

The Quaker Vision of Gospel Order

by Lloyd Lee Wilson

A distinctive aspect of the vision of early Friends, about which they had much to say and write, was *gospel order*. Contemporary Friends have by and large lost this term, and the corresponding part of the Quaker vision with it. Early Friends' vision of the gospel order coming into its full being here on earth gave direction and motivation to much of the early Quaker witness and testimony; and the fact that their efforts worked to bring the world (or some small part of it) closer to gospel order is a large part of the reason that their witness and testimony was so effective. Without that vision, recent Quaker activities have been less focussed and less fundamentally effective. Seen or unseen, the gospel order still exists, and Friends (as well as other Christians) would benefit from its rediscovery and fresh application in our individual and corporate lives.

Gospel order is the order established by God that exists in every part of creation, transcending the chaos that seems so often prevalent. It is the right relationship of every part of creation, however small, to every other part and to the Creator. Gospel order is the harmony and order which God established at the moment of creation, and which enables the individual aspects of creation to achieve that quality of being which God intended from the start, about which God could say that "it was very good." ([Genesis 1:31](#)) The spirit of the believer, opened to the Truth of Christ and about Christ as were George Fox and his fellow Children of Light, is opened to the perception of the gospel order as well as the gospel, and empowered to attune one's life to it. As one closely into harmony with the gospel order, one's life is filled more and more with the peace that passes understanding, and one's relationships reflect this peace and harmony. Relationships outside the gospel order, in contrast, are full of tension and conflict, and lead not to greater peace but greater anxiety and clash..

One might say that gospel order is the vessel which contains (and therefore shapes) the Quaker edition of the Christian gospel, giving the Quaker message its particular flavor. Gospel order is not God or any aspect of the Trinity, but it is an organizing principle by which Friends come to a clearer understanding of our relationship to God in all of the divine manifestations and the responsibilities of that relationship. An attention to gospel order enables the meeting faith community to perceive and accept the spiritual gifts which God offers, as well as to develop and exercise those gifts as God desires. Finally, gospel order is both a distinctive aspect of Quaker witness and testimony and the means by which Friends come to understand how they are to witness to the world.

Gospel order is pervasive; it is the order and harmony that characterizes every part of creation when that part is functioning according to the divine will — the shining of stars as well as the making of bread. It has been the experience of Friends that no part of their lives as individuals or

as a faith community is separate from their vision of gospel order. [*See Sandra Cronk, [Gospel Order: A Quaker Understanding of Faithful Church Community](#), Pendle Hill Pamphlet #297, 1991. Cronk has identified dimensions of gospel order applicable to the inward life of worship and discernment, the functioning of the faith community, and the social testimonies of Friends.*] The essays in this collection center around the influence and effect of a right understanding of gospel order on the Quaker message, the presence and effect of spiritual gifts in the faith community, and the witness and testimonies of Friends. There are many other dimensions of gospel order; the aspects set out here are intended to be illustrative, not definitive...

The use of the term "gospel order" among Friends seems to have begun with George Fox, though it quickly spread among the Children of Light. In later generations the more usual terminology became "right order" or "good order", as in the traditional Quaker marriage certificate, which refers to the bride and groom having declared their intentions to marry to their monthly meeting "according to the good order used among them." This terminology seems to infer an adherence to the right procedures for accomplishing some activity. For Fox, however, both the term and the experience were gospel order, and he had a great deal to say on the subject, including the following:

You may see how the Apostle, after he had convinced people, brought them into the Order of the Gospel. The Jews, after they came out of Egypt, they were brought into the Order of the law of God. And as Christians come to believe in Christ, then they are come into the Order of the Gospel.

So, as I was first moved of the Lord God, to go up and down the nation to preach the Gospel, then after[wards] the Lord moved me to go up and down to exhort and unite, that all people might come into the possession of the Gospel, and the Order of it, which is the Power of God ... by which`all things are upheld and ordered to the Glory of God..

So, this was the spiritual Order of the Gospel, which the Apostle in Spirit beheld ... in whom their walking should be, to wit, in Christ, the spiritual and heavenly Man; and not to walk in old Adam, who was without this spiritual, heavenly Gospel Order, which it is the duty of all Christians to walk in..... It is said in Psalm 37:23, "The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord:, that is, by his Power and Spirit." [*George Fox, Epistle 313, in [The Power of the Lord Is Over all, the Pastoral Letters of George Fox](#), ed. T. Canby Jones, Friends United Press, 1989, p.312.*]

The Quaker understanding of gospel order stems from an understanding of Christ's role as the restorer of the original relationship between the Creator and creation. By this view, Christ reconciled creation with the Creator, and by so doing enabled everyone who believes in Christ to

enter into a new relationship with God. It was (and is) the responsibility of Christians to live in this gospel order, both out of the desire to do God's will, from the joy that being in that right relationship brings, and as a testimony to the rest of the world about the gospel.

