

The Quaker Basics3 (Ongoing Revelation)

By

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It is nice to be back at Fairfield Meeting with my friends. We've been on vacation, camping on the shores of the Great West Bog Lake near Loogootee, Indiana. **Now we are home and for that we are grateful.** A word of advice: Don't ever go on vacation anywhere with the word "bog" in the title. Bog: wet spongy ground; a poorly drained usually acid area rich in plant residues, frequently surrounding a body of open water. Bog: to become impeded or stuck.

While I was off experiencing the first definition of bog, our yearly meeting was undergoing the second—impeded or stuck.

This "stuckness" happens often in religion, since most religious enterprises are usually about trying to preserve a bygone era, often at the expense of wisdom and progress. The Pope recently announced the Mass can now be said in Latin. Joan was reading about it in the newspaper and she said, "Oh, that's great, a ritual no one understands now spoken in a language no one knows." **Of course, it shouldn't surprise us that deep-rooted religions have a hard time moving forward.** Traditions have become entrenched. Time has conferred legitimacy. When that happens, change or reformation doesn't just become difficult, it becomes wrong.

But reformation, though usually resisted by religion, is often its saving grace. If religions don't change, they die. **And when our perceptions of God don't grow and change, we die.** Maybe not literally, but certainly emotionally and spiritually. We're like the too-big plant in a too-small pot. The roots can't grow down, so the plant can't grow up. We become root-bound. **This happens all the time in religion.** It becomes root-bound, confined to too small a space, not allowed to breathe and expand and think and live outside its narrow confines.

When something becomes root-bound, one of two things has to happen if you don't want the plant to die. You either have to trim back the plant. Or you have to get a bigger pot. **Religion has usually opted to trim back the plant—You can't think that. You can't do that. You can't say that. You can't be that. You can't believe that.** *That*, of course, is anything outside the boundaries of the pot, outside the doctrine. So the plant becomes bogged down, stuck, mired, unable to move or grow, the limits of its growth controlled, like a bonsai tree.

Or the plant can be moved to a bigger planter. That is always an option for us. **When our lives and experience and knowledge have expanded and grown, rather than allowing ourselves to be cut down and cut back, we can always move to a bigger pot.**

Sometimes we do that by changing churches, by reading books that stretch us, by not accepting pat answers to profoundly difficult questions, or by letting go of one understanding of God so we can embrace another.

It would come as no surprise to you if I said Quakerism has sometimes been root-bound. We've often responded to that by cutting people back and stifling their growth. **But at our best, we've been willing to enlarge the pot.** When old understandings of God were restrictive and confining and unhelpful, Quakers have said, "Our old perceptions are no longer sufficient. We think God might be leading us toward something larger, something more expansive and helpful."

We call this *ongoing revelation*. **George Fox, the founder of Quakerism, believed God's Truth was not confined to any a church or book or creed.** He spoke of a living Spirit who was always at work, inviting us to understand ourselves, the world, and God, in fresh and vital ways. This is *ongoing revelation*—our belief that God did not fall silent when the last page of Scripture was written. **We believe God still speaks, that no one book, no one church, no one religion has wholly and thoroughly captured and contained the essence of God.** We believe our relationship with God is too important to let other people define it for us.

Certainly, we can listen to and learn from other people's experience of God, but we don't believe in a mandatory, once-and-for-all faith. We believe in a God of fresh words.

Yes, we appreciate and learn from the saints of old.

Yes, we appreciate and learn from the witness of our ancestors.

Yes, we appreciate and learn from the scriptures, the symbols, the traditions, and the stories of the Church's past.

But we are not slavishly bound to them when they are no longer useful and compatible with our experience. We believe in a God of fresh words, in having a faith that is fluid enough and flexible enough to be transformed by new knowledge and experiences. **We believe that when the pot in which we've been planted has grown too small, it is time for a transplant, time to make room for growth.**

Last week, a man at yearly meeting said if people didn't share his beliefs, our society would descend into immorality. **He didn't say it in that few of words, but that was the gist of his remarks.** What he was really saying was that his beliefs about God were superior to other's beliefs. **And maybe they were.** But maybe they weren't. Whichever the case, he isn't the one who gets to decide that. We each have to do that for ourselves. We have to work out our own salvation, have to arrive at our understanding of what it means to be in right relationship with God.

No one else should be allowed to pick our faith for us.

I have a friend named Mark who buys a new car every six years. Car dealers hate Mark. **He visits their dealership and they plead with him to buy a car from someone else.** He never buys a car on the lot, which are always loaded with the options normal people want—air-conditioning, power windows, cruise control, tires. **Mark always wants the stripped-down model, the ones they advertise for \$9,000.00, that they never have when you go to buy a car.**

I once asked him why he never bought a car off the lot. I know why—he's cheap—but he didn't want to admit that, so he said, "Why drive someone else's idea of a car?"

Do you know what orthodox theology is? Orthodox theology are those beliefs that got the most votes when the Church held its councils 1700 years ago. That's all it is—someone else's idea of God. **For the first 300 years, Christians understood Christ and his significance in a variety of ways.** The Ebionites believed he was a strict Jew. The Arians thought he was the ideal human, but not God. The Docetists believed he was God in human disguise. Then the Emperor Constantine thought Christianity need a strong center to anchor his collapsing empire.

In 325 AD, he invited all the bishops over for lunch, asked them to sort through the choices and agree on an understanding of Jesus that would unify the Church. This required several more lunches and a few killings, but the bishops finally wrote a confession of faith. We know it as The Nicene Creed. Anyone who didn't believe it was accused of *heresy* and put to death.¹

From then on, whenever anyone asked questions about ultimate reality, the church handed them the creed and said, "This is it. Take it or leave." **At one time, we were satisfied with that, but now it just doesn't make sense.** We've driven enough cars to know what works for us. Lived enough life to know what resonates as truth and what doesn't. Not that all of it's bad. Some of it's wonderful and helpful and deeply true. Other parts, we're not so sure

¹ I am indebted to Barbara Brown Taylor and her book, *Leaving Church*, for this colorful description of the Council of Nicea.

about it. *Ongoing revelation*—our belief that God still speaks—allows us to **take the best from the past, and build on it.** So we don't have to spend our lives holding grimly to stale doctrines which have lost their meaning and power, becoming bogged down and dispirited. **Instead, our commitment to hearing God's fresh word allows us to move from a cramped pot where we have become root-bound and unable to thrive, to a larger habitation so our roots can grow down and we can grow up.**