

JOHN SALTMARSH: QUAKER FORERUNNER

It has been a goal of my studies of early Friends over the past 25 years to trace the developments in English religion and politics that led up to the emergence of early Friends, and understanding the quaker movement as a response to those developments. In other words, what were the questions to which early Quakerism was the answer? For whom was that answer so compelling? I have struggled to find answers to those questions theologically (in *Apocalypse of the Word*), politically (in *The Covenant Crucified*) and socio-spiritually (in *Seekers Found*).¹

A variety of events, movements and key figures form the trajectory of development from radical Puritanism into early Quakerism. One figure that emerges luminously among an amazing assortment of proto-Quakers is John Saltmarsh, who died at the end of 1647 at the age of 35. The meteoric last five years of his life form a remarkable prophetic witness. The interaction of religious and political ideas in his publications is revealing. Also, his references to Seekers in the mid-1640s offer the most substantial early information and interpretation of what that loose collection of church drop-outs was about. Understanding the Seeker ferment of the 1640s and '50s provides important clues to the formation of early Quaker consciousness. It is intriguing to wonder how Saltmarsh would have interacted with early Friends, had he lived long enough. But it is worth noting that he is mentioned most often by early Friends themselves as their forerunner.² So a brief glimpse of Saltmarsh's prophetic career offers useful impressions of the Seeker tendency of the 1640s that prepared the way for the powerful Quaker conviction of the following decade. In his brief biography of Saltmarsh, A.L. Morton describes him as 'perhaps the most talented and influential of all the preachers of the antinomian left. Yet little is known of his antecedents or early life, and little would lead us to anticipate his later developments'.³ Indeed, the religious and political territory Saltmarsh covered during his last years, 1642 to 1647, is startling. As late as 1640, he was apparently a conventional parish minister and devotional writer.

Early Publications

Saltmarsh was probably born in Yorkshire around 1612. We know that he graduated with a Master's degree from Magdalen College, Cambridge in 1636 and that he published a small volume of metaphysical poetry that same year. By 1639, he had become rector at Hasterton in Yorkshire (most likely his home county). He also published that year *The Practice of Policie in a Christian Life Taught by Scriptures*. Totalling over three hundred pages, this compendium contains 486 maxims for Christian life, each supported by biblical citations. Nothing outside Puritan orthodoxy appears yet.

But the events of 1642 quickly rallied Saltmarsh to the cause of religious freedom. He later recalled that he was at first a 'stickler in Yorkshire for the Parliament'.⁴ But the Solemn League and Covenant in 1643 soon led him to qualify his support. That year, he hurriedly published *Examinations*, a reply to a published sermon of Thomas Fuller. Fuller had urged citizens to pray for Parliament and the Westminster Assembly of Divines as they set about to reform the English church and state. But he advised them not to meddle in this great work; reformation was the business of supreme authority alone. Moreover, people should not build up hopes for a perfect reformation or a utopian society. After all, latter-day divines did not enjoy the same level of inspiration possessed by the apostles.

Saltmarsh countered that all English people had an interest in reform and a role to play in it. He further asserted that the apostles had light for their times; the English people were presently receiving new light for new times. He concluded that, with the startling events now unfolding, 'who cannot think that we are rising to that age where God shall pour his Spirit upon all flesh?' We detect here an insistent utopian belief that God was doing something unprecedented in England, fulfilling the prophecy of Joel 2:28, re-enacting the Pentecostal origins of the early church (Acts 2). In this conviction, Saltmarsh appears already moving toward a Seeker outlook: England was on the threshold of a new revelation, a new Pentecostal beginning for the church. There was debate in Parliament regarding Saltmarsh's tract. Some found it extreme while others defended it heatedly. By this time, Saltmarsh was identified with the Independent movement in Puritanism, a coalition of clergy and political leaders opposing the Westminster Assembly's Presbyterian plans for a national church, advocating instead a more decentralised system of congregationally ordered parishes, electing their own elders and ministers. But his writing suggests that Saltmarsh was on the radical wing of the Independents.⁵

In October 1644, Saltmarsh published another short political tract, *A Peace but No Pacification*, urging Parliament not to compromise with Charles but to fight on and vanquish him. (This 'win the war' party was headed in Parliament by Oliver Cromwell, who would create the so-called New Model Army in the coming year.) Meanwhile, his own ministry continued to evolve and radicalise. That same year, he concluded that tithes were unchristian and renounced his parish post at Hasterton, even returning his past year's income. Not long after, he accepted a rectorship at Brasted, Kent, where he refused tithe support. For the first year, he accepted voluntary contributions. Thereafter, he accepted no financial support at all.⁶

The beginning of 1645 saw the release of his most advanced political statement, *Dawnings of Light*, the first to be published by Giles Calvert, the great radical publisher of the day. The tract begins with a challenging dedicatory epistle to Parliament: 'unless we be more sanctified, our enemies do not fall by any divine favor toward us, but by the provocation of their own sins...then their ruin will scarcely be our salvation, but they will only be the first to fall'.⁷ What follows this prophetic warning is an intriguing meditation on the interaction of divine and human interests in reformation. Saltmarsh admits that his musings merely wander 'in the unbounded wafts of Theology', but he imagines that a 'transcendent science' can be devised, using exact and particular methods of inquiry. Generally, the interests of Christ need to be separated from those of the state. Mixing the two only darkens Christ's kingdom and subverts established government.

Saltmarsh urges orthodox Puritans to study the Scriptures anew, in order to see how much latitude they offer both in both doctrine and practice. That should discourage them from trying to impose their understandings upon others. Meanwhile, for their part, dissenting groups should be just as concerned to contribute to the common good as they are to promote their particular sectarian agendas. As in all his writings, Saltmarsh retains a generous and even-handed approach. He pleads for an inclusive sense of the body of Christ, one that allows different degrees and manners of reformation ('coming out of Babylon') to coexist. Name-calling only accentuates division and weakens the nation against its common enemy. Groups withdrawing into their own conventicles should not be labelled as schismatic or sectarian. Saltmarsh prefers the term 'suspension' to 'separation'.⁸

Seeking must be everyone's vocation at this time: 'When tidings of publique calamity are abroad, then is the season of seeking God, and enquiring after sin, and putting God in minde of covenants, and

engagements that he stands in to his people'.⁹ Thus, God is not some inert object to be groped after; our very seeking stimulates God's own faithful response. *Dawnings of Light* is an intriguing treatise of Christian political philosophy, brimming with optimism and fresh, liberal intellectual currents. Its discussion of the 'interests' in reformation, and its almost 'free-market' approach to religious diversity breathe the hopeful spirit of nascent capitalism. Its advocacy of scientific methods of analysis in religious matters suggests a social-scientific outlook far ahead of the times. Saltmarsh was well on his way into uncharted regions. In these aspects of his thought, Saltmarsh sounds many themes that will be developed by the liberal Enlightenment later in the seventeenth century.

