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Quaker Worship from "The New Westminster Dictionary of Liturgy & Worship"

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Quaker Worship

Worship after the manner of The Religious Society of Friends may have a variety of

expressions, but mostly it is characterized as a time of attentive waiting upon God in which spoken and expressive ministries are welcome, but not the primary focus. The central concern is to open oneself to the transforming presence of God, believing that therein abides the well-spring and essence of spiritual vitality. At times this endeavour is referred to as silent worship, but silence is less of a goal than the facilitative setting within which the divine will can be attended, discerned and obeyed. Worship is the adoring response of the heart to God. Independent of place and form, authentic worship will always be 'in spirit and in truth' (John 4.21–24); and Friends affirm it is into such a reality that God seeks to draw all who are willing.

In addition to corporate worship, Friends have long emphasized a private life of personal devotion. It is said of George Fox that he could have reproduced the entirety of the scriptures from memory, and John Woolman's reading the Bible after 'First Day' meetings for worship as a six-year-old sensitized his heart to spiritual matters at a very early age. Likewise, the prayer-lives of Fox and other Friends have been legendary. William Penn said of George Fox, 'The most awful, living, reverent frame I ever felt or beheld, I must say, was his in prayer.' In addition, the religious writings of such Friends as Hannah Whitall Smith, William Penn, George Fox, John Woolman, Thomas Kelly and Richard Foster have been favourites among the classics of devotional literature, and Friends have long advocated the practice of setting a special time apart for prayer as a daily discipline. Friends seek to cultivate a spiritual awareness of God's presence and workings in the world, characterized as listening for the promptings of the Holy Spirit inwardly and discerning the voice of God coming through those around them. In so doing, the private life of devotion complements the corporate life of worship, and vice versa.

1. *Programmed and Unprogrammed Quaker Worship.* An attender of a Quaker meeting for worship may experience any number of approaches to worship, depending upon which group of Friends one joins. Within Friends' meetings and congregations in America, Africa and Latin America, the predominant form of worship has come to follow a 'low church' structure of worship, including the singing of hymns and worship choruses, the reading of scripture, the delivery of a sermon, and times of open worship, quiet waiting and prayer. This

approach to worship has come to be known as 'programmed', and about 80% of the world's 350,000 Quakers use some form of this more expressive approach. Programmed Friends normally make use of pastoral leadership, although the distinction between the clergy and laity is minimized, from the belief that every Christian is called to ministry. Friends do not ordain their ministers; they believe that *God* ordains, and that humans simply 'record' that the exercise of giftedness in public ministry attests to the reality of divine ordination unto gospel ministry. On this matter, Friends believe that God calls women as well as men to proclamational service and pastoral ministry, and they seek to affirm the sense of God's calling on people's lives as befits their experiences. Friends also do not view subsidized ministry as 'paid' ministry; rather, they view subsidy as the practical means by which one is 'released' to pursue one's calling to serve the meeting in ministry.

Despite the growth of pastoral Friends over the last century, the traditional 'meeting for worship after the manner of Friends', however, is 'unprogrammed'. The typical unprogrammed meeting for worship in Britain, Europe, America or Australasia will last about an hour, and it is characterized as a largely silent time of corporate waiting upon God. *Elders and others are expected to come to meeting prepared to share if they feel led, and the elders of the meeting will often sit upon a 'facing bench' at the front of the room. Vocal ministry tends to be brief within such a meeting, with subsequent contributions developing an emerging concern, providing a brief time for reflection between the contributions. Rather than come to meeting with a speech to be delivered, or rather than starting in on a new theme, the goal of vocal ministry is to be a means of furthering the divine word and message to the community of faith. Distinguishing a sense of leading to speak over and against a good idea to share is a weighty concern for Friends. Historically, as early Friends felt moved to speak – sometimes smitten with a sense of awe regarding the message to be delivered – they trembled in the fear of the Lord, and hence were given the pejorative label, 'Quakers'. Vocal ministry within the unprogrammed tradition of Friends has varied in its characteristics from biblical homilies, to sing-song exhortations, to social-reform admonitions, to meditative reflections, and yet one common feature persists. Attenders view

the meeting as a participatory gathering in which all have access to the living word of God, and they hold that all should be willing to speak if led to do so. Where it is felt that God has indeed led within the meeting – both in the silence and through the vocal ministry – this is called a ‘gathered’ meeting for worship. It cannot be manipulated or predicted; it is a spiritual reality, which can only be experienced and embraced when it happens.

At times, Friends have met together and have shared with each other from their respective traditions with much benefit extending in all directions. This has led in some instances to a ‘semi-programmed’ modification of either approach. Times of corporate singing, scripture reading, and prepared speaking at times are added to an unprogrammed meeting as is felt to be serviceable; and space is created for quiet waiting upon God within the programmed meeting for worship, often before or after the message, or both. Either way, it would be a mistake to regard silent worship as a ‘formless form’ to be implemented strategically. Silence creates the space within which to listen to God, and because it is fragile, it is respected among Friends. Worship is both expressive and impressive. In the meeting for worship we express our love for God and receive God’s love for us. The priority of worship, therefore, is to open our lives to God’s saving-revealing work – whether it comes to us in the spoken word, the music or the silence – and to respond faithfully to its transforming effect within.

