

J. Philip Wragge

**The Debt of Robert Barclay to George Keith: The Life and Writings of Keith to 1677,
and their influence on Barclay**

(University of Birmingham: unpublished PhD thesis, 1946)

Philip Wragge, later a notable Quaker scholar, sets out to prove that George Keith exercised a significant influence on certain aspects of the thought of his friend Robert Barclay, perhaps the single most famous Quaker writer after Fox. Keith's influence especially appears concerning 'God's revelation and the nature of man's response to it'.

Keywords/themes:

Keith, Barclay, influences on Barclay's *Apology*, revelation, grace and co-operation with it, free will, Inner Light, human response to God, connections to Conway, More, van Helmont, early Quaker theology, authority of scripture, inspiration, knowledge of God, Christ, Christology, Seed, Cambridge Platonism.

Who it would be useful for:

Theologians and historians of Quakerism, and of 17th century religious thought.

Introduction

Robert Barclay, author of the famous *Apology*, is still regarded as ‘the greatest of Quaker theologians’, and his influence has been widespread. When Wragge wrote this thesis in 1946, it was ‘becoming increasingly realised that at least some of Barclay’s views were in part formed by the influence of a Scottish Quaker contemporary, George Keith’. Keith, who ‘in later life left the Society of Friends and became one of its bitterest persecutors’, becoming an ordained minister of the Church of England, has recovered more prominence since Wragge wrote - at least partly thanks to Wragge’s work. Previously his contribution was ‘ignored or undervalued’, probably on account of his apostasy from Quakerism. Keith seems to have had a formative influence on the young Barclay, and moved in circles around Anne Conway of Ragley, her eccentric physician van Helmont and the Cambridge Platonist Henry More.

Section I: The Lives and Writings of Keith and Barclay

Wragge sets out in parallel columns a chronological account of the lives and writings of Keith and Barclay.

Section II: The Friendship of Keith and Barclay

The lives of Keith and Barclay were ‘intimately bound together’ during ‘certain periods’, notably the ‘middle 1670s’. They must have first encountered each other shortly after Barclay began to attend Quaker meetings in Aberdeen in 1665. Soon after both travelled in the Quaker ministry, and a number of letters from 1670s indicate their friendship. There are various other references, including a characteristic apology to Keith, Barclay and other Friends by a rather hysterical character who had previously railed against them. Barclay seems to have met More and Lady Conway and van Helmont through Keith; Conway donated money for Aberdeen’s first Quaker meeting house. Keith and Barclay were drawn closest together through written and verbal controversies with Episcopalian and Presbyterian opponents of Quakerism, both among the clergy, and the staff and students of Aberdeen University. They engaged in a very dramatic public disputation with the latter, in which the Quakers were pelted with mud and stones. Keith and Barclay travelled together, had long

intellectual discussions, and wrote the treatise *Quakerism No Popery* together. They probably also assisted in writing *Quakerism Confirmed*, an account of the debate with the Aberdeen divinity students from the Quaker side. There is evidence to suggest that their friendship lasted until Barclay's death.

Section III: Keith's formulation of the Quaker Message [in his writings prior to 1675]

For Keith, 'Religion is concerned with a relationship between God and man; and this presupposes both God's self-revelation and mankind's awareness of it', and capacity to respond. Humankind's 'formal object of faith' is 'God speaking'; in the church and the scriptures for Catholics and Protestants, but for the Quaker, God speaking in man's heart. Keith distinguishes between revelation *ex parte subjecti* and *ex parte objecti*; that is, the doctrines of scripture made 'clear and evident' by the Spirit of God, and God Himself revealed in the heart of man. The former has no object without the latter. For Keith Protestants only affirm the 'outward' revelation in scripture, not 'God Himself ... objectively manifest'. He makes the same point by contrasting 'abstractive' and 'intuitive' knowledge: knowledge 'which is but received from the borrowed unproper and like forms ... as when I only hear a report of [something]', and knowledge 'whereby a man knoweth things in their own proper forms' as we know ourselves; even so the Quakers 'know the Spirit of the Lord in His Shinings'.

