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A PERSPECTIVE ON FRIENDS MEMBERSHIP

GRANT THOMPSON

INTRODUCTION

THIS PAPER IS WRITTEN FROM the perspective of a contemporary Quaker trying to understand how Friends have viewed the subject of church membership in the past and whether that view is an appropriate one for Friends today. I will make some attempt to tie this exploration into the Friends historical literature, but I should emphasize that I do so as a nonspecialist and that for the most part I have used well-known summary texts such as William Braithwaite's *The Beginnings of Quakerism to 1660* and *The Second Period of Quakerism* rather than the original source materials.

In my own yearly meeting (Northwest, U.S.A.), the subject of church membership is a frequent topic of discussion. Typically, such discussions center around the question of membership standards. What are our membership requirements? Should they be tighter or looser than at present? Can membership requirements pertain to substantive matters of belief without those requirements degenerating into a creed or, conversely, what meaning does church membership hold if substantive matters of belief are excluded from the requirements?

Below is a series of four dichotomous choices which I hope will serve to focus the subject matter of this paper in a logical fashion, as well as to make some of my more obvious biases apparent. The first choice is as follows:

1. Ideally, the set of requirements for membership in Friends meetings (a) should, (b) should not be non-empty.

I will restrict the discussion in this paper to option 1a. The other alternative, option 1b, is included mostly for logical completeness (I apologize for the double negative therein, but it helps to establish a parallel structure in the remaining three choices). Strictly speaking, option 1b implies that everyone everywhere is automatically a member of all Friends meetings, regardless of anything, which makes the concept

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tion and refrain from holding membership in more than one monthly meeting at a time). However, I will suggest here that option 4a is a fully defensible choice. I will do so on the basis of Friends history, on the basis of Scripture, on the basis of corroborating examples from contemporary Friends practice, and on the basis of Friends polity.

FRIENDS HISTORY: A CONTEXT

I suggest that Friends have employed some concept of membership almost since the movement's beginning in 1652, and that from the first, this concept of membership involved a commitment to a shared experience of Truth (Braithwaite, *Beginnings*, p. 141; Arnold Lloyd, *Quaker Social History*, pp. 1-2). As Braithwaite (*Second Period*, p. 249) put it, the Inward Light "had led the first Friends out from the world into a definite body of testimonies, which had been the natural expression in life of the great indwelling experience which they enjoyed, and from the first years fellowship had meant this common witness to a common body of Truth" (emphasis added). For example, as early as 1653, William Dewsbury was instructing that those who walked disorderly were to be charged to depart from among Friends (Braithwaite, *Beginnings*, p. 141). The letter emanating from the Balby meeting of 1656 gave similar instructions (*Ibid.* p. 312). The Perrot controversy of the 1660s gave added impetus to the idea that, in order to be owned by Friends, a person must share in the common expression of Friends' understanding of Truth. An important letter dating from 1666, authored by a committee in which Richard Farnsworth played a leading role, noted that "the elders and members of the Church which keep their habitation in the Truth ought to judge matters and things that differ," and stipulated that "if any differences arise in the church amongst them that profess to be members thereof," those who will not submit to be judged by the church "ought to be rejected, as having erred from the Truth" (Braithwaite, *Second Period*, p. 247; Walter Homan, *Children and Quakerism*, p. 100; emphases added). Braithwaite summarizes the trend which had emerged even by this early point in Friends history as follows: "It had become a pressing need to provide the body with means for dealing with those who had definitely ceased to maintain the Quaker witness" (Braithwaite, *Second Period*, p. 250).

Fox makes reference to church members in Epistle 264 (1669): "And the least member in the Church hath an office, and is service-

of membership rather meaningless. Given option 1a, the next choice might be the following:

2. Ideally, the set of requirements for membership in Friends meetings (a) should, (b) should not include, as a subset, the set of requirements for membership in the Church Universal (i.e., the Body of Christ).

Again I will restrict this discussion to the first option (2a). Option 2b implies that there is no problem, in principle, with admitting a non-Christian into membership. I realize that this option is considered viable in some Friends circles, but its full consideration in this article would require a very different type of discussion than I am prepared to undertake here. Rather, it will be assumed that a Friends meeting should be a subset of Christ's Church. Proceeding on this basis, the next choice might run as follows:

3. Ideally, the set of requirements for membership in Friends meetings (a) should, (b) should not include elements (hereafter referred to as "extra requirements") in addition to the set of requirements for membership in the Church Universal.

