

The nature of religious authority within Quakerism: insights from the theology of Joseph John Gurney (1788–1847)

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Like the early Friends, Joseph John Gurney affirmed belief in the vital agency and divine authority of the Holy Spirit. However, he regarded the biblical record of revelation to also be of divine authority for the very reason that its inspirational source had been the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, the significant outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the apostolic age and the associated New Testament writings, led Gurney to believe that the weight of revelatory authority concerning Christian belief was to be found in the Bible and was plenary. Scriptural authority therefore continued in the post-apostolic age operating in unison with the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit. It is argued that Gurney's theological position was rooted in early Quaker beliefs but also represented a re-appraisal of how religious *authority* in relation to *divine revelation* is defined. The challenge of understanding the latter with complete certainty is also discussed.



Introduction

In this article *religious authority* is applied as a collective term to represent the various ways Christians seek to authenticate their understanding of divinely based revelation.¹ Principal amongst such approaches is use of the Bible, church traditions, human reasoning and personal spiritual experience.²

The emphasis upon the experiential played a pre-eminent role in shaping the faith of early Friends in the seventeenth century³ with their main source of religious authority being a Spirit-led inward experience which took place directly between the individual and God. This was, as Pink Dandelion has commented, experiencing ‘Christ’s direct revelation’.⁴ Robert Barclay’s *Apology*, a seminal work of that era, articulated and advocated the Quaker standpoint.⁵ It also acknowledged that its theological radicalism was likely to be met with opposition given that most Christian traditions placed a greater reliance upon external forms of religious authority.⁶

In the *Apology*, Barclay argues ‘that inward and immediate revelation is the only sure and certain way to attain the true and saving knowledge of God’.⁷ At the heart of this proposition lies the tenet that ‘the Spirit, and not the scriptures, is the foundation and ground of all truth and knowledge, and the primary rule of faith and manners’.⁸ The Scriptures, however, were still important to Barclay⁹ albeit he saw their role in a more auxiliary context.¹⁰ Furthermore, whilst he did not see any necessity to constantly check the authenticity of immediate revelation, Barclay makes clear that ‘these divine inward revelations, ... neither do nor can ever contradict the outward testimony of the scriptures, or right and sound reason’.¹¹

¹ ‘Divine revelation’ can be described as being shown something about God which has been revealed by God; see Abraham, W. J., ‘Revelation’, in McFarland, I. A., Fergusson, D. A. S., Kilby, K., and Torrance, I. R., (eds.), *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, pp. 445–447 at p. 445.

² This parallels with Albert Outler’s ‘Wesleyan Quadrilateral’, see Outler, A. C., ‘The Wesleyan Quadrilateral- in John Wesley’, *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 20/1, (1985), pp. 7–18; <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/656fc081e5c4af09d4c78999/t/6720f347d6638820f686601d/1730212680758/1985-wtj-20-1.pdf> (accessed 17 June 2025). Outler argued that Wesley’s approach to understanding the Bible was ‘with Scripture as its pre-eminent norm but interfaced with tradition, reason and Christian experience’, see Outler, ‘Quadrilateral’, p.9.

³ George Fox’s own spiritual experience being a case in point, see Nickalls, J. L., (ed.), *The Journal of George Fox*, Philadelphia, Pa.: Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, rev. ed., 1997, p. 11.

⁴ Dandelion, P., *An Introduction to Quakerism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 21.

⁵ Barclay, R., *An Apology for the True Christian Divinity: being an explanation and vindication of the principles and doctrines of the people called Quakers*, London: printed for Thomas Tegg, 9th edn, 1825, pp. 18–64.

⁶ Barclay, *Apology*, pp. 18–19.

⁷ Barclay, *Apology*, p. 25.

⁸ Barclay, *Apology*, p. 69.

⁹ Barclay, *Apology*, p. 68.

¹⁰ Barclay, *Apology*, pp. 68–69.

¹¹ Barclay, *Apology*, p. 18.

By the early part of the nineteenth century a growing ‘evangelical’ influence within the Society of Friends had become evident and this continued to advance in the decades which followed.¹² Joseph John Gurney¹³ has generally been considered to have played a leading role in this development.¹⁴ His writings and spoken addresses reflect a steadfast belief in the divine authority of the Old and New Testaments¹⁵ with an array of arguments presented by him to support this view.¹⁶ For Gurney, there was also an expectation that ‘every divine revelation, intended for permanent utility among men, so obviously requires a divine Scripture’.¹⁷

The especial focus and attention which Gurney gave to the Bible has been perceived both in the nineteenth century¹⁸ and more modern times¹⁹ as being the antithesis of the importance placed by the early Friends on the role of the Spirit in immediate revelation. In the article sections which follow this introduction, a different interpretation is presented and the case made that Gurney’s theological position was more nuanced in that it both affirmed *and* challenged elements of early Quaker belief. This is evidenced by the way Gurney defined religious authority in relation to revelation, in the reasoning that led him to emphasise the biblical record and the manner in which he understood immediate revelation to operate after New Testament times. Additionally, it is argued that both Gurney and Barclay’s beliefs about religious authority include assumptions which when deconstructed show the limitations of suggesting a simple dichotomy of views existed between Gurney and early Friends.

(1) Gurney defines the authority underpinning divine revelation by the *source* of the revelation rather than by the way it is communicated

At the outset, it is vital to acknowledge that Gurney holds the belief that the writers of the different works of the biblical canon ‘all wrote under the influence of the same Spirit’.²⁰

¹² Isichei, E., *Victorian Quakers*, London: Oxford University Press, 1970, p. 8.

¹³ Milligan, E. H., ‘Gurney, Joseph John (1788–1847)’, in Matthew, H. C. G., and Harrison, B., (eds.), *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, vol. 24, pp. 287–288.

¹⁴ Isichei, *Victorian Quakers*, pp. 3–4.

