

This Light is *saving*. It is the instrument or means by which we are drawn into fullness and wholeness of life and right relationship to God, ourselves, and one another. It is not primarily through the mechanism of assent to certain theological propositions, however heartfelt, nor by participation in certain established rituals, however sincere, that one comes to be "saved" in Quaker faith and practice; it is chiefly through the operation of this Saving Light in human hearts - in the hearing and doing of the Living Word as inwardly revealed in the course of common life.

This Light is *eternal*. It was before time, is now, and will be forevermore. As the writer of John says, "In the beginning was the Word." Friends have always identified the Inner Light with this "logos" or Eternal Word. It is by this Eternal Light and Word that all of the saints and sages down through the ages have known and spoken the Truth. It is by this Light that the Holy Scriptures of the ages have been written (and must be read). It is by this Light that whatever is true, good, and beautiful has been brought forth in human community over time. This Light is and has always been the source and fountain of all human creativity.

This Light is *resistible*. It is not an inevitable force or automatic power; it can be resisted, ignored, or otherwise denied in the human heart. To quote C. S. Lewis, "God does not ravish; He only woos." Although we receive this Light freely and from birth, we are free to choose whether or not and how to respond to its promptings. As someone once remarked, "We are predestinated and foreordained to decide for ourselves!"

This Light is *persistent*. The Light never ceases to make its Living Witness within each and every human heart, even when it is resisted. Although stubborn resistance and persistent disobedience may greatly dim its luminosity, the Light can never be fully extinguished within us. This is the unfailing love and mercy of God which passes all understanding.

This Light is *pure*. It is utterly infallible and perfectly good. Although we may err in our discernment of the Light's witness within us, for any and all who turn to it in humility of heart, the Light is an inerrant guide to truth and wisdom. And, because it is the pure love of God within us, this Light is completely good and trustworthy.

This Light is *ineffable*. It defies complete and accurate description. Like much in the realm of spirit, the Light cannot be completely understood, but it can be experienced and known.

Lastly, and perhaps most important to the present discussion, this Light is unequivocally *universal*. It is freely given by God to each and every human being who comes into the world, regardless of race, sex, nationality, philosophical orientation, religious creed, or station in life. It is the divine birthright and inheritance of all, not the privileged possession of a few. To paraphrase the scripture, it is the Good News of God "preached to every creature under heaven" (Colossians 1: 23).

Now it can readily be seen from these characteristics that the Quaker concept of the Inner Light is radically universalism in its thrust. As such, it offers a strong challenge to many of the exclusivist assumptions of conventional Christian faith. Here is where the tension between Christianity and Universalism in Quakerism begins to be felt.

It is hard to overstate, for instance, how radically different the Quaker view of salvation is from the popular Christian conception. According to our understanding of the Inner Light, any person of whatever religious persuasion, who turns in sincerity of heart to the Divine Light within, and lives in accordance with its promptings, will be saved. All of God's children, Christians and non-Christians alike, have equal access to salvation through the Light.

This view constitutes an outright denial of the exclusivist Christian assumption that salvation comes *only* to those who confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and participate in certain established rituals of the Church. One need not be a professing Christian, in other words, to be saved; and many who are professing Christians are (apparently) not saved.

Similarly, Quaker Universalism challenges the now-prevalent evangelical Christian view that the Holy Spirit "comes into one's heart," presumably from outside, at the moment of conversion. Friends have testified throughout their history that this Holy Spirit is already resident as a Divine Seed in every human heart, waiting to be decisively accepted and nurtured through attentive obedience in daily life. This difference in viewpoint explains the real distinction between Quaker "convincement" and evangelical "conversion."

Salvation and conversion are not the only fronts on which Quaker Universalism challenges conventional Christianity. From the beginning, for instance, Friends have vociferously challenged the fundamentalist Christian assumption that the Bible is the Word of God, insisting instead that the Holy Spirit, the Christ Within, is the Word of God. The Bible is a declaration of the fountain; it is not the fountain itself. The fountain is Christ, the Living Word. George Fox argued disarmingly that, if the Bible were really the Word of God, then one could buy and sell the Word of God and carry it around in one's pocket!

In a similar vein, the Quaker doctrine of "continuing revelation," which says that God continues to reveal Truth to those who have ears to hear, directly challenges the fundamentalist Christian belief that God's revelation was completed when the books of the biblical canon were finalized by the Church.

Quaker Universalism also challenges the conventional Christian definition of the Church, insisting that the Church is not a building. Nor is it an identifiable group of confessing Christians. It is, rather, the universal fellowship of all those persons, of whatever background or persuasion, who know and live in accordance with the Living Witness of God's Light within them. Unlike the standard Christian definition, the Quaker definition of the Church embraces non-Christians, and even theoretically excludes professing Christians who have no real inward, life-changing experience of God.

These few examples should make it clear how deeply-rooted and fundamental the Universalist perspective is in Quakerism, and how profoundly, in turn, this perspective affects the Quaker approach to Christianity - so much so that Quakerism takes a strongly prophetic stance over and against a number of widely accepted interpretations of Christian faith.

It should also be clear, however, that Quaker Universalism, as we have described it here, has little or nothing to do with that brand of eclectic, humanist philosophy called "universalism" that is so prevalent in liberal Quaker circles today. This sort of pseudo-universalism - "pseudo" because it bears a superficial resemblance to Quaker Universalism, but is really contrary to it in a number of crucial ways poses such an insidious threat to the true Quaker view that I would like to spend a few moments describing in more detail how the two are different.

While Quaker Universalism is strongly religious in content and devotional in orientation, pseudo-universalism typically maintains a pronounced philosophical detachment from all religious traditions (especially, as we shall see, from Christianity). Unlike Quaker Universalism, which calls for a faith commitment to a specific religious path, pseudo-universalism teaches non-adherence to any particular religion at all, preferring a kind of smorgasbord approach to religious ideas instead.