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The Meeting for Worship in which Business is Conducted- Quaker Decision-Making Process as a Factor of Spiritual Discernment

Paul Anderson
panderso@georgefox.edu

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THE MEETING FOR WORSHIP IN WHICH BUSINESS IS CONDUCTED— QUAKER DECISION-MAKING PROCESS AS A FACTOR OF SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT

PAUL ANDERSON

“How do Friends worship?” They meet together in quiet waiting before the Lord. “How do Friends celebrate the exchange of marriage vows?” They meet together in quiet waiting before the Lord. “How do Friends conclude revival meetings or begin planning for political activism?” They meet together in quiet waiting before the Lord. “How do Friends celebrate communion and baptism?” They meet together in quiet waiting before the Lord. “How do Friends dedicate babies or memorialize those who have recently died?” They meet together in quiet waiting before the Lord. And, of no surprise to the reader by now, if one asks: “How do Friends make decisions, plan for the future, manage budget and personnel decisions, and decide matters of faith and practice?” the response likely to come back is: “They meet together in quiet waiting before the Lord.”

By now the inquirer might be asking, “Do you Quakers to *anything* other than *wait on the Lord*?” to which one might say, “I hope not, other than also to *discern* God’s will and to *obey* it.” To live life radically— aspiring to live in total submission and obedience to Christ—is the high calling of every believer. The essence of the quest, however, is spiritual rather than political or religious. It is a dynamic reality, rather than a static or programmatic one. Therein lies the challenge of opening ourselves to the proclamation of Jesus. To paraphrase Jesus, “The Leadership of God is at hand; do an about-face; get responsive to the Good News!” Herein the promise of the soon-to-be risen Lord: “After I depart, my Spirit will teach you and lead you into all truth;” and the experience of George Fox: “Christ is come to teach his people *himself*!” converge.¹ This is *why* we wait earnestly and attentively upon the Lord—although, as any attender can attest, we’re not always that quiet. According to Eden Grace,²

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The primary theological doctrine and spiritual experience of Friends is that the living Christ is present to teach us Himself. No priestly intermediary is necessary for Divine access, for “there is One, Christ Jesus, who can speak to thy condition.” Rooted in such texts as John’s prologue, Quakers believe that the Light of Christ is given in some measure to all people. This experience of the immediate presence of Christ, both personally and corporately, implies that we may be led by the Inward Teacher. Since Christ is not divided, the nearer we come to Him, the nearer we will be to one another. Thus the sense of being led into Unity with one another becomes a fundamental mark of the Divine work in the world.

Obviously, the items in the first paragraph above overstate and understate what most Friends do. For one thing, the number of strictly unprogrammed Friends around the world is less than 15% of the total number of Friends overall. In the programmed and pastoral traditions of Friends, most of the above endeavors have evolved their own patterns and structures, within which a few minutes of quiet waiting or open worship (in which testimonies are often shared) punctuate an otherwise busied order of worship. In those traditions, there might be *too little* quiet waiting on God instead of too much. Indeed, spiritual revival and renewal only break out when space is created wherein to respond with spontaneity to the immediate promptings of the Holy Spirit.

Even in the unprogrammed traditions, however, silence often becomes formalized. Custom plays a role there, as well. While silence is indeed fragile, as the spiritual deepening of one person can be interrupted by another who “speaks beyond one’s leading,” silence itself is *not* the goal. Silence too easily becomes seen as something to be maintained, or not disturbed, rather than a facilitative means to the real end: *attending, discerning, and minding* the Divine Will. Such is the basic calling of all followers of Christ—across time, space, and religious traditions—and it is *the very heart* of authentic Christian faith and practice. This is *why* we wait quietly together before the Lord.

Central to the endeavor of attending, discerning, and minding the dynamic leadership of Christ, then, is the Quaker “meeting for worship in which business is conducted.” While wisdom has accrued over three and a half centuries as to how to do it well, and *sometimes* even effectively, the way forward for Friends and others wishing to benefit from that wisdom is not simply the learning of a method. Rather, theory and praxis revolve around engaging the *dynamic reality* of Divine

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Guidance itself, which is and will ever be a profoundly spiritual experience. In that sense, the Quaker decision-making process deserves to be considered within the larger endeavor of seeking to live under the lordship of Christ as a factor of spiritual discernment. This essay therefore explores several aspects of that venture.

A MEETING FOR WORSHIP...

The first point to be made is that decision-making after the manner of Friends takes place within a gathered meeting for worship. Why do Friends insist that it happen in such a setting? This is because the goal is not simply making a decision or achieving consensus. The goal is *coming to unity around a common sense of Christ's leading*, and as with any process of corporate spiritual discernment, such happens most powerfully and effectively within a gathered meeting for worship.

As a corporate exercise, several other factors come into play. Jesus promised that he would be present where two or three are gathered in his name (Matt. 18:18-20), and Friends experience and testify that this promise is indeed true. Indeed, the collective wisdom of a larger group provides a richer assortment of perspectives than even a creative individual can muster, but the spiritual power of the gathered meeting is more than simply a quantitative enhancement of input. It involves a qualitative change, wherein coming together in worship becomes a sacramental reality—the topographical place where God's presence is made manifest in the world *incarnationally*. The *Real Presence* of Christ is actualized *in* the Gathered Meeting.

