

*Discerning authority*  
***together***  
*on the way to the door*

By Jennie Isbell

## Easter Morning\*

Maybe someone comes to the door and says,  
"Repent," and you say, "Come on in," and it's  
Jesus. That's when all you ever did, or said,  
or even thought, suddenly wakes up again and  
sings out, "I'm still here," and you know it's true.  
You just shiver alive and are left standing  
there suddenly brought to account: saved.

Except maybe that someone says, "I've got a deal  
for you." And you listen, because that's how  
you're trained –**they** told you, "Always hear both sides."  
So then the slick voice can sell you anything, even  
Hell, which is what you're getting by listening.  
Well, what should you do? I'd say always go to  
the door, yes, but keep the screen locked. Then,  
while you hold the Bible in one hand, lean forward  
and say carefully, "Jesus?"

In his poem "Easter Morning," William Stafford tells the story of someone answering the door, and he offers two possible endings to the story. In the first stanza, it is Jesus at the door who tells the person to repent, and all is well. In the second stanza, the identity of the visitor is less clear, but comes across as a traveling salesman. The poet recommends responding to the one who knocks at the door by going cautiously, discerningly.

The image of keeping the screen locked and carrying a source of authority to the door to confirm who is calling seems appropriate to Friends' understandings of how discernment works. Like Stafford, Friends will be inclined always to go to the door, because we believe that God is at work in the world and that we, as individuals and as worshiping communities, may be called to take a specific and active part in bringing God's Way to bear. Difficulty sometimes arises when we go to the door as a meeting or church community, and everyone is carrying something different in their hand, and perhaps when we lean toward the screen and say a name for God that sounds different than what our fellow members say. Most painful of all, is coming to the door together and only then realizing our differences in vocabulary and understandings of spiritual authority.

## With the Bible in One Hand

In the gospels, there are several kinds of authority identified. From their context, some insights about these forms of authority arise.

In *Matthew 7:28-29*, the crowds hearing Jesus recognize that he teaches as one with authority. In particular, the crowds note that Jesus does not teach as the scribes teach, so in some sense, his authority is: 1) recognized by others as opposed to claimed by himself, and 2) recognized as different from others who do claim authority for themselves.

In *Mark 6:7-11*, Jesus sends the disciples out in pairs and gives them authority over unclean spirits. Here Jesus is the giver of authority, which is given for a specific purpose and given with very specific instructions in how to go about the work. Herein lays a particular call to a particular form of obedience in the daily life of those called.

In *Matthew 8:5-10*, a centurion asks Jesus to heal his servant. When Jesus offers to travel to the servant, the centurion says that Jesus can cure the servant from a distance, with words, and that he knows this about Jesus because he understands the way authority works in his own military context. Jesus calls the understanding of the centurion "faith."

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A more curious gospel-based insight into authority comes in *Luke 4:5-7*, when the devil, tempting Jesus, shows him all the kingdoms of the world, and offers Jesus authority over them if only Jesus will worship him. The authority the devil offers is unconditional.

Revisiting Stafford's poem, it does seem as if it may be the devil who comes to the door in the second stanza. As Quakers, called to participate in worshiping communities and enjoying tools for shared discernment that have been handed down from earlier Friends, we don't have to answer the door alone.

*"... we don't have to answer the door alone."*

### Members of the Body, Discerning and Responding Together

Central to Quaker spirituality is membership in a worshiping community. Listen deeply. Be willing to be challenged and changed by what we hear – **this** is the call to participatory membership. It seems impossible to "do discernment" outside of relationship to one another – **not** individual discernment and not corporate discernment. For this reason, we are called into bodies (meetings, churches), and these bodies are intended, as our tradition holds, to be bodies of Christ moving in the world. We expect that the Spirit of God may come upon us in worship and we brace ourselves to respond to this Presence.

Discerning communities turn to Scripture, the texts of our extended communities' relationship with God, and they turn to the broader tradition and insights gained by persons of faith in earlier generations. They consult reason and experience too. Discerning communities have an on-going, in-the-moment, present and powerful relationship with the speaking, leading, teaching Christ. Such communities practice being in community, transparently, learning to listen and respond as one body. In this model, if community is deteriorated, it must be repaired, so that again Friends may together seek the Christ who is present as Teacher.

When your own body is sick, you might consult a professional or do research on your own to see what is needed. You might rest. You might medicate. You might emerge from your sickbed long enough to resolve to move toward a wellness plan as a step towards preventing future illness. Or, when your body is sick, you might deny it, and put off care of the body until all vitality is gone.

When the body of your worshiping community is sick, what do you do?

### What Do You Carry With You to the Door?

In the Stafford poem, the visitor at the door may be an ambassador of God, or he may be someone much less appealing. The poet suggests going to the door, and keeping the screen locked while inquiring of the source. Recalling the lessons on authority from the gospels, one might pause to consider the source of authority represented by the visitor, and also what measure one (and one's community) carries to the door. Late 18th-century Methodist John Wesley is credited with identifying four sources of authority for addressing theological questions: Scripture, tradition, reason and experience.

An insightful exercise for body/community health assessment is to take these four categories and ask individuals to write down what percentage of influence each has in the life of each person. Using percentages that add up to 100, how much weight does Scripture have in your discerning/decision-making processes? Reason? Experience? Tradition? And then, write down the four categories of influence again and ask what percentage of influence each has in the life of the worshiping community as a body. Listen carefully for the answers. Individuals may not know how the body they belong to moves, or they may see that they are in stark contrast to their perceptions of how their own religious community makes decisions and understands sources of authority. How will it be to bring these insights into the community for further conversation?

It may be best, if you find yourself hearing a knock at the door, to keep the screen locked, carry a trusted source of authority in your hand and take your Friends, with all that they carry, in hand. Be gentle with one another as you learn how you each recognize spiritual authority, and resolve as you make your way to the door to make time to know one another more deeply, and to care for the body you share.

For tools to help your meeting or church begin or deepen the process of exploring vocabulary, spiritual authority and their shared understandings of being called and being responsive to God, consider *Leading Quakers: Discipleship Leadership, A Friends Model*, an adult religious education resource published by the Earlham School of Religion.

Jennie Isbell is a 2007 graduate of the Earlham School of Religion and currently serves ESR as director of outreach. Her work with bodies extends into her body-centered ministries as a massage therapist and yoga teacher.



