

2023 George Richardson Lecture

The Seed and the Day of Small Things: Finding Power and Powerlessness in Quaker Theology

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Abstract

This paper explores early Quaker uses of ‘the Seed’ and of ‘the day of small things’, and the theology of power and powerlessness that emerges from a consideration of these key images. I argue for a theological account of power that begins from the experience of ‘being empowered’ through the active presence of the Holy Spirit – an experience which I take to be central for, although far from unique or even distinctive to, early Quakerism. I argue that divine empowerment, expressed and explored in reflections on the seed and on the day of small things, sets up an economy of power that avoids the ‘power struggle’ that often characterises representations of power and its distribution, within and beyond theology.

Keywords

power, seed, Margaret Fell, John Whitehead, Elizabeth Bathurst

It is not a blow he is striking. It is a seed he is planting. A seed is something that has life in it.¹

1 Canfield Fisher, D., *The Deepening Stream*, London: Persephone Books, 2021 [1930], p. 541. I am grateful to Katie Harling-Lee for introducing me to the work of Dorothy Canfield Fisher.

Introduction

Having chosen to focus this year's George Richardson Lecture on the theme of the 2023 QSRA conference, I explore some aspects of the theology of power in the writings of Quakers of the first two generations, looking in particular at how they engaged and expressed the experience of empowerment in relation to social and ecclesial structures of power.² My main aim throughout the lecture is to argue for a theological account of power that begins from the experience of 'being empowered' through the active presence of the Holy Spirit – an experience which I take to be central for, although far from unique or even distinctive to, early Quakerism. I argue that divine empowerment sets up an economy of power that avoids the 'power struggle' that often characterises representations of power and its distribution, within and beyond theology.

I begin by contextualising the theme in terms of wider questions with which I am engaged as a theologian, looking beyond Quakers. Then I give a brief overview of some of the key ways in which the Quakers of this period talk about 'the seed' and how it relates to power and empowerment. I take a deeper dive into one early Quaker text that is especially illustrative of the power dynamics in Quaker theologies of the Seed, before turning to a related and particularly intriguing strand of early Quaker biblical interpretation: that is, readings of the 'day of small things' (Zech. 4:10). A final section offers some reflections on the contemporary relevance of these approaches to power, powerlessness and empowerment.

Context: Inspired Voice

One of the foci of my current research is voice in theology – the voice that speaks about God and about all things in relation to God. As a Quaker doing theology, the question of voice brings me quickly to the question of divine empowerment. How should we reckon with the claim that there is speech about God, not only authorised or permitted, but empowered and made possible by God? Much of what is written and taught about methods, sources and norms in theology – about how we speak of God – focuses on questions of authority and authorisation. What speakers, sources, methods, norms or institutional frameworks make speech about God trustworthy? By what criteria can it be judged acceptable or valuable?

It is understandable and right that academic theology, in particular, should focus on questions of this kind, given the widely accepted principle that one of the key functions of (specifically) academic theology is to exercise a critical or

² I wish to express my gratitude to the speakers and participants at the 2023 annual conference of the Society for the Study of Theology, which was also focused on the theme of power, and provided rich food for thought as I prepared the lecture.

‘second-order’ role in relation to ecclesial speech.³ There is, however, a risk that it occludes another question: how is it that people can and do speak of God, repeatedly and afresh? How is it that there is God-talk to interrogate or critique – not merely as a hypothetical possibility, but as an experiential or historical given? This question is put on the table with particular clarity in the context of revivals and other outbreaks of religious creativity, especially those characterised by the empowerment of new and unusual speech and speakers alongside other innovations in community and practice – such as the Azusa Street revival at the origin of the Pentecostal movement and the emergence of Quakerism some 250 years before that.⁴

It is no wonder, especially now in an age of disturbing charismatic and populist power, that the follow-up questions about authorisation jump forward immediately. How do you know this is really God? How do you distinguish true and false prophecy? How do you avoid all the pitfalls that appear as soon as you step off the known path? It seems to me that as self-confessed heirs of a moment, not only of religious power struggles but of creative empowerment, Quakers cannot move directly to these suspicious questions without pausing to acknowledge and reflect on the empowerment that is claimed. We need to create a space for understanding empowerment without fitting it immediately back into the logics of authorisation, authority and order.

Consider, for example, Margaret Fell’s famous narrative of the incident in Ulverston church.