Attempting to get at the wellsprings of inspiration rather than its collected pools is another reason Friends wait attentively before the Lord. When George Fox described the biblical basis for attentive waiting before the Lord, he was seeking to experience again “that same power and Spirit that the prophets and apostles were in” that gave forth the Scriptures. (*Journal*, Nickalls, pp.30-33) While this image of the inspirational process might come across as simplistic, the interest is a worthy one. The Scriptures indeed declare the reality of the ongoing inspirational work of the Holy Spirit, and an ironic problem with holding that God no longer speaks directly to humanity as in the days of old is that this notion *goes against the clear teaching of Scripture*. Indeed, the ongoing leadership of Christ in the world through the Holy Spirit is described not simply as an incidental mat-

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ter in the Bible; it is presented as the pinnacle of Jesus' mission, continuing throughout the history of the Church—his flock (Jn. 14-17).

The question, therefore, is how to prepare ourselves to be in a position to be led by Christ—effectively and dynamically—when we are also fallen beings, subject to error, sin, and selfishness. Given a healthy dose of modesty, we can minimize the dangers of subjectivism and the tendency to project our interests onto the process. And yet, we cannot understate the fact of our utter reliance on the grace of God's working, rather than the sufficiency of our own. A humbled disposition before the Divine Presence is not a contrived posture; it is the only authentic way to be when the eyes of our hearts are opened to the truth. While all of us may have potential access to the Divine Will, none of us has full access to it. This is *why* we listen to what God might be saying through Scripture, one another, reason, and how God has led in the past in seeking to attend God's leadings in the present. As John Punshon says,³

Hearing the voice of the Shepherd is not easy. It is soft and indistinct until we become familiar with it. Though it often uses no words, we can understand it clearly. It only comes to us when we recognize a deep need of it within ourselves, and when we are willing to devote time to listen to it.

Because the meeting for business is a meeting for *worship*, we seek to prepare accordingly. This means bathing the event in prayer and coming ready to put aside the distractions of our busied lives in order to listen intently to the gentle whispers of the Holy Spirit within and among us. We also want to come to the meeting informed about the issues, so that our contributions will be seasoned with knowledge and perspective. Often, the introduction of a different way of looking at a perceived impasse provides a way forward. The Clerks and leaders of the meeting will thus take care to inform people about the issues to be discussed, and agendas and minutes will be distributed and posted in a serviceable fashion.

As the group gathers, the Clerk as the presiding officer calls the meeting together as a meeting for worship, and beginning with either prayer or a few minutes of quiet worship is customary. As matters are discussed, and as deliberations on important matters ensue, the Clerk will often introduce times of prayer or quiet waiting during the meeting, as well. Sometimes vocal ministry occurs as members share about their deepening understanding of the issues and the emergence of potential ways forward. The Clerk also will gather input from all sides

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of the issue, wanting to be sure that alternative perspectives are a direct part of the deliberations. Conducting the session as an intentional meeting for worship also lifts our focus from the mundane to the divine. Therefore, the question is not “What is “expedient?” or “What is the easiest route to take?” The goal is discerning Christ’s will for the meeting, and we believe his will is not divided, but unitive.

This is one of the most important aspects of the meeting for worship being exactly that: *a meeting for worship*. In contrast to a political gathering, in which “winners” and “losers” either gloat or sulk, depending on the competitive outcome of a discussion, the goal here is for all to succeed in a common goal—attending, discerning, and minding the will of the present Christ. Likewise, the desired “consensus” is not simply a factor of compromise, wherein some give a little in one way, and others give a little in another. Modification of one’s understanding will indeed happen on the basis of one another’s input, but the goal is not to sort out one’s opinion by means of forcible jostling back and forth until the path of least resistance produces an outcome. Nor is it a *quid pro quo* exchange: “You come my way, and I’ll go yours.” Such are products of creaturely activity, not submission to the Divine Will. Rather, the goal in a meeting for worship in which business is conducted is to come to unity around a common sense of Christ’s leadership, which while achieved together in community, is the result of a product greater than the sum of its constituent parts. It is the spiritual process itself—a factor of corporate spiritual discernment—that is the goal; this affects everything about the preparation for, the conduct of, and the reflection upon such an eschatological⁴ event.

Something of paradox is also here involved. Only when “making the decision” is a bi-product, as opposed to being the main focus of the event, can the best decisions emerge. Rather than focusing on “what *we’re* going to do,” focusing on “what *God* is wanting to do” is the best way to discern our role in partnering with the Divine Will. To become the “friends of Jesus” (Jn. 15:14f.) is to understand his will, and to obey it. Putting that relationship first is ever the priority, and that involves creating lives of spiritual receptivity to God and attentive responsiveness to the divine leading.

...IN WHICH BUSINESS IS CONDUCTED

Because it is a meeting for worship in which business is conducted, this changes everything about the ways we perceive the activity

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involved. Neither effectiveness nor efficiency is the goal, but the work of spiritual discernment is central to the endeavor. Rather than worship being drawn in as a facilitator of business—"Let's pray so we can be helped in our *real* work: the decisions at hand," we come to see the business of our lives as an occasion for *seeking the Lord together*—"The decisions at hand provide a wondrous opportunity for the central work of our lives: seeking the Lord's leading prayerfully and in community." Those are two very different approaches.

