

FRIENDS WAY OF WORSHIP

For members of the Society of Friends the meeting for worship is the central fact of their corporate religious life and the basis of their common service. As the Quaker meeting has a character of its own, differentiating it markedly from other forms of Christian worship, some contribution is required from Friends if a discussion of ways of worship is to be complete. But just because the Society has no liturgy or ritual, administers no outward sacrament, ordains no priest, does not recite a Christian creed, and refuses to consecrate any building, what it may have to offer is hardly likely to provide direct answers to a questionnaire appropriately addressed to other parts of the Christian Church. Nevertheless, if a freer form of answer is admissible something perhaps may usefully be said in a short memorandum about a tradition of worship, now over 370 years old, in which groups of men and women have regularly met in holy communion with God and with one another and in a deep sense of the real presence of Christ, coming to “know one another in that which is eternal, which was before the world was,” and are knit into a unity “treating one another as those that believed and felt God present.”

THE MEETING FOR WORSHIP

Meeting for Worship from Sunday to Sunday, and frequently on other days too, Friends have regularly spent a considerable part of their time together in silence, but have always felt free also to minister to one another in the spoken word of exhortation and in uttered prayer, under what they have felt to be the constraining and restraining influence of the Holy Spirit. It is misleading to say that Quaker meetings are silent; their true basis is attentive and expectant waiting on God in worship with full opportunity for vocal ministry. Nor is the silence to be regarded as a rite. In the early days of Friends, Robert Barclay wrote: “True worship consists neither in words nor in silence, as silence, but in a humble dependence of the mind upon God.”

Worship is man’s response to God and the fixing of attention on him as he has revealed himself to us in history. It is to a God who not only “is love” but who “so loved the world” that we lift our hearts in an act of adoration and thanksgiving, self-giving and penitence.

Meetings for worship held after the manner of Friends are still attended by quite small numbers; indeed large gatherings have sometimes been found difficult. Nobody would claim that the form and method of the Quaker meeting for worship was one to be imposed on others: even for Friends it often falls short of the ideal. Yet others besides Friends have come to recognise the worth of a time spent in quiet waiting on God, with complete freedom of responsible utterance for all, old and young, man and woman, cultivated and uninstructed; and this practice has undoubtedly influenced and helped other branches of the Christian Church.

The meeting for worship is a venture faith; and everyone involves risk not only at the hands of the insensitive and those who do not fully understand, but equally because of unfaithfulness to the Light of Christ on the part of others.

While rejecting outward forms, Friends do, of course, for ordinary convenience, appoint a time and a place for meeting; and the fact that this mode of worship is recognisable and that examples of it may be strongly evaluated shows that after all it tends to a certain form. Yet the successful use of Friends' mode of worship depends first on the practice of communion in silence, an expectant silence in which the worshippers wait on God, are listening and attending and responding to the guidance of the Spirit; and on the emergence from this silent communion of a responsible spoken ministry.

To the non-Friend who too often has gained the impression that a Friends' meeting offers nothing but empty silence, the whole idea may at first be repellent and intolerable; nevertheless, it is certain that many a stranger has found rest and comfort and healing of soul in the quiet of a Friends' meeting, and has come to know something of the presence of God there. It is equally certain that many who have turned away unsatisfied from liturgical forms of worship and official ministries have found freedom of spiritual exercise and a message to their own hearts either in the silence or in some simple word spoken out of it in the name of Christ.

THE VOCAL MINISTRY

Addresses and lectures for religious instruction are in place in gatherings arranged for that purpose; but a prepared address or sermon is felt to be out of keeping with the spirit of meeting for worship. Worshippers are indeed urged to attend “with hearts and minds prepared,” and those who from time to time feel called to speak will often, be able to render the greater help to those who listen, if they speak out of a place that relies on the practice of daily prayer to God and Bible reading; but in this case it is the person - not the sermon - that has been prepared. Friends believe that true vocal ministry arises out of the exercise of the meeting and is given of the Holy Spirit. The group becomes fused into an organic whole through the empowering and enlightening action of the Spirit. In the language of another 17th-century Friend, Isaac Pennington (1616-1679), “The life of Christ flows from the vessel of life in one to the vessel of life in another.” In consequence the vocal ministry speaks to the heart and “condition” of all those present. It will relate to what the speaker knows to be true in his or her own experience. Yet, it grows out of the experience not of one person only but of the whole company of worshippers, who themselves have been given a deeper insight into the meaning of life as they have waited together in the presence of God. It has expressed and has responded to the search of the human heart for the heart of God.

