

THE RELATION OF FOX'S MESSAGE TO THE BIBLE

George Fox began his public work as a teacher and preacher by giving absolute priority to the proclamation of a message that he called “the everlasting gospel.” His opponents and critics call it “the Quakers’ new gospel,” but Fox maintained that he was re-proclaiming the gospel that had been preached by the apostles, but which had gone into eclipse since their day.

There are several distinctive features of this apostolic gospel that Fox preached, and what I have to say about the biblical basis of the message will be related to them. One of these distinctive features is what might properly be called Fox’s *functional Christology*. He called people to a personal encounter with a Christ who is alive and who manifests himself to us as the teacher, prophet, priest, and king of God’s people. These “offices” are not just honorary titles nor mere attributes. We are being called in this gospel to know and experience Jesus Christ as *our* king, *our* priest, *our* prophet, and we are called to know him as the king, priest, prophet, head, and orderer of God’s new covenant people, and to know ourselves as being gathered by the power of this gospel into this new covenant community.

Fox did not invent the “offices of Christ,” but neither is his message concerning them derived from mainstream Christian theology. In the teaching of the Reformers—Luther and Calvin—concerning the offices of Christ, the prophetic function is never invested with the same messianic and theological significance as the offices of priest and king. In Fox’s teaching, however, the prophetic office of Christ becomes no less important than his priestly and kingly functions, and this shift of emphasis brings about a Copernican revolution in our understanding of who Jesus Christ is and how he saves people.

Mainstream Christianity puts the emphasis on Christ’s priestly office. His saving work is seen as atoning for our sin, forgiving us for sin, and pardoning us for sin. By so doing, he delivers us from the consequences of sin, but does not deliver us from captivity to sin. By his atoning act on the cross, he reconciles us to God but does not give us the power to overcome sin and temptation. Therefore we will not know victory over sin until we pass into the next world. The theological term for this atoning act of Christ as our priest is “justification,” and a Christian is defined, according to this doctrine, as a justified sinner. It seemed never to occur to John Calvin that the sin of a justified sinner could lead to just as disastrous and tragic personal, social, and historical consequences as the sin of an unjustified sinner.

Fox was in revolt against this kind of Christianity. He maintained that Christ also has the power to save us from captivity to sin. When he preached that “Christ has come to teach his people himself,” he was proclaiming that Christ is the expected “prophet like Moses” who is able to teach us what is right and what is wrong, and to give us the power to do the right and reject the

wrong. He is able to save us *from sin*, and not, as the Calvinists maintain, unable to do more than save us from its consequences.

The chief point of controversy between the Quakers and the Puritans in the seventeenth century was whether or not Christ has the power to deliver us from captivity to sin. Because Fox and the Quakers were re-proclaiming the primitive gospel preached by the apostles, they were proclaiming that Christ, in his prophetic office, is able to teach us what is right and give us the power to do it. We might compare those who are conscious of having been made captive to sin, so that they are continually doing wrong, to a prisoner who is in a pit. His problem is to get out of the pit. If we offer him a salvation which leaves him in the pit, what good is this to him? If we come to a prisoner in this situation and tell him, "You are saved, but you are not going to get out of the pit until the time of your death," this is not "good news." The *good news* is that Christ has power to save us *from* our sins.

In my 1974 article on "George Fox's Teaching about Christ,"¹⁷ I reviewed the principal passages in the New Testament that Fox used in support of his prophetic Christology. These included the sermon by Peter in Acts 3 (in which many of the things Fox was preaching had first been preached in the Christian era), the opening chapter of Hebrews, the story of the transfiguration, the parable of the wicked husbandmen and the rejected cornerstone, the episode of the Samaritan woman, and the prologue to the fourth gospel. These passages were a prominent part of Fox's teaching and preaching.

When Fox reports of his Firbank Fell sermon that "I opened the prophets and the figures and shadows and turned them to Christ the substance," (Ni:109) his preaching is patterned after that of the apostles, especially Peter. He comments on the apostolic preaching that "In the old testament Christ was preached and held forth by promises, and by figures, types, and shadows, and by the prophets, and by the prophecies. And when Christ was come, the apostles proved ... out of the scriptures, Moses, and the prophets, ... that Jesus was the true Christ" (6:228).

Thus, Fox feels, we have in the Old Testament three types of witness which help us to know who Christ is: the promises, the prophecies, and the types, figures, and shadows. We will consider each in turn.

In his sermons Fox would have recited the *promises* of God concerning Christ, beginning with "the promise of God ... to man kind, 'that the seed of the woman should bruise the serpent's head,'" a reference to Gen. 3:15 which Fox calls "the first promise of Christ." (6:9) Surely he would also have mentioned the great promise to Abraham that "in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice" (Gen. 22:18) which he

¹⁷ *Quaker Religious Thought*, Vol. 16, nos. 1-2 (cumulative nos. 39-40), Winter 1974-75, pp. 20-45.

refers directly to Christ in a 1676 tract (5:266). A third promise that he would have included comes from Isaiah 11:10, “there shall be a root of Jesse, which shall stand for an ensign [‘a signal’ in some modern versions] of the people; to it shall the Gentiles seek.” To Princess Elizabeth of the Palatinate, Fox wrote in 1677 that “the Lord is come to teach his people himself, and to set up his ensign, that the nations may flow unto it” (BII:270). And in 1690 he wrote a paper “concerning the Ensign, which Isaiah prophesied the Lord should set up for the Gentiles, which I showed was Christ” (BII:494-497).

