

THE NEW MINISTRY

In 1981, a group of Friends gathered at the Quaker Hill Conference Center for a “Consultation on the Ministry.” The group included Quakers from England and from several varieties within American Quakerism. The report of the proceedings of this gathering³⁴ is well worth study, and its monograph on the history of recording ministers in London Yearly Meeting is the most comprehensive treatment of this subject that I have seen. The author, Patricia Ann Brown, quotes the statement of Lucia Beamish that “the most serious effect of the Quietist spirit was its influence on the Quaker ministry.”

Since the publication of John Stephenson Rowntree’s prize essay, “Quakers Past and Present,” in 1858, there have been several schemes and programs for rejuvenating the Quaker ministry. The aim most of these schemes has been to reduce the influence of the quietist spirit on that ministry. The major assumption has been that ministry in the Quietist Quaker tradition has undesirable features due to a basic flaw that has been present in Quakerism from the beginning.

At one extreme, this has led to the abolition of the whole conception of ministry as a vocation to which some members may be called. There are at least eleven American yearly meetings in which there are no recorded ministers at all, and four others in which the number of those recognized as being called to exercise a gift in the vocal ministry is less than two per yearly meeting.

At the other extreme, there are fifteen American yearly meetings that, in 1981, reported they had a total of more than a thousand ministers, most of whom are engaged in the work of pastor or co-pastor in some local congregation. Most of these recorded ministers are fulfilling the familiar role of “pastor of the congregation.” Because so many Quaker ministers are actually functioning as pastors, the terms “minister” and “pastor” are beginning to be used as if they were interchangeable.

Thus we have two kinds of Quakers, pastoral and non-pastoral—those with “ministers” and those with no (or very few) ministers. Both groups have been trying to rid themselves of the last vestiges of the Quietist spirit, and both have largely succeeded in doing this. But because both groups have assumed that the Quietist spirit has its roots in the teaching of George Fox and early Friends, they have become emancipated from the spirit of Quietism with a minimum of help from Fox. The flight from Quietism has not helped us to understand what Quaker ministry was like before it came under the influence of Quietism.

³⁴ *Friends Consultation on Ministry*, Nov. 19-22, 1981, (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1981).

I think there has never been a time in Quaker history when the Quakers have been more explicit in their rejection of their heritage as it pertains to a distinctive understanding and practice of Christian ministry. I'll not take time here to spell out in detail the particular manner in which both pastoral and non-pastoral Friends have bypassed what can be learned about Christian ministry from Fox and his vision.

In my experience, the great difficulty of speaking about Christian ministry to contemporary Quakers is that, although most are familiar with one or more of the several Quaker traditions relating to ministry, there are now very few who have knowledge from *experience* of the *itinerant, prophetic, non-professional* Quaker ministry. People have just never met a minister of the type that was characteristic of the Quaker ministry in the 18th or 19th centuries. In short, it is not possible today to observe at first hand this distinctive type of ministry that is itinerant, prophetic, and non-professional. We know about it only by hearsay.

My own experience of this kind of ministry has been limited to the small remnant of aging ministers who remained after the recording of ministers was abolished in London Yearly Meeting and most of the Friends General Conference. However, I had a good opportunity to see the Quietist version of this kind of ministry among Conservative Friends in England and North America, before the number of such ministers became greatly reduced in the last generation. Howard Brinton stated that during his lifetime the Quaker minister became practically extinct in Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, and his prediction that the distinctively Quaker minister is on the way out in other parts of the Friends community has proved to be correct.

At the present time the practice of worship and ministry varies so widely that visitors from one meeting to another often find themselves strangers and non-participants in an experience of Quaker worship outside their own tradition.

I have tried in these preliminary comments to put the subject into the context of the contemporary Quaker scene. My reason for doing this has been to stress the need to get beyond debating the merits or demerits of various types of Quaker ministry current among Friends today. Instead, I want to explore the implications for us today of the everlasting gospel that Fox preached, and especially to learn how it may bring us closer to the practice and experience of a living ministry.

