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“HIS POWER AND SPIRIT IN THEIR HEARTS”¹: QUAKER SPIRITUAL DIRECTION²

BARBARA S. WORDEN

In her stimulating essay, “Taming Anarchy: Quaker Alternate Ordering and Otherness,” Gay Pilgrim expresses a concern for “Friends who felt they were in need of spiritual direction” especially in an increasingly theologically liberal tradition where “The whole concept of the reality of God was no longer credited.”³

Christian spiritual direction in general, as well as any particular tradition in Christian spirituality, “rests upon... or includes a set of assumptions about God and humankind and how they are related to each other.”⁴ Understanding the Quaker tradition in both spiritual direction and spirituality requires, along with examining the “differing historical moments” and tools of Friends history, a return to sources in the experience of early Quakers, especially the distinctive calling and ministry of George Fox.⁵ These assumptions or traditions apply across the theological spectrum from liberal to conservative Evangelical Friends. As John Woolman wisely stated regarding his experience of reading Thomas à Kempis’ *Imitation of Christ*, “All true Christians are of the same spirit, but their gifts are diverse, Jesus Christ appointing to each one his peculiar office, agreeably in His infinite wisdom.”⁶

Sources for the real life practice of spiritual direction among Friends depend heavily on letters, both personal letters and the uniquely Quaker institution of the Epistle. The emphasis on inwardness in Quaker religious experience means that journals along with writings specifically dedicated to Quaker practice are also an excellent resource for examining issues in the Quaker approach to spiritual direction.⁷

Spiritual “direction,” especially in the Quaker tradition, is not primarily authoritarian or instructive, but relational. The director is a fellow companion on the road to life in Christ, one with more experience than the directee, who both models and intuits the signs of God’s working through the Holy Spirit in the directee’s life and empowers him or her to experience and discern those signs in spiritual, psychological and narrative dimensions of life.

This study focuses on the underlying themes or assumptions of Quaker spiritual practice and spiritual direction. First, “Christ has come to teach his people himself” through the active presence of God in the human spirit, through the “inward light” or the “Seed” of God within. Second, the significance for the individual of a developing consciousness of the continuing work of God in his or her spirit and life. Third, that knowledge of God is above all experiential. Fourth, preaching and evangelism are done as much or more by actions and living as by words. Fifth, that the only reliable approach to the Bible is by the guidance and authority of the Spirit of God. Sixth, that spiritual direction occurs in and by groups of people, especially the “gathered meeting” for worship.

CENTRAL THEMES IN QUAKER SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

While these principles are valid in and of themselves, note how they are also developed in the writings of George Fox and other leading Friends. They also are rooted in Scripture, and borne out in human experience. Therefore, central themes in Quaker spiritual direction deserve a fuller consideration.

First, “Walk cheerfully over the earth, answering that of God in every man” (Gen 3:15; Jn. 1:9; 1 Cor. 2:10-13). “I directed them to the Light of Christ, the heavenly man, and to the Spirit of God in their own hearts, that they might come to be acquainted with God and Christ, receive Him for their teacher, and know His kingdom set up in them.”⁸ These two paired quotes from Fox’s *Journal*, the first of which appears in Fox’s address to the Valiant Sixty, the first group of Quaker missionaries, describes what is probably the most significant premise of Quaker practice in spiritual direction. The fact that all persons have some element of God in their hearts, described variously by early Quakers as the *seed*, the *light*, and the *inward light*, cannot be overemphasized in Quaker spiritual direction. This assumption is the reason John Woolman was able to dispense with an interpreter when he was ministering among the Delaware Indians.⁹

In the practice of spiritual direction, this conviction means that a Quaker spiritual director will know that God is already at work in the directee and will continue to work after the session is over. The ideal spiritual director will define his or her task as assisting the directee in noting and building on God’s movements within the soul. Quaker

spiritual directors should also realize that those they direct may well be aware of what they need and should be empowered to build on God's work within. God's work within the individual can and must be trusted and must not be discarded in favor of the director's own agenda, no matter how lengthy the experience, how holy the reputation, or how learned the mind. A spiritual director, minister, or evangelist will approach a person as someone in whom God is positively working, rather than as someone evil who must be argued, theologically bludgeoned, or terrified into salvation.

