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'THE PRESENCE IN THE MIDST'

KOINONIA AND CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

JANET SCOTT

INTRODUCTION

This paper takes the concept of *koinonia* used by the World Council of Churches and attempts to develop a Quaker response through an exegesis of Matthew 18 in relation to the Meeting for Worship for Church Affairs. It suggests that the implications of this chapter are that a loving community, living in obedience to Christ's teaching, has an authority to make decisions.

KOINONIA

Koinonia is used in the New Testament to describe the life of the church. It is difficult to translate into English but its meanings include community, communion, participation, sharing, fellowship and solidarity. The World Council of Churches Faith and Order Conference in 1993 used the term as a central concept because of its breadth. It links together the nature of God—the relationships of mutual indwelling within the Trinity; the activity of God—the divine giving and receiving which is the life-giving source of all creation and all human community; and the activity of the whole faith community. The conference wrote, "Koinonia...springs from the word of life...it is nothing less than the reconciling presence of the love of God. God wills unity for the Church, for humanity, and for creation because God is a Koinonia of love, the unity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit...Koinonia is a gift...the Church is called to be a sign and instrument of this all-encompassing will of God."

It is God who is the source of *koinonia* and who wills that the whole of creation is brought into this relationship of life and love. The church plays a part in this, experiencing *koinonia* as both gift and call, as the "already and the not-yet" of its life. It is a concept for the church universal and one that enables fruitful discussion of church unity for it concentrates on purpose and spirit rather than on

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structures. It is also a concept for the local church, whether as a yearly meeting or as a single congregation, for the gift and the call are the same wherever the church is found. Every meeting should expect to know the presence of God, and to be given the task of showing and bringing about a life of unity and reconciling love.

GOSPEL-ORDER

A traditional Quaker phrase that expresses a sense of *koinonia* is “gospel-order.” I understand gospel-order to include the structures by which our meetings relate to each other; the processes by which our church affairs are decided, that is, our discipline; the outcomes in actions that transform lives and transform the world, that is, the testimonies; and the understanding of what is happening that comes from a distinctive way of telling the gospel story. There are many aspects of this, but here the concentration will be on “the presence in the midst” as the source of authority. Quakers express this in a number of ways, ranging from *seeking the will of God* to *finding unity*, from William Penn’s description of Christ as *presiding* to “*the sense of the meeting*.” All of these are trying to describe and explain an experience that at its best enables those present and worshiping in a meeting for church affairs to feel taken out of themselves, moved by the Holy Spirit, and enabled to reach decisions that have about them a sense of rightness.

The Quaker tradition contains reference to and interpretation of the biblical tradition. I intend to look at one interpretation of the presence in the midst—that found in the Gospel of Matthew, and the implications it might have for how we as Quakers understand the authority of the gathered meeting. In doing this I am trying to weave together three aspects of biblical studies. First, from critical scholarship I am using the method of redaction-criticism. This method does not ask historical questions; it is not asking what Jesus actually said. It concentrates on the author, and on what message the author is trying to convey through the way in which s/he selects, handles, orders and interprets the source material. Second, I am using some historical theology, in that I point out some of the interpretations of the gospel that Quakers have made. Third, I do biblical theology in the sense that I attempt to apply what has been discovered to contemporary Quaker situations and questions.

Underlying this is what I understand as the Quaker hermeneutic: the Bible is the result of the activity of the Holy Spirit in the minds and experience of people and communities; these people have expressed their experience in words and ways influenced by their own culture, not all of which are relevant to other cultures; the Bible is a witness to the Holy Spirit, so we must take it seriously, especially when it challenges us in ways that are uncomfortable; but it is the experience of the Holy Spirit in our own lives and worship that enables us to read the Bible aright and to understand what it teaches. Therefore, as Fox pointed out in the well-known story, to be able to answer the question, “What canst thou say?” we must also be able to answer the questions, “Art thou a child of Light, and hast thou walked in the Light and what thou speakest, is it inwardly from God?” Our hermeneutic is validated by the practice of lives of faith.

Therefore when we have done the groundwork, when we have tried to hear the same Spirit that taught the author of the gospel and our own Quaker forebears, when we have understood the tradition in our minds and hearts, in our worship and our actions, we shall be better able to discern how the Spirit speaks to us now.

