Our speaking and our identity

§ 1 Overture. Not just metaphors— or there is no “just”

The “language for the inward landscape” is no help if in our exploration of it we stay at the level of description, and translation, of lexicography and paraphrase. The gathered wisdom of the tradition, of the people to whom we have been led, is not in the words, unless we recall and rest love with where the words come from, and recognize that their language was being used as a means to evoke in the reader or hearer an echo of an experienced reality, and to provide some instrumental help for them to feel towards the reality pointed to.

Wrestling with these terms and the issues they raise is critical, I think, to our survival, and by this I mean not only our definitional existence, our reason for being, but the processes by which our community develops, deepens, discerns, and responds in witness, and in walk.

It may be useful here to stop and reflect on the Quaker use of the word “baptism.” Of course, Friends early reached the position that the outward ordinances are not necessary, and indeed to be avoided as a habitual practice, especially since the baptism that John foretold would be the work of the Christ would be with fire and the Holy Spirit. Yet the word “baptism” is very commonly met in the journals. For example, Martha Routh reports

On sixth day, we were at the Branch, a trying meeting, attended with close secret baptism of spirit; yet encouragement was handed to the exercised travelers. (Routh, pg. 190)

Ann Crowley says,
In this arduous journey, we travelled nearly 3000 miles, attended 241 meetings, and visited 627 families. Such an engagement required deep baptisms, to prepare for usefulness, in the great Master's time, doing or suffering according to His unerring wisdom; but by endeavoring patiently to bear these descendings, we were permitted, at seasons, mercifully to feel the renewed arisings of light and life... (Crowley, pg. 470)

John Griffith writes: It became indisputably clear to my understanding, that it is altogether impossible to administer, in a feeling effectual manner, to people's several states, unless we are baptised thereunto. (Griffith, pg. 43)

A common variant is "dipped," as in "dipped into sympathy." In almost all cases, the accounts imply an inward struggle, resulting in an unmerited and unpredictable increase in awareness and ability—an increase of life and wisdom arising from exercise, to put it in more traditional parlance. 17 It is, I believe, a common experience for the spiritual traveler, especially one who feels under the weight of some concern, and it represents in microcosm of the Quaker progress of the soul—one might characterize such an event as an episode of the inward work of Christ in the exercised person. Such experiences are evidence that the person is attuned in some measure to the guidance of the Spirit, and in that attunement made aware of limits or boundaries of their availability under the pressure or longing to walk more closely with the Guide.

As an aside, I think we should bear in mind that most of the journals and the storehouse about the writing that we have from the early Friends were written by ministers, as part of their ministry (even as these lectures are). So perhaps it’s useful to pause and ponder the minister’s experience of his or her work.

John Griffith writes,

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17 I find an interesting parallel with Origen's teaching on "aporia" or "impasse" in Scriptural interpretation. With his understanding of Christ the Word active among us, he moves past the established philosophical usage, and uses the term to describe a time when the mind does not see how to make sense of a passage; then the exegete relies upon the activity of the Logos, the living Word, to teach the seeker, who thereby grows in wisdom enough to understand the Scripture in fact and through the Spirit that gave it forth. Von Balthasar, pg. 8, and see also P. Martins, *Origen and Scripture*. 
The main design of gospel ministry is to turn the children of men to the grace of God in themselves, which will teach them to work out their own salvation, and diligently to seek the Lord for themselves, in whom, their strength being renewed, their spirits would unite, and greatly help and relieve the ministers in their gospel-labours. (Griffith pg. 128)

But the thing that drives gospel ministry is love. The minister learns from an apprenticeship in listening and following, and immersion in a soul-climate including both their own spiritual condition, and that of those they encounter. The minister in time, with experience, comes to know that love is the most important anchor for service, though it is not an easy lesson to learn and hold to; and since love is the fundamental commandment for us all, the minister’s message first and last must be love, a yearning for the spiritual flourishing of others.

From an inward purifying and steadfast abiding under it, springs a lively operative desire for the good of others. All faithful people are not called to the public ministry, but whoever are, are called to minister of that which they have tasted and handled spiritually. The outward modes of worship are various, but wherever men are true ministers of Jesus Christ, it is from the operation of his spirit upon their hearts, first purifying them, and thus giving them a feeling sense of the conditions of others. (Woolman Journal, pg. 31)

Martha Routh, whose journal is full of valuable reports on her inward experiences during her service in the ministry, gives a glimpse of how she experienced this “feeling sense”:  

While sitting under the renewal of baptism, I had to believe that the state of the meeting was very complicated. But it is only for thee to read, oh fellow traveler, thou who art able to do it, in a similar line, what it is to be so engaged, and how great the care and watchfulness which is necessary, even when under the holy anointing. The states of the people are opened like flowers in a garden, some appearing beautiful to the eye, and affording a pleasant savor; others of a contrary appearance yielding an offensive smell; others having little or no scent. To know how the culturing hand should be turned upon these, in order to help, is indeed a weighty matter; and nothing short of that adorable wisdom, which alone is profitable to direct, can accomplish it according to the divine will.

(Journal page 215).

Perhaps it was Richard Bauman who said that the dilemma of the minister was that she was called to do everything the Spirit required, and nothing that it did not require. The core of the work is in listening – listening to Scripture, to the gathered meeting, to the condition of individuals, to one’s
inward condition, and below, through, above all listening to the Spirit. Much of the language that one hears from the ministers includes a strong sensory component — even a phrase like “I felt a stop in my mind” conveys the feeling of being pulled up short, or coming against a wall. As a more recent example of this embodied perception, I offer a phrase that Bill Taber used, with a smile: the “minister’s belly.” I have heard from Bill, from friends, and from others, varying accounts of its origin. In one version, Bill was recalling the feeling of warm and tangible love in the fatherly hug of a portly, beloved minister. In another which you will read in that remarkable memorial prepared by Ohio yearly meeting, the phrase refers to visible tremors that the young Bill noticed in the substantial belly of a beloved minister as he felt the conviction that he was called to rise and speak.

