

1-1-1981

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## Recommended Citation

Jackson, Nancy N. (1981) "A Call to Perfecting Our Faithfulness," *Quaker Religious Thought*: Vol. 51, Article 2.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt/vol51/iss1/2>

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# *A Call to Perfecting Our Faithfulness*

NANCY N. JACKSON

## SIN

“Sin” is an intimidating word. For many, both the word and the idea behind it have become unfashionable. They bring to mind judgment, self-righteousness, unforgiveness. We prefer to think in terms of illness, or even of “society’s guilt” in shaping us.

This may diminish self-condemnation and condemnation of others, but if taken too far can also diminish our sense of moral responsibility. It is not an either/or situation: we are not *just* the victims of our heredity or environment. We have some responsibility for the way we live our lives.

### THE BIBLICAL CONCEPT OF “SIN”

Though we may not like the word “sin” we know that something is basically awry with human nature and the world. Biblically, the concept we designate “sin” covers a multitude of related ideas: rebellion (against God and man), perversity, missing the mark, folly. Sin results in such attitudes and actions as pride, ego-centeredness, resentment, violence, deceit, squandered opportunities, callous indifference to others, to list only a few.

The Hebrews distinguished between unwitting sins done out of ignorance or impulse, and deliberate coldly calculated transgressions against God and man. The New Testament preserves the same distinction. Sometimes the word “sin” is reserved for calculated transgressions. For the unwitting sin, in the Old Testament, a sacrificial offering will atone. But this is insufficient for deliberate sin.

In either case the result of sin is a spreading hurt that needs cleansing. The prophets knew that for the sinner himself the consequences are destructive, notwithstanding outward

appearances: "...the wicked are like the tossing sea, for it cannot rest, and its waters toss up mire and dirt. There is no peace, says my God, for the wicked" (Isa. 57:20-21 RSV).

If we are tempted to excuse sin in ourselves or others by pointing to Jesus and the law of love, it is good to remember that Jesus never confused compassion toward the sinner with condoning the sin. He recognized the reality of sin, though he was always ready to forgive the sinner, especially the one who was conscious of his sin and his need for forgiveness. In the case of the woman caught in adultery, he first challenges the crowd to fellow-feeling and humility, commanding that the one without sin cast the first stone. Then he tells the woman, "go and sin no more" (John 8:11 KJV). He does not condemn her, but he does not tell her she has not sinned.

The insidious thing about sin is that if you think it doesn't exist, or that you are immune, your moral senses get dulled. Recently I heard a minister give a dramatic presentation of Lot's misadventures in Sodom, using a little poetic license but grasping an important truth. He, as Lot, tells how when he and his uncle Abraham go their separate ways, Abraham warns him against the evil of Sodom, and how Lot confidently assures Abraham, "Don't worry; you brought me up well; I'll be faithful to God and keep myself pure."

But out of curiosity, he decides to make one visit. When he approaches the city the atmosphere of evil is so palpable that it sickens him and his companions, and he swears never to go near the city again. But on the plains with his flock, he can hear the music and the laughter coming across the night air. He wonders if his perceptions have been exaggerated. Maybe the people aren't so *bad*. Maybe he can do something for the town. So he returns to Sodom, but instead of helping them, gradually accepts their standards. In the end Lot is so out of touch with God that when the mob clamors for Lot to release his two male guests for its pleasure, Lot offers to send out his two virgin daughters instead. He is right in trying to protect his guests from harm, but his stratagem for doing so is clearly sinful. He is fighting evil with evil.

In what areas are we like that? Do we accept frequent divorce, homosexuality, violence in television and real life,

terrorism, starvation, as just "the way things are"? Do we from laziness redefine sin as "old-fashioned" and declare that our principal duty is to ourselves? In the world and in our churches do we smile and remain poised in the name of tolerance, even when we know that something is seriously wrong?

In writing to the Ephesians, Paul admonishes them not to live the godless life of the Gentiles, who "have become callous and have given themselves up to licentiousness, greedy to practice every kind of uncleanness" (Eph. 4:19 RSV). Without God, they are calloused, petrified. The Greek word *porosis*, from *poros* which originally meant a stone harder than marble, came to refer to hardening of the joints, the callus formed where a bone has been reset and which is harder than bone. The insidious thing about sin is that gradually, almost imperceptibly, it petrifies one's capacity to feel right and wrong.

