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MULTI-DENOMINATIONAL BELONGING AND QUAKERS IN EVANGELICAL FRIENDS CHURCH SOUTHWEST

JENNIFER M. BUCK

Quakerism is a tradition rich for the intersection of conservative tradition and emergent positioning to the culture. Some understand this term as ‘convergent Friends,’ and in this context today, the convergent nature of some strands of Quakerism opens it up for hybridity and multi-belonging. Rather than assess Quakerism in regards to other faith traditions or religious communities, this paper seeks to look at a recent movement in Evangelical Friends in the Southwest region, that of multi-denominational belonging.

DENOMINATIONALISM

Much can be said about the future of denominations in the 21st century in what we could identify as a post-denominational age. Non-denominational loyalty has truly become its own almost ‘denomination’-like identity, particularly within Evangelicalism. Denominations do serve as a primary mode of trans-congregational structure and life within the church today, not only in America but worldwide, yet little theological writing exists on the intersection of various denominations beyond individual statements of faith.

The uniqueness of particular streams of the Christian tradition can serve as a helpful community to guard one’s theology and historical identity. In regards to the Quakers, I have often identified that ours is not the largest voice, but nevertheless still a necessary and valuable one. This speaks to distinctives and convictions we bring as a community into conversation about the various streams of the Christian faith, one with an emphasis on our Spirit-led tradition.¹ Yet, no denomination is sacrosanct, particularly in regards to human manipulation and dogmatic insistence on historical practices that embody the zeitgeist of a particular past era rather than an openness to

the Spirit's movement today. Schisms are often a result of lack of unity, minor polity issues, arbitrary decisions by denominational leadership or even human sin rather than true differing of theology or doctrine. Survival has motivated other Reformation movements to make tactical-strategic choices, motivated more by numbers and finances, rather than biblical-theological-ethical convictions.² Similarly, loyalty to an institution and its self-preservation motives can, and often does, clash with faithful Christian witness, as the Gospel sides with those marginalized by institutions. Such thinking can lead to exclusivist theology and believing one group of Christians contains a corner on the market of correct theology. This type of Pharisee-ism exists as respectable institutional sin couched in the language of identity.

Distinctiveness can be used to validate the reasons for continued existence; it can also be used to remain faithful to an original calling from God. The competitiveness wrapped up in being distinctive is more of an American value than a Christian one, and it could be argued that the elimination of denominational diversity came as a result of American competitiveness. Yet one Christian value that denominational distinctiveness can embody is that of the prophetic witness. When containing a particular reason for being, denominations can faithfully understand their prophetic calling as one to identify the faithful and sinful aspects of their context which such a denomination is uniquely positioned to identify. This sentiment has been particularly true of the Quaker tradition historically. This clear sense of God-given identity allows for continual refinement alongside contemporary culture without losing a reason for existence.

Referencing the idea of convergent Friends specifically, theologian Roger Olsen's words on denominations appears accurate: "the secret of [denominational] success lies in its discovering the essentials of its historic ethos, separating them from secondary and outward non-essentials, and adapting itself to new generations and social environments."³ Having a clear theological center with loose-boundaries, especially in regards to congregational life, allows for the contextual community to have an influence in shaping the praxis. For Quaker, our Pietist spirituality and historical identity allows for institutional freedom and openness to cultural adaptations.

CASE STUDIES

Related to hybridity and multi-denominational belonging, I plan to use a few case study churches amongst the Evangelical Friends Church Southwest as examples of an observed phenomenon of Quakers straddling multiple denominational contexts. I would say that this is a natural byproduct of our low-church, Congregationalist-influenced model of ecclesiology. More Holy-Spirit-led churches leads to hybridity and less denominational identity as a result of being a more pneumatologically sensitive people. And for the sake of this adaptation-accommodation debate, I am more concerned with observing phenomena than making a value judgment. That said, I think this is a trend that must not be ignored whether one sees the value of this hybridity or not.

Two movements within Evangelical Friends churches in the Southwest have begun to emerge in regards to other denominations: the first is the overlap with neo-Reformed theology, and for that I will use Friends Church Yorba Linda from Yorba Linda, CA as the case study, and the second is the overlap with the neo-Pentecostal movement, and for that I will use Friends Church Orange from Orange, CA and Crosspointe Friends Church from Fullerton, CA.⁴

The neo-Reformed theology I am speaking to here is best embodied in the publications and writings from the Gospel Coalition, with leading voices like D.A. Carson, Tim Keller, and John Piper shaping its theology. The Gospel Coalition was founded as a broadly Reformed network of churches to advocate “gospel-centered principles” and the “doctrines of grace” and it embodies a neo-Calvinist view on Scripture and salvation. It clashes with traditional Friends theology over women in ministry, the role of the Holy Spirit and the nature of church polity, to name a few areas.⁵ In Friends Church Yorba Linda, a mega-church of 5000+ members and a 100-year history, this manifests in conservative views of eschatology, regular practice of the sacraments, an elimination of women elders and preachers, and a more traditional/conservative reading of Scripture. They would understand such alignment of their theology with the neo-Reformed movement as a move for correct doctrine as well as growth emphasis, even though they would still understand themselves as non-confessional. Also, ironically given my next example, they would reject the “second blessing” teaching regarding spiritual gifts and tongues, though this topic has been a cause for splits in their church in its past. Based on their location in north Orange County, CA, all of those theological movements, slow

in shifting as they may have been, does not clash and in fact reinforces the ethical positions of a primarily Republican, socially conservative community.⁶ From talking with some of its pastoral staff, as well as observing the manner in which it partners with the rest of our Yearly Meeting, I believe it would understand much of its Quaker identity as solely historical, with “self-doctrines” that have essentially become non-functioning beliefs. An odd reality from one of the largest Friends churches worldwide, but perhaps not related to size rarely equating to faithfulness in our movement.