This choice addresses the issue of whether the subset referred to in choice 2 is a proper (option 3a) or improper (option 3b) subset. Before proceeding with a selection from this pair, I should note that particular care needs to be taken here, because I suspect that option 3b holds a strong intuitive appeal for many (it does for me, anyway). As a simple matter of logic, if all Christians everywhere are not automatically members of all Friends meetings, then some extra requirements must be operative, even if they are only such innocuous requirements as the need to complete a membership application (or some other requirement designed to ensure that membership is voluntary), or the need to refrain from holding membership in more than one monthly meeting at a time. Therefore, despite the intuitive appeal of option 3b, I will restrict the remainder of the discussion to option 3a, which leaves the following as a fairly important choice:

4. Ideally, matters of substantive belief (a) should, (b) should not be included among the extra requirements for membership in Friends meetings.

This choice forms the crux of the subject matter for this paper. Following option 4b, it is easy to imagine a membership system in which all extra requirements pertain simply to matters of logistics or practicality (as in the two examples listed in the preceding paragraph, wherein prospective members are required to complete a membership applica-

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A large number of spiritual disciplines are clearly viewed as normative within Scripture. Richard Foster's *Celebration of Discipline* gives a good overview of these, which include the classical disciplines of meditation, prayer, fasting, study, simplicity, solitude, submission, service, confession, worship, guidance, and celebration. I will refer to these as "ordinary" disciplines. In addition to these, however, Scripture allows for and even gives examples of other disciplines, which I will call "extraordinary." Stated most broadly, an extraordinary discipline could be viewed as any spiritual observance or practice that is not given an unqualified mandate within Scripture. Thus, in this broad view, almost any practice, spiritually edifying or otherwise, might be termed an extraordinary discipline. I will impose a more narrow definition, however, by restricting the universe of potential extraordinary disciplines to those that pass a two-part test: First, an extraordinary discipline must be consistent with Scripture (although, by definition, it will not be commanded in Scripture). Second, the decision to enter into an extraordinary discipline must be made in response to the call of the Holy Spirit.

In principle, of course, only the second test (a mandate from the Holy Spirit) is logically required, since any discipline that passes this test will automatically pass the other (scriptural consistency). However, keeping both tests explicit is an important safeguard, because the human capacity for error is sufficiently great that considerable mischief can result when either of the two is ignored. For example, suppose someone said that the Holy Spirit had called him or her to live a life of prayerlessness. Clearly, this would not be an authentic Christian discipline, since it fails the test of scriptural consistency. Because of this failure, we could rightly conclude that the individual had erred in his or her perception of the Spirit's leading. On the other hand, scriptural consistency by itself is also insufficient, since there are surely an infinite number of potential practices which are not explicitly prohibited within Scripture but which would be of dubious spiritual benefit.

Some believers have a negative view of extraordinary disciplines, particularly when these disciplines are entered into on a congregation-wide or denomination-wide level. A healthy skepticism is understandable, of course, as warranted by the abuse of such disciplines in church history. The Protestant reformation, for example, came about in large part because the institutional church of the time had allowed a number of "extras" in the form of destructive mythology and cultural baggage to contaminate the central message of the gospel. *Sola scriptura* was the standard of the reformers as they strove to throw the baggage

able; and every member hath need one of another.” Epistle 251 (1667) makes clear that Friends who ceased to be in unity with the Truth were to be disowned. In the same epistle, Fox shows little patience for those who view this position as legalistic: “Yet these that cry so much against laws, yet they live themselves in the law of sin and death; which they obey when they do evil; who are without the understanding of the righteous law, which the righteous live in and see. Therefore, such must be exhorted and reproved, if they go under the name of Quakers....”

As the system of membership gradually became codified during the next couple of centuries, the tie between membership and witness to Friends’ beliefs was generally maintained, for example, among the “orthodox” yearly meetings in America. With the adoption of the uniform discipline of the Five Years Meeting in 1902, language was established which persists to the present day in many yearly meetings: A candidate for membership must accept the beliefs of Christianity as held by Friends. For example, Northwest Yearly Meeting’s procedure is described on pages 75-76 of its Faith and Practice. When a person makes application for membership, the elders are required to ascertain three things: first, whether the applicant makes a credible profession of faith in Christ Jesus as Savior and Lord; second, whether the applicant lives consistently with that profession; and third, whether the applicant accepts the beliefs of Christianity as held by Northwest Yearly Meeting of Friends and will conform to its spiritual disciplines.