¹⁵ For example, see Gurney, J. J., *Essays on the Evidences, Doctrines, and Practical Operation, of Christianity*, London: R. B. Seeley and W. Burnside, 5th edn, 1833, pp. 1–111; <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/njp.32101066132000> (accessed 17 June 2025); Gurney, J. J., *Four Lectures on the Evidences of Christianity, Delivered in Southwark, 1834, to the Junior Members of the Society of Friends*, London: Hamilton, Adams, & Co., 1835, pp. 1–108; <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.32044081820326> (accessed 17 June 2025). The latter work was a third-party report published without Gurney’s permission.

¹⁶ Gurney, *Essays*, p. vi.

¹⁷ Gurney, *Essays*, p. 89.

¹⁸ For example, see Hodgson, W., Jr., *An Examination of the Memoirs and Writings of Joseph John Gurney*, Philadelphia, Pa.: C. G. Henderson & Co., 1856, p. 95; <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.32044078869146> (accessed 17 June 2025).

¹⁹ For example, see Hamm, T. D., *The Transformation of American Quakerism: Orthodox Friends, 1800–1907*, Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1992 [1988], p. 21.

²⁰ Gurney, J. J., ‘Hints on the Portable Evidence of Christianity’, 4th edn, in *The Minor Works of Joseph John Gurney*, London: Harvey and Darton, 1839, vol. 1, pp. 221–402 at p. 235.

However, he does not follow this into a corollary whereby the Scriptures are considered to have lesser *authority* than direct and inward revelation. In his *Strictures* work,²¹ Gurney claims that the representation by early Quakers of the Spirit being ‘the primary Rule’²² was set within a context that ‘was not intended, as I conceive, to apply to the question of authority, but only to that of *order and dignity*’.²³ Similarly, in part of his response to the Congregationalist Ralph Wardlaw²⁴ who had published a critique of Quakerism,²⁵ Gurney argued that whilst the *Apology* was not without some shortcomings, he did not believe its aim had been to undermine the authority of the Scriptures because Barclay had acknowledged that any revelation contrary to them was not of God.²⁶ Gurney’s assertion therefore is that Barclay ‘does not set up one divine inspiration as superior in point of authority to another; for that which is divine is of God, and higher authority there cannot be’. Furthermore, he claims that Barclay gave precedence to the Scriptures’ authority in the sense that its authenticity as a divine source was already well evidenced in contrast to ‘that which is presumed to be inspiration’.²⁷

Gurney therefore does not afford the Bible a secondary status concerning authority because having originated from the Holy Spirit its authority is divine and thereby absolute, being neither tiered in anyway nor self-contradictory.²⁸ He does not see this position as being out of step with Friends’ beliefs, contending that Quakers have consistently affirmed ‘that the whole Scriptures ... were given by inspiration of God, and

²¹ Gurney, J. J., *Strictures on Certain Parts of an Anonymous Pamphlet entitled “The Truth Vindicated;” with Evidences of the Sound and Christian Views of the Society of Friends on the Subject of the Holy Scriptures*, London: John & Arthur Arch, 1836; <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.hnnnnl> (accessed 17 June 2025). *Strictures* was a polemic against an anonymous publication attributed to Henry Martin, see *The Truth Vindicated: being an appeal to the light of Christ within, and to the testimony of Holy Scriptures; by way of answer to a pamphlet, entitled “Extracts from Periodical Works on the Controversy Amongst the Society of Friends.”* [By Henry Martin.], London: Edmund Fry and Son, 2nd edn, 1836; <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.hnnnnk> (accessed 17 June 2025). Gurney viewed *Truth Vindicated* as an attempt to undermine the authority of the Bible, see Gurney, *Strictures*, p. ‘Advertisement’. The author of *Truth Vindicated* was a birthright member of the Society of Friends although it is not clear whether he had left the Society or not, see *Early Friends and Modern Professors. In reply to “Strictures,” by Joseph John Gurney. By the author of “the Truth Vindicated,”* [By Henry Martin.], London: Edmund Fry and Son, 1836, p. 14; <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.hnnnnj> (accessed 17 June 2025).

²² Gurney, *Strictures*, p. 24.

²³ Gurney, *Strictures*, p. 24. Gurney was also prepared to go further in suggesting that some of the early Friends had ‘expressed themselves obscurely, and it may be, even incorrectly, on this subject’, see Gurney, *Strictures*, p. 24.

²⁴ Brown, S. J., ‘Wardlaw, Ralph (1799–1853)’, in Matthew, H. C. G., and Harrison, B., (eds.), *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, vol 57, pp. 373–374.

²⁵ Wardlaw, R., *Friendly Letters to the Society of Friends, on some of their Distinguishing Principles*, Glasgow: Archibald Fullarton & Co., 1836; <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.32044081813792> (accessed 17 June 2025). Wardlaw’s work included an appraisal of Gurney’s views about immediate revelation, see Wardlaw, *Friendly Letters*, pp. 312–379.

²⁶ Gurney, J. J., *Friendly Letters to Dr. Wardlaw*, Norwich: printed by Josiah Fletcher, 1836, p. 7; <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/chi.090320953> (accessed 17 June 2025).

²⁷ Gurney, *Friendly Letters*, p. 8.

²⁸ Gurney, *Friendly Letters*, p. 6.

that they are therefore of direct divine authority'.²⁹ Of note is his use of the word 'direct'³⁰ because later in the same work when Gurney is discussing the operation of the Holy Spirit, he comments 'By *immediate* I mean *direct*, so that nothing is interposed between the soul which is acted on, and the power which acts.'³¹ Using an analogy of a student learning from their teacher, he sees no reason why written material produced by the teacher should not be considered as also operating as a form of direct communication.³² In other words, Gurney does not regard *different* modes of communication between God and an individual to necessarily mean that by default this should equate to a difference in *authority*.³³ Similarly, in his *Observations* work, he explains that in affirming 'the essential superiority of the Holy Spirit' the intention is not to suggest that the Scriptures are flawed in some way 'but ... to distinguish between that which is produced, and the power which produces it; between the work which we can see, and handle, and *its divine, unchangeable Author*'.³⁴ The delineation which Gurney makes between the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit is therefore not based on the criterion of *authority* and stands in contrast to other Friends of his day like Thomas Hancock³⁵ who could not accept the idea of the Bible being 'placed above the teaching of Christ's Holy Spirit by immediate revelation; because I dare not, as matter of principle, place the effect above the cause'.³⁶

