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A Critique of Quaker Accountability

WILMER A. COOPER

The purpose of this paper is to deal with the question of accountability in the light of our need to be answerable to one another in the community of faith, which for us means the Friends Meeting.

The term accountability will be addressed in two ways: First, the question of how we exercise and balance freedom and discipline in our life together within the Meeting. Secondly, the question of whether in our faith and practice we are in historical continuity with the original Quaker vision. Thus the objective will be to assess accountability in these two respects from the early period to the present, and in the light of our performance to indicate some signs of warning as well as signs of hope for the future of the Society of Friends.

THE CURRENT CRISIS IN LIGHT OF THE EARLY QUAKER NORM

Although Friends have been in almost perpetual crisis since their beginning in the middle of the 17th C, certain conditions now prevail which make the situation different in degree, if not in kind. Furthermore, the crisis is accompanied by a sense of forboding when one thinks of what is at stake for Friends now, as well as in the future.

To evaluate the current situation it may be helpful to recall how early Friends defined their community of faith, the role accountability played in it, and some of the departures from this understanding which have taken place through the years. If we define and articulate "the early Quaker norm" we will have something against which we can assess where we are and where we are going.

In defining their community of faith, early Friends used mainly Biblical images such as "the Body of Christ," "the People of God," "Children of the Light," and "Publishers of Truth." They functioned organizationally under what George Fox called "the Gospel Order." Thus we are immediately involved in a Quaker theology of the church and a doctrine of ecclessiology.

Descriptively speaking, Friends came together out of a sense of being gathered in the Spirit of Christ which united them as the "People of God." To be so gathered by Christ as the head of the Church provided a structured community of faith out of which

Friends lived and went forth in ministry. This may be contrasted with being gathered out of a particular concern as is often the case today, such as the peace testimony, or a group of social concerns. Shifting to concerns as the basis for gathering often means diversity of starting points rather than being gathered into a covenant relationship to God and to one another.

From this lack of focus and gatheredness, Quakerism appears to many (Friends and non-Friends alike) to be in essence an expression of individualism, a form of religious democracy based on the assumption that through the Light within every individual has private access to God with little or no attention given to a corporate relationship to God. Extreme examples of this differ little from the Ranterism that plagued Friends in the 17th-C England, namely, the belief that each person should seek his/her own inner leading and then act on it. This, of course, is just the reverse of the traditional belief of Friends that the corporate discernment of the gathered meeting is more trustworthy than the leading of any given individual. That is what made it possible for the group to arrive at a common sense of unity as all sought the Light of Christ together.

John McCandless¹ has summarized the Friends' understanding of the church as a "...vision of what it means to be a people of God: a community of the committed, bearing a vision of Truth around which the community is organized, demonstrating the power of the Spirit of God, a prophetic people, a worshiping and praying people, a people on mission, a people marked by moral and ethical sensitivity."

It should also be noted that early Friends coupled this understanding with a Biblical norm to provide discipline for the group. Like the Anabaptists who preceded them, Mt. 18:15-17 was their guide for dealing with offenders, as Barclay's *Anarchy of the Ranters*² makes clear:

If your brother sins against you,
go and tell him his fault, between you
and him alone. If he listens to you,
you have gained your brother. But if
he does not listen, take one or two
others along with you, that every word
may be confirmed by the evidence of two
of three witnesses. If he refuses to
listen to them, tell it to the church;
and if he refuses to listen even to the
Church, let him be to you as a Gentile
and a tax collector. (RSV)

Early Quakerism was not therefore religious individualism, with everyone interpreting his/her own leading and doing his/her own thing. Rather, the norm was that because we can all come into a common unity through the Light of Christ within, it is possible to be a covenanted people of God responding to his will and purpose for us. This may indeed mean that individuals will follow their own leading, but they will do so with a sense of responsibility and accountability to one another in the community of faith, and with the further sense that their actions are initiated by God.

