

Introduction to Quakerism

Session 1: What is Quaker Worship?

Friends Meeting Cambridge, Oct. 8, 1:00 p.m.

The remaining dates are Sundays: Oct. 15, 1:00p.m.; Oct. 22, 29; Nov.5, 19 all at 6:45p.m.

Robert Barclay (1648-1690)

“For when I came into the silent assemblies of God’s people, I felt a secret power among them, which touched my heart. And as I gave way to it, I found the evil in me weakening, and the good lifted up. Thus it was that I was knit into them and united with them. And I hungered more and more for the increase of this power and life until I could feel myself perfectly redeemed.” (*Apology*, p. 254)

“When assembled, it should be the common task of one and all to wait upon God. It should be a time for turning away from one’s own thoughts and for suspending the imagination in order to feel the Presence of the Lord in the midst and to know a true gathering in his name according to his promise. Then, when everyone is thus gathered, and all meet together inwardly in their spirits, as well as outwardly in their persons, the secret power and the virtue of life are known to refresh the soul. It is there that the pure motions and breathings of God’s Spirit are felt to arise.” (*Apology*, ed. by Dean Freiday, p. 248)

Caroline E Stephen (1834-1909)

On one never-to-be-forgotten Sunday morning, I found myself one of a small company of silent worshippers who were content to sit down together without words, that each one might feel after and draw near to the Divine Presence, unhindered at least, if not helped, by any human utterance. Utterance I knew was free, should the words be given; and, before the meeting was over, a sentence or two were uttered in great simplicity by an old and apparently untaught man, rising in his place amongst the rest of us. I did not pay much attention to the words he spoke, and I have no recollection of their purport. My whole soul was filled with the unutterable peace of the undisturbed opportunity for communion with God, with the sense that at last I had found a place where I might, without the faintest suspicion of insincerity, join with others in simply seeking His presence. To sit down in silence could at the least pledge me to nothing; it might open to me (as it did that morning) the very gate of heaven. And, since that day, now more than seventeen years ago, Friends’ meetings have indeed been to me the greatest of outward helps to a fuller and fuller entrance into the spirit from which they have sprung; the place of the most soul-subduing, faith-restoring, strengthening, and peaceful communion, in feeding upon the bread of life, that I have ever known. (*Britain Yearly Meeting Faith and Practice*, Chap 2)

William Taber (1927-2005)

“The writings of George Fox and many other Friends all point to communion as central to Quaker worship. Although there was much preaching in the early Quaker meetings, it was all to one purpose: ‘to take the hearers to Christ and to leave them there.’ When we have once entered into that experience of communion, we realize that we did not create it through our action of worship; all we did was to enter a reality which has always been there from the beginning of time, waiting for us to join it, . . . It is always here within us and beside us, available to us as an invisible stream into which we can step at any time. The heart of worship is communion with this invisible but eternal stream of reality in which is the living and eternal Christ. Worship, then, is something which can be entered at any time of the day or night when we are ready to step into that stream, either through the grace of God or through our own great desire (which also involves the grace of God).” (*Four Doors to Meeting for Worship*, pp. 3-4)

John Woolman (1720-1772)

"I went to meetings in an awful frame of mind and endeavoured to be inwardly acquainted with the language of the True Shepherd. And one day being under a strong exercise of spirit, I stood up and said some words in a meeting, but not keeping close to the divine opening, I said more than was required of me; and being soon sensible of my error, I was afflicted in mind some weeks without any light or comfort, even to that degree that I could take satisfaction in nothing. I remembered God and was troubled, and in the depth of my distress he had pity upon me and sent the Comforter. I then felt forgiveness for my offense, and my mind became calm and quiet, being truly thankful to my gracious Redeemer for his mercies. And after this, feeling the spring of divine love opened and a concern to speak, I said a few words in a meeting, in which I found peace. This I believe was about six weeks from the first time, and as I was thus humbled and disciplined under the cross, my understanding became more strengthened to distinguish the language of the pure Spirit which inwardly moves upon the heart and taught [me] to wait in silence sometimes many weeks together, until I felt that rise which prepares the creature to stand like a trumpet through which the Lord speaks to his flock.

