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Responses to Issue #86

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RESPONSES TO ISSUE #86

MEMBERSHIP CRITERIA

R. W. TUCKER

QUAKER RELIGIOUS THOUGHT #86 contains, in Rupert Read's article called "The Nature and Centrality of the Concept of 'Practice' Among Quakers," a Wonder Worth Remarking Upon. It also contains, in Grant Thompson's article called "A Perspective on Friends Membership," an earnest and closely reasoned essay that cries out for serious rebuttal.

First, the Wonder. For several decades I have been pointing out whenever I got the opportunity that the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting 1955 reunion Discipline, and its successors, and corresponding statements from other liberal Yearly Meetings, establish liberal Friends as the most liturgical of all Christian bodies. We make the Anglicans look like pikers. These Books of Discipline extol the form of silent worship, but weasel on the central questions, worship of Whom, with what understanding, to what ends. Unity in these Yearly Meetings is based on agreement on a form of worship, and agreement on a series of propositions about social change which, in the absence of doctrinal clarity (or indeed, of any doctrine at all), become little more than political propositions.

I share the political opinions and I like the form of worship, so for a long time I put up with the consequent collapse of ministry and the decay of worship into discussion groupism, book reports, group therapy, animistic wonderments about nature, and of course and always, politics. And all that talk, talk, talk about the virtues of silence.

The last straw, for me, was a confrontation with the decay of traditional ethical values. An issue of arguable adultery arose in my (formerly Conservative) Meeting in connection with a proposed marriage. I wanted the Meeting to consider it, and I was ready to be persuaded that in this instance it was not adultery (it really was arguable). What I heard was a refusal even to think about the question I raised. Friends who were admirable in their ethical sensitivity to issues of peace and

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social justice (in several cases, famous for it) were simply obtuse about sexual misbehavior. Thereafter I discovered I could not worship with these Friends, because I no longer respected them. They did not practice Christianity, they practiced a splinter religion of their own invention, working hard at selected excerpts from our Lord's teachings and ignoring others.

I am reliably told that in evangelical Meetings one finds the opposite tendency, to be ethically sensitive about issues such as adultery but obtuse about peace and social justice. My wish is to belong to the whole church, which tries to do all the things Jesus said to do.

The Wonder, one that I never expected to see, is that at last someone who comes from the liberal tradition of liturgical/political unity, and is happy in this environment, has actually burst into print defending liturgicalism and politics as a basis for unity. Rupert Read deserves an award for honesty.

He also is to be commended for finding a theological argument for defending a system that led me, and others I could name, to resign our memberships because we saw it as leading only to invincible deterioration. His theological argument is based on a misreading of Thomas Kelly (an evangelical Christian), but then, the Vedantists like Kelly, too. Read embraces the notion that Friends are mystics, in blissful ignorance that this explanation of us has been exploded. (See many early issues of QRT.) If you buy into that way of understanding us, then his argument makes sense. If you don't, he at least helps you grasp what's going on. His little essay is must reading for any Christian lost among liberal Friends.

GRANT THOMPSON HAS CLARIFIED my thinking wonderfully, by taking up the question of things that Jesus neither said nor implied but that Friends require. I am grateful to him even while I disagree with him.

He writes: "Ideally, the set of requirements for membership in Friends meetings (a) should, (b) should not include elements (hereafter referred to as 'extra requirements') in addition to the set of requirements for membership in the Church Universal." He comes down on the side of should...pointing out that "if all Christians everywhere are not automatically members of all Friends meetings, then some extra requirements must be operative...." Then he goes on to the specific instance of the requirement of total abstinence as an example of such an "extra requirement."

All this seems to make perfect sense at first reading. At second reading, it may strike others, as it did me, as hopelessly sectarian.

The progenitors of our faith did not think of themselves as setting up extra requirements for a sect within a wider Church Universal. They thought they were reestablishing the One True Church. Today that sounds numerically implausible, and rather narrow, but are we to avoid narrowness by favoring a view of ourselves as one of many sects within a wider Christian church? I have no difficulty at all hearing George Fox denounce this as a pernicious and abominable heresy, together with all Friends up to at least 1800, many Friends up to 1900, some Friends today.

Early Friends thought of themselves as reestablishing the church on its true Gospel foundation, and calling all who had gone out into apostacy to return to Christ. They read the Bible and saw in the relationship between Jesus and his disciples a total model for what every Christian community should be. They announced that Christ had come to teach his people himself, and they determined to be a hearing and obeying community of discipleship on the Gospel model.

