

Gospel Order

By Annis Bleeke

The term 'Gospel Order' was more familiar to early Friends than it is to us today, but its importance for our life, work and witness remains undiminished. Agenda Committee feels it would be right for a renewed awareness of what underlies Gospel Order to permeate all the sessions of Yearly Meeting, and is grateful to the author of the following article, as well as the editor of 'Quaker Monthly', for permission to reprint it from the February 2002 issue.

The text was prepared in 1996 for one of North Pacific Yearly Meeting's Quarterly Meetings, and was mainly intended to cover one aspect of Gospel Order, that of personal relationships within a Meeting. It has since been redrafted and re-edited; its author, Annis Bleeke, is a member of that Yearly Meeting, currently serving as Associate Secretary of Friends World Committee for Consultation in London. For further reading, Friends are referred to the Bibliography which follows the article. All the listed publications can be obtained from or through the Quaker Bookshop.

When the disciples asked: 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of Heaven?' part of Jesus' long reply is:

If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

Matthew 18:15ff (NRSV)

This is the traditional Gospel text that defines the notion of accountability within the church. It is the background text for the responses of the early Friends to the challenge of mutual accountability or Gospel Order.

George Fox taught that Friends constitute a covenant community. The dictionary definition of a covenant is that of a contract or agreement. In Scripture covenant has always referred to a relationship of abiding trust and fidelity with God. For early Friends that covenant was the one promised by the prophet Jeremiah:

...I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts: and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord...

Jeremiah 31:33ff (NRSV)

The first generation of Friends recognized that there was a tension, which still exists today, between the freedom of the individual in relationship with the Divine and the common good of the community of Friends of which the individual is but one. In our 350 years of existence the balance between these two has swung widely.

That first generation of Friends set up a system of meetings on the local, regional, and national level. These meetings, for men and women, were to make provision for those suffering and to set boundaries to individual behavior. They were to see to church affairs and to discipline members of the community. Gospel Order is the term used by George Fox and others to describe this structure and discipline.

Discipline is a hard word for us to hear today. It conjures up images of rigid rules and means to enforce them. But this does the term a disservice. Discipline shares a Latin root with disciple. Discipline is a process of discipling. That is, acting toward one another as disciples, helping one another to become Disciples of Christ in traditional Christian terms. Mutual accountability is an integral part of the process.

Fox's pastoral letters are full of calls to mutual accountability. He uses old fashioned words like 'admonish' and 'exhort'. The Religious Society of Friends today lives with the unfortunate history of succeeding generations of Friends' use of Gospel Order or discipline. Elders and overseers, appointed to nurture and care, came to guard the external symbols of membership in their insistence on particular forms and beliefs. They built a 'hedge' around the community of Friends to keep it safe from the tainting of the outside world. Inside that hedge, many wonderful and beautiful people lived and thrived and a rich life of faithfulness to God was lived. But the hedge grew thicker and tighter and more and more Friends were put outside it for varieties of reasons, some as simple as mode of dress, others as complex as disagreements over theology.

This is what George Fox wrote about mutual accountability in 1669:

...though the doctrine of Jesus Christ requires his people to admonish brother or sister twice before they tell the Church, yet that limits none... that they use no longer forbearance before they tell the Church; but that they shall *not less than twice* admonish their brother or sister before they tell the Church. It is desired of all, that before they publicly complain, they wait in the Power of God to *feel, if there is no more required of them to their brother or sister*, before they expose him or her to the church. Let this be weightily considered.

And further, when the Church is told and the party admonished by the Church again and again and he or they remain still unsensible and unreconciled, let not final judgment go forth against him or her till

everyone of the Meeting have *cleared his or her conscience that if possible the party may be reached and saved.*

All [those who] behold their brother or sister in transgression, go not in a rough, light or upbraiding spirit to reprove or admonish him or her, but in the Power of the Lord, spirit of the Lamb, in the Wisdom and love of Truth, which suffers thereby...*So, may the soul of such a brother or sister be seasonably and effectively reached...*

And be it known to all, we cast out none from among us. For if they go from the Light, Spirit and Power in which our Unity is, *they cast out themselves. It has been our way to admonish them, that they may come to the Spirit and Light of God, which they are gone from, and so come into the Unity again.*

T. Canby Jones, letter #264, section 3

There is no rush to judgment here. The early Quaker interpretation 'softens' the harsh Biblical text, brings it into the community and establishes the goal of bringing each Friend into unity with the community.

