

# Reaching Decisions

The Quaker Method

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## **Reaching Decisions**

*Advised, that Friends keep all our meetings in the wisdom of God and unity of His blessed spirit, wherein they were created and settled; and continue your godly care and service therein, for the good ends for which they were first instituted. And keep all contentions, reflections, and smittings out of your meetings; and keep*

*down and out of all heats, and passions, and doubtful disputations; ... that the affairs of Truth may be managed in the peaceable, tender spirit and wisdom of Jesus Christ, with decency, forbearance, love, and charity towards each other.*

Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1721

The Quaker movement began as a group held together by no visible bond but united in its own deep sense of fellowship, a kinship of spirit kept vital by concerned Friends who were continually traveling from one meeting to another. But it was soon found necessary to have some sort of specific organization for dealing with practical matters. There was immediate need of systematic help for persons suffering loss of property through distraint of goods to meet fines. Arrangements had to be made for the validity of marriages without the usual service of an officiating clergyman. The poor must be cared for, burials arranged, records kept of births, marriages, sufferings and deaths. There were children to be educated and traveling Friends, if their own resources were insufficient, needed financial help. Friends often desired to petition King or Parliament. Disorderly persons were sometimes to be dealt with in order “that Truth might be cleared” of misunderstanding by the scandalized public. But the very need for organization gave rise to a serious theoretical problem — how can a free fellowship based on Divine guidance from within set up any form of church government providing direction from without?

As early as 1652, William Dewsbury urged Friends to set up general meetings, to be attended by Friends in a limited

area to meet immediate needs. His instructions were given forth as “the word of the living God to his Church.” Other leaders spoke in similar terms and with the same prophetic authority. But care was taken not to produce an authoritarian code. In 1656, at a meeting of Friends in Balby, Yorkshire, a letter was composed “From the Spirit of Truth to the children of light,” giving advice rather than formulating rules on twenty points of behavior. This letter concluded with the well-known sentence:

*Dearly beloved Friends, these things we do not lay upon you as a rule or form to walk by; but that all, with a measure of the light, which is pure and holy, may be guided: and so in the light walking and abiding, these things may be fulfilled in the Spirit, not in the letter; for the letter killeth but the Spirit giveth life.*

*Letters of the Early Friends, p. 282*

Additional advices were issued from time to time by various meetings with a similar caution regarding the priority of the Spirit. In 1659, the General Meeting at Skipton for Friends in the North issued a document for guidance in conduct. Again Friends are urged to stand fast in their liberty,

*that no footsteps may be left for those that shall come after, or to walk by example, but that all may be directed and left to the Truth, in it to live and walk and by it to be guided, that none may look back at us, nor have an eye behind them, but that all may look forward waiting in the Spirit for the revelation of those glorious things which are to be made manifest to them.*

## **To Act as a Whole**

The underlying principle of Quaker church government is summed up in another passage in the same letter.

*That the power of the God-head may be known in the body, in that perfect freedom which every member hath in Christ Jesus; that none may exercise lordship or dominion over another, nor the person of any be set apart, but as they continue in the power of truth ... that truth itself in the body may reign, not persons nor forms: and that all such may be honored as stand in the life of the truth wherein is the power not over, but in the body.*

In other words, the meeting is to act as a whole and be governed by Truth, not by persons appointed to rule. If individuals are chosen for some particular service to the meeting, they should be continued in such service only so long as they are guided by the Truth. Thus the basis of Quaker church government was early expressed in a way that eliminated the possibility of individual authority. Only the authority of the group acting by the dictates of Truth was valid. The supremacy of a majority over a minority was completely dispensed with. There was no voting.

General meetings drawing Friends together in limited areas at periodic intervals developed in the decade 1650- 1660. Some of these occasions were simply meetings for worship, others also included sessions for the transaction of

corporate affairs. By 1658, general meetings were held yearly with leading Friends in attendance from all over England. The support of Friends traveling in the ministry to distant places often claimed attention.

When George Fox was released from his three years' imprisonment at Lancaster and Scarborough in 1666, he found the Quakers suffering severely because of the Conventicle Act which forbade attendance at any assemblies for worship other than those of the established church. There were also a number of other serious difficulties. Nearly all the leading Friends were in prison. Fanatics, such as the hysterical women whose adulation of James Naylor had earlier led to public scandal, were bringing the movement into disrepute. The followers of John Perrot were teaching that the essence of religion required no outward frame of reference. This party held that even fixed times for public worship were man-made devices. To counteract such tendencies toward religious anarchism a group of leading Friends issued a letter (*Letters of the Early Friends*, p. 319) asserting the authority of a meeting to exclude from its fellowship persons who persisted in rejecting its judgment. This was shortly before George Fox's release. This letter, by definitely subordinating individual guidance to the sense of the meeting as a whole, marked an important step in Quaker development.