Free-Grace

At the end of 1645, Saltmarsh took a more theological tack with *Free-Grace*, subtitled *The Flowings of Christ's Blood Freely to Sinners*. Published by Calvert, this book went through eight printings by 1661. It deserves some detailed attention here, for it prompted Puritan critics to label Saltmarsh an antinomian and libertine. Such accusations were inspired by his attack upon the casuistry that had overtaken much Puritan spiritual counsel. The doctrine of predestination, asserting that souls were either elect or damned from the beginning of time, implied that salvation was a status to be *inferred* rather than sought. Thus, individuals were directed to examine themselves for signs of their election. For example, moral virtue and industry might be signs of God's grace at work. Puritan divines reassured anxious souls that even the *desire* for salvation might be a hopeful indicator. That approach worked well enough for many average parishioners. But for more introspective and morally scrupulous souls, it became a maddening hall of mirrors.

Free-Grace purports to be the experience of a soul wracked by feelings of guilt and unworthiness. Morton believes this to be Saltmarsh's own story, but the prose is so ambiguous and garbled that this is difficult to confirm. It may just as easily be someone Saltmarsh interviewed, as the text states, or a composite portrait of several persons he had known. In any case, the individual was haunted by an accusing conscience. He went to hear sermons, but with no relief. He feared not going to church; he feared going as well, since it would be an abomination for an unregenerate soul to take communion. He went to ministers for help. They generally told him that his troubled conscience was a sign of God's work in him. But rather than preaching Christ and salvation to him, they prescribed 'religious duties' (prayer, church attendance, Bible study, etc.). He

complained that he could not make himself pray. The minister answered that even the desire to pray was prayer. This didn't help: what if his desire to pray was simply for his own sake and not for God's glory? The minister responded that even *the desire to desire to pray* was a sign of grace!¹⁰

The poor soul concluded that he was not really sorry for his sins, but simply afraid of hell. This was a legal sorrow, a merely slavish terror, not the terror of a true child of God, with brokenness and meltings of the heart. Ministers went through the Bible with him, reading the promises of salvation there, to see if they stirred some hopeful feeling in his heart. This common practice was called 'applying the promises'.¹¹ But he could feel only his own miserable, selfish spirit. Slowly, the individual became suicidal, attempting to take his own life at least once. But messages of God's love slowly came into his heart. He began to see that God had already pardoned his sins. *Free-Grace* concludes by advising others not to resort to Puritan regimens of religious exercise, 'lest you perish in the sparks you kindle, as I almost did'. In other words, trying to *infer* one's salvation from self-induced 'sparks' of hope is a futile exercise. Saltmarsh urges ministers to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ first and foremost, rather than prescribe legalistic 'duties'.¹² Otherwise, doubt will consume some souls

Saltmarsh summarises: God covenants with us in *Christ*, not on the basis of any human merit. We love God because God loved us first. Christ died for all. Just as all are dead in Adam, all that live are alive in Christ.¹³ At times in this book, Saltmarsh still holds out for predestination, insisting that it remains a 'secret thing'. But he is willing to use the term 'general redemption' as well.¹⁴ To the Calvinist mind, Saltmarsh had undermined God's sovereignty in human redemption. Christ's death for all, without redemption, seemed to place freedom on the side of human decision to accept or not (although Saltmarsh insisted that salvation was all God's work). Moreover, if the 'duties' of Christian piety were swept aside, then how was spiritual and moral regeneration to occur? After all, anxious self-doubt provided the fuel for a great deal of Puritan self-improvement and social betterment. Such concerns underlay the accusations against Saltmarsh of an 'antinomian' and 'libertine'. Indeed, we can see this problem in a 1652 letter of Dorothy Howgill (wife of Francis Howgill) to George Fox. She confesses that reading Saltmarsh's *Free-Grace* some years before her Quaker conviction had led her astray. She took the emphasis upon Christ's death for sinners *as sinners* to be 'liberty to walk in sin'.¹⁵ Saltmarsh's *Free-Grace* appeared the same year as Thomas Lambe's General Baptist

manifesto, *The Fountain of Free Grace Opened*. Both works were major assaults upon Puritan theological orthodoxy and spiritual formation. But neither book simply advocated human free will in salvation. Both maintained a paradox that steadfastly resisted simple reduction of salvation to either God's election or human freedom. We find a similar paradoxical interpretation in early Quaker writings such as Edward Burrough's critique of 'Free-Willers'.¹⁶ We also find deep turmoil over the question of election in the conviction narratives of a number of early Friends.¹⁷

Saltmarsh functioned as a leading figure in the Independent movement. He was part of the younger generation of Independent ministers, orthodox in their university training, but rapidly moving beyond Puritanism. Murray Tolmie finds Saltmarsh among the leaders mentioned at an Independent gathering in London, held in 1645 or 1646. The meeting debated whether Independents should continue involvement in their local parishes or join the Separatists in complete withdrawal.¹⁸ Saltmarsh's participation in the decision against separation fits with his overall attitude of mutual toleration, despite the rapid radicalisation of his views.

