



# **WORDS IN TIME**

**Essays and Addresses**

**Online Free Edition**

**Douglas Gwyn**

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“Can’t See the Covenant for the Contract,” was first published  
in *Friends Journal*, May 1997.

“The Seed: The Power of God Among Us”,  
was first published in  
*Friends Spirituality: A Study Guide for Adults*,  
published by Philadelphia yearly meeting, 1990.

For my long-time friend,  
Richard Sturm

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## *Introduction*

This book is a collection of short pieces, most of which have appeared in print elsewhere. They cover a nine-year period, 1988-97. I chose the title *Words in Time* because several of the pieces were written for particular occasions, and address specific dilemmas facing Friends at the time. As such, these keynotes and essays are somewhat time-bound and situation-specific. For example, “The Covenant of Light” addressed Friends United Meeting shortly before the “Realignment” controversy erupted at the end of 1990. But problems of alienation and mutual exclusion within the wider Quaker family continue; the message of reconciliation still needs to be heard.

All the pieces in this collection attempt to place current Quaker struggles within a larger context. The rootstock of our Quaker tradition, in its unique expression of the ancient Hebrew-Christian faith, can provide important perspective on today’s dilemmas. In particular, two themes encompass this collection: covenant and seed.

Covenant is a key theme of the Bible. The progressive stages of revelation in the Bible are expressed as a series of covenants: with the first man and woman, then with Noah, with Abraham and Sarah, with Israel through Moses and David, and finally with all humanity in Christ. Covenant expresses the quality of loving, faithful, forgiving relationship between individual humans, between humans and the divine, between humans and the earth, and in human society at large. It is an important holistic principle for Friends to reclaim today: it integrates personal

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spirituality, morality, peace and justice issues, and environmental concerns into a single framework, a single web of relationships. Early Friends understood the light within as a covenantal reality. It is not something to be turned on and off, to be heeded or ignored, but to be lived with faithfully. All dimensions of our lives can find integration and right order through our deeply intimate dialogue with the light.

Seed is another important theme in the Bible. God promises that the seed of the woman will prevail over the seed of evil (Gen. 3:15). God promises Abraham that his seed will become a great people, a blessing to all the families of the earth (Gen. 22:18). The New Testament proclaims Jesus Christ to be the seed of Abraham through which that universal blessing is realized (Gal. 3:16). There are two aspects to Christ's identity as the seed of Abraham (the bearer of God's promise of blessing to all peoples) and the seed of the woman (who prevails over evil). First, the historic identity of the Jewish people (the collective seed of Abraham and Sarah) is compressed into the drama of one life, as portrayed in the gospels. Then, the same seed is universalized through the promise of redemption to all peoples through Christ. This universal aspect is sometimes expressed in incarnational terms (as in Col. 1:27: "Christ in you, the hope of glory,").

Early Friends used the language of Christ as seed extensively. In fact, they spoke of the seed as much as they spoke of the light. These two metaphors evoke somewhat different aspects of God's presence. Within a society that had taken Christ captive within the bounds of creeds, sacraments, and cultural Christianity, Friends "liberated" Christ again as a seed sown in all soils, in all men and women, regardless of culture or belief. George Fox preached the drama of the seed's presence within the individual as a reenactment of the gospel story. Like Jesus the carpenter's son, the seed abides with us, unheeded in its commonness, repressed and rejected through human arrogance

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and presumption. But where the stony earth of the heart is broken open and surrendered to the seed within, the seed rises, the power of God begins to work, the promises of God are fulfilled, and the power of sin and alienation is broken. If the Quaker language of the light is about knowing the will of God, the language of the seed invokes the power, the will to do it. The radical Quaker message of transformation and empowerment often found its boldest expression in the rich metaphorical space of the seed.

It is crucial to reopen that space among Friends today. Quaker worship and witness have grown superficial in many quarters. Those who want to go deeper often resort to other spiritual traditions – Catholic, Eastern, and others. We have an untapped depth in our own tradition. The language of the seed charts that depth, because it gets to key issues of impasse, surrender, and the death/rebirth of the self.

Most of my writing has been devoted to the exploration of early Quakerism. I have sought to take seriously the Christian vision of the earliest Friends. I have utilized my background in biblical studies to unpack the rich and deeply encoded biblical imageries Friends used. But I have undertaken that work in light of my own experience as a Friend, and under a concern for the challenges facing Friends and our wider culture today. There has been a kind of "navigational" principle involved in this work. In navigation, bearings are taken through a process of triangulation: one point is ascertained in relation to two fixed points at a distance. My method of studying early Quakerism has been to locate it in relation to present-day Quaker experience and the biblical tradition in which it is grounded. Of course, it has also been important to try to understand early Friends in terms of their immediate historical context in seventeenth-century England. But despite the amazing amount of scholarship that has been devoted to that period, historical context alone will not come to terms with

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the transcendent power that coursed through a prophetic movement like the early Friends.

Modern “objective” scholarship balks at the idea that present-day experience and concern should impinge upon the task of studying a past historical phenomenon. But the notion that one can set aside one’s standpoint is a folly of modern naivete. Just as George Fox insisted that one can read the Bible rightly only in the same Spirit and life that the prophets and apostles knew, so we come to understand the witness of early Friends by engaging as best we can through the same spiritual disciplines they employed. Thus, scholarship is intellectually responsible to the available data; but what we hear from the data will depend much on the spiritual reality we live.

In three studies of early Friends, I have sought to understand Quaker witness in light of three key biblical themes. In *Apocalypse of the Word* (Friends United Press, 1986), I found the overall coherence of George Fox’s writings in his apocalyptic sense that Christ had returned through the presence of the universal light within. In that effort, I made use of modern biblical scholarship that has identified the apocalyptic outlook as central to the liberating gospel of Jesus and Paul. In *The Covenant Crucified* (Pendle Hill, 1995), I portrayed the revolutionary character of the early Quaker movement as a covenantal initiative that invited English society into the kingdom of God at a momentous juncture in history, the beginnings of capitalist society. I utilized current liberationist scholarship on Tribal Israel and the early Church, illuminating the social and political dimensions of covenant in the biblical tradition. Finally, in a third study, focusing on the English Seekers and their breakthrough as Quakers (now in its final stages of writing), I have focused on the key dynamics of atonement (reconciliation with God, fellow humanity, and the earth). Each of these studies has concluded

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with an attempt to return from the seventeenth century to the challenges we face today.

By contrast, this book is a collection of writings focusing primarily on the present. It shifts the dynamics of triangulation, aiming to discern our situation in light of early Quaker and biblical witnesses. There are no formulas offered here for how to “fix” modern Quakerism, no “travel directions” to steer by. The undertaking here is not science but interpretation. There are no empirical “distances” or “angles” by which to locate ourselves. Still, the distant points of early Quakerism and biblical history do offer some “angles” or perspectives by which we can locate ourselves suggestively, imaginatively. And it is a poverty of the imagination that blinds and binds us most sorely today. To be sure, the human imagination is perennially given to idolatrous hopes and wishes. But it can map new realms and open a larger space in which God’s true leadings may yet move us.

The principle of triangulation is important. Most twentieth-century religious life has been dominated by attempts to operate by only two reference points, the Bible and present experience. Adequate historical awareness cannot generate out of only two reference points. One will absolutize one point or the other. Either one makes Scripture absolute in some timeless sense of an eternal rule-book (biblical fundamentalism), or one makes modern experience absolute and discards the Bible as a useless relic (secular humanism). Neither choice attains a historical sense of either the Bible’s reality or our own. As a result, twentieth-century American religious life has seen many clashes between these two absolutisms. The early Quaker movement offers an especially propitious third reference point. It comes at the threshold of our modern era. As such it speaks evocatively to our modern consciousness, yet does not fit neatly within our worldview. Coming at the end of the Protestant Reformation and the beginning of the liberal Enlightenment, early Quakerism has

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affinities with both, yet conforms to neither. It is both intensely biblical and boldly universal. Early Quakerism presents us with an enduring paradox that can help us see beyond the popular frames our culture places around reality.

### The Background of the Chapters

The essays and addresses included here are organized according to theme. Part I focuses on covenant as an important frame of reference for understanding early Friends and ourselves. It is a framework that can help us move beyond the “irreconcilable differences” and “incommensurate sensibilities” that exist between Friends today.

“The Covenant of Light” was the Johnson Lecture given at the Friends United Meeting Triennial sessions held in Bloomington, Indiana in July, 1990. I was teaching at Pendle Hill at that time. I had been disturbed by the acrimony and confusion of the previous FUM Triennial, held in Greensboro, North Carolina. Not only were evangelical and liberal constituencies in open conflict during those sessions, but I was struck by the very caricatured images they had of one another. Like many others, I saw that the evangelical insistence upon doctrinal purity, led by Southwest Yearly Meeting, was moving FUM to the brink of new schisms. “The Covenant of Light” was a call for reconciliation, not in the sense of the declaring some fictional unity, but in the sense that we are called to travel to some “place” beyond our current positions. The conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman in the Gospel of John illustrates a faithful engagement between two people of seemingly unsurmountable religious differences. Where is the place of “Spirit and Truth” where we can meet?

I warned Friends of impending divisions if we did not seek reconciliation together wholeheartedly. But I did not guess that

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within the next six months, the General Secretary of FUM would call for “Realignment,” a definitive separation of Christian and universalist constituencies, even if it meant the end of FUM. That initiative was eventually rejected by FUM’s governing board. Interestingly, my address did not receive the same publication and promotion given to other Johnson Lectures both before and after it. Clearly, its message ran counter to the designs at work in FUM’s central offices at the time. A number of people expressed desire that it receive greater distribution. A couple Friends even mentioned that it was an important factor in their conviction as Christian Friends. I am glad finally to make it available here.

“Renewing Our Covenant” followed two years later as a keynote address to the July, 1992 Western Gathering of Friends in Portland, Oregon. The invitation to speak had come partly in response to my earlier Johnson Lecture and partly as a consequence of my work among Friends in Berkeley, California. As a Friends pastor there, I worked to bring Berkeley’s three Friends meetings into closer communication and cooperation. The Western Gathering was an initiative of Pacific Yearly Meeting, to bring western evangelical and liberal Friends together for a week, to learn from one another. I think the initiative was inspired partly by the sense that things work out differently west of the Rockies, and that western Friends generally feel some distance from the historic traditions and divisions that have dominated Friends in the East. In the American mythic consciousness, the West is about starting over afresh. Inter-Quaker dialogue might work rather differently in the West. Serious efforts to recruit balanced participation from both streams were hampered by the fact that Southwest Yearly Meeting, caught up in the politics of Realignment, was in no mood to mingle with liberal Friends, eastern or western. And in general, evangelical yearly meeting superintendents and pastors were not avid in promoting the Gathering, despite its support by the Friends World Committee

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for Consultation. At the same time, however, John Punshon of the Earlham School of Religion later observed that the planning of the conference had failed to sound themes that would appeal to the interests and concerns of evangelical Friends. “Let’s explore ourselves together” is basically a liberal agenda.

“Renewing Our Covenant” built on the perspective of “The Covenant of Light,” keying on the issue of “culture wars,” both among Friends and in the wider American culture. “Can Our Branches Be Olive Branches?” (the subtitle) asks whether historic divisions among Friends, if we can learn from them, can serve as the basis for a healing, peacemaking ministry to our wider culture. The address is included here in a slightly abbreviated form, as it appeared in the December, 1992 issue of *Friends Journal*.

“Sense and Sensibilities: Quaker Bispiritality Today” came four years later, at a May, 1996 Pendle Hill Issues Roundtable organized by Chuck Fager. The consultation had been set up to explore how a specifically Quaker understanding of the Church (ecclesiology) and interpretation of the Bible (hermeneutic) might help us find our way forward in two key areas: renewing our traditional peace testimony and resolving divisive questions regarding homosexuality. I had spent that year as a Scholar in Residence at Pendle Hill (another of several incarnations I have enjoyed there!). I felt that Chuck had posed a useful question, so I contributed a paper. This piece ponders the early Church’s bipolar quality (Jewish and Gentile), a theme I had raised in “Renewing Our Covenant.” I reflect on early Christian bipolarity from my experience as a “bispiritual” Friend, one of a growing number of Friends who in different ways feels at home in both the evangelical Christian and liberal universalist sectors of modern Quakerism, who cannot simply anathematize one in favor of the other. Rather elliptically, I use the theme of “bispiritality” to address questions of sexuality and peacemaking. I have learned much from gay, lesbian, and

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bisexual Friends over the years. I believe their struggles through issues of sexual identity, committed relationship, religious community and the AIDS crisis have molded them into an important source of spiritual and moral authority among Friends today. No vital renewal of Quaker faith and practice will take shape without their contributions. “Sense and Sensibilities” is reprinted here from *The Bible, the Church and the Future of Friends*, edited and introduced by Chuck Fager (Pendle Hill, 1996).

“The Covenant Crucified” was a paper given at an April, 1995 Pendle Hill Theology Roundtable (I was a Pendle Hill student that year). It is a summary of my book, *The Covenant Crucified: Quakers and the Rise of Capitalism*, which was released later that year. Chuck Fager suggested I include it here and I gratefully agreed. The Covenant Crucified is a complex and demanding book, layered with multiple themes and theses. As writing-for-the-market strategy, I admit that it is poorly devised. But I remain unrepentant, because I believe that our modern captivity within the structures of capitalism is so deep and subtle that simple answers do not reveal its true nature. There is much history in the book, and a number of biblical and Marxist concepts (such as covenant, commodification and capitalism) which are only vaguely familiar to most people. Yet I believe it is important to understand these terms, or rather the dynamics to which they refer. It is also important for Friends to understand the role our forebears played in the beginnings of capitalism. The defeat and recontainment of the early Quaker Lamb’s War constitutes one of the founding crimes, a forgotten victimization sealed within the foundations of our capitalist culture. Friends certainly became vibrant practitioners, “winners” in the capitalist revolution. But the first generation envisioned a utopian, covenantal future for the new order that was savagely repressed and defeated. It is crucial to raise this forgotten crime to



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consciousness if we Friends would look behind the facade of this world as we know it. The paper is reprinted here from *New Voices, New Light*, Chuck Fager, editor (Pendle Hill, 1995).

“Can’t See the Covenant for the Contracts” was written in 1996 to introduce the concept of covenant to Friends and help stimulate interest in *The Covenant Crucified*. It develops a sense of covenant that is similar to the Quaker understanding of the light within. That is, covenant is a universal presence within and among us. Its source is in a transcendent God, but we know it through our most intimate, immanent experience. It is the binding power and purpose of the universe. Early Friends understood the light as a covenant, a faithful, forgiving, guiding, redeeming presence in our lives. Like nearly everything I write, this article is dense. (I can only read slowly myself, and my writing seems to bring everyone down to my speed!) But if followed patiently and forgivingly, it offers a useful introduction to an important motif, one that is explicit in the Bible and early Quakerism, and implicit in our larger culture. It is reprinted from the May, 1997 *Friends Journal*.

Part II begins with “The Seed: The Power of God Among Us,” an essay I have utilized for presentations but have not published before. Written in 1988-89, it marks a period when my own experience and understanding of Quaker worship was deepening, due partly to the daily regimen of silent worship in the Pendle Hill community. It was also a time when the Quaker language of the seed began to register seriously with my own spiritual experience. One factor was reading Charlotte Fardlemann’s excellent Pendle Hill Pamphlet, *Sink Down to the Seed* (Pendle Hill Pamphlet #283). The Isaac Penington quotation she used as an epigraph became an important guide to me and is included in all three of these seed pieces. It also led me to read Penington more extensively. (Quaker Heritage Press has performed a great service by reprinting Penington’s four-volume

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collected Works over the past three years, available at a very reasonable price.) “The Seed” is a meditation on Jesus’ parable of the sower and the four soils, applying it to Quaker worship and suggesting ways the seed is either thwarted or raised up in us. It is a rather strong critique of today’s Quaker worship and lifestyles, which often remain on a superficial level, “atop the seed,” to our own detriment. It may strike some Friends as overly critical, though I can confirm and confess that I know most of these declensions from my own experience! So I do not stand apart from Friends in these criticisms. Even more boldly, the essay offers outright suggestions how Friends can go deeper in Quaker worship. These suggestions are garnered from personal experiments in getting beyond my own mental and emotional habits in Quaker silence. They may be of some use to others, or at least inspire similar experiments. This piece was originally published by the Religious Education Committee of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, in *Friends Spirituality: A Study Guide for Adults* (1990).

“Sink Down to the Seed: Going Deeper in Quaker Life and Witness” was given as a plenary address to the June, 1996 Intermountain Yearly Meeting, held in Durango, Colorado. The yearly meeting theme, “Maintaining Our Spiritual Base in Busy Times,” provided an opportunity to speak from my further reading of Penington and continuing spiritual growth. This piece explores the seed in our overall lives. As conciliatory as the covenant pieces in Part I generally are, these writings on the seed tend to be more critical and challenging to Friends. Still, I want to acknowledge that many Friends have traveled much further than I have. Life in the seed is deceptively simple; it seldom manifests itself in dramatic ways. Often the deepest spirits among Friends are discerned only as we begin to share their life in the seed’s subtle mysteries. “Sink Down to the Seed” appeared in an

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abbreviated form in the September, 1996 issue of *Friends Bulletin*.

Finally, “The Seed: Liberation and Captivity” was the Cadbury Event at the July, 1997 Friends General Conference Gathering in Harrisonburg, Virginia. Here I explore the theme of seeking, an evergreen watchword among many liberal Friends. My research into the seventeenth-century English Seekers both confirms and critiques the pervasive phenomenon of religious seeking in our own time. In this case, I explore the life of the seed in terms of my own generational experience as a Baby Boomer, a “Child of the Sixties.” During the turmoil of the Sixties, my generation left traditional religion in massive numbers, in a pattern comparable to the exodus of young Seekers during the English Civil War of the 1640s. What can we learn from them, especially those who became Quakers? When this Introduction was written, a slightly abbreviated version of this piece was scheduled to be published in *Friends Journal* in its November, 1997 issue.

All these essays and addresses reflect my own continuing journey and growth. They also reflect the loving support and collaboration of numerous Friends of various persuasions in different places. I remain grateful to several Quaker institutions and funds that have made it possible for me to do the research, listening, reflection and writing that go into work like this. They include the George Fox Fund, Pendle Hill, Haverford College, Berkeley Friends Church, Friends World Committee for Consultation, Reedwood Friends Church, Woodbrooke College, and the Lyman Fund. I hope this book will express something of the faith each has shown in supporting this work. My path thus far has made me a guest in many homes, a sojourner with many Friends groups, and a fellow-traveler with all. This itineracy has been crucial to the perspective I have gained among Friends over these past twenty-two years, though it has had its rigors and

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uncertainties. But the Lord has been faithful, and so have so many Friends. May this little book bear the fruits of that faith.

Douglas Gwyn  
Brooklyn, New York  
July, 1997

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**Part I**  
**Covenant**

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# One

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## The Covenant of Light

The Johnson Lecture  
Friends United Meeting Triennial  
Bloomington, Indiana  
July, 1990

“In the presence of God and these Friends...” These words are familiar to many of us, especially those who have been joined together in marriage after the manner of Friends. They begin the traditional affirmation of marriage covenant in our religious society. And anyone who has entered and lived in that primal covenant of creation knows how its meaning comes to transcend whatever intention and meaning we placed in those words on our wedding day. We will be tried beyond our patience and exercised beyond our strength. Yet we struggle together in love and the hope that we can transcend our limitations and obtain a blessing.

Ironically, the hope of transcendence lies precisely in the risky venture of limiting our options, channeling our energies into a single primary relationship. By the grace of God (indeed, nothing short of that will succeed) we may be fulfilled beyond our dreams. Or perhaps I should say *despite* our dreams, for our dreams often express the limits of our imagination. By the grace of God, then, we are healed at the place of our brokenness, where

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dreams die and strength fails, not where we assume ourselves self-sufficient.

When we come together at a large gathering such as this, we are affirming and renewing a different covenantal bond. We unite as present-day members of that great cloud of witnesses, the Quaker testimony to Jesus Christ extending back more than three centuries. With some fear and trembling we stand together, look at one another, and raise our voices to say, in effect, “in the presence of God and these Friends...” There are other great clouds of witnesses in God’s wondrous firmament. But this is the cloud we call home, foggy as we may seem to ourselves at times.

Over its century of existence, Friends United Meeting has embodied a dynamic unity. Sometimes it has been a precarious unity. We have often struggled to define our unity. Sometimes we have attempted to do it in doctrinal terms, using the Richmond Declaration of 1887 and the early Quaker letter to the Governor of Barbados. Yet there seems to be a nagging untidiness, an insistent open-endedness to the Quaker testimony to Christ as the light of the world. It made Puritans distrust early Friends from the very beginning. It has occasioned controversies among Friends over the centuries. And it still causes us to oscillate between clear definitions and mystical clouds of unknowing. On one hand, we want to state courageously what, after all, Friends have always testified of Christ Jesus. On the other hand, we want to respect the ambiguities of the Spirit, which blows in ways mysterious to human understanding. Both tendencies are healthy and partake of the deepest bedrock of Quaker Christian faith.

But our endless oscillation creates genuine discomfort for both Christ-centered and more humanistic Friends. I am not immune to that discomfort myself, and sometimes feel tried beyond my own limits. But in my better moments I believe that this volatile relationship of ours can be and often is profoundly faithful to the spiritual presence of Christ hovering in our midst.

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Friends United Meeting, with the diversity of Friends it includes, is perhaps the riskiest of all covenantal bonds in the Quaker world today. But it is precisely in this unique venture of ours that we may indeed transcend ourselves together, living out a covenant whose meaning far exceeds all of our personal intentions and construed meanings. Friends United Meeting: a marriage made in heaven? Yes! I affirm, in full confidence and hope that it does not depend on my understanding.

Nevertheless, understanding and intention *are* crucial in covenant relationships. And one of the reasons we have trouble being more clear and intentional about our covenant bond is because the term “covenant” has been neglected in our religious conversation. We need to understand it with greater clarity and intend it with greater commitment. The great biblical drama of Hebrew and Christian Scripture is played out as a series of covenants, beginning with man and woman, reformulating with Noah, again with Abraham and Sarah, again with Moses, again with David, and finally in Jesus of Nazareth. Covenant is a committed relationship that binds God and humanity in eternal and mutual faithfulness. But covenant is not only a personal matter between individuals and God. It extends to define all aspects of human life – personal, familial, social, economic, and political. The drama of the Bible takes shape around God’s various attempts to get all humanity living in faithful harmony, living in covenant. Harmony with God finds its rightful expression through our harmony with one another and with the earth itself. If we drop any of those levels of harmony, we fall short of true harmony. The Bible may end with events of some 2000 years ago; but clearly, its covenant drama is still a work in progress down to this day.

In Hebrew Scripture, the single term that defines the entire complex of covenant relations is *shalom*. As many of you know, that word is only partially translated with our English word,

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“peace.” *Shalom* embraces and combines qualities of peace, justice, mercy, health, integrity, harmony, and reconciliation. It is an equilibrium that extends not only through divine and human relations but even into the earth, demanding a balanced and loving relationship with all God’s creatures.

But there is a great irony about covenant relations: they constitute a holy wholesomeness that it is our task to maintain in the midst of changing circumstances and destabilizing forces – today as much as ever. It is something like carrying a jar of water on your head or in your hands, while running helter-skelter across rough and uncertain terrain. It is difficult to say the least. But it can be done, if one learns to keep a stable center. The Bible tells us again and again that this center – our living relationship with God, who personally teaches us and leads us – can hold and keep us whole. When Jesus tells us that the way is narrow, he is not prescribing narrow-mindedness but reminding us to open our eyes wider, for every step counts. Any misstep is dangerous to our equilibrium with God and to one another – dangerous to life itself.

Faithful stability in a changing world demands that our devotion be undivided and undiminished. Hebrew Scripture proclaims the Oneness of God so passionately, and the New Testament announces Jesus is Lord so tenaciously because only an all-embracing, single-minded faith will gain integrity within and without. In every age there are those who insist that truth is known by compounding truths together, that we know God better by being acquainted with many gods, many religions, many cultures. But when we compare religions we trade in dead images. We are “culture vultures” when we feed on carcasses. God is God when God is One, embodying all the contradictions we experience, and exploding all the easy definitions we may offer up. “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb. 10:31).

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We can never live in covenant unless we live with one God. Jesus says, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life; no one comes to the Father except by me.” Now, the cosmopolitan intellectual in me recoils at the brash exclusivity of that claim. But the believer that I am knows the truth of Jesus by experience. The passionate lover knows what the detached mind can never know. And, as Paul tells us, it is love that will stand after all other ways of knowing have passed away. For “love endures all things, hopes all things, believes all things. Love never ends.”(1 Cor. 13:8) It is the lover who makes the covenant. It is the impassioned heart that makes promises no prudent mind would make, and pledges a troth that makes no claims on objectivity. The mind can only construct creeds, concepts, or abstract theories of world religion. It cannot establish *shalom*, the peace that surpasses understanding. The mind can only strike bargains, make deals – and those too shall pass.

\* \* \* \* \*

The meaning of the new covenant in Christ is played out with great poignancy in the meeting between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. That meeting plays a very significant role in John’s Gospel, because it suggests the universal dimensions of the Jesus the Jewish Messiah. John’s Gospel creates a profound tension between the particularity of Jesus in his Jewish identity, and the universal, mystical knowledge that Jesus enables and focuses. For example, John’s Prologue proclaims that the light came into the world in the person of Jesus. But it simultaneously affirms that this same light is in every person that comes into the world.

John’s precarious tension between a universal light and its particular embodiment in Jesus comes into focus in Chapter 4. There Jesus enters into an “inter-faith dialogue” with “one of

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those other people,” a Samaritan. A respected rabbi like Jesus in that day would not normally even speak to a Samaritan, especially a Samaritan woman. And yet, you will remember, Jesus asks the Samaritan woman for a drink of water from the well where they meet. Her initial response is incredulous and slightly testy: I thought your kind had nothing to do with my kind. Now, over the span of human history, men have approached women with pretty improbable lines and made some fairly outlandish claims. But Jesus’ next words to the Samaritan woman are in a class by themselves: if you knew who I am, you would be asking me for water; I would give you living water, so you would never thirst again, because the source would be right there within. (Note the tension there in Jesus’ words about the water: like the light, it comes from Jesus, from someone outside or beyond us, yet it can spring up within anyone. Jesus says much the same thing in John 7:37f.) The Samaritan woman calls his bluff: OK, let’s have some of this water.