One final nuance: in my last opportunity with him, Bill did a little diagnosis of my condition, and then gave this prescription—“Remember the sense of prairie like spaciousness that I felt walking the wide salt marshes of my childhood home. Get the feeling of that openness, that inclusive embrace in here (patting his stomach)—and you feel yourself opening wider and wider in love and caring and the sense of freedom.”

The work is challenging, but the reward is a joy that is not just a satisfaction of being faithful—it is the delight of the gardener or shepherd in fostering growth and the springing up of fresh life, and in the experience of baptism, of preparation under the daily cross, the joy is purified by the growing understanding that ability is furnished from beyond one’s own resources, though all that one has is more and more consecrated and ordered in and for that service. Bearing this in mind, I can read the sometimes dry accounts of the ministers of the past with more understanding, and compassion, and discernment about times when they appeared to me they have lost their way.

Our midweek meeting, a laborious travel of spirit, crowned with peace, for I did not give way to the current of drowsiness, but breasted it with all my might, but was sorry to see so many goodly Friends carried along with the downward stream, having always understood that it is the sick and
dead fish that swim with the current....J.J. (a neighbor, not a Friend) felt led to come to meeting, but not feeling well was going to stay home, when he) thought he heard a secret voice like this, "Present thy body a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable unto God, which is thy reasonable duty." ...in the course of meeting, our dear E.S. was led to speak from the same text most feelingly and practically, which appears to have made a deep impression upon J.J.’s mind. But what it will come to I know not, for many are called and few chosen; and I fear that J.J. is too much like myself, he talks too much. (Edward Hicks, *Journal*, pg. 179).

it is also for this reason that it is valuable to seek to understand, from a sympathetic, inside perspective, what experienced travelers have to say, since we may go far in our journey under the misapprehension that what we have seen and felt is all there is to say or know about the endeavor.

I pause here with another phrase of Bill Taber’s, ”more than a metaphor,” which he used in speaking of the Light, which we will turn to soon, but it is relevant to our whole discourse here.

Cognitive scientists, linguists and philosophers have discovered that "metaphors" are more than colorful turns of phrase or effective political or rhetorical tools. They are deeply rooted in our experience as organisms, they are indeed physical objects in our brain-body system, they engage open psycho–motor pathways laid down during physical activity, sensory experience, in thinking, and when one is caught up in narrative. They are thus concrete objects in the universe, as much as rocks or winds or beetles. Moreover, they are tied to scenarios, possible enactments, and they exercise power by their tendency to expand their reach to include related ideas, experiences, and processes. Let us turn to the great one, Light.

§3. Light


So much has been said and felt and argued about light as a Quaker word that it might be better to pass it by in a talk like this. Yet it is so central to Quakerism from first to last that one cannot leave it
unaddressed. It is easy to enter a conversation about the light by pointing out that early Friends identify
the light very directly with Christ, while for very many Friends now "Light" is detached from that
identification, and it is a placeholder for "the divine" or something even vaguer. This difference is an
important fact.

But I wish to testify first that to a remarkable degree, even the most non-theist of Friends
experience this debatable presence and power with freshness and reality. When we are not talking about
this, but dwelling in it, however labelled, we can indeed be brought to humility, to comfort and challenge,
to renewal, to confession, to unity. This is something to celebrate and acknowledge with reverence. Of
course, for some people there is an actual sensation of light, for others "light" is what they call the
experience of Presence. In any case, it is important to understand that in the original Quaker experience,
the light was not, is not, a passive environmental condition. It is active, searching and challenging. It is a
an agent.

Friends came to this experience of Light when they had reached an impass, had reached the end of
their rope, spiritually speaking — religion was not providing meaning, order for their lives, progress
towards holiness, inner peace. Here is Anthony Pearson:

> dear friend, I must tell thee I have now lost all my religion, and am in such distress, I have no hope
> nor foundation left. My justification and assurance have forsaken me, and I am even like a poor
> shattered vessel, tossed to and fro... as blind, dead, and helpless, as thou can imagine. I never felt
> corruption so strong, and temptation so prevailing, as now; I have a proud, hard, flinty heart, that
> cannot be sensible of my misery. When I deeply consider how much precious time I have
> wasted...my spirit feels a sudden fear; but then I am still flying to my old refuge, and there my
> thoughts are diverted. What it means to wait on God I cannot apprehend; and the confusions in my
> own spirit, together with the continual temptations from without, are so great, I cannot understand
> or perceive the small still voice of the Lord. (In Barclay 1847, pp.327-8)

Indeed, we are safest when we can not only live with the sense of "stripping," of desolation,
but come to see it as a necessary, salutary condition to return to over and over again — so that
"convincement" is renewed over and over in "conversion," whose progress is like that of the
incoming tide. It never hurts to return to fundamentals. In his "Short catechism for the sake of
the simple-hearted," *(Works 1:123-4)* Penington rebukes his fictional discussion partner when
they ask:

> But hath not this Saviour a name? What is his name?
> A. It were better for thee to learn his name by feeling his virtue and power in thy heart, than by
> rote. Yet, if thou canst receive it, this is his name, *the Light; the Light of the World*

Questioner obstinately asks

> Why dost thou call him the light? Are there not other names every whit as proper, whereby he may
> as well be known?
> A. Do not thus set up the wise and stumbling part in thee; but mind the thing which first puts forth its
> virtue as light, and so is thus first to be known, owned, and received. Yet more particularly, if thou hast
> wherewith, consider this reason: we call him light, because the Father of lights hath peculiarly chosen this
> name for him, to make him known to his people in this age by, and hath thus made him manifest to us. And
> by thus receiving him under this name, we come to know his other names

And how does the Light do its work?

