

“A Way Forward”

The Future of the Society of Friends in Britain

Introduction

A periodic examination may well be a good thing for religious groups. Other organizations do this frequently. They ponder how well “form follows function” (to use an architectural adage), they take corrective action, and then they issue “mission statements” restating goals and objectives. So it seems appropriate for Quakers to take a careful look at themselves, particularly inasmuch as it’s been a hundred fifty years since Friends were prodded into a major review by John Stephenson Rowntree! His prize-winning essay was published as *Quakerism Past and Present : Being an Inquiry into the Causes of its Decline in England and Ireland* (Philadelphia, Henry Longstreth, 1860).

One thing an organization can do is to decide whether it’s time to quit. Organizations do quit, sometimes because they can’t compete in the market, or the product has become obsolete or conveyed by other companies, or mismanagement pushes them toward bankruptcy. At other times a generation managing an old family business gets tired of working; so they sell out and retire to a comfortable estate, content to know that what their family poured energies into for generations continues to serve the public. Such a decision requires soul-searching! Folks find it hard to quit something that’s been emotionally energizing, personally fulfilling, and generation-bonding for a long time.

So, before pondering how we Quakers might more faithfully, and capably, fulfill *our* spiritual role in society, let’s consider whether, in the face of diminishing numbers and adverse cultural pressures, we might choose rather to phase out our social capital and, in a generation or two, close the enterprise. Let’s examine the rationale for doing this and weigh the pros and cons. An up-front disclaimer: I personally do not favor this option; but some religious organizations have chosen this route, apparently for sufficient reasons, so at least let’s examine its pros and cons.

Is it time to phase out the Society of Friends?

Yes we should, and here's why. Numbers are diminishing, meetings are aging, schools, colleges, and other institutions increasingly serve mostly non- Quaker families and are often quite independent of our meetings. Friends' testimonies such as peace, integrity in personal and business dealings, human rights, care for the afflicted and suffering, resource conservation, etc., are concerns other groups now share. In post-modern culture, tolerance is a major virtue, and, given its current connotation, has so largely voided specific belief systems that previously shared doctrinal consensus no longer binds Friends together—it actually makes them quarrelsome. Early Quaker teachings appear central to some Friends, anachronistic or simply wrong to others. So why not just let the Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Moslem, humanist, Wiccan, and atheist folks in local meetings export insights gained from the Quaker experience and renew fellowship within their primary affinity circles? The *liturgy* of silent worship (thank you, Pink Dandelion, for that term), like meditation and yoga, detached from historic roots, is clearly exportable. Finally, for some present-day Friends, Christianity is being replaced by non-theistic humanism, so why not phase out the Quaker chapter in history and let our checkered narrative inform future generations? Quaker books and journals are stacked in libraries and archives, symbolic sites such as Fox's Pulpit and Pendle Hill sufficiently memorialize this chapter of cultural history, and numbers of charmingly quaint old meeting -houses symbolize a rich social legacy. Ongoing services rendered by endowed charities would continue to commemorate our testimonies about justice, peace, and care for the needy. The Quaker name would continue to connote virtues such as excellence, fairness, and integrity, whether used to peddle oatmeal or banking services. Children in the next century reading history books would learn of heroic Quaker efforts to abolish slavery, relieve suffering, promote peace, and to build bridges physical and social. Faithful reformers such as John Bright, John Woolman, and Elizabeth Fry would be pictured and praised. Colleges named after Quaker worthies would continue to offer youth historic glimpses of our heritage, and to underscore our ethical teachings. Secondary schools founded and funded by Friends would continue to convey our testimonies about integrity, fair dealings, peace, justice, and care of the earth. Children of high-placed social and political leaders attend some of these prestigious British and American schools; and surely Quaker values, attributed or not, would filter down to

ordinary folks. The peaceable kingdom envisioned so artistically by Edward Hicks, and attempted in Pennsylvania, isn't here yet, but we have planted good seeds for a future Eden. They are just growing in different soils, in different "gardens of the Lord."

