

The Christian Faith of Friends

by Ben Richmond



Listening to Christ:
A simple faith that transforms lives

Introduction

This pamphlet arose out of the work of the North American Ministries committee of Friends United Meeting. That committee is comprised of lead staff people or other designated representatives from each of the FUM-member yearly meetings in North America. Over the last two years, we have been considering our charge to share the Christian faith of Friends with the general public. Before we could work on specific outreach programs, we realized it was important for us to agree together on the faith that undergirds our work. Early on, the committee agreed that we share a commitment to three faith pillars:

1. Our faith is rooted in the atoning work of Christ: his life, death and resurrection.
2. We emphasize a “listening spirituality”: listening to the living Word of God revealed within each individual; listening to God’s word revealed in Scripture; listening to God’s word revealed among us in the church.
3. We expect that this faith will result in lives transformed to reflect the character of Jesus: peace, simplicity, equality, moral purity, integrity, etc.

The committee asked Ben Richmond to write a document that would develop these themes as Friends understand them. We had several stimulating discussions of early drafts and also circulated them among members within our various yearly meetings. After Ben revised the paper to its current form, the committee asked that it be published. While it does not attempt to be a systematic theology, we believe it is a helpful expression of our common faith.

Alan Weinacht, clerk

North American Ministries Committee

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Friends' faith centers on the life, death, resurrection and continuing presence of Jesus Christ. We emphasize the presence of the resurrected Christ and the life-transformation that comes from listening to, and following, him. In Christ we have discovered the love of God, God's power to forgive and heal, and God's continuing presence as Teacher and Lord. Therefore, we emphasize listening to the living Word of God — as revealed in Scripture, as well as the Spirit of Christ speaking both within each individual and in the community that makes up the church. We have discovered that when people center their lives in Jesus Christ and practice a listening spirituality, that the community life that results begins to reflect the character of Jesus: gentleness, peace, simplicity, equality, moral purity, integrity, etc. This offers great hope to the world, and it is our joy to share this life with others.

*“You are my
friends if you
do what I
command you”*

John 15:14

The Atoning Work of Christ

Christians believe that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus has brought about an atonement (or reconciliation) between humanity and God. Time and again, those who give their lives to Christ find that God has the power to move people from darkness to light. (1 Peter 2:1) Throughout the history of Christianity there have been numerous ways of understanding how this works, each of which reflect aspects of biblical truth. The various theories of the atonement¹ are ways

1. Among the classical theories of the atonement are the “ransom,” “satisfaction,” “moral influence,” and “substitution” theories, and their many variations.

of understanding the experience of social and personal evil in light of the forgiveness and redemption that come from God. This points to God's gracious offer of salvation and eternal life.

Friends have always been open to expressing their faith in a variety of ways and reject any reliance on creedal affirmations.² Nevertheless, Friends share some basic understandings about sin, Christ and the atonement:

1. God created the world, and all that is in it, "good" and, from the beginning of creation, God intended humanity to live in harmony with creation and one another.
2. Humanity's inability to live that quality of life is objective evidence of humankind's need for a radical intervention by God. There are many ways of talking about "original sin" but a key aspect of sin is the ever-repeated choice humans make to exercise self-will rather than to rely upon God for guidance.
3. Outward rules and laws, while useful in reminding us of God's intention, fail to create true goodness either in individuals or in society.
4. God chose to enter into human history in the person of Jesus Christ. As fully human and fully divine, Jesus Christ bridges the gap between humanity and God. Because of sin, Jesus' life led, inevitably, to the cross. The cross, then, becomes both the sign of humanity's rebellion against God, and God's sacrificial love for humanity.
5. Through Jesus' death on the cross God offers forgiveness for sin, and through His resurrection and the gift of the Holy Spirit God

2. This follows from Friends reliance on the New Covenant promise that each person will know God directly, see below. The various books of Faith and Practice issued by yearly meetings of Friends are the only definitive expressions of Quaker faith.

provides the possibility of a new life that reflects the goodness God intended from the beginning of creation.

In one of the early expressions of these truths, George Fox, (one of the foremost preachers among the early Quakers and the primary organizer of the movement) wrote:

*But, I say you are redeemed by Christ. It cost him his blood to purchase man out of the state he is in, in the Fall, and bring him up to the state man was in before his fall. So Christ became a curse to bring man out of the curse and bore the wrath, to bring man to the Peace of God, that he might come to the blessed state, to Adam's state he was in before he fall, and not only thither, but to a state in Christ that shall never fall. And this is my testimony to you and to all people upon the earth.*³

A key way to understand the atoning work of Christ is in terms of Jesus' role as mediator of the New Covenant. (Hebrews 9:15) William Penn (another of the early Quakers and founder of Pennsylvania) wrote:

*"...the Quakers never knew of any other Name than that of Jesus Christ, through which to find acceptance with the Lord; nor is it by any other, than Jesus the mediator of the New Covenant, by whom they expect Redemption, and may receive the promise of an eternal Inheritance."*⁴

At the last supper, Jesus declared his own understanding of his coming crucifixion in these words: "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood." (Luke 22:20)

3. "Epistle 222," (1662) in *The Power of the Lord is Over All: The Pastoral Letters of George Fox*, Edited by T. Canby Jones, Friends United Press, 1989, page 179-180.

