

## The Testimony of Joshua Sprigge

**J**OSHUA SPRIGGE (1618-1684) is best known as the author of a history of the English civil war and is by some described as a chaplain under Sir Thomas Fairfax the parliamentary general. He was a thorough advocate of toleration, publicly protested both by word and pen against the decision to execute King Charles I, and when James Nayler's case was before parliament, he headed a deputation to petition for his release.

Theodor Sippell of Marburg has written in English a book about him, which he is anxious to publish, and which he has dedicated to the memory of William C. Braithwaite. *It is entitled Joshua Sprigge. A help to a better understanding of Early Quakerism.* It is based on three rare tracts, all published in 1649 by Sprigge, which Theodor Sippell has very generously given to the Library at Friends House. They are :

1. *A Testimony to an Approaching Glory.*
2. *Christus Redivivus.*
3. *A Further Testimony of the Glory that is Near.*

The first of these tracts contains three sermons printed before, viz. *God a Christian's All, Himselfe Nothing*, 1640; *The Dying and Living; Christian and Solace for Saints in the Saddest times.* The following extracts from Sprigge, and comments, are contributed by Theodor Sippell, and are printed as a welcome contribution from an old friend.

The passage below is taken from *A testimony to an Approaching Glory*, 2nd edition, corrected, London, 1649. The first sermon in this work *God a Christian's All, Himselfe Nothing* (Genesis 5,24), shows that we must date his conversion before 1640.

**I**F so be it might be no offence, I should give you my own experience for the confirmation of this point, (for we can speake nothing, but what wee have heard, and what wee have seen :) Now I must confesse, and professe unto you, that God hath made reall this truth unto me, not by study, not by notion, not by outward discovery, but by an inward experiment : for this I have found, and I trust more have found it besides my selfe, though it may be they cannot tell what to call those things that work within them, nor how to expresse it, (it may be) but this I have found, that all outward administrations hath been weake, and unable to produce those fruits and effects which the Scripture makes mention of : it hath been as the Law ; *What the Law could not doe, in that it was weake*, etc. And look into your selves, whether you have not *found* it so in your selves, that you have

had some corruption that hath troubled you : Some masterfull lust you would be glad to get the victory over, and ye would account him a Messenger, one among a thousand, that could shew you how to effect your desires.

I am sure, it hath been so with me ; and when I have seene such word as these in the Scripture ; *Sin shall not have Dominion over you, for you are not under the Law but under Grace*, I have considered with my self, and have done as I have been directed to doe, and I have told my selfe thou art under grace, and I have pleaded this to God, Lord I am under grace, I am under the Gospel, and why should sin have dominion over me : and thereupon I have studied the promises, because 'tis said : *There are given to us exceeding great and precious promises, that by them, we might be made partakers of the divine nature.*

I have looked upon Jesus Christ dying for me, because the Scripture saith *The love of Christ constraines us*, etc. When all this while I have been like *Siseras Mother*, wondring in my selfe, why doe his Chariot wheels stay etc. ? Why am I not set free from my lusts ? Is the Gospel a broken Reed ? Doth it tell us things that wee make up by imagination, rather then feel the real operation, and experiment of them within us ?

The last Scripture, I was much exercised in, in relation to these things, was this, in the Epistle of John ; *He that abideth in him sinneth not.*

Hereupon I inquired what this is, to abide in Christ, and sought to make it out to my selfe by my own Reason, and to finde it out by the Letter of the Scripture, and all the account I could give of it, did relate to the Creatures action : I thought we must be still commanding our selves, and putting our selves on to abide in Christ ; and wee must call upon one another to abide in Christ. And thus was I exercised in a carnall toile and perplexity, and never could see my desires all this while. I could not finde my corruptions slain by all these means, till God was pleased to hold forth this discovery to me, which I doe now desire to hold forth to you, *viz.* that it is not the flesh of these things, it is not the historical knowledge of these things, it is not *the saying* you are under grace ; it is not being under the forme of the Gospel that can change your hearts, set you free from sin ; but it is the Spirit that when he comes, doth chase