George Fox believed that, as the everlasting gospel was preached and received again, all that had been lost since the apostles' days would be recovered; this included "the true ministry." It was said of Fox's ministry that "many through his ministry were turned from darkness to light, ... and

gathered to the true shepherd and bishop of their souls; for he did not preach himself, but Jesus Christ” (4:5-6). Fox declared that “the work of the ministry [is] to bring people to the knowledge of the son of God” (3:165). Looking back on thirty years of faithful service in the ministry, at a time when his leadership was under criticism, Fox wrote, “since I went forth, and forsook all things; I sought not myself, I sought you and his glory that sent me; and when I turned you to him, that is able to save you, I left you to him” (8:61). At a general meeting in 1658, in a sermon to Friends who were active in the ministry, he commented that “it is a weighty thing to be in the work of the ministry of the Lord God, and to go forth in that” (BI:425).

Both worship and ministry were weighty things to early Friends and to Friends in the 18th and 19th centuries, but how weighty are they today? I had occasion to ponder this more than forty years ago, while attending a yearly meeting of Conservative Friends in Ohio. A highly esteemed minister came to me and said that he would like to have an opportunity with me. This word “opportunity” has largely gone out of style among modern Friends, but in the old days and among the Conservatives it meant a time of worship and quiet in which there would be real communication, real communion. I knew enough Quaker history to know what I was being invited to. We sat in silence in one of the classrooms of the Friends boarding school in Barnesville, and after about fifteen minutes this Friend reached toward me and touched me, and he said, “It is wonderful thing to be called to the ministry of the gospel of Jesus Christ.” Then we sat silently for a few more minutes, and that was it. How often this must have happened in Quaker history: that an older minister took the trouble and the interest to reach out to a younger person and hold up to him how weighty it is to be called to the ministry of the gospel. This is something I have never forgotten.

In 1671 Fox tried to spell out what it means to be a minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ, in a paper called “The Call to the Ministry,” which unfortunately has never been published. In it he says, “First, they must be made alive by Christ, [who] is alive and liveth forevermore ... and quickened by him, before they ... can be ministers of the spirit, [and] be able to receive heavenly and spiritual things ... So, all must be called by Christ ... out of the world ... and receive his power, spirit and grace and truth and faith [before] they can preach Christ ... They must see him and know him and hear his voice, and have spiritual things from him ... and they must all receive their gifts from him for the work of their ministry ... It is Jesus Christ that doth make and ordain ... ministers by his power and spirit.”³⁵

This term “minister” covers a number of activities, and is not limited to vocal communications in regularly appointed meetings for worship. Fox had a concern for all the many kinds of ministry, and exhorted Friends to “mind that which is committed to you, as faithful servants, laboring in love; some

³⁵ Fox, Headley MSS, Cat. No. 8, 102F, p. 320

threshing, and some ploughing, and some to keep the sheep” (7:24-25). “And therefore all mind your gift, mind your measure; mind your calling and your work. Some speak to the conscience; some plough and break the clods; some weed out, and some sow; some wait [stand guard] that fowls devour not the seed. But wait all for the gathering of the simple-hearted ones; for ‘they that turn many to righteousness, shall shine for ever’” (7:18).

Fox pointed out that “there is difference betwixt Friends going into the world, and of coming among them that are come to silent meetings, and to feed there; for that which may be seasonable to the world, may not be to them” (7:128). In the earliest days of the Quaker movement, the work of the minister was mostly directed to “the world,” whereas in the 18th century the ministry was mostly, if not entirely, directed toward established and settled meetings of Friends. These are two quite different kinds of ministry and call for different approaches. In 1656 Fox wrote an “Exhortation to Friends in the Ministry” (BI:315-317) which is directed to those ministers who were constantly moving from place to place, breaking new ground and preaching the everlasting gospel to people who had never heard it before. This ministry involves engaging people who have never heard of Christ’s power to gather people to himself, his power to teach us the principles of righteousness, and his power to give us the ability to do the right. In Fox’s day as well as today, this preaching was hard work, breaking up the clods.

These ministering Friends were frequently exhorted by Fox to “stir up the gift of God” in them, and “always be ready to preach the word ... He that observes the wind or storms, will not sow the seed; and he that regards the clouds will not reap ... But the word of the Lord must be preached in season and out of season” (6:425). To a particular Friend in the ministry he wrote, “The Lord God of power give thee wisdom, courage, manhood, and boldness to thresh down all deceit. Dear heart, be valiant, and mind the pure spirit of God in thee, to guide thee up unto God” (7:113).

