

West Hills Friends Advices & Queries on Authority

Friends know that spiritual authority is derived from the inward work of God's Spirit. We do not recognize authority based upon title or rank. This non-hierarchical view of authority is reflected in Quaker worship and in the Quaker method of doing business. In these practices, anyone may speak. The value of what is shared is not determined by a higher human authority, but by the group itself, recognizing the presence or absence of Christ in what has been said.

Friends regard someone's idea as authoritative, not because of their position, but because we recognize that their words do indeed reflect the Light of Christ's Spirit. If we do not hear that Light reflected in their words, then what they say is without authority no matter what title they may use among us. Among Friends, a leader has authority when he or she is delivering God's message.

West Hills Friends does not judge a person's ministry and leadership on the basis of any incidental characteristic. It is our experience and testimony that God works through people without regard for race, age, gender or sexual orientation.

West Hill Friends, Portland OR – westhillsfriends.org

While Quakers do not have a creed, we do have right order for conducting Business and other matters. I believe in right order, and group process as ardently as I believe that the sun will set tonight and rise in the morning. I have faith in right order the way some people have faith in good works. I have faith in right order because it empowers us. By making decisions in our corporate process, a process in which we expect the Spirit to participate, we allow the living Spirit to inform and guide us, and lead us to a decision that is best for the Meeting, whatever that decision is. If we expect and embrace guidance, and follow the methods we have developed for right order, we are empowered by the Spirit, by the process, and by the group that we are in. Reaching Sense of the Meeting on a difficult issue is first, a great relief, but it is also ennobling, and it is humbling, because we could not have gotten there alone. And it is an affirmation of faith. - Diana White

http://neym.org/sites/default/files/DWhite_Mt.Toby02.pdf

I was at the plow, meditating on the things of God, and suddenly I heard a voice saying to me "Get thee out from thy kindred and from thy father's house." And I had a promise given with it, whereupon I did exceedingly rejoice that I had heard the voice of that God which I had professed from a child, but had never known him. - James Nayler

To summarize, George Fox and other early Friends asked "What Canst Thou Say?" with an emphasis on "Thou." In asking this question, they were inquiring into the ultimate source of religious authority and apparently finding it in the experience of the individual and the Meeting, rather than in a book or a rigid tradition or any person.

But from the beginning there were ambiguities and soft spots in this answer, as Quaker history would suggest. In the event of a conflict between the apparent Light Within of every person and, on the other hand, a group testimony, how could both the group and the person be "authoritative"? – a problem illustrated in the Nayler case. It is illustrated, too, in the history of disfellowshipping or expulsion from the Meeting over apparently conscientious differences. While methods used in the business meeting were designed to discover unity, they often failed to do so; and because they did not do so in some cases, schism was the result.

What Canst Thou Say? –

Quakerism And Religious Authority

By Mulford Q. Sibley

<https://universalistfriends.org/quf1998a.html>

Conflict as a Tactic that Disempowers

There will be a point in a business meeting where we fall into the narrative of what it means to be Quaker is to challenge the authority of someone who is claiming authority for themselves and undermine that with some inward authority that is going to break everything open and God juice is just going to leak over everything and it is going to be amazing.

But it doesn't actually go that way and what winds up happening is people often feel very disempowered by the process because they think they have accepted responsibility for something and they do the work and they show up and all of a sudden everything is back to square one and every decision can be renegotiated.

It becomes painful for people to do this and people stop taking on leadership because they have had this experience and they decide I don't want to do that anymore. - Michael Huber

<http://gatheringinlight.com/2017/03/24/mike-huber-on-authority-conflict-and-love-in-quaker-conversations/>

The Inner Light does not lead men to do that which is right in their own eyes, but that which is right in God's eyes. As the Light is One, so its teaching is ultimately (though not superficially) harmonious. In actual experience, it is not found that souls truly looking to the Inner Light as their authority will break away from each other in anarchy.

Ellen S Bosanquet, 1927 Britain YM Faith and Practice

Just as Quakers do not limit the service of God to certain times, or places, or people, so they do not have a set-apart priesthood... There is no need for any specific person to be designated prophet, priest, or church leader. Quakers would say that if people are open to the power of love and light in their lives then they will themselves become prophetic and priestly, and will not need to follow the external authority of church leaders. They will become empowered to be themselves, to find God in their hearts and to serve other people.