In the Book of Genesis one reads that God at the moment of creation said of everything that it was very good; it was in fact all perfect. Only in the Fall of Adam was the perfect order of all creation broken. *[The author is not a creationist, but sees no inherent conflict between science and religion regarding creation. It seems reasonable that God, having created the "laws" of the universe, should make use of those laws in the continuing work of creating the physical world that we know. The creation account in the Book of Genesis is not a textbook on physics but a statement about the relationship of God and creation, and the role of human beings' free will in helping or hindering that relationship.]* After the Fall, some aspects of divine order were completely disrupted and God gave humanity certain other temporary rules of conduct to compensate for our brokenness. Jesus Christ and early apostles like Paul taught that the Jewish Law was just such a "temporary" set of rules of conduct, given because of the "hardness of heart" of human beings, [cf. [Matthew 19:8](#)] and that there was a higher, more perfect standard of behavior that depended not on specific rules but on a new relationship between God and creation, including specific individuals. Jesus Christ was able to call people to this higher, more perfect standard because Christ Himself enabled them to achieve and sustain it..

Quakers extended this principle to apply not just to Jewish Law, but to every aspect of the Christian life. Not only were the stipulations of the Law superseded by Christ's restoration of the original gospel order, but the stipulations of culture and social custom were superseded as well. As individuals came into a true belief in Christ, they felt themselves to be brought at the same time into a new relationship with God and understanding of God's order for all creation. It then became the welcome responsibility of these new Quakers to live according to the dictates of that gospel order, even when to do so meant to be in conflict with prevailing norms, values, or even laws.

This is the argument used by the first Friends to demonstrate the equality of women.. George Fox in particular is quite eloquent on this topic, showing in his arguments that women were created to be equal help-meets with men but were placed by God in an inferior position to men after the Fall. Since Friends understood that Christ in all his offices restored the original gospel order to the universe — the divine order of the creation which existed before Adam's Fall — they knew that women had been restored to their original position of being equal help-meets with men, that was the divine intent from the beginning of creation. Faithful Christians would honor their restored position. Anything less than full equality between women and men was a denial of God's intent and Christ's restorative, redeeming power, and contrary to gospel order. Gospel order overcame both the discrimination of Jewish culture and Law and those troublesome passages in the New Testament which seem to relegate women to an inferior position. Neither had the authority of Friends' understanding of gospel order.

The Quaker perception of and understanding of gospel order is closely linked to their universal application of the doctrines of perfection and perseverance, as set out by Robert Barclay in his *Apology*:

Proposition 8

Perfection [or the Achievement of Spiritual Maturity]

He in whom this pure and holy birth occurs in all its fullness, finds that death and sin are crucified and removed from him, and his heart becomes united and obedient to truth. He is no longer able to obey any suggestions or temptations toward evil, but is freed from sin and the transgression of the law of God, and in that respect perfect. Yet there is still room for spiritual growth, and some possibility of sinning remains if the mind is not diligently and watchfully applied to heeding the Lord. (Romans 6:14; 8:13; 6:2, 18; and 1 John 3:6)

Proposition 9

Perseverance in the Faith and the Possibility of Falling from Grace

Even though this gift of the inward grace of God is sufficient to bring about salvation, yet for those who resist it, it not only may become their condemnation, but does. Moreover, by disobedience, those whose hearts have been partly purified and sanctified by this grace may fall from that state, turning to licentiousness (Jude 4) making shipwreck of faith (1 Timothy 1:19). They fall away again after they have tasted the heavenly gift and have partaken of the Holy Spirit (Hebrews 6:4-6). Nevertheless, it is possible to achieve such an increase and stability in the truth in this life that total apostasy is impossible. [*Robert Barclay, [Apology for True Christian Divinity](#)*]

Viewed from this perspective, gospel order is that state of affairs which would prevail everywhere if the experience of the pure and holy birth of which Barclay speaks were universal, and all souls achieved the increase and stability in the Truth that prevents shipwreck of faith. Since God intends (and yearns) for us all to reach that state, and has made it possible for us to do so, it is incumbent on all the members of the faith community to live in a manner that is in keeping with that state of gospel order and that acts to bring it about more generally. Indeed, there is a joy which comes from carrying out God's wishes in this way and abides with the members of the faith community even when the specific action or decision at issue may bring outward hardship. The experience of that joy has kept Friends constantly at the edge of human understanding of right relationships, speaking and living prophetically for more than three centuries about what our common life on this planet could and should be. More than either the Catholic or Protestant faith traditions, Friends have claimed to be living already in the restored gospel order, and to be enabled by that restoration to live lives of witness and testimony to the power of Christ among us.