Our “sectarian” difference is that we were, and perhaps still are, more consistent about it than most Christians. Jesus said not to take oaths, so we say the same thing. Jesus said not to fight, so we say that, too. Jesus said to pray in private, not in public to be seen of people—this one gets ignored a lot, but I am not the only Friend horrified these days by Friends and others who organize public “prayer vigils” in clear contravention of this command. It’s one thing to go prayerfully to a demonstration (how else would a Christian go?), it’s something quite different to go demonstratively to prayer.

In fact, about the only thing I can think of that Jesus said to do and that Friends ignored and still ignore is the commandment to confess our sins one to another and then grant absolution. This one seems not to have been taken seriously by discipleship groups since the Celtic Church, and of course it had a bad odor among early Protestants, because the Papists took it up and turned it into an instrument of priestly tyranny. Yet there are instances when the earliest Friends apparently acted on this commandment, too.

The commandments of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount and elsewhere in the Gospels are often difficult and sometimes extremely difficult. For instance, the matter of “lust in the heart” is to me one of the hardest strictures in the entire Bible, and I deeply sympathized

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with former President Carter when he said he was a sinner because he had lusted in his heart. A churchgoing nation jeered at this, which tells us the nation no longer knows the Bible.

The position of Friends, then, was that we were a people who, though we might fall short, did not water down all the difficult things the Lord requires of us and label them “counsels of perfection” and teach that we did not really need to do them. Our message to other Christians was, “live up to your profession.” Friends historically put the most rigorous possible interpretation on what Grant Thompson calls “the set of requirements for membership in the Church Universal.”

Our history since the beginning has been mainly a history of thinking through the implications of that set of requirements ever more rigorously as time and events have presented us with new challenges. Slavery is not denounced in the Bible, but it was clear to Friends that the teachings and example of Jesus are not consistent with any form of using other people as if they were things, and it was clear that slavery was an outrageous instance of doing just that. Today I for one believe the same principle requires Christians to question many aspects of our capitalist economic order.

It follows that in terms of our historic interpretation of the set of requirements to be a Christian at all, “extra requirements” are more than we can reasonably demand of ourselves or others—except, of course, mechanical requirements having to do with the forms of meetings for business, the paying of our share of costs, service on committees, and so on. Grant Thompson mentions these, but I would not count them under “extra requirements.”

The doctrine of *sola scriptura* fails abstractly because it has no Scriptural basis. But it does have a commonsensical basis: It keeps us from running out after strange isms. “Gospel Christianity Revived” is frequently extremely difficult, and we need to work hard at supporting one another in obeying all the things our Lord commanded, and this is quite enough to keep us very busy. We do not need to go out and look for other things to take positions on.

GRANT THOMPSON ARGUES that we may properly set up requirements that go beyond Scripture, and that this is why we are a sect and not the church. I would argue, on the contrary, that because we are the church and not a sect, we are not required to do things that cannot be said to be in or plainly implied in the Gospels.

Grant Thompson cites the example of the advice for total abstinence from liquor as an “extra requirement.” I agree that total abstinence is not at all warranted by the Gospels either directly or by implication; if

anything, wine is endorsed. I conclude that it therefore cannot properly be made a matter of Discipline; it just is not in the same league with adultery, or going to war, or even with nonmembership in secret societies.

I feel about this so strongly that it is now keeping me out of membership. When I resigned from Arch Street Meeting, I immediately applied as a new Friend to Rockingham Meeting (Ohio YM, Conservative). My application foundered on that Yearly Meeting's total abstinence clause. I'm about as abstinent as any nonabstainer I know, among other things for health reasons, but I felt a stop at assenting to this clause in the Ohio Book of Discipline.

I have now spent several years torn between two opinions. One is my agreement with Rockingham Friends that if something is in the Discipline, one ought to do it. The other is, that when someone applies for membership who enthusiastically agrees with everything the Meeting stands for, especially the things that set it apart from other kinds of Meetings, it is fantastically absurd to keep him out of membership over so petty an issue as this one. I am grateful to Grant Thompson for helping me see clearly that my problem here is not total abstinence as such. It is my unwillingness to belong to a body that adopts a position that defines it as a sect. I left liberal Friends because I want to belong to the whole church and not any splinter of it; this same urge is now separating me from Conservative Friends. Is there no real Meeting anywhere anymore?