[George Fox] ... desired that he might have liberty to speak. And he that was in the pulpit said that he might ...

And said ‘ ... You will say, Christ saith this, and the apostles say this, but what canst thou say? Art thou a child of Light and hast walked in the Light and what thou speakest is it inwardly from God?’⁵

In the scene that Fell sets up, there is an established structure – a power structure – that grants permission or authorisation to speak and that gives order to speech. There is a pulpit and somebody occupies it; the unknown travelling lay preacher expects, and is given, authorisation to speak; and some people are ruled out as possible speakers, even in this relatively permissive environment (Fell herself does not at this point attempt to speak to the assembled group). The most striking thing about the question Fell records – ‘what canst thou say?’ – is not that it was

3 For a critical discussion of this strand of thinking about the function of ‘doctrinal theology’, see Higton, M., *The Life of Christian Doctrine*, London: Bloomsbury/T&T Clark, 2020, pp. 111–37.

4 For a discussion of the implications for theology of the ‘renewal’ (Pentecostal and charismatic) movement, with particular emphasis on ‘starting with the Spirit’, see Yong, A., *Renewing Christian Theology: Systematics for a global Christianity*, Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014, p. 19.

5 Margaret Fell, ‘The testimony of Margaret Fox concerning her late husband George Fox’, in George Fox, *A Journal or Historical Account ...*, London, 1694, p. ii.

asked – not that the structure of authorisation was called into question. What is striking, I suggest, is that the question was not immediately taken as an injunction to cease from all theological speech or all scriptural interpretation. On the face of it, George Fox's reported words sound like an instruction or warning to refrain from saying anything – at least if one is not absolutely confident of being 'a child of Light [who has] walked in the Light' and of being able to claim that the source of one's words is 'inwardly from God'. However, set in the context of Fell's life and theological work – as she looks back across many years of active ministry to write the story of how this ministry began – it appears rather as a moment when new speech is empowered.

The Ulverston incident, and Fell's narrative of it, sets up a complex relationship between authority or power-to-authorise – what I call elsewhere in this article 'ordering power' – on the one hand, and empowerment on the other. It does not set these two – ordering power and empowerment – directly in contradiction as bad power and good power, or power and resistance, or power and powerlessness. Rather, it opens up the possibility of talking about at least two different economies of power, one of which, empowerment, does not – I will suggest – result in a zero-sum game of power and powerlessness. Making sense of Quaker experience requires an economy of power that is not simply a mirror-image of ordering power. It is neither primarily 'resistance to the current ordering power' nor 'an alternative ordering power'. Empowerment, action and speech 'inwardly from God' or 'in the power of God' has a primary and foundational givenness, a reality that does not rely on ordering power either positively *or* negatively. As a theologian who spends most of her time working on non-Quaker material, it is important to me to question accounts of divine and human power that assume that power is primarily power-over, or the power to order and authorise. Such accounts tend to frame discussions of power in terms of who holds power or who gives it up – and quickly run into difficulties, of which feminist thinkers are particularly primed to be aware, around the valorisation of powerlessness, self-sacrifice or vulnerability.⁶

In what follows, I use the pairing of empowerment and ordering power to explore the relationship between three features of early Quaker theologies of power: the very frequent language applied by Quakers to themselves or each other of being, acting and speaking '*in* the power of God' or '*in* the power of the Lord'; the disavowal of active resistance to the 'powers that be'; and the affirmation that the power of God is or will be manifest in the overthrowing of the present unjust order of things. Madeleine Pennington's highly significant work on early Quaker responses to persecution is important background for this discussion. Pennington demonstrates that persecution and all other forms of encounter with the 'powers that be' are secondary factors in Quakers' spiritual and theological

6 For critical discussion of which see, for example, Tonstad, L., *God and Difference*, New York: Routledge, 2016, pp. 98–132.

development – and that a sense of divine empowerment, of being, acting and speaking in the power of God, decisively shaped early Quaker responses to their various interactions with the powers that be (including suffering and persecution, but also including what a much later generation would come to label ‘speaking truth to power’).⁷

‘The Seed’ in Early Quaker Theology

It is well established that ‘the Seed’ is a significant motif in early Quaker theology, although Isaac Pennington is, as far as I know, the only individual Quaker theologian whose theology of the Seed has received extended scholarly attention.⁸ It is worth reflecting, before going further, that, just as a natural symbol, a ‘seed’ says interesting things about power and powerlessness. It is, on the one hand *potentiality*, power to become, power to grow and (particularly in agricultural contexts) power to sustain life; and on the other hand *powerlessness*, occupying almost no space, making no claim to control, realising its potential only by first disappearing. The quotation at the start of this essay from Dorothy Canfield Fisher’s inter-war novel – put in the mouth of a character whose spiritual life is formed by Quakers – illustrates the point; the seed has power by ‘having life in it’, and is thus contrasted with the ‘blow’ that exerts force.

