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Comments

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Comments

on Ruth Pitman's paper (see QRT #60)

LARRY KUENNING

Both Ruth Pitman and I think that there ought to be a community of Christian faith with a real discipline -- one with important similarities to the Quaker community of two and three centuries ago. We differ in how we apply this belief: I belong to such a community and she doesn't.

My community is small, as are the other communities I know that try to practice corporate moral responsibility. A symptom of the modern situation is that real accountability for Christian discipleship is hard to find outside of tiny pockets. The heirs of the radicals of earlier generations -- Quakers and many Anabaptists -- have moved away from this heritage. The very word "accountability" means to many of them merely to ask a few friends for advice, not that they have to explain their life-style to their meeting -- much less, that the meeting might demand changes.

Before considering church order, I want to comment on some weaknesses in the doctrinal foundations of Ruth's paper. All societies have law, but how are we to choose the right law, and why should we obey it when it is inconvenient? Ruth says this choice is based on "a certain amount of narrative." Yet narrative alone cannot convince us of a law if we have no moral perceptions to start with. Actually Ruth's practice here is better than her principle, for she supports the Ten Commandments not only with story ("the God who brought us out of bondage") but with implicit appeals to our own perceptions of the Light that gave forth the law (e.g., "the commandments reveal . . . the nature of Love itself").

Again, Ruth argues that we need a story, and recommends as a "20th-C faith" that we remain open to traditional stories in the hope that they will become meaningful as they are lived. But how shall we choose our stories? (The Bible? The Iliad? Paul Revere's ride?) Our need for some story or other, though a motivation for search, is no criterion of truth. (I'd care less about Christian tradition if I didn't think Jesus was resurrected.)

Ruth's reference to "Atonement" places side by side the traditional Quaker idea of crucifying the self and the traditional Protestant

idea of "Christ's death in our stead," with no hint that these are distinct concepts. I cannot expound here on the distinction, but it has been very important in Quaker history and is relevant to Ruth's concerns. Emphasis on the latter concept at the expense of the former has led to some of the short-cut Christianity she laments in the Gurneyites.

On the subject of accountability, itself, I share Ruth's views enough that I may be able to supplement her presentation, and provide a few minor corrections, within her general framework. But my conclusions will be more radical than hers.

My first supplement concerns disownment. Disownment is not just a technique for maintaining the church's reputation, as embarrassing as it is when a member's behavior reflects poorly on the community's testimony to Christ. Such a member's sin against the community must be dealt with, but perhaps more important is another problem: the process of corporate decision-making has been undermined, since that is supposed to be based on corporate discernment of the mind of Christ. This relates to the question of who interprets the law.

In speaking to that question, Ruth rightly stressed the classical Quaker type of leadership, but she didn't mention that the rank-and-file members were also involved. Any new elaboration of the eternal law, such as the prohibition of slave-owning, had to be approved by the monthly, quarterly, and yearly meetings of the members ~ not just those of ministers and elders. And it had to be approved by the "sense of the meeting," not just by majority vote.

But expecting to recognize a new moral principle, and make it binding, when a quarter of the members don't even care to live up to the principles already accepted, is like expecting the city of Detroit to impose tougher safety standards on auto makers. In the 18th C Quakers could strengthen their stand on slavery because their membership was ~ basically and for the most part ~ committed to corporate discipleship to Christ even in the face of suffering. This corporate solidarity was due in part to continuous weeding of those who weren't really committed. Even so the prohibition of slave-owning wasn't easily attained. With a lot of half-hearted members on board it would have been impossible.

Thus disownment of the recalcitrant is a necessity. Without it, the community soon ceases to be united in a faith that leads to a life of discipleship and taking up the cross of Christ. The diversity of moral practice in modern Quakerism, which hardly ever disowns anybody, is an example of the consequences.

The yearly meeting and the book of discipline are other unmentioned structures which my community has found important, and which other neo-Quaker and neo-Anabaptist groups would do well to adopt. A yearly meeting (for discipline, not just for inspiration) brings different local groups under a single disciplinary structure. Among small discipleship communities today members are usually accountable to each other only within a particular group: one community is not accountable to another. If our predecessors had behaved that way, John Woolman's efforts to abolish slave-owning might have gone no further than Mount Holly Meeting.

A book of discipline preserves a clear record of the community's perception of Truth. If human memory is the sole source for what happened in previous years the rules can be changed inadvertently or even sabotaged. This is less likely to happen when the community's stand is available in writing. The group can still change its mind, but it must do so consciously and corporately.