This change in perspective causes us to redefine our understandings of "success." Rather than seeing success in terms of material, bottom-line matters of the conventional world, success in the Kingdom of God involves lifting our sights to the higher goals of discernment, wisdom, understanding, conviction and commitment. Where Christ's leadings are attended and discerned, *that's* success! Likewise, "failure" is radically redefined. Rather than evaluating outcomes on the basis of popularity or outward measures, the more central question is whether Christ's will was done and whether it was carried out in the loving spirit of his way.

What did people learn from the experience? Was the way of Christ exemplified? Was the truth exalted and embodied? Was love personified? Was integrity maintained? Was the peaceable example of Christ embodied, and was God's concern for justice carried out in the venture? Have we been faithful stewards of the truth we have received? These are the questions that redefine our understandings of success and failure. Christ's work *cannot* be furthered by going against his Way, and being and acting according to the Way of Christ cannot but further his work in the world—ultimately an expression of God's redemptive transformation and love.

Within the business of our lives, rules and regulations help us get from one point to another. However, structure serves the process rather than the converse. Therefore, rules are not meant to be used as means of leverage or getting one's way, but they do need to be adhered to for the reasons they were devised. They also, then, become binding for the group. Non-members, for instance, may attend meetings—and they may even be invited to contribute—but they are guests of the process, rather than directors of it. This is why it is inappropriate for them to share in the decision-making process itself. Commitment to the values of the group and the implementation of its decisions—two essential factors of any membership commitment—are inherent requisites for any decision-making process.

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Also, because agreements are connectional, they cannot in good faith be broken without consulting with the parties involved and renegotiating those agreements. This is why the constitution and discipline of the group are binding until they are changed by due process.

Implications extend, then, to aspects of community authority. While Friends have often been adverse to emphasizing authority, it is indeed central to the enterprise as a factor of responsibility and accountability.⁵ Where an officer of the meeting has been entrusted a charge of responsibility, that person must be accorded the communal authority to carry out the task. Otherwise, one is not released to serve the group effectively. Therefore, the Clerk of the meeting speaks not simply on her or his behalf; he or she speaks on behalf of the meeting that has made the appointment unto service. Likewise, elders, overseers, teachers, pastors, secretaries and superintendents carry out their responsibilities with the attending authority needed to accomplish the work assigned them.

A FACTOR OF SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT

Because the meeting for worship in which business is conducted is only one aspect of spiritual discernment, other factors need to be kept in close consideration. Indeed, while Friends make corporate decisions together, in community, there are also other aspects of the larger discernment venture that will be mutually impacting for each other. As well as *community*, *Scripture*, and *inward leadings*, Friends also adhere to the belief that God works through our *intellects*, and throughout the *history and theology* of a spiritual movement. While Friends have challenged biblicism, traditionalism, credalism, and individualism, they also believe that God speaks through these means; the question is how to get at the unitive truth of Christ through any and all of these means. Therefore, each of these factors of spiritual discernment must be considered, at least briefly, in putting together a set of questions designed to guide corporate decision making. First, however, two points deserve to be made.

The first point is that every approach to spiritual discernment has its strengths, but it also has its weaknesses. We “see through a glass darkly,” as the Apostle Paul puts it, and yet, none of us is without vision entirely. This is why we need to consider the weaknesses of our approaches, as well as their strengths. We also need to consider the strengths of other approaches with which we are less accustomed to

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working. If a person works primarily alone, one may need to consider how to work together in community. If one works well rationally, but has little knowledge of Scripture or Friends history and doctrine (likewise, Christian history and doctrine in general), one may need to broaden one's perspective to insure that the theological side of one's heritage is engaged. In all things, appreciating the fuller spectrum of spiritual discernment allows one to be better balanced and more effectively tempered against one's excesses. This is why the fuller range of discernment venues deserves consideration for the spiritually mature and effective leader.

A second consideration is that an endeavor of inquiry functions best as a factor of asking the right questions, not simply selecting the right answers. The Friendly system of asking *queries*—spiritually probing questions for moving us toward the truth—becomes a genuine asset also for the venture of spiritual discernment. This being the case, for each of the five factors of spiritual discernment listed below, five queries will be raised at the outset of each consideration. In so doing, our appreciation for each is enhanced.⁶

PERSONAL AND INDIVIDUAL ASPECTS OF SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT⁷

One of the great dangers of individual and personal spiritual discernment is the tendency of the individual to measure the worth and merit of an inferred “leading” in accordance with ways that it meets one's own needs. God's will is often hard to distinguish from perceived advantage or gain. This is why checks and balances against one's tendency to be auto-centric in one's personal discernment ventures are important. The Friends Testimony about the Inward Light emphasizes the Light of Christ (Jn. 1:9) as the source of illumination, which is apprehended inwardly; its origin does *not* lie with the individual. It is not “my Light” or one's personal locus of authority, but *Christ's* leadership and illuminative work that individuals seek. Therefore, submission to Christ—authentically and continually—is the only way forward for spiritual discernment to take place most fully and adequately. Such is the starting point, the returning point, and the end point of every aspect of spiritual discernment, and this is especially the case with personal and individual ones. Consider the following queries and considerations:

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1. “Is this leading in keeping with the teachings of the Scriptures?” The Spirit who inspired the Scriptures will not contradict the truths contained in the Bible. The Bible serves as an authoritative and objective referent by which to check subjective leadings.
2. “Are there examples from the past that may provide direction for the present?” Because the Church is the Body of Christ, his leadership can often be evaluated more clearly by hindsight, and such observations may provide parallels that inform present issues.
3. “Is a leading self-serving, or is it motivated by one’s love for God and others?” Most false leadings are revealed to be selfishly motivated, or at least tainted with self-interest, even if the goal sounds noble. The will of Christ is always perceived more clearly from the foot of the Cross; as we release our needs to God we find that God is also freed to meet them in ways pleasing to him.
4. “Does it matter who gets the credit?” The Kingdom God is never limited to the petty “empires” that humans try to build. These will crumble, but what is done for Christ and his Truth will last. A lot of good can be done when it doesn’t matter who gets the credit.
5. “Is the ministry of Jesus being continued in what we do?” If the world sees Christ in our time it will be through the men, women, and children who are his hands and feet in the world. To pray in Christ’s name and according to his will implies taking the time to seek out and know his desires, and this is what makes any authentic follower of Jesus his “friends.” (John 15:12-16)

SCRIPTURAL ASPECTS OF SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT

Challenges faced with biblical authority and interpretation are several. First, the Scriptures must be read thoughtfully, but also prayerfully. With all sixty-six books, representing over a thousand years of oral, written, and compilation history, appreciating the context and literary features of a passage inevitably affects one’s understanding of its meaning. As the inspired written Word of God, the Bible is rendered in the words of humans, and lifting out the content without being sidetracked by the packaging is an enduring challenge of biblical interpretation. Even after agreeing on the authoritative charac-

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ter of Scripture, though, a challenge still remains regarding the particulars of its message. Again, the life that is submitted to God and willing to be instructed and corrected by the clear meaning of Scripture is the place to be regarding biblical aspects of spiritual discernment. Following are queries and considerations to facilitate that process:

1. “Is the interpretation well constructed exegetically, seeking the clearest meaning of the biblical passage within its literary context, as opposed to reading something into it that is contrary or alien to its original meaning?” Sometimes interpreters fail to catch the best meaning of a passage because they lift it out of context or fail to appreciate its clearest and simplest meaning within its original setting. Text without context may lead to pretext.

2. “Does the interpretation make sense of the passage’s literary form—*how* is it meant to be embraced and experienced as true by the reader—and are larger contextual issues taken into consideration?” Asking how a passage is meant to be received by its original author and audience helps us connect its form and function to understandings of meanings, both then and now. A *literal* understanding of a text cannot be achieved without also appreciating its *literary character, setting, and form*.

3. “Are alternative perspectives within the authoritative canon of Scripture also considered, so that the fullness of biblical counsel may be included in seeking the most representative of biblical perspectives?” Any biblical word or theme study will show a variety of perspectives between different parts of the Bible, and sometimes within them. Considering the multiplicity of biblical perspectives, if such is the case, is essential for developing an understanding of the breadth of biblical teaching on any subject.

4. “Are varying perspectives brought into focus around the ‘canon within the canon’—the Christ Events and living under the Lordship of Christ—and following the clear teachings and example of Jesus and the Apostles?” The promises of the First Covenant are fulfilled in the New, and the overall teaching of Scripture deserves to be read from the perspective of God’s pivotal saving/revealing work through Christ Jesus. The epoch-changing work, teachings, and ministry of

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Jesus Christ provide an interpretive lens through which to focus and clarify the larger set of meanings in the Bible.

5. “Where the Bible does not address pressing issues directly, are there parallels which inform the faithful appropriation of scriptural teaching?” On many issues, the best way to apply the moral teaching of Scripture is to identify the original concern and to consider its relevance in later settings and generations. On some issues the Bible is clear and explicit; on other issues it still speaks with authority, but the application often involves an indirect appropriation of a parallel equivalent.

HISTORICAL/THEOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT

While Friends have challenged traditionalism and credalism, they do value tradition and articulate their own doctrines and testimonies. Friends also believe that God has been at work in the church and beyond, and that learnings from the past—both positive and negative—deserve to inform our faith and practice in later generations. Thinking about this is what good theology does. Certainly, appealing to Christian history and doctrine is central to establishing sound doctrine for today, and yet our founding fathers and mothers were also wanting to be faithful to the faith and life of the Apostles. Ironically, many Friends love doing theology, but they have not considered the possibility that they might learn something from those who have been engaging it as a serious discipline over time. Nonetheless, the history and doctrine of Friends (as well as Christian history and doctrine in general) are essential platforms for meaningful discernment in every generation. Following are several queries and considerations:

1. “Are there foundational experiences and convictions that define a movement’s origin, development, and vocation within the economy of God’s sovereign work throughout history?” Notice that Friends elevate the narrative—the story—of how God has worked in the past within their theological approach because it has direct implications for how God might be working today.

2. “Which aspects of a movement’s original vision were reactive and corrective within a particular context, and which are transcendent and timeless—to be upheld within every situa-

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tion?” Distinguishing responses to earlier problems is essential for discerning the overall concern and subsequent applications of it. In that sense, Friends Testimonies are *not merely* “denominational distinctives.” Distinctives involve particular and time-bound expressions of a concern; Testimonies reflect convictions that are timeless in their value and impact.⁸

3. “What have been a movement’s successes and failures, and how can both be instructive for the unfolding progress of a movement’s development?” The reflective memory appreciates both strengths and weaknesses of earlier events—and learns from both. Therefore, low moments of history become as instructive as heroic ones, as pitfalls can be avoided and faithfulness imitated.