THE PRESENCE IN THE MIDST

There is a picture, well known amongst Friends, called “The Presence in the Midst.” It depicts a Meeting for Worship in the Meeting House at Jordans, probably in the eighteenth century. Men and women in sober dress sit on different sides of the room; there are elders and ministers on the facing benches; heads are bowed in prayer save for one woman who looks up to see, standing on the elders’ bench, a transparent bearded figure whose hands are outstretched in blessing. When I am being cynical I describe this as “a fair-haired, white-skinned, Jesus in a nightgown,” recreated in the English Victorian image. Yet it is somewhat of a puzzle to consider how else the Presence might be depicted in a way that would make it instantly recognizable as Christ.

What is particularly interesting for twentieth-century British Quakers is that it is Christ, depicted as a version of the historical Jesus, which is the Presence, rather than God the Creator or the Holy Spirit, both of whom receive far more reference at present. I understand the picture to draw upon the Gospel of Matthew, which is the one that

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most clearly sees Christ with the church rather than the Holy Spirit. Though the references are few, they are significant, especially in their placing. In the prophecies regarding the birth and meaning of Jesus, Matthew 1:23 refers to him as “Emmanuel—God with us.” The final verse of the gospel, Matthew 28:20, concluding not only the stories but also the agenda for the church, has the Risen Christ say, “I am with you always, to the end of time.” It is common to see these two as linked. When we ask what Matthew had in mind as the meaning of “being with us” we find the answer in chapter 18 where verse 20 says, “Where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there in the midst of them.” It is this saying that I now intend to explore.

Perhaps the first thing to be noticed about it is that it is a promise to a community, even one as small as two, not to an individual. In this most ecclesiological of the gospels, the Presence is a feature of the church. The second thing to notice is the context. Although it is common to interpret verse 20 as having to do with worship, it is apparent that the whole chapter is about community-building, and that the immediate context of the verse is decision-making. I suggest that this chapter is more relevant to the Meeting for Church Affairs than the Meeting for Worship. In doing so, I shall look at building up the community, at discipline, and at making decisions.

BUILDING UP THE COMMUNITY

Matthew puts the whole chapter in the context of the Kingdom. He is discussing the eschatological community, which is continuously aware of the spiritual significance of what it does, and which expects both the blessing and the judgment of heaven (see, for example, vv. 4, 10, 14, 35). He begins with the child set in the midst’ (v. 2) and the comment (v. 5) that “Whoever receives such a child in my name receives me.” We should note then that the child in the community represents Christ and is as much a vehicle of the Presence as the gathering of two or three. The intervening material (vv. 3-4) turns the values of the world upside down, making entry into the Kingdom conditional on being childlike, which is here defined as *tapeinosei* to “humble” or “lower” oneself. In addition, there is a duty to “the little ones,” not to cause them to stumble (v. 6), not to despise them (v. 10), and, by implication, to carry out the Father’s will (one of Matthew’s favorite themes) by ensuring that not one of those who stray is lost (vv. 12-14). There is some debate as to whether “little

ones” means “children” though this seems apparent from the context, or whether it also means other humble members of the community. For our purposes there is no objection to taking a wider meaning. There is a need to care for the spiritual welfare of each member of the community, and especially for those who are lost and have strayed.

The chapter concludes with Peter asking about forgiveness (vv. 21-35) and a great parable that links forgiveness with judgment. The church is instructed to be a community of forgiveness, forgiving an uncounted number of times (seventy times seven). There is an echo in this parable of Matthew’s version of the Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:12), “Forgive us our debts as we have already forgiven our debtors.”

The community then is built on humility, care for one another, and forgiveness. The greater the member, the more they are expected to put the welfare of others before their own welfare. Throughout there is a consciousness of the “heavenly Father.” There is a parallel to 18:4 at 23:11-12, and this section of chapter 23 from verse 8 to verse 12 fills out further the nature of the community as one of which the leadership, “Father,” “Rabbi,” and “Teacher,” is in heaven and not in human hands. The human relationships are those of brothers and sisters, relationships of equality to each other and subordination to God. The human leadership, “the greatest in the kingdom” (v. 1), is that of the servant, of the one who gives up the claim to equality. As Minear points out, “the ladder of advancement goes down rather than up.”