DEPARTURES FROM THE NORM

Most separations among Friends have resulted from a “crisis of accountability” of one sort or another. Certainly the Naylor episode in the 1650s was the first major instance. In the 1660s John Perrot and the “hat men” developed scruples on a number of counts which placed them at odds with the main body of Friends. There is no need here to cite a whole series of examples where individual leadings took pre-eminence over the corporate group’s discernment, but the Perrot controversy will serve as an example of an early and repeated disciplinary problem with which the Society has had to deal.

After becoming a Friend, and on a trip to the East, Perrot was confined to prison in Rome. There he not only had a religious opening that removal of the hat during time of prayer, and the customary handshake following meeting were improper, but that all human arrangements for meetings should be placed under the direction of the Holy Spirit, even to the point of doing away with any stated time for meeting for worship. These stands put Perrot at odds with other Friends. But to make matters worse Friends at this particular time were suspected from the outside of being in league with militant radical groups, and many Friends were jailed, including George Fox himself. Nevertheless, in spite of this trouble both within and without the Quaker movement, by 1666 Friends united in a specially convened meeting of ministers in London to deal with internal offenders, such as Perrot.

Richard Farnsworth authored a minute at that meeting which subordinated the individual leadings of Friends to the corporate group. This was published in 1666 just after Fox’s release from prison and just before the death of Farnsworth himself. William C. Braithwaite considers this the point where Friends became a Religious Society, coupling it with the extensive organizational work

which Fox, Dewsbury, and others had carried out.³ From then on Friends took quite seriously the government of a church based on what Fox called "the Gospel Order." Instead of taking their cue for church organization directly from Scripture, Friends held that the living Christ is the head of the Church and the chief orderer thereof. Thus, within fifteen years of their beginnings, Friends had dealt firmly with disciplinary matters and had provided for accountability to God and one another.

TESTING THE NORM IN THE MIDDLE PERIOD OF QUAKERISM

Many other things happened in the 18th and 19th Cs to test the accountability of Friends to one another and to test their faithfulness to the early Quaker vision and norm. Most important for our purposes was the crisis over the system of Elders (and later Overseers) which arose to have oversight of ministry and worship and the moral conduct of Friends. Eventually the Elders also supervised doctrinal orthodoxy. Even though the system of Elders was well intentioned it finally exceeded its proper bounds. It became an oppressive power group which not only displaced the ministers as the dominant group among Friends, but far surpassed them both in authority and power.

By the turn of the 19th C, hardening of the spiritual arteries and an enforced Christian orthodoxy brought about a series of separations. This was coupled with the Quietistic influence on Friends and the almost indiscriminate disownment of members for marrying out of meeting, violating plain dress, or other minor infractions. The hedge of orthodoxy and disciplinary action which had been thrown around the Society of Friends took nearly a century to overcome.

The inroads of evangelicalism into the Society of Friends in the 19th C, as a kind of renewal effort, brought with it many new practices in worship and ministry which seemed foreign to traditional patterns of "waiting upon the Lord" in silent expectancy. Again these new patterns of faith and practice, which came largely from the Wesleyan Methodist influence, raised in a different way the question of Friends accountability to the early Quaker vision. A large segment of Friends in the late 19th and early 20th Cs lost their sense of history and identity with Friends beliefs and testimonies and tended to look more and more like another Protestant denomination.

THE TWENTIETH CENTURY METAMORPHOSIS OF FRIENDS

As one looks at the 20th-C situation of accountability among Friends there is a mixed response. On the one hand many new and

positive things have happened during this century to bring new life and vigor to the Society of Friends, while at the same time there have also been departures from the norm in faith and practice. Not only have evangelical Friends adopted a modified pattern of faith and practice, liberal Friends have also moved in new directions which are cause for concern.

