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Truth of the Heart. An anthology of George Fox (1624-1691) // Rex Ambler



This collection of passages from the writings of George Fox (1624–1691) is meant to do two things: to make available his clearest and most profound writings from all that was written by Fox, and to display these texts in such a way as to show the connections between them. Therefore, it is possible to read the book from the beginning to the end, and gain a picture of Fox's whole vision.

This may at first seem like a rather cumbersome device for conveying Fox's meaning. Why not publish some of his more interesting work? The reason is that Fox nowhere set out his ideas as a whole, systematically. His writing (or his dictating, as was usually the case) was work that almost always responding to a particular situation and with the particular inspiration that came to Fox.

Indeed, he wrote, it seems, as the inspiration came to him, without forethought or working over afterwards. Fox lacked the education and the inclination to structure his thoughts rationally. There is therefore much repetition, digression and even confusion in his work. He also developed the habit, especially in his later work, of letting the Bible do the talking for him, but without stopping to explain precisely how he interpreted the Bible in these cases. Explanation and clarification were not his strong points, which is surprising in a teacher of such profound influence. But for all this, there are times when he wrote with extraordinary clarity, depth and power, presenting an understanding of life that was both coherent and livable. How else then could this writing be made available than by collecting all the bits together and putting them in an order that would reflect Fox's own intentions? What is surprising is that something like this has never been done before. The greater part of his work has therefore remained in obscurity, difficult to find in the few libraries that keep the old works, and difficult to read when the old works have finally been tracked down. Does this mean, I ask myself, that we have remained in ignorance of Fox's wider vision for more than three hundred years?

We have always had Fox's Journal, of course. But this impressive work was not intended as a vehicle of his teachings. It was written as he says himself, 'that all may know the dealings of the Lord with me... to prepare and fit me for the work unto which he had appointed me'. It is an account of Fox's activities, often with the intention of showing how he had been guided to do what he did or vindicated by events in doing it.

Fox's Journal has a defensive tone, perhaps because at the time of writing (mostly in 1676) , he was burdened by the sufferings that Friends were having to undergo for their witness. If we depend on this document for an understanding of Fox's teaching, we shall get a confused and unedifying picture. This is no doubt the reason why the first editor of the Journal, Thomas Ellwood, included a number of papers and epistles that Fox had written earlier, in the 25 years before he wrote the Journal because there Fox wrote mostly with clarity and force about the issues that concerned him. Unfortunately, those papers were not included in later editions, such as the scholarly edition of John Nickalls. And we have little else in print, in Britain at least, to give us access to that early teaching.

Rex Ambler, Birmingham, 2001

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