

MEET THE Friends

by Paul Anderson

FRIENDS AND WORSHIP

In the attempt to recover "basic Christianity," Friends saw that our Lord's commands could be reduced to a double priority. Love God and love people (Matthew 22:37-40). Friends minimize all else for the sake of throwing all energies in these two directions: *worship* and *ministry*. First, let's take a look at a Quaker understanding of worship.

At the heart of vital Quakerism lies the experience of worship. When we worship we receive God's love for us and express our love for God. Worship involves centrally the process of abiding in Christ and He in us, for apart from Him we can do nothing.

WORSHIP happens most powerfully when worship in solitude and worship in community are combined. There is no substitute for private worship if one expects to walk in the Spirit. *Knowledge about God* can never replace intimate *acquaintance with God*. The Holy Spirit is constantly speaking and drawing us to God, so the question is not whether the Spirit will speak...the question is "will we listen?" Only as we sense the mind of our Lord can we pray in His name, and the only way to sense

In this humanistic age we suppose man is the initiator and God is the responder. But the Living Christ within us is the initiator and we are the responders. God the Lover, the accuser, the revealer of light and darkness presses within us, "Behold I stand at the door and knock." And all our apparent initiative is already a response, a testimonial to His secret presence and working within us.

Thomas Kelly

His leading is through listening. Private worship is founded upon a life of prayer, and Spirit-led prayer is not something we do only at given times; it is an unceasing endeavor. Prayer is the outcome of our sense of need, and of our continual dependence upon God.*

The spiritual life, however, is not a private thing alone. It requires the coming together of those whose hearts have been prepared in solitude for the purpose of celebrating God's love in community. As we come together to worship our Lord, He gathers us as a shepherd gathers his sheep. We sense that we are "gathered" when the Holy Spirit brings a feeling of love and unity beyond human orchestration. This love is powerful enough to embrace the unlovely, and this oneness of mind often transcends differences of opinion. Christ is come to teach His people, and where two or three are gathered in His name, there He is in their midst.

For most groups of Quakers the goal of worship is the same, but the way it is done may vary. Some groups adhere to the practice of waiting in silence before the Present Christ, believing that any attempt to predetermine how the Spirit

MEET THE FRIENDS SERIES

① Quaker Beginnings, ② Quaker Testimonies & Distinctives, ③ Friends and Worship, ④ Friends and Ministry, ⑤ Friends and Sacraments, ⑥ Friends as Peacemakers, ⑦ Friends and the Kingdom of God

will lead may hinder the Spirit's working. Here, the practice of "centering" one's heart and mind on Christ's Spirit within focuses not on what we might contribute, but on what Christ is saying to and through us. Waiting on Christ also provides refreshment, as the words of the psalmist come to life: "Be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10). Likewise, Friends take seriously the prophet's pointing to the true source of spiritual empowerment: "In quietness and trust is your strength" (Isaiah 30:15).

Other Friends acknowledge that lack of format does not ensure inspired worship. They believe that the Spirit may also lead in the planning of a service, and that the order of service should be able to be laid down if the Spirit dictates. The focus is not on the leaders of worship or the program, but on the Present Lord. It is the opposite of an audience appreciating a performance because *all* are involved in the act of worshipping God. Worship without participation is a contradiction of terms. Even programmed Friends services, however, can make profitable use of "open worship" times within the service itself. Creating space to attend and respond to the Lord's present leadings indeed is central to spiritual vitality and revival.

FRIENDS believe that the same Spirit who gathers us in worship also leads us in the decision-making process. This is why Quaker business is conducted as a discerning process rather than the rule of the majority. Voting exposes the will of a simple majority, but the mind of Christ is often articulated by a few who have a special burden or a sense of His will. Friends seek to be led by the Present Lord, and they wait until the meeting is gathered with a oneness of mind before making a decision. This process may take longer, but decisions made in unanimity are much stronger. Such decisions can then be supported by praying not *if* they are Christ's will, but *because* they are His will.

Friends see worship as the *end* of all we do. When we share our concerns and celebrations with one another, we do so as an act of worship. When we wait in silence together, the silence is not empty, but it is full—because of the One we meet in the silence. Even the "meeting for worship in which business is conducted" bespeaks our priority. Rather than seeing worship as a way to make better decisions, the business of our life together provides a corporate occasion to come together before the Lord to listen and to grow in wisdom and discernment of His will and pleasure among us. The spiritual maturation that happens in those meetings may be far more important than the decisions themselves.

WORSHIP is not an agenda of hymns to be sung and things to be said any more than the Church of Jesus Christ is a building of brick and stone. Worship is the loving interaction between God and the people of God who are the Church. It may be aided by format but is not to be confused with nor dependent upon it. "Worship is the adoring response of the heart and mind to the influence of the Spirit of God. It stands neither in forms nor in the formal disuse of forms...it must be in spirit and in truth (John 4:24)."*

*From *The Richmond Declaration of Faith* (1887)