Robert Barclay and The Donald

Alastair McIntosh reflects on a binary worldview

Robert Barclay’s An Apology for the True Christian Divinity (1676) is a central text in the history of Quakerism, as Mark Frankel highlighted in a recent ‘Thought for the Week’ (3 March). Here I want to examine the light that Barclay’s text can shed on Donald Trump’s evangelical power base.

Robert Barclay was, arguably, our only systematic Quaker theologian. We only needed one, because our theology tends towards the unsystematic. A systematic approach is a logical approach. It builds up tiers of doctrine from ‘proof texts’ in the scriptures. Quaker systematic theology dives in at John’s gospel, then it’s over to the Spirit. Or, as Mark Frankel puts it: ‘Barclay asserts we know God through Christ by the Spirit, or what he calls “immediate revelation”. This doesn’t destroy the doctrinal approach, but it does relegate it to the second division.

The essence of Barclay

The essence of Robert Barclay is that Jesus never promised us the letters of Paul or other attempts to theologically systemise his teachings. Paul, we might remember, self-identified as a Pharisee, and arguably played true to form. Jesus only promised us the Paraclete. It means the ‘friend’ or ‘advocate’ in Greek and is normally read to mean the ongoing guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus said that to know this Spirit is to be ‘born again’. As such, Quakers ought to be able to meet ‘born again’ Christians on level ground. Without that Spirit, we ‘cannot see the kingdom of God’ (John 3:3). It lends vision that extends beyond the ego’s proud rationality.

The gospels describe it in elemental terms – as living water, a running fire or a wind that ‘blows wherever it pleases’ (John 3:7-8). As such, Quakers hold that God cannot be tied down by dogmas, confessions or creeds. This may render us odd amongst other denominations. We can, however, claim on our side the greatest systematic theologian of them all. In a deathbed vision on the morning of 6 December 1273, Thomas Aquinas declared: ‘Such secrets have been revealed to me that all I have written now appears as so much straw.’

For Robert Barclay the cornerstone of Spirit-led faith is John 1:4. It bears witness to a depth of life that is ‘the light of humankind’. He calls it ‘the Quaker text’ and John 1:9 elaborates that such is ‘the true light that gives light to everyone’. When Friends speak of holding something ‘in the Light’ or ‘seeking clearness’ in the Spirit this is what is meant.

As Friends, all of us are called to this insight, expressed by George Fox as ‘that of God in every man.’ It is what makes potential ministers of us all. It is why, as has been said, we didn’t abolish ordination; we abolished the laity. It is why anyone can walk in from off the street and offer ministry in a Meeting for Worship, if they are Spirit-led. As such, the Quaker way is for all and not just for a spiritual elite. But what’s that got to do with Donald Trump? It’s what Robert Barclay and the early Friends were reacting to that sheds the light.

Calvinism

Robert Barclay was born in Gordonstoun in North East Scotland. There he experienced a Presbyterian theology that was, he said, more severe than any of Calvin’s...
Geneva or the Reformed (Calvinist) churches abroad. An uncle had him educated by Jesuits in Paris, and he became a Quaker when just eighteen. The Quakers offered a challenge to Calvinist theology, which is why they were scourged, branded, mutilated and, like Mary Dyer, hanged by the Puritans of New England.

Calvinism proceeds from the fundamental principle of God's sovereignty over all creation. John Calvin was a lawyer by training, but his rigorous application of human logic could sometimes miss the divine mystery and, especially, kenosis or 'divine letting go' that allows for human freedom. Calvinism takes for granted a black and white distinction between Heaven and Hell. However, to think that we can influence our destiny is held to be a blasphemy. Divine sovereignty means that everything is God-ordained. This results in what Robert Barclay called, 'the horrible and blasphemous doctrine of predestination.' We are predestined by God either to go to Hell, or to Heaven. We are born either of the Damned or the Elect.

The logical follow-through from this is the doctrine of 'limited atonement.' If God has already made up 'his' mind, Christ's saving grace must be 'limited' to the Elect. Patti Smith, the godmother of American punk, said it in style in her lyric, 'Gloria': 'Jesus died for somebody's sins, but not mine.'

John Calvin's binary worldview underlies much Protestantism. It lingers, for example, in Article XVII of the XXXIX Articles of the Church of England. The problem is that it sanctions seeing the world in terms of in-groups and out-groups. You are either with us or against us, in a good state or a bad state, or white or black in apartheid South Africa as it was underwritten by the since-repented doctrines of the Dutch Reformed Church. It follows that a duty of the Elect is to police a world made mayhem by the reprobates.

Universal atonement

Robert Barclay's theology of 'universal atonement' — that all are offered salvation — was fundamentally at odds with the Calvinism of his time. Instead of privileging scripture proofs that support elitism, he privileged passages like John 1:7-9, Matthew 11:28-30, Luke 2:10 and Titus 2:11: 'For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men.'

We are 'justified,' or made right with God, not through predestination, but 'instead, from the love of God for us, and this is the original and fundamental reason why he accepts us.' Remarkably for his time, this included those of cultures and eras that had never heard of Christ. God would always find a way.

Now, Donald Trump's mother was from the Isle of Lewis, the island where I was raised. All four maternal lines of her family had been cleared, which is to say evicted, from their ancestral lands in the south of the island by landed power. These same landlords also introduced a hard-line conservative evangelicalism from the mainland. Mary Anne Macleod, the future Mrs Frederick Christ Trump, was raised in the Free Church of Scotland. Though hard-line Calvinist in its Westminster Confession of Faith, it had, ironically, been formed to break away from church patronage by landed power.

A binary worldview

When I hear 'The Donald' rail about his wall with Mexico, I hear again that binary worldview. The wall with Mexico is a wall that cuts across Trump's own mind. More importantly, it cuts across the minds of those American voters who self-identify as born again or evangelical, and who backed him in significant numbers for the White House. The left do not understand this because, in their dialectical materialism, their public intellectuals have neglected faith. They lack the handles to engage with political theology and thus stand mystified on the sidelines as conservatives, like Theresa May, get worked up and win political traction over Cadbury's non-Easter eggs.

However, just as the Wahhabism in militant Islam cannot be addressed by firing missiles that back its proponents into a corner, so discriminatory forms of Christianity are best engaged with. That is why the Quaker theology of Robert Barclay's Apology matters in our times.

As Mark Frankel's article said, Barclay could be 'disputatious, sectarian, dour and puritanical.' So was John Calvin. In our dialogue with other denominations we can therefore share a laugh at our mutual foibles. In the past there were, after all, 'peculiar' Friends who thought of themselves as the chosen-people.

Furthermore, I find that many evangelicals have a very passionate heart. We theological liberals can get arid in the head. We might have gifts to share with one another.

Alastair is a member of Glasgow Meeting.

His most recent book is Poacher's Pilgrimage: An Island Journey published by Birlinn Ltd at £20. It is also available as an eBook.