No, we should not, and here's why: There are big problems with this scenario. Although British, European, and some North American Quaker groups have been steadily diminishing in actual numbers as well as population percentages, *that's not the case elsewhere in the world.* So, wouldn't it be presumptuous for British Friends to act for all of them? To close down the whole company, as it were, when many local stores are thriving, or at least holding steady? Of course; it would be wrong-headed at best and arrogant at worst. Consider some numbers. Currently there are about 350,000 of us world-wide (some knowledgeable folks estimate half a million) with Friends thriving best (numerically, and maybe spiritually) in the Global South. There are nearly twice as many Friends in Bolivia as in Britain, more in Honduras than in Ireland. There are more Quakers in Kenya than in all of North America. Taiwan Friends number more than those in continental Europe. There are more Eskimo Quakers than Scandinavian ones.

The Anglo Quaker story is not the only one. Contemporary or future "Children of the Light" from other ethnic groups may not as yet have hit the history books, but they are in God's list of those who have overcome "by the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony" (Revelation 12.11) -- to use a phrase favored by early Friends. Furthermore, it is not clear to many of us, myself included, that God is through with Friends. It may well be that our spiritual insights are needed in the world *like never before*. In a section below I'll indicate why that may be so and suggest some faithful responses.

Where we started from, and how we got to where we are now.

The early period. This sketch is necessarily short on details, maybe even with some generalizations a bit broad, if not hasty. You history buffs can fill in the blanks. Well, we Quakers started when George Fox and other spiritually hungry folks, "seekers", found state-run Christianity sterile, doling out second-hand religion. You know the story: young George experienced a powerful epiphany: Jesus Christ "spoke to his condition." Ecstatic faith trumped doubt. Climbing mythically demon-ridden Pendle Hill, he envisioned "a

people to be gathered to the Lord". And gather them he did. This charismatic youth preached to crowds in fields and fairs, got jailed a half-dozen times for disturbing established order. He gathered a cohort of equally Spirit-anointed young men *and women* (later called the "Valiant Sixty") who swarmed over England and abroad, joyously—if sometimes rashly--proclaiming the good news that Christ isn't just somebody back in history, locked up in the Bible, his message to be doled out ritually by politically-appointed "priests". No! The risen Christ is present, to forgive sinners, to lead folks "back through the flaming sword" to a life of holiness, to "take away the occasion for war", to be their present guide and teacher. These God-touched folks called themselves "Friends" from Jesus' invitation to those first disciples who knew their Master's agenda and were prepared to follow it: "I have called you friends." Friends of Jesus! They got dubbed Quakers, in scorn, because some trembled in Pentecostal ecstasy. They suffered beatings and imprisonments and gave God the glory. Fox poured over the Bible until he had practically memorized it, and argued theology with preachers. He gathered up newly convinced folks. Like that perceptive and cultured woman, Margaret Fell (whom he married after she became widowed). Like scholarly Robert Barclay who could set forth Biblical doctrines in an orderly fashion. Like the wealthy and erudite William Penn. Fox exhorted war-minded Cromwell to lay his crown at Jesus feet. He set up a system of meetings for this new covenant people, wrote scads of letters to them, preached in Europe, trekked several times to America to guide "Children of the Light" transplants to the new world wilderness. Such was the 17th century "Quaker Awakening of the Church." Under Fox's charismatic leadership the movement spread like a wildfire. This was a "day of the Lord": the Church restored to apostolic faithfulness. By the time of his death, 1691, the "people gathered to the Lord" numbered some sixty to seventy thousand people. My ancestors, and perhaps yours, were among them. Leary of priest-craft these folks, fervently committed to Christ's renewed Gospel order, gathered in silent worship for Christ to minister to them through Spirit-moved messengers. Sometimes this ministry came through traveling leaders who preached long sermons (some taken down in shorthand and published). Friends also held public "threshing meetings" – a bit like later 19th century revival meetings--- to separate the wheat of goodness from the chaff of sin.