4. William Penn, "The Guide Mistaken, and Temporizing rebuked: or A brief reply to Jonathan Clapham's Book, intituled, A Guide to the True Religion, in which Religion is Confuted, Hypocrisie is Detected, His Aspersion are Reprehended, Contradictions are Compared," (1668) in *William Penn on Religion and Ethics*, edited by Hugh S. Barbour, The Edwin Mellen Press, 1991, page 201.

The New Covenant is announced in Jeremiah 31:33-44 and repeated in Hebrews 8:8-12:

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah....

I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more. (Jeremiah 31:31, 33b-34)

The New Covenant has three parts: God promises to write His law on people's *hearts*; everyone gets to know God *directly*; and God declares *forgiveness* of sin.

Friends stress that the New Covenant is inward rather than outward. The community of believers is not defined by ethnic or political boundaries but by the changed hearts of its members. God is not declaring more or better rules or ideas, but instead is promising to change people from the inside out. Friends also stress that the New Covenant is unconditional. William Penn called this, "God's meer grace."⁵ It is God's sovereign decision to offer love and forgiveness.

According to the New Covenant, God's love is available to all people. In the New Testament, scripture tells us that God works in each person by means of the gift of Light. (See, e.g., John 1:4-9; 3:19-21; 8:12; 2 Corinthians 4:6; Ephesians 5:8; 1 John 1:5-7) This inward and spiritual Light enables people to appreciate and receive God's immediate presence, to receive God's teaching (law), to perceive the ways in which they are living in violation of God's will and repent, and to receive forgiveness and the possibility of genuine obedience. Willingness to attend and respond to the Light is essential for salvation. Friends recall Jesus' instruction, "While you have the light, believe in the

5. In "Sandy Foundation Shaken," (1668) *ibid.*, p. 220-21.

light, so that you may become children of light.” (John 12:36, NRS) And John writes:

“if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light ... the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.” (1 John 1:7, NRS)

Belief in the Light of Christ leads to a special kind of Christian universalism. The requirement — and opportunity — to respond to the Light pertains to everyone, and those who are obedient to the inward Light of Christ will be saved. This is not to say that “everyone will be saved,” because God also grants everyone freedom to turn away from God’s witness in their heart.

There are important consequences of this belief in the universal saving Light of Christ. Amongst these are:

1. The essential character of God is love. Jesus’ salvation is available to everyone without exception.
2. Everyone must come to a decision of obedience in his or her inward relationship with God.
3. We can appeal to this Light in those whom we meet. We have confidence that there is no one in whom God has not already placed a witness.

This Inward Light is Jesus Christ. Therefore, Friends believe that while the community of salvation extends beyond the boundary of any religious affiliation, the Christian church of which Friends are a part is the outward fellowship of those who make a personal profession of faith in Jesus Christ.

A Listening Spirituality

In the New Covenant, God promised:

No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD.... (Jeremiah 31:34, NRS)

Friends take this promise seriously. At the heart of Christian spirituality is the emphatic insistence that each

individual can — and must — have a direct relationship with God, unmediated by priests or any other religious paraphernalia or ritual.

It is in fidelity to this understanding that Friends strip worship of all externals. In traditional Friends worship, believers come together to wait together in silence in the expectation that the risen Lord will be present with them, ministering inwardly to each, according to his or her condition. Anyone who is moved by the Holy Spirit to speak may do so, while the others discern the truth of their teaching.

(1 Corinthians 14:29)

In this, Friends attempt to live out Jesus' words, "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." (John 4:24, NRS) But Friends know that spiritual worship is not a matter of particular forms of worship or the disuse of particular forms. Many Friends today worship with the leadership of a pastor, Bible readings, prepared sermons, hymns, and other pre-programmed aspects of worship. These have been helpful in building the sense of community and providing worshippers with a common biblical knowledge and language to express their faith. But even in so-called "programmed worship" Friends attempt to leave a time of "open worship" when God can speak directly to the heart of the worshippers and the Holy Spirit can inspire prophetic voices to express the Living Word. (Acts 2:17ff)

There are several consequences to the New Covenant emphasis on the inward nature of salvation and God's promise that everyone will know Him directly:

1. Everyone is potentially a minister. Because God speaks inwardly to everyone, it is possible that God will use anyone to be the bearer of the Word. It follows that the community of faith must be open to hear from everyone – rich, poor, young, old, male, female, without regard to race, or training or lack of training.

Everyone must be welcome; everyone must be respected.