> Letting in the light (which convinceth of, and warreth against, sin), the life stirs and is felt; and the
> life leads to the Word which was in the beginning, and giveth the feeling of that also. And in the Word,
> the righteousness, the peace, the wisdom, the power, the love are felt; and he is made all these to those
> who are led into and kept in the light.

Q. *But can I do anything toward my own salvation?*
   A. Of thyself thou canst not: but in the power of him that worketh both to will and to do, thou mayst
do a little at first: and as that power grows in thee, thou wilt be able to will more, and to do more, even
until nothing become too hard for thee. And when thou hast conquered all, suffered all, performed all;
thou shalt see, and be able understandingly to say, thou hast done nothing; but the eternal virtue, life, and
power, hath wrought all in thee.

In some ways this is the most embodied form in which to encounter God. As visual creatures we
have so much experience of light, and its varieties and its opposites—seeing/blindness, radiance, clarity,
the paradox of rainbows emerging under certain conditions for white lights, as Unity in diversity. Light
and heat. Finding a way versus stumbling in the darkness. Day and night, evening and morning,
shadow/false—reflection/true and so on.
So central and visceral is light to our world – indeed it is something we share and know we share with the majority of living things – it is no wonder that many Friends have been glad to accept this near-universal experience, and lay aside the Quaker insistence on the light is a manifestation of Christ at work amongst us. I confess it is difficult for me to get into a mindset that does not feel or assume the equivalents, so as to see what is gained by it, or lost by ignoring or forgetting it. Perhaps the best way forward, for me, is to ask: what do I learn from considering, meditating on living with the possibility of relating the light is experienced with Christ as in the Gospel of John?

First, it is a challenge to individualism or self-sufficiency, because the light, considered as a divine, illuminates each of us as from a common source, and is no personal possession. It came as a surprise to Friends, and it was disconcerting or terrifying.

Second, flowing from a common source it is orienting— the direction towards or away from, warmer/colder., we can choose to collaborate with traveling in and towards it, or shun it; as Nayler points out the light is only a means of salvation if you accept its workings (Love to the Lost, in Works vol. 3 pp. 53-57).

Finally, John’s introductory hymn starts with Logos, and quickly moves to make connections of that cosmic force with creation, life, and light; then adds judgment and the ability to claim our inheritance as children of God, and so accepting the equation of light and Christ, we are drawn experientially into the mysterious heart of relationships with a living other. So that is yet another way to fight free of idolatry, especially the almost irresistible tendency to worship one’s own image, inclinations, and feelings.

A note on terror. When I read the chapter in Hugh Barbour’s Quakers in Puritan England on ”The terror and power of the light,” I was deeply reached and opened to the possibility that I had not at all
understood the encounter with the Light, even though the source of the terror seemed inaccessible to me. Because I start with the assumption that human nature is the same, though culture changes, I have sought to feel my way to the places where our culture bases its deep sense of confidence, which if shattered would indeed bring terror. It is hard for 21st-century people — postmodern, post-Christian people, whose habits of mind are infected and informed by the language of Mammon, the great God of economics, which defines value as wealth, freedom as choice, choice as purchase, individuals as consumers or factors of production, to get into a worldview in which the condition of our souls is a matter for existential anxiety, and to reckon with the idea that some things have value absolutely quite apart from their value in exchange or use. I suppose this is part of the secularization process, the disenchanting of the world, which has shaped modern religion, including modern Quakerism. (I am aware, of course, that there have always been people whose view of the world is so formed (at least, we have records of non-theism, materialist thinking since classical times, and biblical times for that matter. Atheism, or materialism, or nihilism, have always been around as options. “All they that see him laugh him to scorn.”). But there are fears that haunt us, and being cut off from life and alienated from bodies, selves, or others, these when confronted in their actuality are terrifying in such a state, its new to know what it is we fear, to admit our own role — sometimes as cause or perpetrator, sometimes as sufferer, sometimes as both; to recognize that we are mortal indeed, and shall be forgotten— These remain sufficiently painful that a constructive, abundant, and love-filled response can be gratefully received and before that, to hear that one as possible, but there is a way to live and that is free of these terrors — that is good news indeed. To discover upon seeking that way the transformation is required—that the power comes each time we plant our next step, to affirm and enable us to take the next towards a source of greater life — that is good news, too.
§4 “Spirit” and The Spirit

God is spirit, and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.

I remember the first time that I heard “Spirit” used as a proper name. A friend from Philadelphia yearly meeting came to live and work at friends meeting in Cambridge and upon returning from the general gathering in a messaging meeting use some such phrases as that “Spirit teaches. Spirit says…” This usage is becoming more and more widespread, and as has happened with “light,” it has become a way to express a focus of devotion and reverence that has no necessary content or implication. In a time of theological deconstruction and seeking, this has a value in building bridges, reducing barriers to inclusion, and avoiding specific commitments. It is characteristic of a desire for constructive and loving engagement across boundaries. Indeed, once when I was serving as a recording clerk for our YM, a Friend came to me to let me know that my use of the phrase “the Spirit” was uncomfortable to them, because it reminded them of “the Holy Spirit,” and all that Christian stuff.