TOWARDS RENEWAL WITHIN THE RELIGIOUS SOCIETY

OF FRIENDS

BILL SAMUEL

I APPRECIATE THE INVITATION from the editor to respond to Grant Thompson's paper, "A Perspective on Friends Membership" (QRT #86). I will draw upon that and other articles in the same issue in a discussion of Christian renewal within the Religious Society of Friends, with a particular focus on Christians in meetings where Friends lack a corporate commitment to Christ. The second series of choices offered by Thompson is:

2. Ideally, the set of requirements for membership in Friends meetings (a) should, (b) should not include, as a subset, the set of requirements for membership in the Church Universal (i.e., the Body of Christ).¹

Thompson restricts his discussion to the first option. While I agree with Thompson that this should be the case, it is not in the Monthly Meeting (Adelphi) and Yearly Meeting (Baltimore) in which I hold my formal membership in Friends. For those of us for whom being part of the Body of Christ is central to our identity, this presents major problems.

Rupert Read suggests, in "On the Nature and Centrality of the Concept of 'Practice' Among Quakers," that it is practice rather than faith that binds Friends together. Furthermore, he maintains that it is not even important that Friends claim faith in God.² John Miller responds to Read, in "On Faith," that "the biblical tradition and its special revelatory formations in the tradition of Fox, Fry, Barclay, Gurney, Jones, and many others"³ are essential to the meaning of the practice. I agree. In establishing the practices of Friends, Fox sought to serve the faith:

This order of the gospel, which is not of man nor by man, but from Christ, the heavenly man, is above all the orders of men in the fall, whether Jews, Gentiles, or apostate Christians, and will remain when they are gone. For the power of God, which is the everlasting gospel, was before the devil was, and will be and remain forever. And as the everlasting gospel was preached in the

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apostles' days to all nations, that all nations might, through the divine power which brings life and immortality to light, come into the order of it, so now the everlasting gospel is to be, and is, preached again, as John the divine foresaw it should be, to all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people.⁴

The practice has no meaning in itself. Its meaning comes from its service in bringing people to Christ, and keeping them faithful to Christ. Early Friends sought to live in gospel order, which is an order established by God.

Any unity in practice that is not based upon a unity in faith is not the unity of which our forebears spoke. Furthermore, it can become an empty formalism, just as much as the ritual practices the early Friends so vigorously denounced. Sometimes, in meetings such as the one in which I hold membership, it seems that the only thing that unites people is that they appreciate the form of the meeting for worship. There is no unity on the substance of worship or, in truth, even agreement that what Friends do in the meeting should be worship. While many in the meeting may be engaging in true worship, for the meeting as a collective body it has become a ritual or, worse, idolatry.

The Situation of Christians in “Universalist” Meetings

As I have already suggested, those of us who hold that Christ Jesus needs to be at the head of our meetings can have great difficulty when we find ourselves in meetings in which there is no unity on that principle. Similarly, Christian⁵ meetings can have great difficulty in yearly meetings that are not united on faith in Christ.

Many Friends who have not accepted Christ welcome the presence of committed Christians in their meetings. They are distressed when Christians are uncomfortable in these meetings. But when one's heartfelt desire is to be part of the Body of Christ, there can be an emptiness in our heterodox meetings no matter how much one is loved and supported.

Christians in this situation react in different ways. Sometimes, they try to go along with the prevailing approach in the meeting, despite personal uneasiness with it. They may concentrate their attention on warm feelings between themselves and others in the meeting, and on shared commitments to peace, social justice, etc. But usually there re-

mains a hunger for fellowship with other believers which is not satisfied in the meeting community.

Others spend a lot of energy contesting with their meetings, trying to reshape them into communities more nearly resembling their personal visions of faithfulness. Such efforts can come into serious conflict with those who have come into these meetings attracted by the lack of the faith commitments and practices for which the Christians yearn. This path often leads to great frustration and even depression.

I find that an increasing number of Christians drawn to the particular insights of Friends are leaving their meetings, or never becoming fully involved in them. Some lack any regular corporate worship experience, and find their spiritual journeys to be lonely ones with little human companionship. Others become active in other Christian faith communities, but continue to yearn for companionship with those with peculiarly Quaker understandings of the Christian message.

For those in monthly meetings in which there is general unity on the Christian faith, but where such unity does not exist in the yearly meeting, the situation for individuals is different. These Friends may indeed have the kind of local faith community they need, if the meeting's Christian faith is vital (unfortunately, there are meetings that profess faith in Christ, but that are spiritually moribund). Some of the same dynamics I have noted for Christians in other meetings may still exist for these individuals in relation to their yearly meeting, but they also have the option of simply paying little attention to the yearly meeting.