In the "Epistle to a Young Friend," Robert Burns points to this effect:

I waive the quantum o' the sin,  
The hazard of concealing;  
But och! it hardens a' within,  
And petrifies the feeling!

We may begin with enough decency to hide evil desires. In the end we don't care who sees them. The addict — no matter to what (money, drugs, power) — starts in secret but eventually comes out into the open. In this state he reaches a point where he does not care who gets hurt as long as he gets his way.

#### IS SIN INEVITABLE?

An impoverished level of existence has been accepted as normal. Worse, as Paul shows, sin enslaves the will, so that what began as a momentary impulse becomes a bad habit, and at last an overriding necessity. However, although "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23 RSV), commitment to Jesus Christ gives us the power to overcome. "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive" (1 Cor. 15:22 RSV).<sup>1</sup>

Once it has been admitted that sin exists but that Christ frees from the bondage of sin and gives new life, the question remains whether as redeemed Christians we will still sin. Here

the lines are drawn between those who say that sin is inevitable, for this life, and those who maintain that we can confidently hope through God's grace not to sin intentionally.

The Puritans, who held the first view, were said by early Friends to be "pleading for sin," while the Friends were accused of espousing sinless perfection. Passages in the Bible can be found to support each viewpoint and sometimes appear to be contradicting themselves in what they expect of a Christian. John, after speaking of the necessity of walking in the light to have fellowship with God, declares "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar, and his word is not in us" (1 John 1:8-10 NIV).

Even if we do not commit such obvious sins as displaying greed, bad temper, sexual violations, or theft, that is not enough. The word John uses here for sin is *hamartia*, missing the mark, failure to be what we ought to be and could be. There is always room for growth. We need to admit our shortcomings, and whether they seem serious or slight confess them to God, relying on his assurance that through Christ God will forgive us and cleanse us. Obviously, we should not take God's forgiveness and the inevitability of at least falling short as excuses for moral laxity. If we love God and Jesus Christ we will want to obey and imitate them. It may well be that the nearer we draw in fellowship to God, the keener will be our moral perception of failings for which we need his help.

In 1 John 3:9 TEV "Whoever is a child of God does not continue to sin, for God's very nature [KJV has "seed"] is in him; and because God is his Father, he cannot continue to sin." The point is that we now have a share in God's nature and therefore do not sin. Perhaps John here is stating the ideal, where before he was describing the actuality. But it is more likely that earlier John was speaking of particular sinful acts, whereas now he refers to a state of continual sinning. This is no absolute perfectionism, but a declaration that sin, if it occurs, should be the abnormal temporary defeat, not the normal everyday tenor of Christian life. We have a narrow

tightrope to walk. Perhaps in stressing one attitude and then the other John is trying to help his readers achieve balance. If we say we do not sin we become too complacent. If we say sin is inevitable, we can become morally lax.

Despite the polemical tone of his age, our most prominent early Quaker theologian, Robert Barclay, appears to have achieved such a balanced view of sin and perfection. Like John, Paul, and New Testament writers in general, Barclay assumes the basic sinfulness of man without God, but holds up the possibility of change and gradual conformity to God's nature through grace:

Just as iron is a hard and cold metal which can be warmed and softened by fire, the soul of man, even though it is prone to evil, can be worked upon and wrought by the grace of God moving in and upon it. If a man resists or if he departs from the grace of God, his heart can return to its former condition, just as iron rehardens when the fire is removed.<sup>3</sup>

Barclay is equally as impatient as John with morally lazy Christians who conclude that it is inevitable to sin daily. After referring to 1 John 3:9's statement that a child of God does not sin, he argues that imperfection cannot be God's fault, so it must be our own. "If it is of their own doing, it must be because they fall short of using the power of obedience that was given them. In that case, they were capable of achieving God's will with his aid."<sup>3</sup> What is important is that either sin or righteousness will predominate. For the Christian who wishes to obey God, righteousness can and should be his state, making *continual* sin impossible.

To say that men cannot be so leavened by righteousness as to deliver them from sin, is . . . to say that sin and righteousness are compatible. How can a man be called truly righteous even though he sins daily in everything he does? what difference is there, then, between good and evil?<sup>4</sup>

If, as Puritans hold, sin pollutes everything, no one can be sanctified or washed.