4. “How can we apply the Testimonies of the past to needed situations of the present?” Meaningful application hinges upon meaningful interpretation. When the overall principle is grasped, timely application follows.

5. “How can we form leaders not only with a vital knowledge of history and theology, but also with the preparation to be open to what God might yet be doing in them and through them, and in the world today?” This is the query of all educational and formational programs. Our young people are not merely the leaders of tomorrow; they are also *the life of the meeting today!*

RATIONAL/INTELLECTUAL ASPECTS OF SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT

While rationalism and intellectualism can distract us from the life of faith and faithfulness, Friends also believe and experience that God works through our intellect and reason in the distinguishing of truth from error. Indeed, 1 Peter 3:15 exhorts us: “But sanctify Christ the Lord in your hearts, always ready to give an apology to anyone asking a word from you about the hope that is within you.” Robert Barclay gave a reasoned account for our Christian hope; are we in later generations to do any less? The goal, however, is not to outdo the reasoned arguments of others, but in all things to seek the Truth, which alone sets us free (Jn. 8:12). Therefore, rational inquiry for Friends seeks to apply the powers of intellect and intuition alike to the reflective understanding of God’s truth. To believe that Christ is the

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Way, the Truth, and the Life is also to understand something about the character of truth, itself (Jn. 14:6). Beyond the confines of objectivism and subjectivism—yet at the same time including their realms—liberating truth is finally *Christomorphic*. To come closer to Christ is to come closer to the truth, and to come closer to truth is to come closer to Christ. Consider these queries and reflections:

1. “Do we understand *why* we believe something, not just *that* we believe it?” Developing a faith that is biblically and traditionally sound, rationally coherent, and experientially adequate is the essence of serviceable theology—thinking meaningfully about God.

2. “How can we become analytical problem solvers, able to integrate and apply biblical, theological, historical, and political issues into a workable whole?” Indeed, the creative work of God in the world continues through the prayerful labors of those who seek to apply divine wisdom and insight to the pressing needs of the day. The authentic discoveries of science are more indebted to continuing revelation than the secularist will care to admit; likewise, discovery within every field hinges upon the life of prayer and the pondering of mystery.

3. “How can we distinguish compelling challenges to our faith and practice from their lesser companions?” Sometimes new discoveries challenge our beliefs, but it is also the case that the impressive authorities of science and modernism have been used against religious ventures for political reasons, rather than compelling ones. All truth is God’s truth, and where a genuine aspect of truth is discovered, religious faith and practice finds a way to integrate such with biblical and historical understandings. Not all claims to truth, however, are equally valid; therefore, rigorous analysis is required for testing claims to truth, both new and old.

4. “How can we call for adherence to the Center of our faith and practice, while at the same time working practically with their boundaries of expression?” Jesus raised up the Center of the Divine Will, and he calls us to do the same. At the same time, conventional life and work will have their boundaries, and distinguishing between principle and praxis—while holding them together in tension—will provide a way forward on most accounts.

5. “How can we articulate the convictions we hold in ways that make a difference in the world—with our lives—and some-

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times, with words?” George Fox declared “Let your *lives* speak,” and the Gospel message is as much what we live as what we say (Jn. 13:34). Therefore, we take the incarnated witness seriously in all that we do; we seek to convey the truth with all of our lives, . . . which also involves our *words*.

CORPORATE DECISION-MAKING ASPECTS OF SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT⁹

The gathered meeting for worship is the place, then, where all of these aspects of discernment come together. Indeed, individual leadings, biblical convictions, historical/theological understandings, and intellectual reflections come together to be confirmed or amended within the setting of corporate discernment. In that sense, it is the larger gathering of believers to whom we submit in seeking the mind of Christ together, as the larger corporate setting makes it possible to test our leadings and understanding of the Divine Will. In coming to the congregational meeting, we do so prayerfully, and if led to speak, we also release it to the larger meeting rather than trying to force an understanding on others.¹⁰ The Clerk of the meeting also takes liberty to call the meeting to order and to elder those that might seem out of line. Again, the goal is not to prevail over another perspective; bringing in prepared statements or rallying support for a partisan attempt to influence the discussion tends to trample the spirit of the moment. The goal is to be gathered by Christ into a common understanding of his will for the group, and when that happens, it truly is a “spiritually gathered” event! Following are several queries and considerations for corporate discernment:

1. “Does this matter belong to a congregational meeting for discernment, or should it be decided within a working committee or by an individual?” Matters of community maintenance should be relegated to working groups. Only matters that concern the direction of the entire community deserve the searching of all, although clearness for the concerns of individuals is also appropriately sought in the gathered meeting for worship.
2. “Are we asking the right questions?” Because the meeting for business is first and foremost a meeting for worship, in such a meeting the central question is neither “What is expedient?” nor “What is the group consensus?” but “What is the *leading*

of Christ in our midst?” Prepare accordingly and allow times of prayer and quiet searching within the meeting itself.

3. “Have all shared their sense of the truth on the matter, and have they also released it to the rest of the meeting?” All members who have something to say have the responsibility to do so clearly, but having done so, to release their contributions to the larger sense of the meeting and leading of the Spirit. Because no individual possesses all of God’s truth, the contribution of each who has something to say is essential. To withhold one’s truth is a “high crime” against the meeting and an affront to the Lord. It may have been the very piece needed to complete the puzzle. The Clerk should invite insight from all perspectives possible in order for the issue and its implications to be understood clearly.

