

QUAKER MEMBERSHIP: SEARCHING FOR MEANING AND APPLICATION

A Working Paper

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“...to ascertain whether or not he understands the belief and practices of the Society of Friends and ... is in substantial agreement with them and intends to conduct himself accordingly.”

(Brinton, Guide, p. 40. Criteria for Membership)

Webster's Dictionary defines membership as 1) the state or status of being a member, and 2) the collective body of members, as of a society. It defines member(s) as person or persons comprising a society, or community or party.

The word “society” rings a familiar note, but the definitions do not tell us very much. They speak of a member as part of a whole; they do not tell us how you become that part, what defines one as part of the whole, or what constitutes being part of a whole. So essentially, as is the case with most Webster's definitions, or other dictionary reductions, we have the benefit of form and not substance, and certainly it tells us nothing about Quaker or Friends membership. Perhaps a better key to searching for meaning and application would be to utilize a highly valued Quaker guide - experience. What then has been the experience of membership within Quakerism, or better, in Quaker history?

So let's begin with the historical record of Quaker membership, and then move on to contemporary aspects of membership and end with a few concluding comments, appreciating current Quaker tensions inherent in the existing (in place) composition of Quaker Meeting membership.

Historically there was no regularly enrolled membership in the Religious Society of Friends until 1737. Before that time and for a while after attendance at the monthly business meeting was on invitation. The habit Friends had formed of looking after those of their group who were in necessitous circumstances made it helpful to have a list of those who were entitled to material help; thus an enrolled membership came into being.¹ Quakers had learned not to be dependent upon the government for such help. “Let everyone that will preach the Gospel live of the Gospel and not upon any settled or state maintenance ...”² This list then included children as well as adults, for they were also in need, children in early times quite often being in the majority of those left in meetings while their parents were in jail for conscience' sake.

The practice of enrolling children led to birthright Friends - persons who did not join because of “convincement” or spiritual transformation but initially as a result of biological happening. So one negative consequence of the new membership rules was that

numbers of people became Quakers before they experienced a spiritual transformation. When, in the history of the early Christian church, children were subsequently (but not in the earliest times) baptized at birth into the community, and when even later, by Roman edict, all Romans became Catholic (as opposed to heretical) Christians as a result of holding Roman citizenship, large numbers of initially spiritually uncommitted members also arose.

Children, however, were welcome into Quaker membership at birth because the conception of a Meeting was as a community, similar in type to a family, and therefore it was appropriate for them to be under the care and oversight of the Meeting and to be recipients of those funds for persons in need.³

But why was membership not recorded until 1737? Was it only for this reason? Surely Friends were in need from the very beginning, as the Kendal fund for the traveling ministers and those in prison attests. Was there something more? A modern writer states that, "early Friends did not at first bother to record membership, and even now it is not uncommon for an attender to wait years before requesting membership."⁴

But at the beginning, much like as in early Christian beginnings, it was not simply a question of "bother" or "waiting" but rather that a member was identified and recognized experientially without the necessity of bookkeeping. An obvious identity flowed from the then existing experience. At first there is an awakening, a transformation, a being born anew with a baptism of spirit which identifies a group receiving a revelation, and practicing it with ecstatic, apocalyptic enthusiasm. The result is persecution by the world which feels threatened by the consequences of an overt teaching and public witness.

We may again find similarities between early Quaker and early Christian membership not so surprising since William Penn described Quakerism as "primitive Christianity revived." A Catholic priest-theologian, presently under scrutiny by the Vatican, Edward Schillebeeckx writes: Until well into the 2nd century witnesses or martyrs, i.e. Christians who had confessed Jesus as Christ before the civil authorities and as a result, according to Roman norms, were already guilty of a capital offense, *ipso facto* became official witnesses to the apostolic tradition regardless of whether they had actually be executed. This qualified them without the official ordination now required by canon law. Suffering and withstanding torture had consecrated them as authentic witnesses - that is, Christians. They all had become "priests" through their testing and suffering by public authority. That then was the means by which members were identified without any written recording whatsoever.⁵ Ministers arose out of the members and were commissioned or, as in early Quaker language, recorded as such.

And so it was with the original Children of Light as well, also known as Publishers of Truth, before they were nicknamed Quakers and yet longer still before the organizational name of Religious Society of Friends took hold. These people could readily be outwardly identified as witnesses and martyrs during a period of 40 years of persecution. This constituted the first generation and the price was enormous. Many died in jail or of the plague or by execution or as the result of prolonged illnesses upon release from imprisonment.

