

THE NEW WORSHIP

Over the years, the various groupings within the Quaker denomination have developed an amazing variety of worship practices, to such a degree that they often seem unrelated to one another. My purpose here is not to analyze the complex and confused state of Quaker worship, particularly in North America, nor to make a guess as to which of the current worship practices in the Society of Friends most nearly approximate the Quaker vision.

My purpose is rather to begin from a new starting point and to get a new perspective on the problems of contemporary Quakerism, and to bring something into the life of the Society of Friends today which is the heritage of all Quakers but has not survived in any living tradition. So let us take a look at the origin and nature of early Quaker worship.

George Fox maintained that the preaching of the everlasting gospel that had been lost “since the apostles’ days” would bring about the restoration of the true New Covenant worship, ministry, and church order that had been lost because the original gospel was lost. The first Quaker meetings for worship were composed of people who had heard and received this everlasting gospel and who were filled with a fervent desire to gather together in the name of Jesus to wait to feel his presence in their midst as their living teacher, leader, ruler, counsellor, and orderer.

Everyone who was convinced of the truth of the everlasting gospel began to worship in a new way, and they all ceased to worship in any other way. This gathering together “in the name of Jesus” to feel his living presence was the most visible and outward sign of conviction. When people were convinced to Quakerism in the seventeenth century, they weren’t invited to come down to the front of the auditorium to make a public confession that they had accepted Christ as their personal savior, or that they accepted as truth the message that had been preached. But the one thing they did do, the sign that they had received it, was to come into worshipping fellowships.

Conviction was not just an individual matter but led immediately to a corporate act of worship. Fox’s message was that “Christ has come to teach his *people* himself.” In his reports of his gospel preaching, Fox often concludes by saying that many were “convinced of the Lord’s everlasting Truth and are gathered into the name of Jesus, and sit under Christ their teacher and saviour” (Ni:241). He called these gatherings “gospel fellowships” and the worship they practiced he called “gospel worship.”

In a recent attempt to understand early Quaker worship, the book *Quaker Worship in North America*,²⁷ the author of the introduction, Maurice Creasey,

²⁷ Francis B. Hall, ed., *Quaker Worship in North America* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1978, a Faith and Life Study Book).

and the editor, Francis Hall, put forward the theory that the worship of early Friends was an oversimplification or abridgement of Christian worship as it has been practiced from the beginning. They believed that the simplicity of Quaker worship has been achieved by over-pruning, which has resulted in the impoverishment of what is now being called “traditional” Quaker worship, that is, a worship which has nothing to undergird it but a tradition. The shortcomings and failures of the more distinctively Quaker forms of worship are attributed to the excision of liturgical and homiletic elements of Christian worship, and the remedy is seen to lie in restoring these elements without destroying the freedom and spontaneity and prophetic spirit which are characteristic of Quaker worship at its best.

I will not here present a point by point refutation of this thesis; rather I will try to show that there is another approach to understanding the meaning of early Quaker worship. I do not think that early Quakers believed that, if the liturgical and homiletic elements were expunged from Christian worship, what remained would constitute the pure and unadulterated worship that God seeks from his New Covenant people. The seventeenth-century Quakers were not a reform movement for the restructuring of Christian worship. Their claim was that because the apostolic gospel had been lost, “the true worship hath been lost since the apostles’ days (7:323).

In 1658, Fox told a General Yearly Meeting of Friends that “In this night of apostasy, the pure religion and worship in Spirit ... were lost; but now they came to be set up again by Christ Jesus, his messengers and ministers of the gospel, as in apostles’ days. For as Christ sent his disciples to go and preach the gospel in all the world ... so now again, the everlasting gospel must be preached to all nations, ... that they may come into the pure religion, to worship God in Spirit and in truth, that they may know Christ Jesus, their way to God” (BI:420-421). In a “Warning to the Inhabitants of the City of Hamburg,” written in 1677 from Amsterdam, he wrote:

So 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 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 ... and to bring them off all the world’s worships, to worship God in Spirit and truth, which Christ set up above sixteen hundred years since (BII:296).

In the Old Covenant there was a prescribed way of worship, and the Old Testament has much to say about the temple, priests, and cultus of this worship. The New Testament has little to say by way of defining worship in the New Covenant. Jesus says it is not to be temple worship, and that the new worship which God seeks is “in spirit and truth.” But the new practice of Christian worship in the New Testament does not furnish a single definitive, normative pattern of worship for the guidance of the church in future ages.