Although Gurney questioned the way in which elements of theology had been presented in some of the early Quaker writings, he nonetheless also drew upon early Quaker works to demonstrate that they too affirmed the divine authority of the Scriptures. In an appendix to the *Strictures*, extracts from fourteen different Quaker sources³⁷ are

²⁹ Gurney, *Friendly Letters*, p. 6. In the *Essays*, Gurney also states his belief that both the Old and New Testaments are of 'divine authority' excepting a few verses from the Pauline corpus where Paul makes it clear the views expressed are his own, see Gurney, *Essays*, p. 107. Whilst Gurney proposed that some parts of the Scriptures may have been written under a form of divine inspiration different to other parts (see Gurney, *Essays*, pp. 97–98), he nonetheless considered 'that the whole contents of the Bible are of divine authority', see Gurney, *Essays*, p. 98. However, he did not view the Apocrypha as having the same authority, see Gurney, J. J., *Puseyism Traced to its Root, in a View of the Papal and Hierarchical System, as Compared with the Religion of the New Testament*, London: Charles Gilpin, 3rd edn, 1845, p. 7.

³⁰ Gurney, *Friendly Letters*, p. 6.

³¹ Gurney, *Friendly Letters*, p. 32.

³² Gurney, *Friendly Letters*, pp. 32–33.

³³ For further examples, see Gurney, J. J., *Sermons and Prayers, Delivered by Joseph John Gurney, in the Friends' Meeting House, Liverpool, 1832*, Liverpool: Thomas Hodgson, 2nd edn, 1832, p. 27; Gurney, *Four Lectures*, p. 186. The aforementioned works were third-party reports published without Gurney's permission.

³⁴ Gurney, J. J., *Observations on the Distinguishing Views & Practices of the Society of Friends*, London: John and Arthur Arch, 7th edn, 1834; p. 11.

³⁵ Magee, K., 'Hancock, Thomas (1783–1849)', in Matthew, H. C. G., and Harrison, B., (eds.), *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, vol. 25, p. 22.

³⁶ Hancock, T., *A Defence of the Doctrines of Immediate Revelation and Universal and Saving Light, in reply to some remarks contained in a work, entitled "A Beacon to the Society of Friends."* Liverpool: Thomas Hodgson, 1835, p. 8.

³⁷ Gurney, *Strictures*, pp. 35–39.

presented as attesting to ‘the divine origin and authority of the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament’.³⁸ Five of these extracts specifically refer to the “divine authority” of the Scriptures.³⁹ If therefore Gurney’s point is accepted, namely that divine authority is an absolute, it can be argued that there is some justification to his claim that early Friends accepted the *divine authority* of the Bible and therefore by implication that it was not viewed as being secondary with regards to authority. Furthermore, it is noticeable that the *Apology* lacks an unequivocal statement which says that the Scriptures are secondary in terms of *authority*. For example, Barclay’s comment that ‘the scriptures’ authority and certainty depend upon the Spirit by which they were dictated’⁴⁰ could be construed as meaning this but it is also open to an interpretation that the Scriptures represent a form of *delegated* divine authority which nonetheless remains divinely authoritative. For Barclay it would seem that the main point he wished to convey is that the Scriptures ‘are not the principal ground of truth’.⁴¹ It is argued that the ambiguity of language within the *Apology* on this subject meant that Gurney’s re-appraisal of what Barclay was seeking to convey about the Spirit, Bible and divine authority had some legitimacy.

Connections between Gurney and early Friends concerning the nature of divine authority can also be seen in the main body of *Strictures* which includes an extract from *Tractatus Hierographicus*,⁴² an eighteenth century work written by the Quaker Richard Claridge.⁴³ Part of the extract used by Gurney⁴⁴ bears a strong similarity to some of the wording in both the *Apology*⁴⁵ and the 1836 London Yearly Meeting (LYM) epistle,⁴⁶ the

³⁸ Gurney, *Strictures*, p. 35.

³⁹ These are ‘The Confession of Faith, signed by thirty-two Friends, and laid before Parliament, in 1693’; ‘William Penn, in his “Testimony to the Truth, &c.” published 1698’; ‘Samuel Fuller, in his “Serious Reply” ... written in 1728’; from ‘the Yearly Meeting, A. D. 1829’ and the ‘Declaration of the Yearly Meeting of Friends, held in Philadelphia, 1828.’, see Gurney, *Strictures*, pp. 36, 38–39.

⁴⁰ Barclay, *Apology*, p. 69.

⁴¹ Barclay, *Apology*, p. 69.

⁴² Gurney, *Strictures*, pp. 22–23. The original work is Claridge, R., *Tractatus Hierographicus: or, A Treatise of the Holy Scriptures; containing, I. An exhortation to the diligent reading of the Holy Scriptures. II. A Declaration of the true way, whereby we may come to know a profiting in the reading of them. III. That it is by the testimony of the Holy Spirit of God in the hearts of the faithful, that they do certainly and savingly know that the Holy Scriptures are given by Inspiration of God. IV. That the Holy Spirit of God is the principal and only certain and infallible expositor or Interpreter of them. V. That we may certainly know, whether we have the Holy Spirit of God, and that our doctrine is of him*, [The editor’s preface signed: J. B. i.e Joseph Besse], London: printed and sold by W. Ellis, 1724.

⁴³ Bickley, A. C., and Leachman, C. L., ‘Claridge, Richard (1649–1723)’, in Matthew, H. C. G., and Harrison, B., (eds.), *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, vol. 11, pp. 772–773.

⁴⁴ Gurney, *Strictures*, pp. 22–23.

⁴⁵ Barclay, *Apology*, p. 82.

