

Rex Ambler, *The Quaker Way*, Chapter 3 – “Worshipping together” (58-63)

I have kept this till last, not because I think it less important, but to get it into clearer perspective. Our practice of coming together once a week to sit in silence makes sense only if we have learned to do that during the week and have got to know the people we sit with in ordinary, everyday interactions. This would have been easier perhaps for the first Friends, since silence was part of their lives anyway, and the people with whom they worshipped would have met in other ways during the week. When they came together on Sunday, or whenever, they would truly 'meet' one another, since they knew one another well from their daily contacts, and they would be spiritually 'trained' to be open to one another and the experience of corporate worship. The worshipping group wouldn't have to carry the whole burden of their individual spiritual lives, and the meeting for worship would not, by itself, have to sustain them for the rest of the week. Nevertheless, the gathering together was always special. We can see this best when we recognize that, initially at least, they would be doing the same thing together as they did on their own or in their families.

What was the same?

We have some clear directions from Alexander Parker, writing a letter to Friends in 1660:

The first that enters into the place of your meeting... turn in thy mind to the light, and wait upon God singly, as if none were present but the Lord; and here thou art strong. Then the next that comes in, let them in simplicity of heart sit down and turn in to the same light, and wait in the spirit; and so all the rest coming in, in the fear of the Lord, sit down in pure stillness and silence of all flesh, and wait in the light... Those who are brought to a pure still waiting upon God in the spirit, are come nearer to the Lord than words are; for God is a spirit, and in the spirit is he worshipped... In such a meeting there will be an unwillingness to part asunder, being ready to say in yourselves, it is good to be here: and this is the end of all words and writings to bring people to the eternal living Word.⁵⁸

This corresponds to the direction given to individuals who wanted to find the reality of religion and to experience its liberating and life-giving power for themselves. They were to become still and silent, so that their normal anxious thoughts would subside, and then to turn their minds to the truth that their conscience was alerting them to. If they faced that truth and accepted it, they would find greater truth, and that would enable them to see who they really were and how they could now live freely and fruitfully. That was the process. And when they came together to worship they would first have to check with their conscience to see if there was anything in their life that needed dealing with before they could open themselves genuinely to the needs of others. Even then, the point of the exercise in being together was to become more fully aware of the truth of their lives and to respond inwardly to what was revealed to them:

They must be in it [the spirit], and in the truth, to worship the God of all truth.⁵⁹

Everyone is to be in it [the truth] and to walk in the truth, and in the spirit, and to come to the truth in their own particulars [their own individual experience]... And so none can worship alone, but when we join with others in expectant waiting we may discover a deeper sense of God's presence.⁶³

What was different?

The first thing is that we come to feel part of the group, not isolated or alone. This is a good experience in itself, but it can lead to something even better, a sense of being united in the spirit, held together by something larger than ourselves, which can nourish us and enlighten us as a group. Perhaps the best account of this experience was given in Robert Barclay's *Apology*, chapter 11, back in 1676, the first systematic defence of the Quaker practice. Here's one small part of it:

Meeting together not only outwardly in one place, but thus inwardly in one spirit, and in one 'name of Jesus' (which is his power and virtue), they come thereby to enjoy and feel the arisings of this life, which, as it prevails in each particular [individual], becomes as a flood of refreshment, and overspreads the whole meeting.⁶¹

But to get to this experience we have to become aware of the people we are with, and maybe to get a sense of how' they are. Fox did not give very much advice about Meeting for Worship, surprisingly perhaps, but in one letter he gave some searching advice about how to settle down and tune in to the others. The letter was directed mostly to Friends who had been travelling around the country, debating the Quaker cause, and might have got quite heated in their confrontation with Puritan opponents:

Friends, be watchful and careful in all meetings ye come into. When a man is come newly out of the world he cometh out of the dirt. Then he must not be rash. For now when he cometh into a silent meeting, that is another state. Then he must come and feel his own spirit how it is, when he cometh to those that sit silent; for he may come in the heal of his spirit out of the world (whereas the others are still and cool]... Friends, come into that which is over all the spirits of the world, with that ye may see where others stand, and reach that which is of God in everyone.⁶²

You see that Fox is advising them to deal with their own personal stuff first of all, so that they can then be free to open themselves to the others, to 'see where others stand'. But it also suggests a down-to-earth approach to the meeting as a whole: just become aware of who is there and how they are. When we have done that we can consider what might concern us as a group. Are there issues of disharmony, anxiety or practical concern? This is not the time to think about them, but a time to hold them in the light, and hold the Meeting in the light. See the relevance of that old Quaker phrase. 'Holding' is not *doing* anything with it, not yet, it is just taking notice, absorbing what is really going on, feeling the joy or the pain of it. It might be like holding a wounded bird in our hands, or a newly found precious stone. It is a rather unique way of seeking the truth. I heard an ecologist once describe how he would get to know a new ecological environment, a river or a forest or just a field that was unfamiliar to him. He would sit in the field, or by the river, in silence, still and attentive, watching everything that was going on, and he would stay there for hours, until eventually he had a sense of the whole place and the life of that place. That seems to me like a Meeting for Worship.

We are coming together, finally, to 'worship'. That is not something we can plan, or organize, or even consciously undertake. As with our experience of unity in the group, it is a response of the heart to what we are made aware of when we sit in silent waiting.

Worship is our response to an awareness of God. We can worship alone, but when we join with others in expectant waiting we may discover a deeper sense of God's presence.⁶³

We may become aware as we sit together that we are part of a greater unity, a unity of life, perhaps, or a unity of being. Alternatively, we may become aware that the ministry that is being spoken in Meeting

comes, not just from the person speaking, but from something deep inside them which is also inside us, because what is being said speaks to us directly and exactly. Or, we may become aware that the truth we are discerning, through both the ministry and the silent meditation, is part of the ultimate truth we have always been longing for. We may not understand what it is we are experiencing here, but we can be sure we are experiencing something beyond our normal selves and the normal world we inhabit. It may fill us with awe, or wonder or gratitude. And if we give ourselves to that feeling, and say 'yes' to it, that is surely true worship.

Part of the response may be to stand up in the Meeting and speak. This is 'ministry', in our current Quaker language. Another response may be to recognize that we have to settle *a* difference with someone or to help sort out a social problem. This is a 'leading'. If the leading continues and grows so that we feel led to devote some part *of* our life to it, it becomes a 'concern', which others also might join in, in which case it becomes a 'concern of the Meeting'.

Worship, ministry, leading, concern- those are all produced from within us, whether individually or collectively, but not from our conscious mind. We cannot *do* them, only respond consciously to what is being given or shown us. But we can consciously take care of the conditions that make the process possible. We can provide a building that is suitable for quiet waiting together, and yet obviously open for anyone to join. We can fix a good time to meet, and arrange other meetings for learning and support and planned action. These are our responsibility. We also appoint clerk, elders and overseers to ensure that the Meeting can do its business and care for its members. But these too, as we shall see in the next chapter, are also dependent on being 'led', i.e. they require us to care unselfishly for others and to discern the right thing to be done, and that can only come, finally, from the spirit in all of us.