Bruised and weakened by his experience in jail and scarcely able to mount his horse, Fox at this critical juncture went about England and Ireland for four years bringing order out of confusion by setting up Monthly

Meetings as executive units of the Society of Friends. His visit to America in 1671-73 was largely for the same purpose. While there had been some Monthly Meetings before this time, they now became standard procedure and have continued to be basic throughout Quaker history.

## **Monthly Meetings for Business**

A Monthly Meeting is made up of all the Friends in a given district. It includes one or more meetings for worship. The constituent parts of a Monthly Meeting came to be called Preparative Meetings, their function being to prepare for the Monthly Meeting which made the important decisions. Combinations of neighboring Monthly Meetings are organized into Quarterly Meetings and the Quarterly Meetings in turn are united in a Yearly Meeting. This system developed gradually. At first the Yearly Meeting in London consisted exclusively of Friends whose main concern was for the ministry. By 1672, and regularly after 1678, it included representatives sent from all the Quarterly Meetings in England. By 1760, the Yearly Meeting was open to all Friends. The evolution of this system in America followed similar lines, except that, owing to the geographical situation, six Yearly Meetings emerged in the colonies.

The first Quaker meetings for business (or church government) were made up of men only, but by 1656 women's meetings began to appear. In 1671, Fox wrote a circular letter urging that they be set up everywhere. Eventually there were Monthly, Quarterly and Yearly Meetings for women. For some years the business before

the women's meetings differed from the business before the men's meetings though there was no sense of inferiority. It consisted of matters which were felt to be of peculiar interest to women, such as care of the poor, the sick and the imprisoned. The important Six Weeks Meeting begun in 1671 which supervised the affairs of London Quakers was a joint body of men and women. Today all Quaker business meetings, except in two or three conservative areas in America, are made up of men and women. The assignment of important executive responsibilities to women was a bold step in the seventeenth century. The training which Quaker women received in these meetings as well as in meetings for worship qualified them to become leaders of their sex.

## **Monthly, Quarterly and Yearly Meetings**

The system of Monthly, Quarterly and Yearly Meetings as it finally developed in England and America suggests the organic principle of the affiliation of cells or small units in a large organism. The Monthly Meeting is the primary cell in the Society of Friends. Only there does membership exist. Individual Friends have the same responsibilities in the larger group as in the smaller. There is no delegated authority. As Fox wrote in a long epistle on church government: "The least member in the Church hath an office and is serviceable and every member hath need one of another" (*Epistle* 264, 1669).

The larger group does not exist to exert authority over its smaller parts, nor do the smaller parts dominate the larger. Each is both means and end. The larger exists to widen the



range of acquaintance and judgment and to carry out undertakings too big for the smaller group. The larger group asks its constituent parts to contribute money to support its enterprises; gives credentials and financial aid when necessary to Friends and others traveling long distances with a religious concern; supports the larger schools; appoints committees to deal with a variety of issues and concerns beyond the range of the smaller meetings, such as peace, temperance, race relations, publications, the social order, national legislation and the relief of suffering at home and abroad.

A concern, that is, a strong inward sense that some action should be taken to meet a certain situation, may arise in the mind of any individual. It often develops in the silence of a meeting for worship. The member brings it before the Monthly Meeting which may or may not sympathize with it. If circumstances require a wider concurrence, the Monthly Meeting may forward the matter to the Quarterly Meeting. The Quarterly Meeting may then act upon it or may send it on to the Yearly Meeting. In this way a concern secures the support of a group large enough and wise enough to carry it out. The power of the individual to accomplish what he feels has been laid upon him is many times multiplied if his concern is taken up by all three, the Monthly Meeting, the Quarterly Meeting and finally the Yearly Meeting. In some instances an individual may first present his concern to a Quarterly or Yearly Meeting or to a specialized committee. In this case the reverse process may occur, the concern being referred to the Monthly Meetings for action.

The Yearly Meeting issues Advices for the guidance of Monthly and Quarterly Meetings and of individual members. It also addresses Queries to constituent meetings in order to ascertain their condition and discover if help is needed. Advices and Queries are not orders issued by a superior to an inferior. Thus the Monthly Meetings serve as real executive units of the Society.