The Smoke in the Temple

In January 1646, Saltmarsh returned to political pamphleteering with *The Smoke in the Temple*. The imagery of the title is from the Book of Revelation, where the cataclysms unleashed by the pouring out of the seven vials of divine wrath fill the heavenly temple with smoke for a period of time; no one could enter the temple until the seven plagues unleashed by the seven vials had ended (Rev. 15). Saltmarsh interprets this in terms of the political cataclysms of the Civil War and the spiritual upheavals it created for all. He uses this imagery to argue that it is not yet time to settle religion according to anyone's plan. Rather, the people must wait for the smoke to clear: that is, for a religious consensus to form. He argues again for a moratorium among diverse churches during this transitional time: 'We may be Friends, though not Brethren: and let us attaine to Union, though not to Unity'.

He goes on to describe the position of each faction, then to offer a critique of each based on Scripture. In his critique of the Baptists, he takes the Seeker position against their adult baptism: 'the time is not yet come for Ordinances: for as there were several seasons for the givings out of Truth before, so now'. Here he cites the steps in Acts whereby the early church was first constituted. He then summarises the Seeker position thus: because of the general apostasy, there is no

legitimate church at present. Any new founding of the church will be accompanied by miraculous works, like those described in Acts. While war and religious oppression continue, the new dispensation of the Spirit cannot begin. Moreover, he reports, many Seekers suspect corruptions and additions in the canonical text of the Bible, leading them to conclude that new tongues of the Spirit will be needed to reveal the original purity of Scripture and guide the way to true church order. We can recognise here an emerging post-Reformation position that has seen how multiple reconstructions of primitive Christian faith and practice can arise from the same Scriptures; the Spirit begins to emerge as a new primary authority that can gather believers into a new position beyond the competing mechanistic biblical constructions of Puritanism. This Seeker emphasis is clearly moving toward the early Quaker position that the Scriptures must be interpreted in the same Spirit that inspired them.

Nevertheless, Saltmarsh criticises the idealism of this position with no less than seventeen points. He suggests that even centuries of spiritual apostasy are not powerful enough to corrupt biblical texts materially. Scripture, whatever its textual corruptions, still offers a clearer revelation of faith than reason alone can attain. Even if more glorious dispensations will someday come, everyone should still follow as many of the traditional forms as they conscientiously can. In particular, he attacks the assumption that new miracles are necessary to confirm any new dispensation of the Spirit. If we need miracles to believe, he argues, then we will need them continually. The truth of a new revelation should be self-evident. Outward signs convince only the outward mind. The glory that is coming is secret, invisible, inward, spiritual. Thus, Saltmarsh maintains his Christian statesmanship, affirming the dignity of all forms sincerely professed and practiced. He dismisses biblical scepticism and censures the idealism that imagines an unmistakable faith certified by visible signs and wonders. Nevertheless, Saltmarsh also clearly shares the hope of a coming dispensation, albeit in more subtle, spiritualised terms.

One of the most interesting aspects of this small book is Saltmarsh's use of the word 'truth', a word used so ostentatiously by early Friends. He doesn't develop a distinct definition of the word, but uses it repeatedly and with a sense that approaches that of early Friends. It forms part of his overall argument in *The Smoke in the Temple*: as a religious and political consensus, truth will emerge only after the vials of divine wrath have stopped pouring down on the nation, after the smoke of civil and military strife clears. He summarises his argument in the opening epistle thus: each competing religious agenda has 'attained only so far in the Mystery

of Truth', all are short of the glory which shall be revealed in the temple or church of God. Great clouds of opinion darken the situation at present. But, he argues, as they have a common infirmity, they have a common unity. All are coming out of Babylon in various ways and travelling to the heavenly city from various directions. The gathering of the saints into the kingdom of heaven in this day of revelation is like the gathering in the last day, from the four winds or ends of the earth. Therefore, he urges all to search for the spirit of Jesus, for none is worthy to open the seals but the Lamb (Rev. 5.9). He ends the epistle with these pregnant words:

I have only one way to reveal Truth to me which I cannot conceal, nor yet cannot *practice* yet as I would, and that is this: To see Truth by living in the power of Truth and by first obtaining Jesus Christ to live in us in the power of his suffering, death, and Resurrection; for surely Jesus Christ must do all (though more gloriously and spiritually) over again in his, which he did in himself. If Jesus Christ the Light be in us, the Light by which every outward dispensation is seen, will flow in; for where the Sun is, there will be every beam with it.

This is the key epistemological starting point early Friends will build upon the next decade. The truth of the gospel, indeed the truth for England in its moment of liberation, is known only as the faithful patiently undergo the suffering, death and resurrection of Christ within themselves through his light within them. This will be the sense in which early Friends will call themselves 'Friends of (or in) the Truth'. They are Truth's Friends only as they suffer in witness with and for the Lamb, who has broken the seven seals of the Scriptures and revealed their secret wisdom to them. Saltmarsh enunciates this hermeneutic between experience and Scripture – and indeed between political ends and means – succinctly. Yet he also admits he is not quite there yet himself.

Later in the book, he asserts that 'Gospel-Truth is one and the same', but so far, the different churches and worship have only parts of the truth. 'Every Heresie hath a Scripture Word in it. But Truth must be all one and the same, and Homogeneal; not in parts so, but all so... Nothing but Gods power and will can make a thing Truth: his power creates it'. He goes on to critique what some call 'Scripture-consequences' (more commonly known as biblical 'proof-texts' today). These are a 'new, though old designe against Truth...for under colour of consequence, what Conclusions may be produced! What may not Reason draw from scripture, and what may it not

fashion like a Truth!'. He finds this problem of competing biblical interpretations paralleled by the equally serious problem of competing interpretations of Parliamentary laws. In both cases, the overall context and greater sense of the text must be sought: 'Is it thus in Laws human and not much more in Ordinances divine? Yea there is the same onenesse, entireness, indivisibility, and essentiality of the Truth'.¹⁹ Saltmarsh articulates a sense that true reformation – both religious and political – cannot be attained in a piecemeal, constructed fashion. It must be revealed in its true integrity. But the present is a time for discerning truth wherever it may be found, and waiting for a true integration of truth to be revealed in both religious and political ordering:

How Christ is a King of the *Nations* and of the *Church*, and how an Head: Not only the visible body of Christ is pure, but every truth of Christ bears the image of Christ; every truth of his hath something of himself in it who is Truth itself...every beam of light is light; every truth is a sparkle of truth itself. Thus we may judge of truth, by what of Christ we see in it. They who break a crystall may see their face in every peece and parcell; so in everything of Christ there is an Image of Christ, either of his purity, or holiness, or love, or humility, or meekness, etc'.²⁰

Thus, we hear Saltmarsh struggling to articulate a unified field theory of church and state, even as he maintains his position that the two should be separate. Still, within his Christian theological understanding, the truth in Christ should be discernible in either realm.