The Quietist period. The next chapter in our history is different. Officially tolerated, early in the 18th century (now with other non-conformists designated a “religious society,”—a sort of condescending sop from the “established church”) our spiritual ancestors became less evangelistic and more concerned to keep the beloved community clear of sin, free from the worldly defilement, given to simplicity, avoiding superfluity, prudent in business dealings, perceptively aware of how the sin of pride troubles humanity, admirably conscientious in heeding promptings of the Spirit in dealing with the world’s evils- such as slavery and mistreatment of the mentally ill. Worship became increasingly silent waiting in plain meetinghouses with hard benches. Much of this was exemplary: doing what Jesus commanded his friends to do: love neighbor as oneself. Heeding the old prophets, to seek justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. As Quaker colonies formed in America uniform disciplines of faith and practice helped sustain covenant identity. London epistles assured a continuity of belief and practices. They included statistics about the extent to which Friends suffered for refusing to pay tithes to support the state Church, and general admonitions for inward spiritual discipline and moral uprightness. A typical epistle began with a salutation such as this from two hundred years ago: “We salute you in our Lord Jesus Christ with love unfeigned; earnestly desiring that in all your meetings you may be edified and comforted in a sense of his divine presence.....” (*Annual Epistles. . .*, New York: Samuel Wood, 1821, p. 267)

Early in the century Margaret Fell Fox had warned of problems with this effort to separate the Quaker community from the world, especially external disciplines that marked the movement. Once from his trek to the new world, husband George had brought her a present -- some red cloth. She loved it, and opined that the emergent pattern of virtually prescribed grey attire was “a poor silly gospel.” But sterner voices prevailed, urging a separatist approach, and strict disciplines were imposed to keep the covenantal community pure, to be, as the Bible said, “in the world but not of it”, each local meeting a seed plot demonstrating how society should exemplify the peaceable kingdom. The lessons of the Quaker colony of Pennsylvania, “holy experiment”, were not all lost when Quakers gave up leadership. Nurturing the inward life as faithful and orthodox Christians, not withdrawal from the world per se, was the objective. Actually Friends were well engaged in the world,

conducting businesses with integrity—and business acumen—and engaging in applied sciences.

The spiritual life of Friends was nurtured by specially gifted “traveling ministers.” Early in the century Thomas Chalkley of London, began an itinerant preaching ministry across in England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, Holland, Germany and America. He was a ship owner and paid his own way. Thomas Shillitoe travelled widely, preaching wherever he found opportunity, in saloons as well as meetinghouses, to commoners and kings. John Fothergill was another such minister, a fervent Christian whose gave much to the Society of Friends in that century. A name-sake son became a physician and friend of Benjamin Franklin, and a second son Samuel followed in his father’s footsteps in ministerial travels. Other such exemplary servants of the Lord could be noted.

Queries helped Friends hold each other accountable. One example: “are you free from piracy”? (Piracy here meant profiting from goods stolen on the high seas, not illegally down-loading videos—but the principle is the same). Noteworthy Christian disciplines of careful work, deep, meditative worship, integrity in business dealings, and compassionate care marked the era. Woolman is one example of this quietist period at its best. So is the remarkable Anthony Benezet, humble school teacher and intrepid pamphleteer who brought Thomas Clarkson and John Wesley into the abolitionist cause. To offer guarded education for children and close fellowship for adults within close communities of faith had much to commend it to future generations. But exuberant evangelistic preaching diminished. Stern disciplinary walls and disownments for such breaches of external rules as marriage to outsiders, could not keep the world out nor youth in. Numbers slowly diminished. John Stephenson Rowntree estimated that in 1859 there were 15000 Quakers in Britain, 5000 fewer than in 1800. (*Quakerism Past and Present*, p. 187) He blamed overly heavy-handed disciplinary control for loss of numbers. But it’s quite probable a lack of evangelistic outreach was another significant factor.