⁴⁶ ‘Epistle, 1836.’ in London Yearly Meeting (Society of Friends), *Epistles from the Yearly Meeting of Friends, held in London, to the Quarterly and Monthly Meetings in Great Britain, Ireland, and Elsewhere; from 1681 to 1857, inclusive: with an historical*

latter having drawn upon some of Gurney's comments made at this yearly meeting.⁴⁷ This suggests a theological link between Barclay, Claridge and Gurney, and provides further evidence that Gurney's views on this issue are at least partially rooted in earlier Quaker belief.

It should also be borne in mind that Gurney was not the only Quaker of his day arguing the case for scriptural authority. Edward Ash held a similar position in that although he considered Barclay's phrasing 'an impropriety of language ... to designate the Spirit as a rule',⁴⁸ he did not believe Barclay was advocating 'a lower degree of authority to the Scriptures, than to immediate revelation'⁴⁹ but instead that he was placing a greater emphasis upon immediate revelation.⁵⁰ Fellow Quaker Richard Ball, also made the point that he (Ball) did not deny that the Holy Spirit was the source of the biblical record but 'that it is *not* the Holy Spirit and the Scriptures which are placed in competition'. Instead, Ball pinpoints the issue to being whether the 'revelation of truth' in the Bible is considered to be secondary in authority to the immediate revelation that an individual may experience. In his view without having the Scriptures as the final authority it becomes impossible to ascertain the spiritual authenticity of immediate revelation.⁵¹

(2) The *weight* of religious authority is seen by Gurney as being determined by the *magnitude* of revelation

Before developing Gurney's ideas further, it is helpful to set the scene by drawing upon an historical example of debate concerning the nature of immediate revelation. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, Samuel Newton of Norwich in his critique of the *Apology*, identified this issue as being 'the gordian knot of Quakerism'.⁵² Newton argued that for Friends to justify their stance on the primacy of the Spirit they would need to provide some kind of proof that their immediate revelation was of a higher nature than

introduction, and a chapter comprising some of the early epistles and records of the Yearly Meeting. London: Edward Marsh, 1858, vol. 2, pp. 270–274 at p. 272.

⁴⁷ As cited in Braithwaite, J. B., (ed.), *Memoirs of Joseph John Gurney; with selections from his Journal and Correspondence*, Norwich: Fletcher and Alexander, 1854, vol. 2, pp. 58–60.

⁴⁸ Ash, E., *An Inquiry into Some Parts of Christian Doctrine and Practice, Having Relation More Especially to the Society of Friends. With an Appendix*, London: Hamilton, Adams & Co., 1841, p. 240. Although Ash's surname does not appear in the publication, the initials 'E. A.' (i.e. Edward Ash) can be found at the end of the preface.

⁴⁹ Ash, *Inquiry*, p. 240.

⁵⁰ Ash, *Inquiry*, p. 241.

⁵¹ Ball, R., *Holy Scripture the Test of Truth: an appeal to its paramount authority against certain passages in Dr. Hancock's "Defence," and in the writings of Barclay and Penn*, London: Hamilton, Adams, and Co., 1835, p. 30.

⁵² Newton, S., *The Leading Sentiments of the People Called Quakers Examined, as They are Stated in Mr. Robert Barclay's Apology; with an answer to what Mr. Phipps has advanced for the defence of them, in his observations upon an epistle to the author of a letter to Dr. Formey*, London: printed by S. Burchall for E. and C. Dilly, 1771, p. 6; <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/nyp.33433069133001> (accessed 17 June 2025).

the written word⁵³ and that this would also mean claiming ‘that they had as great, or a greater measure, of the Spirit, than the writers of the New Testament’.⁵⁴ Responding to Newton, the Quaker Joseph Phipps⁵⁵ accepted that a greater measure of the Holy Spirit had been bestowed in the apostolic age but argued that because the source of immediate revelation in other times is also from the same Spirit there can be no self-contradiction.⁵⁶ For Phipps, ‘The Question is not, whether the Scriptures, as written by Divine Inspiration, are infallibly right, for such must be so, but whether every one that reads them, is able infallibly to understand them?’ In other words, their right interpretation is seen by him as only being possible through the guidance of the Holy Spirit.⁵⁷ The discourse between Newton and Phipps in trying to tease out the substance of what constitutes divine revelation and how it is to be understood, represented in microcosm the divide which existed at the time *between* the non-Quaker and Quaker worlds on this matter. However, what is significant in the nineteenth century, is that similar disputes had also emerged *within* the Society of Friends⁵⁸ with Gurney at the forefront of these discussions.

Whilst Gurney saw a parity between scriptural and direct revelation in the sense that both originate from the same divine source, the *relative weight of authority* that he attached to both forms of *revelation* differed. This is because for Gurney, ‘the most extraordinary outpouring of the Holy Spirit ever witnessed among men’⁵⁹ had taken place during the apostolic era and this in turn had inspired the New Testament writings which established in perpetuity the fundamental truths of the Christian faith.⁶⁰ Consequently, he is wary of anyone making claims that he considers might run counter to the weight of authority that was established in New Testament teachings and doctrine.⁶¹ In this regard, the idea that immediate revelation might be considered superior in authority to the Bible was robustly rejected by him.⁶² Gurney therefore argued, in contrast to Barclay,⁶³ that such revelation should be tested by the Scriptures⁶⁴ rather

⁵³ Newton, *Sentiments*, pp. 6–8.

⁵⁴ Newton, *Sentiments*, p. 45.

⁵⁵ Fell-Smith, C., and Allen, R. C., ‘Phipps, Joseph (1708–1787)’, in Matthew, H. C. G., and Harrison, B., (eds.), *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, vol. 44, pp. 187–188.

⁵⁶ Phipps, J., *The Original, and Present State of Man, Briefly Considered; wherein is shewn, the nature of his fall, and the necessity, means and manner of his restoration, through the sacrifice of Christ, and the sensible operation of that divine principle of grace and truth, held forth to the world by the people called Quakers. To which are added, some remarks on the arguments of Samuel Newton, of Norwich*, London: printed and sold by Mary Hinde, 1773, pp. 129–130.

⁵⁷ Phipps, *Original*, p. 131.

⁵⁸ For example, see Ash, *Inquiry* and Ball, *Holy Scripture*.

