

Research Note

‘The Most Serious Dissention’: Implications of a Theological Reading of the Keithian Controversy

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Abstract

The Keithian Controversy was one of the most explosive disputes in seventeenth-century Quakerism, but has been neglected in the historiography. Where it has attracted attention, it has usually been assumed that Keith himself was the problem, and the theological contours of the controversy have therefore been given little consideration. Nonetheless, the heart of the controversy was a critical spiritual issue for the Religious Society of Friends: what is the relationship between the Light within and the historical Jesus? This research note reflects on some of the implications of this view for our wider understanding of Quakerism. Above all, it suggests that the Keithian controversy points to intrinsic tensions within Quaker thought, and was the first in a series of Quaker schisms that confronted these issues explicitly. The benefits of studying the Controversy for a more contextualised understanding of all periods of Quakerism are therefore significant.

Keywords

George Keith, Keithian Controversy, Hicksites, theology, Christology

Until the occurrences of our own times threw all former heresies into the shade, the separation occasioned by George Keith may be regarded as the most serious dissention which had ever disturbed the tranquillity of the Society of Friends.¹

In 1835, an anonymous essayist (possibly the prominent Hicksite, Joseph Parrish) reflected upon the Keithian Controversy of the late seventeenth century. The author drew a distinction between the majority of ‘real original Foxonian Quakers’ at the time and the so-called ‘Christian or Orthodox Quakers’ led by the Scottish Friend George Keith. They complained that the Orthodox ‘separatists’

1 Anon., ‘George Keith’, *The Friend* 3/12 (1830), p. 94.

had disingenuously styled themselves as the true inheritors of the Quaker faith, while having ‘virtually abandoned the notion of the sufficiency of the Divine Light’. As a result, they were left to rely solely on the ‘written word’ and the hope of greater respectability from other Christians.²

George Keith had not always been cast as a villain among the Quakers. A well-respected educationalist, he was perhaps the most accomplished Quaker theologian of his generation; he was the older travelling partner of Robert Barclay, and the philosopher Henry More judged him to be ‘the best Quaker of them all’.³ Yet, on moving across the Atlantic in 1685, he became disturbed by the low levels of religious education in the American colonies, even proposing a Quaker ‘confession’ for entry into membership as a way of maintaining consistent Christian standards.⁴ It is this effort (sometimes erroneously described as the attempt to impose a ‘creed’ upon early Quakerism) for which he is often best known. However, the real tensions between Keith and his community emerged almost a year later, following his preaching at a public disputation in which he sought to defend the Quaker view of the historical Jesus.⁵ A fellow Quaker minister, William Stockdale, subsequently complained that Keith had preached ‘Two Christs’ at the disputation, on the basis that he affirmed his ‘Faith in Christ within, and Faith in Christ without’.⁶ Local Quakers eventually rejected Stockdale’s accusation, but tensions only worsened a few months later, when Keith was accused by another Quaker minister of denying the ‘sufficiency of the Light’—this time, for suggesting that people could not be saved without faith in the historic Christ.⁷ When the Monthly Meeting were unable to decide who to support, Keith judged Christian standards within his community to have fallen to irredeemably low standards and held an alternative Monthly Meeting of self-styled ‘Christian Quakers’ to clear his own name.⁸ The crisis quickly spread throughout international Quakerdom, and Keith eventually left the movement under a cloud.

2 Parrish, J. (?), ‘Bishop Doane’s sermon, “Rev. Mr Keith” and the Society of Friends’, in *A series of essays*, Princeton: Homer, 1835, pp. 1–21, at pp. 8–9. The author was identified only as ‘a member of the Society of Friends’, though an unsympathetic reader later crossed out ‘Friends’ and replaced it with ‘Hicksites’.

3 Nicolson, M., (ed.), *The Conway Letters*, rev. Hutton, S.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 307.

4 Ward, M., *The Christian Quaker: George Keith and the Keithian controversy*, Leiden: Brill, 2019, pp. 51–53, 58.

5 Keith, G., *The Christian faith of the people of God*, K151, Philadelphia: Bradford, 1692, pp. 3–4.

6 Keith, *The Christian faith*, p. 3; Budd, T., and Keith, G., *The plea of the innocent*, K189, Philadelphia: Bradford, 1692, pp. 2–3; Jennings, S., *The state of the case briefly*, J670, London: Sowle, 1694, p. 6.