Harvey Gillman, 1988 Britain YM Faith and Practice

We believe any doctrine, belief or practice that contradicts the Scriptures is not to be accepted, and that they are the most perfect outward rule of faith and practice, but not the primary rule, which we attribute to the Spirit that gave them forth, by which alone their meaning can be rightly understood, and we believe without this Spirit none should endeavor to study or teach them. NC YM Conservative, 1935

Members should exercise forbearance in discussion and should seek Divine guidance, realizing that Truth will often transcend the understanding of any single individual. - Advices, Baltimore Yearly Meeting

Friends find their essential unity in their profound and exhilarating belief in the pervasive presence of God and in the continuing responsibility of each person and worshipping group to seek the leading of the Spirit in all things. Obedience to the leading of that Spirit rather than to any written statement of belief or conduct is the obligation of their faith.

New England Yearly Meeting
1985

True worship may be experienced at any time in any place—alone on the hills or in the busy daily life—we may find God, in whom we live and move and have our being. But this individual experience is not sufficient, and in a meeting held in the Spirit there is a giving and receiving between its members, one helping another with or without words. So there may come a wider vision and a deeper experience.

London Yearly Meeting

The Quaker conviction is that as we go deeper into ourselves we shall eventually reach a still, quiet centre. At this point two things happen simultaneously. Each of us is aware of our unique value as an individual human being, and each of us is aware of our utter interdependence on one another.

George Gorman 1982

Each of these Quarterly Meetings were large and sat near eight hours. Here I had occasion to consider that it is a weighty thing to speak much in large meetings for business. First, except our minds are rightly prepared and we clearly understand the case we speak to, instead of forwarding, we hinder business and make more labour for those on whom the burden of the work is laid.

If selfish views or a partial spirit have any room in our minds, we are unfit for the Lord's work. If we have a clear prospect of the business and proper weight on our minds to speak, it behooves us to avoid useless apologies and repetitions. Where people are gathered from far, and adjourning a meeting of business is attended with great difficulty, it behooves all to be cautious how they detain a meeting, especially when they have sat six or seven hours and [have] a great distance to ride home.

In three hundred minutes are five hours, and he that improperly detains three hundred people one minute, besides other evils that attend it, does an injury like that of imprisoning one man five hours without cause.

John Woolman 1758

Our monthly and quarterly meetings were set up for reprovng and looking into superfluous or disorderly walking, and such to be admonished and instructed in the truth, and not private persons to take upon them to make orders, and say this must be done and the other must not be done ... [Or say] we must look at no colours, nor make anything that is changeable colours as the hills are, nor sell them, nor wear them: but we must all be in one dress and one colour.

This is a silly poor gospel! It is more fit for us to be covered with God's eternal Spirit, and clothed with his eternal Light, which leads us and guides us into righteousness, and to live righteously and justly and holily in this present evil world. This is the clothing that God puts upon us, and likes, and will bless.

Margaret Fell 1700

One persistent misunderstanding of some Friends and attenders is that Friends reject outward forms. This is not true. Friends' unique practices flow from a conviction concerning what is the right outward form. The right form for church government, worship, and ministry answers the same question: how should we act, what should be our response, if Jesus Christ is present in our midst, desiring to speak? To Friends, the answer is that we should sit in reverence, waiting for him to speak. Thus, Friends gather in reverence, waiting to be spoken to, spoken through, and led.

Terry Wallace, Susan Smith, John Smith, Arthur Berk

As a Liberal Friend, I know that trying to name the Divine or become specific about the nature of 'God' is theologically inappropriate, that our words stumble to match the depth of all we experience. Thus, at one level, we don't want to use any term. At another level, however, we need to talk quite a lot about what we are connecting with, and we have lost a common tongue, a primal language, to do this in when we start to locally reinterpret our book of discipline in a multiplicity of ways on the basis of the 'need' for inclusivity, or ignore it altogether.

Ben Pink Dandelion

The life of a religious society consists in something more than the body of principles it professes and the outer garments of organisation which it wears. These things have their own importance: they embody the society to the world, and protect it from the chance and change of circumstance; but the springs of life lie deeper, and often escape recognition. They are to be found in the vital union of the members of the society with God and with one another, a union which allows the free flowing through the society of the spiritual life which is its strength.

William Charles Braithwaite 1905

Meeting for worship can be more than just an occasion on which one's private religious needs are satisfied. Silent devotion should lead to an awareness that the meeting is less and less a place we choose ourselves, and more and more a place to which, out of love, God has called us. To understand this is to sense the meaning of those lovely phrases about the community of faith being the body of Christ.