Evangelical renewal and rationalist challenges.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century “Enlightenment” challenges to orthodox Christianity occurred. Unitarianism arose from within Congregationalism. In America the

tension resulted in the Hicksite-Orthodox separation. For most of the century British Friends supported the Orthodox party, buttressed in their faith by other Christian movements, such as Wesleyanism, and by their traveling ministers. Certain articulate Quaker scholars bolstered the historic Christian views of Friends. In 1802 Joseph Gurney Bevan's *Appeal to the Society of Friends* warned against deistic drift and urged faithfulness to Scriptural theology. A few years later Henry Tuke, of York, published *Principles of Religion as Professed by the Society of Christians Usually Called Quakers*. The book constituted a vigorous apologetic for orthodox Christian teachings. It went through multiple printings, supplementing evangelical preaching by traveling ministers such as Mary Dudley whose farewell message to Friends was this:

“Preach Christ crucified. . . do not be afraid to preach the cross of Christ and to proclaim not only what He would do within us by His Spirit, but also what He hath done without us, the atoning sacrifice should never be lost sight of.” (*Her Life*, cited in Walter R. Williams, *The Rich Heritage of Quakerism*, Eerdmans, 1962, p. 146)

The Gurney family contributed much to the shaping of Quakerdom of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Elizabeth Fry's ministry to the Newgate prisoners and subsequent efforts for prison reform was noteworthy and exemplary. Joseph John Gurney, eminent scholar and participant in ecumenist endeavors such as Bible societies and adult education, ably articulated Christian theology and labored valiantly for temperance, peace and the abolition of capital punishment. His *Observations on the Religious Society of Friends*, published in 1824 served as a textbook for orthodox American Friends. So influential was he in America that after the 1827 Separation, the orthodox branch became known as Gurneyite Friends.

Moving from mainstream Christian beliefs to more liberal ones

Rowntree's concern about membership losses took root. With some liberal exceptions influenced by Enlightenment thought—such as the Hicksite split from orthodoxy-- in the latter years of the 19th century Quakers became more mainstream— more in sync with historic Christian faith and practice, less sectarian. They cooperated ecumenically in various activities of education and service. The Friends Adult school movement ministered

to thousands of people, and although most working class folks did not align with Friends, the Yearly Meeting experienced some growth during the last half of the century. In the latter part of the century British Friends engaged in evangelistic outreach. William Allen and Thomas Shillitoe (and from America immigrant John Frederick Hanson) reached across to Norway. At the end of the century and early into the twentieth, out of the concerns of the Prayer League, village evangelism was initiated, envisioned by Arthur Dann and implemented by George A. Fox. A 1917 conference at Birmingham called for new evangelistic outreach, and within a few years a thousand young folks participated. Under pressures of an ascendant liberalism in the new century, however, this home missions ministry drifted away from Quaker patronage.

Nineteenth century British Friends also picked up again the early Quaker zeal for *foreign* missions, this time in with significant financial resources and in an organized manner. A hundred fifty years ago George Richardson, of Newcastle, urged Friends once again to get involved in foreign missions. His concerns were carried forth by a young Friend, Henry Stanley Newman, and, following a conference on the subject, a Friends Foreign Missionary Association was formed. American Friends also engaged with them in missionary endeavors that reached areas such as India, the Near East, Madagascar, and West China. In the latter case the legacy of the Davidson brothers remains in the small Chengdu fellowship and the hospital built by British donors, with local Friends like Stephen Yang during recent times remaining in contact with both British and American Friends.

In North America Quakers were part of the westward migration, forming settlements from Ohio to California, and during the latter part of the century adapting a pattern of settled pastoral care for increasing numbers of converts brought in through revival meetings. Greatly removed from the social ethos of deferential religious treatment in which dissenters from “the Church” had to be labeled “societies”, these Friends just called themselves the “Friends Church.” They figured Fox and other early friends of Jesus would approve. But in Britain more Quietist methods of worship and practice prevailed, and as we will note in the next section, these Friends became more liberal in matters of faith.