7 Budd and Keith, *The plea*, pp. 2–4, 6.

8 Budd, T., *A true copy of three judgements... against George Keith*, B5361, Philadelphia: Bradford, 1692, p. 1; Jennings, *The state*, p. 3.

Nearly a century and a half later the anonymous essayist of 1835 was recalling Keith's dramatic fall from grace not out of mere historical intrigue; rather, they were consciously weaponising the Keithian Controversy to meet the fresh challenges of their own fractious Quaker context—that is, the Hicksite–Orthodox split that ruptured American (and subsequently global) Quakerism and precipitated a series of further divisions from the 1820s onwards. They sought to argue that in their own time, just as in the seventeenth century, a small group was again 'assum[ing] to be the Real Society of Friends' under a divisive banner of 'orthodoxy'. Pointing to George Keith as a well-established mutual enemy, they asked their Orthodox opponents whether they might 'discern in this account, a mirror which [reflected their] own image'.⁹

This short essay was not the only polemical discussion of the Keithian controversy to emerge in this period. The 'Orthodox' Quakers launched a counterattack, this time emphasising the schismatic Keithian spirit of their opponents; a review of the anonymous Hicksite essay particularly stressed that George Keith had become 'ambitious, self-important, and even jealous of that influence which George Fox exercised'. Rather than resembling the Orthodox Quakers, Keith resembled Elias Hicks in his 'attacks upon those things which are most surely believed among us', his desire to amend church discipline and his attempt to claim official authority for unofficial meetings.¹⁰ Here, the focus was on Keith's inflammatory and disunifying behaviour towards others in his Quaker community, and especially his establishment of alternative structures of Quaker authority.

Similarly drawing comparison between Keith and the Hicksites (and also in the 1830s) the American Orthodox Quaker magazine *The Friend*—not the British publication founded in 1843—ran two series of articles on the Keithian Controversy, emphasising Keith's self-important theologising (in particular, the Kabbalistic influence on his thought and his rumoured belief in the transmigration of souls). It portrayed the dispute as a 'warning beacon of the danger of presumptuous thoughts and spiritual pride', which should remind Quakers of the necessity of 'meekness and patience'.¹¹ In the 1834 series Keith was especially accused of 'lord[ing] it over God's heritage, instead of being [an example] to the flock'—a trait that manifested suspiciously soon after the death of George Fox. The implication was that Keith had made a prideful bid for Quaker leadership, for which he was rightly cast out of the movement.¹² Yet, at the same time, the author accepted that the problem was (or at least had become) bigger than one

9 Jennings, *The state*, pp. 12–14, 17.

10 Anon., 'A Brief Review. Bishop Doane's Sermon,—Rev. Mr. Keith,—and the Society of Friends', s.l.: s.n., 1838?, pp. 1–8.

11 Anon., 'George Keith', *The Friend* 3/12 (1830), pp. 94–5; Anon., 'George Keith', *The Friend* 3/16 (1830), pp. 125–26.

12 Anon., 'George Keith', *The Friend* 7/32 (1834), p. 253.

man, as ‘the most serious dissention which had ever disturbed the tranquillity of the Society of Friends’ up to the nineteenth century.¹³

A fuller account of the historiography of the Keithian Controversy—and of the events of the dispute itself—is available elsewhere, and does not need reproducing here.¹⁴ However, the implications of this historiographical legacy are substantial and merit further reflection, not only for their historical significance but also for their contemporary resonance. What was it about the Keithian Controversy that made it such a powerful cautionary tale for Quakers over a century later? Whose account, if any, was more accurate? How have such accounts shaped our more recent understanding of the Controversy, and of George Keith himself? What is missing from this weaponised history?