Jesus then delivers one of his classic *non sequiturs*: go get your husband and come right back. When she denies having a husband, he confirms that she has had five husbands, but the one she is now with is not her husband. Interpreters have long suggested that Jesus may be speaking symbolically here, that by husbands he means religions. (The ethnic background of the Samaritans included the five foreign peoples that Assyria brought into the region after defeating Northern Israel in 722 BCE.) We will recall that both religious faith and marriage are covenant relationships. And in fact, the surprising remark by Jesus does seem to suggest the subject of religious faith to the Samaritan woman. She is astonished that he has discerned her condition. She avows that he must be a prophet, then poses what she perceives as “irreconcilable differences” between herself and him. You Jews insist that Jerusalem is the place to worship. But for us Samaritans, it’s this mountain right here.

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This woman is playing trump for trump, raising the stakes every time Jesus does. So he lays his cards on the table: “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such the Father seeks to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship [God] must worship in spirit and truth.” (Jn. 3:21-24) In other words, the “place” of worship is about to change drastically, from this mountain and that temple, to a “place” of spirit and truth. She responds cautiously: I do believe that when the Messiah comes, these things will get sorted out. Jesus answers simply: that’s who you are speaking to. At this crucial juncture, the disciples of Jesus bumble onto the scene, interrupting the conversation. The woman leaves to bring people from her town to witness Jesus for themselves.

What we have just recalled is a scene extraordinary in many respects. One remarkable point is that this meeting has all the marks of a *betrothal scene* in the Bible. Hebrew Scripture is full of such meetings of men and women at wells. Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel, Moses and Zipporah are all betrothed through meetings at wells. It’s as if the subject of the Samaritan woman’s husbands waves a flag in our faces, in case we missed it. Even so, the marriage implied here is clearly on a different level. As the townspeople accompany the Samaritan woman back to the well, they too will believe in Jesus. They will witness the truth, the “troth,” the pledge of faithfulness that is soon to be solemnized between Jew and Gentile. The wedding date is imminent (“the time is coming, and now is”). And the wedding place is that place of spirit and truth, which is neither here nor there.

We will move on to that place in the Gospel of John in a moment. But let us first consider how this scene interprets our

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condition as Friends today. Coming together here from our various traditions of evangelical and liberal Quakerisms, we meet much as Jesus and the Samaritan woman met. We come from different worlds that often do not acknowledge one another, precisely due to religious differences. Some of us claim to know very clearly who we worship, and that salvation indeed has come from the Jews, in the person of Jesus Christ. Yet any one of us with a vital, growing Christian faith knows that our understanding of this One named Jesus will expand and evolve continuously through the course of our faith journey. So our knowledge of who we worship likewise remains elastic and expandable. Sometimes we want to use our definitions to keep Christ right where we have our greatest sense of security and safety. Keeping our Beloved in a tightly defined role keeps Christ in submission to us. That is the definition of a weak marriage, heavenly or earthly. So the committed Christian knows, and yet doesn't know. The faithful Christian respects Christ's freedom to be as Christ will be.

Others of us claim not to know what it is we worship. We are more committed to a way of worship and a process of decision-making than to defining who it is we worship, or who leads us in decision-making. Like the Samaritan woman and her husbands, we have ranged rather widely in comparative religion, and have no current plans to make a one-on-one commitment at this time. We sometimes end up sounding like perennial debutantes: always just coming out, always ready to play the field. Yet any one of us who takes this liberal/universalist position actually has some definite ideas about God, particularly what we believe God is not. Just listen to us; it comes out all the time. So we don't know, yet we know.

So here we are, with our "irreconcilable differences." We are meeting here in Bloomington, Indiana. But if we would come together at the deepest level, a more soul-searching encounter is required, at a "place" that is not on any map. It is neither your

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place nor mine. It is some place beyond all of us, yet within each of us: the place of spirit and truth. And I am glad that the time is coming and now is; because if we do not find that place together soon, we may again go our separate ways.

Returning now to John's Gospel, the place of spirit and truth is revealed later in another "inter-faith dialogue" – the trial of Jesus before Pilate. Here the marriage will be solemnized and consummated. This outcome is precipitated by the very people who attempted to avert just such a wedding. The Temple and legal authorities have seen how Jesus subverts their power. The covenant that Jesus offers would put faithful relationship with God and with all people in place of their profitable system of temple sacrifice. The very religious establishment that keeps order and extracts revenues for the Roman Empire has been seriously challenged by Jesus and the grassroots movement rushing into this new covenant. Jesus is accused as a subversive, a "seducer of the people." He is brought to Pilate in all seriousness as a trouble-maker, a potential "King of the Jews" that Pilate had better dispatch quickly to the gallows. John gives us a much expanded account of Jesus before Pilate. And for his part, the Roman Procurator is the picture of religious neutrality. Pilate can easily be read here as a sympathetic, even tolerant figure, who doesn't want to be forced into executing Jesus. But John's portrayal is meant to show us something much more disturbing – the falsehood of neutrality.

Pilate wants to beg off from trying Jesus. He suspects that there is a religious question behind the chief priests' desire to be rid of Jesus. He has blundered into Jewish religious life before, and it has caused him nothing but trouble. But the allegation that Jesus has claimed to be King of the Jews is one that Pilate cannot ignore, so he questions Jesus. Jesus readily admits that his kingship is not of this world; if it were, he would have resisted arrest. "So you are a king?" Pilate presses. Jesus replies: "You



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say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Every one who is of the truth hears my voice.” Let us note the way Jesus speaks of truth here: it is much the same way he spoke of water, and much as John’s Prologue speaks of light. Jesus has come into the world to bear witness to the truth. He brings something from “out there” into the world. Yet truth is already at large in the world, and everyone who has been attentive to truth recognizes the voice of Jesus.

Pilate responds with his famous “what is truth?” It’s not that Pilate naively raises a question he never thought about before. Nor is he trying to engage Jesus in an abstract philosophical discussion. Pilate’s point is this: what does truth have to do with it, when your own people’s priests have handed you over to me? You had better wise up fast. You are caught between powers that can easily crush you. To Pilate, the political animal, for whom power is the name of the game, truth is moot. The point is always to play competing powers off against each other, and gain personally in the process.

Still, truth has religious overtones, and Pilate is determined not to walk into a religious conflict within the Jewish community. He knows that the chief priests do not always speak for the Jewish people. They represent the local aristocracy, often at odds with the Pharisees, and little interested in the needs or desires of the Jewish peasantry. So he attempts to placate the chief priests by humiliating Jesus as a king and having him whipped. Then he tries to threaten Jesus, reminding him that he can be crucified at Pilate’s command. But none of these tactics seems to work. The priests are not satisfied with corporal punishment, and Jesus is strangely unmoved by Pilate’s threats. Jesus tells Pilate that he is only a pawn in a much larger game. That sounds a bit ominous. But the priests continue to press Pilate, and Pilate in turn begins to goad them: what? you want me to crucify your king? Finally,

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in exasperation, the priests blurt out, “we have no king but Caesar.”

Well, suddenly it’s as if everything is settled. Pilate has no qualms in sending Jesus off to his execution as a political criminal. It’s as if he decided to use Jesus as a pawn to extract a political affirmation of Roman sovereignty from the chief priests. John notes that this sudden settlement takes place at the sixth hour: high noon by our clock. At midday, the time of greatest light, the political powers reaffirm their working relationship, and truth is sent off to the gallows. Truth is expendable.

Darkness at noon. Moses and the prophets had warned of this day. At the summary of the Law, Moses warns the people in Deuteronomy (Chapter 28) that if they depart from God’s voice, turning away to serve other gods, they will become utterly confused, frustrated, and undone: “and you shall grope at noonday, as the blind grope in darkness.” Centuries later, when Israel had become secure and comfortable in imperial militarism, exploitation, and oppression, Amos the prophet attacked the nation’s smug confidence in the day of the Lord, the day of God’s justice. “Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord! Why would you have the day of the Lord? It is darkness and not light” (5:18). “And on that day I will make the sun go down at noon, and darkness in broad daylight” (8:9).

While John’s account of darkness at noon comes at the decisive moment of his trial, the other three gospels place it differently. They recall Jesus already beginning to be crucified by noon. At that time, darkness covered the earth for the next three hours. At the end of that interval, Jesus cried out, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” The Greek word we translate “forsake” or “abandon” is *ekleipo*, which can also be translated as “eclipse.” Indeed, eclipse is the very point of these mentions of darkness at noon. Jesus and God were in eclipse for men and women of faith that day. People like Pilate, who always lived in

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that eclipse, having turned from the light (John 3:19ff), never even noticed. But those who had lived with Jesus in the faith of his gospel and the hope of God's reign on earth saw a darkness over the earth like nothing they had ever known. It was an awful sight.

The darkness they saw was not only the darkness in the heart of a Pilate who could cynically ask, "what is truth?" It also covered the entire social order. It covered the priesthood of a darkened temple, where forgiveness and salvation had become commodities for sale. It covered an imperial superpower that milked the people with extortionate taxes, reducing the peasantry to destitution and starvation. The man who had brought the light of hope in all this darkness, to liberate captives, forgive debts, and heal the sickness and disability of his people – this man they saw swallowed up by the darkness, crushed, publicly tortured to death.

It is an awful sight. Let it burn into your mind, your heart, your very soul. For this scene of utter desolation is the scene of God's triumph in Jesus. This is the place where the world turns upside down. This is the place of spirit and truth! Do not turn away in fear and horror, for this is holy ground.

The land of shades, the pre-dawn gloom: that was the site of another conversation between Jesus and a woman. Mary Magdalene came to the tomb in that darkness, to work through her grief, to anoint the body of Jesus for burial. And when she entered the tomb of Jesus, she experienced the final degree of eclipse: for now even the dead body of Jesus was gone! As Mary looked into the dark void with disbelief and compounded grief, she heard the voice of someone speaking to her. In the depth of that darkness, both inward and outward, she could not recognize this person, whom she mistook to be a gardener. It was only at Jesus' calling her name that Mary tumbled to him. This moment of recognition was not a detached "A-ha!" This was a turning and reaching of heart, mind, body and soul to Jesus. Here is the

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fulfillment of the promise, the consummation of God's oath to us – the marriage covenant, enacted at a time that existed before time, in a place that existed before place. There and then. Here and now. Spirit and truth.

This and other appearances of Jesus to his friends in the gospels consistently bear out the surprising and almost subliminal ways in which we come to recognize the Risen Lord in our midst. Christ comes often like one at the periphery of our vision, perhaps because we are so often looking the wrong way. Or sometimes when we are so utterly confused, frustrated, or undone that we do not see anything very clearly. Yet that voice, a voice we somehow know, comes to us as the prophet Isaiah testified: "And though the Lord give you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, yet your Teacher will not hide himself any more, but your eyes shall see your Teacher. And your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, 'This is the way, walk in it,' when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left" (30:20f).

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This is the way Christ has reemerged and renewed the covenant of light time and again in the history of the Church. It happens whenever women and men, feeling the eclipse of God, the darkness in personal experience and social relations, turn to behold Christ, speaking and leading from unexpected angles, in unforeseen directions. That time can be any time. The place is spirit and truth, wherever men and women come together in Christ, in patterns of faithfulness to God and to one another. To be sure, Church structures prove vulnerable to the same hardening and darkening forces that turned salvation into a commodity in the Jerusalem Temple, that turned righteousness into a formula among some of the Pharisees. And it is to the shame of Christians that our churches have too often offered up Christ to Caesar, who

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will always dispose of troublemakers for a price – the affirmation that we have no king but Caesar. In such times of darkness, truth is again treated as moot, even expendable. Yet, as James Russell Lowell’s great poem reflects in “Once to Every Man and Nation,”

Though the cause of evil prosper,  
Yet ‘tis the truth alone is strong;  
Though her portion be the scaffold  
And upon the throne be wrong,  
Yet the scaffold sways the future,  
And behind the dim unknown  
Standeth God within the shadow  
Keeping watch above his own.

For the modern Christian it is often tempting to live off the glories of the earliest Christians. And those of us who are particularly enamored of Quaker history are tempted to bask in the glories of our early forebears, from George Fox and Margaret Fell to John Woolman and down to the present. Indeed, we can learn much from their vision and their struggles even today. Far be it from me to discourage anyone from becoming an avid student of the Bible or early Quaker writings.

But it is easy for us to misappropriate these lessons from antiquity. We all too readily make “straw men” out of the Pharisees of old, or the Puritans of seventeenth-century England. We want to conclude with satisfaction that they were wrong and we are right. But many of the critiques Jesus made of Pharisaic piety can easily be applied to us. And the attacks George Fox made of Puritan worship and ministry can just as easily be applied to empty Quaker formalism among us today. The insights and witness of our spiritual ancestors do not accrue to us as righteousness, any more than it sufficed for the Jewish brethren

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of John the Baptist to call themselves “children of Abraham.” “Even now [as then] the axe is laid to the root of the trees”...(Matt. 3:9f). We cannot cling smugly to the traditions of our spiritual mothers and fathers, standing on our modern Jerusalems and Gerazims, pretending to keep the faith there. As we noted before, the place of Spirit and Truth is not fixed according to any map, geographical or denominational. It keeps moving on with the constantly changing terrain of history and culture.

Our pastoral and evangelical pattern of Quakerism has served as a vital renewal of Quaker faith and practice in its time. But that watershed is over a century old now, and many of us (including many pastors) recognize that in its present form, it is a spent force. It is true that many of our meetings suffer in part from the overall economic decline of rural and small-town America. The present situation we find ourselves in is just the opposite of the expanding frontier economy that enabled the founding of our meetings. It is hard to rebuild Friends churches in many of the hard-hit communities of the heartland. But let us not make excuses for ourselves. This reversal of fortunes should guide us into new paths of faithfulness appropriate to these times. Let us venture forth from the comforting familiarity of the Jerusalem our great grandparents built. For like the temple of Jesus’ day, it shall not stand.

And let not liberal, unprogrammed Friends take comfort in this, as if such an outcome will vindicate their own position. Liberal Quakerism is a newer, twentieth-century creation. Its cultural momentum has not yet faded as much as pastoral Quakerism has. In fact, we see many unprogrammed meetings growing and producing new meetings today. But look where they are growing: in those islands of continuing economic expansion, the urban centers, the coasts, and those evergreen sanctuaries, the campus communities. And here we gather more people like

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ourselves – educated, privileged, upwardly mobile. This is a worthwhile ministry, to be sure. But let us not reckon ourselves righteous for the privileges we happen to accrue. This foundation will not stand either. The easy universalism of liberal Quakerism, sampling all faiths and judging them good, is not a covenant but a bargain. Never have “spirit” and “truth” been cheaper commodities. It’s as if secularism, by breaking up the extortionary Christian monopoly on religious truth in Western culture, has driven down the price by flooding the market with ever more brands. Now the informed religious consumer can collect an entire wardrobe of religious affectations, including many exotic imports, at a fraction of the cost. The more religions we “own,” the cheaper each becomes, the less any one can demand from us. No one trades in these commodities any better today than modern liberal Friends. Like the Samaritan woman, we have gone through several covenants, and today’s model is not one at all.

How shall we come together? Neither of our present habitations will suffice. Jesus had to leave his home territory to show us the way to spirit and truth; he calls also to us to leave ours to follow. We too are to go beyond ourselves. But how? And what will it look like? I do not know. I have no formula or prescription to offer. I can only tell you what happened to me. I can tell you something of the formative experiences that have become reference points for my own journey among Friends. These experiences inform my conviction of what needs to come to pass with us. This is the best way I can explain how I can call the “mixed company” that we comprise here in Friends United Meeting a “marriage made in heaven.”

I will briefly describe two turning-point experiences in my life, two “mountain-tops” that form the Jerusalem and Gerazim of my spiritual landscape. What has always been clear to me is that I can choose neither one. Both have come to me by the grace of

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God. I am covenantally bound to live faithfully to both, to let them form the reference points on my own pilgrimage to the place of spirit and truth.

The first experience is one that occurred right here on this campus over twenty years ago, in 1968. It was a time of crisis for me, as I was going through the break-up of a relationship with a young woman I had dated since high school, with whom I had grown up in the First Friends Meeting in Indianapolis. It was the eclipse of that first scenario of marriage, of living “happily ever after,” that crashes down over every one’s head in some way, sooner or later. But, as novelist Willa Cather once commented, these familiar dramas are relived with once-for-all intensity in each one of us. And the world of innocence was finally and fully sundered for me that September, when I felt the thick darkness of personal eclipse settle over me. Sitting alone in my dormitory room one evening, the deep gloom and impenetrable silence was subtly broken by a voice that spoke only three words: “be a minister.” No thunder or lightning, just three words audible from somewhere in those great depths that had opened up within me.

For the next twenty or thirty minutes, I simply sat there and took it in. I had not been preoccupied with vocation – I was looking in a different direction, relationship. And I had never for a moment considered the ministry before that evening. Yet somehow I felt inexplicably *called*, profoundly *named*. It was as if this call named who I was and what I was made for, in a way I had never imagined. There were all kinds of questions and challenges ahead. I had no idea how to pursue this calling. All the doing questions would have to be worked through over time. Indeed, they are still being worked through, as I have served at various times as a pastoral minister, a traveling minister, and a teaching minister. But the *being* question of my life was answered – “*be a minister.*”

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That evening, I knew myself redeemed from despair, saved from the wreckage of my life, rescued from the futility of a life without purpose. And though the content of this experience was manifestly vocational, at the same time a new relationship was begun that evening. I determined to stay attuned to that voice, or to whatever inner nudgings and promptings might come from the same divine source. But there was a deep paradox in my calling to ministry – *I was not a Christian*. I was not active with any meeting or church at that time, or for some years to come. I had received Christian education in my home meeting, and I felt open to Christ, but I had not come to Christ in any decisive way. If anything, I was something of a nature mystic in those days.

Now it is more typical for a young man and woman to receive a calling to ministry some period of time after a decisive experience of conversion and commitment to Christ. The calling usually comes as the meaning of that commitment has had time to deepen, and normally is preceded by intensifying thoughts about going into ministry. My experience was much the opposite. It would be four or five years later, in the middle of my seminary education, before the gospel of Jesus really spoke to me. Only then did I identify the voice that had first spoken to me as the voice of Jesus, the Good Shepherd.

But as I have reflected on this paradox over the years, I have come to realize that I have some good company – Abraham and Sarah, to name two. Abraham was called and followed God while he was still essentially a Gentile. He and Sarah spent their entire lives following a strange God who remained unnamed. And then there is the apostle Paul, who received the call to ministry from Jesus, to whom he was not simply uncommitted but openly hostile, even persecuting. My point here is not to compare myself with Abraham, Sarah, or Paul. My point is that God is on speaking terms with non-Christians. More than that, God redeems and guides all who will listen and respond, regardless of a

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knowledge or confession to the gospel. That paradox is what made Paul not only a good Jewish Christian but the preeminent apostle to the Gentiles. He drew upon Greek religious ideas and practices in his gospel preaching and Christian worship. He could do that because he took the trouble to know and understand the religions of his day. But underlying that intellectual work was that *experience* back on that Damascus Road. He was called before he was a Christian.

I have made some study of world religions, like most people my age. But more importantly, I have struggled to understand the universalism that pervades the New Testament, such as we have noticed in the Gospel of John. And I have studied the universalism in Quakerism that goes all the way back to our beginnings. But underlying all that theological and historical research is my foundational *experience* of God when I was still uncommitted to Christ. That experience tells me that I can enjoy union and collaboration with all those who respond to that redeeming Presence within. To be sure, there are certain deep levels of communion and forms of action we can enjoy only if we share a love and commitment to Jesus Christ. But spiritual partnership is not limited solely to Christian definitions.

Still, that is only half of the truth, according to my experience. To set the other key reference point, I must give some description to a second encounter, some six years later, in November, 1974. At that time I was a student at Union Seminary in New York City. I knew myself a Christian and planned to enter pastoral ministry among Friends within a year. So my theological education was coming to a satisfying fulfillment. Yet, once again, failing romance was about to do wonders for my spiritual life. At that time, I held a revised scenario for living “happily ever after.” I dreamed of entering ministry with a fellow seminarian at Union, whom I had been dating for nearly a year. Suddenly, that scenario

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began to crumble as we experienced some serious difficulties together.

I remember attending the Fifteenth Street Meeting in New York on Sunday with an acute sense of eclipse, “darkness at noon,” my world passing from before my eyes. I remember that I sat in the silence of meeting for worship, repeating to myself a favorite verse from 1 Timothy: “everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving; for then it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer” (4:4f). I sat there with little expectation, except to receive some spiritual solace. Suddenly, I beheld before me the Risen Lord. I do not know how long this encounter lasted. But as I saw his wounds, the evidence of his great suffering, I asked, “why did you do it?” The reply was simple: “Because I love you.” I then stood up in my spirit and embraced Jesus, my Lord. There the vision faded.

I experienced a deep healing out of that encounter. I had had a tendency to hold on too tightly, to cling, in deep relationships with women. Indeed, that had been a key underlying issue in my current relationship. The next time we were together, she quickly began to notice something different. She still felt considerable warmth and intimacy from me, but the clinging was gone. At last I was free to let be – because I knew myself to be loved profoundly, unconditionally, divinely. And though that relationship ultimately did not survive, I had been delivered into a better, more truly loving way of loving others – to love and let be, to love without strings, to love unconditionally. Reflecting on this experience over the years, I have thought of Mary Magdalen at the tomb, who similarly embraced Jesus when she beheld him. Yet she was truly fulfilled when Jesus told her not to cling to him, but go and tell the others. We embrace Jesus best when we have learned to love others as Jesus has loved us.

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That experience complements and fulfills – but also counterpoints – the first experience I described. Like the first experience, this one redeemed me from an experience of despair and hopelessness. It also set me on a new path that both fulfilled me and made me a better instrument of God for others. But it also gave an undeniably *explicit identity* to the divine voice I had first known in my dorm room in 1968. I can respect the integrity of men and women of other faiths. I can affirm that God is working directly with non-Christians wherever I can recognize divine grace working in their lives. But woe unto me if I deny that I know the One who has redeemed me! It is easy to fall into a cosmopolitan etiquette that leaves God as a vague epithet, the Divine Whatever. And there is a need, I believe, to respect the different beliefs and disbeliefs of others. But those of us who have embraced Christ (in whatever sense that has happened in our experience) are not to hide out and play it safe in that cosmopolitan etiquette. We are obliged to testify, with that beautiful hymn, “I Know Whom I Have Believed.”

Today we state our personal conviction that our salvation has come from Christ, just as Jesus affirmed to the Samaritan woman in his day that salvation comes from the Jews. That is our personal conviction. By that, I do not mean that it is our personal opinion. No, if it is based in our deepest experience, it is much more than an opinion, an intellectual tenet, or a personal bias. At the same time, I do not mean that we use our experience to beat others over the head, to judge them for not having the same experience. Personal conviction is to say, like Martin Luther, “Here I stand, I can do no other; may God help me.” My personal conviction acknowledges that others may not share the same experience, that life is pretty ambiguous most of the time, but that I’ve seen a few things too clearly to ignore them. Personal conviction allows me to love others and let them be what they

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will be – but when they run into me, they are bumping into a lover of Jesus.

Those two foundational experiences in my life have been my guiding lights over the years. Other experiences have come since, but I have been most decisively formed by those two. They have made me something of a wanderer, moving among both pastoral and unprogrammed Friends. I feel at home with either – and with neither. I am in the company of Friends, yet I feel always called to move onward. Christ beckons us to some higher ground that neither pastoral nor unprogrammed Friends have yet found – and which we perhaps can only find together.

Let me admit right now that I do not always move onward very courageously. Sometimes I simply vacillate between Jerusalem and Gerazim. I become merely ambivalent, dissatisfied with the camp I'm sojourning in, thinking maybe I'd be happier in the other camp. Other times, I conform too much to my surroundings. Among liberal Friends I'm sometimes too shy about Jesus. And among pastoral Friends I'm sometimes too shy about my non-Christian friends, those in whom I see the light shining unmistakably. Confusion, cowardice, laziness – I must admit to all of these.

But when I'm moving with Jesus, I feel that I'm not just vacillating between Jerusalem and Gerazim, but moving on into the place of spirit and truth. And I feel by no means alone. In my travels among Friends I have found many who know these same territories, who are on the same pilgrimage. I feel a special communion with you, a special neighborhood, as those ancient nomads knew, following the onward call of Yahweh, an unknown God, in the vast, silent expanses of the desert wilderness so many centuries ago.

That groping in the dark, that waiting for the voice behind us, guiding us on toward the place of spirit and truth, that is the covenant of light, held in faith among us. For my part in this

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covenant, I know that I must remain faithful to all of my experience with God, not just the parts I can fit into an easy definition. The covenant of light is *participational*, not *propositional*; it is salvation worked out in fear and trembling, amidst doubt and incomprehension, not a handy formula. The covenant of light often brings people together from diverse backgrounds and understandings. I am constantly surprised by some of the allies I discover in my faith pilgrimage. To live faithfully in the covenant, let us be ready to receive help from unexpected quarters, and to find ourselves united with unlikely persons. That was the experience of the early Quaker movement, as it united men and women from a number of different religious backgrounds, many of them competing and mutually hostile. Early Quaker Francis Howgill writes of his experience of the covenant of light thus: "We were knit together not by any external covenant or form, but by the covenant of life with God, a strong obligation, or bond upon all our spirits, united as one to another...in the unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace."

God's covenant faithfulness constantly creates new faithful communities, new people of God. Whether Jew and Samaritan in Jesus' day, Baptist and Seeker in George Fox's day, or evangelical and universalist in our own day, God calls us beyond our "irreconcilable differences" to become new families of faith, new covenant communities, new instruments of divine purpose in the world. As Peter addressed the first Christians of his day, "once you were no people but now you are God's people" (1 Peter 2:10). This is the miracle of God's wonderful new creation, renewed again and again, from Abraham and Sarah, who first began this mysterious, recombinant family of ours.