The neo-Pentecostal movement I am referring to here is best summarized in gatherings such as the Bethel School for the Supernatural in Redding, CA and the International House of Prayer movement, founded in Kansas City but with centers worldwide. Not unlike the Vineyard movement and the Toronto Blessing movement (and others) of the past, this emphasis on the current manifestation of the supernatural gifts of the Holy Spirit—tongues, prophecy, healing, et. al.—speaks to a baptism or infilling of the Holy Spirit as the initial physical evidence of salvation. Young leaders from both Friends Church Orange and Crosspointe Friends Church have gone for training in the gifts at the (unaccredited) “School” connected with Bethel and have traveled worldwide to participate in grassroots manifestations of the Holy Spirit in faith communities. Worship leaders at both churches lead a blending of contemporary worship songs, but with a heavy emphasis on Bethel and Hillsong’s original compositions, working to cultivate a very free, lengthy time of programmed worship for vocal and participatory Spirit encounters. Both churches have reported instances of healings within the worship services, encounters such as “glory dust” from particularly powerful Spirit encounters, and words of prophecy spoken over the congregation and particular individuals. It should also be noted that these two churches are both recent church plants in EFCSW, emerging only in the last 2 years, and both have curated what we might call a “Spirit-chaser” culture in their young communities. Neither community is particularly large in size, approximately 50 people in each gathering, but both understand themselves as movements, particularly movements of the Spirit.

It should be noted, however briefly but not insignificantly, that both of these denominational hybrid trends—neo-Reformed and neo-Pentecostalism—may have theological partnership with the Friends church, but regardless of whether they do, both are also massive cultural trends at the current moment within Christianity. Based on markers like blog hits, music sales, book sales and the like, both the

Gospel Coalition and Bethel have permeated the contemporary church landscape. They have both built influential empires that are shaping undiscerning faith communities nationwide. A longer conversation about the commodification of church leadership and the consumerism mentality of churches within Evangelicalism overall is of value, but broader than the scope of this work.

The churches observed here are case studies within the Evangelical Friends movement. Some in this room would argue that the hybridity of the dual identities of “Evangelical” and “Friends” is the real partnership to be discussing, particularly in regards to how the Quaker identity has essentially become co-opted by the primary identity of Evangelical. This is a difficult blanket statement to make, since the balance of those hybrid identities differs based on each individual congregation. This is one of the strengths, and at times weaknesses, of the congregationally-led Friends movement. The natural question emerging from such research is why such congregations remain in the Friends tradition. With the rise of the non-denominational movement, why not just ditch the Friends church altogether? Greater research is clearly needed, not solely from differing contexts, but from other voices within Quakerdom. There seems to remain a power of our shared history not easily shed and a strength in our relationships across our Yearly Meeting not easily discarded.

Flexible denominations with clear vision and mission should be differentiated from churches run more like inflexible organizations. This would be one of the many reasons why sociologists Packard and Hope, in their work *Church Refugees*, and others observing church communities have labeled a particularized set of millennials the “Dones,” speaking to how they are done with organized religious communities but not the Christian faith overall.⁷ Rigid rules and structures that lack transcendent theology appear more like museums to past American culture rather than vibrant worshipping communities. Reasons for denominational existence must transcend history. This to me is the difference between tradition and traditionalism. “Tradition is the living faith of the dead, whereas traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.”⁸ The ability of doctrines to exist within a denomination, for particularity and identity, while still being open to a hybridity of belonging as is culturally relevant becomes the goal. The challenge within hybridity, especially when it comes to denominational identity, is to not lose one’s particular identity in Christian cultural trends without accurate theological partnership. True hybridity strengthens

each original position through the partnership, rather than colonizing the one identity. Authenticity is not tradition for history's sake or change for contemporary culture's sake. But true theological discovery, from denominations we might understand as our "other," will lead to sincerer convictions and more relevant practices.

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ENDNOTES

1. The streams language I borrow from our Quaker friend Richard Foster. Richard Foster, *Streams of Living Water: Celebrating the Great Traditions of Christian Faith*. (San Francisco: HarperOne: 2001).
2. Ideas borrowed here from Roger Olson's "The Future of Denominations in the Twenty-First Century," *Brethren in Christ History and Life* (April 2016).
3. Olsen, 14.
4. Author's Note: These examples are from personal observation and anecdotal evidence rather than theological statements by these church congregations.
5. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/about/overview>.
6. As an aside, Yorba Linda, CA as a city has taken legislative action to make homelessness illegal and eliminate low-income housing from its wealthy community. Not necessarily causation or correlation, but merely a note on its ecclesial context.
7. Josh Packard and Asleigh Hope. *Church Refugees*. (Loveland, CO: Group, 2015).
8. I first read this truism from Jaroslav Pelikan., *The Vindication of Tradition: 1983 Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 65.