But on the positive side, let us first catalog some of the new and innovative things Friends have done to bring new life and signs of hope. Organizationally speaking and in terms of outreach in mission and service there has been a flowering of Quakerism in this century unequalled in our history. Beginning around 1900 a number of new associations of Friends formed: Friends General Conference, Five Years Meeting (later Friends United Meeting), and eventually the Evangelical Friends Alliance. Conservative and Independent Friends have not formed such associations. Another natural outgrowth of this development was the formation of Friends World Committee for Consultation, and its auxiliary, the Wider Quaker Fellowship.

There were major developments in both mission and service types of work as well. Not only did the American Friends Board of Missions (formed in 1894) see its work in Kenya become the largest single concentration of Friends anywhere in the world, other mission boards carried out work in Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, Alaska, the Far East, and India. The American Friends Service Committee began during World War I and has become the largest single Quaker service enterprise, with an annual budget of more than \$16 million dollars. During World War II the first formal religious lobby of any denomination, Friends Committee on National Legislation, was established in Washington, D.C. On the global level Friends became involved with the United Nations through the Quaker United Nations Program.

From the 17th C on, Friends have been active in the development of schools at all levels. Beginning with the lower grades and working their way up through the high school and boarding school level, they eventually established a dozen colleges and three post-graduate centers. Friends now maintain more than 80 schools in North America. On a non-academic basis there has been the establishment of yearly-meeting and regional conference/retreat centers, together with many yearly-meeting youth camps and work-camp projects. During World War II Civilian Public Service Camps were opened for conscientious objectors. Young Friends have held important conferences and youth pilgrimages over the years, culminating in the first

World Young Friends Conference in 1985. There are a growing number of retirement homes for the elderly under Friends auspices. Some important professional and interest groups have formed, such as the Friends Conference on Religion and Psychology, the Quaker Theological Discussion Group, and the New Foundation Fellowship. These amazing developments in the 20th C, including others not named, have constituted a blossoming of Quaker life and influence unparalleled in the history of Friends.

Yet in spite of this heartening flowering of the institutions and fruits of Quakerism, we have to ask whether the religious and spiritual foundations are healthy enough to give long-term support to all this branching and proliferation. Or have we overexpanded to the point of depleting the source and nurturing ground of Quakerism, particularly the local meeting? In my 1966 Johnson Lecture at Friends United Meeting I stated: "...we are in danger of withering on the vine, numerically and spiritually, unless something is done to feed and nurture" this very source of life. "Nor should we take lightly the fact that our growth pattern has leveled off, and in many cases is on the decline. To the extent that Friends have shown new strength, life, and vigor in the 20th C, it may be that we have been living on our heritage and the borrowed spiritual capital of the past..."

CULTURAL AND THEOLOGICAL ACCOMMODATION

On the other side of the Quaker ledger, in the 20th C significant changes have taken place in the faith and practice of Friends, both evangelical and liberal. Reference has already been made to the changed pattern of worship, ministry, and theological emphasis adopted by evangelical Friends. Following their lead in the 19th C, programmed pastoral meetings became the pattern for nearly two-thirds of American Friends. Some of these have now been caught up in the "church growth" movement of modern Protestantism, with little emphasis on Quaker testimonies and distinctives. The more liberal pastoral Friends have tried to keep in perspective their Quaker heritage and remain faithful to the Quaker testimonies. Yet their attempt at Quaker renewal has remained partial and sometimes disappointing.

The other big change which the 20th C has brought has come among Friends of unprogrammed and liberal persuasion both in North America and around the world. To make itself relevant, liberal Quakerism has accommodated itself to a series of cultural and theological changes while maintaining the traditional forms of worship

and ministry. While we cannot ignore demands to become relevant, when accommodations are made, it is important that we be clear about “who we are” in terms of the foundations of our faith. Without this we will lose our sense of where we are going, and thus our sense of purpose and destiny.