Much of the body of the book is taken up with a point-by-point rebuttal to an attack against Saltmarsh published by the Presbyterian John Ley.²¹ Saltmarsh argues with Ley in a conciliatory fashion, however, asserting that truth comes in degrees, beam by beam. No one has definitive truth yet. Reproaching one another is not useful. If they both remain faithful, 'it is more likely then in the end both *you* and *I* may prove a better *friend* to the *Truth*. It is possible many this Age might have seen more, had they not cast so much dust in one anothers eyes by their strivings.'²² Later 'Friends of the Truth' were perhaps less liberal-minded than Saltmarsh. But the betrayals of truth by the victorious forces of Parliament and the army in the next years were a major cause of the pent-up fury expressed by early Quakers in the 1650s. Even Saltmarsh became less irenic toward these powers in the final year of his life.

Up to this point in his witness, Saltmarsh maintained a balance

between agitation and mediation. He steadily attacked the Presbyterian plan to impose a new national church. But he was critical of all groups, pleading for a moratorium among them. He held many views in common with the Seekers, but still served a parish church as an Independent minister. In June 1646, however, Saltmarsh's life took a momentous turn. He left his position at Brasted and accepted an invitation to serve as a chaplain in the army. This began a year of intense activity resulting in less publication but in a quantum leap in vision. Some of the most radical preachers in the nation – William Erbury, William Dell, John Webster, Henry Denne, Jacob Bauthumley, and others – had been appointed chaplains. Other advanced spirits populated the ranks of officers and soldiers, generating intense religious energies. Saltmarsh was radicalised by this vanguard. We can also imagine that he added much from his own deep insights. Later reports of his army chaplaincy suggest that he meddled little with politics, but 'laboured to beat down sin and exalt Christ', earning great esteem among soldiers and officers alike.²³

Sparkles of Glory

In May 1647, Saltmarsh published his definitive statement, *Sparkles of Glory*. This larger work opens with a continuing advocacy of suspension of the national church, but quickly moves on to more annunciatory realms. Spiritualist influence, which was rife in the army, becomes much more overt here, no longer tintured by pragmatic political arguments for mutual toleration.

With a clearly post-Reformational perspective, Saltmarsh summarises the basic flaws of a state-sponsored church. First, there is no single, clear model for church order to be derived from Scripture. Any attempt to impose one reduces Christians to bondage all over again. But more than that, it amounts to a 'finer kind of idolatry' to suppose that God enters into outward forms and conveys divine power through them. Nevertheless, he allows that sacraments and other forms are useful as *parables* of spiritual things. They are not to be rejected any more than the disciple Thomas was rejected for needing to see in order to believe. But blessed are they who do not see and still believe (John 20:26ff)!²⁴

Most of the book is an expansion upon two fundamental principles of Spiritualism. First, there are two creations, natures, or seeds – flesh and spirit. Though the apostate church has lapsed back into the former nature, the future of Christians is in the latter. Second, the one true church consists in the one true baptism of the Spirit into one

body of Christ. Hence, the true church is an *invisible* church, although visibly gathered churches are not derogated here.

This leads to stunning assertions of the reign of Christ on earth: 'the true personal reign of Christ is spiritual'. It is a glory that defies all representation. But it manifests itself in human lives. 'Christ reigns already in everything that is put in subjection under him, but we see not all yet put under him. Jesus Christ reigns in Spirit, only his reign appears not yet, now we are sons of God, but it doth not appear what we shall be; but when he shall appear, we shall be like him'.²⁵ Saltmarsh speaks with a strong sense of moment, even apocalyptic moment. Christ is already starting to enter the world through human bodies. The revelation is not yet fully realised; Christ has not yet fully appeared. But there is a sense of imminent transformation. Through this humanised sense of Christ's return in the bodies of believers, we find a psychologically, socially, and historically mediated sense of apocalyptic fulfillment. The return of Christ is seen in Presence-centred terms. Saltmarsh cautions that the Bible's prophecies of Christ's return are allegories, allusions, parables that are not to be understood in terms of any political system as such.

Adapting dispensational schemes from Jacob Boehme, Saltmarsh continues that each Christian's life is intended to reenact the three ages or spheres described in Scripture: the Law, the Gospel, and the Spirit.²⁶ Just as Christ was born under the good dispensation of law and circumcision but had to be crucified to it, so the Christian is born under the outward Christian dispensation of baptism, bread, and wine but must be crucified to it in order to rise to the spiritual realm. There, one comes to know the true Lord's Supper, the very body and blood of Christ in Spirit. On this level, one knows Christ as the true spiritual minister, apostle, pastor:

'Jesus Christ is the true spiritual prophet that teaches his people so as they are all taught of God, and so called in Scriptures a prophet, which the Lord God raised up, in stead of Moses' (see Dtr. 18:18).²⁷ The experience of Christ's Presence has become so complete here that it has obviated the need for a clergy. Christ is the true shepherd of the flock. This Christology is strongly in the Spiritualist stream of the Reformation, having been an undercurrent in England in the Family of Love (or 'Familists'), but going back to Continental Reformers such as Caspar Schwenckfeld, who taught that true communion raises the believer to the heavenly, spiritual plane, rather than Christ descending again into physical bread and wine.²⁸ Although early Friends rejected the progressive dispensational scheme Saltmarsh embraces here, much of the Spiritualist agenda carries over into early Quaker worship and ministry.

Saltmarsh unleashes a stream of earth-shaking theological statements. He asserts that true, spiritual 'gospel order' (good order in the church) is 'that spiritual Distinction and Variety in the Body of Christ, wherein one member differs from another in Measure of Spirit and Glory, and Power, and yet all compleat and make perfect that Body of Christ in the Spirit.'²⁹ Thus, visible church is not abandoned, but is achieved invisibly by Christ's direct action, bestowing different gifts to various individuals to perform different services. 'True spiritual Government is Christ reigning in the Saints in Spirit, ordering them in Thought, Word, and Deed...which is a Sceptre of Righteousness against Flesh and Blood, Principalities and Powers'.³⁰ Covenant ordering unfolds through this intimate relationship, in which God's law is inscribed directly upon human hearts (see Jer. 31:31-34).

