all things? doth he reveal the Father to you? for none knows him nor the Father, but by revelation? doth he open the book of conscience to you? and the book of the law, and the book of the prophets, and the book of parables, and the book of life? that you may see your names written in the book of life, and Christ, the end of the law and the prophets, and the sum and substance of all, who is the "rock of ages," your rock in this age to build upon, who is the foundation of many generations, and the foundation of the prophets and the apostles, and your foundation now to build upon.

¹⁴ Reprinted in Fox, *Works*, vol. 3, p. 14.

And how doth he exercise his kingly office amongst you, or in you? doth he rule in your hearts by faith? as he did in the church in the primitive times: so is Christ the heavenly and spiritual man your ruler, by his power, and faith, and spirit, and grace in your hearts.¹⁵

Fox had no place in his preaching and teaching for an absentee Christ. I've collected 120 references from Fox's writing in which he speaks of two or more offices, or functions, of Christ. He is proclaiming a Christ who can be known by what he *does*. This is significant in relation to Fox's claim that he is going back to the message proclaimed in the apostolic age. Those scholars in recent years who have been making a special study of the teaching and preaching of the apostles have concluded that the first Christians, the Jewish Christians in Palestine up to 70 A.D., thought of Christ primarily in terms of what he does.

I will try to summarize what I believe to the heart of Fox's message:

First, it is a proclamation that Christ is alive, and that he is present in the midst of all who gather together in his name.

Second, the living Christ is present in our midst in a functional way. As our living shepherd he feeds us, as our living bishop he oversees us, as our living prophet and teacher he teaches us God's righteousness, as our living king he rules and governs us, and as our living priest he intercedes for us and forgives us.

These functions or offices of Christ are the central theme of Fox's gospel ministry. The purpose of this ministry was to turn people to Christ. And when we turn to Christ and come to know him in personal encounter, he becomes *our* shepherd, *our* teacher, *our* counsellor and leader and guide. We know him by what he does.

This is the message that caused many thousands to begin to gather in the name of Jesus in order to come to know him in all his offices.

In its shortest form, this gospel was sometimes reduced to just eight words: "Christ has come to teach his people himself." On the other hand, Fox on several occasions took up to three hours to preach the gospel. In these long evangelical messages he included his understanding of Christian history since the days of the apostles, his understanding of Christ as the substance of all that prefigured and foreshadowed him in the Old Testament, and his interpretation of the parables used by Jesus to convey his message to the world. The reason it took so long to present the gospel in the seventeenth century, and takes even longer today, is not that the message is complicated. The reason is that *we* are very complicated, burdened with innumerable hang-

¹⁵ Fox, *Works*, Vol. 5, pp. 319-320.

ups and doubts and questions, and so it takes a long time to understand and accept the message.

One of the early Friends, Stephen Crisp, maintained that the movement had expanded and grown rapidly as long as the Quakers “kept to the simplicity of the gospel.” When they stopped preaching this simple gospel, they ceased to grow. But although the gospel message itself is simple, it has tremendous consequences. It brings in a new fellowship, a new worship, new ministry, a new church order, a new righteousness. Fox never doubted that preaching this gospel would inaugurate a new era in Christian history, not by reforming the existing churches but by making a new beginning from this starting point. Because he attributed the “long night of apostasy”—the faithlessness of the church—to the loss of the gospel of power, he believed that it could be brought to an end by the re-proclamation of the long-lost gospel.

Francis Howgill, one of the people who was convinced at Firbank Fell, became the senior member of the team—with Edward Burrough—that took the gospel to London with great success. He described their work in these words: “We are come to the everlasting gospel again, and have received it, and it’s the power of God, which was to be and is to be preached again to the nations after the apostasy.”¹⁶

In a sermon preached on the island of Barbados in 1671, Fox said, “Since the days of the apostles they have lost the power [and] the life in the apostasy, but now the gospel is preached again among you ... now we have received the gospel again ... that which was preached in the apostles’ days in the beginning, the everlasting gospel” (R:271). Similarly, “Now must the gospel go over all nations again, ... seeing the apostasy has gone over all since the apostles’ days” (CI:249).