For a monthly meeting as a corporate body, the dynamics of its relationship to the yearly meeting tend to fall into patterns very similar to those of individuals in monthly meetings that lack a Christian commitment. A Christian meeting will yearn for Christian fellowship with other meetings on the basis of a shared commitment to Jesus Christ.

Some Christian meetings may be active in their yearly meetings, participating in the same way as other meetings. There may be no obvious conflict or uneasiness. But these meetings need to be careful that they do not compromise their Christian witness. A number of Christian meetings have been engaged in frequent struggle with others in their yearly meetings, often around revisions to Faith and Practice or on issues on which some claim new revelation that appears to contradict traditional Christian understandings. They sometimes appear to be continually fighting rearguard actions, attempting to stave off tides of change that are moving in directions increasingly inconsistent

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with their Christian faith tradition. As meetings, they tend to become discouraged, frustrated, and tired.

Some Christian meetings have largely withdrawn from the struggle, forwarding their share of funds for the yearly meeting's support but having little active involvement. In my yearly meeting, there are such monthly meetings that are almost invisible at the yearly meeting level. Under that quiet surface, there may be deep feelings of hurt and resentment about being part of a body about which they have serious reservations. At best, there is a sense of resignation about the direction of the yearly meeting.

A few Christian meetings have gone further in their withdrawal from the heterodox larger bodies. Clintondale Friends Church last year withdrew from New York Yearly Meeting. Swansea Meeting is withholding support from New England Yearly Meeting, while not withdrawing its membership.

This review of some of the responses of individuals and meetings demonstrates the very real dilemmas they face. All too often, Christians are bitter, discouraged, cynical, frustrated, resigned, and/or exhausted from conflicts.

The Call of Christ

Are these negative feelings the proper mark of Christ's people? Of course not. It is all too easy to let ourselves be overcome by the things that disappoint us. But if we believe in the gospel, we know that Christ has won the victory and we should not be discouraged. Jesus' Great Commission and the vision of Fox of a great people to be gathered should still motivate Christians. There is a broken world around us, full of people who need to hear the Good News of their Savior, not the frustrations of people immobilized by denominational struggles.

There must be a realignment. I am not speaking of a structural change in the Religious Society of Friends, although that may come about. The realignment of which I speak is to come into alignment with the cause of Christ in this world. Christians must move from reaction to the initiatives of those who don't share our faith, to action to implement the call of Christ in our individual and corporate lives. That others don't hear the call, or actively resist the call, is not a reason for us to give anything but our all for our Lord and Savior.

SIGNS OF RENEWAL

There are indeed signs of a stirring among Christian Friends who may seem isolated in the Quaker environment in which they find themselves. There are many striving to align themselves with Christ, increasingly joining with others for mutual encouragement and nurture. In recent years, local and regional fellowships of believers have sprung up in many parts of liberal Quakerism. From Maryland to California, from Britain to Chicago, Christians are gathering periodically to worship together, to pray together, to nurture each other's faithfulness. There are no formal ties among these groups, but there are many connections made. Ohio Yearly Meeting (Conservative) has played an important role in nurturing a number of these fellowships through visits, correspondence, and larger gatherings.

What are the fruits of these movements to gather together in the name of Jesus? I know best from several years of experience of Christians in the Baltimore Yearly Meeting area meeting together. I hear similar reports from other areas.

Christians become bolder in proclaiming our faith. With the support of others, Friends "come out of the closet" and speak openly of their faith, and are less inclined to recast their message in terms deemed comfortable to a mixed group of listeners. Initially, Christians often do this with a lot of residual fear of how others will react. More often than not, we find our meetings respond more positively to authentic messages which are unambiguously Christian than they have to our self-filtered messages of prior years which had lost their power in the speaker's efforts to be inoffensive.

There may be noticeable changes in the atmosphere of monthly meetings. Where before there may have been a distinct sense that messages referring to Jesus or the Bible were not very welcome, such messages may become common and accepted. Bible study groups may begin, and adult education opportunities may focus on our Friends heritage without shrinking from its Christian content.

Friends revitalized through Christian fellowship may bring that energy into yearly meeting work. In Baltimore Yearly Meeting, Friends involved in the informal Christian fellowship network have played key roles in furthering the Spiritual Formation Program and other initiatives of the Committee on Nurture and Recognition of Ministry. While such programs are not presented as explicitly Christian, and involve a

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wide range of Friends, their character is deeply affected by the Christian commitment some of the leadership brings to them.