Therefore, 'the Christian is one, who hath the incorruptible seed in him, or the Word which liveth and abideth for ever, which Word is the Lord Jesus Christ'.³¹ The seed within functions as a key metaphor in the Spiritualist vision of advanced Seekers and Quakers. The seed represents the last hope of reformation, indeed of all utopian prospects, now completely separated out from state-sponsored reformations and even sectarian congregations. It now lies beyond the reach of all human striving, either political or individual. This seed rises within to reign only through radical surrender; the death of self and its will. Saltmarsh admits that figures such as Wycliffe, Luther, and Calvin were beginning to receive glimmerings of his revelation, but were still deep in the dark night of apostasy.

All these reformers were attempting to 'return to the Gospel-Day', the church of New Testament times. But that was not possible, for God had already 'laid it by'. Just as Christ came not to restore the priesthood again but to lead onward, true reformation must move on. There is no way back. But a period of purification from old idolatries is required. Like Israel coming out of Egypt, this is a time of the church in the wilderness (see Rev. 12:1-6). Christians must retire in Spirit into that wilderness. The emergent, spiritualised faith is a new dispensation of light. In time, it will cover the earth, swallowing up all former dispensations. Thus, Saltmarsh suggests the beginning of a new, universal revelation of God, a universal light of Christ. Those who have come into this light, or Spirit, discern the 'same Spirit in others, as in Prayer, Preaching, Prophesying, Conference, Conformity to Christ, Spiritual Conversation, so as Christians can in a manner say...here I taste, and see something of God'.³² Hence, beyond all definable boundaries of church

membership and doctrine, each individual in the light of Christ recognises it (or the lack of it) in the actions of others.

Saltmarsh ventures here a definition of truth more integrative and systematic than the several statements found in *The Smoke in the Temple*. It is worth quoting at length here:

There is but one Truth, and that is Jesus Christ. I am the way, and the truth, and he is the Truth in the original or pattern, and we see nor know no more Truth than we see and know in him, this is called the truth as it is in Jesus: For Jesus Christ is the Alpha and Omega of all things, and comprehends all essence and form and life, and Spirit of things in himself; and all things of this Creation are but Shadows and Images of this Truth, and the outward forms of that glory; this Truth makes free, that is the operation of it; and therefore so much of Truth or of Christ any one knows or receives, so much freedom or liberty they receive, and so much they are delivered into the glorious liberty of the Sons of God; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty: And therefore as Truth is in any, so is spiritual liberty, and the Spirit of bondage in them passes away, and such are disburdened of the legal terrours, fears, of the lyes, delusions, false conceptions, traditions under which they have lived as they grow up into Truth; the Spirit of Truth only teaches and reveals this Truth, and opens those treasures of wisdom and knowledge which are in Christ. Truth though it be but one, yet is shines forth in many streams of glory and opens like day; in Jesus Christ this variety of truth appears that truth, or glory, or true brightness of God, and all that truth of this creation or forms of the world; and all truth of letter, or Scripture, or outward Ordinance is in its pure Essence and Spirit in Jesus Christ; Truth gathers up men more into Christ from the flesh and loose vanity of the world; and therefore we are said to have our loyns girt with truth; the girdle of truth, as it were, binding us up, and keeping close in Spirit to the Lord; there is a fullness, settlement, and establishment in truth; and in things of this world; there is a far more solid and real enjoyment in the substance of things here, than in their shadows, counterfeits, or pictures, because there is a nature, or Spirit and life in that thing to be enjoyed, and answers the Spirit and life of him that enjoys, by communicating something [more] substantial, solid, and proportionable than images and shadows are. So it is in the truth Jesus Christ, in whom is life, and more excellent, glorious, and spiritual form, or life, exceeding the nature of things here.

This Spiritualist manifesto of truth has a Gnostic, anti-material potential. But Saltmarsh keeps his Platonic imageries grounded in this world. Similarly, in the next decade, early Friends maintained this Spiritualist epistemological commitment to the inwardness of true revelation and spiritual life. But Fox and other early Quaker leaders worked vigorously to balance that epistemology with a thoroughly grounded set of moral standards and material practices (what we today would call 'the testimonies to the truth'). This was crucial to keep such inward, mystical ways of knowing from wafting into esoteric wisdom.

Clearly, these statements issued from some profound experience that Saltmarsh found among the army ranks, even some sense of incipient church order. It now led him to conclusions startling within a military setting. Saltmarsh adds that war is the work of nations, the natural impulse to self-preservation and just retaliation. Many Christians fight alongside 'natural' men under this law. But as Christ is more fully manifested in Spirit, the Christian is taken up, out of such activity. Christian perfection is to lay oneself down 'to rest in the bosom of whatever providence God opens'. Left to its own desires, the human will leads individuals to lust, desire, and plot, even to kill one another. Peace is to be 'willing to be gathered up by God from one Way and raised up to a higher one'. God moves from one tabernacle to another. The Christian must move with God. This inner surrender leads to outer surrender, a willingness to receive the enmity and oppression of others into oneself. There, one quenches the violence, destroying it in the Spirit.³³ *Sparkles* stops short of a generalised principle of nonviolence or conscientious objection to military service. Saltmarsh was apparently still hopeful that God might yet accomplish something liberating through the army. But a clear principle of Christian withdrawal from warfare was emerging. This vision carries over strongly into early Quaker pacifism, which was less a philosophically reflected moral position than a sense that Friends had passed, through radical surrender, into a new spiritual reality that they could not expect the nations to share yet.