This true vocal ministry, according to Friends’ understanding is characterised by a deep sense of responsibility alike to God and to fellow men; none may claim exemption from the call when it comes. The vehicle of the message may just as well be an uninstructed and hitherto tongue-tied worshipper as one capable of polished and accomplished utterance. A few words “from the Lord” may have as much value as a longer address. “We bring our varying gifts to Thee and Thou rejects none;” “They that have the spirit of Christ are ministers of the spirit and they minister to the raising up of the spirit in others.” (James Nayler)

THE FELLOWSHIP

Worship has a twofold reference; vertically to God, and horizontally to man. The meeting is not a collection of individuals, but a religious community joined in a common purpose. Friends agree with other Christians in feeling that individual communion with God is no substitute for corporate worship;

each has its place. Something is given to the gathered group that can never be known in isolation. Again Robert Barclay writes: “As everyone is inwardly gathered to the measure of the life of Christ in himself, there is a secret unity and fellowship enjoyed, which the Devil and all his instruments can never break or hinder.”

Friends’ sense of fellowship and of mutual responsibility is, of course, not confined to the time actually spent in common worship: but, generated and centred there, it extends through all dimensions of the common life, and gives foundation, quality and strength to the wider sense of Christian responsibility towards all sorts and conditions of men, of no matter what colour, class, creed, or other trait, that expresses itself in social and international service.

THE BIBLE

Friends place a very high value on the Scriptures. On the one hand they are the record of God's disclosure of himself to men through the Hebrew people, culminating in the unique personality of Jesus Christ (in his life, death, and resurrection) and, on the other hand they tell the story of man’s discovery of the nature and purpose of God as conditioned by his response and obedience to the Light of Christ leading to growth in insight and knowledge of truth.

Our members are advised “to be constant in the private reading of the Bible,” “to be diligent in reading and meditating upon the Scriptures” and “to seek to come into the living experience of the Spirit from which the Scriptures sprang, and to find words to express them simply and worthily.”

The debt we owe to modern scholars for their reverent study and unfolding of the Scriptures is thankfully recognised. Friends are urged to take full advantage of these resources now so abundantly available. It is laid upon our Elders to provide weekly opportunities for instruction in the study and interpretation of the Bible.

At the same time the reading of the Bible in meetings for worship will form a valuable contribution to that worship, and the daily use of the Bible throughout the week and familiarity with its contents, are regarded as a vital and essential part of that preparation of heart and mind for worship which is enjoined upon all our members.

THE SACRAMENTS

Friends, as is well known, affirm that the outward and visible forms of the sacraments of Baptism and of the Lord's Supper are not necessary. This does not mean that they are indifferent to those deep spiritual values which the observance of these sacraments have for most other Christians. Friends emphasise the necessity both of being baptised of the Spirit and of inward communion with Christ, and these experiences they feel are not conditioned by the use of any outward forms.

The main difference between ourselves and most other bodies of Christians arises from the emphasis we place on the light of God's Holy Spirit in the human soul... This direct contact between the Spirit of Christ and the human spirit we are prepared to trust to, as the basis of our individual and corporate life... The Light of Christ in the soul may be experienced by all: no form of the Divine Grace is the monopoly of a priestly caste, through whom alone it can be ministered to others. We do not make use of the outward rites of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, but we do believe in the inward experiences they symbolise. Our testimony is to the actuality of this experience even without the external rite.

There is no altar in the Friends Meeting House but in the meeting for worship the experience of the presence of Christ in the midst is the means of grace and the source of life. "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit." God, the Father of Jesus Christ, is our loving Heavenly Father, to be approached directly and not by way of oblation; and prayerful thought is naturally turned to the meeting place with God found both in the individual heart and in the communion of the worshipping fellowship of Friends. The fact that many others find the forms of outward ritual helpful to them or even an indispensable expression of their worship is fully recognised. But Friends feel that the outward form tends to draw attention to itself and to blur the true vision of God. Relying on the promise of Christ they pray for a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit which brings the assurance of grace and power.

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