While I believe the above to be an accurate summary of a trend which has been evident throughout Friends history, it should be readily acknowledged that tension over this trend has also existed throughout Friends’ history. As mentioned above, some of the earliest examples of Friends acting to establish a link between belief and membership (informal or otherwise) were prompted by movements led by individuals such as John Perrot who were suspicious of any attempt to give the gathered meeting authority to pass judgment on the individual conscience. The tension persisted through the Hicksite separations in American yearly meetings during the early 1800s, and the matter cannot claim to be completely settled even today. The point of the above (very brief) history is to show that the idea of linking membership to acceptance of Friends’ beliefs has been around for a long time.

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but it seems pretty clear that the others were also; the relevant texts are Judges 13:2-5, 1 Samuel 1:10-11, and Luke 1:13-15. Interestingly, all were Nazirites for life, and in all three cases the lifetime commitment was made by the person's mother. Although not addressed in the Numbers 6 passage, this must have been a legitimate practice, inasmuch as in two cases (Samson and John the Baptist), the decision was ordered by the angel of the Lord (Samuel's mother apparently decided by herself).

Anyway, I suggest that the Nazirite vow represents a biblical example of a set of extraordinary disciplines. Nothing in Scripture required one to become a Nazirite; rather, it seems to have been fully voluntary (either on the part of the individual or the individual's mother).

Importantly, it appears that the Nazirite vow continued to be practiced by early Jewish converts to Christianity. A possible example is found in Acts 18:18, which reads:

Paul stayed on in Corinth for some time. Then he left the brothers and sailed for Syria, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila. Before he sailed, he had his hair cut off at Cenchræa because of a vow he had taken.

Now, it is not certain that a Nazirite vow per se is implied here, but it is clear that the vow involved some form of extraordinary discipline. A better example is given a few chapters later in Acts 21:17-26, which reads as follows:

When we arrived at Jerusalem, the brothers received us warmly. The next day Paul and the rest of us went to see James, and all the elders were present. Paul greeted them and reported in detail what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. When they heard this, they praised God. Then they said to Paul: "You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews have believed, and all of them are zealous for the law. They have been informed that you teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to our customs. What shall we do? They will certainly hear that you have come, so do what we tell you. There are four men with us who have made a vow. Take these men, join in their purification rites and pay their expenses, so that they can have their heads shaved. Then everybody will know there is no truth in these reports about you, but that you yourself are living in obedience to the law. As for the Gentile believers, we have written to them our decision that they should abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals

overboard and restore the authentic doctrines of Christianity to their rightful place in the life of the church. The reformers' goal was this: If a doctrine could not be proven from Scripture, it could not be owned by the church. There is a lot to be said for this approach. In terms of the ordinary disciplines (the timeless standards that ought to be observed by everyone), for example, it seems to constitute a prudent criterion: If a practice was not important enough to find its way into the Bible, the church probably should not view it as an eternal commandment binding on all Christians everywhere.

Nevertheless, I think it would be incorrect to conclude from this that the ordinary disciplines are the only authentic Christian disciplines. By definition, it is impossible to conclude that the Bible mandates any particular extraordinary discipline (otherwise it would no longer be extraordinary). However, I do believe that the Bible does sanction extraordinary disciplines. An interesting example is the Nazirite vow, described in Numbers 6:1-21. The first eight verses of this passage read:

The Lord said to Moses, "Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'If a man or woman wants to make a special vow, a vow of separation to the Lord as a Nazirite, he must abstain from wine and other fermented drink and must not drink vinegar made from wine or from other fermented drink. He must not drink grape juice or eat grapes or raisins. As long as he is a Nazirite, he must not eat anything that comes from the grapevine, not even the seeds or skins. During the entire period of his vow of separation no razor may be used on his head. He must be holy until the period of his separation to the Lord is over; he must let the hair of his head grow long. Throughout the period of his separation to the Lord he must not go near a dead body. Even if his own father or mother or brother or sister dies, he must not make himself ceremonially unclean on account of them, because the symbol of his separation to God is on his head. Throughout the period of his separation he is consecrated to the Lord.'"

The Nazirite vow, then, was one of separation and consecration, as stated in v. 8. In fact, the word Nazirite means "one separated" (this should not be confused with Nazarene, which refers to someone from the city of Nazareth). The person making a Nazirite vow was bound to a number of lifestyle restrictions, encompassing diet (no grapes), association (no coming near a dead body), and appearance (no haircuts). A Nazirite vow could be entered into for a season or for a lifetime. Examples of Nazirites in the Bible include Samson, Samuel, and John the Baptist. Actually, only Samson is explicitly referred to as a Nazirite,

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Members are warned against the production, sale, and use of alcoholic beverages and other habit-forming and body-defiling drugs, including marijuana, tobacco, beer, and wine.