Sparkles places greatest emphasis upon the work of Christ at large among the people 'The Lord Jesus hath a day and time to be revealed in, in which is his coming in the Saints when he will judge the World, and then shall Antichrist be consumed' (see Rev. 20:1-10).³⁴ God's indulgence of false worships will end and worship in Spirit and truth will replace them. But this comes only through what Saltmarsh calls the 'Fiery Tryall'.³⁵ Unfortunately, we do not pass on easily to higher revelations of God. The old vision of God must die: 'the fiery tryant is the Spirit of God burning up or destroying' the old truth. What was

good and righteous before must be consumed and crucified. He notes that these trials are 'Prophecy of the last judgement' experienced in the Spirit here and now. Thus, Saltmarsh witnesses an apocalyptic sense of personal transformation, in which the believer experiences *now* what the world at large will experience later. In that process, one is so changed as to become a *new creation* in Christ. That sense of an inner conflagration carries over into early Quaker conviction narratives. In his *Journal*, George Fox writes that in 1647 he witnessed 'the mountains burning up, and the rubbish, and the crooked ways and places made smooth and plain that the Lord might come into his tabernacle. These things are to be found in a man's heart.'³⁶ Such apocalyptic transformation was the inward beginning of the more outward conflict early Friends called 'the Lamb's War'.

Saltmarsh clarifies that this transformation does not imply that one's earlier faithfulness was bad. Christ's life embodied the best of the law's righteousness. Still, that body was crucified in order to be raised up to a new sphere. 'So every Christian is to take up his crosse, and to bring his highest and choicest...to this crosse, and to have them all crucified to higher discoveries of God, that is the knowledge of Christ Crucified, or self-denial'.³⁷ Christians often mistake this experience for God's absence. It is rather God's presence, making the old wither in order to bring in a fuller glory. A similar line of interpretation of spiritual experience is also found in another book issuing from the army the following year. *The Saint's Travel to the Land of Caanan*, by R. Wilkinson (1648).³⁸

Sparkles concludes with Saltmarsh's classic description of Seekers. In view of the apostasy and confusion of the churches, Seekers wait in the spiritual wilderness for the coming of the Spirit with power. In the meantime, they worship

only in Prayers and Conference [religious discussion], pretending to no certain determination of things, nor any infallible...interpretations of Scriptures. They wait for a restauration of things, and a setting up of all Gospell-Officers, Churches, Ordinances, according to the pattern of the New Testament. They wait for a Apostle or Angel, that is, some[one] with a visible glory and power...to give visible demonstration of their sending, as to the world... This is the highest of their Attainment.³⁹

'But', he adds, 'some speak of a further discovery, and more spiritual than this of the Seekers'. He now articulates the new Spiritualist sense that must have been emerging at that time.

According to that view, the New Testament church was only a transitional form. Apostasy aside, it was intended to pass away in any case. All dispensations are but for a season, and they are never restored. Therefore, to wait the restoration of New Testament church order is antichristian. There is nothing in Scripture to warrant it. The truth is that Christ, the eternal seed, is already in all true Christians. All true reformation, growth, and improvement of the church can only take place only by Christ himself working through his people. The world will see Christ come in the saints, but it will be 'in a day of conviction and spiritual judgement upon themselves'. Far from being a day of signs, wonders and glory, the day of the Lord will be perceived by most people as a day of consternation. This point has much in common with the prophecy of Amos 5:18: 'Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord! Why would you have the day of the Lord? It is darkness and not light'.

So Saltmarsh sees two key groups on the edge of some imminent breakthrough. The Seekers are looking in the wrong direction: outwards and backwards. The second group (probably the worship groups he had encountered in the army) he does not consider to be Seekers anymore. They have moved on to 'a further discovery, and more spiritual'. He prefers to leave this new position unnamed (it may be represented in the 1650s by some groups called 'Waiters', which Burrough categorised alongside Seekers in 1656⁴⁰). But Saltmarsh has already sketched many important points that we will see defined more fully in the Quaker movement. Clearly, developments in the army and elsewhere by 1647 had given Saltmarsh much reason to hope for momentous things to come.

His Final Months

One reason for optimism was the army's defeat and capture of Charles. Parliament quickly moved to disband the army, fearing the latter as a threat to the Presbyterian settlement and even Parliamentary sovereignty itself. But the army refused to disband, causing still greater concern in Parliament. In June 1647, *A Letter from the Army* appeared, Saltmarsh's last publication. He reported on the mood among the ranks, seeking to allay fears of an army takeover of the government. In various counties where army regiments had moved or been stationed, people appealed to them to act as mediators between themselves and Parliament. Though Saltmarsh did not state it explicitly, everyone knew that the existing Parliament would enact only modest political reforms, was still determined to impose Presbyterianism on the nation, and might even return

Charles to the throne.

So the army sought to satisfy some 'just grievances' before disbanding, to ensure that members would be 'estated in a free and clear capacity' both as soldiers and as citizens.⁴¹ This probably meant two things. First, that no one would be prosecuted for acts of war, whatever the ensuing settlement might be. This was an important point, especially if Charles regained the throne. But more broadly, it also meant that the army intended to coerce from Parliament political freedoms that would 'flow down' to all fellow subjects. Once their civil rights were established, he was confident the army would do whatever Parliament commanded.

Saltmarsh witnessed 'a mighty spirit for Justice and Righteousness raised up in the Army'.⁴² He assured Parliament that the army did not wish to impose an Independent church settlement on the nation, or challenge the rule of law. 'I know no designe here appearing, but Peace to the Kingdom'.⁴³ Saltmarsh may have been innocent at that point of more revolutionary designs moving among the regiments. Some were by this time plotting actions that would have overruled by force not only Parliament but the generals as well.

The army formulated its position in a 'Solemn Engagement', adopted earlier in June, formally stating its refusal to disband. Instead, an Army Council was organised, including not only the generals but representatives elected from the regiments, possessing full voting rights. Here was a democratic organ of self-government for the army also aimed to influence the direction of civil government in England. Saltmarsh's letter thus came at the moment of great resolve within the army. That was also near the time he left, probably for reasons of health.