## **The Book of Discipline**

Early in the eighteenth century, selections from the minutes of the Yearly Meetings were gathered in book form under captions alphabetically listed. This compilation came to be called the *Book of Discipline*. The manuscript book issued in 1762 by Philadelphia Yearly Meeting is entitled *A Collection of Christian and Brotherly Advices Given Forth from Time to Time by the Yearly Meetings of Friends for New Jersey and Pennsylvania*. As need arose additions were inserted, each with its appropriate date. This book, abbreviated to contain only active regulations, was printed in 1797. Later the alphabetical system was replaced by a topical arrangement. The discipline has been reissued and revised from time to time up to the present. It will continue to be rewritten to meet changing needs. The Discipline is both a moral guide and a manual of Church Government. Additions and revisions show the evolution of moral consciousness as it became increasingly sensitive to slavery, war, intemperance, racial and class discrimination and other evils.

As an example of growth in moral sensitivity, we find under the heading "*Negroes or Slaves*" twenty-four

manuscript pages of entries, dated 1688 to 1790, recording each step of the process by which the Society of Friends in America freed itself from holding slaves. Under *Queries* there are three sets of questions dated 1743, 1755, 1765 respectively. Those dealing with slavery are —

*1743. Do Friends observe the former advice of our Yearly Meeting not to encourage the importation of Negroes, nor to buy them after imported?*

*1755. Are Friends clear of importing or buying Negroes and do they use those well which they are possessed of by inheritance or otherwise, endeavoring to train them up in the principles of the Christian Religion?*

*1765. The same Query as in 1755.*

In 1776 the Query was amended as follows:

*Are Friends clear of importing, purchasing, disposing of or holding mankind as slaves? And do they use those well whom they have set free and are necessarily under their care and not in circumstances through nonage or incapacity to minister to their own necessities? And are they careful to educate and encourage them in a religious and virtuous life?*

Here are three steps showing increasing sensitiveness to a clearly defined evil. First, Friends were not to buy imported Negroes; next, they were not to buy any, though it was assumed that they might inherit them; finally, they were not

to hold them in servitude at all. The evolution of the *Book of Discipline* is a testimony to the power of the Quaker method in educating and sensitizing conscience.

In the same year that the Declaration of Independence stated: “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness,” the Quakers made their own declaration which took these great words at their face value. They did not support their own revolution by violence, but none the less they carried it through in a thorough-going way.

## **The Individual and the Group**

The perennial problem of the relative rights and responsibilities of the individual and the group was never so clearly solved that it did not give rise to difficulties. The Wilkinson-Story party separated from the main body in England in 1678, principally because it was opposed to any authority exercised by the group over the individual. The separation in Philadelphia which took place in 1827 was to a large extent the outcome of differences between the more individualistic and more authoritarian trends in the Society of Friends.

Yet in a large measure the Quaker form of church government succeeded in securing a reasonable balance between freedom and order. Without some authority over the individual the movement would certainly have disintegrated as did the various groups of religious anarchists. Without considerable liberty the Society of

Friends would have crystallized into a formal system. The adjustment depended upon group authority over the individual tempered by individual initiative in affecting the judgment of the group.

The meeting for the transaction of church business is as distinctly a religious exercise as is the meeting for worship, but it has a different objective. The meeting for worship is focused upon the divine-human relationship and the meeting for business is mainly concerned with inter-human cooperation, the two being interdependent. From another point of view, the meeting for worship concerns *being* while the meeting for business concerns *doing*. What is implicit in worship becomes explicit in action. The meeting for business should, therefore, be preceded by a period of worship in which the hard shell of egocentricity is dissolved and the group united into a living whole. It is also well to conclude the business meeting with a period of silent devotion. George Fox wrote to Friends,

*Friends, keep your meetings in the power of God, and in his wisdom (by which all things were made) and in the love of God, that by that ye may order all to his glory. And when Friends have finished their business, sit down and continue awhile quietly and wait upon the Lord to feel him. And go not beyond the Power, but keep in the Power by which God Almighty may be felt among you.*

*Epistle 162, 1658*

Since there is but one Light and one Truth, if the Light of Truth be faithfully followed, unity will result. "The Light

itself,” says Thomas Story, “is not divided, but one and the same entire, undivided Being continually” (*Sermons*, p. 61). The nearer the members of a group come to this one Light, the nearer they will be to one another, as the spokes of a wheel approach each other as they near the center. The spirit of worship is essential to that type of business meeting in which the group endeavors to act as a unit. True worship overcomes excessive individuality by producing a super-individual consciousness. If serious differences of opinion appear, it may come about that by recourse to a period of silence a basis for unity can be discovered. If a high degree of unity is not reached, action is postponed, provided an immediate decision is not necessary. For such a meeting the only essential official is a clerk whose business it is to ascertain and record, or be responsible for recording, the sense of the meeting.