Look at the italicised portions above: *not less than twice*: Ministry, delivered in a caring and loving manner, among Friends does not end after a set period of time. Even in the days when Friends were more routinely 'read out of meeting' the part of community life forbidden to them was the Meeting for Worship for Business, not the Meeting for Worship and fellowship in the community.

feel, if there is no more required of them to their brother or sister. This is similar to 'looking for the seeds of war within'. Fox advises the community and the individuals in it to examine their own attitudes and leanings, asking if there is something in them personally or in their corporate structure, which adds to a difficulty with an individual member.

cleared his or her conscience that if possible the party may be reached and saved: The goal of the laboring, or elderring if we must use that term, is not individual comfort, not a sigh that the one in whom a 'problem' has been perceived is gone. Rather, the goal is salvation of the other! It is not me, not we, but the other who is the center of concern.

they cast out themselves. It has been our way to admonish them, that they may come to the Spirit and Light of God, which they are gone from, and so come into the Unity again: When, as is inevitable in human communities, there is a separation of a person from the community, the community must be sure that it is not they who drove them away. Rather the individual who left the fellowship, not because of barring or banning on the part of the community, but because of the mutual

recognition that the relationship was no longer one of Unity, unity in Christ to use the traditional language.

This is also in adherence with Paul's teaching to the early Church in his letter to the Hebrews when he challenged them:

...let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but *encouraging one another*...

Hebrews 10:24-25 (NRSV)

The teaching from the Gospels and Paul and from the writings of George Fox were from their time. We are aware of the sometimes sad history of the Religious Society of Friends in the last 350 years. The question for Friends today is: What is Gospel Order now? That is: What guides do we have for mutual accountability in our meetings in this time?

The first place British Friends go for answers is to the 1994 version of *Quaker faith & practice of Britain Yearly Meeting (Qf&p)*. It is interesting to look at its predecessor, the 1959 version of *Christian faith and practice in the experience of the Society of Friends of London Yearly Meeting*. The latter has no index reference to Gospel Order; the former has a whole section. Partially, but not entirely, that is because the 1994 version incorporates *Church government* and *Faith & practice* in one cover while the 1959 version did not. This disparity does say something about a perceived need today for our common life. The Section referred to is in Chapter 19, entitled 'An Ordered People'. The introduction lays important groundwork for considering these questions now.

The danger for any spirit-inspired religion is individualism carried to excess. In the seventeenth century, this was seen amongst those called Ranters. Friends, too, ran this risk. What preserved them was the discovery of 'gospel order', the setting up of meetings for church affairs where individual insight was tested against the insight of the gathered group.

Quaker faith & practice: the book of Christian discipline of the Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, Chapter 19

Questions of mutual accountability, of Gospel Order, are also current in the United States. There some Friends are writing and talking about it in an attempt to bring the concept back into the practice of the Religious Society of Friends today.

Sandra Cronk tells us 'gospel order' is, first and foremost, life lived in God's transforming, guiding, and sustaining power.'

Sandra Cronk, p.9

Lloyd Lee Wilson, in more words, says the same thing when he writes:

Gospel order is the order established by God that exists in every part of creation, transcending the chaos that seems so often prevalent. It is the right relationship of every part of creation, however small, to every other part and to the Creator. Gospel order is the harmony and order which God established at the moment of creation, and which enables the individual aspects of creation to achieve that quality of being which God intended from the start, about which God could say that 'it was very good.'

Lloyd Lee Wilson, p.3

In our Meetings we are called to be covenant communities accountable to the Divine and to each other. In secular communities we choose to be there, among those people. In a covenant community we are first called into a relationship with God and God gives us to one another and to the community. Our relationship with others is divinely mediated. Our relationship with God changes us, changes the way we live, gives a new order to our lives, and we cannot live that new life alone.

These are ideas we must continue to explore with each other asking about the content, motivation and atmosphere surrounding the interaction we have with each other. In our Meetings we do not choose each other. God has chosen us and given us a particular way to relate to the Divine. In our unprogrammed meetings that relationship is through the gathered silence of the Meeting for Worship. We are given to each other; we are disciples together. This raises more questions than there are answers. Among them are:

- What are guidelines by which we engage this discipling with each other? For me this is the 'Gospel Order' challenge of the twenty-first century.
- Is there a place for 'exhortation' and 'admonishment' among us in our Meetings?
- When, how and about which issues in our lives?

Parker Palmer provides us with a delightful way to begin to consider community when he says:

In a true community we will not choose our companions, for our choices are so often limited by self-serving motives. Instead, our companions will be given to us by grace. Often they will be persons who will upset our settled view of self and the world. In fact, we might define true community as the place where the person you least want to live with always lives!

Parker J. Palmer, 1977, quoted in Qf&p: 10.19

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