What does all this say to us? First, sin, both as deliberate

flouting of God and what we know to be right, and as falling short of being the people we could be, does exist. Though our definitions of its content are relative and inevitably incomplete and inaccurate, we have the guidance of God to aid us in discerning it — through inner promptings of his Spirit, through his Word in the Scripture, especially the life of Jesus, and through the faithful community of fellow Christians. Deliberate turning of our backs on the inner promptings of the Light will inevitably dull our perceptions of good and evil. We will gradually come to see ourselves, even when completely callous and indifferent to God's commands and the effects on others, as "not really that bad." We're no worse than anyone else. "Surely repentance and guilt are outmoded concepts which psychoanalysis can explain away."

I doubt whether many of us are altogether in danger of this kind of mindset, but we might be in certain particular areas. But if we will acknowledge sin as a reality, we can hope through God's help to achieve a state when a deliberate act of sin is an exception. As we recognize these exceptions we need only remember John's assurance that if we confess our sins God through Christ will forgive and cleanse us. There is such a thing as being too morbid about sin. Paul knew that his Christian converts had been sinners, that they might still fall short on occasion, but he addresses his letters to the "saints," the sanctified, those set apart by God.

## PERFECTION

So much for sin. But what of its opposite, perfection? Being closely related, the two are, in a sense, angles of the same problem: what kind of life is possible for Christians?

If we shrink from the word "sin," we are apt to find "perfection" a word with even greater handicaps. The word "perfection" has a hard, finished aspect. It implies such an absolutist state that to speak of "more perfect" is grammatically incorrect. Yet Jesus declares: "You must be perfect — just as your Father in heaven is perfect" (Mat. 5:48 TEV).

One of my friends declares that these words are the most unfortunate and harmful in the Bible, and thinks they ought

to be expunged. For him, as for many of us, perfection, especially as a command, has the force of an impossible, inflexible law. We strive, but know we are never good enough: we could have covered a certain point more carefully in a paper we wrote, our work at the office could have been a bit better, we didn't have exactly the right words in speaking to a child, a spouse, or perhaps to a friend in time of distress. If we keep making mistakes, missing the mark, what kind of Christians are we? We know we're not perfect. If we think we are, someone will straighten us out.

Yet what about those throughout the centuries, including Quakers, who have claimed to have achieved perfection? All too often perfectionists show their imperfection by the way they judge others and glorify themselves. "All our righteousnesses are as filthy rags," Isaiah (64:6 RSV) tells the Israelites. If we take pride in *our own* righteousness as something *we* achieved, not as a gift from God, we become self-righteous, judgmental, arrogant. Our own righteousness may even conceal a secret addiction to the sin for which we are criticizing someone else. We may look down on the thief, but think it smart to put over a sharp business deal. We may deplore violence, yet harbor secret grudges and resentments which we are sure God shares.

Jesus chides those who see the speck in their neighbor's eye but not the log in their own (Luke 6:42). He was especially hard on the Pharisees, because in trying to be perfect they were so often hypocrites. He looks more favorably on the Publican who while beating his breast says, "Lord here I am, a sinner" than on the Pharisee who prays "Thank God I am not as other men." If nothing else, our lack of humility often proves us to be imperfect.<sup>5</sup>

### WHAT DOES PERFECTION ACTUALLY MEAN?

If it is impossible to achieve perfection, and the claim to have done so is a sign of hypocrisy, what then? If Paul can tell the Philippians (3:12 NEB) "I have not yet reached perfection," who are we even to *think* of trying for perfection? Did Jesus really *not* mean "You must be perfect," for this life at least? Wouldn't it be better to admit that we are sinners — "only human" — and forget about this "perfect" nonsense, and

live the best we can, not judging ourselves or others too harshly, and trying to help one another from day to day?

Perhaps we have misunderstood the idea of perfection in the Bible, and been misled by the absolutist connotation of the English word "perfect." In the King James Version, "perfect" has been used to translate several Hebrew and Greek adjectives. Interestingly enough, in the RSV other words are often, though not always, substituted, particularly when dealing with men. For example, on his deathbed David advises Solomon, "And thou, Solomon my son, know thou the God of thy father, and serve him with a perfect heart" (1 Chron. 28:9 KJV), which the RSV renders "whole heart."