In trying to understand a changing world and accommodate ourselves to the new scientific age; many Friends, especially those of a liberal persuasion, began to re-examine a lot of religious and Biblical assumptions about the outer world of nature as well as the inner world of the self. For example, one can interpret the whole life and thought of Rufus Jones (a formative 20th-C figure) as an attempt to give a positive and constructive response to all of these issues -- a valiant effort, however one may regard his particular response.

What are some of the changes which have come in the 20th C which need to be evaluated from the standpoint of being accountable to the early Quaker vision and norm?

1. The identification of Quakerism with mysticism has become a 20th-C custom among many Friends which is often more confusing than helpful. Certainly Quakerism can be considered a form of mystical religion, or at least it has mystical elements, but it should not be confused with certain forms of classical and eastern mysticism which have little in common with Quaker spirituality. Quakerism is a spiritual form of religion which acknowledges God’s mediation of himself and his will through historical events and phenomena. But because Quakerism stresses the spiritual as over against the historical and physical, it sometimes borders on gnosticism, namely, the tendency to so spiritualize life that it ignores the incarnational nature of God’s revelation. The life of the Spirit has limited meaning and significance until it becomes embodied in the outward forms and events of history. Most forms of mysticism shy away from this kind of emphasis. The frequently quoted Quaker adage, “let your lives speak,” is a good example of the way the immanent and transcendent ought to be visibly joined.

2. “That of God in everyone” has become the code phrase for liberal Quakerism without taking fully into account the way George Fox used this term in the 17th C. All too often it is now interpreted as meaning that there is little need for God to transcend our humanity. For some it represents a kind of “romantic humanism” which in effect asserts that “everyone is his/her own God.” This in turn lends itself to a form of religious individualism which violates the very idea of being a gathered people of God, and undercuts our sense of responsibility and accountability to the corporate body of Friends.

3. The secularism of our age has influenced Quakerism in more ways than is often realized. Some Friends espouse a secular humanism and agnosticism whose secular values appear to its "god." This bears little resemblance to the prophetic vision of George Fox and his overwhelming sense "that the power of the Lord is over all." This secularism has been accompanied by philosophical and political individualism which has impacted the faith assumptions and practice of Friends both evangelical and liberal. Whether the goal is personal salvation (for the evangelicals) or self-realization (for the liberals) the connect-edness with the church as the "Body of Christ" and the "People of God" is discounted, if not lost.

4. "Universalist Friends" make up a new form of Quakerism which wants to disengage itself from the historical and Biblical roots of the Quaker faith, and to disassociate Friends from Christianity. The claim is that religious pluralism is the wave of the future, and that Quakerism as they define it should provide a bridge for the religions of the world. Universalist Friends ignore the authentic Quaker universalism held by George Fox, which was so clearly spelled out in Robert Barclay's *Apology*, namely, that Christ (the universal Logos of God), whether known by that name or not, is available to all honest seekers after God. Moreover, Friends believed that this Christ was the source of salvation for all humankind.

Universalist Friends only exacerbate the problem Friends already face of how to accomodate our existing pluralism without becoming completely fragmented. This leads to what Hugh Doncaster has described as, "any Friend can believe anything and the Society of Friends stands for nothing."⁴ Or in the words of Lewis Benson, Quakerism is "a refuge for those who want freedom to follow their own individual bent in an atmosphere that is mildly religious and fiercely tolerant."⁵ Not only is the survival track record for such pluralism and individualism nil in church history, it could lead to a religious anarchy and disaster for the Society of Friends.

5. The "consensus" method of Quaker decision making has substantially altered the traditional "sense of the meeting" search for divine guidance. Consensus is the substitution of a political/sociological model for a religious one. Even though the consensus method of doing business is much preferable to majority-minority voting, the underlying assumption that there is a common will of God for the meeting is often ignored. Guidance by the mind of Christ in a spirit of worship and prayer is very important in setting aside self-

will and manipulative strategies. The historic Quaker view was that as Friends seek the Light of Christ together, they shall be brought into a common sense of unity.