It turns out that the use of “Spirit” in this way, without the definite article or other qualifier, is widespread outside modern Quakerism. It is interesting to see the range of communities that use it—neo-Pagans, Spiritualists, some groups influenced by Hindu mysticism, among others. Given the thousands of years in which people have contrasted “spirit” with “matter,” it is not surprising that the term can carry so many meanings.

Which spirit do we seek? Do we mean what we say when we quote the “Peace testimony,” with its uncompromising claim about its authority?

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18 Merriam-Webster comment: Deconstruction doesn't actually mean "demolition;" instead it means "breaking down" or analyzing something (especially the words in a work of fiction or nonfiction) to discover its true significance, which is supposedly almost never exactly what the author intended.
the Spirit of Christ, by which we are guided, is not changeable, so as once to command us from a thing as evil, and again to move unto it; and we certainly know, and testify to the world, that the Spirit of Christ, which leads us into all truth, will never move us to fight and war against any man with outward weapons, neither for the kingdom of Christ, nor for the kingdoms of this world.

I think it does matter what Spirit we listen to, and if we are being guided by the Spirit of Christ, we will be able to tell. Moreover, by learning together to do so, we will be helped in these confusing times, these transitional times, to make use of other sources of guidance in a way that brings strength and coherence, rather than confusion. Those who have walked this path have noted many times characteristic effects, which indicate the work of the Holy Spirit, and while some of them are noted in conventional "Pneumatology," others are peculiarly Quaker, or at least Friends have put their own flavor on them.

A. The Spirit of Christ can bring into unity across time and culture

First, it is good to reflect upon the bedrock claim that God, whatever God is, is one. This may seem to go without saying, but the implications, which Friends preached boldly from the beginning, are still important to us today. As Job Scott said, "The gospel is no upstart thing of only about 1800 years standing."

He is only one. His operations, offices, relations &c., are many and diverse. His attributes, though many, do not divide, nor diversify him. He is good, holy, just, merciful, &c. He has or is wisdom, power, love &c. Yet his having and...exercising all these, prevent not his unity. It follows, therefore, that in strictness of expression, he rather is, than has, any of these...For his word is himself; his spirit is himself; so is his goodness, wisdom, power, love, justice, mercy, &c...He has no wrath, but what is, in him, the same thing as his love. He is one. The contrariety is in us....All the possible diversity that may seem to be in him, respecting us, is wholly in us.

Sometimes I think modern Friends don't realize just how Christocentric early Friends were. Their "Christology" seems to me very "high" indeed, one reason that I find such resonance with such figures as Origen and Erasmus, whose experience of Christ at work in the world is intense. There are indications from early Quaker controversies that their contemporaries noted this emphasis. Cf for example from Fox's Journal, when an antagonist, Col Lyne, admits that Fox is Christian, contrary to charges made, and says, "I perceive you exalt Christ in all His offices beyond what I have ever heard before." Nickalls, pg. 598.
The universal work of Christ, by many names, is a well-known implication, which Scott restates directly:

Were the heathen under the new covenant? I answer that so far as the law was written in the heart, and conformed unto, among the heathen, Jews, Mahometans, Negroes, Indians, or any other race of men whatever, and whenever, they were so far under the new covenant...There never has been but one way of salvation: this was, and is, Christ forever....[Jesus] declares, "before Abraham was, I am." As if he had said, "I am, not now only...I am through all time, the life of religion, the salvation of man, the everlasting covenant." (Journal 15-16).

This understanding may be in part responsible for the multiplication of names for God that we find in the Journals: Truth, the Inward monitor, Best Help, Adorable Wisdom — seeking to convey the attribute of God that is most evident in experience at the time.

In our struggles with discernment, however, the commitment to God as One casts an important light on our ideas about "continuing revelation," because it reminds us that the deeply satisfying unity we long for, and sometimes taste, is not a matter of "best fit" construction; and the difference is that the unity not only feels nourishing to us at the time, and removes a sense of constraint and discomfort, but enables us to see how the unity that brings life exists below or beyond or within the differences we see most easily.

But all this is, in a sense, reasoning from first principles, whereas Friends have felt the unity, many times, and seen it as a "covering" of the Spirit, because hearts were changed, hasty spirits were quietened, and words if spoken came with power and with sweetness, however few and halting they might be. Such times are, in Quaker parlance, baptizing times, when we are dipped into sympathy with each other. Such baptisms do not come as a result of our intent, but rather when we relinquish our need for control or victory, and are reduced or graced with a longing for clarity, and to sit together with our brothers and sisters in love. Have you not known times, when you feel yourself in exile amidst your
Friends, or your culture, or from yourself, and brought into a deep exercise of spirit, when no way forward appears?

This state of conviction, of being convicted, is a time when the judging part can come forward quickly, and our intellects cannot see the way to a solution. It may well be that for unity to be found again, we must go through long preparation of heart and soul, before mind and strength can be brought to bear. New England’s story is good to recall: our separation in 1845 was a fruit of broken trusts, the exercise of power to compel uniformity, and some theological differences – but indeed also of wounds and anger, fear, and other perennial elements of human frailty. Reunification took 100 years, and it required that contradictions be addressed and lived past in love, and it took so long because individuals needed to be healed enough of inward conflicts, wounds, and fears that the yearning for outward unity – which has never since looked like unanimity! – took the lead; and indeed the conversion that began in the early 1900s, and took organizational form in 1945, has continued down to today; and the process must ever be renewed.