Without losing sight of this natural symbolism, in early Quaker texts the ‘seed’ is best understood as a biblical term. The image I have used elsewhere for seventeenth-century Quakers reading the Bible is that of old-style optometry glasses – stacking up a series of lenses and looking through them, all at once, to see clearly what is in front of you.⁹ Quaker writings look through the whole Bible, Genesis to Revelation, in order to interpret present events. For the purpose of this paper, I would add that certain key recurring biblical terms – like Seed, the focus of this paper, but also Light or Truth – hold together that distinctive vision, that collection of Quaker lenses. Many Quakers in the early generations are reading the Bible, to quote what Elizabeth Bathurst said of herself, ‘without the Help of Humane Concordance’;¹⁰ they are not in a position to put together organised accounts of ‘what the Seed is in the Bible’. The recurring terms function, rather, to facilitate connections across the biblical corpus and, even more importantly,

7 See, for example, Pennington, M., *Quakers, Christ and the Enlightenment*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021, pp. 45–61.

8 See Creasey, M. A., *Early Quaker Christology: With special attention to the teaching and significance of Isaac Pennington, 1616–1679*, Catholic and Quaker Studies, no. 2; Birmingham, 1973. On the significance of ‘seed’ language in the Quaker theology of the first two generations see, for example, Angell, S. W., ‘God, Christ and the Light’, in Angell, S. W. and Dandelion, P. (eds), *Oxford Handbook of Quaker Studies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 158–71, here p. 160.

9 Muers, R., *Testimony: Quakerism and Theological Ethics*, London: SCM, 2015.

10 Bathurst, E., *Truth’s Vindication*, London, 1683, 3rd unnumbered page.

as the basis for relating the biblical texts and present experience. To change the metaphor, these key terms, as they circulate in the early Quaker community finding its voice in 'scripture dialect' (to quote Bathurst again), become dense clusters of theology and spiritual experience. They are the DNA of Quaker thought and experience transmitted in a small space – a bit like seeds.

So what is the power of the seed in the Bible and in Quaker theology? The place I normally start when speaking about Quakers and the seed is with the curse placed on the serpent after the fall: 'And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel' (Gen. 3:15).¹¹ In much of the English commentary tradition of the seventeenth century, following Luther though not Calvin, this is an enormously important text – read as a divine promise of salvation in Christ, a first proclamation of the gospel.¹² Probably drawing directly on that tradition, 'seed' appears very clearly in the earliest Quaker texts, the first generation, as a reference to Christ.¹³ To be more precise, it is soteriological language, operating in a very similar space to the Johannine language of light; the focus is on the whole person of Christ *as* the gracious gift and the source of salvation. Both in the Quaker texts and elsewhere, the language of the 'seed' is frequently used to hold together the biblical story from Genesis to Revelation and to focus attention on Christ's decisive victory over evil.¹⁴ 'Seed' places a focus on the intense struggle arising from the juxtaposition of Christ's proclaimed victory and the continued effects of suffering and evil – a struggle experienced on all levels, from the individual to the political and social.

'The seed' between Genesis and Revelation is, then, cosmically significant; it is the triumph of the power of God over all that opposes it. Contemporary readers are likely to object that this is a totally different meaning of 'seed' that carries none of the natural symbolism discussed above; this one means 'descendants' or 'offspring' and is translated accordingly in later versions. The point, though, is that in Quaker traditions of reading the coincidence of the words is enough to set up a whole series of intra-biblical resonances and connections – allowing interpretations that connect the individual and the cosmic, the inner and the outer, the beginning, the middle and the end.

Quakers of the first generation, when they read this text, focus first on the idea of the 'enmity' between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman at the

11 All biblical quotations are from KJV unless otherwise stated.

12 On which see Patrides, C., 'The Protoevangelium in Renaissance Theology and Paradise Lost', *Studies in English Literature 1500–1900* 3/1 (1963), pp. 19–30; Apetrei, S., 'The Universal Principle of Grace: Feminism and Anti-Calvinism in Two Seventeenth-Century Women Writers', *Gender & History* 21 (2009), pp. 130–46.

