

Are Your Meetings Held in the Life?

The Relation of the Meeting for Worship to the Life of the Society

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There are two anecdotes about Quaker meetings for worship which I would like to retell. The first is the exciting and triumphant description by Robert Barclay of his first experiences at Friends' meetings:

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, and so I became thus knit and united unto them, hungering more and more after the increase of this power and life, whereby I might feel myself perfectly redeemed.

The second is the startling experience of Samuel Bownas in 1696. On this day he sat in the back row dozing through the meeting as he did regularly each Sunday. He describes it in his journal:

a young woman named Anne Wilson, was there and preached. She was very zealous, and fixing my eye upon her, she with a great zeal pointed her finger at me, uttering these words with much power, "A traditional Quaker, thou comest to meeting as thou went from it the last time, and goes from it as thou came to it, but art no better for the coming; what wilt thou do in the end?" This was so pat to my then condition that, like Saul, I was smitten to the ground, as it might be said. Turning my thoughts inward in secret, I cried, "Lord, what shall I do to help it?" And a voice, as it were, spoke in my heart saying, "Look unto me, and I will help thee."

These two accounts illustrate almost exact opposites of what a meeting for worship can mean to the individual. I long for the sense of power in the meeting, which, if yielded to, will weaken the evil in me and raise up the good. But I often find myself going from the meeting as I came to it. It was only a brief respite in the regular business of living. Why is it that this latter experience is that of so many of us?

I wonder if one reason, and perhaps the main reason, is that we are not really convinced that such a power as Barclay and Bownas felt can be present in the meeting. So we believe in God's presence in ourselves and in others and in the meeting. Do we, with faith, ask for and wait for God's guidance? Where else but from God can this power come? If we do not have faith in God's presence and guidance, how can our meetings weaken the evil in us and raise up the good? Without God in our meetings are we not doomed to go from them as we came to them?

Something that impresses me, when I consider what these two had to say is that they were speaking from their own inner experience and conviction. I wonder if many of our discussions about the ministry in our meetings, about prayer, about the nature of God are useless because few of us speak from inner experience. We may be well read—in Quaker works, in the Bible, in theology and philosophy, in devotional books—but we ourselves really have not experienced a hundredth of what the saints we admire experienced. I know people who do have the faith in God and God's nearness to them that comes from experience of God. To them I listen with gratitude, and I love to be with them because it colors their entire lives.

It seems to me that only if each participant believes in God's nearness and power, and only if each one tries faithfully in meeting, in private devotions and throughout the week to open his or her life to God, can our meetings be more than a fraternal or social organization with worthy purposes. I believe that aspirations like those I have described are essential in order for a Friends meeting for worship to be worthwhile. It seems to me hypocrisy to call our gatherings "meetings *for worship*" if our aspirations are any less than this. And I wonder if the meeting can be full of God's power unless all, or all but a few, in the gathering have these aspirations foremost in their hearts. The closer we get to God, the better we understand ministry which comes from God, whether the experience of the speaker is expressed in words and phrases familiar to us or not, and the more meager and pitiful seem the messages that do not arise from a deep dependence on God.

There are many places where most Quaker meetings of today can be rightly criticized for great lacks. But I feel that almost all of these are only symptoms of our greater lack—the lack that too often we do not admit even as individuals and seldom as a group.

How can the members of the meeting live in right relation to one another without basing their lives on a right relation with God? All of us have felt that refreshing love for another member which has come unexpectedly, at the times when our own spiritual level has been raised.

How can we make right decisions in business meeting without individual and group searching for God's will? Too many of our business meetings and committee meetings are contentious or useless or just plain dull because we do not have the love of the eagerness and freshness that those who walk with God have exhibited in the past and do exhibit now in our times.

Can we avoid being jealous of other members' gifts or feeling guilty because they do more for the meeting than we do or being resentful because they do less, unless our lives are guided by Divine Power? Only then can we be at peace. Can we say "yes" or "no" to requests for our services with sure faith that we are doing the right thing? We spend less time on apologies and rationalizations for our actions the more they spring from God's guidance.

How can we break away from old forms and traditions without uneasiness or reluctance and without rashness unless we depend on God's guidance?

These are questions I ask of myself and the meeting I attend. I ask them also of your and your meetings. I do not mean to imply by my emphasis that we should all drop everything until we all reach a high level of spiritual growth, because we know from our small experience that each experience of the evil being weakened in us and the good being raised up brings forth new and unsuspected power in us, for love, for joy, for peace. And these small, but continued, changes in our lives will affect those around us.