DISCIPLINE

The community is also to be disciplined, but Matthew places self-discipline first (18:8-9). In highly-colored and I hope metaphorical language, he advocates rooting out the causes of one’s own faults. For the sins of the brother or sister the procedure is much more gentle, careful, and aimed at winning back the lost (18:15-17). George Fox took his view of dealing with transgression directly from this chapter; it became part of the discipline of London Yearly Meeting; and still survives in part in *Quaker Faith and Practice* at 12.17 and 20.70. We are less inclined to bring each other’s faults to the Meeting than the seventeenth-century Friends; perhaps we rely on our elders and overseers in “watching over one another for good.”

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We have to be careful in the interpretation of verse 17—if they will not listen to the Meeting, then let them be to you “as a gentile or a tax-collector.” This must be seen in the context of the gospel’s insistence on not judging each other (Matthew 7:1ff; 13:24-30 and 36-43). Judgment is God’s business; and this God is the one who wills that not one of the little ones be lost (18:14). On the contrary, the lost are to be sought for and welcomed back (vv. 12-13). So to regard someone as a gentile or a tax-collector is not to be seen as judgment but as recognition. It is recognition of a spiritual state. The person is not excluded from the community when it worships but becomes one of those to whom the kingdom is to be offered again.

We remember that in this gospel discipleship is to be offered to all the nations (28:19), that gentiles are examples of faith (8:10-11; 15:28), and that the judgment on the gentiles will be on their loving service of others (25:31ff.). A “gentile” then should perhaps be seen as one on whom lesser demands are made. Just as the gentiles were and are excused the full rigors of the Jewish law but are expected to keep the basic laws for humanity, so a “gentile” to the Meeting should be encouraged in faith and love. The same may be said of the “tax-collectors.” As Jews who collaborated with the occupying power and operated its systems, tax-collectors are seen by Jesus as the “sick” (9:9-13), as those he has come to call and to heal. They will also be seen (21:31) as examples of those who will enter the kingdom before the religious leaders because of their acceptance of the right way to live. To follow Jesus, the tax-collector Matthew has to leave his counting table, as Peter leaves his fishing (4:20) and as all disciples must renounce themselves and their lives (16:24-26). Those seen as tax-collectors by the Meeting are those who need help to effect a change in their lives, a change that will enable them to become disciples.

However, the implication of this chapter is that, in both cases, by refusing the discipline of the Meeting, they also exclude themselves from the responsibility for decision-making. Discipline and decision-making go together. The discipline can only be exercised by those who accept it for themselves. This was clearly understood in Friends’ early practice, in the use of disownment. For example, a yearly meeting minute of 1744 (London Yearly Meeting, *Extracts from Minutes and Advices*, published 1802, p. 70) referring to those who marry by the priest, says, “they shall be dealt with in a spirit of Christian love and tenderness, agreeably to our known discipline; and that after the

commission of such offence, their collection shall not be received, nor shall they be relieved in the manner of poor Friends, nor be admitted to sit in meetings of discipline, until they be restored into unity with the monthly meeting....” Those who “walked disorderly” were dealt with in love and tenderness, were welcome to worship, and their restoration was earnestly sought, but they were not in that unity of faith and practice that enabled them to attend the Meetings for Church Affairs. This means that the “you” who are addressed in 18:18-20 are not necessarily the whole of the community but are its gathered heart. Individually they are the faithful disciples whose lives and actions show their commitment; together they are strengthening and caring for the flock. They already have a unity of purpose for they are gathered around their Lord’s teaching.

DECISION-MAKING

Matthew envisages decisions as taken in a gathered community, where love and forgiveness, humility and mercy are practiced. There is an interplay between the community and heaven whereby unity reached on earth is mirrored in heaven. A quite extraordinary authority is given to the gathered Meeting when it reaches unity. The understanding of this has to begin with a focus on “in my name” (v. 20).

...“IN MY NAME”...

