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The Theology of Samuel Fisher, Quaker
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An analysis of the theology of Samuel Fisher, in the context of the controversies in which he engaged, and centred on his view of the doctrine of the inner light, and its implications for soteriology (doctrine of salvation), ecclesiology (doctrine/study of the church), and pneumatology (doctrine/study of the Holy Spirit), and the authority of Scripture.

Keywords: Samuel Fisher; Light, Christ, Holy Spirit, Church, Scripture and its authority; early Quaker theology, soteriology, ecclesiology, pneumatology, controversy between Quakers and Protestants.

Who it would be useful for: Theologians and historians of Quakerism.

Biographical Introduction

Fisher was born in Northampton in 1605, the son of a local tradesman, and ordained in the Church of England after graduating from Oxford in 1630. He became a Baptist in 1643, and after an active and disputatious ministry, underwent conviction as a Quaker in 1655 as a result of the preaching of Caton and Stubbs at Dover. The year after his conviction he attempted to deliver a 'prophetic message' before Lord Protector Cromwell and Parliament, but was held down and silenced. Thereafter he was active as a minister and writer, travelled extensively, including on the continent, and was imprisoned several times. His most notable work is *Rusticos ad Academicos*, the subject of Hall's study, the only apology for Quakerism 'from the early period undertaken by a writer with a training in the ancient languages and in theology'. As such he is an important figure. However, as a theologian he is 'able rather than profound', and a 'shrewd controversialist rather than a powerful thinker'. 'His verbosity is immense, his sentences labyrinthine, his humour crude'. His works display a 'love of argument ... prolixity and inability to prune', and a 'regrettable tendency to coarseness'.

Chapter 1: The Light that lighteth every man

At the beginning of each chapter, Hall produces a short summary of the argument of each 'Excercitation' of *Rusticos ad Academicos*, according to the topic of the chapter.

The distinctive teaching of the early Friends 'is often thought to be that of a light in every man'. The 'idea of the light of Christ is the key to the understanding and clarification of Fisher's theology', so although it occupies the final Excercitation of *Rusticos ad Academicos*, Hall deals with it first.

For Fisher the light is not 'a latent spark of the divine in man' (contra Rufus Jones). It is 'within' but is not a 'natural endowment, but a measure of the 'true light' from God and Christ. It pertains, therefore, to the realm of grace, [and] is sufficient to bring to salvation. The light itself is not salvation but the means to it. It demands the response of following and obedience from men', and any withdrawal of the Spirit is not really a withholding of grace, but 'through the disinclination of man to attend the light.' As for Fox and the other early Friends, the saving work of Christ understood in terms of the light is available and sufficient for all, in contrast to Calvinist theology.

Hall briefly traces the use of 'light' in Christian theology and looks at the use of the term in Fisher's contemporary context: she refers to Eeg Olofson's work on the inner light in Barclay, where it is observed that Barclay cited the Cambridge Platonist John Smith in support of his understanding of the light. Hall cites the work of Geoffrey Nuttall on the term's 'wide use in radical Puritanism' and Canby-Jones on the similarity between Puritan use and Fox's. Like Fox and Fisher Sibbes distinguished between 'a natural and a heavenly light'. It is possible that Fox's use owed something to Sebastian Franck, but Canby-Jones denies this. 'The strands of his thought are not novel but his combination of mysticism, prophetism and evangelical Puritanism is unique.' John Owen identified the inward light with natural reason or conscience, denied that it was sufficient for salvation and insisted that the light of Christ was something new: 'Separated from the historic Christ, the doctrine of the light leads to pantheism or humanism.' Fisher, as we have seen, distinguished between the natural light and the light of Christ, so to this extent there is a misunderstanding between them; though Owen thought that the Quaker doctrine of the light *reduced to* the natural light, rather than necessarily thinking that the Quakers asserted it to be no more than this.

