

# Robert Barclay speaks

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Robert Barclay (1648-1690) was the greatest systematic expositor of Quaker theology which the Society of Friends has ever produced and his monumental work, *The Apology*, has been the classic in this field for nearly three centuries.

Barclay joined the Quaker movement at the age of eighteen, bringing with him a brilliant background in Calvinism and Catholicism, having studied under some of the leading theologians of those movements in his native Scotland and in Paris. His contacts with Friends impressed him with their rare combination of inwardness and outwardness in religion and he determined to devote his abilities to the furtherance of this way of life.

The first few years after he allied himself with Friends were spent in travel in the ministry in England and on the Continent and in the legal defense of Quakers. His later years were devoted more and more to the written word, chiefly in brief tracts and booklets challenging the prevailing Calvinism of seventeenth century England. From 1682 to 1688 he served as governor of East Jersey, acting through a resident deputy. In this post one of his chief concerns was to make this New World colony a refuge for the Calvinists whose theology he abhorred but whose right to religious freedom he staunchly defended.

Barclay's message of the Seed of Light as well as the Seed of Sin needs to be heard again in our troubled, revolutionary world.

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## ON THE HEIGHT OF HAPPINESS . . .

"Seeing the height of all happiness is placed in the true knowledge of God, (This is life eternal to know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent) the true and right understanding of this foundation and ground of knowledge is that which is most necessary to be known and believed in the first place."

## ON EXPERIMENTAL RELIGION . . .

"What I have heard with the ears of my soul and seen with my inward eyes, and my hands have handled of the Word of Life, and what hath been inwardly manifested to me of the things of God, that do I declare."

"We do distinguish betwixt the certain knowledge of God and the uncertain; betwixt the spiritual knowledge and the literal; the saving heart-knowledge and the soaring head knowledge. The last, we confess, may be divers ways obtained; but the first, by no other way than the inward, immediate manifestation and revelation of God's spirit, shining in and upon the heart, enlightening and opening the understanding."

" . . . neither can the natural man of the largest capacity, by the words, even scripture words, so well understand the mysteries of God's kingdom, as the least and weakest child who *tasteth* them by having them revealed inwardly and objectively by the Spirit."

## ON CONTINUAL REVELATION . . .

"What is proper in this place to be proved is that Christians now are to be led inwardly and immediately by the Spirit of God, even in the same manner (though it may befall not many to be led in the same measure) as the saints were of old."

## ON THE INWARD LIGHT . . .

" . . . a divine, spiritual, and supernatural light is in all men; . . . as it is received and closed within the heart, Christ comes to be formed and brought forth. . . ."

" . . . if thou desirest to know this perfection and freedom from sin . . . , turn thy mind to the light and spiritual law of Christ in the heart . . . , so that that life that sometimes was alive in thee to this world, and the love and lusts thereof, may die, and a new life be raised, by which thou mayest live henceforth to God, and not to or for thyself; and with the apostle thou mayest say . . . It is no more I, but Christ alive in me; And then thou wilt be a Christian indeed."

## ON REASON AND THE INWARD LIGHT . . .

"For as God gave two great Lights to rule the outward world, the sun and moon, the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night; so hath he given man the Light of his Son, a spiritual divine light, to rule him in things spiritual, and the light of reason to rule him in things natural. And even as the moon borrows her light from the sun, so ought men, if they would be rightly and comfortably ordered in natural things, to have their reason enlightened by this divine and pure light."

## ON THE SCRIPTURES . . .

"Because they are only a declaration of the fountain, and not the fountain itself, therefore they are not to be esteemed the principal ground of all truth and knowledge. . . . They are and may be esteemed a *secondary rule*, subordinate to the Spirit, from which they have all their excellency and certainty . . . the Spirit is the first and principal leader."

## ON THE MEETING FOR WORSHIP . . .

"And as everyone is thus gathered, and so met together inwardly in their spirits, as well as outwardly in their persons, . . . the secret power and virtue of life is known to refresh the soul, and the pure motions and breathings of God's Spirit are felt to arise; from which, as words of declaration, prayers, or praises arise, the acceptable worship is known. . . . And no man here limits the Spirit of God, nor bringeth forth his own conned gathered stuff; but every one puts that forth which the Lord puts into their hearts; and it is uttered forth not in man's will and wisdom, but in the evidence and demonstration of the Spirit, and of power. Yea, though there be not a word spoken, yet is the true spiritual worship performed, and the body of Christ edified. . . ."

" . . . I myself, in part, am a true witness, who not by strength of arguments, or by a particular disquisition of each doctrine, and convincement of my understanding thereby, came to receive and bear witness of the truth, but by being secretly reached by this life; for when I came into the silent assemblies of God's people, I felt a secret power among them, which touched my heart, and as I gave way unto it, I found the evil weakening in me, and the good raised up, and so I became thus knit and united unto them, hungering more and more after the increase of this power and life, whereby I might feel myself perfectly redeemed."

" . . . for as our worship consisteth not in words, so neither in silence as silence; but in an holy dependence of the mind upon God: from which dependence silence necessarily follows in the first place, until words can be brought forth, which are from God's Spirit."