Fox maintained that those who hear and receive the everlasting gospel are *constrained* to gather together in the name of Jesus to feel his living presence in all his offices. Thus the worship that belongs to the New Covenant is revealed and restored through the preaching of the gospel and the power of the gospel experience. One of the phrases that Fox often used when speaking of the Quaker community was “children of the New Covenant” and he says that the children of the New Covenant can be known and recognized because they gather in the name of Jesus and come to know him in all his offices. In “an epistle to be read amongst Friends” (1679) he wrote:

...[A]ll the children of the new covenant do gather together in the name of Christ Jesus ... And being gathered in the name of Jesus, he is in the midst of them the Prince of life and peace, and captain of salvation, and a prophet to open the book of conscience, and the book of the law, and [the] prophets, and [the] gospel, ... and a bishop to oversee them, and a heavenly shepherd to feed them in his heavenly pasture of life, and a heavenly King to rule in their hearts (8:166).

If the “gospel fellowship” or “children of the New Covenant” are those who meet or gather “in the name of Jesus,” then it is of prime importance to have a clear understanding of what it means to “meet in the name of Jesus.” There must be many millions of Christians who profess that when they practice Christian worship they are meeting in the name of Jesus. Are all these professing Christians “children of the New Covenant” and are they all gathered into the fellowship of the gospel and into gospel worship?

It seems reasonable to infer that when Fox speaks of meeting in the name of Jesus, he means that we must meet to feel the presence of the living Christ in our midst as a king to rule over us, a prophet to open to us, a priest to intercede for us, a shepherd to feed us, a bishop to oversee us. It follows that, in Fox’s view, if we do *not* gather together to feel the living presence of Christ in our midst in all his offices, then we are not meeting in the name of Jesus.” For Fox, meeting in the name of Jesus has a very definite content, and it has to do with the gospel experience, the experience of Christ as present, and present in a functioning way. I have found 22 references where Fox makes it clear that “meeting in the name” involves such a definite experience.

One of the outposts of early Quakerism was the handful of Danzig Quakers who had been first visited by William Ames in 1661. Danzig was the farthest east city in Europe where Quakers were known to exist, and they suffered frequent persecution. Although Fox was in Europe in 1677 as part of the missionary team to Holland and Germany, he was not able to travel as far as Danzig. But these remote Quakers in Poland were much on his mind, and in 1677 he wrote them a letter of love and encouragement in which he says:

I am glad the Lord hath witnesses in that city, to stand for his glory and name, and for Christ Jesus, the great Prophet, whom

God hath raised up, who is to be heard in all things; so that ye need none of the prophets, which men have raised up. Therefore, stand faithful to Christ Jesus, your Shepherd, that he may feed you; hear his voice, and follow him, who laid down his life for you: but follow none of the shepherds and hirelings, that are made by men ... Set up Christ to be your Counsellor and Leader, and then, ye will have no need of any of the counsellors and leaders of the world; for Christ is sufficient, whom God has given you. Set up Christ Jesus to be your Bishop and Overseer, who is sufficient to oversee, that you go not astray from God ... I am glad ye are come to own Christ Jesus, your High Priest, ... made higher than the heavens, as the church and the apostles owned him in their days ... and this do all the children of the new covenant witness, who walk in the new and living way (BII:286-287).

In 1685 the Danzig Friends were again under persecution and were imprisoned under close confinement on bread and water, and denied visits from their wives, children, and friends. So Fox wrote to the king of Poland, John III, on behalf of these “innocent and afflicted people,” and in his letter to the king he says:

Now this punishment is inflicted upon them only because they come together in the name of Jesus Christ, ... who is their Prophet, whom God hath raised up like unto Moses: whom they ought to hear in all things in this day of the gospel and new covenant; who went astray like scattered sheep, but now are returned to the chief Shepherd and Bishop of their souls ...

Now, O King! ... it seems hard to us, that any who openly confess Christ Jesus (yea, the magistrates of Danzic do the same,) should inflict those punishments upon an innocent and harmless people, ... only because they come together to serve and worship the Eternal God ... in Spirit and in truth which worship Christ Jesus set up sixteen hundred years ago (BII:422-423).