13 See Angell, 'God, Christ and the Light'.

14 The other 'bookend' is Rev. 12:17 and the reference to the 'seed' of the woman as those 'which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ'.

centre of the human story; and secondly the naming of the seed *of the woman*. The two themes come together in Margaret Fell's extended discussion of Genesis 3:

the Church of Christ is represented as a Woman; and those that speak against this Woman's speaking, speak against the Church of Christ, and the Seed of the Woman, which Seed is Christ; that is to say, Those that speak against the Power of the Lord, and the Spirit of the Lord speaking in a Woman, simply by reason of her Sex, or because she is a Woman, not regarding the Seed, and Spirit, and Power that speaks in her; such speak against Christ and his Church, and are of the Seed of the Serpent, wherein lodgeth Enmity ... God the Father made no such difference in the first Creation, nor ever since between the Male and the Female ...¹⁵

Consider, first, the role and place of 'enmity' in this text – the power-struggle. The power-struggle is specifically a property *of the serpent*, and it arises as a 'speaking against' the prior experience and manifestation of the 'Seed, and Spirit, and Power'. Women as speakers and teachers are first divinely empowered – by the Seed who is Christ – and only then 'spoken against'. The language of the seed points to women's empowerment as preachers and teachers, and because of it women appear first in the text as empowered agents. There is a reference at the end of this passage to God's mercy and loving-kindness to the weak, but Fell does not begin with women's weakness or powerlessness or being oppressed by the world. Rather, she begins where her experience begins, with a manifestation of power.

This, however, also points us to the fact that the 'seed' language is not only about cosmic-scale transformation. Fell is discussing the power that speaks *in* seventeenth-century women speaking – the real-time and observable change in individual lives. In fact, the distinctive and remarkable value of this keyword, seed, for Quaker theologians is that it lets them speak about how the power of God for salvation, Christ – the same power that bruises the head of the serpent and triumphs in the eschatological battle – is present *in* their lives. They are enabled to do so, in particular, by the way that seed language operates in the New Testament. Alongside the parable of the sower in Matthew 13, one key passage for this purpose is 1 Peter 1:22–23:

ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit unto unfeigned love of the brethren, see that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently, being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever.

The 'seed' is at the heart of Quakers' radical and community-defining claims about the universal free offer not only of salvation but of sanctification and empowerment for ministry. The repeated claim was that 'the seed of the kingdom', also frequently referred to as a 'measure' of divine light, or the divine 'principle'

¹⁵ Fell, M., *Womens Speaking Justified, Proved and Allowed of by the Scriptures*, London, 1666, p. 4.

and various other names, was given to all without exception as a manifestation of the free and compassionate love of God.¹⁶

So where does this leave us in relation to power? First, the language of the seed, by tying up the individual and the cosmic, the soul and the world, makes the relationship of the person to worldly authority – to what I have earlier called ordering power – something of secondary importance at most. Women, in Fell's writing, do not gain the power to speak because they are oppressed or because they are specially authoritative; they have it insofar as the seed of the kingdom of God, given to all, grows and bears fruit in them. Empowerment comes first. Second, however, enmity is real; where there is the 'seed of the woman' there is a 'seed of the serpent'. There are other kinds of power around. They are not real rivals, and in an important sense they do not have real power at all (because 'the Seed Christ is over all and doth reign'¹⁷); but they are often very hard to see past.

That is the conundrum that confronts us at this point – the Quaker version of the problem of evil. If the power of God is at work, what could oppose it?¹⁸ Conversely, if the power of God is really at work, how are things in such a mess now? Quaker theologians have ways of answering this in relation to the individual soul, looking for example at the parable of the sower – the seed given to all does not grow and bear fruit in all, and the calling of God can be resisted. That approach on its own does not really address the apparent *power* of enmity in the world; and it does not say what, if anything, the experience of divine empowerment has to do with the present authorities, the 'powers that be'.

In the next section I suggest that Quakers talking about the seed, and especially talking about enmity and conflict around the seed, are trying to name a situation in which ordering power, authority, has separated itself from the power of God and tried to set itself up as something free-standing. The result of that separation is a fake or temporary power that is liable at any moment to collapse into chaos; and, faced with that power, you do not fight it with its own weapons, because that gives it too much credit. Rather, you announce its powerlessness and wait it out.

