

## THE NEW CHURCH ORDER

As a result of the early Quakers' preaching mission, hundreds of worshipping fellowships were gathered. These gospel fellowships were the starting point for the gathering of a great people. But George Fox saw that the great work to which he had been called was to go farther than restoring the lost gospel worship and gospel fellowship. He saw that "all that receive this gospel, the power of God unto salvation, in their hearts, receive Christ, (the power of God,) and his government and order in the power," (8:207) and he asserted that "preaching of the gospel of Christ Jesus is to the intent that all may come to be heirs of the gospel, ... and to be heirs of Christ and of his government" (BII:241).

Margaret Fell shared Fox's vision of the restoration of the New Covenant church and of the church order that belongs to it. She wrote, "The Lord Jesus Christ is come down from heaven and manifested again in his spirit in the hearts of his people, and [he] is recovering and restoring again his pure and his holy church ... He is become the head of the corner of this building, his holy church and house, which house are we, which he is rearing and building." Again, "This is the great work which the Lord is working in this his day, and the spiritual building which he is rearing and setting up, and he hath put his hand to the work; and when he worketh who can [hinder] it?"<sup>29</sup>

The "great people" that Fox saw was to be raised up by the power of the gospel was not, in his vision, to be a great *sect* or a great *denomination*, but a restoration of God's people in the New Covenant, which would be ordered by the order that belongs to the gospel and that covenant.

Fox said that in the apostasy "the gospel order was lost amongst them, and the government of Christ and his worship ... And therefore now the gospel order is to be set up again, and the government of Christ Jesus." (8:60) But those who received the everlasting gospel became gathered into this church order. In one of Fox's sermons he declared, "as ye come to the new covenant and into the order of the glorious gospel, there is a coming up again from this apostasy and beholding one another's comely order in the gospel of life."<sup>30</sup>

Elsewhere he speaks of the gospel "in which ... is an everlasting perfect fellowship and order, which will stand when all others are gone." (8:157) *How* does the *gospel* lead into this perfect church order? In his *Journal*, he asserted that "all the children of the new covenant, that walk in the new and living way, hear Christ their Prophet, that God has raised up, and anointed to be their

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<sup>29</sup> Margaret Fell, *A Brief Collection...*, pp. 321-322, 253.

<sup>30</sup> Fox, "Wheeler Street Sermon" (1680) in *Early Quaker Writings*, ed. Hugh Barbour and Arthur Roberts (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1973), p. 510.

Teacher and Priest. So now, God doth speak to his people by his son, as he did in the apostles' days. The Lord is come to teach his people himself ... to bring them off all the world's churches, to the church in God, which Christ the heavenly man is head of" (BII:296).

What does Fox mean by "the church in God" and "the church of which Christ is the head"? He and other Quakers made a distinction between the "gathered churches," which were voluntary associations organized by religious purposes, and the "gospel fellowship and order" that was being given to them through faith in Jesus Christ and his gospel. Early Friends did not consider themselves one of the many "gathered churches," although they also stood outside the national churches that were established by law and maintained and ordered by the civil authority.

The Quakers and the gathered churches such as the Baptists were allies in the crusade for religious freedom and the right of voluntary association, but the Quakers were calling people into the church in God of which Christ is the head, and they addressed this call also to those who boasted that their church order was based on Scripture, or who trusted in the stability furnished by charismatic leaders. On the statue memorializing Mary Dyer, on Boston Common and elsewhere, the inscription is that she died for the sake of "religious freedom," but I think Mary Dyer would be very surprised at this inscription. It was not for religious freedom that she died, but for the sake of bearing witness to the truth of this gospel that was being recovered and preached again, and for the church that was brought into existence by the power of the gospel.

As part of their mission to the gathered churches, early Friends addressed a number of pieces of evangelical writing to them. Thus Francis Howgill, who had been through the gamut of these groups, and had never been satisfied with his experience in them, wrote an essay entitled "Lamentation to the Scattered Tribes." And Fox wrote (in "To All That Would Know the Way to the Kingdom"), "the church in God is not in imitation, gathered from the letter of Scripture, ... but they who are born again of the immortal seed, by the word of God, which lives and endures for ever, ... which word is God, which word became flesh and dwelt among us; so he (Christ) is the head of the church ... . It is a lie to speak and say, the steeple-house is the church; or to say, they that are gathered by the form of the letter, is the church of God." (4:18) In an early controversy with a preacher in Leicester (1648), Fox "told him the Church was the pillar and ground of Truth, made up of living stones, living members, a spiritual household which Christ was the head of ... in God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Ni:24).