Hall takes issue with the Rufus Jones view that Fox asserted only 'that of God in everyone' with his doctrine of the light and denied the fallenness of man. As Maurice Creasy argues, the early Quakers understood the doctrine of the light as an interpretation of the 'Person and work of Christ', rather than as in effect 'the message of the mystics of all the higher religions' (Jones). For Fox, 'one alone' could 'speak to [his] condition, even Jesus Christ': this seems to identify the one who is personally experienced, and what is experienced about him, with the one and that about him which is revealed in scripture. (Thus, for Fox, what those who receive the light actually receive is this experience, rooted in the atonement, even if they don't recognise it as Christ.) Fox characterises the experience as 'him, and his power, light, grace, and spirit'. 'The stages of [of redemption in Christ, which are] conviction of sin, repentance, forgiveness, restoration, sanctification are compressed [by Fox] into a single process of rebirth from Adam's state of sin and alienation into the life of sonship with Christ. He telescopes rather than omits the recognised steps and the whole emphasis is on the new life, a state in which Christ 'within' is known.' This is apprehended by revelation rather than faith, however, and the same is true for Fisher, which has implications for Fisher's (and the general Quaker) account of justification.

Fisher denies any natural knowledge of God in the conscience: it is always from grace. What grace reveals, is man's fallen state (which Calvinists held could be discerned by the natural light) and Christ as 'Revealer of the Father, and Redeemer' (which most certainly

could not); in other words spiritual experience, rather than any 'esoteric knowledge'. When the light is received it brings peace and righteousness, and judgement when rejected. The light is the same light that 'gave forth the Scriptures', and by it God draws people to himself; it is sufficient for salvation. Fisher uses Augustine's distinction between the eye and the light which it needs to see to distinguish between the mind of man and the light. Attention to the light entails waiting in it, and if it is not attended to it does not become fully operative, but is diminished and finally withdrawn. It is not the same thing for the light to be in us, as for us to be in the light. Importantly, Fisher frequently refers to the light in quasi-personal terms: 'One does not attend to, follow or obey a thing or a force but a person.' The light is identified with the traditional types of grace: 'Insofar as [the light of Christ] is God's means, by striving in the conscience and stirring the will, to draw men to himself, it is prevenient grace. Where it is received and yielded to, it becomes sanctifying grace which conforms men to the divine image in Christ, making them sons by adoption.' Intellectual acceptance is 'outer', acceptance 'by emotions and will' inward. The light must conform to the ethic of the gospels, and it cannot be wholly identified with the Spirit: 'the light is instrument whereas the Holy Spirit is agent.' Though the light is spoken of in quasi-personal terms, the personal pronoun 'he' is used of the Spirit, but never of the light. There is more confusion between Christ and the Spirit, than the Spirit and the light. Hall expands in detail on all these themes.

Chapter 2: The Light of Christ

'There is a danger [in Fisher's work] of reducing the second Person of the Trinity to an aspect of God [the Father] ... and of constructing a theological system of which the incarnation is not an indispensable part, even while making assertions of belief in its historicity and significance.' The central issue is 'the light [as] an instrument of salvation for all men at all ages ... capable of fulfilling its function apart from any knowledge of the Gospel or the 'outward history'.'

Fisher advances his views in opposition to Calvinist election. He acknowledges no changes in God's will, along with other early Quakers. He also acknowledges no distinction between the dispensations of law and of grace, distinguishing instead between the outward law and the law written on the heart, which both always existed together under both 'dispensations'. Given these principles, Hall thinks it is difficult to see why the incarnation was necessary, though Fisher repeatedly asserts it. She also observes that there is a highly

subjective element to his thought, using scripture to confirm what is felt inwardly. He blurs the distinction between the historical events and the inwardly-apprehended gospel. Hall says that early Friends were Trinitarian in their religious experience, exemplified by Fox's 'the Father of Life drew to me to His Son by His Spirit', though they disliked non-biblical terminology. However, Fisher is in danger of understanding the Son as an hypostasised attribute of the Father, and there is a certain tendency to view salvation history in rather Manichean terms, as if one could as easily draw the conclusion that there was a less powerful, evil opposite to God.