Looking back all the way to them, and to the countless others between them and us, I see that "mighty cloud of witnesses" proclaimed in the Letter to the Hebrews. That great chorus has become even mightier in the two millennia since then.

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Yet still this enormous train of faith moves on, faithfully embodying things hoped for, living out the conviction of things not seen (Heb. 11:1). Hebrews reminds us of the patience of those who kept faith in God's promises without seeing their fulfillment: "These all died in faith, not having received what was promised, but having seen it and greeted it from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth....If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for God has prepared for them a city" (Heb. 11:13,15,16). Going on to describe still more faithful forebears, many of whom suffered persecution and death, Hebrews again concludes, "and all these, though well attested by their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had foreseen something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect" (Heb. 11:39f).

Those first Jewish Christians saw themselves completing the faithfulness of their race and their ancient faith. Indeed, their witness still stands as a great city set upon a hill, a light unto the world, that we can still behold even from this distance. And though we see the later breakdown and scattering of that early city, we see other shining cities of faith in subsequent centuries, other formations in that great cloud of witnesses. Among them we see the astonishing city of living faith built by early Friends. And though that wonderful city is also divided and scattered, streams of faithful witness extend down to us here in this room this evening.

Whether we live during the glorious, mountain-top moments in faith history, or whether we live in those times of transition, moving on toward new mountain-tops of spirit and truth – we are part of that great cloud of witnesses. We are part of it whenever we keep faith with God's covenant, embodying the

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substance of God's promises here and now, despite all the circumstances that make faith appear foolish. For what is faith, but a life that transcends mere circumstance? And what is covenant, but a commitment that is more than making our best bargain with fate?

Looking out at this gathering of Friends, I see a great cloud of witnesses, many of whom I am favored to know personally. As I joyfully behold you now, my friends, I can find no better way to close than to exhort you with the words of Hebrews 12: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God." (12:1f).



## Two

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### Renewing Our Covenant Can Our Branches Be Olive Branches?

Keynote Address  
Western Gathering of Friends  
Portland, Oregon  
July, 1992

In our different forms, American Friends represent many different trajectories and traditions of Quaker faith and practice. Our churches and meetings are the fruit of different movements: westward migrations, Christian missions, peace and justice activism, church planting, seeker quests.

But it is clear that we represent two major streams of Quaker tradition, what we call liberal and evangelical, or universalist and Christ-centered. Not all of us would categorize ourselves purely as one of these or the other. We Friends are irrepressible in our zest for recombinant forms! But all of us are drawn along with the flow of either the liberal or evangelical stream, to some degree.

Recent events in Friends United Meeting suggest that the forces that first polarized us into these diverging streams in the nineteenth century are pulling at us with renewed force. We may be on the threshold of new schisms and alienations – among the

people who call themselves “Friends.” Together we form a volatile chemistry. Perhaps that is why we are also called “Quakers.”

But it is not as if we have come up with these differences all by ourselves. In our own idiomatic way, our diverging Quaker streams embody the same polarization that has reached crisis proportions in our culture today. Sociologist James Davison Hunter portrays this conflict in his recent book, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991). Hunter defines the two opposing forces in American culture today as *orthodox* and *progressive*. These cultural forces are at war today over a wide variety of issues: abortion, homosexuality, women’s roles, the family, education, the arts. I do not wish to deny or minimize other important conflicts in American society today – racial conflicts and class conflicts, for example. But the cultural conflicts described by Hunter are those that most routinely divide American Friends today.

Hunter’s main thesis is that we misunderstand these conflicts if we view them as primarily political, and especially if we trust the media to portray them adequately and fairly. At the root of these conflicts are two fundamentally different worldviews, different understandings of moral authority and its sources.

In the *orthodox*, Hunter sees the commitment to an external, transcendent, definable source of authority, most often the Bible. In various ways, the orthodox impulse is rooted in the conviction that there is an authority that lies somewhere beyond the marketplace of ideas where religions are bought and sold, where beliefs are broken down and analyzed, where values rise and fall like the stock market. This authority lies with a God who transcends this world, whose thoughts are not our thoughts, and whose Scriptures contain Truth beyond our social norms and cultural fashions.

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For the *progressive*, moral authority lies most centrally in immanent, personal experience, in a progressive unfolding of truth. There is a sense that Truth is an evolving process, a continuing revelation, from ancient times down to the present. In traditional faiths today, the progressive impulse manifests itself in efforts to reshape the language and symbols of centuries-old traditions. For example, we see the exploration of feminine images of God, as a supplement or as an alternative to traditional, patriarchal images of God. This revisioning of God is seen as a necessary theological “update” to match the changing roles between men and women today.

In America, these two worldviews, orthodox and progressive, represent the two historic watersheds that have shaped our culture: the *Reformation* of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and the *Enlightenment* of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. American cultural foundations are built upon both the Enlightenment’s liberation from traditional Christendom, and the missionary zeal of Protestant biblical faith. As these foundations shift, cultural conflicts are generated, in both religious and secular spheres. In a wide variety of faiths today, we find orthodox elements seeking to stabilize traditional norms of faith and morality, and we see progressive elements working to redefine those norms in response to new social conditions.

With our origins in mid-seventeenth century England, the Quaker birth moment is right at the *cusp* between the late Protestant Reformation and the early liberal Enlightenment. We are strongly imprinted with both identities. Our position is epitomized by the early Quaker preaching of the light within, the spiritual presence of Christ, abiding with every woman, man, and child, wherever they are, whatever they may believe. At heart, the Quaker witness to the light is neither Protestant nor liberal – but it easily shifts in either direction. It is strongly centered in

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Christian understanding, but it is also open-ended, universalist in its implications. Thus, in relation to its cultural environment, the Quaker faith is strongly paradoxical. As Friends, we are called to be living paradoxes – never an easy vocation. But if we abide in the light as the light abides in us, we can make peace with that vocation, find peace among ourselves, and discover a Quaker reconciling ministry to our American society at large.

Friends are uniquely positioned to be peacemakers in an American society increasingly paralyzed by culture wars. Our divergent Quaker branches, a painful sign of our own brokenness, our disfiguration, can be transfigured in the light, to become olive branches held out to a divided American society. American Friends, reconciled to one another, can serve as wounded healers in American society. That is to say, our own divisions, the thorn in our flesh that belies our peace testimony, can be used by God to reveal a new way of wholeness. Like the Suffering Servant in Isaiah’s sublime song, our scars may yet serve for the healing of the nation – if we can cleanse ourselves of the cancerous, political spirits of smugness, resentment, and prejudice.

God can turn our most glaring liabilities into our most powerful assets. Consider the apostle Paul, for example. On the road to Damascus, God turned the blind zeal that made Saul a persecutor of the Church, into the tireless, self-giving passion of Paul, missionary to the Gentiles. That zealous, persecuting condition was the very thing in Paul that God transmuted into an amazing gift for reaching out to all kinds of people, and enduring intense hostility. To be sure, Paul retained a number of rough edges! But he also became the personal paradigm that inspired Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians, orthodox Christians and Gnostic Christians, for generations to come. Can it be that our divided condition, which epitomizes the culture wars all around us, might be transformed into some paradigm for peace? Can we renew our covenant, redefine the basis on which we remain

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“Friends” in the most sacred and self-giving meaning of that cherished name?

Our Quaker dilemma finds a helpful precedent in the historic council that took place in Jerusalem, in the earliest years of the Church. There, Christians came together around a deep, irresolvable conflict. The Jewish Christians of Jerusalem were very disturbed that in places like Antioch, Gentiles were joining the Church, the Messiah movement, without becoming Jews. That is, they were not submitting to circumcision or practicing the kosher lifestyle. After all, Jesus was a Jew. Belief in Christ, the Messiah, was thoroughly Jewish. How could a Christian not become a Jew also?

For their part, these new Gentile Christians were finding Christ, worshiping in Christ’s Spirit, and witnessing Christ to others with great vitality. They were pioneering a Jesus movement that did not depend upon Temple or synagogue. There was no way they were going to become Jews in order to become Christians. It simply did not speak to their experience outside Judaism. Still, they did respect that the Hebrew faith provided the matrix for understanding Christ. And they recognized that the Hebrew covenants of Abraham and Moses were vital patterns for understanding the joyful, cross-cultural Christian community spreading through the eastern Mediterranean.

Well, did they iron out their differences there in Jerusalem? Did they come to unity? Well, no, not exactly. You might say they agreed to disagree. But that isn’t really an adequate description. More precisely, they covenanted together around their disagreement. They reconceived the Church as a bipolar unity: a Jewish Christian identity, centered in Jerusalem, and a Gentile Christian identity, spreading rapidly from Antioch to other Greco-Roman urban centers. Specifically, the agreement came to this: the Jerusalem Church agreed to recognize the validity of Gentile Christian faith; and the leaders of the Gentile

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mission agreed to collect funds among their churches to aid the poor and suffering church in Palestine. No victory for the hard-liners. No glib glossing over of differences either. Instead, a rather soft-hearted and hard-headed covenant, recognizing the integrity of both parties, as well as the relative needs and resources of both parties.

That is the kind of covenant renewal we require among Friends today. Not hard-hearted renunciations of one another, nor soft-headed declarations of “peace, peace, when there is no peace.” But soft-hearted, hard-headed, covenant-making faithfulness with one another in the presence of God.

Covenant faith is related to the contracted relations that form our secular society, but it raises them to a higher level. The contractual logic that forms our capitalist economy and our democratic political life functions upon narrow visions of self-interest. By contrast, covenant consciousness provides a larger vision of our ultimate solidarity. As in marriage, covenant conceives a faithfulness based in love and forgiveness, rather than limited obligations and penalties. Covenant respects that we have different experiences, based in personal history, gender, and cultural background. But it works to bind us together in the care of a transcendent God who is more than the sum of our parts, whose love is greater than our imperfect loves, and whose interest is in all Creation, not our self-centered hopes and desires.

Thus, covenant is not simply a set of customs, tacit agreements, and formal contracts among people who happen to find themselves together. It is the idiom of intentional community, faithful relationship, commitment. In contrast to our negative freedoms *from*, covenant expresses our positive freedom for, our freedom to bind ourselves to one another in faithfulness to something greater than ourselves. If covenants can bind parties as different as women and men, or God and humans, I suspect that covenant can bind orthodox and progressive into a new

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solidarity. But, just as the Hebrew people's covenant with God elicited the name *Israel*, "God-wrestler," any new covenant we may find among ourselves will be born and sustained by serious grappling with one another.

I want to suggest how we might forge a new covenant, a peace treaty, within our Quaker context of America's culture wars. One important task (suggested by Hunter) is to recognize that our differing positions are not arbitrary, but are rooted within different traditions. In other words, we can gain *historical perspective* on our differences. As evangelicals and as liberals, we sometimes look at what each other is doing with shock and disbelief. What feels like true Quakerism to one looks like a betrayal, an act of random violence upon Quakerism to another. How could they call themselves Quakers and do *that*? But if we look at the different trajectories we have been on for over 150 years, our differences become more comprehensible. We may still disagree, but at least we can recognize that our evangelical and liberal counterparts are acting in good faith with the tradition they have received.

Then, if we want to engage in constructive dialogue around these differences, let us ask one another how our practices fit with the rootstock of our Quaker tradition. Evangelical Quakerism will not always make liberal sense. Liberal Quakerism will not always make evangelical sense. But we can constructively challenge one another to square our practices with the foundations of our Quaker heritage.

Historical perspective is closely related to another imperative, that we recognize and honor each other's sense of the sacred, the inviolable. I would offer some specific examples. For their part, liberal Friends are called to press forward in their rediscovery of the Bible. This is partly for the sake of understanding evangelical Friends: read their book, learn their language. But at a deeper level, these Scriptures provide the

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language, the symbolic field, and the prophetic vision that has informed Quakerism for the vast bulk of our history. We cannot read and learn from earlier generations of Friends without knowing their language. We cut ourselves off from our own heritage when we do not know the Bible.

Let me make one thing clear: the goal is not to read the Bible exactly as evangelical Friends do. Even better will be to struggle around our differences faithfully together, by reading and interpreting the Bible from our different perspectives, our different personal experiences.

For their part, evangelical Friends need to understand and respect the liberal reverence for nature – both human nature and the natural order of our environment. Yes, we are fallen, sinful creatures. But that's not the whole story. There is still great blessing, great beauty in each person. Yes, God's grace comes from beyond us, but it takes hold of wonderful natural resources and intentions in each person. This needs to be affirmed. And liberal Friends are taking important steps toward balancing our relationship with Creation. Friends in Unity with Nature and other Quaker groups are finding new ways to hallow the earth, to rediscover our spiritual relationship with all creatures.

Some Friends are exploring the animistic religions of Native Americans, and the goddess spiritualities of ancient times, to reconnect with the earth. This "neopaganism" seems exotic and promising to some, while to others it seems exotic and dangerous. I personally do not believe it will provide the panacea some Friends expect. But I do recall that no less a Christian than Paul found the universe to be teeming with spiritual forces. To be sure, Christ put these spirits in a new perspective for Paul – all the principalities, powers, elemental spirits of the universe were created in and for Christ, and nothing in Creation will separate us from the love of God in Christ. But the Lordship of Christ *does not deny* the reality of these spiritual forces of nature, or our

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relationship with them. It is past time for Christians to relate their faith again to a living cosmos, to rediscover a dimension of New Testament faith that we have lost in our scientific age.

Evangelical Friends may not choose to follow the lead of some liberal Friends in exploring Native American animism. But I think our different paths into a more Creation-centered Quakerism can eventually find convergence. Let us reclaim a shared sense of the sacred in nature – especially in this age of ecological crisis. We have some wonderful resources within our own tradition for this spiritual reclamation. The writings of George Fox, John Woolman, and others abound with a rich sense of covenantal bonding with God’s Creation.

Let me suggest two more examples how we might honor one another’s sense of the sacred. I would urge evangelical Friends simply to accept that some liberal meetings bless same-gender unions. It may not be an action that Friends churches will ever themselves take. But covenant faithfulness between two people is something to be honored, especially when that couple is willing to live out their relationship under the nurture and guidance of their home meeting. In a market culture like ours, any time two people commit themselves unconditionally to honor and love one another in the sight of God, I feel I am in the presence of the holy, the covenant.

Conversely, I would urge liberal Friends for the same reasons to take seriously and honor the deep evangelical concern for traditional family relations and values. I would suggest that our public silence on families does not serve us well. The family is the primal covenant of Creation. It is a primary force binding nature and culture together, sustaining society. In our local meetings, families need encouragement and active nurture. And in the public realm, injustice, human rights abuses, and social dysfunctions will only worsen if families continue to unravel. Marriage and family may not be the panaceas evangelicals

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sometimes make them out to be. They can be the place of the most terrible abuse and neglect. But that only makes it clearer that Friends today are called to nurture marriage and family vigorously – as traditional Friends meetings once did. I would urge liberal and evangelical Friends alike to make the linkages stronger between our concern for families and other, wider social concerns, such as alternatives to violence, prisons, economic justice, and world peace.

In all these matters, let us find new bases for *fellowship* together, form new alliances for *joint action*. As destructive as our cultural conflicts are today, they are only made worse when we write each other off, and withdraw into the cultural enclaves that make us comfortable. Let us remain engaged, while we challenge and learn from each other. Let us be willing to admit our own weaknesses, instead of bashing one another for theirs. Hunter observes that as liberals, we often are too weak with our sense of boundaries, our sense of who we are and who we are not. And as orthodox, we often are too rigid about our boundaries – too quick to declare who is in and who is out.

In that regard, Dan Seeger’s recent essay, “The Boundaries of our Faith” (appearing in a briefer version in *Quaker Religious Thought* #77), offers refreshing perspective. Reflecting on the controversies in New York Yearly Meeting over goddess spirituality, Dan is enthusiastic about the explorations of individual Friends in alternative spiritualities. But he cautions Friends’ bodies against formally sponsoring experiments and inquiries into spiritual traditions that are really extraneous to historic Quakerism. By analogy, he reasons that many Friends who are enthusiastic about witchcraft would be greatly offended if their yearly meeting chose to sponsor the performance of a Roman Catholic eucharistic service. They would rightly argue that ritual sacraments are outside our tradition. Well, so is witchcraft.

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Finally, Hunter suggests that we choose carefully the environment for working on our differences. Friends World Committee for Consultation of course remains an important channel for working on inter-Quaker reconciliation. In my experience, local area gatherings are much more constructive than the large national and world gatherings. Local gatherings can lead to on-going dialogue, joint action, and covenantal renewal. Covenant-making is strongest when it is local, personal, and situation-specific.

If we are blessed to experience a covenant renewal among Friends in the years to come, I believe we will build it out of many different localized experiments, generating out of shared concerns. In this era of American cultural conflict, Friends have an important peace-making role. It begins at home.

## Three

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### **Sense and Sensibilities Quaker Bispiritality Today**

Pendle Hill Issues Roundtable  
May, 1996

In 1978 I participated in an archeological project at Caesarea Maritima in Palestine. We dug through two thousand years of history, from modern Moslem layers down to Crusader, down to pre-Crusader Moslem, down to Byzantine, down to the original city built by Herod the Great near the time of Jesus' birth. We saw that over the course of successive conquests, destructions, and rebuildings, each new dominant order had made extensive reuse of the original stones first quarried to build Herod's showplace city. Even in our own excavation work, we used these same stones, scattered on the surface, to pave a path, making it easier to push wheelbarrows full of sand.

The ancient lands of the Bible are full of graphic lessons in history – not always the ones that guides to “the Holy Land” offer tourists. What I saw there seems a good parable for religious and cultural history in general, and Quaker history in particular. From the original building of the Quaker movement in the seventeenth century, the forces of time and culture have worn and torn down the original structures, requiring extensive reworking. Until the

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nineteenth century, this was mostly a matter of repair and reinforcement of original structures (though these conservative measures altered the originals more than was often realized). But by the early nineteenth century, with radical polarizations taking place among Friends, major fissures appeared, right down our Quaker foundations, especially here in America. Enormous cultural forces bearing their weight upon our Religious Society both required and inspired major rebuildings.

I speak, of course, of the evangelical renewal of the nineteenth century and the liberal renewal of this century. Both movements have reused the original building blocks of our Quaker founders, as well as extraneous materials. Both have created new structures and put them to uses rather different from those of the first Friends. These evangelical and liberal revisions have often been anathema to one another, just as the Crusader fortress at Caesarea was anathema to the conquered Moslems, and just as the mosque that was built in the middle of the conquered fortress was to the Crusaders. And I am certain both would have chagrined Herod the Great, seeing his original stones used thus.

### Culture Wars

Of course, we Friends do not inhabit that “bloody, patriarchal world of the Bible.” We do not conquer and rule over other peoples – not even other Quakers. However, in the current American “culture wars,” we orthodox and progressive Quakers wage conflict in our own understated ways (usually genteel acts of loving passive aggression). This conflict is waged not only between our evangelical and liberal traditions, but within them as well. In the case of cultural struggle, it is the fear of *symbolic conquest* by the opposition that often elicits our worst behavior.<sup>1</sup> Having spent considerable time among Friends in both major streams, I am often struck by the way each portrays itself as part

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of the “righteous remnant” of true faith. Evangelical Friends see themselves among the Christian holdouts against rampant secular humanism. Liberal Friends feel besieged by the juggernaut of the Religious Right. But most of all, I find many of our intra-Quaker conflicts – for example, those regarding issues of homosexuality – to be the clash of *incommensurate sensibilities*.<sup>2</sup> We talk right past each other, not really understanding one another’s outlook.<sup>3</sup>

I will try to illustrate briefly these differences in sensibility. For example, progressive Friends are offended by walls, impermeable boundaries. We are often scandalized at the orthodox desire to “close the circle” of Quaker faith and practice, to protect something by excluding something else. In contrast, orthodoxy (especially its evangelical version) is given to a “contagion” sensibility, in which a sense of moral and theological “purity” must be defined and protected at all costs. Nothing disturbs this sensibility more than open-ended questions about our sexual lives. Open-ended affirmations are even more disturbing. I was in Southwest Yearly Meeting during the final phases of its withdrawal from Friends United Meeting, from 1991 to 1993. I know this sensibility first-hand. The rhetoric of purity was often striking to me.<sup>4</sup>

But I am also rooted enough in the pastoral tradition of Friends to share some of the discomfort evangelicals feel at liberal Quaker rhetoric. The twentieth-century liberal revision of Quaker faith and practice of course does not attempt to conquer the bastions of the nineteenth-century evangelical revision. But liberal Friends have regularly claimed to *supersede* all previous Quakerisms. This rhetoric is inherent to the ideology of progress. And in the logic of “culture war,” such language is the language of conquest, a conquest of history and moral authority. To be told by a smiling liberal Friend that our theological and moral distinctions don’t matter any more, that we’re really all the same,

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or that Carl Jung has made everything perfectly clear, is offensive to evangelical Friends – and I would include myself here. It amounts to *paving over* a world that still makes sense to some of us, making “liberal use” of the same stones of Quaker tradition evangelicals have constructed, or construed, very differently. This only makes evangelicals want to build the walls even higher – walls too high to be paved over.

The predominant progressive sensibility is one of *extension*, a desire to break down barriers, create an evenness and equality, an equivalence and exchange among all peoples, religions, and cultures.<sup>5</sup> However benign the motives of this program, it strikes preliberal religious sensibilities, from evangelical to Native American, as the pillaging of an entire cultural terrain. Hence, the clash of incommensurate sensibilities between evangelical and liberal Friends. These two sensibilities are in fact interwoven through the entire biblical tradition.<sup>6</sup> In the Torah, commandments regarding family ethics and cultic purity stand alongside those requiring compassion to the widow, orphan, and sojourner. They can be identified within the Quaker tradition as well. Family values and radical social critique inform one other in Quaker writings from Fox to Woolman and beyond. Actually, both sensibilities exist within liberal and evangelical Quaker streams,<sup>7</sup> but purity dominates the evangelical outlook while extension dominates the liberal.

The culture wars are far from over. But I do see some encouraging countertrends. In that regard, a watershed event for me was the Western Gathering of Friends, held in Portland, Oregon in 1992. Friends in the West are as far polarized as one can find anywhere. And unfortunately, evangelical Friends were poorly represented, despite considerable efforts to have balanced numbers at the gathering.<sup>8</sup> But among the two hundred or so brave enough to show up for this “close encounter” with “alien” Quakers, there was a real effort to come to terms. The quality of

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most of the interaction was extraordinary. It seemed as if we had moved beyond an exercise in “tolerance,” or even “understanding;” we attempted actually to validate and celebrate one another. I have seen this changing mood at a number of FWCC regional events and here at Pendle Hill as well. But the Western Gathering especially helped define for me the emergence of a *postmodern Quakerism*.

I will not attempt any adequate definition of postmodernism here,<sup>9</sup> but the relevant feature for our concern is *the sense that progress, modernization, has conquered all – even itself*. Over the past century, the ideology of modernism has celebrated the “New” in its triumph over the traditional in all realms of life, driven by liberal education and by scientific and technical advancement. By mid-twentieth century, however, some crowning moments of modernity profoundly altered the meaning of the New. Two familiar examples, one pessimistic and one optimistic, illustrate the case. The specter of nuclear holocaust showed us that the breathless pace of advancement could advance us right on to extinction. At the same time, the pictures of Earth sent back from the moon allowed us to see ourselves as never before in our totality and ultimate unity. To be sure, advancements continue, and the New, like your Visa Card, is “everywhere you want to be.” But when the New has gone everywhere, superseded everything, it becomes like wallpaper – it *disappears* in a certain sense, allowing us to see ourselves again, but in a new way. We enter the postmodern world, the multicultural situation, in which evangelicals and liberals, Quakers and Moslems, homosexuals and heterosexuals, have become neighbors within something larger than all of us. We simply have to come to terms.



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### Paul and the Apostolic Council

Oh, I forgot to mention earlier that somewhere down at the bottom layer of those ruins at Caesarea, at the old Roman level, must be the place the apostle Paul was kept under arrest for two years, before his case was remanded to the Emperor and he was sent on to Rome, eventually to be martyred. He had been arrested in Jerusalem on questionable charges. You see, Paul arrived in Jerusalem with a rather extravagant amount of money he had collected from Gentile churches in Greece and Asia Minor. The money was a love offering to the poor, struggling Jewish Christians in Judea. The presence of Paul, by this time a highly controversial figure, created great turmoil in Jerusalem.

Now, Paul had collected all this money and made this trip to Jerusalem, which he knew was dangerous, for reasons that were compelling to him. About ten years before, the last time he was in Jerusalem, he had bound himself to a covenant. There was a meeting of Church leaders, which biblical scholars refer to as the Apostolic Council, or Jerusalem Council, in the year 48 or 49, nearly twenty years after Jesus' death, and some fourteen years after Paul had been converted on the road to Damascus. Paul had spent most of those fourteen years in Damascus and Antioch, where large Christian congregations comprised of both Jews and Gentiles thrived. The Jewish Christians of these congregations took what we might call a "liberal" attitude toward the Torah. Most of them had grown up in the cosmopolitan Greco-Roman culture outside Palestine. Some of them chose a strict practice of Torah regulations at home, but they did not hesitate to eat and socialize nonkosher with their Gentile Christian friends. And they certainly did not feel that their Gentile brothers and sisters in Christ needed to become Jewish. It was Christ's death on the cross (and their baptism into his death and new life) that saved and united them, nothing else. So their sense of Christ's free gift

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to all humanity aroused a sensibility of *extension* and *equality*. It did not negate their Jewish identity, or their sensibility of kosher purity, but stood alongside it.