B. The work of the Spirit is also timely — We have found that it is to be relied upon from moment to moment, working always towards our salvation, our liberation. The early narratives of conscious wrestling sometimes feel almost formulaic, but, after all, it is the fate of each of us to reinvent many wheels as we each of us encounter the world as new individuals. Job Scott

Before I was 10 years old, the workings of truth grew so powerful in my mind at times, that I took up several resolutions (or at several times resolved) to amend my ways, and live a serious and religious life, though I was not one of the most vicious of my years.... it was the very power and spirit of God upon me that so condemned and distressed me for sin, and strove to redeem my soul from the bondage of corruption. (Journal 27)
When in this mood, he "began to take notice of what I heard read and conversed about religion" (Journal 28), and developed some desire to know God’s spirit, as converts did in the days of the apostles.

But, like many others, I overlooked its lively checks and calls in myself; longed to be favored with it; but supposed it was some extraordinary appearance, different far from any thing I ever yet had been acquainted with.

Because the prompting of the Spirit can be overlooked, drowned out in its small promptings and beginnings, Friends have come to mark many phenomena of inward weather, of moment-to-moment experience with the Spirit, as we walk through our lives which have both inward and outward trajectories. I have spoken earlier about some elements of this, but there are additional ideas and experiences that are of importance for the active life founded in the listening practice of the daily watch.

In the following extract, John Churchman, a minister with long experience in watching for the small openings to duty, reports, in a sense, the genesis, continuation, and departure, of a calling that in the end came to nothing:

In the year 1736, one night as I lay in bed, my mind was uncommonly affected with the incomes of divine love and life, and therein I had a view of the churches in New Jersey, with a clear prospect that I should visit them. In that prospect and the strength of affection which I then felt, I said in my heart it is enough; I will prepare for the journey as soon as I can hear of a suitable companion, for I do not expect that I shall have a clearer sight than I now have.

I soon heard of a Friend who had a visit to New Jersey before him, and spoke to him about my concern, but he let me know that he knew of a companion, and they had agreed upon a time to proceed. After I had mentioned it to him and some other Friends, my concern seemed to die away; but I remembered the resolution I had taken up, and that I then thought I would not look to be bidden again, I was fearful something had drawn my mind from the proper attention to that opening, which was the reason it seemed to go off.

The more I strove to look after it, the duller it grew; and I then sorely repented that I had spoken about it, and thought it should be a warning to me in future; for I began to see there was a difference between seeing what was to be done, and being bidden to do the thing shown: besides this, I had to consider there was a time to bud, a time to blossom, a time for fruit to set and appear, and a time for it to ripen. (Churchman Journal, pg. 190)
Indeed, the experience was well worth reporting, even though "nothing came of it," because it provides an instructive window in to a minister’s experience of attentiveness, of patience, of readiness for response, and for freedom in the letting go, whatever the cost to self-esteem. I note here also that any Friend may have such experiences, since we are all to be on our watch, during our daily choices to undertake or to refrain, to speak or to be silent. It is the daily practice of our faith.

The ebb of the spirit’s tide can sink very low, as any Friend who’s traveled in the ministry can attest. I remember well times when I felt a clear call to undertake some work in the ministry, and as the time approached, I felt drained and sterile. With experience we can interpret the lessons with less fear:

> I am sensible that these stripping seasons have been very teaching to me: and when we look like fools to those who are foolish indeed, it is at such times we learn true wisdom; for in true silence we have the best teaching, even the Lord himself is our instructor. (Ruth Follows, in Skidmore pg. 53)

Indeed, now, when I undertake to follow a leading, such as these talks, I expect that as the time approaches all sense of self-confidence will be withdrawn, and I have come to welcome, indeed count upon that time of emptiness, when I know that I am a servant indeed; and I know also that if there is anything I can bring or offer to my Friends of instruction or encouragement when the time arrives, it will be made available to me, “for Thou art the same Lord, whose property is always to have mercy,” in the words of the Book of Common Prayer.

**Spirit and Christ.** While it is useful to explore the offices and operations of the Spirit, however, this goes only so far towards understanding whether the Spirit we stand in is the same Spirit that Jesus spoke of, and embodied, and shared with his friends and followers, accessible and alive even after his death. 20 That is a spirit of guidance and truth, surely, which Jesus says will provide continuing insight into the Gospel that he brought and lived. But if it is the Spirit of Christ, and we are no longer servants but

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20 After all, if we are being guided by the One, then later revelation should build upon the Gospel, not overthrow it.
friends, then as we come to know that Spirit, more of Christ’s personality should be unfolded to us, made available so that we can enter into it, or feel it taking up living room within. So I would like to speak for myself here, about how I have come to see the Spirit in its present operation as the Spirit of Christ.

First I should stop and bring into focus an important Quaker term, or rather practice: *waiting*. Rather like “dwelling in watchfulness,” which I mentioned earlier, “wait” in Quaker spirituality has an active quality. When we read Isaiah, “They that wait upon the Lord shall mount up as eagles,” we realize that this is “waiting on” as in “waiting on table”: it is the inward posture of one who is attending to the intentions or purposes of another person, who may at any time ask us to undertake some task or journey. Or again it is the waiting that happens when a learner is in the presence of a teacher, an apprentice with a master – looking and listening for teaching or demonstration or enactment, so that the attending soul can see or act in fresh ways, growing in capacity and freedom under the guidance of the active One.

”Waiting” is the operative term here, because I can say that my experience of the Spirit has grown in the waiting, not day to day, but also year to year. As I come into the Presence, I have been given the grace sometimes to wait to feel into that personality (to feel, too, where my personality and that of the Spirit are not comfortable together). It is as though I have come into a room, over and over, and become gradually acquainted with its shape, its dimensions, its furnishings, its atmosphere.