2. Historical Developments among Friends. Historically, the Quaker approach to worship was anticipated by Christian contemplative traditions in north-west England in the mid-seventeenth century. Groups of people had begun to gather in silent waiting on the Lord, calling themselves ‘Seekers’, and it was among these gatherings that George Fox and other early Quaker leaders exercised their early ministries in the 1650s. As England had come through a bitter century and a half of civil struggle in which religion was wielded as a pawn by Roman Catholics, Anglicans and Puritans alike, emphasis upon the authentic and unmediated worship of God was a welcome balm for many. George Fox, Robert Barclay, William Penn and others proclaimed the recovery of primitive Christianity and, in that sense, the Quaker movement was inspired by restorationist concerns. Early Friends were critical of institutionalizing tendencies within

Christianity, and they sought to recover apostolic Christianity as a Spirit-based reality rather than an organizational one. In these respects, they saw themselves as challenging not only the established churches, but the Reformers as well. In the implementing of attentive waiting upon the Holy Spirit in worship, Fox sought to recover the experiential setting out of which the prophets of old produced the inspired scriptures, and the act of meeting together for worship marked aspirations of drinking from the spring-waters of the inspirational fountain rather than its collected pools.

Quakers grew rapidly, numbering as many as 10,000 by 1660 and 50,000 by 1700. The movement especially took root in America, where the granting of a large portion of land to William Penn (Pennsylvania) became a site in which Friends attempted to erect a society patterned after the kingdom of God and the teachings of Jesus, and it was known as ‘the Holy Experiment’. Here the Quaker movement flourished, and Quaker worship developed into its classical form of quietism. With the American revivalist movement in the late-nineteenth century, however, Friends in the midwest assisted in the endeavour to bring spiritual renewal and social reform, and this led to the introduction of prepared messages, singing and the emergence of pastoral ministry among Friends. Where revivalist meetings in America served to heal the nation after the Civil War, Quaker revivalist preachers and travelling ministers eventually settled down as pastors and teachers within the new meetings that were springing up throughout Ohio, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Idaho, Oregon and California. These regions have since become centres of evangelical and pastoral Quakerism, and the fruit of their missions work in the twentieth century has been the primary factor in the doubling of the membership of Friends in the same period.

3. Quaker Convictions about Worship. In addition to the above convictions of Friends as to the spiritual and unmediated character of authentic worship, Friends also hold several other beliefs. The first regards the character of sacramentality, wherein it is seen not as a liturgical or an instrumentalistic act, but as an incarnational reality. A common misconception is that Friends do not believe in *baptism and *communion, but this is not the case. Friends believe that baptism is essential for Christian living, but they believe the baptism of Jesus –

by fire and by Spirit – is experienced as a factor of faithful abiding in Christ spiritually. Likewise, communion after the manner of Friends is central to the life of the Spirit, and the real presence of Christ is encountered wherever two or three are gathered in his name (Matt. 18.20) and where the faithful open themselves to God's transforming love in their lives (John 15.1–15). The true outward sign of the church is likewise the changed and changing lives of believers. The 'fruits of the Spirit' (Gal. 5.22–24) provide the most telling measure of authentic Christianity, and it is by persons' loving character and deeds that the authentic followers of Jesus are recognized (John 13.34). In these ways, Friends believe authentic sacramentality is incarnational rather than ritualistic, and that the truest outward sign of the authentic church will always be the incarnational measure.

A second conviction about worship is that human access to God is unmediated and apprehended by faith inwardly. Christ alone is the true priest, and while humans carry out a variety of ministries on behalf of Christ, the goal of ministry is always to draw people to the saving, revealing and healing work of Christ. For these reasons, Friends seek to diminish all else in order to heighten the sense of the divine presence within the meeting for worship. While room is made for expressions of worship, Friends resist tendencies to coerce or manipulate worship experiences by others, and for this reason consider even their structured approaches to worship non-liturgical. Such can lead to an individualistic approach to worship, but at the core of this testimony is the belief that it is God who gathers participants in worship, and the power of the corporate worship experience roots in transcending oneself and being open and responsive to the divine initiative. The simplicity of architecture and plain furnishings typifying Quaker meeting houses reflect this concern. All else is diminished in order to focus on the singular priority of the divine presence in the midst.

A third Quaker conviction about worship is that the Spirit of the risen Christ continues to lead the church (John 14–16) as the centre of normative NT Christianity, and this informs the meeting for worship in which business is conducted. The Quaker decision-making process roots in the proclamation of George Fox that 'Christ is come to teach his people Himself', and Friends have sought to take this conviction seriously. As well as seeking to live in faithful responsiveness to Christ's leadings personally,

Friends have developed an impressively effective approach to corporate discernment in which the clerk of the business meeting will articulate the issue, invite contributions from all sectors of the membership (even dissenting ones), call for a time of threshing the chaff from the kernels and finally suggest a common 'sense of the meeting'. While critics of such a deliberative approach claim a voting system of judgement can be more expeditious, it should be made clear that there is nothing as inefficient as a divided group – especially over important matters. Further, the goal is not decision-making primarily; rather, the need to make corporate decisions is seen as an occasion wherein to come together and learn discernment, wisdom and prayerful searching within a community of faith. Neither is decision-making after the manner of Friends to be regarded simplistically as a 'consensus' process alone. The goal is to come together around a common sense of a divine leading, and such an aspiration is rooted squarely in seeing the endeavour as a worship event in which humans listen for God's present leadings.

Paul N. Anderson, 'Was the Fourth Evangelist a Quaker?' *Quaker Religious Thought* LXXVI, 1991, 27–43; Robert Barclay, *Barclay's Apology in Modern English*, ed. Dean Freiday, Newberg, OR 1967/1991; Francis B. Hall (ed.), *Quaker Worship in North America*, Richmond, IN 1978.

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