I will comment fairly briefly on some of the other structures of classical Quakerism which Ruth mentions. She rightly stresses the radical change from upright life to skill as the criterion of leadership, representing a change of faith. Only a community that believes that God directs history, and that his purposes are best served by faithfulness to the moral Truth he reveals, will be willing to rank integrity ahead of competence in choosing leaders. Other types of leadership -- based on other beliefs -- also exist, of course. The "charismatic" leader who keeps his followers emotionally high needs neither bureaucratic competence nor more integrity if his followers take this "high" for the Holy Spirit.¹

Although I agree that actions can take on symbolic significance which conveys more than official theology, I question one of Ruth's examples: the use of peculiar dress, originally called "plain" to signify what it was -- ordinary unadorned clothing, with the message, "Christ teaches plainness and humility." This gradually became an ethnic style whose message was, "We hold our religion by tradition." Now that Quakers have dropped ethnic dress, some fringe groups have imitated it, with the message, "We must be holy; don't we look it?" It still upholds a law, but is the law still God's?

It is hard for me to say much about such structures as acknowledgments, queries, and meetings of ministers and elders, since my community, and other Christian-disciple communities I know, are too small to need them. With six members you don't need many formalities. Problems will not go unnoticed even if there are no queries. You

know who is good at what sort of ministry even if there's no written list. And you know whether J.W. has repented of putting W.S. into the pond even if he hasn't put it in writing. I am not praising smallness or deprecating formal structures; I wish our community were big enough to need more of them, and I encourage those who talk about a disciplined church to consider joining one.

Finally, to expand on Ruth's comments on membership: I agree that the basic membership requirement should be a direction of the will, but toward what? Ruth says, "a dedication of the will to learn what a particular tradition teaches as it is lived." Shouldn't she have said, "to learn what Christ teaches as he is followed"? After all, Ruth's tradition ~ Quaker Christianity ~ contains a strong protest against letting human traditions eclipse God's law. But if the membership requirement should be a dedication of the will, can all the various meetings Ruth describes as antinomian become accountable communities by changing their membership requirements?

The obstacles are tremendous. Supposing you persuade a meeting to adopt the new membership standard, what do you do with those who came in under the old standard, whose life orientation is not a dedication to follow Christ? Will they change their life orientation just because the meeting has changed its rules? How will the meeting even mobilize itself to make this change, as long as these people are in it?

If you leave them in, you have the problem described in commenting on disownment: the community cannot form a corporate sense of the mind of Christ if half the members are not looking for it. Do you throw them out? Even assuming it could be done, I might question whether it is fair. These people joined because they were offered an antinomian environment. Even if the meeting repents of the offer, is it fair to change the arrangements now?

But there is an entirely different approach to the membership problem. It was the approach of the early Quakers, and it is also that of my own group. Call it the "separatist" approach; it goes like this: First, stop trying to change your meeting's structure, which derives from the faith of its members and will not change unless they change their faith. Second, find those people (in your meeting or out of it) who have, or can be converted to, the Christian faith, in its full dedication to discipleship. Third, meet with those people, for both worship and discipline, and be ready to develop with them appropriate structures of accountability as Christ leads.

Among the structures to develop is your relation to other church organizations. There is a disagreement, here, between moderate separatists and radical separatists. The moderates would establish the new community but keep one foot in the ancient churches of their tradition. The radicals say you should come out of them all. The early Quakers were radicals.

There is also a difference between independent separatists and catholic separatists. The independents see no need for structural ties between their own little community and other discipleship groups. The catholics (small "c") say that all discipleship communities should be connected for disciplinary purposes. The early Quakers were catholics.

This approach is not for those who put their faith in human organizational skill. To them it may be crazy ~ more outrageously simplistic than Ruth thought her own approach. I propose it for those whose faith is in God's power to make something out of people's faithfulness. I don't know how many of these there are. As Ruth says, the problems about accountability are rooted in a crisis of faith.

NOTE

1. Ruth's sociological perspective on law and leadership, though of a different temper from classic Quaker treatments of this subject, may be inescapable in the face of a modern neo-Quaker dilemma. In original Quaker theology, the leaders' understanding of the law carries the day because the same Truth that inspires it also confirms it to the followers. But what if the followers' sense of inner guidance confirms the leaders' errors? The diversity of interpretations among neo-Quaker groups shows that this must sometimes be happening. Can classical Quaker ecclesiology be maintained intact in the face of this experience?