

Listening for the Voice of God: Silence in Quaker Worship

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One by one we enter the room, into the silence that is already there, and take our seats. The silence touches each of us, spreads and deepens as the room fills, finally gathering us all into a single body, covered by a Spirit that is beyond all names.

The first that enters into the place of your meeting. . . turn in thy mind to the light, and wait upon God singly, as if none were present but the Lord; and here thou art strong. Then the next that comes in, let them in simplicity of heart sit down and turn in to the same light, and wait in the spirit; and so all the rest coming in, in the fear of the Lord, sit down in pure stillness and silence of all flesh, and wait in the light Those who are brought to a pure still waiting upon God in the spirit, are come nearer to the Lord than words are; for God is a spirit, and in the spirit is he worshiped. . . . In such a meeting there will be an unwillingness to part asunder, being ready to say in yourselves, it is good to be here; and this is the end of all words and writings—to bring people to the eternal living Word.¹

For the last 350 years, this gathered silence has been the foundation of Quaker worship. The silence of Quaker worship, however, is not an end in itself, but an opportunity for seeking communion with the Sacred. Quakers do not worship the silence, but that to which the silence leads. If mystical experience is a direct and unmediated experience of the Divine, the Sacred, God, then the Quaker meeting seeks and sometimes achieves a group mystical experience in which all present can share together in this connection. For these moments, all are “gathered” and are “covered” by the Spirit. Here Quakers have found—and still find—a communion in the silence as deep and strong as in any bread and wine.

The absence from Friends' worship of the outward observance of the Lord's Supper, water baptism, and other sacraments emphasizes the reality of inward experience. Friends are aware of the power of a true, inward baptism of the Holy Spirit; in meeting for worship at its best they know direct communion with God and fellowship with one another. These experiences make the outward rites seem unnecessary and, to some Friends, a hindrance to full attainment of the spiritual experiences which are symbolized.²

The silent meeting makes Quaker worship unique among the religious traditions of the world. It is first of all a communal experience, yet a communality quite distinct from the silent meditation of other traditions, even when practiced in a group, because the silence is alive with the possibility of prophecy. For Quakers, the time of prophecy has not passed. The prophets are not dead; they are alive and still among us. The Spirit may call any person out of this silence to be a prophet on any occasion, just as among the Apostles at Pentecost, when they were alight with flames that descended upon them and caused them to speak in tongues.³ It is this Voice for which we listen. For this reason,

Quakers are admonished to come to meeting neither intending to speak nor intending not to speak, but to sit in “expectant waiting” for the Voice of God that may speak to them, and through them, on that day.

As expressed by the early Quaker Edward Burrough,

While waiting upon the Lord in silence, as often we did for many hours together, with our minds and hearts toward him, being stayed in the light of Christ within us from all thoughts, fleshly motions and desires, we received often the pouring down of the spirit upon us, and our hearts were made glad and our tongues loosened, and our mouths opened, and we spake with new tongues, as the Lord gave us utterance, and his spirit led us, which was poured upon sons and daughters.⁴

Burrough here combines the image of *Acts* with a prophecy of Joel, also a favorite Quaker text: “I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions.”⁵ Quakers, from the earliest days, have allowed their “sons *and daughters*” to speak in meetings for worship, which was as revolutionary as the meeting itself, proceeding without priest or minister.

Quaker worship is founded upon the personal experience of each worshipper, not upon any received belief, whether in the Bible or in a fixed creed. It is based upon direct personal connection with the Divine, without the mediation of an ordained leader. George Fox challenged the first Quakers, “You will say, Christ saith this, and the apostles say this; but what canst thou say? Art thou a child of Light and hast walked in the Light, and what thou speakest is it inwardly from God?”⁶

At the start of the meeting, we sit as individuals, joining into the silence in our own particular ways. One may pray inwardly; another may begin with a meditation exercise, or by writing in a journal, or by taking time to sense the quality of light, the state of energy in the room. In these separate ways we gradually become more and more deeply attuned to the silence, which has its own quality—thick or thin, vibrant, pregnant, resisting, enfolding. Slowly, each comes to that deep, centered place where the mind becomes quiet, and each becomes more closely united with all present, more able to listen for that still, small Voice.