This novel situation in Antioch raised concern in the mother Church at Jerusalem, where apostles such as James the brother of Jesus, Peter, and John still lived. They had known the Lord in the flesh. They knew him to be the Messiah, the fulfillment of centuries of Jewish hope. They understood the Church as the true Israel, God's people restored to their original purity. They were purified by baptism. But did their baptism *replace* their circumcision, or did it *confirm* it? Was the Church a fundamentally new *ecclesia* of God, or was it a new, true Israel within the historic *ecclesia* of Israel? The Jerusalem Church was divided on that question. Within the Jewish realm of Jerusalem, the question was fairly abstract. But news of developments in Antioch and elsewhere concretized the question, and posed a Christian identity crisis. New Testament scholar Hans Conzelmann summarizes the dilemma: there in Antioch were Gentile Christians operating with no intention of being circumcised or practicing a kosher lifestyle; was this a case of sheer neglect and laxity on the part of the Jewish Christians that had first converted them?<sup>10</sup>

I hope the relevance of this sudden detour into the New Testament is clear. Orthodox Friends have accused progressive Friends of a similar laxity. Many unprogrammed meetings have evolved into congregations where few accept Christ as Savior, and where homosexuals are affirmed, clearly at variance with Christian and Quaker tradition. I recall Lewis Benson telling me of his protracted debate with Douglas Steere over the issue of meetings accepting new members without a commitment to Christ. At that time, many years ago, Douglas argued (according to Lewis) that if new members were not already Christian, the Christian majority and tradition of the meeting would soon win

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them over. Well, Lewis concluded that subsequent history had surely proven Douglas wrong. Lewis and Douglas didn't get along very well. God help me! I loved them both. Are liberal Quakers slack? Or are evangelical Quakers bigoted? Perhaps both. Perhaps neither.

Back to Jerusalem. Paul and some other representatives from Antioch traveled to Jerusalem to meet with the apostles there and sort out their differences.<sup>11</sup> According to Paul's description in Galatians 2, this Apostolic Council agreed on three points: first, the Jerusalem apostles gave full recognition to Paul and to the Gentile churches he was founding and serving; second, there was an agreement to work on different fronts, with Peter heading the Jewish mission and Paul heading the Gentile mission; and third, Paul would make a collection of funds from Gentile congregations in the prosperous Greco-Roman cities to aid the poor Jewish Christians around Jerusalem. Paul hints that some participants tried to add some stipulations that he strongly resisted and which James, Peter, and John ultimately did not demand.<sup>12</sup>

This agreement, this covenant, was much more than a compromise, an agreement to disagree. Paul's radical sense of Christ won the day there in Jerusalem. According to Paul's gospel, Christ's death and resurrection had initiated a profoundly new age and order of affairs. Old distinctions like Jew and Greek continued to exist, but they stood alongside each other within a new, larger totality, life in Christ. As Conzelmann summarizes, this meant two things in view of the present debate: Gentile Christians were free in Christ not to become kosher; Jewish Christians were equally free to remain kosher, not merely as a matter of cultural preference, but as a *calling*. During his earthly ministry, Jesus had met all persons where they were. He accepted them as they were, but challenged them to be free. So now the gospel of Jesus Christ was breaking loose upon the world, meeting people in all kinds of places, conditions, and callings,

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challenging them to be free where they were. Thus, as Paul argued in his letters, in the radically new situation since Christ came, the point is not circumcision or uncircumcision, but being recreated in Christ (Gal. 6:15).

What, then, of Paul's collection for the Church in Jerusalem? Were the apostles at Jerusalem bought off? Further, would a gift from the Gentile congregations imply their inferior status? Well, I cannot speak for all of them, but I believe Paul at least saw it from another level. He writes that he was quite anxious to make this collection anyway. This was not a *quid pro quo* transaction, a recognition of the Gentiles in return for financial aid to the Judeans. To Paul, this point of the agreement honored the paradoxical tension inherent to the new situation in Christ. It balanced the *universality of salvation* that united Jew and Gentile in Christ, with the *historical particularity* of who Jesus was, where he came from, the historic faith that he both embraced and reinterpreted. Everything in Paul's letters is devoted to maintaining this creative tension.

Finally, the other point of the agreement was a recognition that incommensurate sensibilities would continue to exist between Jewish and Gentile Christians. Dividing up the mission field between Peter and Paul not only freed both to do what they did best. It recognized a *bipolar* quality in the Church: a Jewish Christian pole that defined the Church's *historical point of reference*, growing out of Israel's saga; and a Gentile Christian pole that defined the Church's *universal frame of reference*, a new way of being that could unite all peoples, cultures, and identities in Christ. Of course, the Church even at that early point was not just bipolar but multipolar. Paul himself acknowledged this with the affirmation that in Christ there is neither male nor female, Jew nor Greek, slave nor free (Gal. 3:28). Profound polarities of gender, religious culture, and economic class would continue to

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exist among Christians; but they would find a mysterious freedom and unity with one another in Christ.

Paul came away from Jerusalem hoping that a viable bipolar Christianity had been established. But, as he goes on to tell in Galatians, relations were soon strained. Peter visited the Church in Antioch shortly thereafter. At first, he ate with the Gentile Christians, just as Paul did. But when certain conservative leaders from Jerusalem arrived later, he withdrew into kosher table fellowship with them. Paul was livid. He confronted Peter, accusing him of breaching the Jerusalem agreement. Paul soon found himself standing alone among the apostles. Even his long-time co-worker Barnabas succumbed to the spirit of segregation. Paul left Antioch for Greece, and then began the most creative phase of his apostolic ministry, increasingly at odds with the mother Church in Jerusalem, yet energetically faithful in his commitment to collecting funds for them. The tensions came to a head with his return trip to Jerusalem, his arrest and eventual removal to Rome. Well, Paul had been wanting to go to Rome for some time. Now he had his way paid....

The saga of Jews and Gentiles united in Christ continued to go downhill from there. If this is a lesson in history, it seems to be a pessimistic one. And if we are to draw parallels for evangelical and liberal Quakers today, the scenario does not appear promising. A bipolar ecclesiology does not seem to work, considering the continuing struggles in Friends United Meeting. A Quaker bispirituality is often suspect among evangelicals and liberals alike, just as bisexuality is often suspect among straights and gays alike. I myself have taken some hard knocks over the years as a “bispiritual Friend.” But one thing I have learned from figures like Jesus, Paul, and George Fox is that sometimes when you’re catching trouble from both sides, you may be onto something.

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As we all know, the history of Jewish-Christian relations during the long tenure of Christendom ranged from unfortunate to horrendous. It was only in the modern era, with the decline of Christian hegemony and the rise of the liberal Enlightenment, that we begin to see an improvement. Liberalism and its new atmosphere of secularity provided a third realm, a liberated zone, in which an honest dialogue between Jews and Christians could start. Obviously, this has not always worked out. The unparalleled abomination of the Nazi holocaust proved that the modern, post-Christian world is still a dangerous place, and that Christianity has no monopoly on anti-Semitism. But in general, the liberal Enlightenment provided a realm for dialogue and mutual respect between Christians and Jews much as the realm Paul called “being in Christ” opened a new space for Jews and Greco-Roman pagans to unite in the ancient world.

In my recent research among Seeker and earliest Quaker writings in England of the 1640s and ‘50s, I have found several writers who prophesied the coming of that new era. They wrote of three ages of salvation history: the age of the Law, played out in the saga of ancient Israel; the age of the Gospel, played out in the history of the Church up through the Reformation; and the age of the Spirit, just beginning to dawn.<sup>13</sup> They understood this new age in Christian terms, but they saw it moving in new, universalist dimensions the Church had lost. Some of them, particularly Quakers, called for a lifting of the ban against Jews in England. An interesting sidelight of this movement is the Quaker-Jewish dialogue in Amsterdam during the 1650s, which probably involved the young Jewish philosopher-to-be, Baruch Spinoza. From discussing the Light with Quakers in the 1650s, Spinoza went on to become one of the great, formative thinkers of the liberal Enlightenment.

I believe that the new and still largely “undiscovered country” of postmodernity offers another historical *novum*, a new

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opportunity, bearing upon our conflicts among Friends today. As I suggested earlier, we have entered a new situation; we are starting to sense a different way of being in the world. Everything from fundamentalism to multiculturalism is an attempt to deal with this new situation – one that none of us truly understands. At the Conclusion of *The Covenant Crucified*, I tried to describe the postmodern situation, and to portray the new ways in which people of diverse traditions and sensibilities are trying to be covenantally faithful to God and to one another. I characterized these experiments under the rubric of “X-Covenant,” because we really do not know yet what we are groping our way into.

But the point for our present concern is this: postmodernism is postliberalism. Of course, postliberalism does not mean that liberalism is dead anymore than postchristianity spells the end of the Church. It means, however, that we are now free in some historically new sense to be together, to respect each other’s callings – Christian or universalist, homosexual or heterosexual – and find complementary ways to coexist. Surely, we will continue to challenge one another; of course, even as we continue a critical but loving dialogue. But we do not have to despair of one another. In fact, our salvation inextricably relates us to one another.

### Quaker Bispirtual Ecclesiology

This is Quaker bispirtuality. Most of us will continue to live as evangelicals or liberals, and as straights or gays. For mysterious reasons, some of us will move in both realms. But covenantal faithfulness requires that we learn to respect and welcome the sensibility that is alien to us. So the question remains: what kind of collection are liberal Friends going to take up for evangelical Friends? I don’t think evangelicals need the money. But what gift might be given, to honor the continuing

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biblical faith that is, after all, the historical rootage of our Quaker tradition? I think that many liberal Friends are already making that gesture of good will, by showing a genuine interest and regard toward Quaker evangelicals, by reading the Bible again, by visiting Friends churches to listen and learn. These are acts of good faith. Whatever fruits they bear or do not bear in the future, acts of good faith are never wasted.

For evangelical and other orthodox Friends, the challenge is different. Many will resist the idea that we live in a new age that puts Christians together with other religions, and heterosexuals together with homosexuals on an equal basis. They will insist that the salvation preached by Paul is the only salvation. Well, it is and it isn’t. Christ is the same, yesterday, today, and forever. The Word of the Lord endures forever. But its *syntax* changes. We learn this from Paul himself, particularly from his tortured, convoluted rhetoric in Romans 9-11. There, he confesses his anguish at the growing gap between Israel and the Church, his two communities of faith. Nevertheless, he affirms that because of Israel’s apostasy, God chose to include other peoples in the great work of salvation. They are wild olive branches “grafted” into the cultivated tree of God’s people, replacing branches lost from the original. But Paul cannot simply write off his fellow Jews who were not converted to Christ. He desperately grasps at the hope that these diverging streams will someday reconverge or complement one another.

Over ensuing centuries, the same problem of apostasy has recurred. Bad faith in the Church, in all its branches, has led God to graft other peoples into the olive tree of divine purpose in the world. Some are coming by conversion to Christ. But, owing to the multicultural situation we now experience, other forms of covenantal bonding are also important. Today, God wills to work through the dialogue and cooperation between many peoples of many faiths and nonfaiths, and between people following

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different paths of faithful love. I believe this, and I see it happening in many seemingly unrelated experiments around us.<sup>14</sup>

### Typological Interpretation of Scripture

As a hermeneutic of Scripture, this amounts to a typological interpretation of the New Testament, much the same as Paul and other first Christians read the Old Testament typologically. In other words, Israel's exodus from Egypt was a historic salvation event for ancient Hebrews in their own right, but it also prefigured salvation in Christ. Likewise, the Apostolic Council of the first century was a historic peace covenant between Jewish and Gentile Christians in their own right, but it can also prefigure the faithful community emerging between Christians and others at the end of the twentieth century. Some will complain that this understanding supersedes Christ. I answer that it is a matter of learning to recognize Christ anew.

As an ecclesiology, this multipolar formation will offend people on both sides. Orthodox Friends will insist upon an unambiguous and exclusive Christian identity. And many progressive Friends will shrug and ask why they need those "fundamentalists" anyway. But these debates are all prefigured in Paul's letters. In Galatia, they wanted to drag Christ back within the neat boundaries of the Torah. In Corinth, they were ready to drag Christ off to the mystery cults. Undoubtedly, many early Christians did go off in these directions. But those like Paul, who held the tension of these powerful opposing forces, forged their way on to something truly powerful and transforming. Today, we face the same challenges. Many days, I feel utterly overwhelmed and want to give up. It may indeed prove futile in the end, just as Paul's hope for a Jewish and Gentile Church proved. But any other path is *futile from the start*.

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### Conclusion

Finally, I have said little about issues of homosexuality, and I have not brought the Quaker peace testimony into this discussion at all. I have little to add to the current conversations on either issue. But anyone with the eyes to see can discern the moral authority and leadership emerging from gay and lesbian Friends today. I affirm current efforts in many meetings to recognize and honor the covenantal relationships of same-sex couples. I am discouraged to see impasses among Friends on these matters. One help might be for concerned Friends to learn from and ally with Jewish and Christian networks working on these issues. They go by various names. The United Church of Christ and the Disciples of Christ have a network called Open and Affirming Congregations. The Roman Catholic Church has the Integrity movement; lesbian and gay Presbyterians call theirs More Light. Friends could share our experiences and learn from what others are doing. We would have nothing to lose but our sense of superiority.

It is hard for us today to imagine what an astonishing thing it was in the first century to say that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free. Each of those pairings confronted relations that were normally defined by inequality and enmity. I can think of no better pairing to add to that canon today than "neither straight nor gay."

As for our peace testimony, I will simply repeat what I have said at the Western Gathering and elsewhere. The differences that divide Friends today may seem like innocuous distractions, compared to much of the violence in the world. But so much of the civil strife in America and abroad today arises from problems of incommensurate sensibilities similar to those Friends experience. Yes, we need to be out there in the world, doing what we can for peace. But the efforts we make at reconciliation among

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ourselves are of a piece with the peace we wage elsewhere. As Jesse Jackson preached to the Democratic National Convention in 1988, we all have a patch to bring and sew into the multicultural quilt of peace and justice. I do not believe these patches are “pieces of the truth,” as some Friends have put it. It is more as Paul (or someone following him) wrote in Ephesians 3:10: the Church embodies the “manifold wisdom of God” (KJV – or “the wisdom of God in its rich variety” in the NRSV), the many faces of Sophia, on earth as it is in heaven.

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### NOTES

1. See James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic, 1992), for the dynamics of culture war.

2. Chuck Fager has made me aware that my use of the word “incommensurate” is close to Alistair MacIntyre’s similar expression of “incommensurable” premises clashing in our culture. I am not enough informed of MacIntyre’s work to compare my understanding with his. I would only say that whether or not our sensibilities are ultimately “incommensurable,” they do seem “incommensurate” at present.

3. A classic example I recall among Friends was one painful session of the Friends Triennial Sessions in 1987. I do not recall the specific “bone of contention,” but I was taken with the way liberal and evangelical Friends lobbed ideological “mortar shells” in each other’s direction, with only the vaguest aim. Neither camp could grasp the real “location” of the other.

4. Especially prominent in such discussions are Paul’s words in 2 Cor. 6:14ff, against believers being “unequally yoked” with unbelievers – “what fellowship is there between light and darkness?” (vs. 14); “be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch nothing unclean; then I will welcome you” (vs. 17, quoting from Isa. 52:11).

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5. The classic example of this liberal project was the study of comparative religion in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The attempt to identify common “truths” or thematics, all describing some universal experience, sometimes defined in modern, existentialist terms, has been a fruitful development. But it is inevitably fraught with certain reductionist tendencies, forcing diverse religious beliefs and practices into certain abstract or artificial categories, tinged with a Eurocentric worldview.

6. I have given an overview of these two different biblical “codes” in Chapter One of my recent book, *The Covenant Crucified: Quakers and the Rise of Capitalism* (Wallingford, Pa.: Pendle Hill, 1995).

7. Liberals are by no means devoid of concern for the family or sexual ethics. And the pride liberal Friends take in their form of worship suggests some sense of cultic purity. The impulse to purity also expresses itself in liberal concern for the integrity of creation, as in issues of environmental pollution. On the evangelical side, the impulse to extension expresses itself most obviously in evangelism and missions. Liberal Friends often do not recognize the work for education and material aid that often stands alongside the work of conversion in evangelical missions. Finally, evangelical work for social reform, peace, and justice may not be as strong as it is among liberals in this century, but it is by no means absent. It was a strong feature of evangelicalism in the early-to-mid-nineteenth century, and was important feature drawing orthodox Friends toward evangelicalism.

8. At the Western Gathering, John Punshon analyzed this problem helpfully, suggesting that the theme and process of the gathering was framed within a liberal Enlightenment worldview,

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no matter how genuine the intentions of inclusivity had been. A biblical or theological theme might have been more compelling for evangelicals.

9. Again, see my *The Covenant Crucified*, the Conclusion, for a fuller cultural theory of postmodernism.

10. Hans Conzelmann, *The History of Primitive Christianity* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1973), p. 83.

11. We have two different descriptions in the New Testament of this pivotal meeting, Luke’s description in Acts 15 and Paul’s in Galatians, Chapter 2. Because Paul was actually there at the Council and because he wrote Galatians closer to the time of the events, his description is viewed as more reliable. Luke wrote much later, utilizing second-hand reports; he may have combined accounts of the Apostolic Council with those of a later meeting that Paul did not attend, issuing stipulations he did not affirm.

12. These may be the four items that are in Luke’s description in Acts 15: to avoid sexual immorality, meat sacrificed to idols, meat from strangled animals, and any food consisting of blood. These four stipulations are derived from Leviticus 17-18, which had regulated Gentiles living within Israel’s borders. In 1 Corinthians, we see Paul write vigorously against a case of adultery and rather ambivalently against eating meat sacrificed to idols. But his positions are derived from his own moral sense and ecclesial concern, rather than legal stipulations coming from Jerusalem.

13.. These writers adopted this scheme of history from the German mystic Jacob Boehme, who was writing around the

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beginning of the seventeenth century. But the basic ideas went back much further, to the writings of Joachim of Fiore in the eleventh century.

14. Again, I would suggest the Conclusion to *The Covenant Crucified*. Another book that describes from a political science perspective many such postmodern ventures in faith is Richard A. Falk's *Explorations at the Edge of Time: The Prospects for World Order* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1992).

## Four

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### **The Covenant Crucified Quakers and the Rise of Capitalism**

Quaker Theology Roundtable  
Pendle Hill  
April, 1995

In this presentation, I will summarize the book-length project that has occupied most of my research and writing efforts over the past seven years. The final product, forthcoming with Pendle Hill Publications this fall, is a fairly lengthy book, with a rather complex argument. I will only be able to hit some of the main points in this presentation. But I do hope it will incite listeners enough to become readers when the book arrives.

In many respects, it would seem that nothing could be more out of place than a reconsideration of capitalism – at a moment when that system has achieved unprecedented global dominance. With the fall of Soviet communism and the increasing penetration of China by the forces of capitalist expansion, many gloat at the final triumph of capitalism, even an “end of history.” Yet any serious student of history should recognize the dialectical overtones of this moment of consummation. It is the kind of



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situation in which the very success of a historical tendency overturns it and begins to transform it into something else. Thus, while the present system has never seemed more secure and complete, it may well be in for fundamental changes.

This state of affairs calls for fresh approaches to looking at ourselves as the inheritors and participants in the present system. While comprehensive, systemic, totalizing studies of capitalism are attractive, they do not seem to be yielding very much insight today. It is partly the cultural logic of the postmodern that seems to make smaller-scale, more group-specific studies more useful. Thus, I found myself searching for the inner logic of capitalism by way of the beginnings of our own Quaker movement, since our religious society arose at a key moment of transition out of the last stages of feudalism and into the first coherent political settlement of capitalist order in seventeenth-century England.

And while theology would seem to be the furthest thing from the key to understanding capitalism today, it is clear that in England and the Continent, Reformed theology – particularly covenantal (or federal) theology – served as the key ideological engine for innovation in that period. Biblical themes of covenant helped inspire the rise of the market economy, democratic politics, and religious freedom constituting the foundations of capitalist society as we know it.

Thus, the Puritan context of Quaker beginnings is crucial to our understanding of what early Quaker witness meant, not only in religious terms, but in political and economic ones as well. In this regard, I am of course indebted to the socio-historical theses of Max Weber and R. H. Tawney, particularly as they are applied by Christopher Hill to his work on the Puritan Revolution. At the same time, I do not believe that Hill's work has ever come to terms adequately with the early Quaker phenomenon and its true, revolutionary valences. So while I am indebted to Hill, I see my

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work as both an extension and correction to his reading of later Puritan and Quaker radicalism.

This study also aims to be a corrective to the way we as Friends tend to study early Quakerism as the beginnings of our denomination. We all have our ways of appropriating their heroic witness as some kind of spiritual capital with which to trade in the religious marketplace. However, the more I immersed myself in the literature of these early Friends, the more it became clear that the first ten to twenty years of Quaker witness, the Lamb's War, must be seen as a failed nonviolent revolution, one which was progressively rejected and repressed by Puritan and Restoration powers, and forced to revise and reposition itself in order to become the denominational entity we know and celebrate today. The apocalyptic witness of the earliest Friends was thus outside the religious, political, and socio-economic boundaries that we today place on religious language. In the modern categories that shape our minds so rigorously today – whether liberal or evangelical – we are scarcely able to hear the full historical overtones of the apocalypse Friends were living and articulating in the 1650s.

The *Introduction* of the book establishes some working definitions of covenant, linking it with the biblical tradition and contrasting the religious sense of covenant with the degraded, contractual forms that have taken its place in market economy, contractarian political theory, and religious denominationalism. The crisis inherent in capitalism's present moment of vainglorious triumph are also laid bare, most pointedly in the lethal contradiction between capitalist expansionism and the environmental limits of the earth.

*Chapter One* is a review of some recent Marxist and materialist readings of the biblical covenantal movements of Tribal Israel and the New Testament Church. The work of George Mendenhall and Norman Gottwald has been especially valuable

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for showing the Yahwistic covenant to be a revolutionary ideology that overturned the vassal treaties that held ancient Near Eastern political empires together. And their rereading of the Israelite invasion of Canaan as a revolution of indigenous, marginal peoples only sharpens the socio-political power of our traditional understandings of the Yahwistic faith. Fernando Belo's materialist reading of Mark similarly opens up whole new vistas for understanding the words of Jesus and the movement that grew up around him and after his death. I go on from there to show the international network of Christian covenant communities as the most potent countercultural force to arise in the Roman Empire – precisely at the time, by the way, of its vainglorious zenith.

*Chapter Two* shifts to the covenant theology and politics of the Reformation, and the Puritan movement in particular. I find the Puritan spirituality to be a spirituality of anxiety, grounded in the believer's agitated search to discover whether he or she was one of the elect, a true participant in the covenant of grace. Here, individuals mainly inferred their election, rather than experiencing it. This agitated spirituality generated considerable energies in religious, political, and economic enterprise. But it also maintained a certain alienation in social relations. The Puritan covenant of grace tended to enfranchise class divisions, engendering a new ruling elite in economic life and the representation of its class interests in Parliament's House of Commons. It also maintained a complementary clerical class, enfranchised through the rule of religious expertise. The English Civil War, the triumph of the Puritan agenda, might have established this social arrangement more easily were it not for the fact that the conflict inspired a new, radicalized wave of utopian expectation among many middle-to-lower class English people, especially those who served in the Parliamentary Army.

*Chapter Three* characterizes the Quaker movement that gathered together so many of those young radicals during the

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1650s. The Quaker *covenant of light* defined a fundamentally different spirituality, what I call a spirituality of *desolation*, in which idealistic young Puritans had to experience the defeat and death of their political hopes in Cromwell and the Army, of their millenarian hopes of an imminent, physical return of Christ, and of their religious hopes of finding true righteousness among the proliferating array of squabbling sectarian groups. But it reestablished these utopian ideals on a new spiritual foundation. The preaching of the Lamb's War unleashed a desolating critique upon the various inside deals of the Cromwellian regime, the religious clerical establishment, the social arrogance and specious trading practices of the new mercantile class, as well as the various formal religious devices by which many an earnest Seeker had hoped to obtain peace with God. The peace Friends offered, the covenant with God, was found only through the scorching devastation of all false hopes, only through a radical surrender. This was not a covenant to be rationally inferred but intensely *experienced*, in the most dire personal upheavals and interpersonal confrontations. Not surprisingly, the Quaker movement drew most significantly from among those of a socially marginalized position (most notably women), of a politically disillusioned mood (particularly former members of the Army), and of spiritually liminal, or mystical, experience (especially Seekers and Ranters).

*Chapter Four* begins the narrative that takes up the remainder of the chapters by following the progress of the Quaker movement in the early 1650s. The Lamb's War unfolded as covenant conflict, starting in the parish steeplehouses and local marketplaces, moving quickly into the courts when Friends were arrested for their witness, and from there toward Parliament and the Army as the principal juridical powers of the land. The Lamb's War was a consistently *nonviolent cultural revolution*, based on the conviction that the revelation of God's judgment

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upon human arrogance and domination in all spheres would bring all low before the true spiritual and political authority of the land, *Christ returned to rule through the hearts of the people*. This apocalyptic witness, and the movement it gathered, grew exponentially in the first half of the 1650s, inspiring fear and increasing repression from the priestly, legal, and political establishments.

*Chapter Five* offers a new look at the Nayler incident of 1656 as the culminating moment of the Lamb's War. Certainly, there are fundamental questions about the spiritual and mental states of Nayler and his followers. But these do not obviate the larger symbolic significance of their Bristol act, signifying the central point of the Lamb's War: Christ come in the flesh of ordinary people. This meaning constituted the spectral horror of the Nayler incident to the ruling elites of the religious and political spheres, however much they dwelt upon Nayler's self-understanding and the extravagant gestures of his followers, both men and women.

The insinuation of Christ as present and authoritative at large in society, initiating a new social order from the grassroots – *this* was the true “horrid blasphemy” for which Parliament chose to punish Nayler as a token of the Quaker movement at large. This sign scandalized not only the ruling classes but the general populace as well, unleashing unprecedented mob violence against Friends meetings in concert with Cromwell's more aggressive new measures to repress Friends. This chapter looks at these larger socio-political valences of the Nayler incident, partly through an extended Christological reflection. I believe that Nayler in his action, like Jesus in his entry into Jerusalem, saw the need to produce a decisive revolutionary sign, one that would either instigate a quantum leap in their revolutionary movements, or unleash a lethal response from the existing powers.

