

BOOK REVIEWS

Robert Barclay *A Catechism and Confession of Faith: A New Edition edited in Modern English* Dean Freiday and Arthur O. Roberts (eds) Newberg, OR, Barclay Press, 2001. pp 144. ISBN: 0-912232-96-3 (paperback) \$6.95.

This is a curious book. It offers an updated version of a text which the 24 year old Barclay wrote in 1673 in order to outdo the divines whose Westminster Confession had been adopted by Parliament in 1648. In this, characteristically Presbyterian doctrines are set out with a formidable array of scriptural texts cited as proofs. Barclay's object is to show the impartial reader that, contrary to the calumnies of their opponents, Quakers can demonstrate their principles directly out of scripture. He goes one better than the Westminster confession in that his texts are unadorned by commentary or interpretation. Unusually, the catechetical questions precede the positive statements of the Confession, a deliberate move on Barclay's part to make the work more approachable and serviceable as an instructional text.

Dean Freiday and Arthur Roberts have done the same service for this text as is provided by Freiday's *Barclay's Apology in Modern English* (published privately: Elberon, NJ, 1967). In the introduction to that earlier work Freiday explains his procedure as 'transphrasing – somewhere between translation and paraphrasing (xl)'. Barclay's language has been simplified and updated, and his long sentences broken down. The biblical quotations, originally from the Authorised Version, have been replaced with the New Revised Standard Version. Where it has been thought necessary, other modern biblical translations have been cited in the footnotes.

In Barclay's day, the *Catechism* no doubt served as a useful *vade mecum* for a Quaker preacher who was confronted with Presbyterian and other protestant opponents. It would be interesting to trace examples of its use in this context. The fact that Barclay revised it towards the end of his life suggests it was still used, but whether as a missionary tract or as an instructive text for new converts and children is less clear.

Who, however, will use this new version? For scholars of Barclay and his religious environment, it can at best act as a handy commentary on Barclay's text, with some general account of the changes (mostly minor) made in the various later editions. The intended readers are those who are interested in Barclay's teaching but are not in a position to tackle his original text.

Here I see some dangers. As a teacher of biblical studies, I would be very wary of using this book with any study group without including a rigorous

exploration of the pitfalls of using the bible as a mine for proof-texts. Otherwise, we risk both a superficial approach to the bible and an uncritical approach to the tradition. Liberal Quakerism, perhaps even more than more biblical educated varieties, has a tendency to latch onto such biblical phrases as suit its purposes and this book might even encourage that tendency. The use of contemporary biblical translations also raises questions on those occasions when Barclay's point depends on a turn of phrase in the Authorised Version. This provides interesting material for analysis, but the reader is not given much help in dealing with such problems. However it is used, all the catechism does is to show that isolated biblical verses can be read as giving answers Quakers are happy with to pre-selected questions. Well and good – but once we have said that, what have we proved? What about counter-verses, if there are any? What claim to truth can any of this support unless we share certain presuppositions about biblical authority? Any study group would need to debate these issues.

I would also have concerns about the reduction of the historical distance between Barclay and ourselves. If the updating leads a new group of readers to tackle the original seriously, then that is to be welcomed. However, I wonder if this version is always a simplification. For instance, at the beginning of the 'Preface' Freiday and Roberts offer 'yielding to the inclinations of the ego' to stand in for Barclay's original 'giving way to the vain and airy imaginations of his own unstable mind.' The latter is clearer to me, at any rate, as the word 'ego' is laden with so much Freudian and post-Freudian baggage.

A telling afterword recounts the debate Freiday and Roberts had over the inclusion of sections on the duties of servants. They were included, but the fact that the question arose shows that the impulse behind the book is as much to do with proselytising as with historical education. Barclay's exuberant title which outbids the Westminster divines by ascribing his work to the authority of the 'patriarchs, prophets and apostles, Christ himself being chief speaker in and among them' – a defiant statement of a profoundly controversial Quaker claim – is also relegated to an appendix. That title itself would be a provocative discussion point for most contemporary study groups as an insight into a very different world of discourse.

A curious book, then, in that its audience is unclear. Even the cover of the book with its calculatedly 'distressed' look gives an oddly mixed message about the antiquity and current significance of the text. It is undoubtedly the product of a great devotion to Barclay's thought and of much devoted work. Used with due caution, it can be a useful encouragement to a wider audience to explore a fascinating dimension of the history of Quaker thought.

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