## **The Method of Reaching Unity**

The business before the meeting, presented by the clerk, a committee or an individual, is “spoken to” by those who have opinions or judgment regarding it. When the consideration reaches a stage which indicates that a reasonable degree of unity has been reached, the clerk announces what he believes to be the sense of the meeting. If the meeting agrees with his wording as given or revised, this becomes the judgment of the meeting and is so preserved in the minutes. The degree of unity necessary for a decision depends on the importance of the question and the character and depth of feeling of those who oppose the general trend of opinion. On many items of routine business, little or no expression is necessary. Even silence

may give consent. But on important matters, care is taken to secure the vocal participation of all who feel able and willing to express themselves. Some problems have been postponed for more than a century awaiting unity. An example was the toleration of slavery within the Society of Friends. Had a vote been taken as early as 1700 slavery would probably have been voted out, but a substantial minority would not have concurred. The subject was brought up again and again, progress was made slowly until in 1776 the Society was united in refusing membership to persons who held slaves.

An opposing minority, however small, is not disregarded, especially if it contains members whose judgment is highly respected. The *weight* of a member in determining the decision of the meeting depends on the confidence which the meeting has in the validity of his judgment. On some subjects some Friends are more reliable than others. On a financial problem, the opinion of a single financier might determine the sense of the meeting, although his opinion might carry less weight on some other subjects. If an individual lays a concern before the meeting, much depends on the degree to which the concern has gripped him. If he feels it deeply and perhaps brings it up again and again in spite of opposition, the meeting may finally acquiesce even though a degree of hesitation is still felt by some.

If a serious difference of opinion exists on a subject which cannot be postponed, decision may be left to a small committee. Not infrequently the minority withdraw their opposition in order that the meeting may come to a

decision. It is, however, surprising how often real unity is reached, even though the discussion in its initial stages shows a wide variety of opinions, or a pronounced cleavage arising from strongly held convictions. As the consideration proceeds, unity gradually emerges and is finally reached. The decision may be along lines not even thought of at the beginning. This procedure takes more time and patience than the voting method, but the results are generally more satisfactory to all concerned.

The clerk is theoretically a recording officer, but in practice he must frequently assume the duties of a presiding officer. He must be sensitive to all trends of opinion, including those not well expressed. When two or more persons rise at once, he must recognize one as having the floor. He must determine the appropriate amount of time to be devoted to each item on the agenda in view of the total business before the meeting. He must decide on how much expression he can safely base his minute. He is responsible for keeping one subject at a time before the meeting. He may request talkative members to limit their remarks and silent members to express themselves. All this appears to lay a heavy burden upon the clerk, but in any contingency he may derive help from any member. Theoretically, it is the meeting as a whole, rather than the clerk, that exercises authority, but the clerk may occasionally find himself in a position in which some exercise of authority is unavoidable.

If this Quaker method of arriving at unity does not succeed, the difficulty is generally due to some members who have not achieved the right attitude of mind and heart. Dogmatic



persons who speak with an air of finality, or assume the tone of a debater determined to win, may be a serious hindrance. Eloquence which appeals to emotion is out of place. Those who come to the meeting not so much to discover Truth as to win acceptance of their opinions may find that their views carry little weight. Opinions should always be expressed humbly and tentatively in the realization that no one person sees the whole truth and that the whole meeting can see more of Truth than can any part of it. When B speaks following A, he takes into consideration A's opinion. C follows with a statement which would probably have been different had A and B not spoken. Every speaker credits every other sincere speaker with at least some insight. Finally a statement is made which receives the approval of all. A number of persons say "I approve," "I agree" or some equivalent.

This method is similar to some other consensus methods, for instance those suggested by M. P. Follett in *The New State* or Frank Walser in *The Art of Conference*. It differs radically in being religious. George Fox writes, "Friends are not to meet like a company of people about town or parish business, neither in their men's or women's meetings, but to wait upon the Lord" (*Epistle* 313, 1674). Quakers have used this method with a large degree of success for three centuries because it has met the religious test, being based on the Light Within producing unity. As the Light is God in His capacity as Creator, Unity in Him creates Unity in the group. When the method has not succeeded, as in the divisions during the nineteenth

century, spiritual life was low and Friends too impatient to wait for unity to develop.