⁵⁹ Gurney, *Observations*, p. 476.

⁶⁰ Gurney, *Observations*, pp. 476–477.

⁶¹ For example, see Gurney, J. J., *A Letter to the Followers of Elias Hicks, in the City of Baltimore, and its Vicinity*. Baltimore, Md.: Woods and Crane, printers, 1839, pp. 23–25; <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/chi.15960379> (accessed 17 June 2025).

⁶² Gurney, *Strictures*, p. 24.

⁶³ Barclay, *Apology*, p. 18.

⁶⁴ Gurney, *Observations*, p. 93.

than vice-versa.⁶⁵ This approach can be seen in views expressed by him (albeit based on an unauthorised newspaper report) at the annual LYM gathering in 1836 in which he argued that Quakers should continue to uphold their distinctive practice of being led by God's Spirit but within the context of being faithful and answerable to the biblical record.⁶⁶ Edward Grubb's contention that Gurney had altered 'the basis of authority from inward to outward'⁶⁷ fails to acknowledge that Gurney is not underplaying the importance of the Holy Spirit but proposing a different insight as to how the Holy Spirit operates in the post-apostolic era.

(3) For Gurney, immediate revelation continues in the present day but operates within a post-apostolic framework of established fundamental Christian truths

In 1847, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, Orthodox (PYM),⁶⁸ published its *Appeal* which included an argument against Gurney's idea that 'to say that the Bible is "the only authorized record of divine truth," implies that nothing since the Scriptures were issued, has been written by Divine authority'. Yet saying this would mean that other writings 'which have been penned under a measure of the same divine influence and authority' would be ignored. Consequently, ascribing divine authority of a written work solely to the Bible would result, according to PYM, in the end of 'divine immediate revelation' in the modern age.⁶⁹ PYM's viewpoint appears to be in sharp contrast to Gurney's belief in the plenary nature of biblical authority. However, as will be further discussed, his position is more complex than this given the significance he attached to both the Bible and ongoing immediate revelation,⁷⁰ as for example both Simon Bright⁷¹ and David Swift⁷² have acknowledged.

⁶⁵ Gurney, *Strictures*, p. 24.

⁶⁶ *A Report of the Proceedings of the Yearly Meeting of the Society of Friends, Reprinted, with Corrections and Additions, from the "Christian Advocate" Newspaper, of May 23d and 30th; together with notes by members of the Society; to which is added, the Quakers' Yearly Epistle for 1836*, p. 15; <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.hnnnm> (accessed 17 June 2025).

⁶⁷ Grubb, E., 'The Evangelical Movement and its Impact on the Society of Friends. (Presidential Address to the Friends' Historical Society, 1923)', *Friends' Quarterly Examiner*, 58/229, (1924), pp. 1–34 at p. 32.

⁶⁸ Discussing the division within New England Yearly Meeting which took place in 1845, Rufus Jones claims that a majority within PYM around this time held an 'anti-Gurney' position; Jones, R. M., *The Later Periods of Quakerism*. London: Macmillan and Co., limited, 1921, vol. 1, p. 526; <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.32106006274861> (accessed 17 June 2025).

⁶⁹ *Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, An Appeal for the Ancient Doctrines of the Religious Society of Friends. Published by direction of the Yearly Meeting held in Philadelphia, in the fourth month, 1847: addressed to its members*, Philadelphia: printed by Joseph Kite & Co., 1847, p. 16; <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.hwjpb9> (accessed 17 June 2025).

⁷⁰ Gurney, *Observations*, pp. 92–93.

⁷¹ Bright, S., 'Friends Have No Cause to Be Ashamed of Being by Others Thought Non-Evangelical': Unity and Diversity of Belief among Early Nineteenth-Century British Quakers', in Swanson, R. N., (ed.), *Unity and Diversity in the Church. Papers read at the 1994 summer meeting and the 1995 winter meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1996, pp. 337–349 at pp. 344–345.

⁷² Swift, D. E., *Joseph John Gurney: Banker, Reformer, and Quaker*, Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1962, pp. 176–179.

Within the biblical narrative Gurney sees an unfolding of God's purposes through progressive revelation which reaches its fulfilment in the person of Jesus Christ and the arrival of a new spiritual dispensation.⁷³ He also believes that modern-day Christian works do not contain any *new essential* principles. Instead, he sees them reflecting to some degree what has already been presented in the Scriptures⁷⁴ because only the Scriptures hold all the necessary doctrines of the Christian faith.⁷⁵ However, this stance should not be judged as being totally juxtaposed to traditional Quaker belief because although PYM's *Appeal* had argued for the importance of continuing revelation it also categorically affirmed that all key doctrinal elements of Christian soteriology could be found in the Bible, that anything which contradicted the Scriptures was untrue and that other written works were not to be seen as being on an equal footing with the Bible.⁷⁶

It may therefore be asked how did Gurney envisage immediate revelation operating in the current age? Alister McGrath has highlighted how divine revelation can be viewed as a multi-faceted concept which does not necessarily have to be characterised by doctrinal considerations.⁷⁷ Building upon this general idea it can be argued that the emphasis which Gurney placed upon the work of the Spirit in leading an individual to a closer relationship with the Divine and a deeper understanding of the ways of God, is essentially acting in an immediate, direct and revelatory sense. As Gurney commented 'Saving knowledge is not a mere intellectual acquirement; it is a *spiritual apprehension* of divine things.'⁷⁸ There is ample evidence that Gurney believed the work of the Holy Spirit was of vital importance.⁷⁹ It was certainly something that was an integral part of his own faith; 'the "golden clue,"' was the phrase he used according to Anna, his daughter.⁸⁰ T. Vail Palmer's assertion that Gurney understood revelation as to 'know

⁷³ Gurney, 'Hints', pp. 235–239.

⁷⁴ For example, see Gurney, *Essays*, pp. 106–107.

⁷⁵ Gurney, *Strictures*, p. 23. See also Gurney, *Puseyism*, p. 10.

⁷⁶ Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, *Appeal*, p. 16.