To have the possibility of reaching that Oneness in which all are gathered and sense the communion with the Sacred, the meeting must begin with a core of those who approach it with discipline, a discipline that does not start upon walking into the room but is practiced every day of their lives.

Worship, and preparation for worship, begin before one has left one’s home. . . . Worship in a meetinghouse with one’s friends should be only a special period of a life of worship that underlies all one’s daily affairs. For he who carries a Shekinah [manifestation of the Presence of God in Jewish theology] daily in his heart, and practices continual retirement within that Shekinah, *at the same time as he is carrying on his daily affairs*, has begun to prepare for worship, for he has never

ceased worshipping. Such worship is no intermittent process, but a foundation layer of the life of the children of the kingdom.⁷

I must, then, maintain my sense of the sacred throughout every day. This starts with what Quakers have traditionally called a “time of retirement,” the hour set aside as a private, personal time, generally at the beginning of the day. This time is given over to contemplative prayer, to reading the Bible or other sacred or devotional writings, to meditation—and for today’s Quakers, “meditation” may embrace a variety of Eastern as well as Western traditions. In these ways I arouse awareness of the presence of the Divine, the Sacred, strong enough to continue through my day and my week. At meeting on Sunday, then, all our individual practices, all our individual efforts to be continually aware of the Sacred, join together to create the strength and depth of the community’s meeting for worship.

If it should happen that sitting in that waiting silence of the meeting I hear the Voice of God, it is my duty to speak those words aloud for all those present to hear. At the same time, each speaker must first be sure: Am I truly moved by the Spirit, and not by my own personality and ego? We must be sure also to say no more than we are given, and not “outrun our Guide” in speaking. As expressed by the 18th- century Quaker minister Samuel Bownas, “. . . keep close to thy gift, intently waiting to know thy place, both when to speak and when to be silent; and when thou speakest, begin under a sense of divine influence, whether it be in preaching or praying; and without it, do not either preach or pray.”⁸

No wonder then that Quakers do so often quake, inwardly or outwardly, when such a message draws them to their feet and they give it utterance.

Throughout the meeting, I, like all the other participants, must listen for that voice, whether speaking directly through me or through the mouth of another. And in a curious, paradoxical way, words spoken and heard in this way do not break the silence at all. Rather, they deepen it, bring it closer to that gathered place where, in the words of George Fox (who first gathered those seekers who became the Quakers) “the spirit of the Lord is over all.”

This meeting in silence, if I give myself over to it, is life-changing:

Give over thine own willing, give over thine own running, give over thine own desiring to know or be anything, and sink down to the seed which God sows in the heart and let that be in thee, and grow in thee, and breathe in thee, and act in thee, and thou shalt know by sweet experience that the Lord knows that and loves and owns that, and will lead it to the inheritance of life, which is his portion.⁹

Meeting for worship is a school for the spirit, in which I am shown myself as in a mirror, just as I am. Sitting in the silence, I am first “convinced” by the Spirit of the Truth I find there. As I continue, I become aware of the “Light that lighteth every person”¹⁰ shining on me in the silence. I am searched by that Light, and by that Light I am “convicted” as all my flaws and shortcomings are shown to me. And if I continue still, I may finally be “converted” to the path I am to follow. This is the traditional Quaker formulation of the spiritual journey, centered in the silence of worship.

- 1 Parker, Alexander; *Letters, etc., of Early Friends*, A. R. Barclay, ed., 1841, London, Darton & Harvey, Vol. 7, pp. 365-366:
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- 2 *Faith and Practice, a Book of Christian Discipline*, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, 2002 p.
- 32
- 3 *Acts 2:4*
- 4 Edward Burrough, 'The epistle to the reader' in George Fox, *The great mystery of the great whore unfolded*, 1659, prelim
leaves b1-b2.
- 5 *Joel 2:28*
- 6 'The testimony of Margaret Fox concerning her late husband', in George Fox, *Journal*, 1694, p.ii; bicent edn, 1891, vol.
2, pp. 512-514
- 7 Thomas Kelly, *The Gathered Meeting*, Woolman Series of Friendly Papers No. 14, p. 11
- 8 Samuel Bownas, *A description of the qualifications necessary to a gospel minister*, 1750, p. 107; 1989 edition, pp 98-99
- 9 Words of the 17th Century Quaker Isaac Penington, in *Some Directions to the Panting Soul*
- 10 *John 1:9*

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