## **Advantages of this Method**

At its best, the Quaker method does not result in a compromise. A compromise is not likely to satisfy any one completely. The objective of the Quaker method is to discover Truth which will satisfy every one more fully than did any position previously held. Each and all can then say “that is what I really wanted, but I did not realize it.” To discover what we *really want* as compared to what at first we think we want, we must go below the surface of self-centered desires to the deeper level where the real Self resides. The deepest Self of all is that Self which we share with all others. This is the one Vine of which we all are branches, the Life of God on which our own individual lives are based. To will what God wills is, therefore, to will what we ourselves really want.

The voting method is a mechanical process whereby the larger force is pitted against the smaller one over which it prevails, possibly without even an attempt to adjust to it. The Quaker method produces synthesis in which each part makes some adjustment to the whole. In general, voting creates nothing new, one party is simply more numerous than the other. The organic method may actually produce by a process of cross-fertilization something which was not there at the beginning. As in all life, the whole is more than the sum of its parts. A new creation emerges through the life or soul of the whole which was not completely present in any of the parts. As the meeting becomes a unit, it learns

to think as a unit. This is an achievement. Every partial, fragmentary view contributes to the total view.

The voting method is usually quicker. Organic growth is a slow process, but that which has life is adaptable, while mechanisms tend to be rigid. In the voting method when the vote is taken, each individual has one or a fixed number of votes, irrespective of his interest or knowledge, while in the Quaker method, each individual possesses or should possess weight proportional to his interest in and his knowledge of the particular subject before the meeting. It might appear that, because the Quaker meeting must wait for unity, this method would tend toward conservatism. This is sometimes the case, but, in general, Quaker pioneering in social reforms shows that conservatism has not generally prevailed. The first response of many people to a new proposition is negative, hence the voting method which is the quickest may itself produce a negative response. Minorities tend to be more radical than majorities. If decision is postponed in the effort to secure unity, time is given for an advanced minority to convince the majority. In the end a more novel decision may result.

## **Conditions Favorable to Success**

A minor consideration is that of size. The Quaker method works better in small than in large groups. This is true both of the meeting for worship and the meeting for business. It is easier to achieve unity in an intimate group the members of which are well acquainted with one another than in a large group where there is bound to be more diversity. But experience shows that even in large groups, especially if

they contain some able, “well seasoned Friends,” this method can be employed successfully. Biologists believe that evolution can take place best in groups of a moderate size. If the group is too small, there are not enough variations to insure progress. If the group is too large, variations are swamped by the impact of the mass.

Therefore, if a Monthly Meeting becomes overgrown, it should divide. Such cell-division is the organic method of growth which has been characteristic in the Society of Friends from the beginning. Division may also be occasioned by the scattering due to economic reasons. Members, especially young people, may move to localities where there is no Friends Meeting. Perhaps they will start meetings in their homes. Such a meeting may begin in a very small way, but as like-minded persons find out about it and isolated Friends realize that such a project has been undertaken, the meeting will probably grow. This simple method of growth gives Friends a strategic advantage. Religious sects which require professional pastors and special apparatus cannot afford to begin so informally. But Friends can start a meeting anywhere and under the simplest conditions with as few as two members. In the colonial days, Friends spread rapidly in many pioneer communities because a Friends meeting could so readily be held in a home.

The Quaker method is likely to be successful in proportion as the members are acquainted with one another; better still if real affection exists among them. When differences and factions arose in the Corinthian Church its members wrote to ask Paul’s advice. After making several concrete

suggestions, he goes on to say in the famous 13th chapter of his letter that love is really the only solution. In a similar situation John speaks in his first letter of love as essential. “We know that we have passed out of death into life because we love the brethren” (I John 3:14)<sup>1</sup>.

## **The Binding Force within the Group**

For “love” Paul and John use the Greek word *agape* instead of the more usual Greek word *eros*. *Agape* means unselfish love which seeks to be possessed as well as to possess. Paul said *agape* “does not insist on its own way” (I Cor. 13:5). This is the highest binding force within a religious group. It signifies the Spirit which draws men together and to God without at the same time resulting in the domination of one will by another. It is love that brings into harmony the apparently contradictory concepts of unity and freedom.