Christ restored that order to the created universe about which God said at the moment of creation, “It is good,” and which had been disrupted by human nature, as symbolized by Adam's fall from grace into sin. Two distinctive aspects of Quaker belief about this order are that the restoration is effective now, in the present moment, and that every human being is capable of achieving that spiritual maturity, or perfection, which brings one fully into the gospel order. There is no need or reason to compromise with the existing order until the Second Coming, and no limitation on who might attain this relationship with God to 144,000 elect souls or any other number. On the other hand, realization of the divine plan requires the active and willful cooperation of the individual believer; there is no “cheap grace” and no predestination of certain souls to salvation..

The first of these distinctive Quaker beliefs regarding gospel order — that Christ's restoration of the Creator's order in the cosmos is effective in the present moment, not some future time, is part of Friends’ understanding that the "end times" are also part of the present moment. In Quaker eschatology the gospel is always breaking into our lives now, in the present moment; early Friends were not waiting for the Second Coming at some future time, but joyfully and publicly witnessing that the Kingdom of God had come among them already. [*cf.* [The Day of the Lord, Eschatology in Quaker Perspective](#), ed. By Dean Freiday, Barclay Press, 1981.] The new order of the Kingdom of God, restoring the divine intent for the cosmos from its brokenness and sin, was (and is) gospel order. This order was present and available already, not postponed to some future date when Christ would return to an outward rulership over creation. Expressed differently, the gospel is both the restoration brought about by Christ and the changed creation resulting from the restoration. Friends preach their experience that Christ has come among them already, and that therefore the Kingdom of God is a present fact and all Christians are called to live as Kingdom people now, in the present moment. Living in such a manner is not only part of our covenant relationship with the risen Christ but also an evangelical witness to the world that the Kingdom of God is indeed at hand.

The second distinctive belief, that every person was capable of living in gospel order, was in sharp contrast to other Christian groups of that day who taught that only a portion of humanity could be saved; sadly, a teaching that still has its adherents. In this sense of universal salvation Quakers had indeed revived the faith of primitive Christianity, as expressed in the early hymn quoted by Paul in his epistle to the Philippians:

And for this God raised him high...

So that all beings should bend the knee at the name of Jesus

And that every tongue should acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord to the glory of the Father.

(Philippians 2:9-11, New Jerusalem Bible)

The third relevant distinctive belief about gospel order is that it is possible for a believer to fall away from a state of grace, as expressed by Barclay in his [Proposition Nine](#), quoted above. This

means that it is necessary for each believer always to be seeking to discern God's will, trying to discern gospel order in every situation, to protect against such a disaster. There is nothing in Friends faith or experience that indicates that a person who believes in Christ is saved no matter what one does afterward; what Friends do believe is that one who accepts the inward grace of God is enabled and empowered to live in harmony with God's Will and the gospel order. The choice whether or not to do so is up to the individual..

For early Friends to admonish one another to keep to the gospel order, therefore, was to remind themselves that they were citizens of the Kingdom of God, not a worldly government, and should act accordingly. In any individual or corporate circumstance, there is among the alternatives a choice that is in keeping with the gospel in all its fullness. [[1 Cor. 10:13](#)] It is incumbent on Friends to help one another discern that one choice among the many that may be open, and to carry it out faithfully. When we do so, we lift all of creation closer to that perfection which God intends and of which Barclay wrote. When we fail to do so, all of creation drifts farther from its intended relationship with the Father, and the Divine Plan is hampered. Over the generations of our history as a people of God, Friends have discovered and developed a number of practices and procedures which have been useful in this process of discovering what action is in keeping with gospel order in a given circumstance. These procedures have been very helpful again and again, and are rightfully valued highly by many Friends today. However, it is well to remember that the processes by which Friends discern the gospel order are only a very small portion of the gospel order itself, which encompasses all human endeavor and indeed all of creation, throughout eternity. The processes by which we humans discern gospel order may change and develop over the centuries, as may our perception of gospel order, but the order itself is unchanging.

It was an important practice to Friends from the very beginning to call things by their right names. Early Friends understood experientially how important our use of language is, and the words we use to express our understandings also shape our understandings. The fundamental distrust of language as an adequate vehicle for communicating religious experience led Friends into waiting worship; it has also led to great care in the choice of specific words when words are necessary. It is not by accident, therefore, that Friends came to name certain committees of their meetings Social Order committees,,for this title embodies the vision that there is a social order, in harmony with and expressive of the wider gospel order. This is an optimistic vision, in which the witness and testimony of Friends in the wider community should therefore be to witness to how that social order might be brought into wider reality. The change in nomenclature to *Social Concern* committees seems to me to express a loss of vision concerning the gospel order and a subsequent transformation to an essentially negative perspective, in which things look awful and Friends must do what they can to ameliorate the worst situations.