Unlike today, anyone who attended a Meeting automatically committed an illegal act against the state. One's life was on the line from that communion with other outlaws for conscience' sake. Such risk was the stock of membership. "Persons were known as

Quakers if they attended Meetings and were prepared to suffer for their beliefs.”⁶ Donaster tells us “...there was no formal membership until 1737, though the fact of membership was at no time more real and significant than in these first 80 years....”⁷

Out of these experiences grew a linguistic abhorrence of creed or dogma but Friends easily talked of doctrines, principles, beliefs, testimonies, practices, advices, accepted as the basis of the existing spiritual commonality. As the external persecutions tempered, the beginning of internal disputes took place. One of the very first of these disputes was called the Wilkinson-Storey conflict. Among other things those who followed Wilkinson and Storey “feared informers and they wanted to hold their meetings away from their village instead of openly in their own houses.” says David Holden in his recent book Friends Divided.⁸ There were other disagreements with Fox concerning the place of women in Quaker ministry, the increased control emanating from London, and questions of spontaneity and organization flowing from the creation of Monthly Meetings for business. Wilkinson-Storey and others felt that too much authority was now placed in the community meeting without enough openness for the revelations of the Spirit to flow, certainly an authentic concern. Perrot, before their time, and Keith to follow, questioned the relationship of charisma and community. (Note: not to confuse charisma with “comfortableness.”)

However the dark side of the dispute, Holden concludes, was that “the dissidents wanted to be allowed to meet on the moors and save the heavy fines that came from meeting in Friends’ houses. The dissidents also wanted to be allowed to pay tithes and avoid the heavy fines for not paying them.”⁹ With the passage in 1689 of the Toleration Act, Quaker persecution and public witness began to wind down as a more comfortable era dawned. Those who were under persecution from the King now found themselves in America under contract to the King in William Penn’s “Holy Experiment.” The outs were the ins while retaining their principles and doctrines found within the spirit of radical Christianity. The refusal to take oaths, adherence to pacifism and a type of simple living, and language of equality, adherence to spiritual baptism and communion, the absence of hireling priests, the joy of silent meeting, and the refusal to take their hats off to special people characterized Friends nevertheless.

Holden says, “membership had been confined to those who had been baptized in the truth thus limited to adults and children mature enough to understand. Although the message was intended for everyone, only those who had fully accepted it by facing persecution were welcome to the inner “select” and business meetings.”¹⁰ A London Yearly Meeting epistle of 1708 cautioned against admission of persons too early into fellowship.¹¹ But this would no longer be the norm.

Friends soon “ceased to prophecy in public against steeplehouses and had become a thrifty dealer studying to be quiet.”¹² Practices had become testimonies by the end of the 17th century, against war, gambling, alcohol, swearing, music, dancing, and they moved toward separation from the world rather than contention with it. This new version brought on a different and more formal outward way of living wrapped around the quietist life of plainness all the while moving from thriftiness to wealth. As a Holy Experiment ceased in Pennsylvania, they were the outs,

religiously, once again, but certainly with the ins economically. With membership defined in terms

of the above customs and rigidly enforced, many disownments resulted.

In 1737 London Yearly Meeting drew up a Minute that finally defined membership to solve the problem of too many attenders, non-members and indigent people taxing the available funds for the benefit of members who had previously been recognized by their persecution and preaching. As formal membership was created in the process Friends lost the “select” nature of the meetings for church affairs. Previously only “well-seasoned” Friends had been invited to attend. With formal membership for all friends all were now free to attend meetings for business.¹³ With this the roles of ministers, elders, and overseers were enhanced to administer a discipline considered necessary for such broadened membership.¹⁴

The original discipline, called “Gospel Order” is summed up in an epistle Fox wrote just before he died in 1791: “Keep all your meetings in the name of the Lord Jesus that will be gathered in his name, by his light, grace, truth, power and spirit by which you will feel his blessed and refreshing presence among you and in you to your comfort and God’s glory ... and therefore all stand steadfast in Christ Jesus your head, in whom all are male and female and know his government ...”¹⁵

By 1812 the London Yearly Meeting stated that there would be considerable advantage in keeping an alphabetical list of members. In 1851 a similar recommendation was made in regard to keeping a list of attenders of meetings not in membership. By 1862 compilations of the number of habitual attenders as well as members was kept, 13,844 members, 3190 attenders.¹⁶

During the 19th century as part of the withdrawal from outward witness and confrontation, the Friends suffered inward, internal corporate strife with many separations and new formations of separate meetings which this paper is not designed to comment upon in detail but which certainly has a bearing on the diversity of Quaker values today. These separations resulted in permanently established variations of Quaker membership, discipline, practice and faith, moving from an original apocalyptic prophetic beginning to a later quietist mystical stance. Today Quakers are religiously identified generally in conservative, moderate, liberal and evangelical camps (not to be confused with political language) with smaller groups pulling at the poles such as the New Foundation Fellowship and Quaker Universalist Fellowship.