To this end, it is immediately worth noting that neither side in the Hicksite–Orthodox split attempted any serious engagement with the historical interpretations of their opponents; certainly, neither side risked claiming any of Keith’s principles as their own. This was history as hagiography, and the Keithian Controversy—with George Keith as its central villain—was being used primarily as a foil against which later Friends’ own faithfulness could be constructed and defended. Common to almost all accounts in this period (and more generally) was the sense that Keith himself was the basic problem—either because he was too theologically or philosophically minded or because he was angry and spiritually proud.¹⁵ In practice, the two have often been presented together, as if a concern for theological coherence amounts to a moral failing, or a symptom of a depleted prayer life, or a lack of proper obedience to the Inward Light.¹⁶ In an era of modern historical method, this inherited focus on the failings of Keith himself has often prevented the wider significance of the Controversy from garnering the level of scholarly attention enjoyed by other early fractures in the Religious Society of Friends.¹⁷

13 Anon., ‘George Keith’, *The Friend* 3/12 (1830), p. 94.

14 Ward, *The Christian Quaker*; see also Pennington, M., *Quakers, Christ and the Enlightenment*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021, pp. 182–287.

15 For further reflections on this early historiography, see Ward, *The Christian Quaker*, pp. 18–21.

16 See, for example, Cadbury, H. J., and Frost, J. W., ‘Caleb Pusey’s Account of Pennsylvania’, *Quaker History* 64/1 (1975), pp. 37–57, at pp. 38, 41, 57; Proud, R., *The History of Pennsylvania, in North America*, 2 vols; Philadelphia, Poulson, 1797, vol. 1, pp. 363–5, 373; Gough, J., *A history of the people called Quakers*, 4 vols; Dublin: Jackson, 1789–90, vol. 3, pp. 318–24; Evans, O. C., *Friends in the Seventeenth Century* Philadelphia: Pile, 1876, p. 594; Williams Kirby, E., *George Keith, 1638–1716*, New York: D. Appleton-Century co., 1942, pp. 8–9, 51, 64.

17 There has been very little dedicated consideration of the Keithian Controversy, and even less as a major event in the history of the Quaker movement itself. The most extensive works have been produced by J. William Frost (predominantly a compilation of the key sources of the dispute with commentary), Ethan Williams Kirby (a biography of Keith himself, which inherited many of the assumptions of the early historiography) and Gary B. Nash (a largely political reading). Frost, J. W., *The Keithian Controversy in Early*

However, dwelling on Keith's failings alone does not provide an adequate explanation of the original events of seventeenth century. Above all, little attempt has been made to understand the theological issues at the heart of the dispute on their own terms. Once again, where theology is given a stake, we are often introduced to Keith as a cuckoo in the nest: his Quakerism was the 'product of conscious effort, of deliberate introspection and rationalisation', and by 'growing emphasis upon Christian fundamentals he was attempting to make Quakerism merely another Protestant sect'.¹⁸

It is surprising, therefore, to return to the original sources of the Keithian Controversy and find a subtle clash of fundamental Quaker ideals whose core concerns were precisely the Christological tensions explored in various papers at the 2021 Quaker Studies Research Association (QSRA) conference.¹⁹ As J. William Frost has noted, the key issue in most of the original sources of the Keithian Controversy was 'what happened to Jesus *after* his resurrection'—that is, whether Christ retained a human body (which remains in heaven as a human body) or whether he could be conceived of purely as a spiritual reality.²⁰ More importantly, these tensions were not only troubling to Keith but were felt deeply by his opponents. Indeed, it was their theological concern, not Keith's, that ultimately precipitated the crisis in the first place. Seemingly obscure debates around the resurrection were not, therefore, Keith's unique and unreasonable preoccupation, but the outworkings of key Christological questions raised at the very start of the dispute. In other words, theology was a motivating issue on both sides of the debate. Downplaying its significance to the Keithian Controversy has allowed the dispute more often to be characterised as a personal cautionary tale than a significant juncture in the history of Quakerism—and a failure to reckon fully with the tensions surfaced by the Keithian Controversy is matched by their re-emergence in every major schism of the Quaker movement since.

