

Responses from the Jewels of Quakerism Internet Survey

7-26-09 to 7-30-09

What does "Continuing Revelation" mean?

Spirit didn't stop speaking to people after Spirit spoke to those who wrote the Bible. Spirit is always available to us, and sometimes we are open enough to know new things..

Lu from Rochester, NYYM

It means that God isn't finished with us yet. The spirit of the eternal gave human beings free will and then didn't see what all they would do with it, so the spirit must continue to reveal new truth as it becomes clear.

Liz/Savannah Friends (SEYM)

To me it means that God did not stop communicating with humans once the Bible contents were written. God continues to be revealed in our lives. It also means that as I grow in my relationship with God, new insights and understandings are revealed to me, so that I may know God in a deeper way.

I do not think it means that God changes, but that human perceptions of God are continually changing as we experience God in a deeper way. (Some people see contradictions in the Bible and use this to discount its wisdom. For me the Bible includes the comforting message that humans can learn as we go and God keeps trying to help us out of our ignorance.)

Susan Lee Barton, Clear Creek MM, Ohio Valley YM

Spirit always speaks, Spirit is always present. We must trust and listen and once we do, way is opened.

Anonymous, Perry City Friends

The creator can reveal information to individuals that is not codified in writings or in creeds of the past.

Pam Rider

It means that just because you think you know the answer does not mean that you do not have to continually test that answer from the perspective of "let us see where love leads us."

Kenn Harper, Rochester Meeting, NY

I think of it as meaning something both pro-active and wonderful as well as something that negatively defines another idea in Christianity.

First, the positive. Continuing Revelation is a fundamental corollary to "There is that of God in Everyone," and "Listen for the Still Small Voice within." Without the notion of continuing revelation, those ideas would be hollow. I understand this to mean that because there is that of God within everyone, and if we listen that of God within us can guide us in ways that we have no direct conscious, rational access to. I speak of leadings, intuitions, callings, etc.

If there is no continuing Revelation, then it follows, as it does for some, that turning to the Bible is the only source for Truth (and yes, I do mean it to have a capital "T" as that is how some understand the Bible). BUT, because, as the UCC church has it, "God is still speaking," we have ready access to current, organic, culturally appropriate insights that, with corporate discernment, or clearness committees, we can feel comfortable acting upon, even if they disagree with some Biblical teachings, or teachings of the church.

The negative part of this is that it creates a real rift between those of us who believe that God was listened to by the Biblical writers who wrote out of their own cultural and spiritual context and those who believe that the Bible is the literal, infallible truth. Those same folks have very ingenious ways for getting around some of the edicts laid out in the Bible (women silent in church, no braids or adornments, etc. etc.), but the fact is, some gyration is needed in order to both be a modern person believing in equality between sexes (or equal valuing by the Divine and humans) and a believer in the infallible Truth as it is set down in the Bible. The current, classic argument that requires the most gyration is the whole arena of LGBTQ issues. It seems "cleaner" to me to simply accept that the Bible is an historical record, God is still speaking and that as we grow into the Kingdom, some things we used to do (stone adulteresses comes to mind!) simply don't reflect our new understanding of a compassionate, inclusive and loving God.

Sue Tannehill Buffalo, NY

God continues to teach those who make themselves available to be taught how to live according to the Divine Will in the present day. Continuing Revelation does not involve a new Gospel, but teaches us how to live out the Everlasting Gospel in our current circumstances.

Lloyd Lee Wilson - Rich Square Monthly Meeting, NCYM(C)

It means that God/Spirit continues to reveal His/Her/Its purposes and guides and directs us. It means that every day we can receive new revealed wisdom from Spirit.

Susanne Ratcliffe Wilson, Redwood Forest Friends Meeting

To me it means that how God reveals God's self to us is not static. It is a dynamic relationship and I continue to open more to what God is and what God offers to me/us. It also means that God is not 'boxable' - meaning, once I (think I) know something about God, it's not a once-and-for-all knowing. God is larger than what I think I know and God will continue to open me to who God is.

Mary Kay Glazer, Quaker

"Continuing Revelation" means that, as Rufus Jones said, "If God ever spoke He is still speaking." Unlike other Christian denominations, Quakers believe (and believed) that the Holy Spirit's creative activity among us did not end with the first generation of Apostles at Pentecost. The Spirit continues to speak and reveal God's insight and wisdom to us if we are willing to listen. While God is "unchangeing," our understanding of God's wisdom is not, and may increase or diminish over time and over generations.