*Agape* is closely akin to friendship, a uniting force which at the same time respects individuality and freedom. In the Gospel of John, Christ identifies love of this type with friendship when he says, “Greater love has no man than this that a man lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). Since the word “love” has so many different meanings, it was more appropriate that the Quakers should call themselves a Society of Friends than, as one contemporary group did, a Family of Love. It may be that the appellation “Friends” which has become so familiar that its origin is seldom inquired into, came from the saying of Jesus, “No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends” (John 15:15). In the early minutes of the

meetings in Pennsylvania the Quakers sometimes call themselves “The Friends of God.”

The Society of Friends in choosing a name gave expression to the feeling that their religion was based on friendship as distinguished from a code of duty appropriate to servants whose obligation is mainly to yield unthinking obedience. Here the early Friends made a religious emphasis different from the Protestants of their time. The Puritans held that man’s hope of salvation depended on obedience to commands set down for all time in the Sacred Book. These commands were thought of as instructions which a servant receives who knows not what his lord does and must needs obey, whether he understands or not. But if God’s will is revealed not so much by a law from without as by the Light of Truth which produces action and inspires from within, the relation is one of friendship and freedom based on understanding. There is no external domination. Hence arises the difference between the Puritan concept of duty with its inner tension and compulsion and the Quaker concept of conscience with its sense of freedom and peace. A servant may serve because of a sense of duty, but a friend helps his friend for a reason other than duty. Those who render God service from a sense of duty may hear the divine voice saying “So you also, when you have done all that is commanded you, say ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty’” (Luke 17:10).

In addition to the religion of friendship and the religion of obedience, there is another type of religion which extols the kind of love which unifies through possession. Such love is described by many of the great Christian mystics. It is the

very top of the mystical ladder, the Spiritual Marriage according to the allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs. In emotional content it is akin to the marriage of husband and wife. Unity with God results in so complete a submergence of the individual that individuality is lost, just as a drop of water falls into the ocean and is lost. In emphasizing this experience, many devotional writings of the saints strike a note foreign alike to Quaker and Protestant. Unity through obedience, unity through love and unity through friendship, all are deep aspects of human experience. The Quaker emphasis allows greater significance to individuality and freedom.

## **Freedom and Organization**

The Society of Friends endeavors to maintain an organization which does not destroy freedom. Freedom appears in an act of concurrence performed not from any sense of inner or outer compulsion but in following Truth for the love of it. The Light Within, being both Truth and Love, draws people together from within. It exerts no outside pressure. It respects the unique personality of each individual. The Ranters, Antinomians and others with anarchistic leanings, some of whom early left the Society of Friends because they felt that any form of organization would limit their freedom to follow the Light of Truth wherever it might lead, did not realize that the Light was Love as well as Truth. To love the truth is to follow that which draws humanity together into a unity of friendship, of non-possessive love, the highest condition in the universe, the very Presence of God Himself. William Penn wrote in his *Maxims*, “Nor can spirits ever be divided that

love and live in the same Divine Principle, the Root and Record of their Friendship.”

This problem of freedom within an organized group was faced by the early Christians. After Paul had founded the Galatian Church, certain persons came there who told the Galatian Christians that in order to be Christians they must carry out in full the law of Moses. When Paul heard of this he wrote with more fervor than in any of his other letters that have come down to us, showing that Christianity is not the old law, neither is it a new law. It is freedom from law. At first this may appear to be pure anarchy. But Paul was not speaking of unlimited liberty for self-indulgence (Gal. 5:13). With the external restraint of law, he contrasts internal guidance based on the love of God. This is pure freedom because, through union with God, man wills what God wills and God is free. Man, therefore, may share in God’s freedom. Paul speaks in terms of the Christ Within. “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal. 2:20). This is true also of the Galatian converts, “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Gal. 3:27). And so he exclaims with joy and wonder, “Christ has set us free; stand fast, therefore, and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery.” The law is for children and slaves but “because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts” (Gal. 4:6).

This is not an easy doctrine. It is not surprising that the Christian Church has been slow to understand Paul or has not striven to understand him. The Church was eventually presided over by an ecclesiastical hierarchy which left little opportunity for liberty of the Spirit. Paul admits the need of



regulations to govern the immature who have not yet won their freedom in Christ (Gal. 4:1-3). But the Church eventually allowed little freedom except at the top. Early Protestantism with its doctrine of depravity required an external rule and the power of external Grace in place of an internal governing Spirit. The Scripture furnished a code interpreted by creeds that was as binding as the law of Moses. The Quakers stand alone in having attempted a form of Church Government which, however it may have developed in practice, allowed in theory for the liberty of those who are led by the Spirit. Like Paul they recognized the need of precepts for the spiritually immature such as children in school, but even the Quaker schools were so devised that compulsion was minimized.