Commenting on contemporary aspects of membership, Warren Smith says: becoming a Friend usually is a two or three month process. Many meetings do not admit children as members until they are old enough to make an independent commitment but Friends also carry with them a body of fellow travelers many times their number. Friends require a large commitment in exchange for few theological certainties, he adds.¹⁷

Howard Brinton has described the modern test of membership as not being a particular kind of religious experience, nor an acceptance of any particular religious, social or economic creed. The test as he sees it is compatibility with the meeting community. Sincere religious experience and right religious belief are both important but they develop in the course of participation in the activities of the Meeting. Those who can become so

integrated with the Meeting that they help the whole and the whole helps them are now qualified to become members.¹⁸

The Christian Faith and Practice of London Yearly Meeting includes the following comments on membership without an authoritative statement of its own and with no apparent necessity for consistency or compatibility of such statements. For example, "Membership... is an outward sign of an inner union with Christ, the living head... Unity is essential upon the spiritual and practical nature of Christianity ... and the claim of Christ to rule our whole life both inward and outward."¹⁹ But then "the test of membership should not be doctrinal agreement, nor adherence to certain testimonies, but evidence of sincere seeking and striving for truth together with an understanding of the lines along which Friends are seeking that truth."²⁰

In a booklet entitled The Meaning of Membership to New England Friends, George Selleck writes that "becoming a member of the Society of Friends commits a person to a way of life. The mark of a Quaker is that he endeavors to live his daily life in keeping with the spirit of the Quaker testimonies. Becoming a member has been compared to ordination in other churches; one is not only potentially a minister but is expected to be informed about his faith, as it is a matter of first hand experience.... The applicant for membership is not expected to formulate his religious beliefs in any prescribed fashion. He is expected to be a humble learner in the school of Christ Persons are accepted into membership who sincerely want to follow the life and teachings of Jesus under the guidance and authority of the Light within.... Membership in the Christian church is a high privilege which entails a corresponding responsibility.... He need not have arrived at truth as defined by someone else but he must be a sincere seeker."²¹

As for seekers, the Pacific Yearly Meeting takes that one on. "Our fellowship with all seekers should not cause us to overlook our identity as Friends... The Society of Friends values the attendance and participation in its Meetings of persons drawn to Friends whether or not they are members of the society. At the same time the Society welcomes and encourages concerned persons to consider the increased opportunities for development of their religious lives which may come through membership. If they are willing, attenders should be included as such in the meeting's list of names and addresses. They may be asked to serve the needs of the Meeting in all ways suitable to their qualifications other than as officers, as members of the committees on worship and ministry, oversight and nominations, and as chairpersons of most committees. ...Members have an obligation to attend and take part in business meetings. Attenders are also welcome. Responsibility for decisions however remains with the members of a Meeting."²²

Perhaps we should conclude with a quotation from New England Yearly Meeting's 1985 Faith and Practice; "Membership in the Religious Society of Friends as a part of the Christian fellowship is both a privilege and a responsibilityFaith in God and an effort to follow the life and teachings of Jesus under the guidance and authority of the Light within are the bases of our Quaker faith. The Society should reach out to and welcome into active membership all who find unity with the principles and the testimonies of Friends as reflected in this book of Faith and Practice."²³

The question of membership entails consideration of present membership and attender composition and how that composition sees itself in unity with the bases of faith described by the New England Yearly Meeting Faith and Practice and as a Friends Monthly Meeting. Composition of many Friends Meetings today have variations of Quaker values drawn from almost every perspective emerging from the strife and separations of the 19th century. These are not only Quaker but Christian variations sometimes posing conflict seeming to be incompatible, and are no less the differences that are found among the Christian church as a whole as well as Buddhist and Hindu and Islamic denominations within the parent group. There has always been a higher value among Quakers in unity than in diversity which is found not in creeds but in experience and revelation and which then is enunciated in principles and testimonies which describe those experiences and revelations. Today there is a longing for identity as well as an appreciation of diversity and a sadness with separation and a longing for a commonality which is not compelled nor coerced and yet such that it reflects more than a lukewarm blandness of comfort and convenience lacking common conviction and conscience. Identity and commonality can be the source of new life to communities already in place through a holy spiritual energy which once again is tested by risk and willingness to suffer for righteousness sake in a world even now experiencing its own demise of existing social structures and the glorification of individualism and relativism.

QUERIES

1. What relevance does the Quaker past have for you?
2. To what extent do you see the diminishment of the original Quaker "Gospel Order" as determinative of presently existing problems concerning membership?
3. In what ways can membership be strengthened in light of past history and present complexities?

NOTES

1. Brinton, Guide, 40ff.
2. Holden, Quakers Divided, 13, quoting Richard Hubberthorn.
3. Brinton, Guide, 40ff.
4. Smith, One Explorers Glossary, 30.
5. Schillebeeckx, Ministry, 32-33.
6. Selleck, 126.
7. Donaster, Quaker Organization, 58.
8. Holden, 21.
9. Holden, 22.

10. Holden, 45.
11. Donaster, 28.
12. Holden, 43.
13. Holden, 35.
14. Holden, 45.
15. Donaster, 15.
16. Donaster, 58.
17. Smith, 30.
18. Brinton, Friends for 300 Years, 127-29.
19. London Yearly Meeting, Christian Faith and Practice, para. 187.
20. L.Y.M., Christian Faith and Practice, para. 368.
21. Selleck, 126-27.
22. Pacific Yearly Meeting, Faith and Practice, 33.
23. New England Yearly Meeting, Faith and Practice, 235.