This basic principle is especially distinctive and valued when viewed in the light of the historical and religious conditions in which Quakers grew and flourished. The suppression of the Church of England during the Civil War and Commonwealth periods and the consequent rising of English Dissenting denominations with loud and vociferous claims of unique and competing ways to salvation resulted in spiritual confusion of many, such as the aptly named "Seekers." If Christian in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* is a fair example, the great question believers were asking themselves was, "What must I do to be saved?" Fox's answer, look within and find God already at work for your salvation, is then and now both comforting and empowering.

In the Friends Church the author attends, a sermon focusing on the "walk cheerfully" quotation from Fox elicited from a church member a wonderfully supporting testimony. A middle-aged man told the story of his daughter on her way to get an abortion, who was persuaded against it by one of the protestors. Unlike the usual stereotype of the protestor's enraged cries of "Baby Killer," this protestor saw his daughter as a child of God and gently spoke to this, convincing her that God would care for her and her unborn child and that her family would support her. The result was a beautiful healthy, now ten-year-old grandson, who lives and thrives largely because a fellow Christian was able to see the daughter as someone in whom God was present and working.

Second, "What canst thou say?" (1 Jn. 4:15). The inward experience of "Gospel truth" is absolutely vital to Quakers. It supersedes even the maintenance of Quaker testimonies because it gives the believer the power to obey them, as proved by a famous incident in the life of Pennsylvania founder, William Penn. Even though many historians question the authenticity of the incident, it is included here because it so beautifully exemplifies several important principles in Quaker spiritual direction. The young man had recently become a Quaker,

but he continued to wear a sword for military exercise required by English universities at the time. His conscience was beginning to be disturbed about wearing the sword, since it violated Quaker principles of nonviolence. When he asked Fox whether he should continue to wear it or not, the Quaker leader replied, "I advise thee to wear it as long as thou canst." Not long afterwards, Fox and Penn met again, and the young man was no longer wearing his sword. When Fox asked, "William, where is thy sword?" Penn replied, "I have taken thy advice; I wore it as long as I could."¹⁰ To Fox, as to all Quakers who practice spiritual direction, obedience to an external standard is secondary to obedience to the internal standard of God, fostered by awareness of the Spirit's work within the person's conscience.

Quaker spiritual direction at its best is described by Thomas Kelly, the greatest modern writer on Quaker spirituality and spiritual direction. In *A Testament of Devotion*, Kelly casts Bonhoeffer's concept of "Christ at the center" in terms of spiritual direction and spiritual friendship for Quakers and all other Christians.

Two people, three people, ten people may be in living touch with one another through him who underlies their separate lives.... We know that these selves are with us, lifting their lives and ours continuously. To God and opening themselves, with us... to Him. It is as if the boundaries of our self were enlarged, as if we were within them, and as if they were within us, their strength given to them by God. The boundaries of our self were enlarged, as if we were within them and as if they were within us. Their strength, given to them by God, becomes our strength, and our joy given to us by God, becomes their joy. In confidence and love we live together in Him. And as if they were within us, their strength, given to them by God becomes our strength, and our joy¹¹

Individuals of varying degrees of spiritual experience can encourage each other in showing unfolding and previously unrealized degrees of life in Christ through the Spirit. An inexperienced person can reveal to an older Christian a dimension of truth, knowledge or spiritual practice, which the older person has forgotten or prematurely discarded and needs to rediscover and reintegrate in his or her own life.

"Letters of Spiritual Counsel" written by the early Quaker Isaac Pennington are especially notable for their advice to seek the counsel of Christ through the "Seed or inner light," even when the author

has reason enough for giving his own advice and opinion to a young couple about to be married and to a man who has expressed some attraction to the Quaker movement but needs to grow spiritually. Sir Isaac always appeals to God's work in the soul, rather than any external authority, as is clear in the following excerpt from one of his letters.