Unfortunately, this unity did not last long.⁴⁴ Parliament rescinded its demand that the army disband, and Cromwell and other generals sought a compromise between the two rival powers. The generals, lacking sympathy with the more far-reaching political demands coming from the ranks, soon abandoned the democratic processes established by the Solemn Engagement. Both within the army and in London a new faction had emerged to press a republican agenda for reform in England. This party, nicknamed the 'Levellers', was led by Lieutenant Colonel John Lilburne, Richard Overton, and William Walwyn. They formulated their proposals in *An Agreement of the Free People of England* in October 1647. On October 28th, this provisional constitution was debated by the Army Council at Putney. The debates were inconclusive. The generals, fearing that they were losing control of the army, arrested Leveller leaders and quelled demonstrations among the ranks. In failing health at home in Ilford,

Essex, Saltmarsh followed these events with alarm. He wrote three letters – to General Fairfax, Oliver Cromwell, and to the Army Council as a whole – deploring their actions, and calling upon them to return to the promises made in June.⁴⁶ But Leveller leaders remained in detention.

On December 4th, Saltmarsh got out of bed and told his wife that he had been in a trance, seen a vision, and received the command to go to the army and speak God's Word to them. He left that evening for London.⁴⁶ Mid-morning on the 6th, he reached Windsor, where the Council sat. He entered the session and told them that, although God had worked with and for them previously, divine favour had left them. They had betrayed God's cause in imprisoning God's innocent servants. His eyes fixed in an otherworldly countenance, he confronted General Fairfax without removing his hat, telling him that he would not honour him; he had honoured him too much in the past. In the hallway, he rebuked Cromwell for imprisoning the Levellers and abandoning positions affirmed as late as June. This apostasy would lead to division and ruin. With his usual candour, Cromwell admitted that things were not going well and that he had received similar criticism from others.

Saltmarsh returned the next day with further oracles of judgment. He was asked if he would advise faithful members of the army to leave. He replied that he would not; God still had a great work to be done, making use of *members* of the army.⁴⁷ Evidently, he believed that some remnant in the army might still prove useful to God's cause – perhaps the Leveller faction or those worship groups that met to 'wait upon the Lord'. He took leave of the officers, telling them he had finished God's errand and would never see them again.

He reached home on the evening of the 9th, apparently cheerful and well, reporting his activity to his wife. The next day, telling her he had finished his course, he took to his bed. He died peacefully the afternoon of the 11th. These remarkable last days were reported by an anonymous author in a small tract entitled *Wonderful Predictions* (1648). The details of the story had been confirmed by the Council itself. It is testimony to Saltmarsh's reputation in the army that the Council was willing to receive his bizarre visitation. In fact, ten days after that confrontation, the Council released the Leveller leaders in a momentary relaxation of the conflict.

Final Reflections

Thus ends an amazing life and prophetic vocation. The brilliance of Saltmarsh's witness and the utter lack of self-righteousness or

resentment in it make him perhaps the most impressive figure from the radical scene of the 1640s. It is hard to say where he might have progressed from *Sparkles of Glory* and from the army if had lived longer. But his influence was great, both before and after his death. Richard Baxter was disturbed by his influence. Writing in criticism of *Free-Grace*, Baxter commented, 'I saw how greedily multitudes of poor souls did take the bait, and how exceedingly the writings and preachings of Saltmarsh and many of his fellows did take with them'.⁴⁸ Thomas Gataker, another member of the Westminster Assembly who attacked Saltmarsh more than once, complained in 1646 that the latter had 'become the Architect for a new Sect, that wants as yet a peculiar distinguishing name.'⁴⁹ The fecund matrix of theological and spiritual development in which Saltmarsh participated continued to grow after his death, finding its most stable and lasting expression in the Quaker movement of the 1650s.

It is difficult to ascertain to what extent Saltmarsh was refining and reporting developments he heard taking place during the Civil War years (particularly in the hot-bed of Fairfax's regiment in 1646-47) and to what extent he was creating these fresh formulations himself. What did he study at Cambridge? He was a contemporary of Isaac Penington's there. Both of them seemed well grounded in the Spiritualist stream of the Reformation. Ideas that he is first to publish suddenly proliferate in print the following year (1648) in the writings of R. Wilkinson and Joseph Salmon of the army, and Gerrard Winstanley, the future Digger. His Spiritualist framing for an emerging 'truth' appears to be a strong precedent to early Quaker understanding. The prophetic Christology of Christ as the saints' inward teacher, combined with an apocalyptic sense of Christ's return known through the Spirit strongly anticipates the core of Fox's seismic preaching in 1652.

It may be, however, that the crushing disappointments for radicals coming at the conclusion to the Civil War were a further preparation required to wean their attention from outward events and their expectation from political deliverers. By 1652, radical spirits knew not to expect anything earthshaking from the army or from Parliament. The inward revelation of Christ as an apocalyptic force and new sovereign power speaking and acting through the consciences of common people was the resurrection of radical hope in the 1650s, the seed raised up from the faded flower of the previous decade's callow hopes. The smoke cleared from the temple when people heard Fox's preaching and following his penetrating spiritual counsel, which showed them how to 'stand still in the light'. This perfected spiritual practice may well be what Saltmarsh had earlier

described as the 'one way to reveal Truth to me which I cannot conceal, nor yet cannot *practice* yet as I would, and that is this: To see Truth by living in the power of Truth and by first obtaining Jesus Christ to live in us in the power of his suffering, death, and Resurrection'.

