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THE VOICE OF FRIENDS HAS MANY ACCENTS

KENNETH E. COMFORT

Recently the question was asked in a seminary class, “What is the future of Friends, and what influences will bring change to the Friends Church in the near future?” The discussion focused only on the current social trends of our own white, middle-class, American culture. The conversation was oblivious to the influences that Friends around the world bring to our faith. If just numbers dictated what ethnic language Friends spoke, it would not be the language of the white Euro-American members, who are far outnumbered by the African and Latin American membership. Because there is such a vast ethnic diversity among Friends around the world, no longer can we talk simplistically about what is normative Quaker worship. Still, there are core beliefs about the Lordship of Christ and the equality of all believers that are timeless and that span cultural understandings.

Pamela Calvert brings up a wonderful topic, which those of us who have worked overseas are more than willing to discuss. The aim of this response is to expand on Pamela’s main argument by including examples of how Latin American Friends express their core beliefs in ways that are true to the doctrines of the early Friends movement, though their manifestations vary from culture to culture. The impact of Christ-centered cultural diversity among Friends will inevitably emphasize Quaker forms of worship in new ways. It would be exciting to expand this dialogue to include African and Asian perspectives of how Friends doctrine is lived out in their contexts as well. We can all learn from our brothers and sisters of other countries as we seek Christ corporately.

The blending of theology with culture is always interesting. Is it more important that Quakers worship in the same way all over the world, or that people from other ethnic groups be granted the freedom to express the Friends faith as it relates to them culturally? Are Friends from other countries given the freedom to contextualize Friends faith and practice to emphasize their own cultural strengths? Quakers around the world share core beliefs that do not necessarily follow a prescribed practice from culture to culture.
Quakers still see themselves as a movement that reaches out to those of whatever gender, race, culture or creed who are open to hearing about “the living and present Christ who is here to teach His people Himself.” Friends continue to see themselves as reaching out in Christ’s name to those who yearn to be valued as equals, especially where there is a need for justice. Still, by and large, the sending culture has isolated itself from the target audience. There is a strong defense of Friends practices. It is not uncommon to hear, “They are not really Friends because they worship differently than true Friends do.”

Intentionally or not, many North Americans think that we are the only people that God can use to spread the message of hope. We go out to be the teachers of truth, yet we miss the fact that we are called to be listeners and learners as well. I remember a discussion with a representative of a Friends organization where I questioned why they didn’t have people from other countries overseeing the different facets of their international work. I was told, “We send people out. We never bring people back.”

The fact is the Spirit of Christ continues to teach His people Himself, regardless of culture or ethnicity. Christ continues to call men and women to be the ministers He intended them to be, regardless of education or social standing. We say we believe in the equal calling of all people. We teach that the Spirit gifts each person uniquely, yet we do not always practice what we preach. We must see that as the seed of truth starts to germinate, that of God in everyone is awakened, and people of all races grow into the men and women who speak truth into their own cultural contexts.

Friends’ faith and practice clearly speaks to the heart of cultures other than our own in new and interesting ways. Examining the worship of Friends from other ethnicities reinforces the multifaceted values of our faith, and it allows those of us from this culture to rediscover primitive, biblical Christianity. The way these cultures interpret Friends’ worship style may not look like the form that early Friends originated, but they do help us define better the latitude of how Christ is teaching His people Himself. We can learn much from our foreign Friends.

Among Latin American Friends there are many cultures represented. It is impossible to say that all Spanish-speaking Friends are homogeneous. There are stereotypical similarities for the whole group, yet there are vast differences in worldview between each culture represented, even between geographic areas of the same country.
I am focusing on the positive aspects of the Latin American cultures for this response. I acknowledge that the Aymara, the Quechua, and all other Latin cultures also have their challenges and their own need for the gospel. I am well aware of the negative aspects of these cultures, as my last term in Peru dealt with many instances of holding people accountable to Peru Yearly Meeting. The sin of prideful ego works its way into every heart.