The Hebrew word here is *shalem* (perfect, whole). Though the two ideas are close, they are not exactly synonymous — for surely if Solomon were *perfect* he could never have fallen away, as he does in later life, when his many foreign wives are able to turn his heart away from God to strange gods: "and his heart was not perfect with the Lord his God, as was the heart of David his father" (1 Kings 11:4 KJV). Here the RSV translates *shalem* as "wholly true." Obviously *shalem* cannot mean a sinless perfection, for David, as we all know, was among other things an adulterer and murderer. Nevertheless the fact that when confronted with his sin by Nathan, he repented, shows that underneath he has remained faithful to God.

Psalms 101:2 uses two slightly different words — *tamin*, perfect, plain, whole, complete, and *tom*, perfection, integrity — both of which the King James Version translates "perfect." "I will behave myself wisely in a perfect [*tamin*] way, O when wilt thou come unto me? I will walk within my house with a perfect [*tom*] heart." Finally, Job is introduced as a man "perfect [*tam*; RSV says blameless] and upright, and one that feared God, and eschewed evil" (Job 1:1 KJV).<sup>6</sup> Clearly righteousness, faithfulness to God, integrity, are involved in all these passages — but not an absolutely pristine state in which sin is utterly impossible.

However, the misunderstanding of what is meant by perfection may well be more than a problem of translation, and may have been present even in the biblical era. Luke substitutes the word "merciful" for "perfect" in his equivalent of

Matthew's "You must be perfect" passage (6:36 TEV), perhaps because Luke feared that Jesus' words would be taken in a legalistic, absolute sense, a perfection impossible to achieve.

In the biblical perspective one is not to seek an absolute static perfection but, far from being content with oneself, one is to seek, with the hope of realizing it, a relatively dynamic perfection, or perfecting. One particularly vivid portrayal of this kind of perfecting appears in Philipians:

It is not to be thought that I have already achieved all this. I have not yet reached perfection, but I press on, hoping to take hold of that for which Christ once took hold of me. My friends, I do not reckon myself to have got hold of it yet. All I can say is this: forgetting what is behind me, and reaching out for that which lies ahead, I press toward the goal to win the prize which is God's call to the life above, in Christ Jesus. Let us then keep to this way of thinking, those of us who are mature. If there is any point on which you think differently, this also God will make plain to you. Only let our conduct be consistent with the level we have already reached. (Phil. 3:12-16 NEB)

Ever since Damascus, Paul has felt that he has been laid hold of, grasped by Christ for a particular purpose which has not been completely fulfilled. So he plows ahead, "forgetting what is behind . . . and reaching out for that which lies ahead."

Paul's determination not to allow the past to absorb him, to the detriment of the present and future, is a good model for us. We may get so distressed by something we should have done, or have left undone, that we become discouraged and waste a lot of energy on endless regrets. Progress consists in asking God for forgiveness and help to avoid the same mistake again, and, if need be, a way to help repair the damage.

But in a sense we need to forget some good things too. As individuals, or as a church, we may rest on our laurels, forever harking back to the time when God was especially close to us and we made remarkable spiritual strides. Though I am quite comfortable with the phrase "I was saved," I am not happy if that is thought of as the be-all and end-all experience of Christian life, our guarantee of a place in heaven, requiring no

further effort or growth. Our acceptance of Christ's sacrifice and our commitment to him is only the beginning of our Christian walk. The same applies to those who point constantly to the baptism of the Holy Spirit as the epitome of achievement. That is only a new opportunity for God to use us.

Is our preoccupation with the glorious days of early Quakerism nostalgia? Is it a cause for vicarious self-congratulation? Or is it an interest in learning from the past and applying its lessons for further growth today? Are we asking what more we can do to show our gratitude? to minister for God and each other? As a church, what are we doing to bring healing, salvation, even perfection to others? This kind of growing, or maturing, is the kind of perfecting we need to keep before us.

#### GROWING OR MATURING IN THE FAITH

To what extent can we share Paul's confidence that we are proceeding toward the goal of life "in Christ Jesus," individually and collectively today? Do we have the assurance of being called by God for a particular purpose, and have we the confidence that we are striving, however unevenly, toward the prize? Many Friends like to call themselves seekers, claiming continuity with the bands of seekers of George Fox's time, who were dissatisfied with the churches of their day and who met privately to wait upon the Lord. I have heard many claim that the spiritual search itself is the important and fulfilling thing. Yet seeking looks toward finding, and as Christians we have been found by God through Christ. The early Friends ceased to be seekers and became a people of God, once they had felt the touch and call of the Spirit of God. We ought to have assurance that we have been found by God through Jesus Christ and can expect, if faithful, to deepen our relationship.