Fisher clarifies his commitment to the incarnation with his doctrine of the 'measure': 'The incarnation is the moment when the gracious purpose of God *towards* men and his saving activity *in* them converge and the light attains its fullest possible measure' (Hall): that is, the historical Christ perfectly embodies the light and all that it is intended to do and to be for human beings. However, Hall thinks that Fisher ought to acknowledge that when 'fullness of the measure is attained, degree does alter the nature of the thing': Christ is more than the light alone prior to or independently of Christ. Fisher draws on various theories of the atonement, but prominent among them and arguably the most compatible with early Quaker teaching generally is the patristic 'Christus Victor' model identified by Gustav Aulen. This fits Fisher's 'dualistic' understanding of salvation history: 'Christ who represents the seed of the woman triumphs over the seed of the serpent, delivers those who are in bondage to the corrupt nature.' It is not explained how the death on the cross achieves this, but the outcome is that regeneration and new birth which Fisher describes using 2 Peter 1.3, 'participation in the divine nature', and the 'growth up into that image of Christ's divine nature in whom there was no sin'. Confidence and peace, reaching almost 'arrogant' proportions in the doctrine of perfection, are the result, rather than guilt over sin. There is a more subjective aspect to this view of the atonement in early Friends compared to the Fathers: the victory takes place within individuals, rather than at a cosmic level. There is a positive side to this: for early Friends, an 'individual's failure to apprehend inwardly and to show the fruits of the Spirit's working' reduced the death of Christ to a mere external historical incident: this was the vital connection between Fox's doctrine of the inward light, and the historical incarnation. Canby-Jones pointed out a note of cosmic victory in Fox. Like Fox Fisher emphasised the organic unity of the various elements of soteriology, though in contrast to the Quaker founder his view of the light minimises the idea of a new covenant instituted by the incarnation. Hall ends the chapter with a verbal comparison of Fisher and his opponents on the interpretation of John 1.9.

Chapter 3: Nature and Grace

Fisher and other early Quakers are more similar to Calvinists than Catholics on the question of human capacities in relation to God, to the extent that 'for them the human reason was in a state of complete incapacity to attain any knowledge of divine truths at all, though it could function adequately in other spheres.' 'The incapacity of man to reach any knowledge of God by exercise of his natural endowment is such that not only does God's handiwork in creation fail to teach but the very Scriptures are unavailing', without the inward light. However, Fisher 'confuses right knowledge with right conduct.' He 'regards the will of man as being involved in the intellectual process', which is one thing, but he also fails 'to distinguish knowledge [of] the will of God and knowledge of the existence and attributes of God'. Even Calvinists generally thought that the latter fell within the remit of natural reason. Adding to this confusion is the fact the divine light is always present. Fisher is, of course, engaged in controversy not systematic argument, and his view is a 'vigorous protest' against the idea that God might leave people with only enough light to bring them to condemnation. The natural man, who knoweth not the things of the Spirit of God, is one who wilfully fails to attend to the light, for Fisher. Logically enough, once the light is received, or attended to, Fisher has quite a positive estimation of human capacities. For Fisher as for Barclay, scripture exercises a check on what is thought to come from the light, or a standard to test it by. (For Fisher, the light is continually present, for Barclay, it is bestowed in the day of visitation.)

Fisher is firm that people are only condemned 'through their own slighting of that Love', and not as a result of divine election. Moreover, the 'offer of salvation would be mere mockery if there were no possibility of accepting' or rejecting it (Hall), but only a 'certain necessity of sinning, contracted to them ... from one single sin of one, whom they never chose to be their Proxy' (Fisher; meaning Adam). Grace (the light) is 'sufficient if obeyed', for Fisher.

Chapter 4: Justification

For Fisher as for the other early Quakers - and in contrast to most Protestants - justification is a change of status, not of standing. It comes from believing and obeying the light, not from

extrinsic mercy. The death of Christ 'avails only in so far as it is received and witnessed within': 'In effect, what Christ did *for* man is not here distinguished from what he does *in* man.' Just as for Roman Catholics, good works – that is, good works produced by grace or by Christ in us – are the 'meritorious cause' of justification, and as such sanctification precedes justification.

Justification removes people from a real participation in the seed of devil, and makes them participate in Christ. Fisher describes participation in Christ in vivid, quasi-sacramental language, and holds it to be achieved 'by the light' or 'in the light' not by means of faith: 'we who are of Abraham's faith and not of your meer Adamical fancy are not made computatively only [imputed] but inhaerently Righteous before God in him [Christ] by a Real Participation of his own Divine Nature.' This invited the response from Protestants such as Higgenson that if righteousness was inherent only, there was no need of a saviour: faith is the evidence of things *not seen*, he argued. In Fisher's defence, 'the unseen is not necessarily the unknown'; Friends believed they had an 'earnest of the Spirit.' Fisher transfers much of the usual Protestant content of faith to the effects of the light: 'the heart's approbation, [and] the principle of spiritual life and obedience' for example. In addition, 'Fisher places faith after the translation to the sphere of the Spirit. Faith is not the initial movement into this sphere.' Even the juridical element of justification is reinterpreted in terms of the light: 'It is in response to the light of Christ that men are judged.' Fisher's doctrine of perfection is tempered by the idea of the 'measure': perfection is according to degrees.