There is a paradox in Latin American cultures in that individualism is often the first characteristic of their personality traits. This “me first” attitude comes to them as an inheritance from Spain and is evidenced in machismo, traffic in any Latin American city, and a certain inability to work as part of a team. Motives are always questioned because what is said or done is not always sincere. Still, Latin Americans constantly work to cultivate their relationships with each other because “La Familia” and “La Comunidad” are held in high value as a way to get ahead. Survival of the fittest is made possible only through survival of the group. The Aymara people of Bolivia and Peru are harsh with each other, and anthropologists have also identified their “communal individualism.” They strive for the survival of the group, so the belittling of some people is commonplace, as other people aspire to rise above the rest. There is constant tension within family groups, social organizations, neighborhoods, and communities. Sadly, this explains a lot of the infighting, church splits, and criticizing of people who begin to rise in leadership in the church or community.

The core of who Friends are has to do with worship. While Anglo-European Quakers tend to prefer contemplative silence, people from Central and South America prefer participatory modes of worship, in which community is enhanced. Important decisions are made only after all of the facets of an issue are considered, and everyone has a chance to speak. Even in voting there is dialogue about the decision that was just made. It is not uncommon to consider further concerns to accommodate the needs of the group after it seems that a decision was already reached. Voting becomes a stepping-stone in the process of reaching consensus for the group.

Some have said that the Aymara is a male-dominated culture. On the surface it appears that the men make all of the decisions. In secular community meetings the men stand in a circle where they debate their ideas and concerns while the women sit on the ground outside of the circle. These meetings always last a minimum of two days. At night the men hear from the women what they heard while they sat silently lis-
tending to the whole discussion of the day. The following morning the men speak from the context of what their wives heard. Some even repeat what they are told to say. That practice has carried over into the church. Today Friends women are taking on more visible leadership roles in the church. Friends in Bolivia and Peru recognize and record women ministers as they realize that the advice given in private is really a message meant for the whole group.

Ministry has tremendous responsibilities. Holding an office in the work of the Lord is considered with the gravity that is due it. Spiritual gifts are highly valued as given to a specific person for a specific purpose. People submit to the spiritual authority as individuals exercise their gifts, but these same people are held highly accountable to use their gifts in ways that are beneficial to the group as a whole, and not to their own advantage. This accountability is open and honest to the point that it is sometimes aggressively confrontive. In the Quechua communities of Peru and Bolivia, the thought of total equality between people makes it hard for a person to be named a leader because a person named to fill a position of leadership is then seen as superior to the rest.

There is more freedom to express God’s truth in the Latin community. It is accepted that religion will question and challenge the culture, and not vice versa. The Bible is seen as authoritative, and the bearers of truth (pastors and elders) who have proven themselves with integrity are listened to because they are recognized as speaking God’s word. People do not worry about being politically correct when there is an opportunity to share God’s message with an individual or a group that needs to hear it. Every meeting for worship has an evangelistic component. Latin American Friends call for a decision and a response to be made about the message that was just given. Latin Friends take seriously the doctrine that the day of visitation is limited, and every chance is given for people to come into fellowship with Christ.

More than once, visitors from the contemplative silent persuasion of Friends have felt that silent worship was lacking in Peruvian Friends churches. Their attempts to introduce silent worship in the local context were unconvincing, though, perhaps because they were not clear enough about the role of the Holy Spirit in the silence. These visitors over-emphasized the “form” of the silence over the power of God, which Peruvian Friends already understand. The Latin Friends were gracious to their visitors, but they wondered how one could express what God is doing in their life by sitting in silence. Bible school students wondered, “If it were just us, silence would be appropriate. But
what about people who come into the meeting off the street?” One pastor pondered, “Will those who still do not know the Shepherd’s voice miss the opportunity to hear the message of hope because we have kept silent? For me to keep silent is to hoard the message of Christ’s universal salvation for myself.” The strong sense of duty to evangelize compels people to invest the gift that has been freely given to make a profit for the Kingdom. Our Friends from Central and South America sense an urgency to communicate God’s love for their community so that all would share equally in God’s blessing. Their numbers are growing because of it.