It is interesting that Paul, after denying in Phil. 3:12 that he is perfect, goes on in verse 15 to speak of a spiritual maturity, a relative perfection, which not only he but many other Christians have attained. If one thinks in terms of maturity, full-grownness, there is progress and a clear contrast to the "babes in Christ" who are just beginning their Christian walk, a contrast which runs throughout the New Testament. For example, a passage chides its readers on being slow to learn:

Although by this time you should be teaching others, you need to have someone teach you again the basic elements [NEB has "the ABCs"] of the oracles of God; you need milk, not solid food. Everyone whose food is milk alone is ignorant of the word that sanctifies, for he is a child. Solid food is for the mature, for those whose faculties are trained by practice to distinguish good from evil. Let us, then, go beyond the initial teaching about Christ and advance to maturity.

(Heb. 5:12-6:1a NAB)

The writer stresses maturity, and although Jesus wants us to be childlike in innocence and trust, he does not want us to be childish. As we mature we must expect new challenges, new tasks, even new difficulties and new temptations. We cannot afford to stand still in our Christian life, either in our understanding of God or in the measure of our obedience to him.

On his pocket Bible, Cromwell inscribed in Latin: "qui cessat esse melior cessat esse bonus" — "he who ceases to be better ceases to be good." A static, stagnant pool grows turgid, and nothing can live in it. The Christian life is one of discipline, striving, keeping to the path. The word Paul uses for keeping to the path means walking in file. There may be much about our life, even our religious life, that is humdrum — eating, sleeping, daily devotions, attending weekly worship services. But we are to remain true to what we have attained, not to relax our standards.

#### ENDS JUSTIFYING MEANS

Charles Colson, of Watergate fame, describes one incident of his prison life wherein he strays from the path of absolute Christian integrity for the sake of his fellow prisoners, only to be brought up short to the realization that this is not what a mature Christian should do. Colson has the job of handing out winter clothing to fellow inmates, and discovers that the chocolate brown jackets allotted them are threadbare, but that there are crates of surplus down-lined, little-worn jackets at hand. The only trouble is, these jackets are green, and prison regulations stipulate dark brown. Dyeing the jackets works, but there isn't sufficient money in the prison budget to buy

the dye. So Colson, with the help of a friend, Woodie, arranges for packets of dye to be smuggled in by visitors.

Colson explains, "I was troubled that the dye had to be smuggled in, but getting around idiotic regulations had always stimulated me and helping the men was now my main purpose in life." Most of us would sympathize with this attitude. However, after one visiting day, Woodie is searched by the guards and Colson is filled with remorse at how he has led Woodie astray and jeopardized his imminent parole. Moreover, he realizes that this "white lie" smuggling operation was not the Christian path, was in fact Watergate all over again.

Did I learn nothing from Watergate? How could I forget that a series of little lies can eventually blur one's capacity to see moral distinctions about big things? . . . Little lies are as corrosive to a man's character as big ones; it is only a question of degree and how long it takes. Now I'd fallen into this trap myself.<sup>7</sup>

Colson resolves to turn himself in — as it turns out, an unnecessary step since the guards hadn't found the dye on Woodie. Nevertheless, Colson has learned his lesson and stops the smuggling. In God's timing, an official arranges to purchase the dye openly, so all the prisoners have warm jackets.

If we are faithful, God will reveal to us little areas in which we need perfecting, and we can't always expect an *immediate* happy ending. If we were guaranteed tangible results for our obedience, of what value would be our faithfulness? Obedience can sometimes be outwardly costly but will, we trust, bring ample inward reward.