## **The Value of Differences**

The attainment of unity within the meeting is not the same as the attainment of uniformity. Unity is spiritual, uniformity mechanical. Friends have never required of their members assent to a religious or social creed, though not infrequently a body of Friends has issued a statement expressing their religious or social views at a particular time. There is, however, always the reservation that the Spirit of Truth may lead to further insight. Differences within the group on the particular application of general principles are tolerated, provided they are being actively explored in a spirit of friendship and in a continued search for truth. Such differences are often of great value in helping new aspects of truth to emerge.

The discovery of truth through differences of opinion is well illustrated in the history of science. “A clash of doctrines is not a disaster — it is an opportunity,” says Whitehead in *Science and the Modern World* (p.266). As an illustration he shows how disagreement in the results of experiments on the atomic weight of some elements led to the discovery that the same element may assume two or more distinct forms or isotopes. Of two different opinions we can say as Christ said in the parable, “let both grow together until the harvest.” The harvest is the fuller discovery of truth which includes both. Thus, as Whitehead shows, Galileo said that the earth moves and the sun is fixed. The Inquisition maintained that the earth is fixed and the sun moves. The modern theory of relativity includes both of these earlier theories. For this harvest it is sometimes necessary to wait a long time.

## **When Differences Cease to Have Value**

But differences cease to have value when fundamental principles are ignored. In science a difference between one theory which is based on the scientific method and another theory based on a different method such as magic or astrology would not be productive of new scientific truth. In similar fashion a difference between two points of view, one arrived at by free search and another arrived at by blind agreement with an authoritarian pronouncement would not be productive of new truth. To be creative the authoritative edict must be subjected to a discriminating inquiry which might alter it. If viewed as fixed it is dead and unproductive.

In Quakerism as in science the new can only arise out of the old. In science a creativity which did not take past discoveries into consideration would generally be unproductive of new truth. Similarly, the Quaker method will not progress without acknowledgment of all the great truths which have been discovered in the past. The meeting should hesitate to accept any suggestion which runs counter to the accumulated wisdom of the saints and prophets who have gone before. When it seeks to arrive at a decision which is an expression of truth it must consider as part of itself the invisible company of all those who discovered truth. Their insight must be given due weight in arriving at a decision. In religion as in science we do not start from nothing. The doctrine of the Light Within does not mean that an individual must depend only on his own measure of Light. As in science we do not expect every one to be a Newton or a Darwin, so in religion we do not expect every one to be a Paul or a Fox. The religious genius, like the scientific genius, must be allowed to give to those who are not geniuses the full measure of guidance.

## **Stages of Growth**

It must be borne in mind that a synthesis of opinion achieved within a group is not good simply because it is a synthesis. Unity may occur on a high level or a low level. A group of bandits may achieve consensus in carrying out their schemes. A nation may be at one in deciding to wage aggressive war. A mob may achieve a united opinion at a lower level than the code of conduct of the individuals who compose it. The clue to this problem is the concept of the Light as that which leads *up* to God. If the proper method is

followed, the Light which unifies the group will be found to be an elevating Principle. As Truth is sought through prayer, worship and an earnest effort to purge all that is self-centered and concerned with possessive desires, the group will rise through deliberation to a higher level than that on which it started. This occurs when there is real interdependence between the meeting for worship and the meeting for business. "Agreeing Upward" is a chapter heading in the works of the Chinese philosopher, Motze. It is toward this agreeing upward that a meeting should aspire.

The organic method of arriving at decisions by consensus appears at the primitive pre-individual level as well as at the advanced post-individual level. In the first case self-centeredness has not yet developed, in the second case it has been overcome. Of the Solomon Islanders, W. H. R. Rivers writes in *Instinct and the Subconscious* (p. 95) that "in the councils of such peoples there is no voting or other means of taking the opinion of the body." Quakers traveling in America in Colonial times sometimes visited the Indian councils and remarked that their method of coming to decisions was like that of a Quaker business meeting. John Richardson, while visiting William Penn, observed that the Indians "did not speak two at a time nor interfere in the least with one another." "My spirit was so easy with them," he continues, "that I did not feel that power of darkness to oppress me as I had done in many places among the people called Christians" (*Journal*, 1856, p. 135). In these councils the women participated as well as the men. Thomas Chalkley in traveling beyond the

Susquehanna in 1706 asked permission of the Indians to hold a religious meeting, “upon which,” he says, “they called a council in which they were very grave and spoke one after another without any heat or jarring ... Our interpreter told me that they had not done anything for many years without the counsel of ancient, grave women, who, I observed, spoke much in their council” (*Journal*, 1754, p. 49). Of a similar council Catherine Phillips notes that, “Several of their women sat in this conference who for fixed solidity appeared to me like Roman matrons” (*Journal*, 1798, p. 144).