⁷⁷ McGrath, A. E., *Christian Theology: an introduction*, Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 25th Anniversary 6th edn, 2017, pp. 137–141.

⁷⁸ Gurney, *Essays*, p. 450.

⁷⁹ For example, see Gurney, *Observations*, p. 76; Gurney, J.J., 'J. J. Gurney on the Doctrines of Friends; with Notes. To the Editor of the Christian Observer', *The Christian Observer*, No. 89 (new series), (May 1845), pp. 273–276 at pp. 275–276. Further examples can be seen in extracts from two letters written by Gurney; one to Isaac Crewdson, and the other in which he offers spiritual guidance to some of his young relatives and stresses the importance which Quakers attach to the work of the Holy Spirit alongside the Scriptures, as cited in Braithwaite, *Memoirs* v2, pp. 20–23 and pp. 151–152 respectively.

⁸⁰ As cited in Braithwaite, *Memoirs* v2, p. 522.

about God'⁸¹ rather than subscribing to Barclay's emphasis to 'know God'⁸² can be queried because it does not take into account the importance which Gurney also attached to experiential faith.⁸³

In part of his *Declaration* concerning 'the immediate and perceptible operation of the Holy Spirit',⁸⁴ Gurney describes how this can make 'clear to the mind' a person's understanding of divine truth and help guide outward actions to reflect an inward spiritual transformation including the distinctive testimonies of Friends such as refusing to swear oaths or participate in any form of warfare. The role of the Holy Spirit in discerning the part each person might play within their worshipping community is also highlighted.⁸⁵

Gurney saw a natural relationship between the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit in which 'The law written in the book, and the law written on the heart, have proceeded from the same Author: ... and therefore they can never fail to correspond.'⁸⁶ Whilst he affirms that Friends believed in the necessity of relying upon the Holy Spirit for a right understanding of the Bible, Gurney also makes clear this is not the same as basing interpretation upon a subjective personal opinion.⁸⁷ Neither are the Scriptures seen by him as a written record captured in the past. Instead, they are a vibrant and lively source which can help nurture an individual's faith,⁸⁸ provide the soundest of guidance in matters of morality and religion,⁸⁹ and present the person of Jesus Christ as a perfect pattern to follow.⁹⁰

A final point of discussion relates to Gurney's view 'that the *moral law* is, to a certain extent, immediately revealed to all men, *independently of the book*'.⁹¹ He also affirmed Friends' belief that because of Christ's atonement everyone had 'a measure of divine light' and that salvation remained a possibility even if someone was unaware

⁸¹ Palmer, T. V., Jr., 'Some Issues from Nineteenth Century Quakerism', *Quaker Religious Thought*, 92/article 2, (1999), pp. 5–40 at p. 12; <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt/vol92/iss1/2> (accessed 17 June 2025).

⁸² Palmer, 'Issues', p. 11.

⁸³ For example, see Gurney, *Observations*, pp. 75–98.

⁸⁴ Gurney, J. J., *A Declaration, by the Late Joseph John Gurney, of His Faith Respecting Several Points of Christian Doctrine*, Boston: printed by S. N. Dickinson & Co., 1847, p. 10; <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.32044081820383> (accessed 17 June 2025).

⁸⁵ Gurney, *Declaration*, pp. 10–11.

⁸⁶ Gurney, *Observations*, p. 93.

⁸⁷ Gurney, J.J., 'Mr. J. J. Gurney Upon the Divine Nature, and the Doctrines of Friends. To the Editor of the Christian Observer', *The Christian Observer*, No. 407, (1835), pp. 668–675 at p. 674.

⁸⁸ Gurney, 'Hints', pp. 231–232.

⁸⁹ Gurney, 'Hints', p. 233.

⁹⁰ Gurney, J. J., 'On the Moral Character of Our Lord Jesus Christ' in *The Minor Works of Joseph John Gurney*, London: Harvey and Darton, 1839, vol. 2, pp. 117–134 at pp. 130–132.

⁹¹ As cited in Braithwaite, *Memoirs* v2, p. 152.

of the biblical narrative.⁹² But Gurney considered it imperative that individuals engage with the Bible if it was available to them. He sees this as having been embedded within early Quaker practice and that Friends understood this to be the way ‘to expect the more abundant light and influence of the Holy Spirit’.⁹³ As part of his private response to Hancock’s *Defence* and its reference to the role of the Holy Spirit, Gurney argues that Hancock had not adequately distinguished between direct inward revelation and the universal Light Within.⁹⁴ Gurney saw this as a fundamental error because he considered the former as taking place within the context of an individual specifically growing in their *Christian* faith.⁹⁵

(4) Epistemological assumptions made by Gurney and Barclay

The theological frameworks used by Gurney and Barclay to articulate their understanding of religious authority contain assumptions about how divine revelation is received, interpreted and understood. In this section, it is argued that these assumptions not only raise particular issues in their own right but also share common ground in that they compound the challenge of knowing with certainty what is being communicated through revelation.

Beginning with Gurney and his belief in the ‘divine authority’ of the Bible,⁹⁶ a question naturally arises concerning how he expected the Scriptures to be interpreted and understood. At a fundamental level, Gurney believed that it was only through the agency of the Holy Spirit that a true understanding of the Scriptures was possible.⁹⁷ However, he was willing to adopt hermeneutical methods such as the use of ‘philology’ to help support his understanding of biblical texts⁹⁸ and he also embraced an analytical approach to theological matters.⁹⁹ His engagement with the Scriptures therefore included a structured methodology for study in contrast to the Quietist tradition which eschewed such practices.¹⁰⁰

⁹² Gurney, *Declaration*, p. 8.

⁹³ Gurney, *Observations*, p. 10.

⁹⁴ As cited in Braithwaite, *Memoirs* v2, p. 33.

⁹⁵ As cited in Braithwaite, *Memoirs* v2, pp. 33–34.

⁹⁶ Gurney, ‘Hints’, p. 295.

⁹⁷ For example, see Gurney, J. J., *Essay on the Habitual Exercise of Love to God, Considered as a Preparation for Heaven*. London: R. B. Seeley and W. Burnside, 3rd edn, 1835, p. 77.