Some time after Fox stopped dictating his *Journal*, in 1676, he appended to the manuscript a brief account of all the preachers who had come forth in public ministry between 1649 and 1657. These were the people who devoted most of their time to “spreading the truth abroad” to North America, Europe, the Near East, the West Indies, and the British Isles. There are about 110 names of this list, and after each name is a brief description of the places where their preaching service took place. In 77 instances Fox specifically states the purpose of their missionary journey was “to preach the gospel” (CII:321-338).

Quakers and church historians of today find it difficult to account for the rapid expansion of the early Quaker movement, and several rival theories have been put forward to account for it. Some maintain that the early Quakers were made to be a great people by irresistible historical forces: they were creatures of their time, and therefore the Quaker explosion of the seventeenth century is

¹⁶ Francis Howgill, *The Dawnings of the Gospel Day* (1676), p. 221.

unrepeatable unless the cycle of history brings us around to a similar situation.

Another theory is that the personal leadership and charisma of people like George Fox is a factor that accounts for the notable achievements of early Friends, and that these achievements cannot be repeated unless we have another set of leaders like them.

But Fox and his co-workers had their own explanation for the rapid growth of the Quaker movement. They said it was because of *the convincing power of the gospel that they preached*. As long as they preached this gospel, they grew. When Quakers stopped preaching it, they became one of history's prime examples of a case of arrested development.

Most of us are familiar with the pattern of "gospel preaching" found among evangelical Protestants of our day. In this preaching, Christ is proclaimed as *forgiver* and *pardoner*. He is our savior because he has the power to take away the burden of guilt for past sin, and assure us of a better hope for whatever is in store for us after death. The object of this kind of preaching is to evoke in the hearer a willingness to make a public confession: "I accept Jesus Christ as my personal savior."

I don't know of any instance in the early Quaker movement where such a "gospel" was preached or where such a response was made. In Fox's gospel preaching, Christ was declared to have the power to forgive us for past sins, but also he is able to teach us what is right and what is wrong, and he gives us the power to do the right and reject the wrong. Moreover, when we receive him as our living teacher, he brings us into a fellowship of disciples who learn together, obey together, and suffer together.

Fox's Gospel message, "Christ has come to teach his people himself," is not just an individualistic gospel, and is not just a matter of saving souls one by one. Those who received this gospel were gathered into a new community, of which Christ is the living head. "This everlasting gospel being preached again, and received again, as it was in the apostles days," said Fox, "...the glorious fellowship of the gospel ... is known again, and received and obeyed by us, the people of God, called Quakers" (5:316).

When people received this gospel and became convinced of it, they always as a result ceased to be affiliated with whatever Christian body they had been connected with, and instead became Quakers. There was never anyone who came to Fox or the others and said, "I am thoroughly convinced of the truth of the message that you are preaching, and I am going to become a Baptist, or a Presbyterian." A short time after Margaret Fell was convinced, she told Fox she would like to have another conference with her parish minister, with whom she had been quite close. Fox felt that he had to explain this in his *Journal*, so he

said, “She was not wholly come off.” (NI:114 He figured that a few days had been ample time for her to break the association of a lifetime.

But before this gospel fellowship and gospel worship and gospel ministry can be known and experienced, the gospel must be preached and received. “The first work,” Fox said, “is to convince people of God’s truth, and turn them from the power of Satan to the power of God” (R:217). The whole thrust of early Quaker preaching was to call people to experience a personal encounter with the living Christ. However, the first thing that newly-convinced people did, after they had received the gospel, was to gather together “in the name of Jesus” to feel and know his presence in their midst, in all his offices. After Fox or some other early Quaker evangelist had visited an area, the only way you could tell who had been convinced and who hadn’t was that those who were convinced immediately began to meet to worship in a way that was new for them, and that had never been seen before in the British Isles.

Is it not reasonable to suppose that this same gospel, that was preached by the apostles and by the early Friends, can be preached today? And that we can begin to build as they did, on the same foundation, so that the great work of the Lord can be carried forward? But I can do more than suggest this as a possibility, because there is already such a contemporary movement, in which some of us are involved. This new movement is not an extension or development of liberal Quakerism or evangelical Quakerism or conservative Quakerism. Rather, we are going back to the beginning, to the gospel that Fox preached.

In one of his pastoral epistles (Ep.240) Fox wrote, “Ye that have seen the everlasting gospel, and known the everlasting gospel preached again, which was among the apostles, and have been reaped out from among the apostates, got up since the apostles’ days; I say, live in it, and dwell in it; in which life and power ye see over to the apostles’ days” (7:268).