The gospel is quite clear that “in my name” has nothing to do with such superficialities as words or formulae, or even with accepted religious practice. In 7:21-23, entry into the kingdom does not depend on calling Jesus “Lord,” on prophesying in his name, or on casting out demons in his name; it depends rather on doing the will of God. From the context we can see that this includes acting on Jesus’ teaching (7:24) and bearing good fruit (7:20). Since these words form the climax to the Sermon on the Mount, all of the teaching there is an example of what is meant. So the first meaning of being gathered in the name is being faithful to the practice of the teaching, living the lives, individually and together, that bear good fruit. I suggest that this meaning is to be read in 18:5. The child is to be received into a practicing community, one that is united in its understanding of the teaching and of the significance of the child.

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The second meaning of “in my name” in this gospel is connected with the following of Jesus in suffering. Just as for Jesus to do the will of God is to accept death (26:39, 42), so for his disciples, “you will be hated by all nations because of my name.” (24:9) As a community which is prepared to be persecuted and which has willingly handed over its hold on life, the meeting should have a true sense of reality, being separated from pride and anger, from power and possessions, and from all the elements of this world that will distort its judgment. I consider this the true meaning of baptism—to enter into the death of Jesus so fully that one’s life is surrendered to God, and received back to be lived in a new way as a sign and presence of the kingdom. Early Friends understood this in terms of “being under” or “keeping to” the cross. As, for example, in the written epistle of LYM 1675 (*Extracts of Minutes and Advices*, p. 20), which says: “It is much upon us to put friends in remembrance to keep to the ancient testimony, truth begat in our hearts in the beginning against the spirit of this world; for which many have suffered cruel mockings, beating, stoning...that the cross of Christ in all things may be kept to, which preserves friends blameless, and honors the Lord’s name and truth in the earth.”

This is the “turning round and becoming like children” of verse 3, and perhaps as such becoming those through whom Jesus is received (v. 5). It is in this context of being a community that does the will of God and is prepared to suffer for it that the third meaning of in my name comes into force. For it is only such a community, one that knows the nature of Jesus and so is able to use his name, that will be able to recognize when he is present. In this third meaning, Jesus is present with authority. He has authority over his community which keeps his commandments. But also, if we now return to the close of the gospel, 28:16-20, he has “full authority in heaven and on earth.” It is this that enables him to give both his commands and his assurance. He gives them to a community which is in worship; he is not hampered by some of them having doubts about his risen presence. In 18:18-20 Jesus gives some of that authority to his church. It is given as two specific powers, the power to “bind and loose” and the power to have requests granted. The use of *amen* (truly) in verse 18 gives emphasis and weight.

...“TO BIND AND TO LOOSE”...

We turn then to look at the meaning of the power to “bind and loose.” There are four strands of meaning. The first comes from the context of the previous verse. This power immediately follows on the decision to be made about discipline, about who is to be “treated as a gentile or tax-collector.” So the most obvious meaning is the power to decide about individuals and their behavior, and to decide about membership, the relation of individuals to the community.

The second meaning comes from looking at the use of a close parallel in John 20:23. Here the Risen Christ, present in his community, gives his followers the gift of the Holy Spirit and with it the power to forgive sins, and to decide which are and which are not to be forgiven. That this meaning can be read here in Matthew is evident from the succeeding material where Peter immediately follows the giving of these powers with his question about how often someone is to be forgiven.

The third meaning is standard in commentaries and refers to the powers of rabbis in the first century Jewish tradition. The power to bind and loose was the power to interpret the law (*halakhal*) especially with regard to behavior. It is thus a power to interpret the teaching of Jesus especially in ethical matters. This gives the church the authority to make decisions on new issues which Jesus in his time did not or could not have considered.

The fourth meaning comes from the parallel passage in Matthew 16:19. In that verse the powers that are here given to the gathered community are first given to Peter; binding and loosing are connected with the keys of the kingdom. At first sight this may appear to be a matter of “gatekeeping,” but there is a most interesting suggestion from M. Crosby (*House of Disciples*, Orbis, 1988) who sees the metaphor of a house being used by Matthew for the church; in this context, to hold the keys means to have authority. If we think of the arrangements in first-century households, the keys gave access to the stores and resources; binding and loosing means being able to decide which resources are to be used for which purposes. We do not have to choose between these meanings. We can use them all. The gathered meeting has the authority to decide on membership, on forgiveness, on ethics and resources, and to take the lead on these matters. When it has decided, then heaven will accept the decision.