Fox never tired of repeating his testimony that both the gospel and the gospel order are not human inventions. "And this gospel may every one testify unto, and to the order of it, that it is not of man, nor by man, neither is it received but by the revelation of Jesus Christ, sent down from heaven" (8:78).

He called gospel order “the order which the Lord’s power and Spirit hath brought forth among his people,” (BII:417) and in a time of controversy he wrote to Friends that “The Lord God hath with his Spirit sealed to you, that your meetings are of his ordering and gathering, and he hath owned [recognized] them, by honoring you with his blessed presence in them ... He hath sealed your meetings by his Spirit to you, and that your gathering together hath been by the Lord, to Christ his Son, and in his name: and not by man” (BII:436-437). Fox is here referring to “meetings for worship, ... quarterly, monthly, and other meetings.”

So we may conclude that “the church in God” is one that is gathered to God and Christ by the power of the everlasting gospel and by the gospel experience. The order of this church is the order that belongs to the gospel. This new church order is not a technique for building a religious society which has validity apart from Christ and his gospel. Gospel order cannot be grafted onto a religious society that does not have Jesus Christ and his gospel at its center. “And therefore,” says Fox, “such as disobey the gospel of Christ, the <sup>power</sup> ~~poser~~ of God to salvation, and will not receive it, nor believe in it, how can they receive the order of the gospel of Christ, the heavenly man, from whence the gospel comes; or to receive him to reign in their hearts?” (8:207).

We know that in recent years there have been a number of people who have thought that the way Quakers reach decisions and carry on their business is so good that it ought to be more universally used, even in the board meetings of banks and insurance companies and in all sorts of political organizations and the like. I don’t think George Fox would have been very enthusiastic about this sort of program. Again, there are some Quaker yearly meetings in which Jesus Christ can hardly be called the center, and they have a lot of trouble with questions of order. This creates a kind of backlash, and so there are two parties in this kind of yearly meeting: the order party, and the disorder party, order versus anarchy, and a lot of tension between them. But neither party is much interested in a gospel foundation for the order of the church. They are not concerned about Fox’s testimony for “the church in God, which Christ the heavenly man is head of.” Isaac Penington is equally clear on this question: “That which distinguishes [the church] from all other assemblies and gatherings; ... [is the] presence of the head with her ... This none hath but the true church.”<sup>31</sup>

In the second version Fox wrote of his sermon on Firbank Fell, in 1652, he declared that Christ “was come, and is come, the same today as he was yesterday and so for ever, a Leader, a Governor, a Prophet, a Bishop, a Shepherd and a Priest [and a King], to exercise his Heavenly Offices in his people, his living members, his church, which he is the holy head of.”<sup>32</sup> Fox’s

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<sup>31</sup> Isaac Penington, *Works*, 4th ed. (Sherwoods, NY: David Heston, 1862), vol. II, p. 478.

<sup>32</sup> *Narrative Papers of George Fox*, ed. Henry J. Cadbury (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1972), p. 168.

last General Epistle to all the meetings in London Yearly Meeting, in 1690, is addressed to “All Friends everywhere, that are alive to God through Jesus Christ, and are living members of Christ the holy Head.” In this epistle he wrote that “the Lord God ... hath settled all his people upon the living, holy rock and foundation ... and gathered [them] into the name of Jesus Christ ... He, their salvation and their living head, is felt in the midst of them,” and he speaks of Christ as prophet, shepherd, bishop, priest, king, and minister (BII:497-498). At Firbank Fell he declared that we know Christ as the head of the church when we know him in all his offices, and he was still saying this at the end of his life.

In an earlier lecture we noted that in Fox’s view, Quaker worship in the name of Jesus is a *testimony* for Christ. In like manner, he sees that the church in God, of which Christ is the head, can also serve as a testimony for Christ. The church itself, the way it is put together on the basis of this experience of Christ as present in all his offices, leads people to know Christ and to receive him. So he says, “keep up your testimony in the power of Christ, for the church that is made of living stones, (which he is the head of) ... a spiritual household, a royal priesthood ... who are of the church that is in God; gathered by the power and spirit of Christ to him ... who is the heavenly and spiritual head of his church” (8:84). “Keep your ancient testimony for the church which is in God, the living members, which Christ, the spiritual man, is the holy head of, and your heavenly rock and foundation” (7:332).