Those who were convinced of the truth of the gospel Fox preached were soon led to gather and to practice this new kind of worship, in which Christ becomes for all his people the new and living way to God as they come to know him in all his offices. Those who faithfully practice this worship are bearing a testimony for Christ and his gospel. This is why Fox was always exhorting Friends to keep up their meetings “in the name of Jesus,” for when they faithfully maintained their meetings “that Christ set up,” even in the face of persecution, they were doing something that was just as important as preaching the gospel.

So Fox writes “concerning our meetings and gatherings in the name of Jesus” that “We ... have felt Christ in the midst of us, and so, according to his promise, we feel him both prophet, priest and king, and lord and bishop, and

shepherd, who is the head of his church ... So, for our gatherings and meetings in the name of Jesus have we suffered imprisonment and spoiling of goods, and stoning, and beating and shedding of our blood, and life itself; so they have been purchased at a dear rate, even with life itself ... Therefore all in the Power of God keep your testimony in the name of Jesus for [these meetings].²⁸

Fox repeats this call over and over: “Keep your testimony ... for your worship in the spirit and in the truth, that Christ Jesus hath set up” (8:34); “keep up your testimony in the light, power, and spirit of God, for the worship, that Christ set up above sixteen hundred years since, in spirit and in truth, ... which is a worship that cannot be shaken.” (8:84) This is a testimony that the Quakers had before the peace testimony was formulated in 1660, and I think in Fox’s mind it was the most important of the Quaker testimonies. It is the thing that brings people to Christ, as they see that we are gathering together to feel his living presence in our midst.

It is hardly believable that early Friends would have endured so much persecution and hardship if they had thought the testimony they were bearing was merely to an auxiliary type of worship whose only justification was that it supplemented other types. Their advocacy of this worship was that it is the “worship that God seeks,” and that he expects from the New Covenant community. They understood it to be a universal worship which was good and true for all people everywhere and in all ages. In his lengthy and important Epistle 249, Fox describes the worship “which Christ set up, which every man and woman in the world must come to” as “the public and universal worship” (7:292). And in *Gospel Truth Demonstrated*, “God’s worship which Christ set up doth not change ... and this is the safe, perfect and infallible catholic or universal worship” (4:414).

We have been trying to understand the early Quaker movement as a new beginning, from a new starting point: the everlasting gospel that Fox preached, which he claimed was being recovered and proclaimed again after having been lost since the apostles’ days. When this recovered gospel was preached again, those who received it began at once to worship together in a new and revolutionary way, a way that Fox regarded as catholic and universal. Fox’s expectation that every man and woman in the world would come to it was based on his hope that the everlasting gospel would be preached again to all the inhabitants of the earth.

This worship in spirit and in truth is not something that can be detached from the gospel. We cannot reject the everlasting gospel and accept gospel worship. Fox would be skeptical about any movement to promote Quaker worship which was not at the same time a movement to preach the everlasting gospel again. Quakers in the seventeenth century who chose to meet in the name of Jesus and practice gospel worship in the face of bitter persecution did

²⁸ Fox, Richardson MSS, p. 282

not do so simply because they *preferred* the Quaker way of worship. They made this choice because they were convinced that Quaker worship was the true Christian worship that belongs to the New Covenant.

Today many Quakers take it for granted that only a small minority of people are likely to have a preference for a distinctively Quaker type of worship. Not even a majority of the members of the Society of Friends prefer it. Many Quaker parents today assume that the worship preferences of their children may not correspond to their own. As one Quaker parent explained to me as her twelve-year-old son went off to a church service, “John is a congenital Episcopalian.” It would never have occurred to early Friends that they were obligated to keep up their testimony for their worship for no other reason than that they happened to prefer it. As Fox put it, “all are to mind the worship that God seeks, and not the worship that men seek” (7:292).

I believe that the recovery and re-proclamation of the everlasting gospel that Fox preached will continue to cause people to gather in the name of Jesus to feel his presence in all his offices. We have found that there is a real hunger for gospel worship across the whole spectrum of contemporary Quakerism, and in a number of different situations, meetings in the name of Jesus have sprung up as a result of people’s conviction of the everlasting gospel.

George Fox saw that the gathering of gospel fellowships was the first step toward realizing a new kind of church order. During his entire ministry Fox was engaged in two major tasks. The first was preaching the everlasting gospel, and the second was helping and advising all who had received the gospel to become gathered into this new kind of church order which he called “gospel order,” the order that belongs to the gospel and the New Covenant. This “gospel order” is the subject of the next article in this series on Fox’s teachings.