Fox reviewed the Old Testament *prophecies* concerning Christ a number of times, referring to those of Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Ezekiel, Samuel, Zechariah, and the archangel Gabriel. What especially concerns us in this study of Fox’s gospel message is his “opening the prophets” in a way that illuminated his teaching on the offices on Christ, particularly the office of prophet, which he mentions most frequently. In the Sermon in Acts mentioned earlier, Peter reminds his Jewish hearers of the passage in Deut: 18:18 in which Moses speaks prophetically of a prophet like himself whom the Lord would send at some future time, who would speak “all that I shall command him,” and, in Peter’s paraphrase, “you shall listen to him in whatever he tells you” (Acts 3:22 RSV).

Although not all modern biblical scholars agree that the passage in Deuteronomy is to be taken in a prophetic sense, it is nevertheless widely accepted that at the time of Christ both the Samaritans and the Qumran Community regarded this passage as having messianic significance. It was the basis of their expectation of a coming deliverer who would be “a prophet like Moses.” Certainly Peter and Stephen accepted this passage as a prophecy of “the coming one.”

Mainstream theology of the so-called “great churches” has ignored this apostolic witness to Christ. Although Calvin’s teaching preserves the traditional messianic offices of prophet, priest, and king, he makes no theological use of the office of prophet.¹⁸ In the first edition of Calvin’s *Institutes* he mentioned only the offices of priest and king, adding prophet only in the later editions but making no use of it in his understanding of Christianity.

Oscar Cullmann, in *Christology of the New Testament*, flatly declares that “there is only a single school of thought in the history of the Christological problem which consistently conceives Jesus as prophet [and that is] Jewish

¹⁸ See John Frederick Jansen, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Work of Christ* (London: J. Clark, 1956), pp. 51, 53, 58.

Christianity.”¹⁹ What he is saying here is that since the days of the apostles the early prophet Christology of Peter and others has gone into eclipse and has never been revived. This judgment would have to be revised by anyone familiar with Fox’s teaching. I have found 47 references in his writings to Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of Moses’ prophecy in Deut. 18:18.

In a sermon preached at Gracechurch Street Meeting in London in 1682, Fox tells us he declared the everlasting gospel, “which was preached in the apostles’ days ... and which the church in the apostles’ days received ... This gospel, I declared, was sent from heaven by the Holy Ghost ... And now this gospel is preached again ... to all nations, tongues, and people: and all people now are to hear Christ the prophet, in this his gospel of the new covenant. For as Moses said, ‘Like unto me will God raise up a prophet, and Him shall ye hear in all things’; so, said I, this prophet, Christ, is come, and all the Jews in spirit, the true believing Christians in the light, ... are to hear Christ in his gospel, new testament, and new covenant” (BII:364).

For Fox, the silent worship of Quakers was primarily an exercise in waiting to hear the voice of Christ in his office as prophet: “We are come to hear our own prophet, which God hath raised up, Christ Jesus, to open to us; and him do we hear in all things in our meetings” (6:245).

In addressing the Jews, Fox relied heavily on Old Testament prophecy. In his “Declaration to the Jews,” written in 1661, he speaks of Jesus Christ as “the Prophet that is to be heard, and King that Daniel prophesied of” (4:293).

Now we turn from the promises and prophecies to the third way that the Old Testament helps us to know who Christ is and what his work is in the world. What did Fox mean at Firbank Fell when he says he “opened the figures and shadows and turned them [the people] to Christ the substance?” (Ni:109).

Let me begin by quoting several authors who can help us to understand what is meant by the *types, figures, and shadows*. First of all, James Muilenburg has observed that “it is important to see that the New Testament, where the consciousness of the newness of the Messianic age is so central, is dependent upon the Old Testament for its categories of newness.”²⁰

Alan Richardson comments in his *Christian Apologetics* that “The fulfillment of prophecy [involves] more than the fulfillment of words and predictions; it involves the fulfillment of history, the validation of the prophetic understanding of [Old Testament] history ... The course of historical events, and not merely the words uttered by the prophets, contains an anticipation and foreshadowing of that which is to come. In the traditional language of Christian theology, the

¹⁹ Oscar Cullmann, *Christology of the New Testament*, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1959), p. 38.