In what I have presented to this point, I have tried to show that the new church order which we find in the early Quaker community is not an added gimmick, but is rather the necessary and inevitable consequence of preaching the everlasting gospel. As Quakers ceased to preach the everlasting gospel to the inhabitants of earth, their understanding of gospel order became dim and finally disappeared altogether. Some vestiges of this gospel order remain in the Quaker structure, but they are now accounted for in various ways without any reference to the gospel foundation on which they were originally founded. Many good Quaker practices that had been firmly established on the gospel foundation have eroded away and disappeared, because they were being maintained on the basis of a tradition that was slowly fading away.

Since 1974 I have traveled extensively to bring the everlasting gospel that Fox preached to a wide variety of groups, and I have always requested a minimum of at least two sessions: one to speak of the everlasting gospel and the second to speak of gospel order. In nearly all of these sessions on gospel order, I contrasted Rufus Jones’s modern view of Quaker church order with the views of Fox as revealed in his writings. Jones considered it “the mark of the wisdom and sanity of George Fox that, mystic and idealist as he was, he faced the facts of life ... He came to see that disembodied spiritual movements cannot succeed and do a permanent work in the world; and when the hour came for it

he took the lead in organizing the Society of Friends for its expanding mission ... It was in some degree a surrender of the original ideal.”<sup>33</sup>

Now let us look at Fox’s own words on this question. It is true that he did not *begin* to preach about gospel order. At Firbank Fell he did not say anything about Christ as orderer, and in fact that office of Christ did not come into his vocabulary for some years. But in at least three statements he asserted that he first went around the country to lay the gospel foundation, and then traveled again to get Friends to become gathered into gospel order on this foundation. In one such account he stated that God had “sent me forth by his everlasting power, first to declare his everlasting gospel, and then after people had received the gospel, I was moved to go through the nation, to advise them to set up the men’s meetings, and the women’s, ... that all that had received Christ Jesus, might so walk in him, and possess his government in the church ... Then men and women are heirs of the order of the gospel, which is from heaven” (8:61). This statement implies that when Fox was preaching the gospel, he knew that he would eventually return to these same people, telling them to be gathered into an order which would be sufficient for all their needs as the church of Jesus Christ.

In another place he said, “First I was sent out by the Lord God, ... to preach the everlasting gospel, the power of God, ... which gospel I received not of man, nor by man, but of the Lord Jesus Christ ... And so after I had received this, and preached it, and many thousands were come into it, ... then by the same power, and spirit, and light, I was moved to advise, to the setting up [of] the men’s Monthly and Quarterly Meetings, and the women’s meetings. So that all in the power of God, the gospel ... [might] keep this heavenly order of the gospel” (8:79-80). And in the *Journal* he wrote, “As I had been moved of the Lord to travel in his power round this nation, ... to preach the everlasting gospel, .... so I was afterwards moved to travel, in the same heavenly power, about the nation again ... to recommend to Friends the setting up of the quarterly and monthly meetings ... that all, both male and female, who had received the gospel, the Word of eternal life, might come into the order of the gospel, brought forth by the power of God” (BII: 247). The gathering together of the people into an orderly, disciplined community was not an afterthought on Fox’s part, but it is something that is implicit in the gospel he preached, and therefore was inevitable.

In my collection of *Notes on George Fox*, the three subjects on which I have accumulated the most references are the offices of Christ, shadow and substance, and gospel order. When I started to make these notes, none of those three subjects meant anything to me; they were not subjects that I’d ever thought about. The reason they have become so important to me is that, as I

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<sup>33</sup> Introduction to Wm. C. Braithwaite, *Second Period of Quakerism* (New York: Macmillan, 1919), p. xxviii.

kept reading Fox and making notes, I found that these are the subjects he was talking about all the time.