From liberal Christian faith to post-modern pluralism

Two important conferences at century's end marked a major fork in the Quaker road. These were the Manchester Conference of 1895 and the Richmond Conference of 1887. The Manchester Conference was set up by the Home Missions Committee to consider questions posed by emergent liberalism. Issues raised at the conference included concerns for education and led to establishment of Woodbrooke. This Quaker center became a nucleus for a cluster of schools, the "Selly Oaks" colleges. British Quakerism had become a major force in liberal Christian education

At century's end the Friends' focus on formal education, religious and otherwise, reflected a shift away from Quietism, as well as from evangelistic outreach, and a move toward liberal theology, in keeping with the optimistic spirit of the age and the impact of scientific theories. Joseph Bevan Braithwaite was a Biblical scholar who retained an evangelical perspective. Others such as J. Rendel Harris, John Wilhelm Rowntree, Carolyn Stephen, and an influential American scholar, Rufus M. Jones, however, accommodated to more liberal theories about the Bible, nature and human personality. Their emphasis upon a rational Christian mysticism as the central Quaker theological construct set a pattern for the next century. One significant result: a gradual decline in the authority of Scripture until it no longer became a definitive test of religious truth, against which leadings of the Spirit could never be in conflict. This shift eventually led to a breakdown of authority for covenantal documents of faith and practice, as local decisions challenging them might (and would) also claim to be guided by the Spirit.

The Richmond Conference took a different direction. The 1887 event gathered the Orthodox yearly meetings ("Gurneyite", those in correspondence with London Yearly Meeting) to redefine Friends faith and practice. The urgency to do so was prompted by a need for guidance to converts gathered through evangelistic outreach and by theological controversies swirling about between liberal and conservative theologies ("modernism vs. fundamentalism"). The resulting approved document, "The Richmond Declaration of Faith," was largely crafted by J. Bevan Braithwaite of London, James Rhoads of Philadelphia

and James Carey Thomas of Baltimore. It became, and for over a century and a half has remained, a definitive statement of Quaker beliefs for most Friends yearly meetings in America and guiding document for most of the others in the world, although, ironically, not for those yearly meetings whose leaders wrote it.

The 20th century synthesis between rationalism and Biblical interpretation has come unraveled in the current century under pressures of cultural pluralism, ethical relativism, and attacks by atheist scholars who blame religion for the world's ills. When early twentieth century liberals handed empirical questions over to the hard sciences they thought they could hang on to the soul, or at least to spiritual realities, accessed by encounters with the Light of Christ within. So they focused upon mystical connectedness to God. Much helpful devotional literature came from this focus, including the reflective writings of Douglas Steere and Thomas Kelly. But then the soft sciences, psychology, sociology, and anthropology, etc., took over explanations of the inner stuff and left liberal Friends without a rational apologetic. So some liberal Friends shucked off remaining *distinctive* Christian doctrines. They hung on to their intuitions, broadened concepts of divine light, and embraced religious pluralism. They retrofitted their heritage to support it, using selected citations from Fox and Penn to buttress claims to authenticity. The Quaker Universalist Fellowship in America is a contemporary organizational expression of this movement. Other Friends in the battered liberal tradition simply quit being theists all together. This trend brought confusion. Numbers of Christian Friends in locales dominated by universalist doctrines sorrowfully left, to worship with the Mennonites or other Christian communities of faith with a strong social witness. Does the Quaker name signify any commonality at all, or has it become empty of meaning, confusing both to insiders and outsiders? This is a question some thoughtful Friends are asking.

Many Friends in the present era resist what they consider a betrayal of heritage. One such person is John Punshon. In 1987 this highly-regarded historian and theologian, with teaching ministries at Woodbrooke and Earlham School of Religion, wrote *Encounter with Silence* published jointly by Quaker Home Service and Friends United Press. That it went through four printings (so far) suggests he is a voice for many Friends who in good conscience cannot affirm the move from Christianity to a generic religion. He wrote: "My

personal faith is Christian. . . I do not care to select those things I find congenial and discount the rest". Problems raised by dialogue with other religions, he insisted, can best be resolved "within the Christian tradition, not by going outside". That's why he rejects contemporary liberalism. (citations are from the fourth edition, 1996, pp, 54-55.)