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*Chapter Six* follows the Lamb's War through the last years of the Commonwealth, as conservative backlash increasingly made Friends pariahs. Nevertheless, after Cromwell's death, last-ditch efforts to produce a ruling coalition among Quakers, Fifth Monarchists, Baptists, and other radicals served to stimulate the most explicit political writings from early Friends. While we could not expect a coherent political vision under these circumstances, the measures advocated by Friends certainly framed a different path for the emerging capitalist order than the one that slowly came into place over the remaining decades of the seventeenth century.

*Chapters Seven and Eight* follow the struggle of Friends in the first years of the Restoration of monarchy and state religion, from 1660 to 1666, under a tidal wave of viciously persecuting legislation under the Clarendon administration. While Friends saw an ally in Charles II, neither he nor they were able to turn back the wrath of a Cavalier Parliament bent on punishing these Quakers who had made their political settlement so difficult and who they were sure might yet rise up violently. For their part, Friends maintained a revolutionary posture – willing to endure any government, but resisting unjust laws to the death. They went to prison by the thousands for their resistance to the Oath of Allegiance to the new regime. Oaths, being the political version of creeds, were a commodified form of covenantal faith – *bad faith* and a devious basis for the settlement of church or state. Thus, the covenantal conflict continued as Friends remained faithful to the covenant of light. They prophesied against the Restoration's covenantal bad faith, looking for its fall in 1666. While the Restoration survived well past 1666, until the so-called Glorious Revolution of 1688, Friends saw the judgments of God in 1665-1667, as the Plague, the London Fire, and the mass destruction of the British fleet by the Dutch leading to the fall of the Clarendon administration. The persistence of the

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Restoration despite these “shakings” was one key factor in the repositioning of the Quaker movement from apocalyptic groundswell to a more well defined peoplehood. The *gospel ordering* initiative that began at the end of 1666 signaled the end of the radical hope to overwhelm English society as a whole, a shift from apocalyptic revolution to a *microcosmic eschatology* – that is, an attempt to consolidate the Quaker movement and its emergent socio-religious order into a disciplined, coherent body that would model the kingdom of God to tender souls under a hostile, increasingly exploitative and anti-utopian regime. I treat the gospel order revision of revolutionary Quaker witness with a great deal of mixed feelings, but with an overall sense that Friends strove with some success to establish an organizational vehicle to carry forth their utopian values through very unfavorable circumstances. A paradoxical conservative radicalism characterizes the surviving Religious Society of Friends.

*Chapters Nine and Ten* summarize the changing posture of Friends in England during the closing decades of the seventeenth century and examine Penn’s transplant of a modified Quaker utopianism to America. I characterize the spiritual melancholy that settled over Friends by the mid-eighteenth century as the consequence of a failed utopian vocation – one that is often summarized today with poignant irony in the adage that “Friends came to Philadelphia to do good, and they did very well.” This is the perennial experience of captivity within the structures of capitalism, the eclipse of ends by means.

I also find Penn’s career to be paradigmatic of a *schizoid split* in post-revolutionary Quaker witness. At different times and under different concerns, he can sound like an evangelical pietist or an early liberal. As such, Penn models an incipient schizophrenia in the Society of Friends at large, a personality split that becomes overt and formal only with the separations of the

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nineteenth century. It is not that Penn himself drove a wedge down the original unity of Quaker witness, but that his frenetic political and religious activism etched with particular clarity the cultural logic of the new, modern world of capitalist expansion. Friends struggle to this day to find our way(s) beyond this schizoid condition.

My Conclusion is an extended meditation on the covenantal dynamics of our present, postmodern situation. I make extensive use of Marxist critic Fredric Jameson’s work on postmodernism as the cultural logic of third-stage, multinational capitalism. I sketch the progress of Quaker history since the seventeenth century as it relates to the steps of capitalist expansion from nationalist, through imperialist, to multinational forms. In particular, we see the increasing difficulty Friends (along with everyone else) have had in retaining an adequate sense of history as we participate in an increasingly global system. Whether evangelical millennialist or liberal progressivists, we Friends are trading in glib, even superstitious concepts of history inadequate to the challenges of our situation. This forces us repeatedly into defensive, reactionary responses to the latest economic, political, and cultural out-workings of the capitalist order. We lack an encompassing, prophetic reading of our times.

Meanwhile, we find ourselves in the middle of a new American civil war – war in postmodern terms, where no standing armies need be deployed, where there are guns enough for everyone, and where ideological combat and image manipulation can be just as devastating to individuals and local communities as mortar shells. I treat three fronts of the current civil war – the domestic front (focusing on gender and sexuality issues), the racial front (particularly in regard to Native American and African American struggles), and the religious front (liberal versus conservative “culture wars”).

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Nevertheless, the book does not end on a pessimistic note. Much of the Conclusion is devoted to describing ways in which Friends and others are participating in what I believe is a new covenantal response, one that is still mostly at an unconscious level. I treat this new covenant under the rubric *X-Covenant*, respecting its present murkiness and noting that all truly original covenantal initiatives, such as the Yahwistic covenant, the early Church, and the early Quaker covenant of light, involve a disturbing and baffling indeterminacy in their first and most creative phases. I find that the sanctuary movement, particularly as it has been articulated by Jim Corbett, provides the most clear expression of the new covenantal consciousness and action. *Sanctuary* itself becomes a very useful term for describing a variety of movements today that aim to preserve people, species, and values who otherwise find no currency in the market culture that extends over the globe today.

While these movements are carried out with little or no sense of relatedness to each other, I believe there is a potential for them to form a kind of interconnection, a sort of webbing effect that begins to rebind social wholeness. X-Covenant would thus be a kind of decentralized, segmented entity, in which the small-group politics so endemic to postmodernity and so self-defeating to radical causes may be overcome by the concatenation of group-specific and issue-specific causes. The forging of bonds between diverse groups with divergent visions is no simple matter, I am sure. But this kind of wrestling is what covenant faith and politics have always been about, as is suggested by the name “Israel” itself.

Friends and other religious groups have a role to play in this new covenant bonding. Particularly the more “mystical” or “apophatic” traditions carry on the spirituality of desolation that is essential to seeing beyond the cultural logic of multinational capitalism. I believe that Friends and other covenant traditions

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can play a revolutionary role in the present situation, something like the role of the Levites among the original tribes of the Israelite confederation. Ours is the perennial call to “wait upon the Lord,” to “sound the Day of the Lord,” to call people to a sense of holy dread. Only through a “dark night” spirituality can we see beyond the forces that separate us and help us bond across our present boundaries.

Much more would have to be said to make this book, and particularly its Conclusion, more coherent to you this morning. But there is not time here for that. I will simply conclude by expressing my conviction that covenant is a key term for social transformation in our present circumstances. It lies deep within the foundational structures of capitalism, and it persists as a repressed utopian consciousness within the system and all of us who participate in it, no matter how rigorously a contractual pragmatism attempts to erase it. We can hear this conflict coming to the surface vaguely in the way the current Republican “Contract With America,” clashes with President Clinton’s occasional use of covenantal terms. It lies within the vocation of Friends and other covenantal traditions to clarify and give prophetic utterance to this fundamental conflict, and to reproclaim the utopian promise of covenant faith: the *shalom* of God on earth.

### SUGGESTED READING

James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

## Words In Time

Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University, 1991).

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Jacques Ellul, *Anarchy and Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991).

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## Five

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### Can't See the Covenant for the Contracts

*Friends Journal*  
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The old saying, “can’t see the forest for the trees,” expresses a key perceptual problem of human existence. We lose the sense of matters, even of life itself, as we get lost in the details. That perceptual pitfall can become a deadly spiritual malaise. We easily lose the Spirit of faith through our absorption in the letter of articulated belief. This is the all-too-familiar failing of all the great religions of the Book. But Eastern and New Age alternatives are not immune either. One may succumb to an enlightenment-by-the-numbers mentality just as easily as one falls prey to legalism or dogmatism. Finally, there is a social and economic version this age-old dilemma of our capitalist system. We routinely reduce God’s creatures to marketable commodities. If we only see the trees – and if we see them only in board-feet – then we not only lose our sense of the forest. We soon lose the forest itself.

These dynamics apply to all forms of relationship. They make it difficult for us to recognize covenant within and around us. Covenant is faithful, loving relationship. It is the hidden, binding force of the universe. The Hebrew prophets were first to articulate what covenant is. They understood that covenant is the

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meaning and purpose behind all God's Creation. The universe exists to embody covenant. And covenant fulfills the purpose of each creature. To live in covenant is to be called, taught, led, and redeemed from senselessness by the same divine power that formed the galaxies. All life is part of this great covenantal drama, in which we struggle to act out faithful, loving roles with one another. In that sense, the universe is "the theater of God's glory," as John Calvin put it.

Like a forest, covenant is a complex moral ecology, an infinitely subtle network of relationships we struggle to maintain faithfully – with God, with ourselves, with one another, with the land on which we live. These relationships are a set of dialogues we carry on, in which we are accountable to one another, answerable for our words and actions. These relationships embody certain values, or virtues, not all of which we understand or can define. Some of these are in harmony with social norms, often making it easy to conform. Other values, especially those that have no market value, may be difficult to maintain in our culture. We may have to make sacrifices of worldly gain, status, or comfort to embody these values. But that is a part of being in covenant.

Particular realms of covenant are inevitably expressed in terms of principles, laws, or agreements. In science, they may be axiomatic laws of nature; in societies, they may be constitutions or compacts; in religious faiths, they may be doctrines and moral systems; in relationships, they may be marriage vows or other contracts of mutual understanding. Martin Buber wrote that covenant is first, last, and always the "lived relationship" between its parties. But the explicit understandings and agreements that evolve through the relationship are important.

For example, the faithful love between parents and children is always accompanied by serious boundaries to be respected and expectations to be fulfilled. Parents limit the children and children

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limit the parents. These limits often become real "bones of contention" in family life. Members struggle at times to see the covenantal love undergirding the many contractual agreements. Yet it is there, infusing it all, hoping beyond expectation, forgiving lapses.

Again, a local faith community – a Friends meeting, for example – is rife with understandings, rituals, and norms. The handshake at the close of meeting, or who is expected to lock the building: understandings like these, both tacit and explicit, make up the warp and woof of a meeting's fabric. Sometimes our struggle with one another over these particulars pushes our patience to the limit. Yet at some level, we know that the real life of the meeting exists both within and beyond all these arrangements. It is that secret life in covenantal trust, lived out through the promises we make and keep, that hopefully carries us together through it all.

Or again, a good business not only demonstrates integrity in all its contracts. It also embodies a larger fidelity to people, values, and the physical environment beyond the interested parties of any given contract. Any business must to maintain that fidelity in the face of competition from other businesses that do not uphold these larger values. The temptation is great to put on the moral "blindfold" of the limited contract, with the hidden proviso that "the devil take the hindmost." But businesses of integrity find a way.

So it is not surprising that God's great covenant partner, Israel, bears a name meaning "wrestler with God." Because it is dialogical, covenant always includes struggle. Yet the fruit of covenant struggle, according to Hebrew Scripture, is shalom, a "peace" that is more vibrant, integrative, and all-encompassing than the usual connotations of our English word. It is the peace that surpasses all understandings.

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Early Friends wrote of the “covenant of light, life, and peace” they had found together. The light was their lived relationship with God and with one another. It brought them to a peace they had never before known. The early Quaker understanding of the light was strongly covenantal. They witnessed the covenant of light to shine forth in all people, everywhere, undergirding everything.

Yet that very quality of omnipresence means that the light is also hidden to us. We are like fish living in the sea, not knowing what water is. So it is often by some experience of desertion, darkness, or faithlessness that we begin to know the covenant of light explicitly. The loss of a loved one, the failure of a marriage, unemployment, or an experience of betrayal drives us into a place of darkness. Hopefully, our eyes will eventually begin to perceive a subtle light there. It is always there, but we are unable to see it until our constructed world of understandings and agreements falls apart. That light is the covenant. It abides within and beyond each of us, within and beyond every faithful relationship, within and beyond every good human hope. By that light, we may begin to rebuild our lives.

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The capitalist social and economic system that now dominates our entire planet is a remarkably creative regime. Its contractual method of organization has progressively been applied to all realms of society – from market economics to democratic politics to religious pluralism. It has created an elastic, polymorphous structure, allowing the peoples of the world to interact in unprecedented ways. Over its four centuries of development, capitalism has exerted a permanent state of revolution on every society where it takes hold. And its speed of

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economic expansion and social transformation only seems to accelerate.

But like all revolutions and their ruling regimes, capitalism has its destructive side. And as the revolution accelerates, so does the destruction. The massive scale of human exploitation that keeps capitalism expanding has produced mind-numbing suffering and social blight. In particular, poor nations and the poor sectors of our society bear the “hidden” costs of affluence in the United States and other wealthy nations. Moreover, the simple arithmetic of continued capitalist expansion on a planet of limited resources and fragile ecological balances can only add up to the physical and spiritual degradation of our planet and all of us on it. Even those of us living in this vast system’s more privileged sectors feel its ravages on the life we hold sacred. The upwardly mobile often pay dearly for their ascent in terms of their spiritual, family, and community lives. We see it everywhere.

Capitalism poses as a relatively value-free system, creating opportunity in all directions for all participants. Yet because the system is weighted in favor of those who possess capital resources, it tends to carry inherited, pernicious biases along with it. Thus, capitalism is not inherently racist or sexist, yet it has accommodated those inequities for centuries. It is only as the market has demanded the wider participation of minorities and women – both as producers and as consumers – that capitalist society has become inspired with the novel idea that they deserve a better chance to play the game.

Technology is the darling child of capitalism, which has fostered its development as no other economic system has in history. Technology too poses as morally neutral. After all, a tool is subject to whatever designs are upon the mind of the one who wields it, right? But as society becomes increasingly elaborate technologically, we begin to recognize a force with a life of its own. Like capitalism, technology is a means that tends to reshape



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the ends to which it is exerted. Noble ends – socially conscious and environmentally responsible – are daily subverted by the sheer possibility of achieving other ends more easily and more profitably. A mundane example is nevertheless a telling one: how many people do you know who are intrigued (or perhaps totally enraptured) by the Internet? There is so much one might do with it; one becomes feverishly obsessed with finding something to do with it.

Yet we continue to be naively surprised that the system has somehow cast off or left behind people, values, lands, and species that we hold dear. We feel compelled to defend them, yet find ourselves always on the defensive, reacting to the latest horror story of injustice, violence, or pollution.

There are many struggles to be waged socially and politically against the blights of the system that engulfs us so totally. But if we wish to move beyond a reactive political posture, let us reclaim a sense of covenant. Covenant is not a super-theory defining everything. It is not a master-plan for a new society. Rather, it is a sense of the whole, a sense of integrity that keeps sight of the forest, and of one's place in it. Covenant is a web of faithful, accountable relationships as complex and polymorphous as capitalism itself – even more so. It does not simply shrug off the people, values, and species that find no value in the market, but insists that there be room for everyone. Covenant is the only thing left that is still larger than the global Babel we have helped build.

Covenant is a crucial understanding for us to reclaim today, precisely because it is intimately related to the contractual culture of capitalism. In fact, covenant was a key intellectual factor in the development of capitalism. During the Reformation era, the Protestant concern to restructure the Church as a covenantal community spun off reevaluations of all realms of society. In economic life, covenant helped inform the contractual basis of a

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market society. In science, the covenantal sense of God's well-ordered Creation influenced the search for dependable laws governing nature. In political thought, covenant helped nurture the social contract theories that gave rise to the modern democratic state. Thus, on many fronts, covenant is the forgotten utopian motive behind the edifice of modernity. It needs to be reclaimed, if we are to correct the course that society has taken.

In *The Covenant Crucified: Quakers and the Rise of Capitalism* (Pendle Hill, 1995), I have explored the role of early Friends in the beginnings of our modern, capitalist era. Through their prophetic preaching and their alternative social ordering, early Quakers charted a covenantal course for capitalist society. They had a covenantal sense of direction for the new regime. The heroic sacrifices made by these ordinary men and women to win the hearts and minds of their neighbors and rulers underscores the holy, covenantal nature of their calling. It is a powerful story, bittersweet in the sense of the hope that lived and died in those first years of Quaker witness. Yet it offers us a glimpse, not only of a fuller Quaker vision, but of a larger, covenantal social vision to be rediscovered and reenacted today.

No book can reveal the reality of covenant. Neither can this article. Only the grace of God can do that. But part of that revealing process is to unmask the regime that we assume to be self-evident. To rediscover the forest is to look both at and beyond the trees. Rediscovering covenant begins with seeing through the contractual culture that surrounds us.

## Six

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### Part II:

### Seed

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#### The Seed: The Power of God Among Us

1988-1989

A great drama is played out in the Quaker meeting for worship. The silent ambiance of the room would seem to portend nothing like high drama: Men, women, and sometimes children sit together in an apparent state of suspended animation. Perhaps a few words are spoken here and there, but mostly there is silence. It is like the empty expanse of an open field.

Yet a drama *is* enacted in meeting after meeting, just as a silent drama is played out season by season in the open field. In both cases this is a drama of life and death. Jesus briefly characterizes the drama in his parable of the sower:

Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it had not much soil. And immediately it sprang up, since it had no depth of soil; and when the sun rose it was scorched, and since it had no root it withered away....Other seed fell among thorns and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. And other seeds fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and

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yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold. He who has ears to hear, let him hear. (Mark 4:3-9)

The seed of God is the promise of God sown in our hearts. It is God's covenant bond, to love and cherish us eternally. By its presence within us, we enter into its drama. It will not be played out for all time in the course of one meeting for worship. But each meeting for worship replays the essential drama. And over the course of our years, the overall drama of our lives unfolds. So the four soils are not once-for-all readings of our particular natures, as if somehow predestined from the beginning. Instead, these soils represent conditions that the seed of God will encounter in us. Some conditions will be rare for us. Others may prevail in us for years on end. If we do not *prepare* our soil through a simplified and centered life, we may expect the cumulative seasons of neglect to stunt or even destroy the seed of God in us. And when that happens, God's promise is left unfulfilled in us.

The various soils of the parable are often found all together in a given group of worshipers. Most of us have some ability to discern these conditions around the room, or hear them as worshipers according to their conditions. Let us examine them in some detail, to see if we know them by experience.

### Along the Path

Some seed falls along the path, where birds come and quickly devour it. Jesus later interprets his parable himself (Mark 4:13-20), characterizing this first condition as one in which the seed, God's word, is quickly snatched away from us by Satan. I have seen this tragedy occur in worship, and have known it in my own experience. I have been caught on the well-worn paths of the world. The din, stress, and distractions of life so swirled around and within me, that I sat there in meeting utterly bewildered or

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bemused. The quiet of the assembly never quite reached me. My hardened heart or distracted mind was utterly oblivious to the seed – and numb to the deft touch that stole it away. I may have been miserable, distracted, or happily preoccupied. In any case, I never really became present – and God did not become present to me.

That condition is visible around us in our meetings. In some cases, we notice it in a person who just gets up and walks out of the meeting, not to return. It may have been a first experience of Friends worship. Perhaps no one prepared them for what would (not!) happen. Or perhaps they just found the silence unbearable. They could not stop making lists of groceries to buy or things to do. Or they could not imagine anything “happening” in such a setting. The more we are conditioned by the media and by life in the “fast-lane,” the more likely we will be riveted to that well-trodden path. If we find ourselves having to live and work in those conditions, then we will need to work hard throughout each busy week to *make* time to be quiet, reflect, pray, and read the Bible and other spiritually enriching literature. One hour of quiet per week will not get the ringing out of our ears! We may need to make changes in work and lifestyle, stepping out of the mainstream, to find the inner peace that nourishes the seed.

The distracted, over-stimulated spiritual state cannot bear the quiet of Quaker worship. It does not know what it is to “wait upon the Lord,” to let go of personal agendas, to lay down pet ideas, reflexive emotions, and compulsive behaviors. It can never guess that the victory that attains inward peace begins with the surrender of all struggle, impulse, and desire.

Local meetings, particularly in urban or campus areas, are called to find ways to minister sympathetically to visitors and regular attenders who manifest this first condition. Not only are they missing an opportunity with God, but they may be disturbing the opportunities of others. Through unseasoned words or fidgeting body language, the harried and haunted attender disquiets the

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meeting. Nothing is gained for anyone if the meeting leaves an attender to do this repeatedly without counsel. He or she only draws others to that unsettled state that cannot bear spiritual fruit, and may increase distraction and sin in our lives. Too often, our benign neglect toward unsettled individuals in meeting is more a lack of caring than a genuine patience. People sometimes lose all hope in the generous “space” we give them. The covenant lapses among us when we refuse to speak to the conditions we encounter in our meetings.

### On Rocky Ground

The second condition is described as the rocky ground where the seed finds little soil. It springs up immediately but is soon scorched and withered by the heat of the mid-day sun. Jesus later comments that this condition is seen in those who, “when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy; and they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away.” I have known this condition myself during periods of spiritual discovery and enthusiasm. I encountered the word, or seed, within and rejoiced in it. There was sweetness, a sense of wholeness, and a promise of life such as I had never known before! I eagerly sought more of it. But I mistakenly immersed myself in various symptomatic activities, and not in the substance itself.

This happens in a variety of ways among Friends, especially among those new to Quakerism. Some start reading every book they can find by or about Quakers. (Friends have been prolific publishers from the beginning; most meetings have plenty of Quaker literature to explore.) So they attempt to root their new-found faith in “finding out about Friends” – without getting to know Friends in the eternal dimension. They set about to “explore Quakerism” – while neglecting the reality to which the “ism”

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testifies. Thus, the seed sprouts immediately, but finds no root *in us*. And when troubles come, it is scorched by the heat and withers. We find that our knowledge is not deep; too much of our “light” is reflected from books or other sources. We discover for ourselves the bitter experience of George Fox, who went from teacher to teacher and book to book, seeking the answer to his deep despair, finding none that could reach his condition.

Other Friends are drawn by their enthusiasm into committee life and the business of the monthly meeting. They become embroiled in the discussions, decisions, and work of the meeting. They are enthralled by that method Friends today often call “Quaker process.” Indeed, that unique and mysterious method can produce little miracles of unity out of the most entrenched personal differences. In any case, such Friends are generally not engrossed by Quaker books, except perhaps *Faith and Practice*, which they cherish as a guide for all occasions. They may even disdain any notion of “content” to Quaker faith – “it’s pure process,” they declare.

Unfortunately, the “process” breaks down for a number of reasons. For one, not everyone enters it in good faith. It seems as if some have joined Friends subconsciously in order to wield arbitrary power in their local meeting. They can single-handedly resist a whole group’s sense of the Spirit’s leading. Whole meetings can become bogged down, held hostage by such individuals.

Other times, differences arising in committee or monthly meeting life have been left unhealed, festering below the surface, creating a mysterious malaise that lingers for decades. Sometimes we Friends emphasize the *light* to the point of denying the *darkness* that lurks among us. We celebrate God’s *guidance* and neglect the fact that we often need God’s *forgiveness* before we are free to be guided again. When we deny the experiences of alienation and transgression among us, a very deep darkness sets

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in, defeating our best intentions and sapping our best energies. As Jesus puts it, if the supposed light in us is actually darkness, how great is the darkness! (Mt. 6:23).

Many have experienced the seed's withering from the oppressive atmosphere of unhealthy relations in the meeting. Distrust is the antithesis of covenant faithfulness. Friends almost never disown members anymore, but we may succumb to passive-aggressive tactics that "freeze out" individuals, rather than seeking to understand and reconcile differences with them. Again, the seed has not found sufficient root within us to withstand such withering droughts. We become bitter or disillusioned.

For others, an initial enthusiasm with Quakerism grows through involvement with social concerns. Many people today come to Friends through social action and contact with Friends in peace and justice organizations. They may see the local meeting as a launching pad or cell-group for activism on a wide variety of peace and justice issues. They never realized they could become involved in so many different concerns! A compulsive actionism sets in, pulling in many directions. Each worthy cause tugs at the conscience, seemingly a leading to action. Activist "burn-out" is a common cause of the seed's withering among Friends. The seed has not found root *in us*, because we have not taken the time to prepare the soil of our hearts. It is rocky and rough, having been subjected to continual neglect as we hurried off this way and that, attempting to respond, with the best of intentions, to a world of constant crisis.

Finally, some are attracted to Friends as a people who respect and embrace a wide variety of religious views and practices. After all, Christianity is only one of a number of great religious cultures around the world. Friends have always affirmed that there is a knowledge of God available within each person. Surely, each historic faith must somehow address "that of God in every one." It becomes easy to view the local meeting as the

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meeting-place of spiritual seekers and multiple religious traditions. To limit oneself to the Christian spirituality of traditional Quakerism would seem parochial at best, and prejudicial at worst.

Thus, some Friends explore a wide variety of religious cultures – through books, weekend conferences, and workshops opening up exciting new worlds of Asian, African, Native American, goddess, and other religious traditions. Some find Jungian psychology as a helpful modern system to integrate this enormous panoply of myth and symbol. It is all very stimulating. And it seems as if there is always one more profound stream of wisdom to be discovered. This path of "happy seekerism" manifests an insatiable appetite for more religious truths, each new one adding greater relativity to the rest. And as we know more truths, we can savor, pick, and choose among them. In this way we become religious consumers, keeping a sense of control over our lives. We avoid surrendering ourselves to truth.

The true servant of God becomes covenantally accountable to one God; the consumer of gods only shops for bargains. Even Joseph Campbell, the late popularizer of comparative mythologies, emphasized this point. He remarked that religious myths are fun to explore and play with, like computer softwares. But one gets nowhere without becoming disciplined in just one or two of them.

The seeker's odyssey may sustain one's personal vitality for a number of years. Yet it may also leave one feeling never quite filled, always haunted by the sense of a missing piece in a giant puzzle of truth. And that missing piece is precisely where trouble seems to strike. The seed within is scorched and withered – but why? It seems generously fertilized with the wisdom of the ages and nations.

The problem is that the seed has found no root *in us*. We have learned about a lot of religions, and have tried out a lot of religious practices. But we have taken no one of them to any depth. Of course, we respect Christianity (at least at its best) but have

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never practiced its more serious spiritual disciplines, not even the Quaker forms. We reverence the greatness of Buddhism, but have not subjected ourselves to its rigorous disciplines. Treating them all as great religions, we grapple with none of them in faith. We in fact practice the spirit of secularism, in which all religious convictions are finally moot. And the seed withers and dies everywhere in the arid, rocky culture of secularism.