⁹⁸ Gurney, J. J., *Thoughts on Habit and Discipline*, London: Hamilton, Adams and Co., 4th edn, 1847, p. 128.

⁹⁹ For example, see Gurney, *Thoughts*, p. 85.

¹⁰⁰ For example, see Grubb, J., and Grubb, H., (eds.), *A Selection from the Letters of the Late Sarah Grubb, (Formerly Sarah Lynes)*, Sudbury: J. Wright, 1848, p. 334; <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.32044081819781> (accessed 17 June 2025). This was a written recollection made by a third-party, see Grubb and Grubb, *Selection*, p. 333.

Gurney's understanding of biblical authority in relation to exegesis of the scriptural text raises further issues. The first concerns whether some of his own particular interpretations were sufficiently robust and able to stand scrutiny.¹⁰¹ Additionally, whilst it is true, as Gurney himself argued, that there is much theological agreement between different Christian traditions¹⁰² there are nonetheless some areas of belief and practice which are disputed. For example, his upholding of the Quaker position of rejecting outward sacraments and rites stands well apart from the position of the wider Church.¹⁰³ Secondly, Gurney's approach to biblical studies also opened up another dimension to his work which led him to challenge what he considered as the mis-interpretation by some Friends of particular passages of Scripture. As a result, this meant that his own biblical interpretations were sometimes pitted against aspects of Quaker tradition.¹⁰⁴ Thirdly, his general confidence that past theological controversies had reached a settled position by the nineteenth century was too optimistic given the emergence during this period of new strands of thought about the Bible and Christian doctrine.¹⁰⁵

For Barclay, belief in the primacy of '*immediate and divine revelation*'¹⁰⁶ meant that his view of the Scriptures was bifurcated in that he saw them as not being indispensable¹⁰⁷ and yet they provided '*a full and ample testimony to all the principal doctrines of the Christian faith*'.¹⁰⁸ As Hugh Pyper has pointed out, given this 'contingent' nature of the Bible which Barclay presents to the reader, the role of the Scriptures within Quaker

¹⁰¹ For example, Gurney argues the case for one particular interpretation of 1 Timothy 3:16, see Gurney, J. J., *Biblical Notes and Dissertations, Chiefly Intended to Confirm and Illustrate the Doctrine of the Deity of Christ; with some remarks on the practical importance of that doctrine*, London: C. and J. Rivington and J. and A. Arch, 2nd edn, 1833, pp. 373–405. His confidence in this view was challenged, see M. J. M., 'On Mr. Gurney's Dissertation on I Tim. III.16. To the Editor of the Christian Observer', *The Christian Observer*, No. 405, (September 1835), pp. 534–36. This in turn led Gurney to defend his position, see Joseph John Gurney, 'Mr. J. J. Gurney on I Tim. III.16. To the Editor of the Christian Observer', *The Christian Observer*, No. 407, (November 1835), pp. 655–56. Braithwaite comments that the opinion in biblical scholarship which later emerged differed from Gurney's interpretation of the verse, see Braithwaite, J. B. (ed.), *Memoirs of Joseph John Gurney; with selections from his Journal and Correspondence*, Norwich: Fletcher and Alexander, 1854, vol. 1, p.431. See also as cited in Braithwaite, *Memoirs* v1, pp. 539–542.

¹⁰² Gurney, *Observations*, pp. 44–48.

¹⁰³ Gurney, *Observations*, pp. 99–177. George Bliss published a work specifically to refute Gurney's views on the sacraments, see Bliss, G., *The Obligatory Nature of the Sacraments; or, strictures on Mr. Gurney's remarks respecting Baptism and the Lord's Supper*, London: printed for J. Hatchard & Son by W. Mason, Chichester, 1826.

¹⁰⁴ Gurney, J. J., *Brief Remarks on Impartiality in the Interpretation of Scripture*, Norwich: printed for private circulation only. Printed by Josiah Fletcher, 1836.

¹⁰⁵ For example, Friedrich Schleiermacher's Christological views concerning the two natures of Christ, see Schleiermacher, F., *The Christian Faith*, Mackintosh, H. R., and Stewart, J. S., (eds.), English translation of the 2nd German edn, 1968 [1928], Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, pp. 391–398.

¹⁰⁶ Barclay, *Apology*, p. 19.

¹⁰⁷ Barclay, *Apology*, pp. 176–177.

¹⁰⁸ Barclay, *Apology*, p. 87.

faith becomes less obvious.¹⁰⁹ Moreover, in a separate work to the *Apology*, Barclay proposed the existence of ‘*Supernatural and Spiritual Senses*’ as the means by which inward immediate revelation can be truly known.¹¹⁰ Maurice Creasey has argued that Barclay’s understanding of “‘inward’” revelation being separate to any “‘outward’” revelation suggests the former is acting as a *parallel* revelation set apart from the outward biblical record.¹¹¹ Whilst bearing Creasey’s point in mind, it is however also important to acknowledge that in the *Apology* Barclay makes clear his view that ‘we distinguish betwixt a revelation of a *new gospel*, and *new doctrines*, and a *new revelation* of the *good old gospel* and *doctrines*; the last we plead for, but the first we utterly deny’.¹¹² There is therefore a real tension and potential paradox in Barclay’s beliefs about the role the Scriptures should play within the Christian faith.

Barclay’s theological position is further complicated in that he draws upon the Bible to affirm the pre-eminence of the Holy Spirit¹¹³ even though he considers the Scriptures to be the ‘secondary rule’,¹¹⁴ which as Jack Dobbs has noted represents an inconsistency within his argument.¹¹⁵ Additionally, although Barclay does not see any automatic need for immediate revelation to be tested, in the event that this should be necessary, the Scriptures are seen as the only appropriate external benchmark to use.¹¹⁶ Frederick Lucas, a nineteenth century Roman Catholic convert from Quakerism,¹¹⁷ argued that using the Scriptures in this way would seem to undermine the position that he believed Friends like Barclay had taken in their questioning of biblical certitude.¹¹⁸

The idea of ‘inward illumination’¹¹⁹ formed an essential part of Barclay’s paradigm for immediate revelation. Whilst he accepted the possibility that the trustworthiness of immediate revelation could be undermined, for example by ‘the

¹⁰⁹ Pyper, H. S., ‘Robert Barclay: The Art of Apologetics’ in Angell, S. W., and Dandelion, P., (eds.), *Early Quakers and Their Theological Thought 1647–1723*, New York, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 207–223 at p. 213.