That said, theology itself is a dynamic interaction of ideas, and apparently inconsistent behaviour (including claims that there was no theological breach alongside criticism of Keith for his theological position) emerged where different theological concerns were competing on both sides. As just one example of how this mutual theological tension manifested in practice, the Philadelphian Meeting of Ministers wrote to London Yearly Meeting in June 1692 stressing that they had keenly reassured Keith of their biblical faith in a historical Jesus—and had even

Pennsylvania, Norwood: Norwood Editions, 1980; Kirby, *George Keith*; Nash, G. B., *Quakers and Politics: Pennsylvania 1681–1726*, Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993 edn.

18 Kirby, *George Keith*, pp. 8–9, 51, 64. For more on the modern historiography of the Keithian Controversy see Ward, *The Christian Quaker*, pp. 21–26.

19 Arcila Villa, J., 'Anne Conway's Christology', Quaker Studies Research Association Conference (17 May 2021), University of Birmingham; Jack, A., 'More and the Quakers on Christ', Quaker Studies Research Association Conference (18 May 2021), University of Birmingham.

20 Frost, *The Keithian Controversy*, pp. vi–vii, x.

offered to make a confession of faith to this effect—but, still, he was not pacified.²¹ This was of course intended to reassure powerful Friends in London that there was no theological problem and they were soundly Christian; in practice, therefore, while Keith argued that Christian standards were slipping, Christian faith was clearly understood as the minimum standard required of a good Friend in the 1690s. Moreover, their downplaying of any substantial religious dispute suggests that reassuring others of their Christianity was, in this context, even more important than defending the sufficiency of the Light.

At the same time, they were more than willing to challenge Keith's theology stridently on their own terms, and in their own meetings in Philadelphia. This became explicit in a Meeting held in Philadelphia in December 1692, at which Keith's opponent Samuel Jennings apparently proclaimed 'we are not to prove [Keith's heresy] from Scripture, but from Books [of] Friends; for the Question betwixt us and GK is not who is the best Christian, but who is the best Quaker'. Keith also recalled another of his adversaries, John Delevall, stating that his heresy was 'in a Fundamental Doctrine of the Quakers'—that is, the sufficiency of the Light.²²

In this sense, the Keithian Controversy indicates the coming of age of the Quaker movement, for the Quakers had been defending their true Christianity to non-Quakers ever since the movement began. Yet now, it seemed, a 'Quaker orthodoxy' was emerging as a powerful force in its own right. This is further demonstrated by what Keith's opponents actually offered him at the Philadelphian Meeting of Ministers: that is, a restatement of something 'put out by Ancient approved Friends', rather than their own personal affirmation. In response, Keith (ironically) demanded instead that they should make a statement from their own faith—that is, a testimony inspired by the Inward Christ. They would not do so, explaining that issuing a statement that 'was already publique' seemed 'Safer and Modester' than creating something new.²³ For his own part, Keith was insistent on an operation of Quakerism within an orthodox Christian framework, while staunchly resisting the development of Quakerism itself into another frame of orthodoxy in its own right.

Further details of the theological contours of the Keithian Controversy can be found elsewhere—but what are the wider implications of reading of the Keithian Controversy through a theological lens?²⁴ Above all, once we accept that enduring theological concerns played a significant role in the dispute, it cannot easily be explained as the result of one man's failings. Instead, the Keithian Controversy points to intrinsic tensions within Quakerism—not only in the seventeenth century but, as above, continually resonant (especially at the most toxic points

21 Frost, *The Keithian Controversy*, pp. 142–43.

22 Keith, G., *The heresie and the hatred*, K174, Philadelphia: Bradford, 1693, pp. 3–4.

23 Frost, *The Keithian Controversy*, p. 143.

24 Ward, *The Christian Quaker*, pp. 26–88.

in Quaker history). The tensions primarily concerned the relationship between the historical and inward Christ. Thus, 130 years after Keith was excluded from Philadelphia Yearly Meeting for *denying* the sufficiency of the Light, the same Yearly Meeting split, ostensibly over the same Christological issues—but this time precipitated by Hicks' *defence* of the sufficiency of the Light. Certainly, the differing experiences of George Keith and Elias Hicks suggest that the Quaker community as a whole had moved some distance on these issues between 1692 and 1827—but this did not bring them closer to resolution, and the community continued to move, this time in various directions, from the 1820s onwards. In the words of the Philadelphian historian Daniel Brinton in 1880, 'Keith's words were unheeded, and what he foresaw came to pass: in fact, exactly that which generations later led to the total disruption of Quakerism ... was what Keith tried in vain to expunge at the outset.'²⁵