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But there might be other matters about which the meeting needs a decision. These are covered by verse 19. If the community is agreed on any matter (*pragma* is deed, action, question, matter of consequence) and makes a request about it, then that request will be granted. In a reciprocal balance, the community that is under authority, that is seeking the will of God and is living in obedience to Jesus' teaching and example, is given the authority to find unity on any matter at all, and to decide it knowing that God will then unite with the decision of the meeting!

SOME IMPLICATIONS

This can help us find an answer to the question about whether a gathered meeting for business can make a wrong decision. We know in our own experience that sometimes meetings make decisions on which they reach unity and which they later feel it right to change. We also know that different meetings can reach differing decisions on the same matter. If we put this into the context of seeking the unchangeable will of God, we have a problem of either appearing to regard God as inconsistent, or of regarding one of the decisions as mistaken. The only apparent alternative is to see God's will on the matter as being temporary. However, with the exegesis that I have suggested we can see that God's unchanging will relates to the authority given to the life and teaching of Jesus, and the authority given to the obedient community where the Risen Christ is present. In the exercise of its authority a meeting, because it is human, may make mistaken or temporary decisions, but it is still God's will that these decisions be made, and God supports them and works with them whilst they last. Nevertheless, this authority must be hedged around with the conditions under which it is given. The authority is withdrawn from a meeting that is not living by the teaching of Jesus, or from decisions that contradict it. The meeting's authority is always dependent on its relationship with the Risen Christ, and thus on its decisions being made in the worship of a humble, loving, and reconciled community. So where we disagree with another meeting or another church we may have to recognize that a decision was rightly reached. This also enables us to look at our history and to contemplate changes we have made or will make without needing to say that because one decision is right another must be wrong.

...“TWO OR THREE”...

Finally we have to consider the significance of “two or three.” We have already noted it as indicating that the community does not have to be large. For the larger meeting we have to be careful to remember that the decision-making authority is given to the whole community. It will not be a valid interpretation at least for Quakers if that power is given over to just two or three members. However, there are some useful implications: first, small committees preparing business for the meeting can if they meet worshipfully make decisions delegated to them by the meeting; second, it shows the value of the Quaker tradition of working in pairs, especially in the accompanying of a traveling minister by another Friend, for two together can make decisions with a certainty one alone cannot have. I also like to think that the provision for two or three to be truly gathered might mean it is actually possible to make our decisions in the normal human state of our meetings because of the presence of a small number of truly faithful Friends.

CONCLUSIONS

Matthew 18 is not the only way of viewing or describing the presence of God amongst us; much more could be said drawing on other biblical passages. I hope that enough has been included here to indicate that our Quaker tradition has drawn on this chapter, and that this chapter is helpful in underpinning much of our gospel-order, especially in our decision-making. When we return to the concept of *koinonia* we can see that Matthew explicates it specifically in dealing with the relationship between the presence of the Risen Christ indwelling in the meeting and the spiritual lives and praxis of the meeting. This is shown in the relationships of the members to each other and their faithfulness in carrying out God’s will through following the teaching and example of Jesus. It is when the meeting is faithful and obedient, loving, forgiving and humble, that it is given the authority to make decisions. I have concentrated on such an apparently narrow area because I see it as a key to many other areas. Issues such as the unity of the church worldwide, diversity and unity amongst Friends, the relationship of Friends and the churches to other religions, contemporary ethical problems on a local or a global scale, all can be approached from the standpoint outlined here, that

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the Christ-like and Christ-filled community is able to decide. As I write this I shudder because of the possibility of misinterpretation by people who want to take power for themselves and their own opinions. That is why this interpretation has to be a whole package. The power to decide depends on being a community which shows in its life that Christ is in it. Its decision-making, like the chapter, begins in humility and ends in mercy.

I conclude, however, by returning to Quaker process. It has seemed to me that in our business method we have a tool through which we potentially can meet the demands of this chapter. In using it to build up our loving, disciplined, and authoritative community, we can demonstrate *koinonia*—of God with us, of us with each other, and through our decisions the *koinonia* of all humanity and all creation. When we know the Presence in our midst, we are able to play a part in making it a Real Presence for the whole world.