Encountering Enmity: John Whitehead

In this section, I look more closely at a specific text, John Whitehead's *The Enmitie Between the Two Seeds*.¹⁹ This is a pamphlet that contains an account of Whitehead's own spiritual experiences and conversion, a defence of himself and his companion in imprisonment and, along the way, a lot about where he stands in relation to the powers that be. George Southcombe has argued that Whitehead

16 On the multiple names see, for example, Bathurst, *Truth's Vindication*, pp. 91–92.

17 Fox, G., epistle of 1663, reprinted as epistle 227 in *Works*, Gould, M. T. C. (ed.); Philadelphia, 1831.

18 As Fox wrote in an oft-quoted passage, 'Then when God doth work, who shall let it?', *Journal* for 1647, Nickalls, J. (ed.); Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952, p. 11.

19 Whitehead, J., *The Enmitie Between The Two Seeds*, London, 1655.

makes an interesting object of study precisely because he is not a particularly sophisticated theologian. Southcombe says Whitehead's 'authority ... derived ... from the ... experience of the light moving within described by the first converts' and he quotes William Penn on Whitehead: 'He was one of those who had "seen, tasted, felt and handled the same Powerful Word of God which they declared of unto others".'²⁰ Whitehead is interesting for my current purposes, not only because he writes about the enmity between the two seeds – in a narrative that ties together the individual, the social and the cosmic – but also because of how he negotiates his relationship to the powers that be, and what this says about the alternative economy of power that emerges in the experience of empowerment.

To begin with, the full title of the pamphlet deserves attention:

The enmitie between the two seeds; wherein is discovered the subtilty and envy of the Serpent's seed, who rules in the man of sin that is born after the flesh, and persecutes him that is born after the Spirit; which spiritual birth is here witnessed (by the operation of the power of God through much travel) of the immortal Seed, which was promised and is come to bruise the serpent's head ...²¹

Whitehead claims to *discover* 'the serpent's seed' who 'persecutes him that is born after the spirit'. The key point here is *discovering*, unveiling, showing what is going on, speaking truth. It takes a kind of power to do that discovering and unveiling – and the discovery and unveiling are themselves signs of the power at work in the world – but the power involved is of a different *kind* of power from the force exerted by the persecutor.

The nature of this contrast is further illustrated by a passage that introduces Whitehead's account of his arrest and trial:

And whereas I am accused of railing against and contemning Authority, I do declare in the presence of God, It is false; for my soul is subject to the higher power, for conscience sake: and magistracie I own, which is the Ordinance of God, ordained for the punishment of evil doers, and for the praise of them that do well; But he that is in the place of a Magistrate and turns from the light of Christ, and casts the Law of God behind his back, ... him do I witness against ... yet no power do I resist, but in that dwells [*sic*], which suffers all things, hopeth all things, and am subject to the will of God: in whom I have that peace which the world cannot give, nor take from me.²²

The initial mention of the 'higher power' is accompanied, in the margin, by references to Romans 13, and there is an apparently straightforward affirmation of willingness to be subject to a just ruler, an ordering power that orders rightly. However, the higher power that *turns from the light of Christ* has no legitimacy – and here the marginal note refers to Isaiah 59, which speaks of the advent of the

20 Southcombe, G., *The Culture of Dissent in Restoration England: The Wonders of the Lord*, Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2019, p. 112.

21 Whitehead, *Enmitie*, unnumbered page.

22 Whitehead, *Enmitie*, p. 22.

Lord to execute vengeance upon unjust judges. So far, so revolutionary – but then the text immediately turns; Whitehead resists no power. The emphasis in the main text is not on the overthrowing of unjust ordering power, nor even on the expectation of God’s vindication (although that is certainly present) but on dwelling *in* ‘that which suffers all things, hopeth all things’ and on peace *in* God. This is not a text about powerlessness, nor really about power to resist, but it clearly is about some kind of power. And, looking back to the title of Whitehead’s text, we find that at the heart of it is ‘*spiritual birth (by the operation of the power of God through much travel) of the immortal Seed*’.