The eternal love of my father is to thee, and because he loves thee and would entirely enjoy thee, therefore doth he so grievously batter and break down that which stands in the way. "What he is doing towards thee, thou canst not know now, but thou shalt know hereafter. Only be still and wait for the springing up of home in the seasons the Father sees necessary, that thou mayst not faint under his hand but be supported by His secret power until his work is finished. The great thing necessary for thee at present to know is the drawings of his Spirit, that thou mayst not ignorantly withstand or neglect them and protract the day of thy redemption."¹²

The obvious emphases on contemplation, waiting in silence, and inner examination, are enhanced by the use of the word seasons which refers to an external earthly or narrative, event driven view of time, but time as expressed by the Greek word, *kairos*, the God-driven time of crisis when God demands a further commitment of life and truth.

Third, "This I came to know experimentally" (Rom. 8:38-9). This phrase, often repeated in Fox's journal, refers to experience as the way to true knowledge of God and his will for life. However, it also has layers of later developed meaning in the realm of scientific knowledge where ideas and impressions of the deep sources of material reality in fields such as chemistry, physics and astronomy are tested by persistent deep examination. The spiritual experimenter, like Fox, is also drawn by spiritual reality and by God into a deep search for experience and discovery which well may be rewarded by discovery of truth which is both new and old. A person involved in Quaker spiritual experimentation will follow the movements of the Spirit within, which lead to "openings" of the divine will, but such a person will not prematurely end the experiment before all the evidence is in because he or she assumes the answer is already known. The best example of this is drawn from John Woolman's *Journal*, where Woolman reports "leading" to go to the West Indies to labor with political authorities over their use of slavery. He went down to the docks twice to meet ships headed there but each time received a "check" in his spirit. The third time he received a leading to go on a ship headed not to

the Barbados but to England,¹³ where he met and influenced several people who were to be leaders in the British antislavery movement which led to the abolition of first the slave trade and then slavery itself in British territories including the West Indies.¹⁴ Woolman's openness to the continued leading of God thus led to a result even greater than he had first envisioned.

Fourth, "Let your life speak" (Eph. 4:1-6). Mary Pennington, an important early Quaker leader, reports that she "despised" Quakers from what she had heard of them until she and her husband Isaac were visited by two early Friends ministers, Thomas Curtis and William Simpson. She records that:

Their solid and weighty carriage struck a dread over me. I now knew that they came in the power and authority of the Lord, to visit us and that the Lord was with them. All in the room were sensible of the Lord's power manifest in them.¹⁵

The Quaker testimony of simplicity also has been as vital for personal spiritual development as it is for evangelism and witness. What would now be called lifestyle issues achieved an increasing importance in eighteenth and nineteenth century Quakerism. As Friends became more economically successful and entered the mainstream of English and American economic, social, and political life, the plain style was increasingly the choice of a minority. The decision to become a plain Friend often involved distancing from family and friends and could alter the choice of a marriage partner or might even preclude marriage. An episode from the life of Sarah Stephen clarifies how important an experienced woman minister, Elizabeth Ashbridge, was in the discernment process leading to the call to simplicity.

One evening, during this time, Elizabeth, in a very weighty manner, addressed me in the language of unspeakable love; remarking also, "What a pity that child should have a ribbon on her head." Her words were piercing, and deeply affected my mind. I do not know that I closed my eyes to sleep, that night; not daring to put on my ribbon, I came down without it. Yet I had many fears, expecting to be censured by one of the family... This was coming a little to the gate of stripping, which work went gradually forward; but great were my trials, both from within and without. Indeed my conflicts were so great, that I might say, "I ate my bread with mourning, and mingled my drink with tears"—but then, O, what precious meetings I had at times! My spirit was so broken, that I could scarcely contain

myself. Here were also divers weighty valuable friends, whose sympathy with me was great, and was a comfort to me.¹⁶

An early version of this paper shared with the Spiritual Direction program at the Houston Cenacle elicited a comment from Sister Mary Dennison, then director of the program, that the decision to adopt the testimony of simplicity was as decisive and demanding a divine calling as the decision to enter formal religious life in Roman Catholicism.¹⁷