More research is therefore needed to unpack attitudes towards the relationship between the historical Jesus and the Inward Christ (especially insofar as this relationship shapes the centrality of certain truth claims in Quaker identity) as a perennial concern in the Quaker story. As one participant in the QSRA conference observed, 'every marriage has one argument'—and perhaps this is the Quakers'. Further unpacking these common elements through Quaker history requires not only detailed theological consideration of each historical period in its own right (and there are many positive recent examples of a greater theological interest in early Quaker scholarship)²⁶ but also extensive scholarly cross-fertilisation between periods of study. What common themes emerge? Have any of the issues raised in the Keithian Controversy been functionally resolved in later periods? Might the answers to these questions help understand the different sensibilities of different modern Quakers with greater nuance? How do individuals now approach these questions within modern Quakerism?

Along similar lines, the Keithian Controversy suggests a complicated and contested picture of early Friends' attitudes to existing Christian teaching, in which early Friends were committed *both* to authentic Christianity as a central pillar of their faith *and* to the saving capacity of the Light beyond the Christian Church. Simplistic portrayals of early Quakerism (either as proto-universalism,

25 Brinton, D., 'George Keith, and the first schism in Penn's colony', *The Daily Evening Telegraph*, 12 January 1880 (Philadelphia, PA).

26 For example, Angell, S. W., and Dandelion, P., (eds) *Early Quakers and their Theological Thought, 1647–1723*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015; Moore, R., *The Light in their Consciences: early Quakers in Britain, 1646–1666*, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press 2000; Moore, R., 'Quaker Expressions of Belief in the Lifetime of George Fox', in Allen, R. C., and Moore, R., *The Quakers, 1656–1723*, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019; Birkel, M., 'Robert Barclay and Kabbalah', *Quaker Studies* 21/1 (2016), pp. 1–15. For an account specifically of changing Christological views over the period 1647–1700 see also Pennington, *Quakers, Christ and the Enlightenment*, pp. 69–207.

or as true Christianity alone, or as merely as reactive commentary on the views of others) are inadequate, just as polemical Hicksite and Orthodox accounts of the Keithian Controversy fail (in those cases deliberately) to engage with the dispute in the round. More exploration is needed of the distinctiveness of early Quakerism not in binary terms but as its own native Christian tradition that rejected such a binary on point of principle. Multiple identities functioned alongside one another from the start; might this also (perhaps uncomfortably) be inherent to the Quaker story?

Thirdly, the Keithian Controversy has sometimes been celebrated as the point at which a more open vision of Quakerism prevailed. However, Keith was also deeply engaged ecumenically—far more than almost any of his contemporaries, and even more so just as his opponents became increasingly tied to a sectarian ‘Quakerism’. Fruitful avenues of research might therefore consider the construction of Quaker identity as it has interacted with ecumenical (and even interfaith) engagement over time. How far have Quaker identity and wider engagement been allowed truly to inform one another throughout Quaker history? Where has this been a cause of reconciliation, and where might it have been an excuse for further division or polemic?

These are just some preliminary reflections on potential avenues of research that may emerge if we accept the basic integrity of the theological dispute at the heart of the Controversy—that is, viewing George Keith not as a foil for modern biases and frustrations but as one side of a subtle and multi-faceted dispute that struck uncomfortably at the tenets that Quakers continue to hold most dearly. More generally, I hope that viewing the Keithian Controversy through this lens will enable it to play a more prominent role in twenty-first-century study of early Quakerism, in turn expanding our conceptual map for the history of the Quaker movement well beyond the Second Period.

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