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Wilmer A. Cooper

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Sponsored by the Quaker Theological Discussion Group

The purpose of the Quaker Theological Discussion Group is to explore the meaning and implications of our Quaker faith and religious experience through discussion and publication. This search for unity in the claim of truth upon us concerns both the content and the application of our faith.

Edited by Chris Downing

Address editorial correspondence to the editor, Department of Religion, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, N. J. 08903.

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Guest Editorial

AN EVALUATION OF THE ST. LOUIS FRIENDS CONFERENCE

Wilmer A. Cooper

October 5-7, 1970, one hundred and twenty-five Friends from twenty-four Yearly Meetings and Associations gathered in St. Louis to consider "The Future of Friends." The concern for this conference originated with an *ad hoc* committee of Friends who had attended the 1969 Congress on Evangelism in Minneapolis.

This was without question the most representative conference of American Friends ever gathered, not excepting the Richmond Conference of 1887, which did not include Hicksite and Wilburite Friends. The Friends World Conference at Guilford in 1967 was attended by all branches of Friends, but was not as fully represented by Yearly Meeting delegations as St. Louis. All but four of the smaller Yearly Meetings were present at St. Louis with up to five delegates, as well as representatives from the major associations of Friends, including Friends General Conference, Friends United Meeting, Evangelical Friends Alliance and Friends World Committee.

The conference was well planned and carried out. An opening address was given by Dr. Oswald Hoffman, a Lutheran evangelical spokesman, and toward the end of the conference another non-Friend observer, Pastor Gerhardt Nitz, shared in a helpful way what he saw and heard taking place in the sessions. Three major position papers were presented by Lorton Heusel of Friends United Meeting, Dean Freiday of Friends General Conference, and Everett Cattell of Evangelical Friends Alliance. These were followed by small group gatherings in which there was free and frank discussion. The meetings were interspersed with worship and prayer periods, both programmed and unprogrammed. The second day of the conference was devoted to plenary sessions where reports were given from the small groups and members were free to express concerns from the body of the meeting. There was a sense of the presence of the Spirit of Christ in our midst, and many felt led to share with one another in a candid and redemptive manner. The

general tone of the meetings was one of good will and a desire to understand and listen to one another, even though sharp differences were expressed.

Many who came to St. Louis with apprehension and even anxiety had the worst of their fears allayed. Others came with hopes that were not fulfilled. Many evangelicals were hopeful that more would be accomplished in terms of a new evangelical thrust among Friends in America. Some of them would hold that this calls for a realignment of Friends. In his address to the conference, Everett Cattell suggested one possible approach to this realignment in what he called a "symbiotic" relationship among Friends. This would allow for organic groupings of Friends (presumably two major ones) in which each would recognize the other's identity and would respect its freedom to develop its own style of religious life and witness. This would seem to be a "live and let live" approach, and yet at the same time encourage dialogue and functional interaction among all groups of Friends.

It is probably fair to say that liberal Friends, and in particular General Conference Friends, felt that the conference provided an important chance to get acquainted with evangelicals and their point of view, and that they appreciated the fellowship this offered even though it may have been strained at times.

In between these two polarities are many Friends United Meeting and Conservative Friends who want to have open lines of communication with both groups and who believe both give expression to elements of Quakerism which need to be heard and shared. Many of these Friends want to be a bridge between the two groups, and themselves believe deeply that creative interaction, yes, even creative tension, between the two can produce new vitality and a condition of renewed health in American Quakerism.

Very prominent in the discussion at St. Louis was the question about the Christ-centered nature of Quakerism. It was perhaps a surprise to some "western" Friends that so many "eastern" Friends accept a Christian view of Quakerism, even though it is clear that not all would formulate their experience of Christ, or the Light Within, in the same words. One had the feeling that some Friends who do not express their Quakerism in Christian terms were hesitant to share their views at this particular gathering of Friends.

Perhaps just as important for evangelical Friends is an emphasis upon Scripture as the source and test of religious authority. With many others there is an insistence upon the

primacy of the Spirit, or the Light Within. Thus this is an area where there are marked differences, if not disagreements.

In working through points of agreement and disagreement about theological belief, voices in the conference called for a re-examination of the historical roots of our Quaker faith and tradition. Friends need to rediscover what it means to be a Quaker within the context of our history. A Quakerism which becomes all things to all men hardly deserves to call itself Quaker.

There emerged in the meetings a vital concern that more Friends travel in the ministry and carry on intervisitation at a depth level among Friends. Even though doors may not always seem to be open to all Friends, at least more concerted efforts should be made in this direction.