Fifth, Fox clearly saw that his calling was “to direct people to the Spirit that gave forth the Scriptures, by which they might be led into all truth, and up to Christ and God, as those had been who gave them”¹⁸ (John 16:13-14). The Quaker approach to scripture concerns itself not with what human authority or institution in the church has a right to interpret it definitively, but how God interprets it in the mind, heart and experience of the believer. Fox once famously said, “You will say ‘Christ saith this, and the apostles say this,’ but what canst thou say?”¹⁹ God opens scripture in the mind and heart of the believer;

Great things did the Lord lead me into, and wonderful depths were opened unto me, beyond what can by words be declared; but as people come into subjection to the Spirit of God, and grow up in the image and power of the Almighty, they may receive the Word of wisdom that opens all things, and come to know the hidden unity in the Eternal Being.

As Caroline Stephens so wisely says, “A book cannot decide between rival interpretations of itself” (74). Who can decide? “The word of God is Christ, not the Bible” (11).²⁰ Thus, the resurrected Christ, as Eternal Word, best interprets himself. As a technique for putting the believer in touch with the Eternal Word through scripture, *lectio divina*, the meditative and contemplative reading of scripture, offers advantages granted to few other traditional methods.

Sixth (Heb. 10:25), in spite of what many perceive as the profound individualism of Quakerism by virtue of the importance of the inner life, the worshipping community is a powerful source of spiritual direction. The institutions of the Clearness Committee, Ministry and Oversight Committee and above all the gathered Meeting for Worship, or for Worship for Business, are dedicated to the fact that God works through the group experience, both large and small. As Robert Barclay states in proposition XI of the *Apology*, devoted to Worship among Friends,

Thus watching in holy dependence upon the Lord and meeting together not only outwardly in the one place, but inwardly in the one Spirit, and in the one name of Jesus, it is his power and virtue that they thereby come to enjoy... since man, the human element, and human wisdom are denied and chained down in every individual, God is exalted. His grace has dominion in each heart. His name comes to be one in all, and his glory breaks forth and covers all.... When because of a breaking forth of this power, anyone is constrained to utter a sense of exhortation or praise, or to breathe to the Lord in prayer, all are alive to it. For the same life in them answers to it “as in water face answers to face” (Prov. 27:19 RSV).²¹

Wilmer Cooper states that, “It has become popular in recent years to refer to the Quaker procedure as a method for reaching decisions by consensus,” a belief that dangerously misses the point. He continues on to say that “Quaker practice assures that all decisions are made in the Spirit of God and under His guidance.”²² The Quaker practice insures that individual rules and preferences are left outside the door, and space is given only to God’s work in the hearts of all present. If the clerk, also guided by the Holy Spirit, determines there is no agreement, then decision is left for another time to give him additional time to work.²³ As in the story of Fox’s advice to Penn about wearing his sword, there is no business or corporate decision more important than the presence and guidance of God.

Someone who comes to a clearness committee for a travelling minute does so not so much to receive permission as for spiritual guidance from “weighty friends” whose long spiritual experience and practice make them uniquely qualified to discern God’s leading. A person who does not receive such a minute is not forbidden to do as he feels called, but will do it without a statement of support from his own meeting. He or she will soon realize that other Friends are not obliged to help or support him, absent such a letter.

Ultimately the first and last points of this study, God’s work in the individual, and God’s work in the gathered meeting that transforms a group of individuals, come together. By all means, human beings are enabled to transcend the limitations of ego and be united by God’s spiritual work in them. Friends’ principles of spiritual direction have and will aid in God’s work.

