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Comments

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by the Faith and Life Movement, June, 1979, and distributed by Friends World Committee, Section of the Americas). The volume is unquestionably one of the best sources on Quaker ecclesiology.

2. Included in *Truth Triumphant through the Spiritual Warfare, Christian Labours and Writings*. . . Robert Barclay, usually cited as R.B. Works (London: Thomas Northcott, 1692) p. 194. The King James Version of Mt 18:15-17 (also verse 18) is given in full, followed by the comment: "From which Scripture it doth manifestly and evidently follow. . . that Jesus Christ intended, there should be a certain Order and Method in the Church, in the Procedure toward such as transgress."
3. William C. Braithwaite, *The Second Period of Quakerism* (Cambridge: University Press, 1961) pp. 248-250. Braithwaite also adds about the statement: "It obviously marks an important stage in Quaker history. . . Quakerism had never been merely subjective. . . The 1666 epistle was a first attempt to strengthen government in the Church." An entire chapter on the settling of monthly meetings follows.
4. *The Friend*, October 10, 1969, p. 1248.
5. Quoted by Hugh Doncaster in *The Friend*, April 10, 1970, p. 414.

Comments

PATRICIA EDWARDS-DELANCEY

Wilmer Cooper's very helpful paper on the crisis of accountability which Friends face rightly points out that crisis is not new but has always been with us. From the early period Ranters, Diggers, Grindletonians, Levellers, Fifth Monarchy Men and others have posed crisis from without. And internally, it would seem from my researches, accountability and its meaning or interpretation has been at the root of most of the crises and historical splits among Friends. Likewise in the late 19th and early 20th Cs, the fundamentalist vs. modernist split in mainstream Christianity was manifest within the Religious Society of Friends as well.

The Richmond Declaration was a response to Wesleyan revivalism, whose accountability took a Creedal form. Similarly, the cessation of the recording of ministers and discontinuation of the recognition of elders and overseers was a modernist-Friends reaction against institutional forms of accountability. Today there is a double polarity

-- among evangelical Friends accountability has become doctrinal, whereas among the liberal Friends as the recognition of ministers, elders, and overseers declined their functions declined as well.

During the past few years, as I have traveled in the ministry among all branches of Friends, I have often met women and men who were struggling to actualize clear calls to ministry which were being blocked by their local meetings. These people perceived the exercise of their call as accountable to the whole body of Friends. After a visit, one Friend wrote me:

It is helpful to be reminded that it is not by our own desire that we are standing out, but because we have been given a vision of how we might be with and for one another, and to know that others have gone before us on this road, that we aren't alone. This helps me to convey to others that a calling is a shared thing, and cannot be kept to oneself, lest it die.

I have found the same concern for the revitalization of accountability structures among both evangelical and liberal Friends -- a yearning for a reappropriation of historical and traditional resources. Among both, I find the same promise of rediscovering not only our Biblical and Christian roots, but also revival of primitive Christianity.

Of course, there are a number of evangelical Friends who could still be described as Elbert Russell characterized them in 1923: "a three-fold. . . compound of one-third 'evangelical,' one-third holiness, and one-third millenarian."¹ But, I find evangelical Friends one step ahead of most liberal Friends -- they have already acknowledged the saving Power of Christ and are deeply enmeshed in Biblical study. As they probe deeper into Biblical truths, and spend time in prayer and expectancy, the early Quaker Gospel begins to have greater meaning for them. As I travel, I am surprised at the number of evangelical Friends who respond affirmatively to my vocalization of the early Quaker vision. And there are small but growing pockets of Friends who are recovering this vision throughout the various varieties of Quakerism. There is usually at least one person in each meeting who has begun sharing this vision with others. The wind of revitalization is blowing among both liberal and evangelical Friends, and I would not want to focus on any one group as holding the most promise.

* * * * *

The normative reality underlying the vision of accountability among Friends should be found in George Fox's conviction

~“There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition.”
Before we can become accountable, there must be unity on the role and authority of Christ.

Friends are not another mainstream denomination. Quakerism was a New Reformation, a rediscovery of primitive Christianity. It was different enough to constitute one of the three main forms of Western Christianity, the other two being Catholicism and Protestantism. Friends preached against the “Constantinian apostasy” of the contemporary Christian churches of the 17th C, including English Puritans and other separatists. George Fox had rediscovered from the pre-Constantinian paradigm,² the revolutionary Power of the indwelling Spirit of Christ. This meant that the paradigm from which they were constructing their view of reality was radically different from that of the mainstream ~ their community of interpretation offered them a differing viewpoint. From it, they could understand and critique other constructions of reality as well as specific religious understandings.