I believe that these qualify as extraordinary disciplines. It is difficult, for example, to find an explicit prohibition in the Bible against consuming alcoholic beverages. In particular, wine seems clearly to have been an acceptable beverage during Bible times, at least when taken in moderation. Thus, a testimony of total abstinence probably would not qualify as an ordinary discipline of the Christian faith. In fact, Friends themselves did not embrace this discipline until relatively recently in their history. The first suggestion that Friends might be moving in the direction of abstinence appears to have come in the form of an 1811 minute from White Water Monthly Meeting, in which Indiana Yearly Meeting was requested to caution its members against being concerned in the making or sale of alcoholic liquors (Elbert Russell, *The History of Quakerism*).

Momentum grew quickly, however, and according to Russell (*Ibid.*), Friends had “generally discontinued the use of alcoholic liquors as a beverage on their tables or on social occasions” by 1850. This testimony has been maintained to the present day in a number of yearly meetings.

Earlier I suggested two tests for authenticity: scriptural consistency and a call from the Holy Spirit. It would be appropriate to ask how Friends’ testimony of abstinence fares against these tests. Personally, I believe that it passes the test for scriptural consistency with ease. Some of the best evidence comes from the various passages that call upon Christians to forgo their own personal rights in order to keep others from stumbling. For example, Romans 14:21 states, “It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall.” 1 Corinthians 8:9 reads, “Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak,” while 1 Corinthians 10:23-24 declares, “‘Everything is permissible’—but not everything is beneficial. ‘Everything is permissible’—but not everything is constructive. Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others.”

In today’s society, where alcoholism and its attendant syndromes are so prevalent, various yearly meetings have covenanted within their respective memberships to surrender their right to consume alcohol. The basis for these covenants is not a scriptural prohibition against alcohol consumption per se, but (at least in part) a scriptural prescription to be mindful of that which might cause a brother or sister to stumble.

and from sexual immorality.” The next day Paul took the men and purified himself along with them. Then he went to the temple to give notice of the date when the days of purification would end and the offering would be made for each of them.

Unfortunately, there are some undercurrents in this story that muddy the waters somewhat. Obviously, the Jerusalem elders were still struggling with some of the unique issues that confronted the local church of that time, a church that consisted largely of Jewish converts to a religion that had not yet fully defined itself relative to its Jewish roots. In this light, one could argue that the passage has little to teach Gentile believers. However, I would like to highlight the role of Paul in this story, remembering the profound depth of Paul’s own understanding of the difference between life under law and life under grace. It appears that Paul himself entered into the vow with the four Nazirites. At the very least it is clear that he sanctioned their involvement in this extraordinary discipline. Thus it could be concluded that submission to extraordinary disciplines is a scriptural principle that is not confined to the Old Testament.

Another interesting aspect to this story is that the four Nazirites apparently took their vows as a group, as evidenced by James’ reference to their vow as a collective act in verse 23 and the fact that their vows were all scheduled to expire on the same date. To me, this implies a role for groups of believers to enter into extraordinary disciplines together, as a body. I will return to this point below in the discussion of Friends polity.

CONTEMPORARY PRACTICE: A PARALLEL

Friends have often observed extraordinary disciplines in the form of public witnesses to social problems. Here are some examples, taken from the Faith and Practice of Northwest Yearly Meeting: On page 17, Query 16 reads,

Do you abstain from harmful, addictive, and unnecessary drugs—including alcoholic beverages, tobacco, marijuana, and cocaine—and from profiting through their use? Do you refrain from gambling and taking part in lotteries?

Also, on page 100, the following is found under the heading “Respect for the Body”:

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The abstinence testimony is an outward manifestation of the inward life we enjoy in Christ, a life that causes us to care about those whom our actions may impact.

Does the Friends testimony of abstinence pass the second test as well? That is, have Friends truly been called by the Holy Spirit to maintain this discipline today, or is it instead simply the meaningless vestige of a bygone era's misplaced zeal? The answer to this question is harder to establish objectively, of course. Personally, I have no trouble believing that Friends who observe a testimony of abstinence are fully in accord with God's will for them in this area of social concern. Nevertheless, I do acknowledge that there may come a time when a testimony of abstinence no longer serves the Lord's purposes. If such a time should come, Friends must be faithful to respond accordingly, rather than to maintain this testimony simply for tradition's sake.