Anonymous, Central Philadelphia Monthly Meeting

How do you think early Friends would feel about the Religious Society of Friends today?

I think they'd see us much as they saw the separatists...as seekers who hadn't found the experience, who were in head.

Lu from Rochester, NYYM

What a great question. I hope many of them would be inspired by how some Friends try to be in the [quite changed] world but not of it. I think they would find that many Friends enjoy a good debate or threshing session, and would hold their own with integrity and faithfulness in a discussion of how the RSOF has changed and why. I believe early Friends would appreciate and even enjoy this sort of dialogue with Quakers of today. I think they would be surprised as all the schisms, but maybe not.

Liz/Savannah Friends (SEYM)

Shocked, saddened, angered, and challenged. I also think they would love experiencing the deep spiritual joy many Friends today share.

Susan Lee Barton, Clear Creek MM, Ohio Valley YM

I think we have a gamut of belief and of action, as we always have - in any society. Always there have the brave and fervent who challenged authority and publicly asked for justice and rightness. Always there have been those who grounded action, their own and of others. And always there have been those who were seeking others more than seeking the Light, adding interesting challenges and dynamics.

Because I am an unprogrammed meeting attender, I do believe early Friends would not understand preaching or traditional Protestant church services of some meetings. I also think evangelical Quakers are a bit shocking.

Anonymous, Perry City Friends

confused. They might wonder if we are really Christian.

Pam Rider

The first generation of Friends would be as perplexed and confused about today's Religious Society of Friends as they would be by today's culture and society. They were creatures of their time and place, as we are of ours.

Lloyd Lee Wilson - Rich Square Monthly Meeting, NCYM(C)

Early Friends would likely see some current day Quakers as fellow travelers who wait in the Light and are empowered and energized in their conversion of manners (transformation) by the Love and Power of God. Early Friends would care more about the experience driving this process of conversion/action than the words that were used to describe it. On the other hand they would see some current Quakers as walking wounded who can only muster the strength to attend to their own healing from their own resources. They would also be saddened by those who try to live up to the "rules" established by what are relatively recently codified testimonies even though the rule-followers have not had the inner experience that makes both "the trying" and "the rules" unnecessary to lead the life that early Friends aspired to.

Kenn Harper, Rochester Meeting, NY

I think that it is similar to a parent looking at a very active, intense, opinionated child and thinking to him/herself, "Well they will either be amazingly productive and the world will recognize it or they will be amazingly productive in such a narrow band of human intelligence or art that it will be years before their genius is respected. Same kid, different scenarios, both legitimate, though of course, parents will prefer one outcome over the other. .

Sue Tannehill Buffalo, NY

I think that many of them would be appalled at the absence of the Bible and the references to Christ in many meetings. I think that they would be pleased to see Friends' continuing witness in the areas of peace-building and other areas of social witness. I think the "new plain" would puzzle them!

Susanne Ratcliffe Wilson, Redwood Forest Friends Meeting

I think that of course there are parts they would recognize. But they might be shocked at the divisions, and also at the religious diversity, that there are Quakers who identify, not just as Christo-centric or theist, but also as pagans, atheists, buddhists, etc. It is quite a range and if early Friends were just dropped into our midst, they might feel a bit out of touch!

Mary Kay Glazer, Quaker

I think much of our current theology, whether Evangelical or Liberal, would be confusing to them. They would probably consider much of our way of thinking notional. I imagine they would be taken aback by much of our current state of "worldliness," and concepts of "self-improvement" and "self-empowerment" and current dislike of words like "discipline" and "obedience."

I think they would recognize the "form" of liberal & conservative worship, but wonder where the Spirit was in worship, and probably would be aghast at the nature of many of our "feel-good" or political pronouncements in worship.

I have a feeling that they would also wonder at EFI Quakers voting in meeting for business and FGC Friends allowing non-members to participate in business. (And also at liberal Friends' lack of conviction as a criteria for membership.)

Basically, except for some of the forms that conservative & liberal Quakers use, I have a feeling the modern RSOF would be unrecognizable as "Quaker" by the mostly pre-Enlightenment earliest generations of Friends.

Anonymous, Central Philadelphia Monthly Meeting

Because Friends have no formal creed or dogma, many people assert that we are free to believe whatever we want. To what degree do you agree with this sentiment?

I think we are free to believe what we have experienced and tested in community. I don't think we are free to believe whatever we want. In fact, we must believe what we have experienced.

Lu from Rochester, NYYM

I think, like many things that get said about Quakerism, this is a gross oversimplification. We are a Society for a reason--we need to test our leadings, our beliefs corporately. Friends can believe anything that truly comes from a place of connection with Spirit, that causes them to live in truth.