The Spirit that I have come to feel, to seek for, is one that makes me tender, malleable, so that I am as it were prepared for shaping, and free of concern about consequences, and direct as a child in my asking and receiving;

That Spirit confronts me with the challenge of the Law of Love, as well as the prophetic virtues of justice, care for the poor, openness to the stranger, worship of the One along, the ethic of Truth: the call to the beauty of holiness, and no final rest else;
When I am in that Spirit, I feel renewed in me the ability to mourn and to find comfort, to serve with whatever I can in the cause of compassion towards my neighbor;

In that Spirit, I am brought to feel Logos/Sophia, the coherence and lawfulness at the heart of this inconceivably messy universe, intricately bound up in its origination and its unfolding, as the first Word of Creation continues to be pronounced and take shape — Wisdom of God, delighting in the creation, and turning us through delight to the awe in which new lessons are learned, of complexity and of sorrow.

In that, also, I can feel kinship with the life of nature, of non-human beings, plants, animals, and the landscape itself, a joy and sense of reverence, and a sense of freedom from a need to matter, to be importance, knowing that I am precious yet of not much account — so that I can feel and rejoice in the Folly to which Sophia brings us, freedom and delight — the life of abandon in the wind-like Spirit.

Waiting further, I can understand more and more the choice and the love shown forth in Gethsemane, and on Golgotha, and the grace of the empty tomb, and how it is nothing arrogant to accept that these in my measure should be my portion, also.

In this waiting, finally, I can at times feel indeed grafted onto a Vine fed and enlivened by a common life, in whose branches and twigs and leaves and fruit I participate in the unity, and rejoice in the growth, and the promise of the seeds for yet more.

The best single word to describe this spirit is Christ. 22

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21 Thus Christ has the whole human race, and perhaps even the totality of all creation, as his body, and each of us is individually a member of it. "You are all brethren" (Matt. 23:8): "all" means the whole creation; and one and only one is Lord, Jesus Christ. (Origen 791-2)

22 I am not a Jesus Seminar fan, but I recall the informal description of the way they’d evaluate candidate sayings of Jesus: Red: That's Jesus! Pink: Sure sounds like Jesus. Gray: Well, maybe. Black: There’s been some mistake. Using this method, as my understanding of the Spirit has matured, I’ve come to vote red: That's Jesus!
§5. Body

Is it not a measure of our assimilation to the values of the larger society that we tend to think and act as if our membership in the Society of Friends is a matter of personal choice? We’re all familiar with the idea of the spiritual supermarket, in which the seeker is recast as a shopper, selecting one or another brand product. Many of us, in accounting for how we came among Friends, will report a sense of having been led, often unwittingly, towards a society of people who combine a reverence practice with commitment to a certain kind of ethic.

Early Friends taught that Christ is present now, "in the body of his saints," as James Nayler said in one of his controversial works:

> God and his word is now manifest in the bodies of his saints in the same manner and as freely as formerly he hath been; and that there he is a sufficient teacher and shield against sin, without any other help to all, according to the measure of their knowledge of him present. (Works 2:536)

It is in this indwelling that all are constituted as one body, not through our will, but through the work of the One, the Seed Christ in us. Fox speaks eloquently of how the power of God can be felt bringing order and unity; and indeed, you might say that, in discerning spirits, a spirit that scatters is to be distrusted, however much it might be welcomed by some as a truthful spirit. After all, God is not either truthful or orderly: God is all things at once, and encountering God-stuff, we encounter what feels like truth, or mercy, or justice, or conviction of sin, or comfort, or challenge — these are all different ways we experience the One.

Fox writes:

> Because the Seed is one which is Christ and he is the Master...all brethren, who are in the Spirit, are one. You have all one Eye, which is the Light; one fire, which consumes all which the Light discovers to be evil; and one Spirit, that baptizes all into the one body, where there is no confusion, but pureness and oneness." (Epistle 46, in Jones 1989)
Even though we are led by an infallible spirit, stability and persistence in faithfulness as a people are a constantly maintained condition: homeostasis in the body of Christ. Fox continues: “Therefore, all Friends mind the oneness and that which keeps you in the oneness and unity...” Fox recognizes that it is possible to wander (jump, run) out of the Light, and thus out of the oneness: we can be led into oneness by minding the Seed, but we can separate again. The health of the body includes an inherent element of reconciliation and repair. There is a continuity between the order that arises when a person or a people are most open and obedient to the Holy Spirit, and the work of that same Spirit which enables us to see the need for reconciliation, and strengthens us to seek it, and live in it. Although the group can be led into right action, and the Spirit can help us discover community structure consistent with its guidance, the individuals are the living stones of the unity, the factors in the structure. We must each dwell in faithfulness, if we hope to be led faithfully as a people.

When we are living in this realization, we are led away from any temptation to see our unity in the body solely in terms of machinery (process) to be deployed to solve a problem, or intervene once something has gone wrong. While such processes and procedures can be powerful tools in the hand of a community or an individual in doubt or difficulty, they are not enough. Like any tool, they must be deployed at the appropriate time, and applied effectively to appropriate problems. To switch metaphors, medication is most helpful if you have a good diagnosis, and you have chosen the correct intervention and dosage.

A persistent challenge for us in our Quaker struggles is that our diagnoses and prescriptions often do not rest on good analysis of our condition. We can be distracted by the confusion of personality with revelation; we can forget that a crisis in a community has a gestation period, and that a disrupting or alarming event very often gains power from pre-existing, often unnoticed, conditions — individuals’
criticisms or doubts, crises of confidence or faith, unresolved grudges, hasty judgments, and a technical mindset that can perhaps close the lips of a wound, but not wait and work for healing.