4. “If there is disagreement, are we able to distinguish between preference and conscience?” Where there is a conflict of perspective, the issue must be sorted until the genuine issue(s) of disagreement is (are) clarified. Then, those who hold opposing views are called to distinguish between preference and conscience. If it is a matter of preference, release it to the meeting and do not stand in its way. If it is a matter of conscience, hold to your conviction as long as it holds you. The prophetic voice *often sings a solo*, at least for a while.

5. “If we have been led together in unity, can we also carry out the decision in unity, in partnership with Christ and with one another?” Friends must agree to wait until there is clarity of leading and then support the decisions made in unity. When this happens, meetings begin to experience the exciting reality of Christ’s present leadership, and the meeting is energized to move forward in the strength of unity. Speaking with a united voice depends on waiting long enough to receive a common sense of leading. Not only do we seek Christ’s leading, but the Spirit of Christ also *seeks to lead us* into truth. Now that is an exciting reality to ponder!

GATHERING A SENSE OF THE MEETING

While all of these factors of discerning the mind of Christ within a group’s decision-making process, not all of them will be applied in the same way. Rather, they all serve the complementary function of helping

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a group understand what Christ's will might be for the particular issues at hand. Believing also that Christ's will is not divided, each mode of discernment should be kept in dialogue with the others. Finally, however, things come to bear upon the corporate decision-making process of a group, and the following elements of an effective meeting for worship in which business is conducted deserve consideration.

First, *adequate preparation* for the meeting is important. The reason for announcing the agenda of the upcoming meeting in plenty of time is so that those who attend can lift up the discussion in prayer. It is also important to commission adequate reports so that any investigations needed in order for the decision-making process to be its best can be conducted in timely ways. Likewise, determining what decisions are to be made by which groups and by which process is significant; it clarifies appropriate linkages of authority and responsibility.

Second, *introducing the issue under consideration well* lays the foundation for a productive and meaningful discussion. In contrast to a Parliamentary approach, though, in which discussion does not begin until a particular proposal is forwarded, the Quaker approach *resists narrowing the options too soon*. Where a particular proposal is forwarded too early, before the larger set of issues has had the opportunity to be considered, much time is wasted on the merits and weaknesses of the proposal rather than focusing on how to understand the larger issue being addressed. This is inefficient and often divisive. Especially when individuals become personally attached to platforms or proposals, pointing out the weaknesses of those proposals, or the strengths of alternative ones, can lead to the setting up of camps on one side of an issue or another. Therefore, the deliberative process should focus first on understanding significant aspects of the problem being addressed. From that fuller sense of the issues involved, better proposals for action arise. All who are involved in the discernment process are *on the same side*—seeking to discern a way forward in addressing the issues at hand. Other people are not the problem; the problem is the problem. People are the problem-solving resources.

Third, having drawn in the relevant input from all sides, the Clerk will *seek to weigh the considerations and to identify potential ways forward*. This may take more than one attempt, and as the Clerk offers particular impressions of what the sense of the meeting might be, he or she will look for confirmations or corrections of those inferences. Sometimes this happens by the nodding or shaking of heads, or from the direct words of those who respond. Sometimes, the Clerk will comment directly on why particular contributions are spiritually more

weighty than others, and equally helpfully, why they are not. The goal here is to “thresh” the wheat from the chaff, and to help the meeting distinguish the more significant contributions from their counterparts. If the weighing process goes well, determining the plan of action is uncontroversial. If clarity evades the meeting, or if there is a substantive difference between two or more potential ways forward, the Clerk should identify what the particular matters of agreement and disagreement might be, followed by proposing how to address the points of contention. This may involve spending times of silent waiting and prayer on the spot, although sometimes new input that might clarify the way forward may be required for a unitive decision to be forthcoming, leading to holding the decision over until that information has been gathered.

Fourth, *offering a Sense of the Meeting* becomes something of a summary of where the group feels a oneness of accord on both the identification of the issues to be addressed and what might be “the mind of Christ” in addressing those issues. In offering a “Sense of the Meeting,” the Clerk will often share concerns that have arisen from the discussion as a means of setting the decision in a larger context, and some articulation of why a decision is taken also lends an understanding of how the group had come to such a decision within its deliberations. As the decision is rendered in written form by the Recording Clerk, or sometimes by the Clerk, if acting alone, the larger set of issues and concerns can also be included within the minute. This is helpful for several reasons. Sometimes persons may oppose an action because of things they are worried about. Being able to register these concerns within a public minute allows for accountability and attentiveness to potential future problems, while not requiring the decision-making process to be held up unnecessarily. Also, some analysis of why one course of action was chosen over another allows adjustments in the future if required by circumstances. The written minute is finally approved by the group—at times with some slight modification—and when the corporate minute is ready to be approved by all, a “Sense of the Meeting” has been achieved.

Finally, the result of good process is one that is both more effective and more efficient. Where the group attains a common sense of Christ’s leading, it may then proceed buoyantly and energetically toward its implementation. While coming to unity around a common sense of Christ’s leading may take more time in the decision-making part of the process, if both problem-identification and decision-implementation are considered as part of the venture, it is *much more*

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efficient (and effective!) than rushing an issue and trying to get people to go along with something they did not own to begin with. Decisions that are both *understood* and *collectively owned* have a far greater chance of being carried out with missional success than do quickly made decisions that are mandated by a dominant individual or group.