But if the intellectual substance of their faith became theologically blurred, liberal Friends in the current century held tenaciously to the ethical teachings of Jesus, following him in deed if not in word. And such obedient discipleship, though propositionally-challenged, offers hope of renewal. Yes, acted love *can* lead folks back to truth, if they heed the message of the Cross and listen to the Spirit. If prayerfully, even penitently, they will listen, Friends once more *can* offer a clear Christian apologetic for the times. Will they stand with Punshon and do so? May this be so!

In America the flight to doctrinaire fundamentalism by those who had rejected early twentieth-century modernism is over. Friends within Friends United Meeting and the Evangelical Friends Church International are increasingly nourished by historic roots. Conservatives hang on to their deep Christian spirituality and testimonies to simplicity and integrity. With their brothers and sisters around the world these Friends, and others, find inward spirituality central to the Quaker journey with Christ, whether manifested in the Pentecostal fervor, introspective heart-searching mysticism, deep ethical concern, ecstatic experiences of the evangelistic and revivalist eras, and deep centering down in quiet worship. Earnest Friends *everywhere*, some unfortunately snared in internal differences, long for a *world-wide, coherent, renewal of their covenant community*. Can the parent yearly meeting lead the way forward? One hopes so!

The way forward: some earnest suggestions

1. Let leadership accept and urge upon Friends a penitent posture. If our Hutu and Tutsi brothers and sisters-- horrified at the carnage caused by civil war--can repent for having worshiped false gods of tribalism, we Anglos ought to have the grace and courage to repent for having worshipped false gods of rationalist skepticism and egocentricity. We can acknowledge how subtly self-deception has skewed our understanding of God's acts in time and space as well as within the human psyche. Repent! Yes, that's what I said. This isn't just

my word. It 's the *word of Jesus* whom we profess to honor: "Repent, and believe the good news!" (Mark 1. 15) It's our risen Lord's word to Thomas: "Stop doubting and believe!" Respond like Thomas did—and like persons for whom honest doubt is the underside of faith, when awe-stricken by Christ's presence -- "My Lord and my God!" (John 20: 27-29).

2. Pray that the year 2010 will be a "day of the Lord," a special visitation upon a humbled, contrite, and now prayerful people. Ask members and attendees to covenant together to lay their own spiritual condition before the Lord and ask for renewal, to be cleansed from sin, for transformation. A key feature of the Quaker Awakening was its call to holiness of *heart and life*. Our historic testimony against "preaching up sin to the grave," against "sinning more freely at Christ's cost" and for mystical union with the divine, is a persistent theme, played with variations in *each era* of our history. (For a succinct account of this central theme, see "Holiness: the Quaker Way of Perfection" by Carole D. Spencer, in *The Creation of Quaker Theory*, ed. Pink Dandelion, Ashgate, 2004). Let's renew that call.

3. Reaffirm that we Quakers are part of the Christian community of faith. Friends, be honorable: demonstrate integrity with our heritage. Accept the substance of it not just the title and a few testimonies extracted from their Biblical settings. Perhaps reprinting and distributing to meetings key documents from Fox, Barclay, etc., is in order. Acknowledge that lack of clarity in communicating our historic Christian faith does not accord well with our ancient testimony about plain speaking ("let your yea be yea and your nay be nay"). May our commendable works of love and efforts at social justice be matched by equally commendable words. Let's once more become "Publishers of Truth " in words as well as in deeds. Let our roots nourish our fruits again!

4. Admit the need for a new Christian apologetic for an increasingly indifferent society; and take steps to articulate that apologetic. The era of Post-modern culture is more open to revealed truth than was the Enlightenment era (now ending) that degenerated into a denial of central Christian beliefs such as the Incarnation and the Resurrection. Ask the Friends World Committee for Consultation to expedite, and find funding for, a select conference of Quaker scholars, within the next few years, gathered *from around the world*, to restate our Christian doctrines. Let's hear Hispanic, Asian, and African voices as well as British,

European, Near Eastern, and North American ones. Here are some principles this writer deems essential for Friends' next step forward.