Jesus' parable mentions religious persecution as a cause for the seed's withering. Modern Friends are rarely persecuted for our faith in the way early Christians and early Friends were. Yet the modern, secular world sometimes harries us with a whirlwind of stimuli. We live in a torrent of literary production. Even within the tiny area of Quakerism, there is more being published than one can follow. And today's electronic media add overwhelming amounts of input. News of the world makes us painfully aware of violence, suffering, injustice, repression. International awareness brings the abundant richness of the world's many cultures to us. Wanting to respond to all of it, we become over-extended in the process. "Burn-out" is the modern equivalent of the scorching heat of persecution for many Friends today.

Bookish Friends, committee Friends, activist Friends, and seeking Friends abound in our meetings. Their concerns and contributions are integral and vital to modern Quakerism. Most of us have spent time as one or more of these types. But we also see people come to Friends in enthusiasm and leave in desolation, because they were not helped to root their legitimate concerns in the deeper life of the Spirit. We do not *minister* to them – because we have no living tradition of spiritual guidance left in many of our meetings. And where the ministry is dead, the covenant is broken.

And so we hear the messages of unrooted faith constantly in our meetings for worship. It is the sound of the seed withering in our midst. It is the ministry that begins so often with words like,

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"I've been thinking..." "I was reading the other day..." "I went to the march yesterday..." The messages that follow may be intellectually subtle, anecdotally affecting, emotionally charged, or nobly humanitarian. They may speak to our heads, our hearts, or our social consciences. But too seldom do they speak to the life of God in us, which is *in* the head, heart, and conscience – but not *of* them. The messages do not *speak to* the depth of God in us because they too seldom *come from* that depth in the speaker. Many Friends today equate vocal ministry with a rationalistic wondering aloud, an arresting anecdote, a mild emotional catharsis, or a lament of violence or social injustice. With such impressions, it is no surprise that many meetings for worship are well-ventilated but basically unministered. And all the hot air withers the seed of God.

### Among the Thorns

The third condition is described as the seed that falls among the thorns and is choked, yielding no grain. Jesus later comments that these indeed respond to the word: the seed is raised up. But "the cares of the world, and the delight in riches, and the desire for other things, enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful." Perhaps none of us has always evaded this condition. In some ways it seems to be the least serious of the three we have seen. After all, the seed survives and grows. Yet in the long run, it is stunted by competing forces and proves unfruitful. So this condition is actually very serious, because we can convince ourselves we are alright. We decide that we may not be another John Woolman or Margaret Fell, but we're spiritually alive.

What are the thorns that choke the seed in us today? Perhaps most prevalently, they are our vocational lives. The modern sense of career, defined almost completely through employment or other income-gathering activity, consumes so

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much of our time and energies. Our work lives seem to combine “the cares of the world,” “the delight in riches,” and “the desire for other things” in us. We are heavily burdened by the responsibilities we face at work and can scarcely “leave them at the office” when we go home. The Quaker sub-culture of heightened social conscience only intensifies the burden for many who must work in organizations with very different value systems and decision-making procedures.

Yet we are there because we feel we must earn a sufficient income. Our income demands may arise from noble needs, such as raising and educating children. Or we may simply be habituated by a variety of small comforts and diversions, each seemingly innocent in itself. We feel we need these because we work so hard – and we work so hard because we feel we need these. That circularity begins to entwine and strangle the seed struggling to grow in us. When we are not overworking, then we are just comfortable enough and just sufficiently diverted to be unmindful of the drawings of God at the depths of our being.

The thorns of care, delight, and desire also serve to separate us from one another. Most of us live in discreet units – urban apartments or suburban houses. Again, the rigors of work life increase the desire to withdraw into privacy and seclusion. Opportunities to refresh ourselves through spiritual community are few, because Friends rarely live together in groups, and we are often too weary or diverted by other activities to meet more often. Thus, the hour of worship once a week becomes a thin wafer of communion for our starved souls.

The Bible offers a universal description of our alienation when it tells the story of man and woman departing from God’s counsel. When God describes the life man and woman will lead independent from divine communion (Gen. 3:14-19), Adam is told of the toils and anxieties he will experience in seeking sustenance from the ground. He will eat his bread with sweat on his face, and

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the ground will often offer up thorns and thistles. Those thorns reappear in Jesus’ parable and in the entangling demands of men’s work lives. God goes on to describe Eve’s dilemma: she will be caught between Adam’s dominating desire and the terrors of childbearing. Today, as women move beyond the traditional roles of a patriarchal society, they are discovering the same sweat of desperate career described of Adam. Women today are often especially pressed by the image of the “wonder woman” purveyed by the media: you can be the loving mate, the perfect mother, the full-time wage-earner, the aerobics champ, and the deep spiritual being – and if you can’t, then what is wrong with you? What a damning insinuation! Meanwhile, for their part, men struggle to balance their traditional bread-winning toils with greater responsibility in child-rearing, and fuller participation in spiritual life.

These developments in women’s and men’s roles are important and creative. But the thorny realities of Genesis 3 remain. When we depart from God’s counsel, we depart from the “holy conversation” of healthy relationships and forsake the covenant that nurtures a sustained life of fruitfulness. The scattered, even shattering worship experiences of our local Friends meetings bear ample witness to the problems. We come to accept very superficial vocal ministry, so that a “gathered meeting” may be understood as one in which all the messages are on the same subject! There is a disturbing level of weariness, distraction, and complacency among long-term Friends who assume that they are doing “just fine.” The seed is raised up and surviving, but with a spindliness that cannot bear the fruits of true knowledge of God, true holiness of life and conversation, true discernment of conditions, true ministry in the word of life, and true blessing to others.

One need not aspire to be a John Woolman or a Margaret Fell. But if we do not heed their witness and examples, we may fall

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continually among the thorns. John Woolman took various steps to decrease his successful business in order to be a more faithful minister and committee-member among Friends. He knew that his faithfulness consisted in much more than showing up for worship and monthly meeting. It was to be an entire life built around spiritual devotion – prayer, meditation, reading, visitation. It may be that we today we are called to withdraw in varying ways and degrees from the strangling demands of career. Can our sense of vocation deepen, to be based primarily in spiritual servanthood and secondarily in wage-earning?

When Margaret Fell became a Friend, she immediately redefined her home as a meeting place, hospitality center, and communications hub for the growing Quaker movement. As Quaker feminist scholar Carol Stoneburner has observed, Fell and many Quaker women after her redefined their homes as both private and public spaces, undercutting the division of spheres that helps to support traditional patriarchal order. Fell's Swarthmore Hall and Lucretia Mott's Philadelphia home became not only private retreats for their families but also spaces of spiritual community for local Friends, committee meetings, and traveling ministers.

It is not that the cares, delights, and desires of the world will simply go away. They have their places in us and will always demand much of our energies. But the spiritually disciplined life, as found so richly in our own great tradition, thins out the thorns. Spiritual devotion allows us to stand back, discern which needs are real and which ones are imaginary, and place the cares in the larger context of confidence in God's help. Under these conditions the seed may grow, thrive, and finally bear fruit.

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### Into Good Soil

Finally, the fourth condition: falling into good soil, the seed is raised to fruitfulness. This is no ordinary fruition, but a hundredfold yield, supernatural fruitfulness. Jesus does not comment on the fourth condition, except to repeat the parable's bold claim, for here we enter the true mystery. Indeed, he follows the parable of the sower with other seed parables. He notes the mystery of seeds sprouting in the field, without the sower ever understanding how. Then he compounds the mystery with his parable of the mustard seed, a tiny seed that produces a large shrub, large enough to accommodate the nests of birds. Such is the kingdom, or power of God, as it appears with strange grace in our midst.

### Preparing the Soil

What is the good soil? Is this a value judgment upon persons: some good, some bad? No, the real question is: what makes the soil good for the life of the seed? No ground is ready-made for the planting. It must be *prepared*. Encumbered by rocks and fruitless vegetation, hardened by the sun's rays, the soil must be cleared and worked. It must be turned, broken up, and smoothed to prepare the way for the seed. Among these three parables, Jesus interjects this warning: "Take heed what you hear; the measure you give will be the measure you get, and still more will be given you." There is something for us to do in this mystery, a part to fulfill in this covenant. The more fully we give ourselves over to it, the more fully we will be graced, beyond all our strivings.

The time-honored queries of Friends ask: do you come to meeting for worship with heart and mind prepared? What is the preparation that readies us, makes us good soil for the life and power of the seed? It is not simply a matter of arriving for meeting



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on time, though with our hectic lives even that is not always easy. Preparation for worship is a life that integrates prayer, meditation, edifying reading, and deep conversation into the busy routines that most of us must pursue. We cannot expect to dive casually out of the heat of the world into the coolness of divine communion for an hour per week. That only brings the heat of the world in and disturbs the still waters, leaving no place for peace.

There must be a simplification of life, in order to create space for reflection. Fruitful activities are to be discerned from the fruitless, and the latter cleared away. The hard rocks of obstinacy – habituations, fears, hates – are to be pried loose and set aside. And the subtle hardening that comes over us through our normal, work-a-day “toil under the sun” is to be overturned, broken down, worked on, smoothed out. This process takes place both in solitude and in our daily life with those we love. It is only as we live mentally quickened, emotionally tendered, and spiritually attuned that we can expect to arrive at meeting for worship with hearts and minds prepared.

When an entire group of Friends lives in that commitment, “the way of the Lord” is truly prepared, and what the meeting receives in the pouring out of God’s light and love, and in the raising up of the seed to fruition, is far beyond anything they could produce by their own efforts. Yet even when only a few in the meeting have devoted themselves to God in this way, they may still have a powerful anchoring effect for the entire meeting, bringing others less prepared into the sublime coolness. This has been the most central function of the recognized minister in traditional Quakerism: one whose daily devotion and practice of God’s presence helps to ground the meeting, whether she or he speaks or not.

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### Seed and Light

At this juncture, it is helpful to note that Jesus interjects another parable among the three parables of the seed. He speaks of the lamp, a light that one does not place under a bushel or a bed, but on a stand: “for nothing is hid, except to be made manifest; nor is anything secret, except to come to light.” Let us take that figure to clarify the relationship between the seed and the light. Light suggests the revelation of God, that which allows us to see ourselves and others more clearly. Though we are not able to look directly into the source of this powerful light, we do see God obliquely. If we would know God, ourselves, and others in the truth, let us not shunt the light off to the side in our consciousness, among the clutter of unanswered letters, unpaid bills, unfinished projects. The lamp deserves the place of honor and central vantage-point in us. This is simply another metaphor for speaking about the importance of mindfulness and preparedness in our daily devotion to God. Let us organize our lives, “build our houses,” so to speak, around our experience of the light, so that all things we have and do may be seen clearly. This prioritization and simplification is the same reality as the soil preparation just described, because the light and the seed are simply two different aspects of the same divine reality within us.

The seed is the power of God, the new will and personhood that arises among those who wait in the light. The seed is the bond of love and mutual service that unites us in covenant faithfulness. The seed is a key image in early and traditional Quakerism, but has often been neglected among modern Friends, who usually prefer to speak of the light. It seems we wish to appropriate the light as a helpful source of illumination, an aid to us in discerning specific matters and solving certain life problems. By itself, this understanding of the light becomes a principle of self-improvement, personal reform. But we do not relinquish

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control of our life. By contrast, the raising of the seed within is the emergence of a new power and will in us. It arises only as we give way to it, loosening our grip on the controls. The seed's life emerges as we die to self-preservation, self-interest. We have already explored the ways the seed *fails* in us, and how the meeting for worship then fails among us. Now let us finally enter the mystery of the seed's *victory* in us. But note: even this fourth condition does not escape death. When Jesus discerned the hour of his passion at hand, he said to his disciple, "Truly, truly I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life." (John 12:24f).

Because this is true mystery, we will now shift modes to dramatize the struggle of faith on a more intimate level of experience. We will examine four different conditions: this time wandering, soaring, sinking, and fleeing. Each of these is an inner mood of alienation we have viewed at a more symptomatic level up to now. Each represents a condition we may experience acutely in meeting for worship. Each is a hardened soil, or state, that needs to be broken through if the seed is to be raised up. In that breakthrough, we may experience some surrender to, and of, our own brokenness. To experience that release, we are called to release our grasp on the life we hold so dear. So the drama of life and death is inverted, becoming a drama of death in life. Therein we share the passion of Jesus.

So the heart of the mystery, the paradox of the seed comes into view at last: our life-struggle becomes victorious as we quit struggling. When we finally rest, God's work in us can at last move forward. We discover true empowerment when we stop trying to wield our own power and yield to the power of God within. Our surrender allows God's triumph to work in and through us.

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As we enter this realm of mystery, we can no longer rely on the analysis of symptoms. We enter a deeper inwardness that requires a different language. Hence, the following section will mix descriptions of inward states with more prescriptive language. I offer these out of my own experience and growth in silent worship, hoping that some of these practices might prove helpful to others. At the same time, I realize that others may have different experiences and find other disciplines more fruitful. So what follows should be understood as suggestive, rather than any kind of norm for Quaker worship.

The inward states we will map correspond generally to the different soils of Jesus' parable. We will now work back through those soils in reverse order, from the wandering state often found among the thorns, through the sinking and soaring states usually associated with the rocky soil, to the fleeing state found along the path. Finally, by traveling through this more personal level of the mystery, we will at last return to the fuller mystery of the gathered meeting for worship.

### FOUR CONDITIONS LAID TO REST IN GOD

Give over thine own willing, give over thine own running, give over thine own desiring to know or be anything, and sink down into the seed which God sows in thy heart and let it be in thee, and grow in thee, and breathe in thee, and act in thee, and thou shalt find by sweet experience that the Lord knows that and loves and owns that, and will bring it to the inheritance of life, which is his portion.

– Isaac Pennington, *Some Directions to the Panting Soul*

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### Wandering

A condition I frequently bring to meeting is a wandering, musing, apathetic one. This mood seems innocuous enough. I feel no great pain or anxiety. No special energy captivates me: no fear, but no joy either. I am lukewarm, neither hot nor cold. This is what the seed fallen among the thorns feels like from the inside: a spindly, anemic, chronic condition of the soul. A wandering mind and an indifferent heart are dangerous as long-term conditions.

There I sit in meeting – complacent, unmoved, satisfied. Certainly, there is a place for feelings of satisfaction and adequacy! But if these lapse into an apathetic inattention, I may slip into trouble. I may be dozing through a crucial moment, like the disciples with Jesus at Gethsemane after their Passover feast, dazed by consumption and leisure. In a society of wealth, comfort, and passive entertainment, the numbed conscience is a rampant malady. Blandness can mask important emotions and concerns needing prayerful attention. I may be repressing these with a surface of benign tedium that fools even myself. Or in some cases, my apathy may be the deadened state of long-term depression, the putrefaction of unexpressed anger, or the scar tissue of deep grief.

This mood is really the most moribund condition of alienation from God. Whether it comes through excesses and self-satisfaction, or as the aftermath of life traumas, such deadness is an insidious threat to life. Apathy may feel peaceful, but it is the furthest thing from the stillness that truly attends to God. Great energies may be required to shake it loose. But the answer is not to induce feeling by manufacturing artificial crises. That only turns me into an adrenaline addict. Rather, I must simply *become present*.

First, it may be good to take stock within: are there any important questions or challenges I am simply shunting aside at the moment? In reviewing my situation, I should be attentive to any

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concern that quickens my pulse or breath. Often that simple exercise will reveal ignored issues requiring examination, discernment, or healing in the light. Or it may give opportunity for me to praise God, as I become mindful of many blessings I have received.

But it may be that none of these remembrances will sustain my movement inward. Now I take a different tack. Breathe deeply into the emptiness, the vacuum. Displace it with sheer physical inspiration and expiration. Let each breath start as far down as possible and fill the abdomen, the chest, the throat. The breaths need not be noisy or fast, but full and regular. I sometimes find it helpful to breathe in slow ten-counts. I may decide to add silent words to each expiration. I may choose to repeat silently the simple words spoken by Abraham, Moses, and others when coming into the presence of God: “here I am.” Or I may wish to repeat the ancient call of the Church: “Amen. Come Lord Jesus!” (Rev. 22:20).

I may feel I have no enemies, but this deadness is the greatest enemy, a shell that blocks feeling. Therefore, I seek to enlarge the borders of my heart with each breath. I look around the room at other worshippers, personal friends and acquaintances whose struggles I know. Let compassion be the guide. Let the heart grieve with those who grieve, rejoice with those who rejoice. Think also of loved ones not present at meeting – family, friends, neighbors, co-workers – bringing to God their struggles and joys. Be mindful also of the many problems of the local community, the nation, and the world. Bring before God the sufferings of the poor, the violated, and the oppressed, asking for help. Be mindful also of the wealthy and powerful, who face particular responsibilities and temptations. Pray also for the violators and oppressors, that God may interrupt, confront, and redeem them in love.

As the borders of my heart are enlarged, I move into the enlivening presence. I feel deliverance from numbness into vibrant

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stillness, as the heart's hard layers of insulation are stripped away in compassion. And as I am quickened to God in this ministry of intercession, I may also discover ways I may act in service, encouragement, and counsel toward those in my prayers.

Simple mindfulness often reveals ways we can be *agents* of the divine assistance we ask from God. Still, whatever good works we may perform for others, we have not done our best by them if we do not offer our *prayers* for them.

A loving survey of those worshiping around me may offer subtle or sharp flashes of discernment, insights into the conditions of individuals or the group as a whole. These are gifts of the Spirit that can lead into edifying ministry during or after the meeting for worship. True discernment is always rooted in love. Though it often sees into the faults and delusions of others, it does not gloat or "tisk" at them, but reaches out compassionately. As Paul discerns it, "love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (1 Cor. 13:7).

Here we enter the covenant of life in the seed. Not only the *feeling* of love returns, but love's *faith* in others, and the loving *will* to serve one another unselfishly. At last the seed bears fruit.

The awakening to compassion often elicits the deepest ministry in meeting for worship. When we speak from the stillness of truly universal love, whether through prayer, exhortation, or witness, the object of our concern finds its proper perspective. Such ministry will be neither sentimental nor acerbic, neither condescending nor vituperative, neither abstract nor mundane. We learn to speak plainly and lovingly a living word, a two-edged sword, "piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb. 4:12).

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Soaring

A second condition I may bring to meeting feels more positively expansive than the bland, wandering mood just described. In this case I am riding high, soaring with good spirits. The mind races, savoring recent events, pondering an interesting question, or indulging in fantasies of wish-fulfillment. My heart flows with delight, anticipation, good-will, joy, hope. I can usually connect these thoughts and feelings with specific current events in my life. But sometimes they are unaccountable: I just seem to wake up with them.

I certainly do not feel this way every day, so when such moods come, I want to make the most of them. I want to ride these favorable breezes as far as possible, so I spread every inch of canvas I have in me. I indulge every impulse of heart and mind. When one tack does not prove thrilling, I quickly change to another. In this condition, I may find myself sailing into expansive vocal ministry, quickly following another person's ministry that catches my fancy. My words may rush into heady notions or sentimentality. I may become a serious obstacle to the deeper workings of God's Spirit in the meeting – and in myself.

The soaring state may be associated with the seed that falls on rocky ground. It is the mood of those who, "when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy." Whether we find joy in Quaker thought, Quaker process, seeking, or activism, we seize upon it with a sense of excitement. We want to ride it for all it is worth, to make it sustain our lives. Yet, as noted before, this condition cannot sustain life. If we stay at that level, the seed finds no root in us. We will eventually feel "burned" when people, ideas, causes, or our own energies fail us.

The point is not to renounce the joy, but to stop pumping it with our minds and hearts. *Let it be*. Do not grasp at it. Secretly, we fear it will slip away. The expansive state is often a subliminal

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mood of despair, because we do not bring it into the presence of God. The “up” mood of despair is sometimes called *presumption*. We presume upon the good feelings and good fortunes that come to us. We want to make them work for us.

We sometimes use negative energies in this way. We ride high on self-righteous anger, using it to judge others and justify ourselves. Anger, like joy, has its place in us. But just as we let joy over-ripen into self-indulgence, we can let our anger fester into self-aggrandizing rage. Eventually, self-righteousness “boomerangs” back as paralyzing self-recrimination. The soaring despair we have named as presumption can quickly plummet with crushing force into the mire of sinking despair. Both phases have the same root cause – alienation from God.

So the point is to bring our joy to God, and turn our presumption into *thanksgiving*. One way to do this is simply to ask, “why am I feeling so great?” Isolate the specific events and experiences that have brought this joy. Feel their fullness in your heart. Now give thanks to God for these experiences, and for the individuals who have played their part in them. By all means, savor your own role in good events. But make that satisfaction a further opportunity to offer thanks for divine guidance – no matter how unconsciously it may have operated. Let heart-felt thanksgiving stop the racing mind and slow the pumping heart. Come into sublime stillness from human excitement.

Let the energy of God’s Spirit lift the soul to new heights. Unfold the soul to God, stretching it out like wings – circling, waiting for the sure up-drafts of eternity. Thus, be as the eagle – *soaring, yet at rest* upon the currents, circling higher and higher. Take in the wonderful vistas; let the Spirit do the moving and revealing. Such times can be rich with refreshment and wisdom. Again, use your breath to come to that stillness and remain in it. Breathe deeply into the headiness and excitement, displacing them, stretching out the inner being with each inspiration, resting in God

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with each expiration. You may wish to repeat silently a few words of thanksgiving and commitment: for example, “Bless the Lord...O my soul;” or “to thee...O Lord...I lift up...my soul...O my God...in thee...I trust.” Use each expiration to mouth one or two or three words at a time.

The prophet Isaiah knew this power of God in his own life. He had known the strength of a young man and the enthusiasm of youth; he had seen how these surge and fade. But Isaiah was a prophet, not by the fevered imagination of his own brow, but by waiting upon God to receive strength, to be lifted up to the place of vision. Thus, Isaiah could testify: “they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint” (Isa. 40:31)

We often love the prophets for their stinging criticisms of society, their ability to “speak truth to power.” Unfortunately, we tend to hear their words with a spirit of spiteful human judgment. We harbor the desire to denounce today’s powers with the same incisive words. Again, this is the self-righteous rage that so easily boomerangs back upon us as paralyzing guilt and impotence. The prophet’s vision and social critique are not of that spirit, but from the silent waiting that rises above rage and transcends mere analysis. True judgment is spoken humbly by the prophet, as one who stands in the midst of the people, who shares their fate, and remains vulnerable both to God and to them.

Whether we are soaring with righteous indignation or joyful elation, we are in danger of presumption. We may find ourselves soaring above the wisdom of God in us. To sink down to the seed is the beginning of wisdom. It is to live in creative communion upon God, realizing that God is the ultimate source of all joy and all justice. Depending upon God, we may become agents of divine love and peace. Here we enter the covenant that binds us together in loving service. Here the seed thrives and

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becomes fruitful. The call of Jesus, the seed of God, goes out to us: “abide in me....You who abide in me, and I in you, shall bear much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:4f).

### Sinking

It is not uncommon for me to sit down in meeting with a distinct feeling of spiritual undertow. Sometimes, it reaches an almost physical sense of sinking, like a continuous falling. It may seem more like drowning, or an inner collapsing under some oppressive weight. My spirit flails about, grasping at straws. Yet every assurance or comfort I grasp only seems to break loose and fall with me. Breath itself may become shallow, as if I am laboring against some lethal, implosive force within. Sometimes, the source of the malaise is obvious: I already know I am in grief for someone or something, caught in some painful bind, or mired in depression. But often I cannot account for this awful feeling. In any case, the silent void of meeting for worship only seems to increase my sense of a relentless, crushing weight.

I may already have psychological understanding of my plight. I may be in counseling to work through the issues underlying my feelings. Such therapeutic measures are very helpful, even vital if long-term depression or self-destructive tendencies are setting in. There are important questions for the mind to answer, and painful stoppages for the heart to break through. But these tasks do not plumb the full spiritual depth of despair. Psychological treatments offer clarity for the mind and catharsis for the heart, but they may still leave one in alienation from the power of God within. True spiritual healing and reconciliation are needed.

Let us return for a moment to the biblical story of alienation in the Garden (Gen. 2-3). The tragic loss of human intimacy with God and with one another is traditionally called “the

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Fall”. The experience of sinking despair is the one in which we know the Fall most acutely – it can feel physically like falling. And because it brings our separation from God and others into sharp focus, it can provide our surest path back to God. In the experience of despair, we are at the threshold of hope and true joy. This too is implied in the story of the Fall. God’s description of alienated humanity’s condition in Genesis 3:16-19 is traditionally called “the Curse”, yet that curse also contains a *promise*: man and woman will feel the despair of their existence *until they die*. Our condition is not eternally cursed; we can die to it and be reborn to God, through the seed of the woman.

Adam understood the promise to be realized through the wonder of procreation; his offspring would redeem his mistakes. Thus, he promptly named his wife “Eve,” mother of all life. And with Adam and Eve, all humanity has shared in the perennial hope that our offspring will succeed where we have failed – or at least carry on after we have died. But the passion of Jesus reveals a different understanding of the promise: we may die and rise to fruitfulness in this life.

Meanwhile, there I sit in meeting: sinking, grasping, gasping, drowning. How can I inherit this promise? It seems utterly beyond my wretched grasp. But the point is to quit grasping, stop fighting. What does “waiting upon the Lord” mean but to stop struggling? Simply fall. Simply let go. The relief is often immediate. Fall into the empty void of the silence. This is a free-fall that may go on for days. Learn to rest in this free-fall. In this way, I come to know myself *falling free* – free of all the floating straw that once appeared like salvation. Free at last to be with God.

Rest in God; go under; succumb to the undertow at last; breathe into it; take it in with long, full draughts. With each breath, sink further into the bosom of God. Here the passion is no longer struggle but complete surrender. It may help to enter the passion by repeating the words of Jesus, two or three with each exhaling.

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An example: “into thy hands...I commend...my spirit.” Or repeat words from the Psalms, such as: “The Lord is my shepherd...I shall not want.” These words can be simply half-formed on the lips with each expiration, without making any sound to disturb the worship of others.