John Punshon 1987

It is this inward work of Christ, and not our verbal statements about Christ, that can produce that amazing unity in a gathered meeting for worship, a gathered meeting for business, or a gathered opportunity between two people. And finally, it is this inward work of Christ that leads inevitably to the important outwardness of Quakerism; to a life able to behave in all those ways which Jesus taught and in which he led the way, to a living equality of men and women, to a radiant and supple pacifism that comes not merely from books or movements or anger but that wells up from deep inner springs.

William Taber

At its best, a Quaker Meeting is not just a collection of individual seekers, but a community of faith, a covenant community, knit together by our common seeking of God. We are like spokes on a wheel: as we draw closer to our center in God, we also draw closer to each other. ... And as Douglas Steere has reminded us, “To come near to God is to change.”

Differences and disappointments are inevitable, but in a faith community these are seen not as obstacles, but as opportunities for transformation. God calls us into community because it is only in community that we can learn God’s transforming lessons of love, service, compassion, and forgiveness.

Thomas Gates

One of our dearly held modern shibboleths is that we are all equal. The truth is that God does indeed love each of us equally, and invites each of us, equally, into the kingdom, into salvation, into right relationship, into wholeness. But too often there is a negative side to this cliché that all Friends are equal. This is the attitude that adds, if anyone stands out or thinks he or she has a gift or calling, we’ll pull that person down. If such a person is arrogant or on a power-trip, then it is right to admonish and try to help the Friend see his or her gift and role in the larger context of Gospel Order. But what if a Friend is paying close attention to God’s voice, and living with increasing integrity and love and for that reason others feel uncomfortable? How do we regard someone who is exercising gifts given by God for the edification and upbuilding of the faith community? Too often deep vocal ministry, a prophetic voice, or moral leadership are resented.

Martha Paxson Grundy

[Friends] will tell you, in a variety of words and metaphors, that there is one, even Christ Jesus who can speak to your condition. Having heard that voice, one needs to heed it. In the ongoing, unfolding work of “conversion of manners,” one needs companions along the way. We need a faith community. We need a Religious Society of Friends with whom to worship, and in whose proximity we learn the hard lessons of how to live in Gospel Order – with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, forgiveness, humility, gentleness, and self-control. Our meetings have a great responsibility to be gatherings of people who are listening to the Inward Teacher, helping each other listen, and learning how to listen together.

Martha Paxson Grundy

A Friends meeting is intended to be so much more than a loose association of individuals on separate and private spiritual journeys. Friends are called to be a faith community, seeking to know each other “in that which is Eternal” as we journey together. Ideally we acknowledge that our primary relationship is to God and to that of God in each other. We let go of the idea that we have only private lives and hold ourselves accountable to the authority of the Spirit in the life of the meeting. We grow in a sense of responsibility for each other and become part of a gathered community.

Margery Mears Larrabee 2007

The Society of Friends can make its greatest contribution to community by continuing to be a religious society—I mean by centering on the practice of a corporate worship which opens itself to continuing revelation. Again, community is simply too difficult to be sustained by our social impulses. It can be sustained only as we return time and again to the religious experience of the unity of all life. To put it in the language of Friends, community happens as that of God in you responds to that of God in me. And the affirmation that there is that of God in every person must mean more than “I’m okay, you’re okay.” The silence of the Quaker meeting for worship can be an experience of unity. I am an orthodox, garden variety Christian; I find the image of God first in Jesus the Christ. But it is my joy in the silent meeting to seek with those who find different ways to express the inexpressible truths of religious experience. Words can divide us, but the silence can bring us together. Whatever kinds of community the world needs, it surely needs the kind that embraces human diversity.

Parker J. Palmer

We regard elders as individuals with “power” who might “tell us off”, rather than as those offering service in line with their gifts, responsible for the nurture of our worshipping life. ... Much upset and hurt and energy could be saved by ... our all remembering that “to elder” is a positive verb, and that eldery is done on behalf of the community for the community. It is not about the individual.

Ben Pink Dandelion

Does anything unite this diverse group beyond our common love and humanity? Does anything make us distinctively Quaker? I say yes. Each of us has different emphases and special insights, but wherever Friends are affirming each other's authentic experience of God, rather than demanding creedal statements, we are being God's faithful Quakers. Wherever we are seeking God's will rather than human wisdom, especially when conflict might arise, we are being faithful Quakers. Wherever we are affirming the total equality of men and women, we are being God's faithful Quakers. Wherever there is no division between our words and our actions, we are being faithful. Whenever we affirm that no one—priest, pastor, clerk, elder—stands between us and the glorious and mystical experience of God in our lives, we are faithful Friends. Whether we sing or whether we wait in silence, as long as we are listening with the whole of our being and seeking the baptism and communion of living water, we will be one in the Spirit.

Val Ferguson 1991