Renew foundational beliefs. If “Truth is to prosper” to use a Foxian term, Friends, as a people, must lay again a theological foundation for our faith and practice. Unity based on love rather than intellectual agreement is commendable in respect to relationships with other religious groups, but is inadequate for sustaining a covenant people and stabilizing their witness to the world. Here are some foundational beliefs to be re-affirmed:

1. *All truth is ultimately revealed, whether through the book of nature or the Bible. And within the soul and the community of faith. The chasm between science and religion is being bridged in our times, now without diminishment of divine agency.*
Polkinghorne is more credible than Dawkins. Consider the faith journey of a major world scientist, Francis Collins, an American leader in genome research. In his *Language of God* Collins, like C.S. Lewis generations ago, found convincing the moral argument for God. He found the path of truth, first away from atheism to agnosticism, then to theism, and then to experiential Christian faith. His BioLogos web site features similar views by other scientists. And the Templeton Foundation currently sponsors conferences for reconciling science and religious faith). Indeed, God is at work in the world.
2. *The universality of Christ the Light is affirmed by the particularity of Jesus. Let's focus upon the Christ's presence—in the created realm, in history, in the heart. Forget “inner light,” a term never used by early Friends. Christ is “the inward light.”* As a Quaker-cherished passage from the Gospel of John reads: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. . . we have seen his glory. . . full of grace and truth” (John 1: 14).”The “universal and saving light” theme elaborated by Robert Barclay speaks powerfully to a pluralistic culture. Let's reaffirm the unity of Christ as historically revealed and as spiritually received. As George Fox exhorted Friends, everyone must “come in at the door.” (See *Some Principles. . .*, 1661) That door is Jesus Christ, incarnate in time and space, and inwardly present in the heart. Seventeenth century Friends recovered to the church the neglected teaching of the *inward* Christ. Twenty-first century Friends need to recover a neglected teaching about the *historic*

incarnate Christ. Echoing Fox, most Quakers in the world find Christian truth claims both experientially and rationally credible. They find revealed truth not just cognitive but transformational, and more fully comprehended through obedience to divine will.

3. *The Bible authentically defines the person and work of Christ.* It is “a true and faithful record” and the leadings of the Spirit do not contradict its message. The conciliar, Spirit-guided judgment of the faithful community helps interpret or clarify meanings that come through the various biblical literary forms--- poetry, drama, exhortation, narrative, parable etc., noting that although inspired not all scripture is equally revelatory. So we avoid evasions such as Gnostic allegorizing, or fundamentalist treatment of all narrated experience as equally prescriptive. Let’s look again to the Bible, especially the New Testament, for spiritual direction and normative ethics. Biblical scholarship has contributed greatly to our understanding of the cultural context, to the nuances of genre difference, authorship, and the like. But the best scholarship accepts the central events of Christ— birth, life, death, and resurrection—as authentic, reported with integrity, rightly grasped experientially by faithful people who understand with Augustine, that the senses are God’s messengers, and that reason and intuition are his gifts to us. It is instructive to note that one of the world’s leading contemporary New Testament scholars, a highly-reputed lecturer and author, is an evangelical Quaker, Paul Anderson, a professor at George Fox University. The “John, Jesus, and History Project”, of which he is co-chair, is effectively challenging what Archbishop John A.T. Robinson called the “critical orthodoxy” of modernistic biblical scholarship, which assumes that because the Gospel of John is different and spiritual that it cannot be historical. Perhaps the “Quaker Gospel” says more about the Jesus of history, as well as the Christ of faith, than skeptical academicians have thought.
4. *Christ’s life, death and resurrection is the procuring cause of salvation, human and cosmic.* Let us recapture the wonder of God’s creation, the universe, and enter into the drama of a cosmic re-creation awaiting human redemption, accepting our covenant for the stewardship of the earth, and anticipating the wonder of eternal life in heaven.

