

Session 6: September 16, 2018 – Worshiping together

Mike, Sean, Richelle, Janice, Bettie, Wendy, Eherin (Willie and Meredith attended worship and potluck)

1. Review of Session 5 discussion of what the Bible is for Quakers

We began by rejecting the modern notions of *scriptural literalism* and *fundamentalism* that ascribe “final authority” to the Bible as all one work, dictated by God, with specific assertions of what is “right belief” and “right behavior.”

Quaker’s instead follow the principle of *continuing revelation*. The Bible is not a fixed and final but as a library of *sacred texts*, available for our shared inner light to use in bringing us new understanding. Margaret Fell wrote of this new approach to scripture in describing the first time she heard Fox speak [emphases added]:

“[He] opened the Scriptures and said the Scriptures were the prophets’ words, and Christ’s and the apostles’ words, and what as they spoke they enjoyed and possessed and had it from the Lord. And said, then *what had any to do with the Scriptures but as they came to the Spirit that gave them forth?*”

“*You will say Christ saith this and the apostles say this, but what canst thou say? Art thou a child of the Light and hast thou walked in the Light, and what thou speakest, is it inwardly from God, etc.?*”

“This opened me so, that it cut me to the heart, and then I saw clearly that we were all wrong. So I sat me down in my pew again and cried bitterly: and I cried in my spirit to the Lord, We are all thieves, we are all thieves, *we have taken the Scriptures in words, and know nothing of them in ourselves.*”

– from *The Journal of George Fox*

It is important to seek understanding of this distinction between Bible as authority and inward Spirit as authority. In waiting worship, we are learning how to listen to this Spirit that “gave forth the Scriptures.”

2. Description for newcomers of religious, social, and political context of first Quakers

In 17th century England, the government enforced membership in and tithing to the Church of England, which was dominated by Puritans. Those who did not comply were called dissenters and were subject to losing property and being imprisoned. Even so, many became dissenters. People now had the 1611 King James translation of the Bible into English, and those who were literate read it to others, allowing dissenters to discuss what the sacred stories and sayings meant to them personally.

Some of these folks, called Seekers, decided to set aside the interpretations and doctrines of the established church—not wholly rejecting them, but acknowledging that these things did not awaken the spiritual awareness they longed for. Small gatherings of Seekers began sitting in silence together. For them words got in the way, so they chose to “wait upon the Lord”—that is, to wait for the inward spirit which they knew they shared to move them to spoken ministry. These were the people whom George Fox began to teach the Quaker way.

Be still and know that I am God. – Psalm 46:10

3. Query, worship sharing, and discussion

In whatever form of silent waiting you do, what do you experience early in your sitting, and how does your inner awareness change throughout your quiet time?

All but one of us had been present for meeting for worship earlier, and we used this time to describe to each other how we experience such “waiting silence.” Here are some examples from that process.

- One person focused on the parables during meeting for worship, not on specific ones but on the fascinating mystery of parabolic storytelling, and the way Jesus seems to be “hiding the truth.” A second person shared frustration that the parables don’t make sense and seem to commend irrational behavior.
- One drew an analogy between her worship and the the Buddhist practice of silently blessing each person in the room—and then beyond the room.

- One described a “covered meeting” after which traveling Quaker Daisy Palmer said, “The closer we come to each other the closer we come to the center.” In a covered (or gathered) meeting, the worshipers have a distinct feeling of being joined together and feeling the wholeness of the group. Such an experience is difficult to describe to those who have not shared it.

“In a gathered meeting, as I have experienced it, it is impossible to draw away from the Divine. One is gladly caught and lifted up and knows that others are experiencing the same thing. Imagine the feeling of being...any concert where everyone is singing the same song with heartfelt joy. It’s like that, but deeper, much deeper and because it is a sense without words, it is known in a different part of ones being than the normal verbal places we inhabit most of the time.” – from jewelsofquakerism.org/survey-questions/a-coveredgathered-meeting

- One described carrying meeting for worship with her during the week. This can be more difficult to do in our modern culture, where we do not all live and work together in one small community as the first Quakers did. It can also seem more difficult to “center and sink down to my soul” during meeting for worship than when alone during the week. In meeting, *we are all centering down collectively*, so we may need to wait for those who have less ease in doing so.
- One said that at the start of silent waiting (alone or in meeting), it is difficult to become still physically or mentally. She gradually settles until she doesn’t feel her body. Sometimes she is drawn deeper. She told of praying for God to be present and receiving the message, “I’m here. Pay attention.”

4. How can we continue the Quaker way during the week?

Here are some of the comments:

- One said that our culture imposes a lot of time constraints. We are always busy.
- One said that instead the geographical separation of Friends during the time between meetings for worship was the most difficult to transcend.
- One reminded us that, as dissenters, early Quakers chose to give up the community and social services provided by the church parish to non-dissenters. They had to create their own communities, to live closely together, and to work our substitute ways to provide for and care for each other.
- One said that in modern American culture, spouses and families tend to stay with each other rather than with a larger community. In the small communities of early Quaker England, people moved and worked among each other, extending their families.

5. Homework

- **Session 7** – After meeting for worship and potluck at 12:30 pm on Sunday, October 21st.
- **Read ahead** – Begin to read Chapter 4 of *The Quaker Way*, “Making Decisions” (64-81)
- **Read again** – The “Worshiping together” section of Chapter 3 (58-63). In particular, look at how Ambler contrasts what is the same for both early Quaker and present day worship, on the one hand, and what is very different about worship for modern Friends.

“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.... 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....”

In a letter, Fox advised Friends “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.” (61)