The grounding for any religious commitment is faith. Within the Quaker community of memory there has been incorporated the telling and retelling of faith stories. In this view, faith is not understood as orthodoxy or mysticism, but faith is seen as trust and being obedient to the will of God. That will is learned by listening to the Voice of Christ within and obeying his Voice ~ the gathered people of God functioning in Gospel Order through continuing revelation. Constantly underlying all of these assumptions was a transcendent and immanent reality of faith which continued to enable Friends, on the basis of their paradigm, to move into a vision for a new reality. In this, faith then becomes an openness to the inbreaking of a new reality, and there is the solid expectation of arriving at a commonly accepted basis.

These early “non-conformists” were profoundly communal. They perceived themselves as the gathered community of believers who worship in the Power of Christ, who have seen the apostasy of Constantinianism, and therefore base their faith, lives, and accountability in a transforming paradigm of reality ~ witnessing that the basic tenets of Christianity are an attainable vision of the people of God as the Body of Christ.

True accountability is experienced only as God gathers people together. The gathered community then becomes a visible sign of the Body of Christ, and a witness of his Presence to the world. This

community comes into existence wherever people together hear and obey the call of the living Christ, who confronts them and invites them to follow Him.

An essential element for all members of the community is a total commitment to Christ as the normative reality of their lives and a total surrender to living their lives in the Power of the living Teacher who will lead them to Truth, love, and vision. Christ is the authority -- not the Scriptures, not human leadership. Members strive to live in the fulness of God's love, and to follow Jesus as completely as possible. Out of the unity which develops comes the Power and vision to seek justice; to encounter the world with the radical, suffering love of the Cross.

One of the distinctive and essential elements of Christian accountability is the revitalization of the meaning and understanding of discipleship. Members of gathered communities have voluntarily chosen involvement and enter as "convinced members" -- convinced that the living Lord is calling them to encounter the world through communal involvement. These fellowships corporately witness to the vision of the Kingdom of God on earth. Thus, they become expressions of the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God in which the fulness of Christian discipleship is expressed and lived. Discipleship through obedience places Christ at the Head of the Body, where He is in authority to gather, speak, teach, and guide.

Throughout the ages a point of dispute between radical and mainstream Christians has been the relationship between the message of Jesus and the actuality of living it out in the world. Arthur Gish³ poses a clearcut choice. He says that for the faithful community there is only one answer to this relationship, "the message of Jesus must either be lived or rejected." Faith and obedience, Christian teaching and living, are not to be separated but are the foundation for the joy, love, and freedom of discipleship.

The early Friends often stated that the Kingdom is come and coming. Finally it became clear to me what the implications of this were. Where the faithful community lives under the gathering and authority of Christ and is accountable to God and to each other, the Kingdom has already come. The proclamation that God's Kingdom or Shalom will come on earth can hardly be taken seriously by the world unless this faithful community first lives it, however imperfectly. This is true anticipation of the fulness of the Kingdom yet to come.

Accountability and membership in the gathered community are more demanding than in mainstream Christianity. Membership is a

definite commitment to a Way of Life that is radically different from the surrounding secular culture. There are many jobs one cannot hold, many activities in which one cannot participate. Membership involves transformation, and the “convinced” member willingly follows Christ with joy and submission, not by being impelled through legalism and law. As one struggles to remain obedient, corporate discernment helps maintain accountability and provide support for the individual. Community procedures encourage decision-making through “waiting on the Lord for the sense of the meeting,” whether in business or clearness meetings.

Accountability does not require set-apart ministers, but expects the gifts of every person to be utilized in ministry to and by the Body of Christ. These gifts will be nurtured and utilized without regard to maleness or femaleness, educational or secular accomplishments, color or age, and without placing hierarchical status on differing gifts. Constantinianism neglected one of the most profound and essential elements in the accountability of both early Christians and early Friends -- bearing the Cross in opposition to the evil structures and the evil in the world. Friends referred to this as the Lamb’s War. Non-violent expressions of love -- Christ’s Love and Light -- must radiate from one’s witness if the surrounding darkness is to be dispelled. This was not passivism but a pacifism of active non-violent resistance to evil. Testimonies for peace, equality, etc. were grounded in active engagement in the Lamb’s War. And there was a sense of empowerment to speak prophetically to each other as well as to the surrounding world.

In final analysis the crisis of accountability is fundamentally related to our sense of identity and ground of authority. Are Friends more concerned about numerical growth or obedience to the Voice of Christ? Are we more concerned about self-perpetuation or embracing the whole Gospel of Jesus Christ? Are we more concerned with capitulating to mainstream, Constantinian Christianity or again becoming a gathered community of faith that embodies Christ?

NOTES

1. Elbert Russell, “The Society of Friends,” *Christian Century*, vol. 40 (Oct. 25, 1923): 1366.
2. “Paradigm” here means simply “model, or example.” One of the pioneers of the Form Criticism method, Martin Dibelius (1883-1947), however, also developed “paradigm” as a technical term for “a short illustrative notice or event” usually woven around a particular saying of Jesus, and often the basis of early sermons.
3. Arthur G. Gish, *Living in Christian Community* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1979), p. 42.