To Howgill and Burrough who were laboring in London he wrote, “Sow not sparingly”, and “stir abroad whilst the door is open ... Dear Francis and Edward, in the life of God wait ... that as good ploughmen, and good threshermen ye may be, to bring out the wheat” (7:131-132).

Toward the end of his life Fox became increasingly concerned that the ministry to “the world” should continue. But by this time there was a growing need for the kind of ministry that he called “keeping the sheep.” This latter ministry was primarily to the convinced. It also was prophetic, itinerant, and non-professional. It was not exclusively, or even primarily, exercised within the limits of the congregation of which the minister was a member. Such a person was known as a “public Friend”, which meant that his or her services as a minister were performed throughout the whole Society of Friends.

Very often these itinerant ministers undertook long journeys, which involved much more than just preaching in regular meetings for worship; they might also include special appointed meetings for youth or for the general public, meetings with families in their homes, and personal counselling. On such journeys a minister was usually accompanied by an elder, or by a younger or less experienced minister, and both the minister and the traveling companion carried credentials from the meetings of which they were members. Whether their ministry was to “the world” or to the settled and established meetings of Friends, this task involved strenuous work, sometimes undertaken under difficult traveling conditions.

I will not attempt to furnish a comprehensive description of this ministry, either to the world or to the church. But it was no light matter to be called to the ministry in either case. It took time and money, and involved making special arrangements for those times when family and business responsibilities would have to be accommodated to the work of the ministry. Among the earliest Quaker missionaries to the world were some who performed prodigious labors and traveled great distances. In some cases they were so much “on the road” that they were never members of any local congregation. Some were dependent for a subsistence allowance on funds raised by national collection. But the uncertainties and hardships of this vocation did not deter them.

It was said of Edward Burrough that for ten years he devoted all of his time to publishing Truth and reserved no time for himself at all. Robert Widders, a Friend from the north, was often a much-appreciated traveling companion of George Fox, and it was said of him that “he always put the Lord’s business before his own and so he never lost an inch of ground.” Those who ministered to the convinced were no less selfless in their devotion to the work of the ministry.

Eventually the mission to “the world” ceased to be a part of Quaker life, and the work of the ministry became limited to activity within the borders of the Society of Friends. Today in London Yearly Meeting and in many American yearly meetings there are no Quaker ministers of record. When members of these yearly meetings are asked why they have none who are recognized as having a special call to the ministry, they usually reply that “We are all ministers.” This explanation is apparently supposed to mean that all members and attenders are free to participate vocally in the meetings for worship, and seems to imply that in former times, when there were recorded ministers, the other members and attenders did not have equal freedom to speak in meeting—which was certainly not the case.

When we hear the declaration that “we are all ministers” we are not being told that every member now contributes the same unstinting labor and selfless dedication to the work of the ministry that was formerly contributed by Quaker ministers. At least, I do not find it possible to put that interpretation upon it.

These Quaker ministers were not a separate and ordained order of men and women. George Fox had said “Keep the ministers of the gospel equal brethren” (4:337), and this prophetic, itinerant, non-professional ministry was, he believed, the gospel ministry that belongs to the everlasting gospel and the new covenant. It ends forever the priestly office, and abolishes the dichotomy between priest and people, clergy and laity. It is that ministry which belongs to the new covenant worship, which has abolished both priest and ritual. Fox believed that this ministry was a direct consequence of preaching the gospel, and his hope for the future of the Quaker community was grounded in his hope that its ministry to the world and to the church would continue to gain in strength.

The weaknesses and failures of the Quaker movement were not all due to the influence of Quietism or the role played by elders. There was a much deeper and more profound cause: the winding down of the ministry to “the world,” and the concentration of Quaker ministry on nurturing the already convinced. Soon after the end of the 17th century, all the Quaker ministers were engaged in “watering” and none was engaged in planting. As a result of this shift of emphasis, what had been the main concern of this Quaker ministry—preaching the gospel—gradually faded into the background and then disappeared altogether.

Now that the everlasting gospel is being preached once more, this will certainly lead to a better understanding of the ministry that belongs to this gospel and to the new covenant. The preaching of this gospel has begun to stimulate interest in the nature of Quaker ministry, and this is sure to be the case wherever the everlasting gospel is preached and received.