## ON THE EXPERIENCE OF GROUP WORSHIP . . .

"As iron sharpeneth iron, the seeing of the faces one of another, when both are inwardly gathered unto the life, giveth occasion for the life secretly to rise, and pass from vessel to vessel. And as many candles lighted, and put in one place, do greatly augment the light, and make it more to shine forth, so when many are gathered together into the same life, there is more of the glory of God, and his power appears, to the refreshment of each individual; for that he partakes not only of the light and life raised in himself, but in all the rest."

## ON MINISTRY . . .

"And when they assemble together to wait upon God, and to worship and adore him; then such as the Spirit sets apart for the ministry, by its divine power and influence opening their mouths, and giving them to exhort, reprove, and instruct with virtue and power; these are thus ordained of God and admitted into the ministry, and their brethren cannot but hear them, receive them, and also honor them for their work's sake. And so this is not monopolized by a certain kind of men . . . but it is left to the free gift of God to choose any whom he seeth meet thereunto, whether rich or poor, servant or master, young or old, . . . male or female."

" . . . my heart hath been often greatly broken and tendered by that virtuous life that proceeded from the powerful ministry of those illiterate men; so that by their very countenance, as well as words, I have felt the evil in me chained down, and the good reached to and raised."

"The ministers we plead for are such as having freely received, freely give. . . ."

## ON PRAYER . . .

" . . . prayer is two-fold, inward and outward. Inward prayer is that secret turning of the mind towards God, whereby, being secretly touched and awakened by the light of Christ in the conscience, and so bowed down under the sense of its iniquities, unworthiness, and misery, it looks up to God, and joining with the secret shining of the seed of God, it breathes towards him, and is constantly breathing forth some secret desires and aspirations towards him. It is in this sense that we are so frequently in scripture commanded to pray continually. . . . Outward prayer is, when as the spirit, being thus in the exercise of inward retirement, and feeling the breathing of the Spirit of God to arise powerfully in the soul, receives strength and liberty by super-added motion and influence of the Spirit to either audible sighs, groans, or words. . . ."

## ON BAPTISM . . .

"As there is one Lord, and one faith, so there is one baptism; which is not the putting away the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience before God, by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And this baptism is a pure and spiritual thing, to wit, the baptism of the Spirit and Fire, by which we are buried with him, that being washed and purged of our sins, we may walk in newness of life. . . ."

## ON COMMUNION . . .

"For we certainly know that the day is dawned in which God hath risen and hath dismissed all those ceremonies and rites, and he is only to be worshipped in Spirit. . . ."

## ON FIGHTING . . .

"But for such whom Christ has brought hither, it is not lawful to defend themselves by arms, but they ought over all to trust to the Lord."

## ON LIBERTY OF CONSCIENCE . . .

"That no man, by virtue of any power or principality he hath in the government of this world, hath power over the consciences of men, is apparent, because the conscience of man is the seat and throne of God in him, of which God is alone proper and infallible judge, who by his power and Spirit can alone rectify the mistakes of conscience, and therefore hath reserved to himself the power of punishing errors thereof as he seeth meet."

## ON TAKING OATHS . . .

"It is no ways lawful for a Christian to swear, whom Christ has called to his essential truth, which was before all oaths, forbidding him to swear; and on the contrary, commanding him to speak the truth in all things, to the honor of Christ who called him; that it may appear that the words of his disciples may be as truly believed as the oaths of all the worldly men. . . . Who then needs further to doubt but that since Christ would have his disciples attain the highest pitch of perfection, he abrogated oaths, as a rudiment of infirmity, and in place thereof established the use of truth?"

## ON TITLES AND HONORS . . .

"All these titles and styles of honor are to be rejected by Christians because they are to seek the honor that comes from above and not the honor that comes from below."

## ON COMMITMENT TO CHRIST . . .

" . . . this is the spiritual day of Christ's appearance, wherein he is again revealing the ancient paths of truth and righteousness. For which end he hath called us to be a first fruits of those who serve him, and worship him no more in the oldness of the letter, but in the newness of the Spirit. And though we be but few in number, in respect of others, and weak as to outward strength, which we also altogether reject, and foolish if compared with the wise ones of this world; yet as God hath prospered us, notwithstanding much opposition, so will he yet do, that neither the art, wisdom, nor violence of men or devils shall be able to quench that little spark that hath appeared; but it shall grow to the consuming of whatsoever shall stand up to oppose it! yea, he that hath arisen in a small remnant shall arise and go on by the same arm of power in his spiritual manifestation, until he hath conquered all his enemies, until all the kingdoms of the earth become the kingdom of Christ Jesus."

## ON WITNESSING FOR CHRIST . . .

"This is the great work of the scriptures and their service to us, that we may witness them fulfilled in us. . . ."

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Readers interested in a somewhat fuller account of Barclay's writings are referred to the booklet "Barclay in Brief", by Elanore Price Mather, obtainable from Pendle Hill, Wallingford, Pennsylvania.

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