²⁰ James Muilenburg, *In The Way of Israel*, (New York, Harper, 1961), p. 135.

earlier is a 'type' of the later."²¹ "If then, we follow the teaching of the New Testament and interpret biblical history in the light of it, we shall realize that the fulfillment of prophecy doesn't primarily mean the detailed accomplishment of precise predictions ... It means rather that the prophets ... apprehended, however dimly, the very pattern of the process of salvation in history."²²

And R. T. France, in *Jesus and the Old Testament*, states that "Jesus saw his mission as the fulfillment of the Old Testament scriptures; not just of those that predicted a coming redeemer, but of the whole sweep of Old Testament ideas. The patterns of God's working that the discerning eye could trace in the history and institutions of Israel were all preparing for the great climax when all would be taken up into the final and perfect act of God which the prophets foretold. And in the coming of Jesus all this was fulfilled. That is why he could find 'in all the scriptures the things concerning himself'."²³

In Webster's dictionary the first definition of "type" is "a person or thing (as in the Old Testament) believed to foreshadow another (as in the New Testament)," while a "figure" is defined as "a person, thing, or action representative of another."

Fox is not vague or ambiguous about what he considers to be "types, figures, and shadows." I have compiled a list of 37, which I don't claim to be exhaustive, and which were all prominent in the life and history of God's old covenant people. These include such things as the Mosaic covenant and law, the Levitical priesthood, temple, altars, holy days, feasts, oaths, and dietary laws, as well as "the outward Jerusalem," the prophets, promises, and scriptures, of which Christ is the end and substance. These represent the priestly, kingly, and prophetic aspects of the religion of the Jews.

Fox declared that, as Christ has come and can be known by his new covenant people as their *living* priest, king, and prophet, he has therefore ended all these "types, figures, and shadows," and has inaugurated a new Israel of God, of which he is the head. These things are not only *fulfilled* by the coming of Christ, they are also all *ended* and *abolished* by his coming. Fox says that "Christ came to put an end to all figures, types and shadows" (3:437), and "Christ Jesus is the substance of all figures and shadows, and he endeth the many things."²⁴

If these are all ended and abolished by the coming of Christ, then there is nothing left of the old covenant. They are the shadows and Christ the

²¹ Alan Richardson, *Christian Apologetics* (New York: Harper, 1947), p. 188.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 191.

²³ R.T. France, *Jesus and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1982), p. 79, quoting Luke 24:27.

²⁴ Cadbury, AC, Cat. No. 3, 62D, p. 68

substance is the reality, and Fox says, referring to Col. 2:17, “When the substance was come, the shadows fly away.” (6:47) Christ, he says, “ends all the types, figures, and shadows, first covenant, and priesthood,” (7:81) and again, “all figures, shadows, and types, in the old testament and covenant, Christ the substance is come, and abolishes them, ... and he saith, ‘Behold, I make all things new’” (8:285).

By preaching Christ as the “substance,” Fox was also proclaiming him as the new covenant. He taught that Jesus Christ is not a messenger who brings us a new covenant that is distinct from himself. *He himself is the covenant.* Christ, says Fox, “is the beginning of the new world.” (6:472) As he makes all things new, the old things must be done away. The new order is “a new and living way ... a new prophet ... a new spiritual worship ... a new church which is in God which Christ is the head of.”²⁵ Fox proclaimed that “Christ is come, the covenant of God,” (4:153) whose followers “look to the everlasting covenant, Christ Jesus the prophet, to hear him, whom God hath raised up, which Moses prophesied of, which now thousands witness” (4:147).

“Therefore,” he urges, “know Christ, who is the substance of all the types, figures, and shadows ... The priests, and the law, and the first covenant, were figures of the everlasting covenant, Christ Jesus” (7:139).

Fox’s prime example of an apostle who preached “Christ the substance” was Stephen. Stephen is not called an apostle in the New Testament, and he is not reported to have used the term “substance.” But he functioned as an apostle and, according to Fox, he was the one who saw most clearly that Christ had ended the whole order of the old covenant, and it was this claim that provoked his death. Stephen saw that if we accept Christ the whole old covenant system comes to an end, and this was a scandal to his hearers.

I have found fourteen places where Fox refers to Stephen as having “confessed Jesus, the substance of all figures and types” (BI:217). For example, “he preached the substance, Christ the end of the law ... He did not establish the Jews in their ceremonies, signs, and types; but Stephen brings them to the substance.” (3:333-334) “Stephen was stoned to death for denying the temple, and for witnessing the substance.” (3:77-78) Again, “Stephen suffered death for witnessing against the shadows, and witnessing the substance” (3:335).

The word “substance” when used in contrast to “shadow,” appears only once in the New Testament, in Col. 2:16-17. Those versions most familiar to Fox had translated “soma” as “body,” a literal translation which does not clarify the contrast. Both Fox and Margaret Fell consistently understood “body” in this passage to mean “substance,” and each sometimes used both words, “body and substance,” when quoting it. The Revised Standard Version translates “soma” as “substance” in this passage, while the New English Bible uses “reality.” The

²⁵ George Fox, Headley MSS, (1672), Cat. Nos. 8, 55F, and 8, 56F, pp. 42, 43

complete RSV passage reads: “Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a sabbath. These are only a shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ.”²⁶

²⁶ Jerusalem Bible translates this passage: “These were only pale reflections of what was coming: the reality is Christ.”