Keith denies that 'no true and saving knowledge of God is to be attained but by the Scriptures being read or heard', and that Scripture is a closed canon: 'though no new essentials are to be added, yet a fuller, new and clearer testimony may be added concerning the same old essentials', by 'the Spirit of the Lord'. The scriptures are a 'perfect testimony of all the essential of the Christian religion', but are not sufficient without 'the inspiration of the same spirit that gave them forth': there was 'a law and testimony writ in man's heart before a line of Scripture was ever writ in a book'. He even asserts that the Biblical writings are not infallible and subject to textual errors.

In *Immediate Revelation* (IR), Keith says that man is constituted by three principles: 'a bodily, animal or brutal principle, then a natural, human or rational principle, and finally a principle of faith which is spiritual or divine.' In *Universal Free Grace* he distinguishes between vegetation, sensation, reason and grace. Each of these is separate and distinct for 'nothing can reach beyond its principle': even 'as the things of reason are above the things of

the senses, so the things of faith are above ... reason.' He describes the natural/rational and spiritual principles in some detail. The former is innate and allows humans to judge rightly concerning 'earthly' things. Such religious knowledge as is derivable from it is 'abstractive', and as such 'foolishness' in the Pauline sense. The spiritual principle is the immediate revelation of God, the 'Seed and birth of God' in man. The principles seem rather compartmentalised for Keith; it is hard to see how they can relate to each other. The nature of the spiritual is rather obscure, though he says it is not 'accidental', but as 'substantial' as the outward birth of flesh and blood, and gives a spiritual sense as real as the five senses.

The Fall of man involved a loss of the spiritual life, and the perversion of the natural/rational principle. The earthly or beastly gained anthropological hegemony. God, however, provides everyone with a 'day or time of visitation', which is able to revivify the dead image of God in man, or rekindle the dead coal. This is done through 'mediate revelation', God appearing to man in a 'shadowy manner', as in Old Testament theophanies; an 'immediate revelation to the unbegotten' through judgement and mercy – the one tormenting the conscience, the other softening and subjecting the soul in true humility to God's judgement and finally rejoicing in divine mercy. This leads to 'immediate revelation to the begotten', those born of the Seed. Here there is no sense of judgement, but an 'unspeakable brightness in the purified soul as a permanent and abiding object.' In this passage of *Immediate Revelation*, Christ is noticeable by his absence, in contrast to other passages of the work and other works by Keith, where Christ plays an important role.

Keith portrays Christ as like Adam before the Fall, but of still more exalted virtue: 'divine perfection and virtue ... above all men that ever were, or ever shall be'; this, he says, is the union between God and man, which sounds like a low Christology – the difference is apparently only one of degree - though he distinguishes between the union in Christ, which is 'immediate', and that between God and others with the 'seed', which is only 'mediate'.

Christ is the light that enlightens everyone who comes into the world (John 1.9), who breathes life into the seed; 'and as it is obeyed, cherished and followed, and its drawings are felt more and more forcibly, so the eye opens (which was shut in Adam) to see God ... and so man comes to live in God'. Man's active response is required. Faith and conversion are one and the same: the 'first step or entrance into a holy life'. Repentance has two aspects, a dying to sin and 'regeneration into a new life'; the extent to which man is active or passive in this process is unclear. The 'Apostacy' [of the church] started 'when people departed from this holy, living power revealed in them'; the end of it will be their returning. In *Immediate Revelation* Keith's main concern is with the inward Christ: his coming in the flesh is

subordinate to his coming in the spirit. In *The Way to the City of God* (WCG), he redresses the balance somewhat, yet his emphasis remains that ‘express outward knowledge’ matters less than faith and love. In response to critics of this position, Keith vigorously rejected any separation or opposition between the outward Christ of history and the inward Christ at work in the heart of man; yet he always asserted that the heathen who had never heard of Christ could be saved by their response to his inward influence. Outward, theoretical acceptance of Christ is of less use than an inward response, not thought of as a response to *Christ*.

Keith thought that the knowledge of God from either the words of scripture or the works of creation was spiritually valuable only insofar as illuminated by the inner light. Wragge comments that Keith acknowledged everything was a revelation, since the character of the Creator appears in what he creates. But for Wragge in the end he draws too sharp a line between the natural and the spiritual, just as he does in the case of human nature, and underestimates the extent to which God’s presence to the soul is a ‘mediated immediacy’ (mediated, paradigmatically, by the historical Christ). The divine influence is also sporadic for Keith, rather than ‘impinging on [human] lives in all situations’. He saw natural knowledge as only carnal, though he touches on the idea of Christ as revealed in others, notably others in (and through the fellowship of) the Quaker meeting.