Robert Barclay's discussion of perfection is balanced, biblically based, and shows an appreciation that life in Christ is a maturing process. First, like Paul, Barclay is in no doubt that it is Christ who gives us the power to become perfect:

Perfection is attributed only to the reborn man who has been raised by Christ and renewed in his mind. He will know Christ, living, reigning, and ruling in him and revealing the law of the Spirit of life in him. He will be led by the Spirit which

not only reproveth sin, but provides the power to overcome it.<sup>8</sup>

There is room for growth, for as we use the measure given us it will increase, as in the parable of the talents. Barclay rejects the complacency that insists that once perfection has been achieved it can never be lost. Yet he reassures us that occasional lapses into sin will not mean the whole struggle was in vain:

Those who have attained a measure of perfection must be diligent in their attention to that of God in their heart. If they are not watchful they may fall into iniquity and lose it. Many good and holy men have had their ups and downs of this kind. For although every sin weakens the spiritual condition of a man, it does not destroy him altogether or make it impossible for him to rise again.<sup>9</sup>

Barclay does think it possible to reach a state of maturity wherein one ceases to sin:

Even though a man may reach the state where he is capable of resisting sin but sins anyhow, nevertheless a state can be attained in this life in which it becomes so natural to act righteously that a condition of stability is achieved in which sin is impossible.<sup>10</sup>

While holding up a sinless perfection as the goal, Barclay offers a continually growing perfecting as within the reach of every Christian who yields himself to Christ, believing that with his help continual sinning can be a thing of the past. Like Paul, he is confident of the prize: ". . . glory, honor, peace, and immortality await those who have not only done good but continued patiently at it."<sup>11</sup>

How can we make perfecting real in our daily lives? Above all, we need to keep open and expectant before God. Early Quakers declared that if you mind the Light you have, God will increase it. According to Robert Barclay:

If you wish to know the perfection and freedom from sin that are possible for you, turn your mind to the light of Christ and his spiritual law in your heart and allow its reproofs. Bear the judgment

and indignation of God upon the unrighteous part in you as it is revealed there, and which Christ has made it tolerable for you to do. Allow this judgment in you to become victorious, and thus come to partake of the fellowship of Christ's sufferings. . . . Henceforth you will live for God and not for yourself.<sup>12</sup>

Thus willingness to let the Light reprove sin is part of one's Christian maturing, perfecting. Indulgence in sin gradually dulls our moral discernment. Attention to perfection sharpens awareness, so that we become more sensitive to shortcomings, to mistakes, even to places where we can become better instruments of God. If we are attentive to God he will tell us new areas in which we are to grow, new ministries in which he wants us to serve, new joys he wants us to experience, new depths of compassion he wants us to reach.

## THE FAITHFUL COMMUNITY

How do sin and perfection relate to the faithful community? Despite the individualism of our age, and of some religious devotees in all ages, the bulk of Christian and Quaker tradition testifies to the fact that we cannot be and ought not be Christians alone. Thomas Kelly gives a lyrical portrayal of the "blessed community," those who, having known God experientially, find unity with fellow pilgrims on the spiritual journey. We experience true fellowship — *koinonia*, not just the horizontal person to person relationship, but the horizontal-vertical relations of person to person *in God*.<sup>13</sup> In the old Quaker phrase, members of this God-centered community know one another in "the things that are eternal." God is the catalyst:

Persons in the Fellowship are related to one another through Him, as all mountains go down into the same earth. They get at one another through Him. He is actively moving in all, coordinating those who are pliant to His will and suffusing them all with His glory and His joy.<sup>14</sup>

## THE OBJECT OF FAITH DETERMINES THE KIND OF COMMUNITY

There are many aggregates of people, but for a genuine community with a sense of identity, of we-ness, we must be faithful to someone or something. The object of our faith determines the kind of community we will be. As Christians we are faithful to God and to Jesus Christ — God become one of us. This commitment marks us as the people of God. According to Charles Thomas the first mark of a people of God is commitment to a vision of truth, gained through a revelatory experience, a theophany. "Thus, the people of God are identified by a vision of truth that unites them in a community of faith in action. This vision sets the stage for the calling and the response."<sup>15</sup> Do we as a community have a vision to which we respond, either as leaders or followers — a vision comparable to that of the Hebrews under their prophets, the early church under Jesus and the apostles, early Friends under Fox and other leaders? As a faithful community, the people of God is bound to him in a covenant, a mutually agreed upon relationship, with rights and privileges but also responsibilities and obligations. Yet beyond these, as Jesus makes clear, is a covenant of mutual love. Our faithfulness must embody a loving, not legalistic, spirit, for only ungrudging love will hold our loyalty. Says Charles Thomas:

Apart from such a covenant of love the response which any of us makes to God can easily be limited by other claims for our loyalty or by personal ambitions. The people of God, however, ask not for their own terms of covenant, but for his.<sup>16</sup>

Just as perfection is part of God, and any share in it we may have is his gift, so the faithful community is those gathered and chosen by God, and not *our* creation. Of course we must cooperate in God's molding as his people, as we cooperate in his perfecting. Paul knows that God has done the initial choosing, and that whatever we do is response. To the Ephesians he presents a cosmic vision of God and his purposes, "who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him" (Eph. 1:3-4 RSV). We are not just chosen, but

we are chosen to be holy and blameless. Holy (*hagios*) denotes something set apart, different — as a temple or sacrificial animal is set apart from ordinary buildings or animals. Supremely, God is holy; but we as Christians are to partake of this holiness and therefore we cannot be just decent and respectable in the world's definition. As William Barclay puts it, "the difference is this — that the Christian lives and works and behaves, not as any human laws compel him so to do, but as the law of Christ compels him to do."<sup>17</sup> We are also to be blameless, without blemish, and therefore cannot be satisfied with second best. The connection with sin and perfection is obvious: as holy, different, we must eschew sin; as blameless, we must strive for perfection.

#### WHAT ARE THE EVERYDAY IMPLICATIONS?

How do we live this out from day to day as ordinary members of the faithful Christian community? How are we to be towards the world? Does our faithfulness to God demand that we withdraw from the world? Does our love of neighbor demand that we adapt our Christian heritage to the point of accommodation to the world? Paul would answer: "Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, so that you may judge what is God's will, what is good, pleasing and perfect" (Rom. 12:2 NAB). This does not mean indifference to the world, for later Paul says, "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep" (12:15). We are to love and serve our fellow men, but as far as our discernment enables we are to make God and Jesus Christ our point of reference, not man. We should keep our inner ear tuned to God and to the life of perfecting maturity to which he calls us. As Charles Thomas says, Christians are to be a prophetic people:

When understood as a prophetic people, they are in the world to proclaim the word of God as both a saving word and a word of judgment upon personal and social evil. They are not conformed to this world, but are a transforming agent in it. Consequently, they cannot be a mere reflection of the culture around them or uncritically support

it. Rather, they call all human institutions and practices to justice and righteousness.<sup>18</sup>

What about our personal relationships? The good man does not habitually associate with the wicked. Without being self-righteous and with a message of compassion to bear if called to it, we know there is a fine line between this and associating on a habitual basis with those whose lives can only be described as wicked or sinful. C. S. Lewis cautions:

I am inclined to think a Christian would be wise to avoid, where he decently can, any meeting with people who are bullies, lascivious, cruel, dishonest, spiteful and so forth. Not because we are "too good" for them. In a sense because we are not good enough . . . to cope with all the temptations, nor clever enough to cope with all the problems, which an evening spent in such society produces. The temptation is to condone, to connive at; by our words, looks and laughter, to "consent."<sup>19</sup>

Completely united with God, Jesus could cope without damage, though even he needed to retire periodically to the wilderness. Most of us are not strong enough Christians to escape sully by a secular world, particularly if we try to act alone without the fellowship of a faithful community.

#### CAN OUR MEETINGS BE RENEWED?

We cannot return to the days when the Quaker meeting was the central focus for members' lives. But can we capture something of that spirit? Can we encourage one another to raise the meeting on our list of priorities, and to ask for clearness not only for marriage, but for such important decisions as career, change of residence, and retirement plans?

What has become of eldering? Even if compassionate and discerning people were available, how far would we be willing to unveil our individual and interpersonal hurts, tensions, conflicts? And how can we better distinguish a genuine commission from God from human busybodiness? At times a faithful community has to say to its members, or perhaps its nation, or its town, "There is greed, selfishness, sensuality, or pride in what you are doing." But such a thing must not be said judg-

mentally, but as a fellow seeker and grower who, having been found by Christ, having had some experience of a walk on his path, can feel he has some basis for a loving admonition — recognizing that tomorrow the admonished may be the one whose experience in another area equips him to do the admonishing.

Mutual admonishment to be faithful to the pattern shown us through Christ is not an end, but only a means of enabling us to become ever more like him, and to equip “the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ” (Eph. 4:12-13 RSV).