It was also felt that careful exploration might open new channels and opportunities for "functional cooperation" among various groups of Friends, especially in the areas of mission, service and outreach. Apropos to this was a concern that when Friends make Quaker statements through the news media they extend the courtesy of informing, if not consulting with, other groups of Friends about public utterances. It was mentioned that many Friends have been "grieved" by the pronouncements of other Friends, which all too often come through to the public as speaking for all Friends.

Several important and concrete conclusions were reached and agreed to at the conference. There was a consensus that the three main papers read, together with the responses, should be published and shared with all Friends for serious study and reflection. Secondly, it was felt that the St. Louis dialogue should continue in some way. It was jointly concluded that the chairman of the conference should address a letter to all Yearly Meetings asking them to designate one or two persons to form a "Faith and Life Committee" to further these discussions at two levels: one at the level of theological (or faith) considerations, such as the centrality of Christ and biblical authority in Quakerism; and the other level having to do with structure and organization (life) as it relates to the affiliations and alignment of Friends in America. Thirdly, it was agreed that in order to facilitate the publication of the addresses and to see that the "faith and life dialogue" continues, Friends World Committee for Consultation (American Section) should be invited to help facilitate the implementation of these decisions. Although representatives from the Yearly Meetings were asked to bear special responsibility for reporting back to their Yearly Meetings and to encourage the consideration of these

concerns, still it was recognized that a central agency like FWCC could best service their implementation. FWCC could also serve as a central tax-free agency to receive funds for this purpose. It was suggested that the model of the National Friends Conferences on Race Relations which are called under the auspice of FWCC provides a pattern for the way in which "National Friends Faith and Life Dialogues" could function.

These decisions of the St. Louis Conference, reached by a "sense of the meeting," are by no means insignificant. Indeed they could form the basis for a new and important kind of cooperation and movement ahead for Friends in North America. It is only a beginning, but a beginning which, if implemented, could have far-reaching and significant results.

This still does not satisfy the concern that some have, to see a realignment of American Friends in order that each viable form of the Quaker witness can be relatively free to express itself and carry out its concerns without being hampered and thwarted by others in Quakerdom. Such a realignment might well have its advantages, but there are also deep-seated liabilities to such a course of action which must not be dismissed lightly in considering next steps for American Quakers.

There was a great sense of urgency at the St. Louis Conference that Friends must go beyond their "tribal quarrels" and conduct themselves as a "family of Friends." They must also get beyond preoccupation with themselves and get on with their mission to the world. Something of an apocalyptic note was sounded by Friends from both ends of the theological spectrum. An evangelical Friend said, "The world is going to hell and we need to do something about it," while a non-evangelical voiced the concern that "the ecological crisis will wipe us all out in ten years if we do not respond to this need."

It is this writer's judgment that the forthright manner in which Friends at St. Louis were able to speak to one another has been made possible by several important things which have happened in recent years. Of no small significance has been the creative dialogue and encounter which has taken place through the Quaker Theological Discussion Group and *Quaker Religious Thought*. Readers of *QRT* will be interested to know that many themes which have had high priority in *QTDG*, such as Lewis Benson's *Catholic Quakerism*, were reflected in some of the discussions at St. Louis, especially Lorton Heusel's paper. But the seedbed for the St. Louis Conference has been prepared in many other important ways. For example, there has been the interaction of students at Earlham School of Religion who range in the Quaker spectrum from Oregon to

Philadelphia. Another example is the conference of fifty Friends leaders on "Christ in Quaker Faith and Practice" held at ESR in 1967. Also of great importance have been the World Conferences of Friends, especially at Guilford in 1967, and the consultative and visitation work sponsored by the Friends World Committee. Of similar significance have been the conferences and activities of the Young Friends of North America. Then there is the new spiritual vigor and theological vitality of evangelical Friends who are to be credited with calling the St. Louis Conference. Of equal importance was the response of other Friends to the conference call, especially General Conference Friends. All of this is a sign of great encouragement for future encounter and dialogue among Friends.

It is further the judgment of this writer that the "prospering of Truth" among Friends can and will take place only out of the creative interaction and encounter which Friends can have at a deep spiritual and theological level. Certainly we are not after a syncretism of American Quakerism, but is it not possible that a new kind of Quaker dynamic and truth will emerge as Quaker evangelical concern for the centrality of Christ encounters the Quaker social action concern for the peace witness, for example; or as the evangelical concern for the biblical and historical witness interacts with the liberal concern for walking in the Light and asking, "What canst thou say?" Too long have Friends and others in the Christian tradition emasculated the Gospel by stressing one emphasis or another, or blunted their message and mission to the world by their spiritual and theological schizophrenia. Is not the power of the Gospel and the Quaker message to be recovered by the creative interaction of these polarities of life and thought in the Society of Friends? Only then can we hope for the Truth to prosper on our behalf, and only then can there be a calling forth of a viable Quaker ethos for the future.