The relationship between Keith’s Christology and anthropology is well summed-up for Wragge in the phrase, ‘Christ is both the Seedsman and the Seed and also the precious fruit.’ The implication of this is that those who have the living Seed are infallible; but the test of their infallible judgement is highly subjective. Wragge argues that he places too little emphasis on ‘By their fruits shall ye know them’, and in his earlier writings ‘undervalues the importance of Scripture as a criterion for checking one’s own subjective views’. ‘Nowhere in his writings at least up until 1678 does Keith recognise the importance of a group check upon individual infallibility’; surprisingly, given Barclay’s emphasis on this against the Ranters. Instead he concentrates on the ‘self-evidencing Power and authority’ of ‘a true living sense and feeling of God’ which is contrary to sin, as opposed to a ‘cold, faint and dead’ human product.

At the same time, the divorce between the natural and spiritual principles has a tendency to make the implication of Christ as Seedsman, Seed and living fruit, to obliterate the human co-operation that Keith ostensibly insists upon. Wragge sees this as paving the way for the Quietism of the 18th century, with its hostility to human learning and an inordinate emphasis on silence. In *The Way to the City of God* Keith perhaps inclines to a proto-Quietist ethical and spiritual passivity.

The influence of the Cambridge Platonists probably caused Keith to fuse the natural/rational and spiritual principles to some extent: the Light has ‘an universal virtue and power to reach unto the whole man not only to cure the blindness of his understanding, but the perverseness of his will and ... affections’: true but not permissible under his own classification of principles, comments Wragge. The same influence has him exalt the rational, in a somewhat Pelagian way which he otherwise rejects (like Barclay).

As rigid a distinction between principles as Keith originally made would not allow man to fall, or the seed to work in him, according to Wragge; and there is always a conflict between human activity and passivity in Keith’s analysis. Sometimes he gives a ‘more satisfactory view’: at times, in both IR and WCG human nature is presented as having an innate capacity to respond to the objective manifestation of Christ in the Seed, bridging the gap between the Seed ‘from above’ and the natural principle ‘from below’, placing them in dynamic relation, rather than as discrete and static. Holiness is above man’s natural life, and yet he has a capacity for it. The soul must be able to ‘partake’ of both the divine life, and the animal nature, in order to either fall or become regenerate. In this Wragge finds a ‘remarkably modern picture of the diversity, yet the unity, of human personality.’

Section IV: The Writings of Keith and of Barclay before the *Apology*

Similarities of Style

Keith came from a background ‘in close contact with the land ... His style often reflects this, it is primitive and racy, his sentences are long, rambling and ungrammatical and he is concerned with the basic and elemental things of life; his language has in the phrases of [the literary critic] L.C. Knights a ‘muscular content’ and ‘physical immediacy’.’ ‘Scripture has also helped in the development of his plain, direct and simple [but vivid] style; his works are full of Biblical quotations and references.’ These traits dovetail in many passages: so, for example: ‘the things of God themselves are held forth in Scripture under the name of sensible things which are most taking pleasant and refreshing unto the senses, as light, fire, water, oil, wine, ointment, honey, marrow-fatness, bread, flesh, manna, and many such like names.’ ‘Hence some mourn as a dove, so David, some chatter as a crane, so Hezekiah, some roar as a lion some sing and make sweet melody with their voices and some sigh and groan unutterably.’ Keith also has the contemporary tendency to ‘denunciation and invective’, and while this is mild by the standards of the time it is characteristically imaginative and vivid.

There is ‘little evidence to show a classical style imposed upon his simple native tongue, yet Classical quotations and phrases and formal logical exposition of his subject matter are often found in his controversial writings’, and he has a command of Latin, Greek, and Hebrew.

