

Quaker Meeting for Worship – Douglas Steere (1937)

“For when I came into the silent assemblies of God’s people, I felt a secret power among them which touched my heart; and as I gave way unto it, I found the evil weakening in me and the good raised up.” – Robert Barclay

I was once asked by a woman about the Quaker approach to life, and I began to tell her what Quakers believed about the nature of men and their relation to God. But she cut me off abruptly with the assurance that she had heard a similar ideal theory expounded by every religious group she had ever met. “What I want to know,” she insisted, “is what you Quakers do!” What then, do we do in Quaker worship? I can only speak for myself as a member of the Society of Friends, and I shall put it very informally and very personally.

I attend a Meeting that usually has from sixty to ninety persons present. We meet together in an old meetinghouse each Sunday morning for an hour. I know many of the worshipping company. I think about this meeting for worship during the week. I think about the people whom I shall meet there. I often go out to visit one or two of them during the week. They come to visit my wife and me. We know one another as people, with personal problems, political views, with special “concerns,” and in the course of time we come to know the weaknesses and the strengths of one another in the affairs of this world. On Sunday we gather “to know one another in that which is Eternal.”

The little meetinghouse where I worship lies well out in the country. I get there just before eleven, enter in silence and sit down. There is no altar before me, no choir loft, no organ. Only three rows of “facing benches,” each of the back two being slightly elevated above the one in front of it. In former days, as in many Meetings still, certain older Friends and some “weighty” Friends who have often had insights to share with the group sat in these benches facing the Meeting.

Our meetings are made up of a group of people gathered together in silent prayer. The first thing that I do is close my eyes and then still my body in order to get it as far out of the way as I can. Then I still my mind and let it open to God in silent prayer, for the meeting, as we understand it, is the meeting place of the worshipper with God. I thank God inwardly for this occasion, for the week’s happenings, for what I have learned at God’s hand, for my family, and the work there is to do. I often pause to enjoy this presence. Under God’s gaze I search the week and feel the piercing twinge of remorse that comes at this, and this, and this. I ask forgiveness for my faithlessness and ask for strength to meet this matter when it arises again. There have been times when I had to re-weave a part of my life under this auspice.

I hold up persons before God in intercession, loving and seeing them under God’s eyes, longing for God’s healing and redeeming power to course through their lives. I hold up certain social situations, certain projects. At such a time I often see things that I may do in company with or that are related to this person or to this situation. I hold up the persons in the meeting and their needs, as I know them, to God.

But again and again before I get through this far in prayer my mind has been drawn away by some distraction. Someone has come in late. Two adorable little girls who are sitting on opposite sides of their mother are almost overcome by delight in something which is much too subtle to be comprehended by the adult mind. How noisy the cars are out on the highway today. The wind howls around the corner and rattles the old glass in the window sashes. Do these rude interruptions destroy the silent prayer? Well, there was a time when they did, and there are times still when they interfere somewhat, but for the most part I think they help. The latecomers stir me to a resolve to be more punctual myself (a fault I am all too well aware of) and I pass directly on in prayer, glad that they have come today. The little girls remind me of the undiscovered gaiety in every cell of life and they remind me too that a meeting for worship must be made to reach these active nine- and ten-year-olds, and I pass on. Sometimes I pray the distractions directly into the prayer.

When I have finished these inward prayers, I quietly resign myself to complete listening: letting go in the intimacy of this friendly company and in the intimacy of the Great Friend who is always near. At this point, one could use Robert Barclay’s words in describing our silent sitting together, “As our worship consisted not in words so neither in silences as silence, but in a holy dependence of the mind upon God; from which dependence silence necessarily follows in the first place until words can be brought forth which are from God’s spirit.” I do not know what takes place here. Often I am sure it is nothing at all. But there are times when a certain slowing-down takes place, a certain healing seems to go on, certain tendering, a certain “dependence of the mind upon God.” This, however, may come in at any point in my own directed prayers and take precedence over them. Someone asked another how long he ought to pray, and received the answer, “Long enough to forget time.” One might say of one’s own prayers that they ought to be persisted in only long enough to be superseded by something that takes a person beyond them. It is so much more important that we be prayed than that we pray. And yet the latter has been found to be a frequent preparation for the former.