¹¹⁰ Barclay, R., *The Possibility & Necessity of the Inward and Immediate Revelation of the Spirit of God, Towards the Foundation and Ground of True Faith, Proved, in a Letter Writ in Latin to the Heer Paets and Now Also Put into English*, London: re-printed and sold by T. Sowle, 1703, p. 13.

¹¹¹ Creasey, M. A., “‘Inward’ and “‘Outward’”: A Study in Early Quaker Language’, *Journal of the Friends’ Historical Society*, supplement No. 30, (1962). p. 12; <https://journals.sas.ac.uk/FHSS/issue/view/547> (accessed 17 June 2025).

¹¹² Barclay, *Apology*, pp. 87–88.

¹¹³ Barclay, *Apology*, p. 31. Although the biblical text is not referenced it is part of 1 Corinthians 12:3.

¹¹⁴ Barclay, *Apology*, p. 65.

¹¹⁵ Dobbs, J. P. B., *Authority and the Early Quakers*, Frenchay, South Gloucestershire: Martin Hartog, 2006, p. 71.

¹¹⁶ Barclay, *Apology*, p. 82.

¹¹⁷ Riethmüller, C. J., *Frederick Lucas. A Biography*, London: Bell and Daldy, 1862, pp. 6 and 61; <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/bc.ark:/13960/t76t4jc79> (accessed 17 June 2025).

¹¹⁸ Lucas, F., *Reasons for Becoming a Roman Catholic; addressed to the Society of Friends*, London: Charles Dolman, 1839, p. 24.

¹¹⁹ Barclay, *Apology*, p. 18.

Imagination of Man', he maintains the infallibility of authentic '*Divine Illumination*'.¹²⁰ However, Barclay's belief that immediate revelation 'is evident and clear of itself'¹²¹ belies the reality that an individual's claim of immediate revelation does not always align with the experience of others, as events within Quaker history have sometimes shown.¹²² The emergence of *collective* discernment as a way to help determine revelatory truth highlights how early Friends believed that *individual* immediate revelation could not always operate without boundaries.¹²³ It can be argued that collective discernment led to a form of tradition which became a developing source of religious authority in its own right within Quakerism. This not only helped to define Quaker identity but also carried with it the potential to resist any future insights if it was perceived that these might undermine what had already been established.¹²⁴

Concluding thoughts

Gurney does not distinguish between the divinely inspired Scriptures and genuine direct inward revelation in terms of the origins of their religious authority, seeing both coming about through the work of the Holy Spirit and being of divine authority. In this sense he conflates divine inspiration with immediate revelation. As divine authority constitutes the highest level of authority irrespective of the mode by which it is conveyed, Gurney therefore does not consider scriptural authority to be secondary in its nature, a position which he believed Barclay and the early Friends also held. However, Gurney places a greater emphasis on scriptural revelation because of the hugely significant outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the apostolic age and the New Testament writings which followed. This does not mean that he thought the agency of the Holy Spirit had come to an end. On the contrary, he considered the Holy Spirit continues to play a vital role in the life of the Christian and the wider Church. In this regard and like Barclay, Gurney did not

¹²⁰ Barclay, *Possibility*, p. 19.

¹²¹ Barclay, *Apology*, p. 18.

¹²² For example, the controversy associated with the Quaker John Perrot, see Gwyn, D., *Seekers Found: atonement in early Quaker experience*, Wallingford, Pa.: Pendle Hill Publications, 2000, pp. 340–347.

¹²³ For example, see 'A Testimony from the Brethren, who were met together at London in the third month, 1666, to be communicated to faithful friends and elders in the counties, by them to be read in their several meetings, and kept as a testimony amongst them' as cited in Barclay, A. R., (ed.), *Letters, &c., of Early Friends; illustrative of the history of the Society, from nearly its origin, to about the period of George Fox's decease; with documents respecting its early discipline, also epistles of counsel and exhortation, &c.*, London: Harvey and Darton, 1841, pp. 318–324; <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.ah39t9> (accessed 17 June 2025). See also Dandelion, *Introduction*, p. 45.

¹²⁴ For example, see Wilbur, J., *Two Letters, in relation to the Doctrines and Condition, as Well as Order and Usages of the Society of Friends. To which is appended a contrast of some of the doctrines of J. J. Gurney, with those of Robert Barclay, and other standard writers of the same faith. By another hand*, n.p., 1844, p.13; <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.hnnnna> (accessed 17 June 2025).

believe this would lead to existing essential Christian truths and doctrine being altered but in contrast to Barclay he proactively argues the case that the authenticity of any new revelation be tested by the weight of the Scriptures.¹²⁵

It is critical to appreciate that Gurney's reliance upon scriptural authority is not an end in itself. It is *because* of his confidence in the Bible's divine authority that he is able to affirm belief in what its narrative conveys to him, namely God's final revelation in Jesus Christ.¹²⁶ It is therefore the recorded *revelation* within the Scriptures which is of paramount importance to him. Consequently, it is argued this is why in his *Declaration*, he is also able to affirm the early Quaker position of not describing the Bible as “*the word of God*,” because I am of opinion that this epithet, considered as a distinguishing and exclusive title, properly belongs only to Christ of whom the Scriptures testify'.¹²⁷ Accordingly, whilst Gurney upheld the divine authority of the Scriptures and the words contained therein, he highlights that their purpose is to convey this revelation.

¹²⁵ See article sections under sub-headings (1) to (3).

¹²⁶ Gurney, *Puseyism*, pp. 14–15.

¹²⁷ Gurney, *Declaration*, p. 7.

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