The ‘most common characteristic of Keith’s work is his use of synonyms and the bringing together of words of very similar meaning’, often to ‘physically immediate’ effect. He shares this with Barclay, and most likely Barclay owes this to Keith. Barclay goes further than Keith in his alliterative use of words: the Papacy is an ‘oppressing and persecuting principality.’ Barclay had a stronger power of invective than Keith, and his works are almost entirely controversial rather than straight exposition. ‘Keith and Barclay are alike in their debt both to the Bible and the classics, though it is obvious that of the two Barclay was more influenced by the latter’ than Keith. Barclay was ‘the son of Noble parents’ and spent several years in Paris. His work ‘shows little of that vigorous, simple, natural environment, so characteristic of Keith ... On the whole his sentences are less clumsy, shorter and more grammatical, his words and phrases are longer and more elaborate.’

Similarities of thought and expression

‘Barclay’s writings before the *Apology* do not fully show the direct influence of Keith’s written work since they were in the main a refutation ... of attacks on Quakerism; Keith’s thought is therefore seen more indirectly. There is not a great deal of evidence to show whether Barclay had read Keith’s various works; ‘odd quotations’ suggest he had read WCG and *Help in time of Need*. ‘Yet the influence of Keith on Barclay is unmistakable, and Keith’s debt to Barclay especially regarding the Papacy seems quite clear.’ At this point Wragge presents a detailed synoptic (tabulated) comparison of numerous passages from Keith and Barclay, in proof of this assertion, by means of direct verbal comparisons.

Section V: The Writings of Keith and the *Apology* of Barclay

Wragge examines Keith’s influence on Barclay’s famous *Apology*, which he dates at 1675, in the same fashion: a verbal comparison of passages from Keith’s works and Barclay’s *Apology*, set out in parallel columns. His conclusion is that ‘strands of Keith’s thought’ had a direct influence; notably concerning ‘God’s revelation and the nature of man’s response to it’ (Keith’s account of which is summarised in section III above; Barclay’s to be found in

Propositions II, III, V and VI of the *Apology*, and in the passages from these selected by Wragge).

Section VI: Conclusion: The Claims of Keith

After joining the Church of England, Keith published an answer to Barclay's *Apology* called *The Standard of the Quakers Examined* (1702). In it he claims that Barclay took over his ideas and misinterpreted him. This, Wragge says, 'clearly needs cautious consideration'.

Keith tries to suggest that he already recognised the need for 'outward means' besides immediate revelation, when he wrote IR. While he did say, 'Wherefore, we cannot but acknowledge a great usefulness in instruments from without', he went on to insist that they should not be overvalued, and 'set up in God's room as if we could not live without them'. However, Wragge argues (on the basis of his textual comparison) that many themes and ideas in Barclay do indeed seem to originate with Keith, as Keith claims in *The Standard*: the distinction between subjective and objective revelation, and the critique of Protestants in terms of this (see section III above); the distinction between a 'new gospel', which Quakers do not promote, and a new revelation 'of the good old gospel and doctrines', which they certainly do (section III); the idea behind, if not the term, *vehiculum dei* (the 'Spiritual body' of Christ, which 'came down from Heaven of which all the saints do [inwardly] feed'); Keith's use of 'clear distinct knowledge' and 'historical outward knowledge' is similar to Barclay's, partly from their shared discussions about these topics, according to Keith, and there seems little reason to doubt him; Barclay's methods of argumentation perhaps also owe something to Keith. Keith claims to have provided Barclay with quotations from the Fathers, largely gathered from Vossius and Grotius (two great Dutch theologians of the Arminian party, who believed in free will and opposed Calvinism); which Barclay sometimes misused out of context. They rarely use identical quotations, but Barclay does sometimes do what Keith accuses him of; though so did many authors in the period. Barclay clearly did draw some of his arguments for Quakerism from Keith; but they are by no means the only arguments Barclay uses. Keith says they seem the best arguments to him, which is of course a matter of debate.

'We must beware of thinking that so active and intelligent a mind as that of Barclay merely adapted what Keith had to offer'; Wragge's survey 'does not show what a great deal of Barclay there is apart from Keith.' However, 'the penetrating and acute mind of the

maturer Keith' clearly did influence 'Barclay in the late 1660s when he first became a Quaker as a 'meer' youth', as well as later. 'It is to Keith that we owe in his *Immediate Revelation*, the earliest systematic exposition of the Quaker faith ... and it is a tribute to him that Barclay after a period of several years of study and controversy, should incorporate so much of it in his *Apology*', on such crucial issues as 'the nature of God and His revelation in Christ and the Seed, and man's capacity to respond.'

Summary prepared by Andrew Harvey (2012)