Many people have been disappointed when they have heard me speak about gospel order. They had expected that I would furnish them with a detailed description of a system of church organization, which could serve as a kind of ready-reference manual, a practical guide for Quakers in conducting the affairs of the church. But gospel order is not a system of rules for ordering a religious organization, like *Roberts' Rules of Order*. The central, operative principle of gospel order is the presence of Christ in the midst of his church, manifesting himself in his many offices. There can be no gospel order apart from the presence of the living Christ. Gospel order comprehends everything that belongs to the work and mission of the church. It is not simply a method of conducting business meetings, or providing lubrication for the many corporate activities of the church.

We can mention some of the most important components of gospel order. In this series we have already considered worship, the gospel message and gospel preaching, and we will be taking up the ministry, the new righteousness, and cross-bearing. Other parts of gospel order are the corporate testimonies on moral issues and the maintenance of discipline within the gospel fellowship.

I believe that the most important church activity within the compass of gospel order is the work of preaching the everlasting gospel to the inhabitants of the earth. The foundation of gospel order is the gospel, and this gospel foundation cannot be laid just once with the expectation that it will furnish a foundation for all future generations. If the gospel is not preached, it gradually ceases to be the rock and foundation on which the whole superstructure of the church is built. The gospel is not “the power of God” unless it is proclaimed.

Another feature of gospel order is what Fox calls “the liberty of the gospel.” In my personal experience I have come to set a high value on this element in gospel order. In modern Quaker life there has come to be a misunderstanding about the relationship of discipline to liberty. Many Friends have come to believe that if we have discipline in the church we cannot have liberty, and if we have liberty we cannot have discipline. But Fox believed that those who are gathered into a disciplined and ordered gospel fellowship under the rule of Christ will experience the maximum liberty that human beings are capable of knowing. Thus he urged Friends to “stand fast in that liberty wherewith Christ hath made you free, by his light, grace, truth, spirit, faith, and everlasting gospel, the everlasting power of God, which is an everlasting freedom and liberty above all bondage and false fallen liberties and freedoms.” (8:181) And in the *Journal* he exhorted Friends to “keep in the power, that ye may stand up for your liberty in Christ Jesus, males and females, heirs of him and of his gospel, and his order. Stand up for your liberty in the gospel ... for if ye lose it, and let another spirit get over you, ye will not so soon regain it.” (BII:250) Surely Friends today can understand these last words, for as we have lost the

gospel foundation for church discipline, we have lost this sense of liberty and in its stead we have anarchy.

I have not commented here about the actual structure of interrelated meetings in the traditional Quaker organization. I find that some Friends regard the structure of Preparative, Monthly, Quarterly, and Yearly Meetings as the real meaning and content of gospel order. But it is quite possible to have these outwardly visible aspects of gospel order, and at the same time *not* have the presence of Christ and the gospel foundation for them. The orderly rules for holding these meetings are not immutable, and are more in the nature of social conventions that can be revised and rearranged from time to time.

However, I think it is important to note that the arrangement of meetings that was set up in the seventeenth century served to avoid a totally congregational system of church order on the one hand, in which each particular worshipping fellowship had a great deal of autonomy, and on the other hand, a hierarchy that ruled the church from the apex of an organizational pyramid. The aim of the original Quaker system was to make it possible for Friends to have church fellowship on a local, regional, and national level. These levels of religious association can be visualized as three concentric circles, and at the center of each circle is the living Christ who is the living Lord and orderer of the whole body. In the twentieth century, this system has deteriorated quite rapidly, and has been replaced by a strictly congregational system at one end of the spectrum, and by a central bureaucracy at the other. What we are coming to is a society in which the local worshipping congregations are related to each other only through a central bureaucracy, and this is exactly what Fox and his associates were trying their best to avoid. Fox's vision of a functioning Quaker community, based on this gospel foundation that we have been discussing, is well summed up in this 1674 epistle:

[Friends] ought in all their meetings, that gather in the name of Jesus, to wait upon the Lord for wisdom, counsel, and understanding, that by it they may be ordered and directed in his holy service and business ... as they are directed and ordered by the Lord's power and wisdom, ... in the name of Jesus Christ, for he is in the midst of them, their prophet, priest, teacher, shepherd, bishop, and counsellor, opening with his heavenly power, feeding with his heavenly food, counselling with his heavenly counsel, ... overseeing them with his holy power and spirit ...

[Friends are] to wait upon the Lord; and feeling his power and spirit to lead them, and order them to his glory; that so whatsoever they may do, they may do it to the praise and glory of God, and in the order of the gospel ... which is the power of God (8:70-71).