To make good on my earlier claims that the *primary* reality here is divine empowerment I have to look elsewhere in Whitehead’s text, and particularly to his argument with and about ministers – which is parallel in many ways to the argument about magistrates:

[I witness] against all you that have a forme of godliness, and deny the power (which leads out of sin) and creeps into particular houses, which you call Churches, & there keeps people ever learning & never able to come to the knowledge of the truth: which makes free those that know it, and walk in it; all those that are Ministers of Christ, I owne, and by their fruits they are knowne, that have received Christ and are by his spirit sent to preach: and abides in his doctrine, and freely declares what they have freely received ... the Ministers of Christ walks in the power of godliness, and goes from Cittie to Cittie, and from village to village, preaching the Kingdom of God ... and brings people to the knowledge of the truth.²³

Ministers of Christ properly so called, Whitehead says, walk ‘in the power of godliness’ and ‘bring people to the knowledge of God’. They are contrasted with those who ‘have a form of godliness but deny the power (which leads out of sin)’ and, crucially, ‘keep people ever learning and never able to come to knowledge of the truth’. The first group, the true ministers, do endure persecution, but their defining characteristic is being, acting and speaking in the power of God that also empowers others. By contrast, false ministers are *deniers* of power in themselves and in others. Both the (false) ministers and the magistrates, and elsewhere in this text the representatives of the army, have taken ordering power without connecting it to the present and active empowering power of God. At least in the case of the ministers, for Whitehead, they have given up on the very possibility of power that is not reducible to power-over, to various forms of social and institutional control. Without the power of God working freely and without measure, all we can ever have is an endless power struggle between rival forms of order – that amounts in practice to comprehensive disorder.

Having a different kind of power can often look very like powerlessness – just as nonviolence can look like passivity or compliance. The ‘looking like’ can go very deep; to talk about the cross as the power of God, as the Quaker theologians

23 Whitehead, *Enmitie*, pp. 18–19.

persistently do, is to focus attention, both on the contrast between divine power and the powers that be and on the implications of this contrast for Quaker experience. I want, however, to maintain a distinction between, on the one hand, claiming the ‘power of the seed’ – and potentially encountering persecution and refusing violent resistance – and, on the other hand, advocating powerlessness. This distinction comes out rather clearly when we consider early Quaker readings of the ‘day of small things’.

The Day of Small Things

‘Who has despised the day of small things?’ (Zech. 4:10) comes from a notoriously baffling and difficult-to-translate section of the book of Zechariah.²⁴ A brief search for theological interpretations of the ‘day of small things’ turns up assorted uplifting reflections on the value of little-noticed faithfulness and service by people who are relatively powerless – by far the best example being Christina Rossetti’s poem ‘Who hath despised the day of small things?’²⁵ Quaker theologians of the first and second generation, however, wove this curious text into an account of the drama of salvation. They made of it not just a word of encouragement to the despised ‘little people’ but also, and predominantly, an urgent call to everyone, particularly to those who held worldly power. Combined with the Quaker theology of the seed, the ‘day of small things’ became a way to speak about the ways in which the power of God is both experienced and ignored. It was read as a text not about the value and significance of powerless people but rather about how anyone might miss or ‘despise’ the power that is really available.

Thus Elizabeth Bathurst, in a passage introduced by a quick recapitulation of ‘seed’ imagery for Christ in the Bible, finishing with the parable of the sower:

The Seed (or Grace) of God is small in its first appearance (even like the Morning Light), but as it is given heed to, and obeyed, it will increase But if people will despise the day of small things, and will not believe in this low appearance of this Light of Jesus in their hearts, which though it discover to them their sins, and reprove for them, yet because its reproofs are soft and mild, and its voice small and still, they outclamour the sound thereof in their consciences ... then woe will be unto them.²⁶

In Bathurst’s thought, then, the famous or infamous ‘day of visitation’ is the day of small things that is easily despised. This is integral both to the character of the God who calls – ‘soft and mild’, with a still small voice – and to the felt experience

24 See, for a representative discussion, O’Brien, J. M., *Nahum, Habbakuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*, Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2004, p. 130.

25 Rossetti, C., ‘Who Hath Despised The Day of Small Things?’ in Crump, R. W. (ed.), *The Complete Poems of Christina Rossetti*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979, vol. 2, p. 257.

26 Bathurst, *Truth’s Vindication*, pp. 86–87.

of convincement – the risk that the sound of the call will be ‘outclamoured’. At the crucial point, the seed, the presence of God in the world, has a power that can be mistaken for weakness.