CAN WE ACHIEVE A QUAKERISM OF RENEWED ACCOUNTABILITY?

It is well known that convinced Friends outnumber birthright Friends in a substantial number of meetings and yearly meetings, even in some of the traditional centers of Quaker beginnings. We can be grateful and thankful for this growing edge of Friends, but we must be vigilant in helping new members and new meetings gain sufficient knowledge of the history and tradition of Friends, so that they will not deny or misrepresent the very things they hope to sustain in their new-found association. At the same time, these newer meetings and newer Friends have something to teach all of us as we try to envision a new future for Friends.

If this critique of where we are seems to have been unduly hard on liberal Quakerism and evangelical Friends, a similar critique could also be made of those expressions of Quakerism which lie somewhere in between. In assessing the accountability or lack of it on the part of the various branches of Quakerism, there is plenty of blame to go around. Both evangelicals and liberals have preserved as well as violated certain elements of the early Quaker vision. Hence, in terms of responsibility for what has happened, we should not write off any segment of the Society of Friends.

If we are concerned about recovery of authentic Quakerism we will need to give further encouragement to such things as the re-discovery of Biblical and Christian roots in some quarters of liberal Quakerism. And we need to recognize that among evangelical Friends there have been valiant efforts by prominent and respected individuals to recover the essentials of the Quaker witness and testimonies within the evangelical tradition. Other important forces are helping Friends to recover the essential focus and vision of Quakerism. Among these has been a quarter of a century of experience with the Earlham School of Religion. Friends from both evangelical and liberal persuasions have had life-changing experiences at ESR in terms of a new understanding and appreciation for their Quaker and Christian roots. This has affected their determination to make a difference as they go out to serve Friends in all branches of the Society, both at home and abroad.

It is easy to look at the many signs of decline and decay among Friends and perhaps conclude that God may not have any further use

for the Quaker witness that has become so confused and garbled. My own view, however, is that the early Quaker vision has been insufficiently realized for us to lay aside our work at this point. Neither do I think we should consider joining up with some other larger and numerically more successful group. Is not God still calling us to bear witness to and to live out the vision which George Fox and early Friends set before us? But as we respond to this calling there are basic questions which must be addressed now and for the future. These can only be summarized here, but perhaps that will be sufficient to stimulate further thought and perhaps inspire action.

SOME CRITICAL QUESTIONS FOR FRIENDS TO ADDRESS

In summarizing these points, it is suggested that we begin with the same assumption that William Penn proclaimed for our forbears in the 17th C, namely, that the early Quaker vision was "primitive Christianity revived." Integral to that was Friends belief in "continuing revelation," namely, that God's revelation is not closed but that God continues to reveal his will and truth to us today. But Friends also believed that such new spiritual leadings and openings would not cancel out or conflict with God's special revelation in the life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus. They understood and experienced the resurrection of Jesus not only historically but in terms of the risen Lord who manifests himself through the Light of Christ within.

They also claimed, drawing heavily from the Gospel of John, that this disclosure of God to humankind was not confined to a particular time and place, but was universally available to all persons. As already indicated this constituted the universalism of early Quakerism. It is in this context of a Quaker heritage of faith and experience that I would like to single out some critical points for Friends to consider.

(A) Friends today need to discover a sense of identity: Who are we? Where did we come from? Where are we going? And most important of all, Whose are we? Generally speaking Friends have lost their identity, thereby seriously limiting their sense of purpose and destiny.

(B) Friends need to recover a sense of religious authority: Who is the author of our faith? What is the source of our religious experience? Most Friends would say that they want to emulate Jesus. To do so, we need to participate in his authority -- that of the living God whom he revealed.

(C) Friends need to recover a sense of corporate accountability to one another as the "People of God" and the "Children of the

Light,” and to relearn seeking together the Light of Christ within. Coupled with this is the need to recover “the lost art of eldering” one another in those things which are eternal as well as those things which are communal and practical.