FRIENDS POLITY: AN IMPLICATION

Friends polity has been referred to as "covenantal" in the sense that decisions are made by the gathered meeting as a collective entity, with individual members agreeing together in a spirit of unity. Each such decision thus implies a covenant between the individual members of the meeting, a covenant to abide by that into which they have entered jointly. So, if the set of decisions taken or actions made by a meeting constitute a set of covenants between the members of that meeting, does this imply anything about what could reasonably be expected of new members, individuals who were not part of the original decisions? In my opinion, it does.

Again, under the view of Friends polity being assumed here, a decision or action must be accepted by the group's members in order to be owned by the group. If this is the case, suppose that the following scenario were to unfold: 1) Action "A" is accepted, and thus owned, by the group at some point in time. 2) At some future point in time, entry into the group is granted to an individual who does not accept action A. 3) By definition, then, action A is no longer owned by the group. In other words, if acceptance of extant decisions is not a requirement for membership in the meeting, then the standing of all such decisions is utterly tenuous, since any new or existing member can withhold or withdraw his or her acceptance of any such decision at any time.

Not all decision mechanisms carry the same implication, of course. For example, if the only requirement for group ownership of a decision were the support of a simple majority of the group's members, rather than the acceptance of the group as a whole, I do not think that the same conclusion would hold. In a majoritarian system, active dissent by a minority (of any size) need imply nothing about the validity of existing decisions. While it might be reasonable to expect new members of societies operating by such decision mechanisms to acknowledge the extant decisions of the respective society, the necessity of their acceptance is less obvious.

The decision of those who entered into the Nazirite vow in Acts 21 (above) can be viewed as an example of the covenantal mechanism envisioned here. After the four disciples had entered into their vow together, suppose a fifth arrived on the scene and asked to join, except that this particular disciple happened to have an exceptional fondness for grapes! Could he (or she) ignore the Nazirite prohibition against eating grapes (Numbers 6:3) and still be a full participant in the covenant? I do not think so. This is not to say that he could not have been a full member of Christ's Church, that he was falling short of God's will for his life, or even that he could not come alongside the others and observe those features of the Nazirite lifestyle to which he was best suited, but I do not see how he could be viewed as a full member of the covenanting community unless he were to accept the decision by which the community itself was defined (i.e., the decision to enter into the Nazirite vow).

The point of the abstinence example in the preceding section was to illustrate how extraordinary disciplines can be legitimate and meaningful expressions of the life of the church. To me, it is natural to view Friends membership as another example of this type of discipline. In keeping with the covenantal nature of the church's other extraordinary disciplines, such as collective witnesses to social problems, the discipline of church membership under Friends polity serves the important purpose of defining the set of participants in those covenant relationships. In other words, the discipline of church membership is one in which (among other things) a group of people agree to affirm or accept the church's disciplines, both ordinary and extraordinary.

Of course, this is not the only possible view of church membership, but it is the one that makes the most sense to me if the idea of the covenant is to remain central to our polity. If the church is to be characterized by a spirit of unity (that is, where the functioning of the

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body derives from the concerted action of its constituent parts), to me it only makes sense that new members accept the existing commitments of the body into which they are asking to be grafted.

CONCLUSION

I have suggested here that it is legitimate for Friends membership requirements to include items in addition to those necessary for membership in the Church Universal, and that these items may appropriately pertain to substantive matters of belief. From the first days of the movement, Friends have expected that those who “go under the name of Quakers” should evidence a clear commitment to the community’s shared experience of Truth.

It should be emphasized that this view does not relegate to second-class status those who decline to become members of the covenanting community. No one would ever suggest that Peter was a second-class Christian, for example, even though (as far as we know) he never took a Nazirite vow. As with other extraordinary disciplines, the decision to enter into Friends membership should always be a highly personal one, one made on the basis of a genuine call and not as a matter of course or on the basis of others’ expectations.

By their basing membership in part on a shared commitment to a set of spiritual disciplines, I see Friends as desiring to present a united front to a world looking for answers. It is a way of presenting our testimony, of saying, “Here we stand; we do have certain common convictions; out of obedience to our Lord we proclaim these truths.” Membership is a covenant we make with one another. It is also a promise to a skeptical world, a promise that we can be looked to for consistency in word and deed.