

The Seed of God is the Quaker Message

By Karen Tibbals, Rahway-Plainfield Monthly Meeting

Today, the phrase “that of God within” may be the closest thing to a creed that Quakers today have. Notable 20th century Quaker Lewis Benson wrote about it, as Steve Davison has reviewed in his blog, [Through the Flaming Sword](http://throughtheflamingsword.wordpress.com/category/early-quaker-theology/that-of-god/page/2/). (you can read that post at throughtheflamingsword.wordpress.com/category/early-quaker-theology/that-of-god/page/2/)

Steve feels that today’s Quakers don’t think about what that phrase really means and, in fact, don’t really **know** what it means. As I have been in conversation with Friends about the meaning of this phrase, I have come to understand that what is underneath this phrase for at least some Quakers is a reverence for the sacredness of life. This is very similar to the metaphor of the world as God’s body, as conceptualized by the theologian Sallie McFague. (For those who are interested in this concept, I recommend her book [The Body of God](#).)

But I think what the early Quakers meant by the term “that of God within” goes beyond both what Sallie McFague’s Body of God metaphor and beyond what is understood today by Quakers. I would echo Steve’s comment that the phrase is not fully understood, but more than that; that our modern understanding lacks the power that early Quakers assigned to the phrase.

To understand the power that early Quakers experienced, we need to know what other words or phrases they also used. British Quaker and theologian Patricia Williams has developed a helpful list of other terms that she found used interchangeably for “that of God” in writings of early Quakers: “living bread, teacher, voice, peace, lamb, morning star, that of God within, Christ within, Word of God within the heart, witness, anointing, grace, covenant, measure, cross, life in Christ, the life in the world, and confusingly, the gospel.” Not on her list, but also used, were “Spark” and “The Light Within” and “Seed of God”.

Robert Barclay (1648 – 1690), (the first male Quaker systematic theologian – yes, there was a woman also – see below) used the concept when he answers the question posed by opponents to Quakerism about evil people. Patricia Williams explains Robert Barclay’s thoughts as follows: “In some it (that of God or the Seed of God) remains undeveloped. In some, it is rejected. ... It can be, and is, resisted. However, in people who do not resist it but receive it, it matures.” (All quotes from Patricia Williams, [Quakerism, A theology for our times](#), 2008 Infinity Publishing, page 14.)

That Seed of God is not natural to humans, as Barclay says: “Adam did not retain in his nature any will or light capable to give him knowledge in spiritual things...for whatsoever real good any man doth, it proceedeth not from his nature.... but from the Seed of God in him, as a new visitation of life, in order to bring him out of this natural condition.” ([Barclay’s Apology](#), page 97)

Elizabeth Bathurst, the first female Quaker theologian (1655-1685) whose work was published posthumously, and who was probably writing after Barclay's Apology was published in English in 1678, agreed with Barclay that humans had both the Seed of Sin and the Seed of God within. As she wrote in her seminal work, *Truth's Vindication*, "the *Seed of Sin*, which Satan hath sown in us, defiled ... our first and fallen Nature." In her clearest description of the Seed of God, she doesn't say those exact words but uses other related terms: "God hath communicated and given unto every man a measure of the light of his own Son, a measure of grace, or a measure of the Spirit, which the scripture expresses by several names, as sometimes of the Seed of the kingdom..... the light that makes all things manifest."

According to Bathurst, our goodness doesn't come from our human nature; it comes from the Seed of God. Echoing Barclay, she says: "for whatsoever real good any man doth, it proceedeth not from his nature, as he is man, or the son of *Adam*; but from the *Seed of God in him*, as a new visitation of life, in order to bring him out of this natural condition: so that, though it be *in him*, yet it is not *of him*."

She agrees that the Seed of God can be resisted: "this may be resisted and rejected in both, in which then God is said to be resisted and pressed down... And to those who thus resist and refuse him, he becomes their condemnation. "

A Biblical example of resisting the Seed of God is the rich young man who resists giving away all his worldly goods to follow Jesus. (Matthew 19:22)

Learning about the concept of the Seed of God has enhanced my worship practice. My prayer for myself each day is that I am open to God's will. The Seed of God matures in me when I spend time in worship and take time to do other spiritual practices. That is my choice, my free will, whether to be open to the Seed of God.

Most importantly, the Seed of God is transforming. Bathurst and Barclay both call the fruits of it a "new visitation of life." Bathurst says it brings one "out of this natural condition." Marcelle Martin covers the topic of the transformation experienced by Quakers (both historical and contemporary) wonderfully in her book, Our Life is Love. How many of us Quakers today can say we have been changed by an encounter with the Seed of God? Or are we just relying on "that of God" in the sacredness of life and not encountering the power to be found in a relationship with God?

Personally, I have experienced this power. When I am open to the Seed of God, I receive leadings and messages from God. This Seed of God doesn't lead me in a worldly way, and doesn't give me rational messages; instead, it leads me in a way that makes sense to God. For example, I left my well-paying job several years ago and went back to school to study Quakerism at the Quaker seminary, Earlham School of Religion, which made no sense in a worldly way. At the same time, I have also undergone changes in my personality, for example becoming more open and able to listen to others. This all happened because of the

transformation I continue to experience as I open myself to the Seed of God. As a wise person recently said to me, “God doesn’t call the prepared, God prepares the called.” I believe I have been becoming prepared for my ministry of helping to birth the Quakers & Business group.

I find a prayer using this concept particularly useful when someone’s behavior is upsetting to me. A friend of mine recently asked if it was ok to pray for a person to have a heart attack and die. In my opinion, it is not helpful to pray for that. I don’t think focusing on negative energy is helpful at all! Instead, in similar situations, I pray for God to open that person’s heart to the Seed of God in them. This prayer keeps me out of deciding what is right to happen.

Finally, to me, the concept of the Seed of God represents a core message of Quakerism. The message that the Seed of God is transformative is a unique message, one that resonated with the early Quakers and is still true today. It is my belief that our job as Quakers is not to carry the message about what we think others should or shouldn’t do. My belief that the core message needs to be that everyone can be changed if they spend time experiencing the Seed of God. We can change the world if we convince others to open themselves to the Seed of God within them, and not close themselves off from it—whatever they call it.

For those who are interested in reading Elizabeth Bathurst’s [Truth Vindicated](#), an online copy can be found at the Digital Quaker Collection of the Earlham School of Religion Website.