away all clouds, as the Son [Sun] on the earth. It is Christ in the Spirit, who is the truth within you, represented by that History without you ; and yet all these things are [not] the making out of God to you ; they are not your happinesse, or your life ; for our happinesse lies not in any action, be it in the greatest action ; not in the *mortification* of sin, nor in *vivification*, but our life lies in Union, that hidden principle within us, that is God. And if ever you would have this Union, and that which is your hope made out to you and would have the enjoyment of it in this life, you must wait upon that Jesus that came downe from the Father's Bosom, and lived in the flesh ; I say, you must wait upon him, to come and live in your spirits, not onely to bring you *forth* in the participation of his nature, but to fil you with the fulnes of God ; for so we have warrant to expect, that you may be filled with all the fulnes of God ; Now this the Lord shew you to be a truth : there is a twofold truth ; there is a *mediate* truth, and an *ultimate* truth ; there is a truth manifesting, and a truth manifested : Now the Truth manifested, is Union ; *That they all may be on[e] as we are one*. This is the truth that God would manifest to us by these things ; by coming to us in the flesh of Christ, and in the Spirit.

The Truth manifesting, is the Appearance of Christ in the Spirit, sutable and conformable to that outward Appearance of Christ in the flesh without us, for our sakes : you will never have the Love of God, and your Union with God, manifested to you, unless it be manifested to you by the Spirit ; except God Worke the same workes in you, that he wrought in Christ. And thus I have discharged my selfe of this same Testimony. .

The coincidence between this testimony of Joshua Sprigge and the religious experiences of early Friends is remarkable. We must, however, not overlook the difference. He never joined Friends. He never came under the personal influence of George Fox. *His views on election and predestination—how much soever attenuated—would not have been approved by Friends, to say nothing of his speculations about the angels and the angelic nature.* Perhaps his latest book of 1676 (*News of New World from the Word and Works of God compared together*) which is not accessible for me, would reveal other points of distinction.

So much the more we must lay stress on the fact that nobody else before had a deeper sense of that which William C. Braithwaite calls "the central experience out of which the Quaker message sprang". Just in the same way as George Fox, Joshua Sprigge "found in his own

spirit the place where a seed of Divine life was springing up, the place where the voice of a Divine teacher was being uttered, the place that was being inhabited by a Divine and glorious presence." Whereas John Everard and other mystics of the most advanced type are leaning far too much to neoplatonist speculation and are in danger to annihilate completely human personality, Joshua Sprigge, in deep unity of spirit with early Quakerism, remains on scriptural lines. He will not give up his *personal* communion with Christ in all eternity.

Sprigge avoids the use of traditional theological terms, the *notions*, as he calls them. His terminology is scriptural, not formed by dogmatic controversy. For his person, he chooses that form of "Scripture cognisance" which conforms to his own personal experience. It is in the main the mystical religion of St. Paul, St. John and of the Epistle to Hebrews. He uses the texts of the Scripture only as far as he can adjust them to this personal type of his and leaves the other texts alone, because he judges them to be rudiments of a lower administration.

Sprigge and early Quakerism hold the same position in as much as they are both expecting the imminent second coming of the Lord in the Spirit and in the Truth, beyond and in spite of all scholarly forms and definitions. "The kingdom and government of Jesus Christ", says he,

is not outward, formall, and shadowy, but inward, reall and powerfull. It is in Spirit, and within you, not in the person of men or ministers without you : it is that that shall destroy sin out of the world, and all the fruits of sinne, and shall replenish the subjects of it with holinesse and happinesse.

And this kingdome comes not with observation, how else should it come as a snare on all those that dwell upon the earth ? The first and second appearance of Christ are not so much distinguished in time as in excellency and glory. And that of Christ's second appearance, which is now but as a cloud of a handbreadth, shall cover the heavens . . . . The Lord Himselfe will shortly preach Himselfe with clearnesse and authority, and all that cloud of envy that is upon his appearance, shall not hinder him. Even so come Lord Jesus, Amen.

*Just at that time began the sending of George Fox !* The affinity of thoughts between Joshua Sprigge and Early Friends is so great that it is not astonishing to find the same coincidence in their religious language, floating between the temporal and eternal view. Here and there Quaker expressions, only interpreted by Sprigge, receive their peculiar meaning ; for instance the Quaker term "truth", interpreted by Sprigge as "the true sense", contrasted with the shadow and parable of the outward letter. Many abrupt and rhapsodic utterances of Early Friends, which scandalized the

hearers, escape any misconstruction as soon as they are interpreted according to the teaching of Sprigge. So we may call him *the first apologist of Quakerism*, although his early tracts were published before he had any knowledge of the message of George Fox.

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