In similar fashion there has been in some quarters in recent years a substitution of “right order” for “gospel order”, and a concomitant narrowing of the scope of right order to those procedures

by which Friends come to make decisions. Now it seems to me that substituting for the full vision of gospel order the processes by which the gospel order has been perceived is an error similar to the prevalent substitution of Quaker testimonies for the Truth to which they originally gave witness. Too great an attention on the details of the procedures themselves rather than on the underlying desire to be in the gospel order relationship with the Author and Perfecter of our faith tempts us toward the substitution of the procedures for the divine relationship in our minds and hearts. The procedures we follow are not gospel order itself, and they are not magic ritual, which will ensure gospel order if we follow them ritualistically, without possessing the inward reality. We lose an important part of our spiritual heritage when we do not transmit the meanings along with the vocabulary.

Fox said that the Scriptures could be fully and truly understood only by those persons who had come into the same Spirit that gave them forth; the same is true of gospel order. We are enabled to perceive gospel order and to understand a given circumstance in the context of gospel order through the action of the Holy Spirit that gives it forth, as well. The perception of gospel order is a spiritual exercise, therefore, rather than an intellectual one, and the intellectual processes or physical procedures by which we look for discernment are aids to the spiritual process, rather than the process itself. The fundamental means by which a meeting or an individual discerns gospel order is by centering down into waiting worship, to listen and receive what the Spirit will offer to enlighten the circumstance. The old phrase about “feeling out” what is right order aptly expresses the nature of a process that is spiritual perception rather than intellectual methodology.

As individuals or as a meeting community we should go about answering the question, “What is gospel order in this situation?” by listening to the Inward Guide, and learning to set all things aside except that guidance. If we do, we will see over time that there is an internal consistency and pattern to our actions in gospel order, although seeking after consistency or intellectual logic would not have led us in the paths we have traveled with the Holy Spirit.

Likewise, we can teach gospel order only by a sort of “pointing”, in which we share the means by which we discern gospel order and examples of our discernment. Intellectual or rational explanations can not capture the essence of gospel order or the means by which it is perceived. The learner must come into the Spirit that gave forth gospel order on her own. Nevertheless, in any meeting where the question of the nature of and discernment of gospel order had already arisen, it would be beneficial to arrange some corporate investigation of the topic, through retreats, corporate prayer, and group reading and study. These settings offer the opportunity for Friends to share their experiences in discernment as well as the fruits of those experiences.

The fruits of an attention to gospel order in a given monthly meeting or other faith community are numerous. For example, William Taber has written in *Friends Journal* and *Quaker Life* that the gifts needed for effective pastoral care are one fruit of an attention to gospel order. [William Taber

Jr, "A Fruit of Gospel Order", [Friends Journal, 7/89](#), pp. 24-25. This article also appeared in the 4/89 issue of Quaker Life.] Through a careful attention to gospel order, Taber says, "Friends will be led to give the pastoral care that is needed or to see that someone is found who can do so." Gospel order includes, in Taber's understanding, "the Spirit-given ability to meet specific needs of a specific situation and time." Beyond this example, all the fruits of the Spirit recited in the Epistle to the Galatians are bestowed on the faith community that dedicates itself to gospel order, because maintaining gospel order means maintaining a right relationship with the Holy Spirit and the GodHead.

A clear vision of gospel order can arise in any faith community where the gift of prophecy is given and accepted, and God can dispense spiritual gifts as He wishes; so it may come to your faith community no matter what you do or let be. God will bestow on each community the spiritual gifts it needs, with divine timing and according to the divine plan. Still, we have as human beings the option of accepting or rejecting God's gifts, and helping or hindering the progress of the divine plan for creation. Fox's continual admonitions in his epistles certainly argue that communities as well as individual Friends benefit from attending directly to the question, "What is gospel order in this situation?"

To the extent that we keep close to gospel order in each circumstance of our private and corporate lives, we gain spiritual strength and clarity from being in harmony with our Divine Guide. When we stray, a jangling and disorder will come into our lives which replaces the peace beyond understanding with "the bread of anxious care" of which the Psalmist spoke. [[Psalm 127:2 RSV](#)] Let us resolve, therefore, to feel out carefully for gospel order in each decision we approach, and to follow faithfully those promptings and leadings we are given, that we might "come into the possession of the Gospel, and the Order of it, by which all things are upheld and ordered to the Glory of God". (Fox, Epistle 313)

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