Liz/Savannah Friends (SEYM)

I thought it means that we're free to believe whatever God wants. Big difference. I do take issue with those who want to shorten our name. We are the RELIGIOUS Society of Friends, not the Society of Friends. We are a worldwide faith community, not a social group, but within that there is room for many different experiences of the Divine.

Susan Lee Barton, Clear Creek MM, Ohio Valley YM

If we believe that the Light shines in all, there develops a very firm set of beliefs. We must respect and honor and assist all, as led. If we believe in continuing revelation, again, we believe that there is more than historically honored scripture - that scripture/communication is alive and continually being added to.

We are free to interpret the Creator and our interactions with this force in any way that speaks to us...

Anonymous, Perry City Friends

It's absolutely true we can believe whatever we want, but that does not mean anyone other than ourselves need accept or even respect that belief. I don't believe this is specific to the Religious Society of Friends. It's hard to discern, because so many friends avoid discussions of belief because we don't want to judge others or be judged because of our personal perspective.

Pam Rider

Although there are probably beliefs that are more useful/effective for guide one into living the life that early Friends aspired to, I suspect that one can believe whatever one wants if for no other reason that it is the experience of the Light and the Practice of dwelling in Love that really matters. If one possesses the Truth and the Light and the Seed grows in them what does it matter the words that one uses to talk about it. Even the "correct" words only hint at how to walk the path, how to recognize when you have arrived, and what to do when you have (or have not) arrived.

Kenn Harper, Rochester Meeting, NY

This is the same error in spiritual thinking that leads people thinking about politics to say, "Hey, it's a free country, I can do what I want." I believe that this is wrong.

We don't have a formal creed or dogma because we believe in continuing revelation. This will always create tensions among people because some people feel that one thing is revealed to them which is right for all.

That said, we DO have a long and very vibrant history of testimonies and Faith and Practice books, and journals. Taken as a whole, these documents frame an "arena" of belief within which Friends must live. Minimally, those who consider themselves Quakers need to be able to say how what they believe, if it is VERY different from the testimonies, can be derived from the Testimonies. This is not creed or dogma; it simply requires that each person link their beliefs to the Testimonies. Examples that have made us distinct and earned us persecution include simplicity, peace, community, etc.

That said, perhaps what we DON'T have the right to do is to judge what others believe based on how "Quakerly" they (or we) think they are.

Sue Tannehill Buffalo, NY

I do not agree in any degree at all.

I believe that anyone who is nurtured by the worship and other activities of a Quaker faith community should receive our hospitality, respect, and explanation of who we are and why. However, those who form the core of the community - who discern and articulate who we are as a people of faith - need to be convinced of the historic position of Friends as part of the (unseen) Christian church, and be actively involved in the "conversion of manners" needed to live out that position in the world at large. I say "need" because I believe that if there is not a core of people "of like mind", no faith community of any persuasion can long endure. Friends understand that Christ has come to teach us Himself: we should always be listening to what Christ has to say for us to learn in the present day. Anyone who wants to sit in on that process is welcome to do so, but not welcome to re-define the process to something else.

Lloyd Lee Wilson - Rich Square Monthly Meeting, NCYM(C)

I disagree with this. I feel that there are some essential components to our religion e.g. that there is that of God in everyone. I would not consider someone a Friend if he/she did not believe this. There is a lot of room for individual interpretation; the clearness process with Friends, if done well, will help individuals decide if they belong in the Religious Society of Friends.

Susanne Ratcliffe Wilson, Redwood Forest Friends Meeting

This is a tough one. I long for a common belief in a Holy Presence among Quakers, my spiritual community. Yet how do we live into that without rigidly defining God and our beliefs about who/what God is? So, for example, I would like my community to be more explicit in being grounded in the Holy Spirit, yet I would not want to feel that I had to be defined by certain beliefs. I feel the tension of this place and hope and pray for God's guidance as we wrestle with this question.

Mary Kay Glazer, Quaker

I disagree with this. I believe that the basis of who we are, and our various practices originates (or ought to originate) from the Divine Law of Love and the teachings of Jesus.

I believe that, while we each have a personal necessity to listen and obey the Spirit's voice within, Quakerism also has a fundamental belief in the corporate experience and obedience to God. To me this means that there is a corporate experience and formation of belief and practice. And a need for us to submit to the corporate wisdom in the Spirit as well, through testing and discernment within our meetings and churches.

Anonymous, Central Philadelphia Monthly Meeting