Such councils where sex equality is maintained and voting unknown indicate that the organic method is in accord with human nature, as it evolved out of primitive, matriarchal conditions. The more mechanical method of voting becomes natural in a later stage of development when society has become more individualistic. But there is a still further stage when self-conscious individualization is surpassed but not eliminated, in a divine-human community so inspired by the one Spirit that it can act as a unit. The third stage resembles the first but it is higher because those who are in it have passed through the intermediary condition and become individuals. In the first stage there is unity, in the second individuality and in the third the synthesis of unity and individuality which makes possible participation in group life with freedom.

## Notes

1. Quotations from the New Testament are taken from the *Revised Standard Version*, 1946.

## **About the Author**

Howard Brinton taught at half a dozen institutions, including such Quaker centers as Haverford, Guilford, Earlham and Woodbrooke. The last of these four provided a model for Pendle Hill. He also worked overseas in Japan and Europe for the American Friends Service Committee. Between 1936 and 1950, he served as director of Pendle Hill, sharing that job with his wife, Anna Brinton.

The Brintons first came to Pendle Hill in 1936, where they faced the contingencies of a pioneer school community. All sorts of odd jobs, which a maintenance crew might later handle, fell to the Director of Studies. Howard Brinton was frequently seen traipsing across campus on his way to negotiate the latest crisis, pursued by his rabbit Tibbar and the family dog Nuto. Gerald Heard, then a member of the Pendle Hill staff, watched this peaceable kingdom on the march with delight and saw in it a practical illustration of the philosophy of survival by reconciliation.

In addition to writing more than a dozen Pendle Hill pamphlets, Howard Brinton wrote *Friends for Three Hundred Years*, a classic work of Quaker faith and history. Howard Brinton died in 1973.

## **Pendle Hill**

Located on 23 acres in Wallingford, Pennsylvania, Pendle Hill is a Quaker study, retreat, and conference center offering programs open to everyone. Pendle Hill's vision is

to create peace with justice in the world by transforming lives. Since Pendle Hill opened in 1930, thousands of people have come from across the United States and throughout the world for Spirit-led learning, retreat, and community.

At the heart of Pendle Hill is a residential study program which encourages a step back from daily life for reflection and discernment in preparation for deeper engagement in the community and wider world. Because spiritual experience is essential to Quakerism, Pendle Hill's education is experiential, or experimental, at its core. Adult students of all ages come for a term or a year of education designed to strengthen the whole person – body, mind, and spirit. The Resident Program captures the earliest vision for Pendle Hill while responding to the call of the world in which we exist today. Program themes include:

- Quaker faith and practice
- Dismantling oppression
- Spiritual deepening
- Leadership skill development
- Ecological literacy
- Personal discernment
- Arts and crafts
- Gandhian constructive program
- Building capacity for nonviolent social change.

Programs are offered in a variety of formats – including term-long courses, weekend workshops, and evening presentations. Those unable to come

for a term or a year are encouraged to take part in a workshop or retreat. Information on all Pendle Hill programs is available at [www.pendlehill.org](http://www.pendlehill.org). Pendle Hill's mission of spiritual education is also furthered through conference services – hosting events for a variety of religious and educational nonprofit organizations, including many Quaker groups.

The Pendle Hill pamphlets have been an integral part of Pendle Hill's educational vision since 1934. Like early Christian and Quaker tracts, the pamphlets articulate perspectives which grow out of the personal experience, insights, and/or special knowledge of the authors, concerning spiritual life, faith, and witness.

A typical pamphlet has characteristics which make it a good vehicle for experimental thought. It is the right length to be read at a single sitting (about 9000 words). It is concerned with a topic of contemporary importance. Like words spoken in a Quaker meeting for worship, it embodies a concern, a sense of obligation to express caring or to act in response to a harmful situation.

To receive each Pendle Hill pamphlet as it is published, order an annual subscription. Please contact:

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