ALTERNATIVE WAYS FORWARD

Sometimes, however, unitive decisions are not reached by the group, forcing the consideration of alternative ways forward. Failure to achieve unity may be a result of any number of factors, but options still exist. First, an understanding of an issue may simply *require more time to mature and develop*. If the decision itself can be delayed in order to gather more information and to consider prayerfully the issues involved, this is an important option to consider. The more people pray about things, and as understandings mature, things begin to look different. If a proposal does not have the benefit of discussion and consideration from varying angles, it will rarely be a matured proposal. Therefore, asking for more time is a worthy option to consider if feasible.

Second, where some issues are divisive within the larger society, those divisions tend to play themselves out within the Meeting. Where this is acknowledged, wise leadership should resist coming to divisive decisions and should intentionally seek a long-term approach to the matter. Pressures from outside groups and perspectives should thus be resisted, and the unity of the group should be prioritized over divisive tendencies. As getting a common assessment of the issues is the first order of business, all involved deserve to be drawn together on the same side, addressing the problem as the matter to be solved rather than falling into the trap of perceiving individuals or groups as the adversary. Therefore, knowing what common agreements and disagreements are—and why—informs the leadership as to whether the group is ready to come to unity in one direction or another. If too much division still exists, a good option is *to decide not to decide* until a common way forward emerges, preserving the unity of the group.

A third option may allow an individual or group to “*stand aside*” from the decision of the Meeting, while agreeing to support it, even if not in basic agreement with it. While the sketching of the fuller discussion within the original minute is normally sufficient to register the concerns of individuals, sometimes one simply cannot agree with

the direction of a decision to which others are willing to commit. If this is the case, and if the size of the dissenting group is only a few (less than 10-15% of the larger group, for instance), the individual or group can be asked to consider whether their concerns are weighty enough to hold back the progress of the meeting. Normally, this not the case, and objections are noted but laid aside as an act of gracious consideration. After all, if things really go awry, the present decision can always be revisited. The registering of one's standing aside from a decision, however, should be limited to only exceptional cases and should not become the norm. This is because it fractures the group, at least slightly, and it should be resisted unless required by conscience. This option does, however, minimize the vulnerability of the group to the strong-minded individualist, or to one who confuses being contrary with being prophetic. Having one's proposal rejected is always tough on the ego, but that's the whole point! Discernment is *never* about one's ego or personal agenda. It is ever about the attending, discerning, and minding of *Christ's* will for the group. Therefore, regarding one's non-approved proposals, standing aside should only be considered after the following Queries and reflections have been embraced:

1. "Do you feel you have been *listened to*, and that your concern has been *heard* by the larger group?" Not all concerns and understandings are of equal weight, but the important thing is for people to feel that their views are attended and understood by others. If that has happened, they can be released to the larger group's sense of discernment with joy!
2. "Are you satisfied with your articulation of your concerns, including *why* they are compelling, or is there anything you'd like to add or clarify?" It may take more than one attempt to articulate one's concern and its basis well, but having done so makes it easier to release it to others.
3. "Is your desire first and foremost the discerning and following of Christ's will and leading on this and other matters?" The goal is not to make a particular decision, but to come together in unity in aspiring to follow Christ's leading above all else. Getting one's way is of no consequence; following Christ's way is the singular priority.
4. "Do you believe that others *also* desire to follow Christ supremely, and is it conceivable that the larger group may

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have grasped the Lord's leading on this matter despite your continuing concerns?" Any one person's insight is limited, and yet the authentic discernment of Christ's leading may finally be measured by the larger community of mature believers. We may rest in that confidence.

5. "Are you willing to release your concerns to the meeting and to lovingly support the action taken, trusting that Christ is leading and will continue to lead individuals and groups committed to living under his Lordship?" Time will also be a test of decisions made, and adjustments will always be called for in the future as a developing sense of Christ's will unfolds for the group.

CONCLUSION

As Friends come together, endeavoring to participate meaningfully in the meeting for worship in which business is conducted, we really do put into practice what the Bible, our history, our hearts, and our minds tell us about Christ's living Presence in the world. One of the most neglected of Christian doctrines is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. If Christ is alive, he desires to lead his church. If Christ desires to lead his church, his will should be sought. If his will can be sought, it can be discerned; and if it can be discerned, it deserves to be obeyed. This is nothing more than the *basic Christian life*, and it ought to be the standard approach to Christian living—individually and corporately. None of us has sole access to Christ's truth, but then again, none of us is entirely devoid of it. Therefore, we need one another, and the greatest venture humans can pursue together is the endeavor of attending, discerning, and minding the present leadership of the resurrected Lord. When that happens, all things indeed become new; and the Lordship of Jesus Christ is experienced in a dynamic and world-changing way.

NOTES

1. These biblical references encapsulate Jesus' proclamation message in the Synoptic Gospels and his departing words to his disciples in John 14-17. The proclamation of George Fox is referred to more than once in his *Journal* (1647 and 1652), and it has come to express the essence of his message.
2. This paragraph is from her essay, "An Introduction to Quaker Business Practice," delivered to the World Council of Churches in 2000 and posted on the WCC website:

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<http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/who/damascuspost-03-e.html>. This essay also offers an excellent practical overview of the Quaker decision-making process. See also her essay, “Guided by the Mind of Christ—Yearning for a New Spirituality of Church Governance,” *Ecumenical Trends* 32:4 (April 2003) 1-7 and on her website.