Douglas Gwyn

Presidential Address given during Britain Yearly Meeting in London, 4 May 2003

NOTES

- ¹ Douglas Gwyn, *Apocalypse of the Word: the Life and Message of George Fox* (Richmond, Ind.: Friends United Press, 1986); *The Covenant Crucified: Quakers and the Rise of Capitalism* (Wallington, Pa.: Pendle Hill, 1995); *Seekers Found: Atonement in Early Quaker Experience* (Wallingford, Pa.: Pendle Hill, 2000).
- ² For Saltmarsh's influence on Richard Farnworth, see Hugh Barbour, *The Quakers in Puritan England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), 89. William Bittle, in *James Nayler: the Quaker Indicted by Parliament* (Richmond, Ind.: Friends United Press, 1986), 27 notes that Saltmarsh was a chaplain in Fairfax's regiment (1646-47) while Nayler was serving there, concluding that some degree of influence is beyond doubt. In a 1693 letter, William Penn describes Saltmarsh, along with William Erbury and John Webster as 'forrunning Friends appearance', quoted by Geoffrey Nuttall, *The Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith and Experience* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1946), 13. The Quaker schismatic Robert Rich listed the same three among those who 'longed to see this day of the Son of Man; but could not, he vanishing out of their sight' (see Nuttall, *Holy Spirit*, 184). An October 5, 1685 entry in John Locke's diary mentions a conversation with the Quaker Benjamin Furley, who believed that Saltmarsh was the first to refuse to remove his hat to social superiors and to use the plain language toward them. Again, see Nuttall, *Holy Spirit* 83.
- ³ A.L. Morton, *The World of the Ranters: Religious Radicalism in the English Revolution* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1970), 45.
- ⁴ John Saltmarsh, *A Letter from the Army* (1647), which we will review later.
- ⁵ Saltmarsh actually denied being an Independent in *The Smoke in the Temple* (London: Calvert, 1646), 1-2, arguing that he could not ascribe to any singular notion of church at that time and found such labelling of positions unhelpful. Later in the same tract (p. 68) he defined Independency as a kind of separatism, comparing it to Israel's separation from the nations. They cannot mingle or embody with those in a way not of the truth. This separation is not from men but from manners, not from believers but from their practices and corruptions.
- ⁶ Saltmarsh described these developments later, in *An End of One Controversie* (1646), when he was attacked with false accusations regarding his past forms of income. His accuser, John Ley (1583-1662), a member of the Westminster Assembly, characterised Saltmarsh as unstable. The latter replied that if putting off the old man, coming out of Babylon, and growing in the stature of Christ amount to instability, so be it.

- 7 John Saltmarsh, dedicatory preface to *Dawnings of Light* (1644).
- 8 Saltmarsh, *Dawnings*, 33.
- 9 Saltmarsh, *Dawnings*, 68-69
- 10 John Saltmarsh, *Free-Grace: Or, the Flowering of Christ's Blood Freely to Sinners* (Tenth Edition, 1700), 23.
- 11 Saltmarsh, *Free-Grace*, 25.
- 12 Saltmarsh, *Free-Grace*, 37-45.
- 13 Saltmarsh, *Free-Grace*, 106.
- 14 Saltmarsh, *Free-Grace*, 106.
- 15 Letter of Dorothy Howgill to George Fox, A. R. Barclay Mss. 32, Library of the Society of Friends, London.
- 16 Edward Burrough, *The Trumpet of the Lord Sounded Forth out of Sion* (1656), in his *Works* (1672), 107.
- 17 For a sampling of these, see Chapter 8 of Gwyn, *Seekers Found*. For a detailed analysis, see Larry Kuenning, ' "Miserable Comforters": Their Effect on Early Quaker Thought and Experience', *Quaker Religious Thought*#76 (October 1991): 45-59.
- 18 Murray Tolmie, *The Triumph of the Saints: Separate Churches of London 1616-1649* (Cambridge: University Press, 1977), 123-24.
- 19 Saltmarsh, *Smoke*, 59-61.
- 20 Saltmarsh, *Smoke*, 65.
- 21 John Ley, *The New Quere and Determination upon it, by Master Saltmarsh...Examined* (1646).
- 22 Saltmarsh, *Smoke*, 3.
- 23 From the 'Preamble' to the anonymously authored *Wonderful Predictions* (1648), which we will review a little later.
- 24 John Saltmarsh, *Sparkes of Glory: Or, Some Beams of the Morning-Star* (1647), Epistle to the Reader.
- 25 Saltmarsh, *Sparkles*, 18.
- 26 Saltmarsh, *Sparkles*, 52-53.
- 27 Saltmarsh, *Sparkles*, 66. I had long thought that George Fox was first to crystallise this prophetic Christology in such experientialist terms. But this is a very clear statement in 1647.
- 28 Indeed, in *A Survey of the Spiritual Antichrist* (1648), the Presbyterian Samuel Rutherford (1600-1661) wrote partly in response to *Sparkles of Glory*, finding in Saltmarsh's thought a combination of Schwenckfeld, Henry Nicholas, and Familism. See Jean Dietz Moss, 'Godded with God': *Hendrick Niclaes and His Family of Love* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1981), 58-63.
- 29 Saltmarsh, *Sparkles*, 68.
- 30 Saltmarsh, *Sparkles*, 68.
- 31 Saltmarsh, *Sparkles*, 78.
- 32 Saltmarsh, *Sparkles*, 108.
- 33 Saltmarsh, *Sparkles*, 112-15.
- 34 Saltmarsh, *Sparkles*, 185-86.
- 35 Saltmarsh, *Sparkles*, 189-93.
- 36 George Fox, *Journal*, John L. Nickalls, ed. (Cambridge University Press, 1952), 16.
- 37 Saltmarsh, *Sparkles*, 193.

- 38 Wilkinson's book is reviewed in Gwyn, *Seekers Found*, 114-15.
- 39 Saltmarsh, *Sparkles*, 114-15.
- 40 See Edward Burrough, *The Trumpet of the Lord Sounded out of Sion* (1656) in *Works* (1672), 109.
- 41 Saltmarsh, *A Letter from the Army* (1647), 1.
- 42 Saltmarsh, *Army*, 2.
- 43 Saltmarsh, *Army*, 3.
- 44 I am largely dependent on Morton's account of these next stages of development in the army during the second half of 1647. See *Ranters*, 63-66.
- 45 These were published after his death under the title *England's Friend Raised from the Grave* (1649).
- 46 Reported by Anon., *Wonderful Predictions, Declared in a Messages as from the Lord...by John Saltmarsh...* (published hurriedly, before the end of December 1647), I.
- 47 Anon., *Wonderful Predictions*, 6.
- 48 Richard Baxter, *Richard Baxter's Penitent Confession, And His Necessary Vindication* (1691), Preface. Baxter was also a chaplain in Parliament's regiments towards the end of the Civil War. He found himself losing ground among the soldiers as he sought to counter Saltmarsh's 'antimonian' preaching with more orthodox Puritan doctrine. His own failing health caused him to leave the army in February 1647.
- 49 Thomas Gataker, *Shadows Without Substance, Or, Pretended New Lights...a Rejoynder to Mr. John Saltmarsh* (1646), 105.