

The Quaker Way Notes
Chapter 3: Meeting Others
 6 June, 2018

1. "New spiritualities" vs. Quakerism

- *The 'Quaker way of looking for God' involves a personal process of transformation. It cannot be otherwise, given the Quaker rejection of external things as the means of finding God. Each person has to find the truth for themselves, and each person is able to do this because they each have something of God in them.*
- *[Ambler] wanted to emphasize the individual path because it has been so much neglected in present day Quakerism, which tends to see the Meeting for Worship as the whole basis and focus of our spiritual life. When we have seen what we are each called to do individually, however, we will be in a position to recognize that the Quaker path also involves others.*
- *There are many spiritualities that emphasize the individual almost exclusively, and some of the new spiritualities suggest that each person has to find the particular truth that suits them. But this is not the Quaker way, however much we might learn from other spiritualities. The Meeting of Friends was always important, right from the beginning, especially the Meeting for Worship. (49)*

2. Sharing with one another – Five benefits

a. Early Friends needed one another in order to survive.

- *Anyone who rejected the parish church and refused to attend services or pay tithes was out on their ear. They would no longer be supported by the parish system.... Many thousands of people found themselves in this position in the mid-seventeenth century, mostly as a matter of conscience.*
- *In the North West of England...many of them banded together for mutual support and silent worship, waiting for a new prophet or teacher to show them the way. These were the Seekers whom Fox met when he first came to these parts in 1652.*
- *Our practical needs may not be so urgent as theirs..., but practical help is still needed, and it still binds us together. We also need one another socially, perhaps even more now than they did then.*
- *Our society is more fragmented and alienated than theirs.... We therefore feel more isolated individually and feel a strong need to connect with other people who will have at least some sympathy with us and some understanding of our particular concerns. We sense, rightly, that we cannot be fulfilled in our lives if we cannot share our lives with others, and believe we participate in something much larger than ourselves. (50)*

b. We need others to mirror back how they see us and to affirm us.

- *Exposure to the light means we have to see ourselves as we are, to strip ourselves naked', as Early Friends liked to say, and this, as we have seen, can be a difficult experience. Others can help us in this by reflecting back how they see us, and by accepting us as we are. There is no room for pretence here.*
- *On the contrary, the kind of affirmation and acceptance that each of us needs can only be received when we are completely open with one another about how we are. This is given practical expression in the way we sit together in Meeting. We sit facing one another. ...*

- *The presence of the other is then included in our meditation. Indeed the face of the other in front of me may challenge me to 'face up to' myself, my real self, or comfort me in the knowledge that I am accepted as I am. This affirmation by others will help us in turn to affirm and accept ourselves, whatever it is in ourselves that we might feel to be unacceptable. And if we accept ourselves as we are, we are more able to accept others, without judgment or suspicion. (51)*
- George Fox:
 - *'Mind that which first convinced you, that power of God which first awakened you, and arise and live in it, that all your eyes, minds and hearts may be kept single and naked to God [i.e. honest and sincere], and to one another, unclothed of all that is contrary.'*
 - *'Being written all in one another's hearts, have all one voice and the pure language of truth, where in all plainness of speech things may be spoken in nakedness of heart one unto another in the eternal unity of the one spirit....'*
- *This openness becomes possible when we realize that we are heard and accepted, when we 'find love', as the [British Friends'] Book of Discipline says, meaning a warm acceptance. This is what Patricia Loring calls 'a listening spirituality'. It seems to be the condition for another piece of advice in the Book, following George Fox:*

'Friends, meet together and know one another in that which is eternal, which was before the world was.'

'That which is eternal' is that deep part of each of us which links us to God, the Eternal. (52)

c. We each have a limited understanding and need one another to share our insights.

- *We each have a 'measure' of the light, as Early Friends used to say. Remember Samuel Fisher's words...: 'By which light... in some measure, though not the same measure, he manifests something of himself in every conscience.'*
- *It is perhaps surprising that this recognition of different abilities did not lead Friends to adopt the practice of other churches and 'ordain' certain people to 'the ministry'.... But they were averse to setting certain people above others, so as not to lose the benefit of all participating.*
- *Some who are 'weak in understanding' may be strong in something else, like practical help or ability to listen. The 'ministry' is then mutual, and the community grows, as everyone gains confidence in themselves to give what they can, and confidence in others to give what they need. This brings us to the next point. (53-54)*

d. We have different gifts.

- *All these 'manifold' gifts are found to be necessary, which is another reason for not setting some apart as 'holy'...*
- *Fox: 'Therefore, watch every one to feel and know his own place and service in the body, and to be sensible of the gifts, places, and services of others, that the Lord may be honoured in all, and every one owned and honoured in the Lord, and no otherwise.'*

- *Britain Yearly Meeting's Quaker Faith and Practice: ' We recognize a variety of ministries. In our worship these include those who speak under the guidance of the Spirit, and those who receive and uphold the work of the Spirit in silence and prayer. We also recognise as ministry service on our many committees, hospitality and childcare, the care of finance and premises, and many other tasks. We value those whose ministry is not in an appointed task but is in teaching, counselling, listening, prayer, enabling the service of others, or other service in the meeting or the world.'* (54)

e. Out of this openness and sharing comes an experience of unity.

- *We find unity in our common humanity; but also - and this is slightly different - in the Spirit. We know now that we belong together, that we can trust one another and that we can do things together we would never be able to do apart. Out of this knowledge comes strength, comfort, love and confidence to act.*
- *This is not a unity we have to create by artfully establishing common interests. It is already there, if we have the eyes to see it. The point is that, waiting in the light, we do see it; we lose our customary selfish viewpoint and see others as they are, without distortion: 'All they that are in the light are in unity; for the light is but one.'* (54-55)

3. Holding together