3. John Punshon, *Testimony and Tradition* (London: Quaker Home Service, 1990) 85. For the best treatment of the history of the Quaker decision-making process, including insights as to the glories and foibles of the process, see Michael J. Sheeran’s book, *Beyond Majority Rule; Voteless Decisions in the Religious Society of Friends* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of Friends, 1983). See also Barry Morley’s Pendle Hill Pamphlet (#307, 1993), *Beyond Consensus; Salvaging Sense of the Meeting*; George Selleck, *Principles of the Quaker Business Meeting* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1986); L. Hugh Doncaster, *Quaker Organisation and Business Meetings* (London: Friends Home Service Committee, 1958); Eric W. Johnson, *Quaker Meeting: A Risky Business* (Pittsburgh: Dorrance Publishing Co., 1991); Cecil W. Sharman, *Servant of the Meeting: Quaker Business Meetings and their Clerks* (London: Friends Home Service, 1983); Jack L. Willcuts, *Why Friends Are Friends* (Newberg, OR: Barclay Press, 1984); and Douglas Steere, *The Quaker Meeting for Business* (Southeastern Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, 1996).
4. The term “eschatological” may take some unpacking here. The way it is used in theology is to refer to the finality (*eschatos* in Greek means “last”) of God’s breaking into human history in ways decisive. At times, it refers to the end of the age—the end times, but it also refers to God’s divine actions in the present. Friends have called this personal engagement by God one’s “Day of Visitation,” and the assumption is that God is wanting to lead us daily into truth as the essential feature of discipleship. Therefore, while the Kingdom is coming in the future, it is already come in the here and now. The question is whether we will tune in to what God is presently doing through the agency of Christ and the workings of the Holy Spirit in the world and in our lives, receptively and responsively.
5. This connection is spelled out extensively in my response to Pope John Paul’s letter to the churches about Petrine Ministry and the challenges of Christian unity: “Petrine Ministry and Christocracy: A Response to *Ut Unum Sint*,” *One in Christ* 40:1 (2005): 3-39. See also Newton Garver’s response, and my response to his, in *Friends Journal* 52:9 (2006): 20-24. The last essay in the present issue of *QRT*, “Christian Unity under the Lordship of Christ: A New Vision of Catholicity?” provides a summary of the original response plus further considerations.
6. I am appreciative of Howard Snyder’s recent essay, “The Babylonian Captivity of Wesleyan Theology,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 39:1 (2004): 1-20, in which he lays out a “Wesleyan Pentilateral.” In this essay, the place of community is restored to the holistic out-workings of God’s grace. See also Don Thorsen’s excellent book, *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral; Scripture, Reason, Tradition & Experience as a Model of Evangelical Theology* (Lexington, KY: Emeth, 1990, 2005).
7. Guidelines similar to these, as well as those under the corporate guidelines for decision-making, were listed in “The Present Leadership of the Resurrected Lord,” *Evangelical Friend* 23:7/8 (1990): 2-3, 19; this essay was later republished by Barclay Press (Newberg, OR) in pamphlet form as “With Christ in Decision Making; His Present Leadership among Friends” (see note 9, below).
8. On this matter, note my changing of the second essay in the seven-fold series, *Meet the Friends* (Newberg: Barclay Press, 1982; rev. edn. 2003). The first edition title of that essay was “Quaker Distinctives,” and the thrust of it was to consider interesting expressions of more timeless concerns. However, the term came to be associated *wrongly* with such Friendly Testimonies as Peace, Sacraments, Ministry, Worship, and Simplicity. These are not optional distinctives for Christians to opt into or out of; they are enduring Testimonies to what it means to follow Jesus, and yet their timely applications will always be distinctive and

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time-bound. Therefore, that second essay was renamed “Quaker Testimonies and Distinctives,” attempting to distinguish the timeless concerns from their time-bound expressions. Friends *Testimonies* should *not* be called “distinctives.”

9. Many of the following insights are attributed to Dealous Cox, former Clerk of Reedwood Friends Church in Portland, OR, Clerk of the Elders of NWYM, and Chairman of the Board of Trustees at George Fox University. These corporate guidelines were also published in the early 1990s in the *Indiana Friend* and *Quaker Life*, and the individual and corporate guidelines are very similar to those published in my 1990 *Evangelical Friend* essay, mentioned in note 7, above.
11. Consider this classic statement by Edward Burrows (1662), found in *Quaker Faith and Practice* (London: Quaker Home Service, 1995), #2:87:

Being orderly come together, not to spend time with needless, unnecessary and fruitless discourses; but to proceed in the wisdom of God, not in the way of the world, as a worldly assembly of men, by hot contests, by seeking to outspoke and over-reach one another in discourse as if it were controversy between party and party of men, or two sides violently striving for dominion, not deciding affairs by the greater vote. But in the wisdom, love and fellowship of God, in gravity, patience, meekness, in unity and concord, submitting one to another in lowliness of heart, and in the holy Spirit of truth and righteousness all things [are] to be carried on; by hearing, and determining every matter coming before you, in love, coolness, gentleness and dear unity;—I say, as only one party, all for the truth of Christ, and for the carrying on the work of the Lord, and assisting one another in whatsoever ability God hath given.