There are both individual and communal aspects. For we are to become mature and Christlike, but we are also to attain unity as a community in faith and knowledge. Unity, in particular, seems a stupendous task. Clearly, much prayer, individual and group searching, examination of the Scriptures, reading of Quaker and Christian history, together with sharing of contemporary insight and experience, will be required, even to begin rebuilding and renewing our sense of unity and mission. Perhaps the two most basic questions will be: To whom are we faithful? and, to what degree are we willing to commit ourselves to God and one another in a world so crowded with other loyalties — spiritual, moral, intellectual, social, material?

Paul speaks of having been grasped by Christ and wishing to take hold in return. A community faithful to God has, as individuals, been grasped by him. Perhaps truly to be a community we need to be grasped collectively by some vision, some sense of the special call heavenward and forward. If we are to be faithful to our calling, we need to grasp the opportunity for perfecting that is opening before us, take hold of it, seek ways to realize it. If we feel we have a ministry to nursing homes and shut-ins, we should seek some small way to begin, not wait for the full vision in all its details to be unfolded. If we have a concern for world peace, what step can we as a community take now? After the first step there should come a second and a third. And in order to keep our sense of vision, of faithfulness, we may also need at times to seek a broader perspective, a sense of height and depth.

A stirring vision of each of us being built into a temple for the Lord occurs in one of Paul's epistles:

You are no longer aliens in a foreign land, but fellow-citizens with God's people, members of God's household. You are built upon the foundation laid by the apostles and prophets, and Christ Jesus himself is the foundation-stone. In him the whole building is bonded together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you too are being built with all the rest into a spiritual dwelling for God. (Eph. 2:19-22 NEB)

Thus, we are of the household of God. Our supreme call is to glorify God, not just as individuals but as a community, a temple. Jesus Christ is the chief cornerstone, but those faithful before and after him have their share. A song sung in charismatic groups based on this passage captures the essence of our calling and destination:

We are being built into a temple  
fit for God's own dwelling place,  
Into the house of God which is the church,  
the pillar and the ground of truth,  
As precious stones that Jesus owns,  
fashioned by his wondrous grace;  
As we love and trust each other,  
so the building grows and grows.<sup>20</sup>

Here is a call to seeking and being grounded in truth, the assertion that we belong to Jesus and are fashioned by his grace, not primarily by our own effort, that as we love and trust each other we will grow. We have God's assurance: our faithful community will become the “blessed community” of Thomas Kelly, a church without spot or wrinkle, ever more deeply united in God.

#### Notes

1. Lest anyone think I am insisting solely on a conscious acceptance of the historical Jesus, I fully accept Robert Barclay's position that Jesus Christ can speak inwardly to one's spirit whether or not the outward facts of Jesus' life are known.

2. *Barclay's Apology in Modern English*, ed. Dean Freiday (Philadelphia: Friends Book Store, prime distributor, 1967), pp. 93-94.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 158.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 160-161.
5. In Phil. 3:4-6 Paul lists the marks by which he, as a Jew, had been counted as righteous — descent from the tribe of Benjamin, of Hebrew-speaking parents, as a Pharisee conscientious in fulfilling the Law — only to count all these advantages of birth and training as loss, when confronted by Jesus Christ and his grace.
6. The RSV gives more distinctive shadings, speaking of a "blameless way" and "integrity of heart." The TEV translates the passage: "My conduct will be faultless. When will you come to me? I will live a pure life in my house and will never tolerate evil."
7. Charles W. Colson, *Born Again* (New York: Bantam Books, 1977), pp. 358, 360.
8. *Barclay's Apology in Modern English*, p. 156.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*, p. 157.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 163.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 163-164.
13. Thomas R. Kelly, *A Testament of Devotion* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1941), p. 80.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 83.
15. Charles F. Thomas, "Being a People of God," in *The Church in Quaker Thought and Practice*, ed. Charles F. Thomas (Philadelphia and Plainfield, Ind.: Faith and Life Movement, distributed by Friends World Committee, Section of the Americas, 1979), p. 28.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
17. William Barclay, *The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 2nd ed., 1958), p. 90.
18. Charles Thomas, "Being a People of God," p. 31.
19. C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1958), p. 71.
20. We sang this frequently in a charismatic fellowship in St. Louis. In the free way in which charismatics like to share songs, the author was never mentioned.

## Moving?

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