You may wish to use an ancient prayer from the Greek tradition, again giving forth a short section with each breath: “Lord...Jesus...Christ...Son...of God...have mercy...on me...a sinner.” There may be specific sins and regrets to offer up to God. But the fundamental surrender is of your separation from God, which is the root of all sin and despair. Here you are not giving yourself over to the belligerence of an ogre, but returning to the loving embrace of a parent who has been calling you for a long time.

Falling free, coming to rest in God, you may begin to sense an inward peace and solidity. Do not let the mind spring too soon into busyness, or the heart too quickly into celebration. That only interrupts the healing grace of God, working in ways beyond the knowing of the heart or mind. Wait to know the words of the Psalmist fulfilled: “I waited patiently for the Lord, who inclined to me and heard my cry. God drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon the rock, making my steps secure.” (Psa. 40:1f). There will be time to praise God and to view new horizons. But first be established solidly upon the foundation of truth. This truth is not any new insight gleaned from the experience, but the very reality of communion with God. Your faithfulness will be manifested in your commitment to return to that place in God and abide there. Most of all, pay attention to how to get there.

Here we finally allow the seed to fall into our soil, no longer weltering on a stony surface. Here we enter the covenant, as we learn how to lay down our lives for one another in Christ, who showed us the perfect love. In this love, there is no condition

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so low that we cannot speak to it; there is no one unworthy of our time and energies.

Fleeing

A fourth condition I may sometimes bring to meeting represents a fourth mood of alienation. In this condition I sense my true desperation: I feel anxious, panicky, hunted, and haunted. I am like a fugitive, fleeing threats either real or imagined. Often they are very real: crises at home or at work; a sense of unrelieved guilt; uncertainty in important decisions; challenges from hostile persons. But sometimes, I experience this state apart from any current crisis. I may have simply become acclimated to crisis through a stressful job or family situation. In any case, sitting there in the silence, I feel light years away from the light, a far cry from the stillness and inner peace that would provide sanctuary and offer assurance. I squirm and shift my position on the bench, a fidgeting distraction to myself and to others.

The fleeing state is the most typical mood found where the seed falls along the path, along the mainstream, where agitation is a way of life. The seed simply bounces off, unnoticed. It is plucked away as we sell our souls through a series of headlong, distracted transactions made along the thorough-fare.

Experiences of desperation are miserable, but can serve to make us aware of our more fundamental despair. Our circumstantial fears offer hints of something more primal, the basic life anxiety that normally hovers at the subconscious level. We have in us a fundamental fear of losing the life we want to hold as our own. External threats are the ones we cannot ignore; but internal, unconscious ones are often the most subtle and paralyzing. And somewhere below all of those is the ultimate fear of our Maker. It is portrayed graphically in the story of the Fall, when man and woman, in their new-found independent knowledge, flee the approach of God and hide in the bushes. In the next

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generation, that primal fear reaches its full pathological implications when Cain the murderer flees God's mercy to build a city, a fortress of self-defense.

Our defensive strategies and maneuvers can become legion. We develop them for every occasion and do not automatically drop them by coming into the meeting for worship. We can still interpose any number of mental and emotional "fig-leaves" between ourselves and the steady gaze of the light. Meeting for worship can retain the same fidgety, fugitive mood we might feel sitting in a bus station among strangers. Conversely, in the life of spiritual devotion, even sitting in the bus station can attain the same peaceful communion we find in a gathered meeting for worship.

Ultimately, the root of our desperation is always our departure from God's presence. We may have left presumptively, thinking to be in control of our destiny. We "ran out ahead of the guide," confident in our certainty and ability. Or we may have been panicked out of divine communion, taken by surprise by an unforeseen threat, or rattled by some old nemesis. Sometimes we flee because God has simply come too close for our personal comfort. We may be overwhelmed by an acute experience of God's reality and awesomeness; or we may feel threatened by God's nudgings to take a frightening step.

In any case, we bolt, soon finding ourselves disoriented. Like a lost dog that runs and sniffs this way and that, trying to pick up a familiar scent, we cannot find our way "home" to the refuge, the inner sanctuary of peace.

"Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom," states the Book of Proverbs (1:7). This fear is not some ultimate form of intimidation by authority. It is an awareness of that primal fear that we normally suppress and flee. We flee it presumptively when we feel we are in control; we flee it desperately when circumstances go beyond our control. But conscious fear of God is the healthiest

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and most saving consciousness we can attain. It implies careful attention to the presence of God, a healthy fear of losing touch with the divine. That fear relativizes all circumstantial fears, empowering us to stand up to any challenge. Abiding in the presence of God, we need fear no threat to our egos, our possessions, our livelihood, even our lives.

Daily devotion to God's presence keeps us safe in that fear. The hungry longing for sweet communion in God finally casts out fear in our lives (1 John 4:18). Therefore, stand still in the light, wait in patience and fervent desire for God. Sitting there in the silence, breathe into the fear that clutches the heart, displacing it with long, full draughts. "Surely goodness...and mercy...shall follow me...all the days...of my life...and I shall dwell...in the house...of the Lord...for ever." Come to feel the stillness: "I love thee...O Lord...my strength...The Lord...is my rock...my fortress...my deliverer...my refuge...my shield...my salvation...my stronghold." "The Lord...is the refuge...of my life...whom shall I fear?" "Into thy hands...I commend...my spirit."

Thus, we enter again into the drama of the seed, the Passion of Jesus, a moment of resignation to God amid overwhelming fear and pain. This is the awful wisdom of the cross, the power of God that is victorious over the world. Living in the cross, we find peace with God, the only peace that can bring peace to our hearts, families, meetings, nations, and world. This inward sanctuary may not always shelter us from the evil intentions of others, but it is the only place we may sit down in peace and address our enemies as friends.

### THE SEED REIGNS OVER ALL

We have explored four different moods of human alienation, and portrayed the way the promise of God can be received in each condition. We can die to alienation by letting go



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of that part in us that struggles, agonizes, despairs, presumes, or simply sighs in apathy. Thus, we have seen the life we sometimes experience as curse, and the death we may come to know as blessing.

But we have said little about the new life that emerges from our surrender to God in the silence. Of course, the seed can truly rise and grow to maturity in us only through years of spiritual devotion. But there are ways we may know it emerging and unfolding even during one meeting for worship.

First of all, what is most evident in our passage into this new realm is the sense of stillness. There is an inner quiet that is far removed from the deadly numbness we described as the wandering state. This is a living stillness, a hush that may have no content whatsoever, except a profound sense of oneness with the divine. Once you enter that innermost chamber of the heart, that holy of holies, you can remain there fairly easily. If you become distracted, a renewed attention to breath or resumption of inward prayer will usually bring you back into the divine presence.

Something like coolness may be experienced – as if you have entered a subterranean recess, where the air is still and fixed at a lower temperature. At other times, however, you may feel a distinctively warm flush. This infusing sometimes accompanies a leading of the Spirit. In that case, the message you receive may be for you alone, or it may be something given to speak aloud from the silence. It is important to discern the difference, which can be done simply by letting the leading come to maturity. Rather than jumping out of the stillness to speak, take time to encounter the leading fully. This essay cannot include any adequate treatment of vocal ministry. Let it simply be said here that when it comes, the living word has a specific *content* and a specific *context* in space and time. Be faithful to the content in speaking only what has been given; neither add to it with a racing mind nor diminish it with a faint heart. And be faithful to the context by speaking it when and

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where it is given. It cannot be saved for another time or another group, unless a clear sense of leading comes again in the new context.

True ministry of the living word comes from the stillness within and speaks to the stillness in others, or helps lead them there. It may be in the form of prayer, counsel, exhortation, encouragement, or simple witness to the One whose presence has come over the group. In any case, the group begins to feel itself moving to a deeper level. With or without words, the meeting begins to be gathered in the Spirit, where Christ exercises various channels, or “offices,” of grace, according to the needs of the people. For example, as priest, Christ makes reconciliation with God, heals wounds, enables forgiveness, and mends divisions. As prophet, Christ lays open people’s conditions, pointing them in paths of faithful service. As Sophia, Christ teaches her children in wisdom, speaking through the mouths of the simple, often overturning the wisdoms of the world.

Here worship attains its true end: the glory of God revealed in our midst. A sense of awe covers the meeting. The mundane realities and threadbare routine of this familiar group become transfigured, awash in eternity, clothed in radiance.

*The seed reigns over all.* The disordered spirits we brought with us into the room are put in their rightful places by the Holy Spirit, bestowing wholeness, integrity, maturity. Here the fruition of the seed is indeed supernatural. Some fruits are immediate and obvious: inner peace and refreshment are felt; renewed clarity and energies for service are received; the meeting reaches out to new people seeking God. They are “reached by this life” of the seed, much as Robert Barclay was in the 1660s, “For when I came into the silent assemblies of God’s people, I felt a secret power among them, which touched my heart. And as I gave way to it, I found the evil in me weakening, and the good lifted up. Thus it was that I was knit into them and united with them. And I hungered more and

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more for the increase of this power and life until I could feel myself perfectly redeemed.” (Apology, %%)

Over time, spiritual gifts of ministry, eldership, and pastoral oversight will emerge among meeting members, to be recognized and encouraged by the meeting. Where the gospel mystery is known and honored in the midst, its order will emerge also, as surely as any seed contains the structural messages necessary for its maturation into a strong and healthy plant.

Therefore, all who hunger and thirst for righteousness, who desire to see the reign of God established on earth, who long to see goodness and mercy gathered and set as a city upon a hill, a light to the world: prepare the earth in you for the coming of Christ; wait to know the day of God’s favor revealed in you; stand still in the light that reveals all things; and come to feel the seed of God raised up, breaking open the earth, rising to the light, bringing all things into order, truth, and unity.

## Seven

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### **“Sink Down to the Seed” Going Deeper in Quaker Life and Witness**

Keynote Address  
Intermountain Yearly Meeting  
Durango, Colorado  
June, 1996

It feels like an accomplishment just to arrive at yearly meeting sessions like these. It has taken a certain amount of effort, especially for families. Travel is part of the effort, of course. But long before we set out for Durango this week, many decisions had to be made and priorities set. For many, it was a decision to take precious vacation time – time spent not relaxing on a beach or hiking in the mountains, but sitting and listening, discerning and sharing for hours on end. This is not recreation in the normal sense of the word. But we choose to be here, knowing that gatherings like this can re-create us, renew us at a deep level of our being.

Again, for many of us, the expense of coming to yearly meeting is not trivial. A sense of financial priority had to be established. For a variety of reasons, we discerned these sessions to be truly important, outweighing other worthy uses of our limited

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finances. In part, we knew that coming here would have some benefit for us. But we also knew that by coming here we could share something important of ourselves with others.

So being here together these few days is a significant investment in what might be called “Quaker time.” I use the term “Quaker time” here to speak of the time we spend in worship, committee meetings, yearly meetings, and other overtly Quaker settings. Quaker time is that time we put on our “Quaker hat” – or “Quaker bonnet” – and engage in the silent worship, the spiritual conversation, and decision-making we often call “Quaker process.” [British Quaker sociologist Ben Pink Dandelion develops this concept in “The Limits of Liberalism,” in *The Bible, the Church and the Future of Friends*, edited by Chuck Fager, (Pendle Hill, 1996).]

Of course, Quaker time occupies a fairly small portion of our waking hours. We find ourselves living the bulk of our lives in other realms, other “times,” according to different social and moral codes. We spend private time by ourselves and with family. In private time, we often feel the pull of mass culture and consumerism acutely. Then there is work time, where many of us spend a large portion of our lives. At work, we may feel obliged to carry on a style of conversation and a process of decision-making that is not very Quakerly. Then there is time we spend involved in causes. Many Friends spend significant amounts of time as social activists. That important time is often spent in organizations where a Quaker sense of gentle plain speaking may not be honored, where “hard-ball” politics is the name of the game. Finally, there is time spent in intellectual work. Some of us are teachers or academics, or work in other intellectual environments where we find ourselves party to all kinds of “mind games,” jargon-spinning, and theoretical abstractions. These too are traditionally considered un-Quakerly. As a writer and teacher in Quaker theology and

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history, I struggle against unnecessary jargon – not always with success.

The net effect of living in all these “time zones” is that our lives feel cluttered. In part, we get overcommitted by the strong pull of each of these realms on us. We are simply too busy. But the “clutter” effect is just as much a matter of the *incoherence* of all these different activities in our lives. We find ourselves living according to different social codes and moral standards in the course of one week’s schedule. I believe that it is theo *jumble* of our various social identities and roles that stresses us as much as the total amount of activity. So on Sunday morning, we flee to the refuge of “Quaker time,” hoping to escape, transcend, and perhaps even make some sense of the jumble.

Now, it is the ideal of any serious Friend to expand the realm of “Quaker time” in her or his life. Some end up working for Quaker organizations for a time. This can be good work for good causes, but it is no panacea. Some spend a term or a year at Pendle Hill, where they can immerse themselves in Quaker community and discern new priorities and new direction for their lives. From my own experience as both a teacher and a student at Pendle Hill, I can strongly recommend it to anyone who can clear time in their lives to spend a term or more there. But even if you go there, and even if you have a life-changing experience, you will return to a world that is still much the same. You will return to the same dilemma: how can I live like a Quaker in this world? how can I transform private time, work time, and other times into some version of Quaker time? how can my Quaker identity better define my other identities, as spouse, partner, employee, thinker, activist? We want to be full-time Quakers, not weekend hobbyists.

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### Light and Seed

We do not face this dilemma alone. We talk about it in our Friends meetings. We may even form a clearness committee, a group of trusted Friends to help discern God's leading regarding a specific question we face. It is important to make ourselves available to help one another through difficult decisions. And clearness committees offer a process by which we can help one another. I recommend Patricia Loring's Pendle Hill Pamphlet on spiritual discernment and the way to set up and conduct a clearness committee (*Spiritual Discernment: The Context and Goal of Clearness Committees*, Pendle Hill Pamphlet #305).

In the work of spiritual discernment, we often use the traditional Quaker language of the light within. Light is a rich metaphor for God's guidance. Like all historic Quaker metaphors, it is based in Scripture. It draws upon many texts in the Bible. For example, the Psalmist sings that God's living Word is "a lamp unto my feet, a light unto my path." But most of all, Friends have quoted the Prologue of John's Gospel, which identifies Christ as the Word that was in the beginning with God, which created all things, and which enlightens everyone who comes into the world. But we know God as light not simply because the Bible tells us. We know God as light by our own experience. And we know the light is in all kinds of people, because we see the light shine in so many different people.

But we tend to speak of the light in a rather limited way. I hear Friends speak of the light as a kind of auxiliary source – it's nice to have during those times when our own lights "go out," when we don't feel like we are coping very well by our own wits. Otherwise, we prefer to make our own decisions, thank you. We thus operate by the "God is my copilot" mentality. We maintain control of our lives, and "turn on" or turn to the light of God only

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when we feel a little shaky. Those moments don't really occur often enough to change our lives very much.

I also notice that we often speak of the light in rose-colored, "happy-face" language. It sounds as if the light only brightens things up, only reassures and comforts us. This is more "sweetness and light" than the light that early Friends witnessed. The light for them was something that often disturbed them, rather than comforting them, especially during times of personal transformation. If the light is a power of personal and social change, it will disturb us as much as calm us; it will generate conflict as well as give peace.

Traditional Friends wrote of the light in a more vivid sense than we often hear today. But they also used other metaphors for their experience of God. George Fox used more than a hundred different metaphors to describe the work of Christ in the soul and in the community of faith. But one of the key metaphors among early Friends, used nearly as much as the light, was "the seed." We speak of the light to describe the revealing, guiding, discerning aspects of God's presence within. By contrast, the language of the seed hints at other aspects, ones we are more likely to avoid. Early Friends wrote of the seed as the *power* of God, the *promise* of God, the *inheritance* of God sown within each human heart. It is sown there in compassion toward us, sown in the hope that each one of us will become a true and faithful child of God. But this seed within germinates and rises to new life only as we sink down to it. The Seed is the power of God's will. While the light reveals God's will to us, lets us *know* it, the seed is about *the power to do it here and now*. Or again, while the light inspires in us thoughts that are not necessarily our thoughts; the seed raises a will in us that is not necessarily our will. That implies that there is some kind of *death* to be encountered in ourselves if we are to know the power of the seed.

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That dimension of our spiritual growth is threatening to all of us. We want more light, we want to see more. Then we will make our own decisions. We do not want to give up control. We do not want to subject our will to something beyond us, even if it is something deep within us. Perhaps this is why we do not hear the language of the seed often among Friends today! Yet I find that Friends that want to go deeper, Friends who want to expand the horizons of their faith, end up going elsewhere to find that other dimension. Some leave Friends altogether, feeling that their meeting just can't get to that deeper level. But many are able to remain Friends while finding that other dimension through other spiritual disciplines. They go on Buddhist Vipassina retreats, they spend time at Zen Centers, or at Catholic monasteries. They find the rigor of spiritual discipline, the depth dimension, elsewhere, and that's fine. *But we have that depth dimension in our own tradition.* We need to reclaim it today. The School of the Spirit, a Quaker program of study and spiritual formation in the Philadelphia area, is one place where that depth work is finally becoming visible among Friends.

Probably the most sublime Quaker writer on life in the seed is the early Friend Isaac Penington. I wish there were time to tell you about the lives of Isaac and Mary Penington, who were already advanced Seekers long before they were finally convinced of the Quaker way in the 1650s. But I will have to settle for one of my favorite quotations from Isaac's writings. His spiritual counsel is deep, rich with evocative images and metaphors, especially of the life of the seed.

There is often a visceral quality in his writing that helps to locate the *feeling* of the seed within us. Sometimes he mentions the breath as a pathway to knowing God's will. In one instance, he advises, "breathe unto the Lord to reveal what is proper for thee at present." He writes that there is kind of knowledge we can gain

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and store in our minds. But the *sense* of what God wants for us here and now will be found at a deeper level.

I want to read a longer quotation here, one that sums up much of Penington's counsel:

Give over thine own willing; give over thine own running; give over thine own desiring to know or to be any thing, and sink down to the seed which God sows in the heart, and let that grow in thee, and be in thee, and breathe in thee, and act in thee, and thou shalt find by sweet experience that the Lord knows that, and loves and owns that, and will lead it to the inheritance of life, which is his portion. And as thou takest up the cross to thy self, and sufferest that to overspread and become a yoke over thee, thou shalt become renewed, and enjoy life, and the everlasting inheritance in that.

Penington wrote those words in a little tract called *Some Directions to the Panting Soul*. They seem very appropriate to our Yearly Meeting theme of "Maintaining our Spiritual Base in Busy Times." We feel like "panting souls" in the midst of the many commitments, concerns, and identities we try to live out from day to day. Now, Penington uses some uncomfortable words here, like "cross" and "yoke." That language is not easy for us, partly because we feel burdened already. Yet he also promises that this very yoke will refresh our strength, renew our lives.

Sinking Down to the Seed: Three Movements of the Spirit

What would such a breakthrough look like in terms of our busy lives? What does sinking down to the seed mean in terms of the clutter and incoherence we feel in our existence? I do not claim to be a "spiritual athlete" on the level of Isaac Penington or some living Friends I have known. But from my own experience along the path and from my study of Quaker spirituality, I propose three

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ways to describe the breakthrough: from concern to conviction, from enthusiasm to ecstasy, and from resentment to reconciliation.

### From Concern to Conviction

First, the word “concern” has a place of honor among Friends. We speak of the many concerns we carry in our hearts: concerns for the environment, for various oppressed or suffering peoples, for military crises in the world, for issues of gender bias or heterosexism. The word “concern” has a history in Quaker vocabulary. Traditionally, a Friend who came deeply under the weight of a concern was valued, nurtured, counseled, sometimes even supported financially by the monthly or quarterly meeting to work under that concern. A Friend would sometimes “travel under a concern” among Friends and others, to inspire others to work with him or her on that spiritual, moral, or social issue.

But the process of helping a Friend nurture and develop a concern was also a process of winnowing out competing concerns and distracting issues. To come under the weight of a concern is to feel God’s call to act, and there are only so many concerns a person can faithfully and effectively carry. So there is a process Friends have traditionally called “threshing” involved here; that is, separating the chaff of our own thoughts and desires from the pure seed of God’s leading and power to act. Thus, Friends sometimes speak of having a “threshing session” on some question or issue.

Of course, we live in a world of mass communications, of immediate awareness of local, national, and world events. Anyone whose heart is tender, whose conscience is developed, feels a painful burden in perceiving the violence and injustice all around us. One may even become immobilized, unable to act upon any concern. We face what theologians sometimes call the “scandal of particularity” – the awful fact that I am just one person in one time

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and place. I cannot easily accept the limits on what I am and what I can do with my puny time and energy.

Thus, our hearts are full of many things. The light shines in us, but it is blocked and refracted by these many things. It is bent into many directions and colors, often beautiful in their own ways. But there is a confusion that eventually wearies us. To “sink down to the seed” within is to let go of the many things we clutch in our hearts. We have to let go of not simply a few, not even most, but all. Lay them down, spread them out, reexamine them in the light. It is a time to know and accept forgiveness – to forgive ourselves and others for not being able to save the world. It is a time to accept God’s forgiveness for our moral pride in trying to take on too much with too little wisdom. Therefore, to “sink down to the seed” is not only to let go of our selfish, spiteful, or foolish ways. It is also to let go our best hopes, desires, and energies – let them become mere compost for the Seed within – consecrate them to God’s will for us.

This act of renunciation, purgation, has some difficult passages. Perhaps hardest is the waiting – waiting for these composted concerns to be broken down and absorbed into the seed – waiting for the seed to rise within. But if we rest there in God for a season, God will raise us to new life. In traditional Quaker Christian terms, this is the experience of Christ’s Passion – dying with Christ, lying buried with Christ, eventually to be raised with Christ. As the seed begins to rise in us, we will find in many cases that it is fed, it is informed by what we had learned, accomplished, and attempted previously. As it turns out, past strivings haven’t been utterly wasted and discarded after all. The seed reuses and reintegrates our best energies into something new – something we never dreamed.

This subtle alchemy transforms the base metals of our own efforts into the pure, refined gold of divine purpose in the world. This is the meaning of Quaker conviction. It is not a mere

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rational assent to a few principles, like “I’m convinced that there is that of God in every one.” In seventeenth-century parlance, “convincement” meant “conviction,” a sense of sin, of one’s alienation from God, and a movement into greater intimacy with God, fuller reliance upon God’s power and guidance. The movement from concern to conviction is painful, even traumatic at times. But through that movement, we become simpler, more integrated – the light shines more purely through us – the eye becomes clearer, the heart becomes purer, able to will one thing. And the neatest thing of all: many of us get to go through this harrowing transformation more than once in life!

### From Enthusiasm to Ecstasy

Our enthusiasms can burn us out even faster than our concerns. While concerns burden us, enthusiasms take hold of us and can consume us with their wild energy. At first, as we surge along with this energy, the experience is exhilarating. It may be a moral passion, a righteous indignation we can really build up a head of steam with. It may be an intellectual passion, something we can bore our friends with for hours. It may be a recreational passion, or even a newly discovered spiritual “high.”

Enthusiasm *appears* to be spontaneous. We all want to be spontaneous, so our passions seem self-evidently good. The Quaker ideal of following the leading of the Spirit would seem to demand this way of being. Yet upon deeper reflection over time, the *impulse* of the moment often proves to be the compulsion of a lifetime. And we are ruled by these compulsions as long as we continue to live in the whirlwind.

Robert Johnson, in a little book titled *Ecstasy* (San Francisco: Harper, 1987), offers a helpful analysis of enthusiasm. He prefers the Jungian term, “inflation,” being filled with air. The surest sign of inflation is the difficulty we have stopping when we

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are in that mode. True ecstasy, by contrast, is a state we can always pull back from. In fact, it is usually only a passing experience. But with inflation, we want to ride the wild spirit for all we can. In the process, we may run roughshod over others or do harm to ourselves without noticing.

Johnson offers a useful electrical analogy to describe the difference between inflation (or enthusiasm) and true ecstasy. True ecstasy works like electrical inductance. Transformers work by inductance: current runs through one coil; another coil is placed very near the first coil; it picks up energy from the first coil without ever being connected to it. It is proximity, rather than actual connection, or conductance, that transfers the energy in a safe form. By contrast, electrical conductance, direct flow from the source, can easily overpower the motor or appliance that receives it, blowing it out. In spiritual terms, then, real transformation occurs by induction, by God’s Spirit working within us. God’s Spirit works by intimate proximity with our own spirit, without being the same thing. Now, early Friends didn’t know much about electricity, but I believe this spiritual principle undergirds their use of the term *inward* light, rather than the inner light, the seed *within*, not an inner seed. It is the immanence of God within us that changes us, not a sameness between God and ourselves, or God as an inner aspect of ourselves. I can tell you this much at least, if God is my inner self, then God is a “dim bulb” indeed.

How do we overcome our addiction to the rush of inflation, or enthusiasm? Even if we see it doing harm to ourselves and to others, it is hard to stop. Our passions run our lives. To “sink down to the seed” is to “unplug” the passions and to rest in God. God has sown the seed in our hearts through compassion to us. The seed is our ultimate sanctuary, our final refuge, not only from the world, but from ourselves. Resting in the seed, we can wait out the storm, feel God’s mercy upon us. It isn’t easy to stop. Sometimes we suffer intense pangs from our compulsive nature

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when we step out of the whirlwind. It can be helpful to realize that the pain has been there all along, because of the way we've been living – we're just letting ourselves feel it at last. But God's mercy will sustain us in that inward retirement.

The suffering we feel there, and the divine mercy we receive there, are actually the beginning of our own renewal. It is the experience of our own suffering that awakens us more acutely to the sufferings of others. And the experience of God's compassion in our hearts empowers us to act compassionately toward others. As early Friend Richard Farnworth wrote, this process "enlarges the borders of our hearts." The *Journal* of John Woolman clearly shows how over the course of his life, the deeper he went in his inward journey, the more universal his compassion became for all humanity, even all Creation. Those are the travel directions for us too: if we want to get further beyond ourselves, let us go deeper within. The God who encompasses all things awaits us at the deepest recesses of our hearts. True ecstasy, life in the seed, is divine gift. There is nothing of our own power, passion, or intelligence that we can add to it. And nothing in this world can take it away.