"From an inward purifying, and steadfast abiding under it, springs a lively operative desire for the good of others. All faithful people are not called to the public ministry, but whoever are, are called to minister of that which they have tasted and handled spiritually. The outward modes of worship are various, but wherein men are true ministers of Jesus Christ it is from the operation of his spirit upon their hearts, first purifying them and thus giving them a feeling sense of the conditions of others. This truth was early fixed in my mind, and I was taught to watch the pure opening and to take heed lest while I was standing to speak, my own will should get uppermost and cause me to utter words from worldly wisdom and depart from the channel of the true gospel ministry." (*The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*, Moulton ed., p. 31)

Anne Hosking

At meeting for worship relax and let your baby be with you; my small daughter called it 'the best cuddle of the week' when I couldn't rush off and do something busy. It's not easy for the parents to believe that their child's gurglings actually help the meeting rather than interrupt it. Nonetheless, that is true, and you shouldn't give way to the temptation to take a happily babbling child out of the meeting (though howling is something different!). (Britain Yearly Meeting Faith and Practice, Chap 2)

Lloyd Lee Wilson

"Our form of worship arises directly from our experience of God and of the Divine-Human relationship. We are people who have come into the outer fringes of the Presence of God, and have realized on a heart level (not merely intellectual) the glory and power of the Creator and Sustainer of the Universe. The reality of that encounter gives us new perspective and new understanding of our relationship to God. There is nothing we can offer God, feeble beings that we are, except our very selves. So our first act of worship is simply to offer ourselves, totally and completely, to God. . . . To begin worship, we acknowledge again, with awe at his majesty and joy at his love for us, the true nature of the relationship between God and creation. As we center down into the outward silence and inward Presence in meeting for worship, we once again meet God and offer everything we have and are to him, for we are already all his. (*Essays on the Quaker Vision of Gospel Order*, p. 32)

Barry Morley

"A Quaker meeting for worship is particularly vulnerable to abuse. It requires constant nurture and discipline. Its centeredness can be jeopardized by individuals determined to be heard, whose truths are

unassailable, who belittle the offerings of others, who need to lecture, who need to correct.” (*Beyond Consensus*, p. 13)

Marrianne McMullen

Ministry is what is on one’s soul, and it can be in direct contradiction to what is on one’s mind. It’s what the Inner Light gently pushes you toward or suddenly dumps in your lap. It is rooted in the eternity, divinity, and selflessness of the Inner Light; not in the worldly, egoistic functions of the conscious mind. (Britain Yearly Meeting Faith and Practice, Chap 2)

Violet Holdsworth (1869-1954)

Each Friend who feels called upon to rise and deliver a lengthy discourse might question himself – and herself – most searchingly, as to whether the message could not be more lastingly given in the fewest possible words, or even through his or her personality alone, in entire and trustful silence. ‘Cream must always rise to the surface.’ True. But other substances rise to the surface besides cream; substances that may have to be skimmed off and thrown away before bodies and souls can be duly nourished. ‘Is my message cream or scum?’ may be an unusual and is certainly a very homely query. Still it is one that every speaker, in a crowded gathering especially, should honestly face. Some of the dangers of silent worship can best be guarded against by its courtesies. (Britain Yearly Meeting Faith and Practice, Chap 2)

Michael Sheeran

“. . . the real cleavage among Friends is between those who experience the gathered or covered condition and those who do not. The former can differ markedly in the language they use to verbalize the event. For one, the group is gathered in Christ; for the other, the force at the root of the universe or in the depth of every human is expressing itself in the covered assemblage. In either case, the words and concepts are secondary; the event, the experience, is what counts.” (*Beyond Majority Rule*, p. 87)

Quaker terminology:

“Gathered” meeting is one “in which most members feel themselves united as one body in the Divine presence. Such a meeting has a sense of timelessness and peace, even though the inward work of the Spirit may be painful and life changing to some people present.”

“Covered” meeting “goes a step further. In a “gathered” meeting most of the participants are unitedly waiting together upon God, and they generally feel a sense of timeless peace in this state of consciousness. In a “covered” meeting the participants also feel a special sense of the Divine Spirit powerfully at work among them—whether through spoken ministry or prayer or through the invisible energizing, transforming, and bonding work of the Holy Spirit.”

William Taber, *Four Doors to Meeting for Worship*, Pendle Hill Pamphlet #306, p. 29

Thoughts to ponder til next session: consider your ongoing preparation for meeting for worship; what helps and what hinders deeply centering down into expectant waiting worship?

Next session, Sunday, Oct. 15, will focus on What is “Living the Quaker Life”?