In similar vein, Anne Docwra writes:

wheresoever this seed is sown, either in Man or Woman, that is sown upon the good Ground, it will bring forth its increase, according as it is declared in the Scriptures of Truth, and is there called the *least of all Seeds*, and is the *day of small things*, which many have despised, for that which they have accounted to be greater Enjoyments, which are but as the glory of the World, which the Devil, the God of the World, hath shown them.²⁷

The day of small things, in the hands of these Quaker theologians, becomes a day of judgement. There is the judgement that people exercise, the choice to despise or not to despise the day of small things – and this in turn becomes a judgement on them. It is also, however, the day of a turning point, the day when the empowering power of the seed begins its work.

Isaac Penington – mentioned earlier as a major ‘theologian of the Seed’ – deals with the day of small things in a way that both chimes with the account given above and takes significant further steps. Penington is more likely than many of his contemporaries actively to advocate for a position of powerlessness – to say not only ‘find a different kind of power’ but also ‘make yourself weak’. In 1662 he writes to those who ‘complain that they want power’, first about the power of the seed:

There is all the strength, all the power of the enemy, against the work of God in the heart. There is but a little thing (like a grain of mustard seed) ... to overcome all this; and yet in this is the power.²⁸

So far so much we have already seen, but then he comes to the day of small things:

Who ever have been high, and are still waiting and expecting in the heights of their own wisdom ... let them take heed of despising the day of small things, and know that their proper beginning ... lies in the lowness, in the humility, even in that nothingness which bows before the least light of the day.²⁹

Penington advocates not just attention and care and watchful waiting in the presence of a power that *looks like* weakness or is easy to miss, but ‘lowness’ and humility as a pathway to power. Later generations of Quakers would find in this a spiritual practice and pathway to embrace – and it is beyond the scope of this paper to engage in an extended discussion of Quaker ‘quietism’. There are wider questions raised for Quaker theologies of power. How do we keep the balance

27 Docwra, A., *An Epistle of Love and Good Advice*, London: 1683, p. 5.

28 Penington, I., *To All Those That Complain They Want Power*, London: Robert Wilson, 1661, p. 21.

29 Penington, *To All Those*, p. 21.

between, on the one hand, Penington's rigorous refusal to claim anything that looks like worldly power, ordering power or authorising power – and, on the other hand, the hopeful conviction that divine power transforms and re-orders the world?

One possible direction of development, which also points outwards to the social consequences and historical visibility of divine power, is indicated by Whitehead's contrast between false and true ministers. The false ministers are those who hoard power and thus deny effective power both in others and in themselves; they need to release their attachment to power (exercising humility, in Penington's terms) in order to engage with the power of small things. The economy of divine power operates by ever-increasing empowerment and fullness of life, bringing forth 'increase' in all. It is, to return again to the quotation at the beginning of this article, the economy of the seed planted, rather than the blow struck.

Concluding Reflections

This lecture was given a few days after the coronation of Charles III, a very different attempt to perform the relationship between divine empowerment and world-ordering power – a performance, moreover, that took something like its current form not long after the beginning of Quakerism. Rereading the seventeenth-century Quaker texts in that light makes me wonder whether, and to what extent, their vision of divine empowerment confronting the disordered world-ordering power is simply a product of its time. This was, after all, a period in which instability and violence came (as it were) from the top down; in the aftermath of the English Revolution it was easy to see that competing assertions of 'ordering power' amounted to a destructive zero-sum game. We might further ask whether Quakerism was, in the course of its history, very quickly sucked into its own set of 'forms of godliness denying the power'. Is this after all, despite all my protestations, a theology for perpetual rebels or quietists that is not up to the task of actually making anything happen – or, alternatively, a theology to cover up just another attempt to seize control?

These suspicious questions need to be asked, because – as Penington, Docwra and others discussed in this article make it clear – individual and collective self-delusion are persistent dangers. I can only say that the question, 'is there anything more than the zero-sum game of the power struggle?' is urgent in new ways now. It is urgent in the context of polarisation, the so-called 'culture wars', the battles of disinformation in which religion is turned into a weapon and truth is outclamoured. We need alternatives to joining the battle or sitting on the sidelines. We need some sense that it is still worth asking and answering 'what canst thou say?' even when a great deal is being said already, *and* of knowing that that question is not simply an invitation to shout louder. I see this in practice in various forms of Quaker activism – and perhaps the best any Quaker theologian can do is to follow after it and try to give it voice.

Author Details

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