Christian Renewal in Perspective

The Christian renewal movement that I see among Friends (and there are signs of renewal in other parts of Quakerism than those I have concentrated upon here) is not an isolated phenomenon. The fresh winds of the spirit are blowing across the body of Christ. They are reflected in denominational renewal movements, parachurch movements, and the growth of nondenominational churches. In the limited contacts I have had with renewal movements centered in other denominations, I see certain characteristics appearing repeatedly:

- They call for a return to the spirit and vision of the early leaders of the denomination.
- They express kinship with other parts of the Body of Christ, finding spiritual companionship in renewal movements in other Christian bodies and in parachurch organizations.
- They are open to the outpourings of the Holy Spirit that may be manifested in ways that are not typical of their particular tradition.
- They see the need to cross racial and ethnic lines in unifying the Body of Christ, although at the same time they may oppose what they see as copying of secular affirmative action models.
- They find nourishment in meeting together.
- They include congregations as well as individuals. I recognize that I am bringing forth the best in these movements. It is undeniable that many “renewal” efforts within denominations also include those who are fighting for the past, rather than being infused with the Spirit’s continued presence today. But to the extent that such efforts represent a genuine movement of the Holy Spirit among the people of God, they may be instructive for Friends.

The Future of Christian Renewal Among Friends

To what are Christians within Friends, particularly within the parts of our Society that do not claim to be exclusively Christian, called? In part, we are called to a continuation of the efforts I highlighted earlier in this article. We are not called to a carefully worked out long-range

strategy developed through conventional human means. But I believe the Holy Spirit is calling us in certain directions to which we need to be prayerfully attentive.

We need to place greater emphasis on the positive task of discerning and following the leadings of Christ, and become less concerned about struggling with those following different paths in the name of Friends. This is a spiritual realignment. While the Lord's work certainly includes unmasking the false prophets and the inroads of the Deceiver, we must also be aware that we too easily become distracted by church politics from our central focus on following Christ.

We need to transcend the divisions in Friends that have kept brothers and sisters in Christ apart. Within Friends, this means fostering unity across the differences in styles of worship. We must recognize that our Lord's call to us to "worship in spirit and truth"⁶ was not a call to a particular form of worship, or absence of form. We need to make more connections between the Spirit's work of renewal among unprogrammed Friends and that same work among pastoral Friends. While I have emphasized here the movement within one part of our Society, there is clearly renewal occurring in other parts of our Society, and notably within the organizational structure of the largest branch of Friends, Friends United Meeting. We need to nurture one another in faithfulness to our Lord, and benefit from cross-fertilization among Friends from different Quaker backgrounds. If we do not feel our unity in Christ, we are not being faithful.

We need to place ourselves firmly within the larger Body of Christ. While continuing to treasure the particular gifts and understandings of Friends, we need to be more interested in humbly learning from other Christians than in pushing our distinctives on others. We need to join with Christians of many affiliations in renewing the Body of Christ and inviting others to join it.

We need to transcend racial, ethnic, economic, and cultural differences. It may be comfortable to sit in worship among people who look like us, are in similar economic circumstances, and have similar backgrounds. But we are called to be faithful, not comfortable. Our Lord invites all to become members of God's family, and we must seek to better reflect the diversity in God's family at home as well as overseas. This won't be easy, but it will bring us closer to Christ. It may include changes in style of worship, singing, and prayer.

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We need to meet and pray together for mutual nurture, encouragement, and accountability. Such meetings should occur at several geographical levels. Especially in areas where yearly meetings do not have a corporate commitment to Christ, these meetings should sometimes include official representatives of Christian meetings as well as individuals. We need to be prepared to plan together ministries to which we are called corporately, as well as nurturing each other as individuals and local groups.

Our Lord is calling us. Are we ready to answer the call?

NOTES

1. *Quaker Religious Thought* #86, p. 22.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
4. *The Journal of George Fox*, edited with an introduction and notes by Rufus M. Jones (New York: Capricorn Books, 1963), p. 463. This quote is from Chapter XVII, "At the Work of Organizing," in which Fox describes his organizational work among Friends.
5. I use the term Christian to refer to those who believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, our Lord and Savior. I am aware that some Friends consider themselves Christian, but do not share such a belief. I do not include them when I refer to Christians in this article.
6. John 4:24.