'It may, therefore, appear that Fisher has no doctrine of justification at all but that he has been giving a prolonged account of the condition of the justified man.' This was John Owen's view: '[Papists and Quakers] place [the pardon of sin] in the exclusion and extinction of it by [means of] the infusion of inherent grace', which on the Protestant account 'doth not belong unto justification', but sanctification. 'In stressing the inwardness of justification Fisher appears to strip the historic work of objective significance.' (Hall.) 'It is the essential of early Quaker belief that the Christ 'who died at Jerusalem' was one with the pre-existent, incarnate, risen and exalted [and as a consequence] there was no need to fling across the intervening centuries a bridge of faith, Scripture or sacrament, far less to posit some kind of theological mechanism whereby his merits might be used to cover the present deficiency of those who take his name.' The danger of this is that 'the connection between the atoning work and those who receive its benefits' is lost. In other respects Fisher's account (and the early Quaker teaching in general) resembles that of the Council of Trent, but not in this: for the Tridentine fathers, the 'merits of Christ's passion are associated with the rebirth through

the instrumental cause' (baptism), rather than being known 'subjectively within'. Fisher insists on the human role in salvation, but arguably imperils this with his attempt to give an anti-Pelagian account of inherent righteousness: it is a 'something' rather than a state or a relationship': 'man is either under the seed ... of the serpent or of the woman. The man himself is a mere nothing, a neutral ground over which opposing forces fight.' Works are of Christ within, not the man himself.

Chapter 5: The Scriptures [and the question of authority.]

If mainstream Protestantism can be briefly, though inadequately, summarised by the terms *sola fide* (faith alone) and *sola scriptura* (by Scripture alone), 'the Quaker position might be epitomized as 'sola Spiritu' (spirit alone).' Hall argues that by 'the mid-seventeenth century the insights of both Luther and Calvin into the living quality and power of the Bible and the work of the Holy Spirit in authenticating the word and convincing the hearer had hardened into the orthodox Protestant doctrine of the verbal inspiration and sovereign authority of Scripture'. Fisher 'shrewdly comments' that this is to set the letter on the throne where Christ belongs. He attacks the extreme doctrine of verbal inspiration professed by John Owen on historical-critical grounds, showing a strong grasp of Hebrew and critical astuteness. He distinguishes between the scriptures as a source of doctrine, and as history, 'record and declaration'. He holds the selection of texts in the canon to be human and arbitrary – at least to the extent that some left out are as inspired as those in, and that they were preserved by providence. The survival of the doctrine the texts contain is not dependent on the texts, but on the Spirit's inspiration, that brought the texts forth.

His positive doctrine is that the Scriptures have that authority which they claim for themselves: they are sufficient for salvation, which in Fisher's terms means 'the Letter bids us look to the Light as that which leads on to the Life'. The scriptures have an additional function in that they control and inform the doctrine of the true church, which is made up of those who are united in the light. Only in this context does it reveal its true meaning, 'at his [the Spirit's] own mouth and light in silence in all Subjection.' (Fisher.) 'A not dissimilar contrast is drawn by Professor Reid between Luther waiting for the objective word of God and Franck waiting in silence as a preparation for the right understanding of what scripture had to offer' (Hall).

Chapter 6: The Word of God

Fisher's insistence that saving knowledge is 'by revelation of the mind and will of God immediately in the heart' effects a separation between the Word and the Spirit on the one hand, and the written word, which is unreliable, on the other, that leaves him with a significant problem of authority. (Not to mention, as his Puritan opponent Thomas Danson pointed out, that scripture is not simply a declaration of what is in the hearts of believers, but of what ought to be in their hearts.) Fisher tries to negotiate the problem of authority with two rules: that 'the spiritual man judges all things', and the principle of consonance. He denies that the former is subjective, but his argument is circular: if the spiritual man didn't have a measure of God's infallible light and Spirit, he would be in no position to judge; but the idea that the spiritual man has such a measure, comes from scripture. Consonance refers to behaviour that is consonant to righteousness: 'the rule of the Spirit is to be judged as authentic and no self-delusion if it produces righteousness according to the pattern of Scripture and of the righteous men of old.' Again, this appeals in effect to the authority of scripture, yet he has subordinated scripture to the light. Scripture is vindicated by its consonance to the light, and the light by its consonance to scripture.