When this tendering happens in a meeting, one feels knit very closely to one’s fellow worshippers, and a particular sense of our common ground in the Spirit and of our life in “holy obedience” to it often develops. With this we may be brought very low and into a realization of the condition of some group with which we stand out of unity, whether it be the suffering millions in India or neglected friendless senior citizens, or an underprivileged group in our own neighborhood.

Out of this leveling and this gathering of the meeting, some vocal ministry often develops. I said at the beginning that I often thought about the meeting during the week. Experiences of my own, things that I read, a verse of poetry, some insight that may come while on a walk or in the classroom or in a personal visit, some passage of Scripture that has come up in our daily family worship, these are always being directed toward the meeting. Since we have no minister, all of us have a responsibility. It is not the abolition of ministry but the abolition of the passive laity that the Society of Friends has striven for. One never brings anything to meeting with the certainty of giving it there, but one tries not to come empty. Under the influence of the quiet prayer and this sense of unity in the meeting, what light one brought is often completely set aside, or one feels that this should be reserved for another occasion, or it is made over, or new accents, new illustrations, new simplifications are effected. The mind is often drawn to an entirely fresh seed that unfolds itself there in the consciousness of the worshipper.

When I feel drawn to share something in the quiet meeting for worship, I simply rise and say it as briefly as I know how, seeking ever to keep close to the root and to avoid all vain and distracting ornamentation. The other worshippers often do not raise their heads or open their eyes. If they feel in unity with what I have shared and if it speaks to the condition of the meeting, out of which it sprang, then it becomes a seed for their meditation. If it does not, they pay little attention to it and continue in their own worship. If this or something given by one of the other members of the meeting interprets the common need and exercise of the meeting, it is often added to by others, and a common theme is developed that grips the mind of every participating worshipper who is present. I say "participating" worshipper, for it is possible to come to Friends meeting and just sit or perhaps wait and often wait in vain for someone to "say something." Perhaps in no service of worship is so much left to the worshipper as in a Friends meeting. Those who must have music, responsive reading, Scripture reading, announcements, and professional speaking to keep them aroused would probably not be happy there. But the minister of Trinity Church, New York, must have had some persons in mind when he made his suggestion of a moratorium on preaching for a year or two so that those who desire to may worship in peace. Those persons would, I believe, find in the Quaker silent meeting a form of worship in which they could "participate."

After about an hour someone in the meeting shakes hands with the person next to him or her, and the "rise" of the meeting has come. Most of us linger and talk with one another for fifteen or twenty minutes before we leave. One of our members leaves directly, and it is not her Sunday dinner that is responsible. She says that her cup is often so filled at meeting that she is not quite fit to talk about things in general at this point but feels that she must hold it full and get home as soon as possible to see what this means for her to do.

"Was thee faithful?" and "Did thee yield?" are not archaic echoes of personal queries Friends used to ask themselves centuries ago in the first flush of their discovery. More than one member has hurried off to do something on which the divine accent has settled in the meeting. Concerns for certain social situations have sprung out of the meeting. Few leave without some refreshment, some sensitizing, and without at least a tiny nosegay of those mountain flowers that Francis de Sales declared to be there on the heights waiting to be plucked by every true worshipper.



Friend Douglas Steere (1901-1995) was an ecumenical pioneer, a war relief organizer, a teacher of prayer, a philosopher. A Rhodes Scholar who taught philosophy at Haverford College, he also wrote many devotional books. His life manifested a balance between contemplation and action—the inner and outer life—and both sides reveal his gift for affirming the lives of others.

The image he offers here describes Friends worship so that a visitor may feel at home. It is at the same time a deep meditation. Some of the turns of phrase have become archaic in the twenty-first century, but the core of what he is saying is timeless.

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