If we do not allow ourselves to learn from the Spirit lessons about our condition, about our current ability to enact unity, and the things that hinder that acting, our intellectual and emotional labor, our discussions and reports, will not move us forward.

The Spirit by which we are guided, and which underlies all our separate concerns, longs for, persuades towards, our unity. A frequent attention to the community, and a waiting to feel where the unity stands (beneath all our diversity), is a gift to oneself and one’s meeting. Gifts are not elicited by demand or strength, but are things received from love. The kind of prayer I am advocating is one in which our selves, and all the parts and actions of our spiritual body, are held lovingly and known at bottom to be deeply connected. As we make this kind of attention, or attentiveness, a steady thread of our practice, we can find our way, experimentally, into an understanding — and an ability — to see, and then to live, in unity, in some measure. We may well lose sight of the unity, but once we have had the taste of it we know that it can be found and felt again.

This unity may be expressed in many ways, and may well grow into a strong, shared vision for community life. We need to help each other remember that unity is not an accomplishment, or a product, but a process, a living process, which requires the nourishment and care appropriate to itself. A living body maintains its health, in the face of abrasive, down-tearing, consuming forces, by constant up-building, nourishment, rest, and creative action. The result is a sense of well-being, of flourishing, which speaks of a body and mind in balance. When we live as members of one spiritual body, and that body is flourishing, we and our body will give evidence: patience, love, mutual forbearance, eagerness for good works, courage in the face of doubt or trouble, compassion, simplicity, truthfulness, teachableness, joy.
If someone should examine our condition and find these alive in us, find them reliably to be true of us, then we can hope with some confidence that our flourishing has roots in the life of God flowing through us, the Logos, which is God’s creating and healing power.

This in truth is the gospel, the power of God which works for our liberation, each of us, but also makes us know how and where we are one, and where we can be confident of that unity. Jesus’ last commandment was that his friends love each other as he had loved them, but in his prayer at the last supper, he asked that all might be one, as Jesus and the Father were one, and with them. Where daily waiting in silence and expectancy comes to be characteristic of us as a people, we participate in the process of challenge and transformation which prepares us for the unity Jesus prayed for, and equips us for it.

The root of all this, as Friends have always known and claimed — seeing it from the beginning as one of the principal arenas for the Lamb’s War against the Man of Sin — is worship, true worship, in which we see not only what we can become, but also what we are at the moment — what we know that we can live.

§6 True worship and the ministry that emerges from it, and facilitates it

We are most of us familiar with the story that Samuel Bownas tells on himself, as here followeth:

One First Day, being at meeting, a young woman named Anne Wilson was there and preached. She was very zealous, and I fixing my eye upon her, she, ... pointed her finger at me, uttering these words with much power: "A traditional Quaker, thou comest to meeting as thou went from it the last time, and goest from it as thou came to it, but art no better for thy coming; what wilt thou do in the end?" This was so suited to my condition that ... I was smitten to the ground, but, turning my thoughts inward, in secret I cried, Lord, what shall I do to help it? (Bownas 1839, 3)

I must confess that on many Sundays, I have been in his condition, and I have had suspicions that it's true of others as well. To be blunt, I have been in many meetings that are drowsy, comfortable, and serving as refuge or cushion from the harassments of the week, which can include committee work or
even service in the ministry, if one loses contact with the motion of life that can attend, sometimes does
attend, the rightly assumed tasks and duties of life. In such a drowse, our inward eye and ear are closed
to the wonders and terrors that surround us, and of course there are moments when this is therapeutic.
Even on the night he was betrayed, Jesus permitted his disciples to sleep, when it was evident that they
could no other.

But if we wish to speak and live prophetically, and dwell together as a prophetic people who live and
speak in the Truth, we must not fool ourselves about the quality of our worship, and disconnect that
worship from our calling to holiness, to perfection as it is possible for humankind.

The true worship is in the spirit, and in the truth, and the true worshippers worship there; and such
worshippers the Father seeks, and such worship he accepts; but all other worship is false worship,
and all other worshippers are false worshippers; such worshippers as God seeks not, nor can
accept their worship...he that worships out of the Spirit, he worships in that nature; but ... he that
worships aright, must have his nature changed, and must worship in that thing wherein he is
changed, in that faith, in that life, in that nature, in that Spirit whereby and whereto he is changed.
For without being in this, and keeping in this, it is impossible to please God in any thing. He that
is the true worshipper is a believer, and in his worship he must keep to his rule, the law of faith,
the law of the Spirit of <35> Life in him, the law which he receives by faith fresh from the Spirit
of Life continually. (Penington, "The way of life and death made manifest," *Works* vol i: 34)

If that is our goal, it is in worship that we learn what to listen for, and where to find again the springs
of life we have found before. There, too, we start to understand how to follow in the way we have been
shown, in which faithfulness our faith is more securely founded. Job Scott:

No soul ever was, or could be, saved without it, out of the life of it, or in ignorance of its redeeming power.
It is never ideal, or speculative, but is always inward, vital, and experimental; and no man knows anything
more of it, than he so knoweth it...Some suppose the gospel is unconnected with obedience in man. But it
is ever connected with it, requires it, leads to it, and effects it...*(Scott Journal, in Works* vol 1:17)

In an episode of true worship, in which we taste in some measure the freedom, assurance, and
generosity of the Spirit of Christ, we find our way to the Presence, to the Seed and place of rest. But once
is not enough, nor is our starting place always the same — as our lives move ahead, and our condition
changes. So we must feel our way back to the Seed from wherever we start, knowing from experience
what we are seeking, and learning to feel when we are moving towards or away from it. In time, finding
our way from more and more conditions or starting points of awareness or deadness, till we can at any
time move back towards the spring of life, we can learn to come home in an instant (or in a nanosecond as
Bill Taber liked to say, perhaps acknowledging the distracting fullness of our days). This frequent
keeping company with Christ is the Quaker response to Paul's exhortation to "pray without ceasing," to
which other traditions offer other practices native to their own spiritual culture (though with care we can
learn from them). Here's Penington again:

Now this worship,...is continual. There is a continual praying unto God. There is a continual
blessing and praising of his name, in eating, or drinking, or whatever else is done. There is a
continual bowing to the majesty of the Lord in every thought, in every word, in every action,
though it be in worldly things and occasions; yet the Spirit of the Lord is seen there, and <36> the
tongue confesseth him there, and the knee boweth to him there. This is the true worship, and this is
the rest or sabbath wherein the true worshippers worship. When the creation of God is finished;
when the child is formed in the light, and the life breathed into him; then God brings him forth into
his holy land, where he keeps his sabbath. (Works vol 1: 35-6)

If our worship does not work a change, so that we bear the fruits of the Spirit, and the marks of those
who have met with a living power beyond and yet within them, then our worship is not yet true enough,
and we will know that our worshiping is true of we learn more about it from the practice. For example,
worshiping in truth day by day, and feeling in it our kinship and with our friends, and the place where
unity can be found in our diversity, we can learn not to mistake the benefits of this powerful common
living for the essence of it, fruits for roots — so that when we do not know joy, gentleness, meekness, and
patience, kindness etc., we are not discouraged, or discount the power which makes for them. From that
unity we can speak with power, act with endurance, awaken the sleepers, and invite others to the great
work of living justly, creatively, and without fear, in balance with the nature forces upon which our bodies
and our cultures depend. But we cannot manufacture that power, that truth, that fearlessness, if we are
not living in unity. Now, therefore, in a time when our unity feels fragile, let us practice unity by seeking
each other’s well-being and faithfulness.
In recent years, Friends have grown more interested in, and active about, the seeing and welcoming the diverse gifts among us, but we have not yet gone far enough in this work. We are called further, to act on, act in, the expectation that all can be faithful stewards, for the gift's sake, and for each others'. As we are diligent in our own faithfulness, and worship more and more in truth, we will grow ever more aware of how our own callings are bound up with the common life, and we find more ways not only to assert that connection, but also to affirm and forward it in concrete and specific ways. Let us receive concerns with joy as the evidence of God's action in our time, day, and measures, and be eager in praying for and nurturing these gifts, loving our neighbor's concern as if it were our own. Let us challenge ourselves and each other often, asking, What concrete things have I done to welcome another's gifts, so that I rejoice to feel the growth of God's life in him or her, and feel myself nourished thereby? How often do I seek to feel how my service will nourish the growth of those in whom other gifts are active? And here I think that the ministry has much unfinished work, and there are too few at it. I have often said that one important function of a minister [whether officially designated so or not] is to serve as a guinea pig, an experimental organism, who at times tries things, or has things tried on them, as a way of learning on behalf of the body, along or across some frontier. "It is a living ministry that begets a living people," and one way that this happens is by the searching, attentive love with which the minister holds the gifts and service of others.

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23 Friends need to reflect on one message of traditional Quaker architecture. Old meetinghouses have a surprising proportion of their seating space dedicated to the "facing benches," with 10-15% of the seating set aside for Friends who have been encouraged by the meeting to exercise spiritual gifts of ministry and eldership on behalf of the meeting. The message is that we need a lot of Friends to be at this work, each according to their gifts and callings — working together on behalf of the spiritual health of the meeting, and encouraging the enactment of Gospel love in the world. We may use different mechanisms (tradition or new) to see, nurture, and welcome such gifts, but however we do it, we need to get to it, and also be willing to learn lessons from our historical experiments in practice.

The end of the ministry is not only to gather, but also to preserve and build up what is gathered, even to perfection. And the soul being (especially at first, if not for a long time) weak and babish, not so fully acquainted with the measure of life (having had but some touches and demonstrations of it, but not being gathered fully into it, nor rooted and settled in it); I say, the soul in this state, hath as much need of the ministry to preserve, direct, and watch over it in the truth, as to gather it out of the world. (Penington, "Some queries concerning the order and government of Christ's church," in *Works* 2:367)

My longing, Friends, is that we not allow each other to live in the shallows, and fear or complain that we have not the stature, or the power, or the message needed by our times and conditions. Quakerism teaches that this sense of insufficiency is not overcome by an act of will. We have much to die to, as Job Scott said, but also much to learn about the many dimensions of life as a people, the Children of the Light, guided by a spirit of fire, of healing, of prophecy, of compassion and joy.

Then were our hearts inclined to hearken unto the Lord, and our ears, which he had opened to hear, were bent to hear what the Spirit's teaching was, and what He said unto the Church, who is the chief Shepherd and Bishop of the soul. Thus were we gathered into a right gospel exercise and gospel worship by Him, through whose name we had received the remission of sins past, and whose blood had sprinkled our hearts from an evil conscience, and who gave the pure water that washed and made clean. So that with true hearts many began to draw nigh unto God in the full assurance of faith, as the ancient saints did and were accepted, and had access by that one Spirit, by which we came to be baptized into one body, and so came to drink into one Spirit and were refreshed, and greatly comforted; and grew up together in the mystery of the gospel fellowship; and so we worshipped God, who is a Spirit, in the Spirit received from him, which is the gospel worship, according to Christ's appointment. John iv. 24. Burnyeat, *Journal* pg 8; and in Friends Library vol 11, pg. 123)


Woolman, John. *Journal and major essays*. See Moulton, Phillips P.