Moreover, Fisher seems to contrast the inward and the outward, at times, rather than seeing them as intimately related: 'In [Fisher's] discussion of justification, no place could be found for the assent of the mind to outward confession or the consent of the mind with the heart ... Fisher does not regard assent to an objective truth as part of the authority and perfection of the use of the Bible.' Luther underwent a conversion experience involving doctrine; 'the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ.' Fox underwent one involving a Person: 'There is one, even Jesus Christ, who can speak to thy condition'. In his own way Fox was as dependent on the Bible as Luther. 'Fisher, following Fox, knew the error of the 'inscripturation' of the Word. He fell into the opposite error, that of separating the heart's knowledge from the consent of the mind to its truth.'

As well as the final authority of scripture, Fisher rejected the contemporary Protestant criteria of interpretation, such as the consensus of the learned and the analogy of faith (the internal doctrinal coherence of scripture, or how one doctrine relates to or derives from another). 'His own view of the inerrant guidance of the Spirit points to a kind of consensus of the saints, and could lead to a position like that of [Catholicism]. The distinction would

always remain that the Holy Spirit is over [both] the Church and Scripture, neither committed to the one nor bound to the other’.

Chapter 7: The Holy Spirit

Hall says that the Spirit has emerged as ‘the place where all [Fisher’s] roads lead’, and where he is most ‘vigorous and original’ in his thinking; moreover, it is ‘here that the distinctively Quaker interpretation of the Christian Gospel is supposed to lie.’ ‘Some obscurity has been found in his treatment of the relation between Christ and the Holy Spirit. There has been some uncertainty as to the way in which the Spirit operates in the redeemed man. Further, the discussions on justification and the Scriptures have shown the absence of a place for assent and for authority.’ Hall considers each of these issues in turn, in relation to the Spirit.

The Holy Spirit and Christ

There is ‘a close relation without equivalence’ between the two in Fisher’s thought, though sometimes he seems to imply equivalence: notably when he equates the light with ‘a measure of that Spirit of his [Christ’s]’. The close association of the light with the Spirit also confuses the issue regarding the Personality of the Spirit. Hall argues that Fisher did accept the Spirit as divine person, but is careless about his language at times; and the confusion between the Spirit and Christ arises from the Spirit’s role as a substitute for the ‘bodily presence’ of Christ. The Spirit actively leads, in a manner proper to a person, not an impersonal force; sometimes his offices are confused with those of Christ. ‘Fisher thinks of Christ in corporate terms, in his people and not apart from his Spirit.’

The Holy Spirit and Man

It is a fundamental assumption of Fisher and the early Quakers that the Holy Spirit operates directly in man. ‘What, in fact, is the nature of the Spirit’s working in man, and what is Fisher’s understanding of the man in whom it works?’ Fisher often confuses the light and the work of the Spirit; and he separates the inward and the outward in man, in a related way to that in which he separates them in his discussion of scripture. The light is held to stand alone, rather than illuminating the outward history. As HG Wood suggested in his work on Penn’s *Christian Quaker*, Friends ‘were pressing the distinction of outer and inner too hard.’ Hall argues: ‘Man is a whole being, and if Fisher is right in his belief that man only becomes what

he is when he is reborn by the Holy Spirit, he is less than certain as to the way in which this is accomplished. One reason is the limitation imposed by the concept of the light.' Light as a metaphor is too limited for doctrinal purposes, and implies an excessive anthropological dualism.

The Holy Spirit and the Church

'As an inward principle, revealing Christ within men and bringing them into the unity of his Spirit [light] is an admirable way of speaking of the Church. A Church is, however, unquestionably [also] outward, with visible distinguishing marks and it is this aspect of the corporate application of [the light] that its inadequacy is again apparent.' Fisher thinks that the visible Church will soon become co-terminus with the invisible, as the end times are approaching, witnessed by the pouring out of God's Spirit in the Quaker dispensation. As a result he is content to define the Church more or less by the note of holiness as found in individuals, though the 'visibly constituted Church has institutional shape, orders, creeds and the written word. The remnant is dependent on these and, indeed, derives its very existence from them. It is the gathering of those who are faithful to the true inner meaning of them.'

Conclusion

Despite his limitations – both the literary, and the theological, the latter to an extent showing up important issues for Quaker theology generally – Fisher 'as early as 1660, had put into propositional form the early Quaker ideas about the light of Christ, justification and the Scriptures', anticipating Barclay.

Summary prepared by Andrew Harvey (2012)