

George Fox's Use of the Word "Seed"

IN the course of studying Fox's writings from the point of view of his devotional teaching it became clear that a preliminary study of his theological terms would be necessary. These notes are contributed in the hope that they may be of assistance to other students of Fox, and also to invite opinion as to the desirability of preparing similar ones on others of his principal terms.

The word "Seed" occurs frequently in the writings of Fox and the early Friends. Violet Holdsworth in *A Daybook of Counsel and Comfort* (p. xvii), suggests that really to follow his thought in this matter would need a study in itself. She tells us that Fox sometimes identifies it with Christ himself, but more generally with "the germ of Christ-likeness found and sown in humanity." In her book *George Fox and the Light within*, Rachel H. King states that the seed figure refers to Gen. 3 : 15—"the seed of the woman,"—and also to Gal. 3 : 16—"And to thy seed, which is Christ." G. F. Nuttall in *The Holy Spirit in Puritan Experience*, p. 158, believes the reference is primarily to Gen. 3 : 15, and not to the parable of the sower or to organic growth at all. As these notes are the outcome of enquiries incidental to my main study, I must apologize to those whose work I have overlooked if this bibliography is incomplete.

From my own studies I believe it is possible to distinguish a number of different ways in which Fox employs the word. They are numbered here for convenience of reference later. The two chief uses of "Seed" are as follows :

1. The Seed is Christ Jesus, the heir of the promise ; who is one in all ; into whom we are all baptized in the Spirit to become joint heirs with Jesus.

The scriptural basis of this use is Galatians 2 : 20-4 : 7, and especially 3 : 16 for the identification with Christ. Paul in this passage is trying to convince the Galatians that they are now "sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus." He

directs them to Gen. 22 : 1-18 where after testing Abraham's faith even to the readiness to sacrifice Isaac, God promises to multiply his seed "as the stars of the heaven . . . and *in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed* : because thou hast obeyed my voice." The Galatians, having come out from under the Law, live now by faith, Abraham is their spiritual ancestor, "so they are blessed with the faithful Abraham." Paul says (Gal. 3 : 16) "Now to Abraham were the promises spoken, and to his seed. He saith not 'and to thy seeds' as to many, but as of one, 'and to thy seed,' which is Christ." In Jesus, he goes on, the Seed has come to whom the promises were made ; he is the One *in whom* all the nations of the earth are to be blessed. "For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ . . . there is neither male nor female : for ye are all one in Christ Jesus."

We get clear references to this in Fox, such as *Journal*, I., 190,¹ ". . . which Seed sins not, to which God's promise is to, God's blessing is to ; which Seed is one in the male and the female," and "The promise is to the Seed . . . which Seed is the hope, Christ . . ." (*Great Mystery*, "Answer to T. Trever's Principles"). Sometimes it is used as a simple synonym for Christ without reference to the Galatians context, ". . . joining to the suffering Seed, *in which* you offer yourselves to God . . . in your sufferings feeling the Seed which was before that which makes to suffer" (Fox, *Epistles*, No. 101). In this quotation I have italicized the two words which bring out the essential thought of the third chapter of *Galatians*—the *immanence* of Christ in the individual and in the fellowship. This has been noticed by Rachel H. King (op. cit., p. 49) who points out that although the Seed is Christ, the Light is said to come from Christ and never from the Seed. She adds that the "seed does not have connotations of a transcendent Christ" ; we may prefer to say that the Seed is Christ, who is both immanent and transcendent, but that Fox in using the word has Christ's immanence especially in mind.

2. Christ, the victor in the struggle with the tempter.

When Fox speaks of Christ, "the seed of the woman"—an allusion to Gen. 3 : 15—he is thinking especially of

¹ All *Journal* references are to the Bi-centenary edition.

regeneration in man when the power of God conquers evil in him. For this struggle he has various figures of speech: our minds are called "out of the earth"; the "first nature" must go into captivity; "the power of God . . . goes over the power of darkness"; the Spirit is "imprisoned within us"—and many others.

If I understand Fox rightly he has the enabling power of God particularly in mind when he makes use of the incident in Genesis. The enmity that is placed between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent represents the antagonism of the Spirit against the "flesh" and of the "flesh" against the Spirit. The victory of the Spirit is the bruising of the serpent's head by the seed of the woman. Since in the real struggle Christ has the victory, he becomes "the seed of the woman." Thus we find—"This Seed, Christ Jesus, the seed of the woman, should bruise the serpent's head." (*Journal*, I., 417) and . . . "who bruises the Serpent's head, breaks his power . . ." (Fox, *Doctrinals*, p. 852).