(D) Friends need to develop standards of membership. These must be based on a clear sense of purpose for the meeting with standards appropriate to that purpose. Non-creedalism does not mean freedom to believe and practice anything we want. As one Friend has said, “we need to be called out of disorder” into what George Fox called “the Gospel Order.”

(E) Friends need to be imbued with a message of hope. Such a message affirms not only the divine order, but a belief that this divine order will finally prevail. This hope must also extend to our own mission as Friends. We must have hope and confidence that God continues to work through us as individuals and as a Society in order to fulfill the calling which was originally given to Friends, and of which we are heirs today. The world is hungry for the Quaker message, because it is a message of hope for a world in travail.

We began this paper by raising the question about how we can be accountable to one another in the way we handle freedom and discipline within our community of faith, the Friends Meeting. And secondly, we asked whether in our faith and practice as Friends we are faithful to the early Quaker vision. Our performance record of accountability on these two counts has been erratic and inadequate. There are both warning signs as well as signs of hope as we assess what has gone wrong and as we attempt to chart new directions. A new sense of resolve and vigilance is called for if we are to fulfill our mission and calling as Friends.

As we ponder these things, the words of Jesus to his disciples may be appropriate for us: “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest” (Mt 9:37-38). We are challenged to “shake the world for ten miles around,” as George Fox’s ministry “under the power of the Lord” was said to do in his day. May God empower us to demonstrate that kind of ministry in our day.

NOTES

1. In an article, “Everything You Wanted to Know About Membership and Why,” included in the volume on the *Friends Consultation on Membership* (1984), sponsored by Earlham School of Religion and Quaker Hill Conference Center. John McCandless draws heavily on an article, “Being a People of God” by Charles Thomas, which appeared in *The Church in Quaker Thought and Practice*. (published

by the Faith and Life Movement, June, 1979, and distributed by Friends World Committee, Section of the Americas). The volume is unquestionably one of the best sources on Quaker ecclesiology.

2. Included in *Truth Triumphant through the Spiritual Warfare, Christian Labours and Writings*. . . Robert Barclay, usually cited as R.B. Works (London: Thomas Northcott, 1692) p. 194. The King James Version of Mt 18:15-17 (also verse 18) is given in full, followed by the comment: "From which Scripture it doth manifestly and evidently follow. . . that Jesus Christ intended, there should be a certain Order and Method in the Church, in the Procedure toward such as transgress."
3. William C. Braithwaite, *The Second Period of Quakerism* (Cambridge: University Press, 1961) pp. 248-250. Braithwaite also adds about the statement: "It obviously marks an important stage in Quaker history. . . Quakerism had never been merely subjective. . . The 1666 epistle was a first attempt to strengthen government in the Church." An entire chapter on the settling of monthly meetings follows.
4. *The Friend*, October 10, 1969, p. 1248.
5. Quoted by Hugh Doncaster in *The Friend*, April 10, 1970, p. 414.

Comments

PATRICIA EDWARDS-DELANCEY

Wilmer Cooper's very helpful paper on the crisis of accountability which Friends face rightly points out that crisis is not new but has always been with us. From the early period Ranters, Diggers, Grindletonians, Levellers, Fifth Monarchy Men and others have posed crisis from without. And internally, it would seem from my researches, accountability and its meaning or interpretation has been at the root of most of the crises and historical splits among Friends. Likewise in the late 19th and early 20th Cs, the fundamentalist vs. modernist split in mainstream Christianity was manifest within the Religious Society of Friends as well.

The Richmond Declaration was a response to Wesleyan revivalism, whose accountability took a Creedal form. Similarly, the cessation of the recording of ministers and discontinuation of the recognition of elders and overseers was a modernist-Friends reaction against institutional forms of accountability. Today there is a double polarity