### From Resentment to Reconciliation

One of the most damning spirits that can take over our lives, and one of the least acknowledged ones, is the unclean spirit of resentment. Too many of our moral stands and political positions are dictated by our resentment of others. Too often, we place ourselves over against those who threaten, oppress, or simply offend us the most. We establish our position by a simple negation or reversal of what we perceive in them. "Whatever they are, I am the opposite." For some, the foil is the "religious Right," for others, it may be "patriarchy," for others "those feminists," for

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others, "the military-industrial complex." We distill a certain image of "them" and define ourselves over against it.

Moreover, we go on to join forces with others we view as opposite to our favorite foils. Many unholy alliances are formed according to the flawed syllogism that "my enemy's enemy is my friend." Many of us have squandered a great deal of time and energy over many years fighting these "karmic" battles. Over time, as that spirit wears us down, we may succumb to the destructive spirit of rage, blind fury that lashes out against whomever or whatever half-way resembles our nemesis. What may have begun as a liberating gesture of defiance slowly degenerates into an annoying tic, a reflexive, hollow vehemence. In the final analysis, resentment amounts to letting the thing we *detest* most bitterly *define* us most tellingly.

Jim Corbett, a member of this yearly meeting, offers an excellent critique of the spirit of resentment in his theory of civil initiative. He notes that groups employing the tactics of civil disobedience may become enmeshed in a reflexive need to oppose and create conflict with the government and its policies. The spirit of opposition may come to eclipse the positive social concern that first gave rise to the act of civil disobedience. By contrast, civil initiative seeks ways to initiate justice and peace from the grassroots – to do the right thing in its own right. Conflict with the government may or may not follow. But the point is to act upon the positive good itself, not a polemical "good" that is simply the mirror-image of some recognized evil.

John and Diana Lampen are British Friends who have worked for many years in Northern Ireland. I heard them speak about recent breakthroughs there. Friends have worked for a long time alongside many groups seeking peace there. After all these years, it is impossible to say exactly what changed and why. The Lampens used the image of a vast accumulation of feathers. One day, one more feather, one more hopelessly insignificant act,



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finally shifts the balance of the scales. Today, the peace process in Northern Ireland proceeds slowly and ambivalently. At times, it appears completely ruined. But it has gotten this far by the accumulation of many personal efforts and individual transformations. May God continue to pour feathers on Northern Ireland, and on all of us!

One of the most painful lessons is that the work of peace and justice, like the work of the seed within, is one of patient waiting. But patience is an active condition of the spirit. It can march, it can demonstrate, it can live in jails. It can survive the long haul of transformation. But it is not fed on the bitter fruit of resentment. The seed is watered with our tears. It is nourished by acts of good faith, no matter how futile they may seem. And acts of good faith witness God's love to all. They stimulate the life of the seed in others, no matter how deeply it may be buried in the oppressor, the violator, the victim, or the exploited.

James Parnell, a teen-aged Quaker street preacher in the 1650s, was attacked by a hostile mob in the streets of Colchester, England. One enraged man struck him with a barrel stave, saying "take that, in the name of Jesus Christ!" Parnell replied, "Friend, I do accept it, in the name of Jesus Christ." You see, the "Christ" that for one man had become a *club* to beat others over the head, had become for Parnell the ultimate *power* and *example* of self-offering love, redemptive suffering, universal reconciliation. Not long after, Parnell died in the Colchester jail, becoming the first martyr of the Quaker movement. Was his witness in vain? The fact that we gather here this week as Friends, carrying forward that ministry of universal reconciliation nearly 350 years later, offers our answer. We carry forward the life of the seed, rising from concern to conviction, from enthusiasm to ecstasy, from resentment to reconciliation. I feel awe and gratitude to share in that life with you this week.

## Eight

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### The Seed Captivity and Liberation

Cadbury Event  
Friends General Conference Gathering  
Harrisonburg, Virginia  
July , 1997

For one week per year, Friends General Conference becomes a world capital of seeking. Our seeking takes many forms. It strikes out in many directions. I am very much a seeker myself. I am also a committed Christian and involved Friend. But I feel that these identities urgently need renewal today. So I have traveled, sojourned, and worked – among pastoral and unprogrammed Friends, across Christ-centered and universalist boundaries, "back east" and "out west" – searching for that renewal. Along the way, I have studied the powerful witness of the earliest Friends. But I have also been challenged and changed by insights from the newest Friends. Across these vistas of Quaker time and space, I find reasons for hope, seeds of renewed faith and practice today.

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Recently, I have become interested in the seeking phenomenon itself. Over the past three years, I have studied seekers past and present. I have been especially interested in the English Seekers of the 1640s. These were restless ex-Puritans, or perhaps hyper-Puritans, who formed the seedbed of the earliest Quaker movement. Why were they dissatisfied with the religious options of their day? What were they looking for? What did they find in the Quaker movement? To understand the breakthrough the first Friends experienced, and the social and spiritual power of the early Quaker movement, we do well to look at the Seekers of that day. Seekers were creative and controversial innovators in the 1640s. Their ideas and experiments produced a number of those colorful groups we read of in early Quaker history – Levellers, Diggers, Fifth Monarchists, Ranters.

But this is more than a matter of historical curiosity. I notice important parallels between their seeking and our seeking today. The key comparison is between our two historical situations. The English Seekers were a generation of young people shaken out of their inherited religion by the English Civil War of the 1640s. In those upheavals, the English national church lost credibility for them as a religious institution. Where was a spiritual authority they could trust? They left their local parishes, looking for the true church. However, as many different churches grew during the Civil War, all of them claimed to be the true church. These young people moved from one church to another, finding only fleeting satisfaction.

Finally, many concluded that there was no authentic church. Indeed, the variety and conflict between the churches were the most damning evidence of spiritual bankruptcy. England had become a battlefield of competing creeds, clergies and sacramental practices. The classic English Seeker gave up on all of these. Seeker groups began to meet without clergy, without creeds, without sacraments, speaking nothing unless moved by the Holy

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Spirit. Well now, that sounds pretty close to Quakerism. Yet, if these early Seekers were “convinced” of anything, it was that they had not found the answer. They did not want to offer one more product in the new religious marketplace. They were searching for something truly new and transforming. They continued to meet together in small groups, waiting – waiting for new apostles to come with a new revelation. Many of them concluded that only a divine intervention as great as the coming of Christ and the Pentecostal birth of the early church would deliver them from this wilderness of confusion, this captivity to false religion.

Many seekers today have been through a comparable experience. Especially those of us of the Baby Boom generation, who came of age during the 1960s and early 1970s. That was a time when traditional institutions and authorities lost credibility for many. The bland, conformist religion of the Fifties became odious to us, especially as we were confronted with unprecedented crises of conscience: racism, the Vietnam War, sexism, the persistence of poverty in an affluent society. At the same time, our expectations were also raised by a booming economy and inexpensive higher education. The new power of the media image brought the violence of war and racism home. Photographs from space of planet Earth framed our world in a profoundly new way. They were the best and worst of times, when anything seemed possible. They were apocalyptic times, when songs like “The Eve of Destruction” and “The Age of Aquarius” seemed equally apt.

All through these upheavals, there were mainstream Christians and Jews on the forefront of many struggles for justice and peace. But generally, religious communities seemed hopelessly out of touch. The Fifties and early Sixties had seen some of the highest rates of religious participation in American history. Yet the latter Sixties and Seventies witnessed a mass exodus of young people from their religious homes.

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In a book titled *A Generation of Seekers* (New York: Basic, 1993), Wade Clark Roof offers a sociological study of the varied religious journeys of Baby Boomers, those of us born between 1946 and 1964. He finds several factors leading to the mass mobilization of my generation out of traditional religion. But the cultural shocks of the Sixties stand out as the most pervasive catalyst. Ever since the American conscience and consensus were ripped apart by the conflicts of that period, there has been no easy formula of religious truth, no settlement of religious life in our society. Everyone, not just my generation, has been affected by the displacements of the Sixties. This is a story Americans of all ages share in one way or another. But because we were coming of age during that cataclysmic era, we Boomers are most strongly marked by it.

Now, we usually tend to think of seekers today as those who reject traditional, mainstream American religion, looking further and further into alternatives – Eastern religions, Native American spiritualities, the human potential movement, creation-centered spiritualities, the so-called “New Age.” Many of us here have sought in those directions. Many of us have found. We have also found Quakerism to be an alternative spirituality within western culture, one that maintains a simple faith and practice while welcoming truth from other traditions, ancient and new. We speak in various ways of “a new paradigm,” a new spiritual and moral consensus adequate for this new era. The new paradigm is always getting closer – though it never quite seems to arrive. Why?

One of Roof’s most helpful insights into contemporary seeking is to point out that the religious right is also populated and energized by seekers. Yes, religious conservatives also take the Sixties as their reference point. That was a time when families began to tear apart, when churches began to empty, when the sexual revolution began. We do not have to be religious conservatives to acknowledge that these upheavals have been

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destructive as well as creative. Our various liberations have come at a price. Every new liberation is also a new form of alienation. Freedom – at least as our culture defines it – estranges us. American society is more divided, confused, and violent than it has ever been.

So the utopian vision of the religious right is not the emergence of a new paradigm but the reconstruction of the old one. The millions who have become born-again Christians and Jews over the past twenty-five years are mostly Boomers, members of my generation, seeking shelter from the corrosion of mass culture, seeking a safe, wholesome place to raise families and rebuild communities.

Well, maybe they never did catch a sight of that new paradigm coming just around the corner. But we sell the religious right short if we do not recognize that they are seekers too. We may seek in different directions, in different ways, with different hopes and fears. But we do have parallel understandings that American culture is in trouble. We don’t agree what the trouble is. Some say we’ve gone too far. Others say we haven’t gone far enough.

In view of our common seeking condition, it becomes clear that the American “culture wars” of the Eighties and Nineties, between conservatives and progressives of all types, is a continuing struggle over the meaning and legacy of the Sixties. Every new battle over racial issues, women’s roles, gay and lesbian rights, sex education, or militarization is another aftershock of the Sixties.

I have been surprised to discover that the Seekers of England in the 1640s moved in two directions similar to what I have just described. A number of people at the time recognized two basic types of Seekers. The classic type, which I described a moment ago, still operated within a Protestant worldview. They still hoped for the recovery of a pure New Testament faith and

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practice. Their agenda was the Reformation call for “primitive Christianity revived”. But they saw that all the Protestant reformations had failed. Beholding the failure of human inventions to reconstruct the true church, they awaited divine intervention, a new revelation brought by new apostles. How would these new apostles be recognized? Well, they would perform miracles like those of the first apostles in the Book of Acts. Their signs and wonders would make the authenticity of their revelation obvious to all. These “Type A Seekers,” we might call them, were in some respects hyper-Puritans, conservatives driven by intense idealism to radical conclusions.

But a second type of Seeker also thrived. John Saltmarsh, one of their proponents, described their position clearly. He argued that God does not take us backward in history. If the early church was corrupted so quickly after its beginning, there was no point in repeating that exercise. God will take us forward. He prophesied an emerging new age of the Spirit. This new dispensation was much like what we today would call a new paradigm. Saltmarsh and others felt they had already tasted of this new age and new form of church, especially in their meetings for worship. They met to “wait upon the Lord,” to feel God unfold this new paradigm, this “spiritual Christianity,” as they called it. Isaac Penington, who later became a leading Quaker, wrote in much the same vein in his Seeker years. These “Type B Seekers,” let us say, were still strongly Christian. Yet some themes in their writings seem to foreshadow the liberal Enlightenment. These were protoliberal. They saw themselves leaving behind the dead forms and hypocrisies of traditional Christendom, evolving into a more rarefied mysticism. They were optimists. They saw themselves stepping onto a historic escalator of progressive revelation, each new age, each new dispensation of the Spirit becoming brighter and clearer. They were social reformers. They envisioned the new

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dispensation improving the human condition through rational analysis and democratic politics.

During the Civil War, both types of Seekers were filled with hope. It seemed that England was moving toward religious freedom and democratic government. But as the Commonwealth faltered and conservative retrenchment began by 1650, the same Seekers began to despair. The new apostles had not shown up for the Type A Seekers, and the escalator of history had stalled for Type B Seekers. During the 1650s, some Type A’s joined the Fifth Monarchist movement and tried to take over the government, first by coalition politics, then by violent insurrection. Some Type B’s abandoned religious hope altogether and became skeptics. Over time, some became Deists and renounced the idea that God was active in human events.

The important thing to note is that neither type of Seeker was a happy seeker. They called themselves “Mourners after Sion,” “Sion’s Travelers” (as in “travail”) and other names suggesting that they were not out there following their bliss. They hoped for nothing less than the kingdom of God on earth – a private utopia would not do.

However, quite a number of Seekers of both types became Quakers, starting in 1652. The new Quaker movement answered the hopes of both groups, but in surprising ways. Friends claimed to possess the same spiritual power the prophets and apostles had. They claimed to renew the church in its original simplicity. Their worship, ministry, and church government recaptured the prophetic spirituality of early Christianity. But this was not simply a throwback to New Testament times. Friends announced something radically new. They proclaimed nothing less than the return of Christ by the Spirit, the Light shining in each person. Christ was no longer captive in credal sound-bytes or sacramental wafers but moving at large in all people, to gather, teach and lead a new people. But this was not to be simply a new denomination: this was

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the vanguard of a new human society, transforming all relations from the inside out, and from the grassroots up. I have tried to describe the apocalyptic and revolutionary dimensions of early Quaker witness in two books, *Apocalypse of the Word* (Friends United Press, 1986) and *The Covenant Crucified* (Pendle Hill, 1995).

In terms of spirituality, early Friends came closer to the deep mysticism of Type B Seekers. But the Quaker sense of being a peculiar people with a prophetic mission gravitated toward the Type A position. Early Friends rejected speculations upon new dispensations, new paradigms just around the corner. Such notions kept the mind searching in the outward mode, looking here and there for the latest thing. The light that was in each person was the same light that had shone in every age. The point was to stand still and deal with what the light revealed then and there.

Seekers of both varieties felt they had moved into something profoundly new when they were convinced in the power of the light. What changed? I believe the fundamental shift from Seeker to Quaker was a shift from lateral seeking, here and there, to what Francis Howgill (a Seeker leader convinced in 1652) called the “narrow search.” Stand still, Fox counseled Seekers time and again. Sarah Blackborough also wrote to Seekers, exhorting them to come out of the many things and know the one necessary thing.

To summarize, then, the beautiful flower of Seeker hope faded, withered, and died by the 1650s. But early Friends proclaimed that a living seed, a sort of “genetic code” of truth behind those Seeker hopes, survived. Not only had it survived, it was rising to new life, wherever earnest Seekers gathered to stand still, to “wait upon the Lord,” to feel the light of Christ shine in their hearts. That light broke open the hard heart, allowing God’s seed to come forth, a new creation, a new kind of human being, a new way of being human.

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Well, I would love to regale you with more about Seekers and Quakers of old. But let’s get back to our seeking situation. We can recognize Seeker A and Seeker B positions among Friends today. Since the Sixties, many Type A seekers have become neo-evangelical. Neo-evangelicalism has intensified Christian identity and has been a polarizing factor in Friends United Meeting, for example. Meanwhile, some Type B seekers continue to seek and work for the new paradigm, through feminist spiritualities, multicultural politics, environmental action, new physics, etc.

But somewhere along the way, seeking became a steady-state proposition. Some Friends maintain that it would be a mistake to find in any definitive sense. I think the ideal of permanent seeking has evolved as a result of the failure of our liberal ideal of progress. If we can no longer be confident of human progress, we can at least pay better attention to the human process. We can perfect techniques of meditation, conflict resolution, decision-making. Let’s focus on the means and the ends will take care of themselves. Ben Pink Dandelion, Quaker Studies Tutor at Woodbrooke, suggests that “process Quakerism” may represent a new, third seeking position, a Type C. When the means become the end, process is all. This is the path of permanent, happy seeking. (See Ben’s paper, “When the means becomes the end: Liberal Quakerism and the eternal ‘now’,” in the forthcoming publication of papers from the 1997 Quaker Hill Consultation, “Quaker Diversity and the Future of Friends.”)

Process Quakerism has been a creative development among Friends. But in a technological age where processes define products, sometimes with dangerous and unexpected outcomes, it is important for us to keep our eyes fixed on some transcendent horizon, no matter how utopian and unattainable it may seem. The term “Quaker faith and practice” suggests that there is a Quaker faith content as well as a way of practicing it. Similarly, we do not

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have to choose between seeking and finding. Finding redirects seeking, just as continued seeking reframes past findings.

Over the years, I have been a fellow-traveler along these various trajectories of Quaker seeking. I have deepened my Christian commitment with evangelical Friends; I have broadened my horizons with liberal Friends; I have been processed with process Friends! I have learned from all and with all – but I am still not a happy seeker.

During the Nineties, our different seeker quests have continued to diverge and antagonize one another. This pattern is clear in the wider culture and among Friends in particular. And as the decade, century, and millennium slouch toward an end, the rhetoric of culture war becomes demonizing and cataclysmic. We think first of the religious right, where the millennium inspires new readings of the Book of Revelation, predictions of the end of the world, identification of the so-called “liberal establishment” as the Antichrist, and militias preparing for Armageddon. Not a pretty picture.

But I am also disturbed at the spate of liberal books, press coverage, and even a Millennium Watch Institute. They track these right-wing developments with morbid gusto, and exhibit a mirror-image form of doom-mongering. They offer their own dire warnings, their own right-wing portrait of the Antichrist, their own warrants to violence – in this case, state suppression of right-wing groups. Both religious right and liberal left are using the millennium as ultimate rhetorical leverage to demonize one another, even to justify a violent solution to the American culture wars.

I believe seeking has become increasingly preoccupied with this business of “shadow-boxing.” We look at each other across the “great divide” of American culture and of Quakerism, and we project caricatures of one another. In many cases, we project our own unexamined inner shadows, vague “bogey-man”

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images of fear and loathing: “those fundamentalists,” “those universalists,” “those feminists,” “those homophobes.” And the longer we project shadowy caricatures of one another, the longer we refuse to engage in honest dialogue, the more we become caricatures of ourselves. Laughable at best; potentially dangerous to ourselves and others.

Over time, without our noticing very clearly, seeking has floundered and deadened in the Nineties. Of course, there are still significant movements, and individuals making important personal breakthroughs. But when we look across the culture in general and the Quaker scene in particular, we can see a twilight, a deepening gloom, a subtle decay. We have depleted ourselves with endless lateral seeking here and there. We have opened ourselves to new light from some directions, but hardened our hearts to light from some other quarters. Our seeking after is equally running from. Over time, we have withdrawn into safe, sullen enclaves of subculture. Slowly, I have recognized this pattern in myself. That has helped me see it more broadly among us as well.

We are captive peoples. Most of us are not especially oppressed. But we are captives – captivated by a system that serves most of us rather well in material terms. Enslaved by consumption, isolated from one another, fearful and suspicious, we struggle for solid footing, for a place to stand, to resist the forces that daily carry us further into captivity. Seeking and running to and fro, every new place ends up more like the old places.

The Seekers of the 1650s felt an acute sense of captivity. The stories of Seekers who became Friends in those days are full of the language of captivity. But they had learned from the Exodus story of liberation. It was when the children of Israel groaned in their captive misery that God heard and responded. Early Quaker conviction stories are full of the language of groaning, sighing, crying out to the Lord. Early Quaker meetings experienced waves of these sounds among the participants – and waves of physical

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trembling. Do we groan in our captivity? Or are we still in denial, happy seekers? (Sunday evening, Deborah Saunders evoked the images of the Exodus from Egypt, challenging us to wake up and feel our captivity, to prepare ourselves for divine power moving among us.)%%

Now, I do not deny that many among us have struggled and gained a degree of liberation. There have been personal liberations from oppressions based upon gender, sexual orientation, or race. There have been personal liberations from the captivities of addiction, destructive relationships, etc. These have been hard-fought and transforming. When we sang “We Shall Overcome” in the Sixties, most of us Boomers did not realize just how hard the struggle would be – or how much we would have to overcome ourselves. So in a number of ways, we have struggled out of Egypt, out of the most patent forms of American cultural captivity.

But we have wandered long and languished in a trackless wilderness. Rootlessness, aimlessness, loneliness, cynicism, rage: these bewildered conditions have worn many of us down. Like the alienated Israelites that left Egypt, my generation may live and die in this wilderness. But when one is lost in a wilderness, there comes a point where it does no good to continue wandering. Sometimes the only way out is to stand still, cry for help, and let ourselves be found.

Yes, somewhere along the line, a beautiful flower has faded. For some seekers, it was the full flower of post-war American religion and culture, the Fifties and early Sixties. For others, it was the opening bud of the counterculture, the “flower power” of the latter Sixties and early Seventies. In different ways, we grieve for something lost. In different ways, we blame one another for the fading of the flower. But it is easy to become so obsessed with the faded flower that we do not recognize the seed that has slowly come to maturity within it.

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The prophet Isaiah belonged to a demoralized Jewish community that had spent decades captive in Babylon. He writes, “A voice says, ‘Cry out!’ And I said, ‘What shall I cry?’ All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. [Yes,] the grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever” (Isa. 40:6-8). That word, the living word that lodges within each of us, is like a seed. It can lie dormant for many years, in dry conditions, under hard-baked soil. But when the conditions are right, the same seed can awaken and rise with gentle yet irrepressible strength. That seed of God, that deep-encoded hope lodged in the human heart, still lies within the faded flower of our youthful hopes and dreams.

That promise, that seed, stands forever. I know, because it is still alive in me, in spite of everything! Yes, the flower has faded – I’ve gone bald, I’m getting gray, and I’ve slowed down a bit. Yes, the grass withers – I’ve seen many cherished dreams die. Dreams for my own life, dreams for the world, dreams for the Religious Society of Friends – come and gone. And I know that many of those dreams were naive, wishful. But the deep truth that encoded those dreams in me still lives. In fact, that seed has been slowly maturing in us through these long years of hope and disappointment. The time has come for it to rise.

For the seed to rise in this generation, I believe it must re-engage our diverging paths of seeking. By themselves, our conflicting agendas will never move beyond captivity and bewilderment. Observe how in nature, every seed or egg combines two different strands of genetic code. The strands combine and intertwine in a double helix of oppositions that encode new life out of the old. Over the course of most generations, the new life will simply reproduce the old, with minor variations. But at times, new

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combinations produce startling new varieties. I believe we are living in such times, like those that produced Quakerism.

In his day, Isaac Penington was a world-class Seeker. His powerful intellect had roamed far and wide in the 1640s and '50s. Yet his many insights only led him further into twilight. Despite many brilliant departures, he had not arrived. When he finally broke through as a Quaker, he experienced God's presence within as a seed. He writes, "Some may desire to know what I have at last met with? I answer, I have met with the seed. Understand that word, and thou wilt be satisfied and inquire no further." He urges Seekers: "Sink down to the seed which God sows in the heart, and let that grow in thee, and be in thee, and breathe in thee, and act in thee."

Sinking down to the seed amounts to what George Fox called standing still in the light. Both Fox and Penington used seed and light metaphors extensively. We all have some experience of what they call seed and light. We all have some experience of sinking down, of standing still. I have found that reading and listening deeply to their spiritual counsel helps me be more faithful in my walk with God. Other spiritual teachers and traditions can also help us. (Sallie King testified eloquently Monday evening to the enrichment she, along with many other Friends, have found in combining Buddhist and Quaker spiritual practices.)%% But we can also do well to listen more closely to the depth of our own tradition.

The special challenge for us as seekers today is not merely to stand still in our safe cultural enclaves. The challenge is to stand still for one another, stand still next to that "other" that disturbs us. The challenge is to sink down to the unexamined shadow that the disturbing "other" represents: the fundamentalist or the universalist, the witch or the Friends pastor. The one we are running from is the messenger. The message is already within us.

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My past year at Woodbrooke was filled with many important experiences. Among them was listening to a group of grassroots peacemakers gathered from all over the world to pool their experiences in the Responding to Conflict program. I got to know two religious leaders from Nigeria. One was an Assemblies of God pastor and the other a Muslim imam. They came from two tribes enmeshed in bloody ethnic and religious conflict. Both had lost family members. The pastor's right arm had been cut off by Muslim attackers. But these two men have covenanted together to work with the youth on both sides, to root out the cycle of violence, even if the hope lies in the next generation and not their own. It was humbling to observe the two of them together. They were not natural "buddies" and sometimes chafed at each another. And they knew how profound their religious differences were. Yet they were committed to one another in the cause of something greater, a common future for their peoples – and the future of their cherished faiths. If two fundamentalists of mutually-exclusive faiths can move forward together, with differences intact, why not Friends?

At the end of that term, I had a conversation with another participant, a man from Tanzania. He told me he was impressed with what he had learned of Quakers. I shrugged and said sheepishly that we have some problems. But he replied that Quaker ways had made a difference to the Responding to Conflict group, especially at their closing session. They wanted to end with some kind of spiritual affirmation. But the tensions across religious boundaries were an obstacle. They ended up resorting to Quaker silent worship. That created the space for a powerful experience none of them could have planned. I was again humbled to relearn a basic lesson of Quakerism from a newcomer. We Friends are outstanding at creating spaces where different groups can meet and make peace together – you know, those groups that "have problems." But are we willing to step into that space ourselves?



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This is the space where seeking comes to a standstill, no longer running from what we fear, no longer chasing after a past golden age or a future one. Rather, it is standing still next to our shadow-opposite. Here the light comes not through the self we own, but through the shadow we fear and loathe. This is the place of dread, where the flesh fries in its desperation to bolt, where the mind loses its tenacious grasp, where the heart melts, where the seed rises to freedom. This is the end of the world, the new creation.

I have run to and fro more than twenty years among Friends, sometimes running away from one version of Quakerism as much as running toward another. Like many forms of seeking, it has been a faithful errand, a creative process, up to a point. But it has also been erratic and self-defeating at times. I am weary of it. Slowly, I am learning to stand still. The peace that I find, and the strength that comes, contrary to all expectation, are sublime. I know that many of you have found and are finding that place to stand still. Can we stand still together?