I find myself in agreement with Rachel H. King's conclusion that these are the two main uses of the word by Fox. There are several others of minor importance.

3. That which is begotten of the flesh.

When the meaning is human descent, the text makes this clear: "Jesus, the seed of Abraham, being of the seed of David according to the flesh."

4. That which is begotten of the Spirit.

Jesus, the Son of God; e.g. in "The Seed of God, Christ Jesus," in Fox, *Epistles*, No. 207, and a variation, "the Seed of Life," Fox, *Epistles*, No. 61. The idea of spiritual re-birth, "Ye must be born again," brings in a group of phrases, such as: "the elect seed of God, called Quakers"; "the seed of Christ" (*Journal*, I., 343, 345). When we find Friends referred to as "the Seed's seed" we feel that Fox can do no more in this direction.

Variations and combinations of these four meanings are possible and Fox does not fail to use them. The figures refer to the numbered notes above. In the first example the Life is Christ; death the tempter. "In the Seed of Life (4) live, which bruise the seed of death" (2) (*Journal*, I., 344). In the next, three are blended: "Know the Seed of God (4), which bruise the seed of the serpent (2), and is atop of the seed of the serpent (2); which Seed sins not . . . which Seed (1) God's promise is to" (*Journal*, I., 190).

5. The seed of the plant.

Of the instances where the seed of the plant is referred to the following selection is typical: "Plough up the fallow ground.

Thrash and get out the corn ; that the seed, the wheat, may be gathered into the barn " ; " The husbandman after he soweth his seed is patient " (*Journal*, I., 316, 346) ; " . . . the devil's seed came to be sowed " (*Great Mystery*) ; " the harvest white, the seed of God lying thick upon the ground, as ever did wheat that was sown outwardly " ; " for Friends here are as a family, the seed, the plants, they are as a family " (*Journal*, I., 21, 424).

None of the foregoing suggests growth, a slow continuous development to greater maturity. Fox speaks of Friends sometimes as " plants in the Lord," appearing then to mean, by the plant, the individual. " The seed of God lying thick upon the ground," I also take to be individuals.

In 1648 Fox saw that a great crack was to go through the earth, and that after the crack there should be a great shaking. " This was the earth in people's hearts, which was to be shaken, before the Seed of God was raised out of the earth." At first sight this seems to refer to growth, but I am inclined to think that he has in mind the process of regeneration, and that here as in the second sense above, Christ is envisaged as victorious, not coming up as by a growth process, but coming *uppermost* in the struggle—released through the crack!—for the earth is the evil nature in man. Compare Edward Burrough (*Works*, p. 71) : " In the silence wait and you will see . . . the earth broken up, and the fallow ground, *and a passage made for the Seed.*"

It would be unwise to be dogmatic about so prolific a writer as Fox, but after a fairly wide reading of his works I agree with Geoffrey F. Nuttall that when Fox uses " seed " he is not thinking of growth at all. There may be some exceptions to this statement but a prolonged search would, I believe, yield very few. Growth in the Spirit is, of course, fundamental to Fox's, as to other Christian thought, but he almost invariably speaks of increasing one's *measure* of the Light, or Spirit, a term he adopts from Paul, Eph. 4 : 7 ; Rom. 12 : 3 ; etc.

The reason for Fox's neglect of the seed as a metaphor *for spiritual growth* is, I think, not far to seek. The two main senses in which he uses " Seed," viz. Christ, supreme in the spiritual struggle, and Christ, the One in all who live by faith, are fundamental to his interpretation of his own religious experience and, therefore, to his theological ideas. To Fox, the Seed is Christ. His ideas of the person of Jesus are strongly influenced by Johannine Logos Christology. For our immediate purpose it is sufficient to say that to Fox Christ is living, eternal and unchangeable. *Christ does not grow.* If Fox had also used the word seed to mean something that changed, grew, and developed into a more mature condition, the result would have been utter confusion. That Fox did not do so shows that credit is due to him as a clear thinker—more credit than has perhaps been given.

I would warmly welcome comments and criticisms of these notes from readers who are especially interested in Fox's use of language.

T. JOSEPH PICKVANCE