5. *The church, as the body of Christ, witnesses God's kingdom present on earth, and more fully in heaven.* Let's continue these bonds of fellowship whilst contributing our particular insights concerning its message. Historically the tripartite mission of the church has been proclamation, fellowship, and service. Contemporary post-modern religious culture is long on fellowship, eager to serve, but short or blurry on proclamation. We are challenged in our generation once again to provide a clear Christian apologetic for our times. Love can sustain us in doing so.

Revive neglected practices.

1. Spirit-anointed ministry is a vital aspect of Christian witness in the world. It has been an integral part of the Quaker witness throughout much of our history. Outreach ministry of the first "publishers of truth" was supported by Westmoreland and Lancashire Friends through the Kendall fund, and disbursed from Swarthmore Hall. Throughout Quaker history and at the present time, in different cultural patterns, proclamation of truth has arisen from the deep silence of a meeting for worship. Person specially gifted in vocal ministry have been formally recorded, to show concurrence with what God ordains. Traveling ministers have carried a "minute of service" confirming the blessing of local or yearly meetings. In America the practice of traveling in the ministry segued into settled pastoral care and/or evangelist outreach. This was not considered a lapse into "priest-craft" nor a substitute for an obligation for general ministry incumbent upon all, but rather an adaptation of the early Friends insight that *some* are especially gifted and ways should be found to release them to obey the Divine calling. This is a practice in most of the Quaker world. Britain Yearly Meeting would do well to re-examine its stance regarding recorded ministry, to discern and nurture youth who demonstrate *special* giftedness for vocal ministry, pastoral and evangelistic, and who sense the calling of the Lord. And to prepare ways to release them for such ministry. We fund persons gifted in scholarship. We fund ones with administrative gifts. We fund folks gifted in service ministries. Why not then also fund this major gift of the Spirit: the proclamation of Gospel Truth?

2. Perhaps religious education of children and youth could include more *systematic* Bible study, perhaps linked to early Friends writings, such as Barclay's *Catechism and Confession of Faith*. This sort of study could also be useful in membership preparation of seekers and inquirers.
3. In the last decades of the nineteenth century London Yearly Meeting engaged in holistic missionary work, at home and abroad- successfully. Such efforts waned as liberal theology got concerned about alleged missionary linkage to colonial policies, and more interested in witnessing Truth through deeds rather than through words. This would be a good time for British Friends to re-commit to evangelistic outreach.

Conclusion

Will these changes increase membership? The yearly meetings in the United States don't seem to be growing much either, some might argue, so maybe theology isn't the reason for stagnation. Perhaps it's just the secularity of our culture that contributes to our diminishing numbers. Maybe being *more generically* religious would increase our numbers and strengthen our witness in today's world. But the basic question isn't how to increase numbers (lotteries and professional advertising hype might do the same). No. It's how to be faithful to Jesus Christ the Light of the world, in word and in deed. It's how with integrity to honor our Quaker ancestors who suffered imprisonment, even death, for their witness to the present and living Christ, and for those Friends in other parts of our world *currently* suffering persecution for their Christian faith.

In the decades ahead times may be rough for Friends in the Global North if the leavening effect of the Gospel is lost, if nuclear war, or global warming, devastates the globe and political and social chaos ensues. The future may be uncertain, even ominous, but with Christ as our guide our path is clear. An exhortation from one who at first persecuted the followers of Christ and then received the Light and became a leader among them is pertinent to Friends today:

May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Romans 15: 5-6, ESV)

A citation from York Quarterly Meeting of Friends, 1855, appears on the title page of Rowntree's *Quakerism, Past and Present*. The language seems a bit quaint, but the message is clear. Ponder it thoughtfully, and prayerfully.

“If it be true that spiritual religion too dimly shines within our borders; if it be true that, in many places, the strength of the bearers of burdens is decayed; it becomes a Christian Church not only to acknowledge and deplore the facts, but seriously and in the fear of the Lord to endeavor to ascertain the cause, and to seek for ability to apply the remedy.”