It would be wrong to conclude that Peruvian Friends are unfamiliar with meditative worship. Worship happens all the time. People worship as they travel, as they work, and as they play. People constantly meditate and listen to hear God’s will. Prayer and devotional times are spent with family and visitors each morning when they wake up and each evening as they retire. God is constantly on their minds. There is peace about having a personal, conversant relationship with the Almighty Creator of the universe in contrast to fearfully attempting to appease all of the gods of their former beliefs. Friends beam with a visual expression of a changed life. Christians are happier and more at peace with their world than are non-Christians. This is not to say their lives are easy, but that they live with the assurance that they follow the one who gives life, and who brings hope to every struggle.

Our Latin brothers and sisters live with a holy expectation that God will intervene in situations where God’s will is sought. Life is seen as a struggle in the physical world with all of its hardships and injustices. Life is also seen as a battle in the spiritual realm. Spiritual warfare is a reality where humans are asked to take their place in the Lamb’s War. Prayer for the sick or the troubled is offered, often with miraculous results. God’s name is praised, and people are brought into the Kingdom of Light.

Music is important and is very expressive. It is not uncommon to see tears during the singing of hymns or choruses. Music and prayer are the keys to the worshiper’s heart. Prayer is out loud with everyone speaking simultaneously. It is very common to see whole congregations on their knees thanking God for leading them in the paths of righteousness. Prayer is the very expression of corporate worship and communion. It is both an individual expression of the heart and a corporate expression of unity before God.
Intervisitation to encourage each other in the faith is valued by Latin American Friends in every country, including the United States. Visiting between churches has kept this community connected as a body. They strongly identify with who they are, regardless of what country they are from. There is an unspoken camaraderie that is felt because of a shared faith, regardless if one is from Cuba, Mexico, or Honduras.

The Quarterly Meeting system is alive and well in Latin America, whereas it is languishing in the USA. The Quarterly Meeting system speaks to the need for accountability and mutual support. Just as an individual cannot survive on his or her own, a church that isolates itself from the rest of the universal body of Christ will also wither and die. Quarterly Meetings are for the most part joyous affairs that have taken the place of the fiesta in secular society. It is very common at Quarterly Meetings to have business meetings where situations in churches are discussed openly by all. Clearness is sought, and advice is given for the benefit of everyone represented. The power of God is over all, and Christ’s wisdom triumphs, even in the most isolated communities where there is little communication from the outside world.

On the surface, Friends from other cultures may not appear to be faithful to the distinctives that many Friends in our predominantly Euro-American culture hold dear, but nonetheless they are true Friends as they listen to God speaking to their hearts in their own cultural context and seek to obey. There is a common denominator that lights the heart of Friends from around the world as we gather. It is the fact that we are called Friends and we do what Christ has commanded us to do (Jn. 15). Our Hispanic Friends from North, Central, South America, and the Caribbean see themselves as equal brothers and sisters in the Friends Family as they have encountered Christ in personal and real ways. In no way do our brothers and sisters feel that Friends’ doctrine was forced on them by others, but that the Holy Spirit has proved God’s truth in their contexts. They are grateful for the people who have pioneered into their communities to share the Light. Rather than consider our Latin Friends “lesser,” or that they be called “Mestizo” (which means “half breed), let us take our place with them as brothers and sisters together and consider the place that our Spanish-speaking Friends from North, Central, and South American descent have at the Supper of the Lamb. All people come with honor into the banquet hall. No one is considered lesser or greater than anyone else. All people, from every tribe and nation, all sit together, and all partake equally of the blessings that Christ offers because Christ has called each of us equally to himself by name.