ENDNOTES

- 1 George Fox. *The Journal of George Fox*, ed. Rufus M. Jones. (Richmond: Friends United Press, 1976), 149.
- 2 An early version of this paper was aided by a grant from the Elizabeth Bogert Fund for the Study of Mysticism and Spirituality. Although the author is a recorded minister of Mid America Yearly Meeting, Evangelical Friends International, her initial exposure to Friends was in FGC. She has also served on the Executive Board and been active in FWCC, and has attended a number of conferences and triennials serving as both a representative and French translator.
- 3 In *Creation of Quaker Theory*, ed., Pink Dandelion (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 206-7.
- 4 Wendy M. Wright and Joseph F. Power, "Introduction," in Francis de Sales, Jane de Chantal, *Letters of Spiritual Direction* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 9.
- 5 In the words of Wendy M. Wright and Joseph Power's illuminating introduction to the letters of Spiritual Direction of Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal: "the entire history of Christian spirituality might be said to be the attempt on the part of myriads of diverse personalities situated in differing historical moments and with the particular socio-political, cultural, and theological tools at their disposal to let Jesus live," 34.
- 6 *Journal of John Woolman*, ed. Janet Whitney (New York: Henry Regnery Company, 1950), 72.
- 7 Howard Brinton, "Introduction" in *Quaker Journals* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Press, 1978), ix.
- 8 Fox, *Journal*, 165.
- 9 John Woolman, *Journal*, 132:

Feeling my mind covered with the spirit of prayer, I told the interpreters that I found it in my heart to pray to God, and believed, if I prayed right, He would hear me, and expressed my willingness for them to omit interpreting; so our meeting ended with a degree of divine love. Before our people went out observed Papunehang... being then very tender, spoke to one of the interpreters, and I was afterward told that he said in substance as follows: "I love to feel where words come from."
- 10 Brent Filson, "The Quakers, A Sword, And The Leadership Talk," on his Internet web page, Action Leadership, of the Filson Leadership Group, Inc., at: http://www.action-leadership.com/Leadership_Article_Detail.cfm?ArticleID=11, accessed March 1, 2010.
- 11 Thomas Kelly, *A Testament of Devotion* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 59. For example, see *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 95: "he [Christ] wants to be the center, through him alone all things shall come to pass. He stands between us and God, and for that very reason he stands between us and all other men and things. *He is the Mediator*, not only between God and man, but between man and man, between man and reality."
- 12 Isaac Pennington, "Letters of Spiritual Counsel," in *Early Quaker Writings*, ed. Hugh Barbour and Arthur O Roberts (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1973), 235-6.
- 13 *Journal*, 159-71.
- 14 *Journal*, 207-16. These pages include Appendixes A and B, memorials of British Friends on the occasion of his death; and Woolman's own Essay on the Ministry, 223-5.
- 15 Mary Pennington, "Some Account of Circumstances in the Life of Mary Pennington," in *Hidden in Plain Sight; Quaker Women's Writings, 1650-1700*, ed. Mary Garman,

Judith Applegate, Margaret Benefiel and Dortha Meredith (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 1996), 221. William Penn's famous character sketch of Fox provides an excellent example of committed Quakers who were able to teach as much by example as word.

- 16 Sarah Stephen, "Memoir of the life and Travels in the Service of the Gospel of Sarah Stephen," in *Friends Library*, vol. 4, Philadelphia, 1848.
- 17 For a touching and humorous account of how difficult it still is in the modern world, see Scott Savage, *A Plain Life* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2000). See also Isabel Jane, aka Quaker Jane, "Plain Modern," on the Burning Ember Arts Internet web site, at http://www.quakerjane.com/spirit.friends/plain_dress-modern.html, accessed, accessed March 1, 2010.
- 18 Fox, *Journal*, 97-8.
 Quoted by Margaret Fell, in "The testimony of Margaret Fox concerning her husband," from *The Journal of George Fox*, on the Internet site of George Amoss Jr., Quaker Electronic Archive, at: <http://www.qis.net/~daruma/foxfell.html>, accessed March 1, 2010.
- 20 Caroline Stephens, *Quaker Strongholds* (Chula Vista: Wind and Rock Press, 1995), 74 and 11.
- 21 Robert Barclay, *Barclay's Apology in Modern English*, ed., Dean Freiday (Newberg, OR: Barclay Press, 1991), 250-1.
- 22 Wilmer Cooper, *A Living Faith*, 2nd ed. (Richmond: Friends United Press, 2001), 107.
- 23 W. Paul Jones, *The Art of Spiritual Direction* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2002), 247-53. This book contains a valuable section on Quaker clearness committees as a model for group spiritual direction. See also Rose Mary Dougherty, *Group Spiritual Direction* (New York: Paulist Press, 1995), 12.