2. The community needs to provide discernment, nurture and guidance as all these people learn to recognize the Spirit of God at work within them. Friends appoint pastors and elders who are specially charged with this responsibility. Friends have developed a number of special practices to help with this, such as reading “queries” (spiritual questions), and forming clearness committees to help individuals discern God’s will at special times in their lives.
3. Scripture is especially important, for this is where the community learns to recognize God’s voice. The Spirit of God is not inconsistent so as to lead us today in way contrary to how God has led in the past.
4. Friends believe that the faith community should live in unity under the direct leadership of Christ. Since Jesus Christ is present among us as Teacher and Lord, Friends believe that it is unnecessary and an affront to His authority to substitute human leadership in His place. We do not have Bishops to lead the community; rather the business of the faith community is done by business meetings of all the members who gather for that purpose and, with the help of a clerk, unite in discerning God’s will. Unity under the leadership of the Holy Spirit replaces voting with its implication of dominant majorities and defeated minorities.
5. Friends emphasize the inward reality of baptism and communion. Friends look to Jesus Christ himself to baptize believers inwardly by his Spirit (Matthew 3:11, Mark 1:8, Luke 3:16, John 1:33). We also expect that, in daily devotion and in our common worship, Jesus Christ Himself will provide spiritual food, for He is the one who said, “I am the bread of life. Whoever

comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” (John 6:35, NRS) Since Jesus Christ is our High Priest (Hebrews 6-9) who ministers directly and inwardly to the hearts of worshippers, we believe that it is unnecessary and an affront to Him to appoint people to undertake priestly functions. As a witness to the truth that human beings cannot manipulate the grace of God through religious rituals, Friends do not practice outward sacraments such as water baptism or communion with bread and wine.

At the last supper, Jesus told his disciples, “You call me Teacher and Lord — and you are right, for that is what I am.” (John 13:13, NRS) Friends attempt to organize worship and community life around the reality of Jesus’ continuing and effective presence in our midst.

Christ’s Power To Save:

The Evidence of Transformed Lives

Friends understand that Christ’s baptism is best understood as the inward experience of “dying” to one’s own will. This is the necessary precondition to being able to listen to and obey the living teachings of Jesus Christ. It is by daily dying to self-will that the believer is enabled to live a new life of righteousness. Paul wrote about this in his letter to the Romans:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life....

But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him.... But thanks be to God that you, having once been slaves of sin, have become obedient from the heart to the form

of teaching to which you were entrusted, and that you, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.

(Romans 6:3-4, 8, 17-18, NRS)

Friends understand that inward yielding to the will of God is the way of cross, which is the power of God. It is an essential part of the witness of Friends that Christ frees people *from the power of sin* in their lives — and does not merely save people in their sins. Friends joyfully proclaim that it is possible to know the will of God, and to do it.

The testimonies of Friends

The experience of Friends has been that inward baptism and continuous yielding to the leading of the inward Light of Christ, produces transformed lives. As believers “live up to the Light they have” their lives begin to reflect the character of Jesus. As Paul says:

the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. (Galatians 5:22-24, NRS)

Over the years, Friends have born a corporate witness to the power of Christ to bring us — in George Fox’s terms — into the state that Adam and Eve were in before the fall. It is this power of Christ that each of the Friends “testimonies” testify to. From a culture dominated by materialism and greed, Friends testify that Christ leads us into a life of simplicity. From a culture of social inequality, Friends testify that Christ leads us to practice the equality of all. From a culture of sexual promiscuity and exploitation, Friends testify that Christ leads us to chastity and fidelity in marriage. From a culture which seeks security and meaning through violence and war, Friends testify that Christ leads us to forgiveness, nonviolence and peacemaking. From a culture where exaggeration and falsehood dominate discourse, Friends testify the Christ leads us to speak

truth plainly. From a culture where individualism is exalted, Friends testify that Christ leads us into communities of love and accountability.

Simplicity, equality, chastity, peace, truth, and community, are not new laws or ideals. Rather, we testify that these are characteristics that naturally develop wherever the Spirit of Christ dwells. (Romans 8:9ff) Friends acknowledge that as individuals we often fall short of this life. (1 John 1:8) Precisely how these testimonies are to be lived out in practice, given the ever-changing circumstances of history and culture, is a constant matter of individual and corporate discernment. We rely upon grace, grace that frees us to enter again and again into a listening and obedient relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

It is our testimony that the inward working of the Holy Spirit is the only means available by which men and women can begin to experience life characterized by the fruit of the Spirit. The inward working of God's spirit has ultimate importance for individuals and offers hope for the whole world. We yearn for others to share in the experience of the love of God that we have known. It is therefore with great urgency that we seek to gather people into fellowships where Jesus Christ is known, loved, and obeyed as Teacher and Lord.



101 Quaker Hill Drive
Richmond IN 47374-1926
(765) 962-7573
info@fum.org
www.fum.org