

3 Unprogrammed Quaker Worship

Worship is experiencing the presence of God. Worship can happen anywhere and any time to anybody. In biblical terms, when “two or three are gathered together,”¹³ they can experience that presence. Friends call this “meeting for worship.”

For Friends, inspiration and direction for worship begin as inward experiences. In meeting for worship, the Spirit ministers within the members of the group. Friends, therefore, wait in silent expectation for divine inspiration and direction. As a consequence, outward forms of ceremonies and rituals to assist the ministry—such as *pre-arranged* sermons, readings, prayers, hymns, musical orchestrations, or sacraments—are not a part of unprogrammed worship. Instead, unprogrammed Friends *spontaneously* preach, read scripture, recite inspirational works, pray, and sing. Some Friends have even chosen to dance their messages. As Friends have found that the power and awe of worship based in silence transcend words, expectant waiting has become the most commonly shared mode for corporate, unprogrammed worship.

This extraordinary emphasis on inward leadings makes the unprogrammed Quaker tradition different from most religious traditions, and different, in some ways, from worship in *programmed* Quaker meetings and Quaker churches. While all Quakers meet in worship to hear more clearly God’s “still small voice,”¹⁴ Friends in the unprogrammed Quaker tradition conduct their worship entirely in expectant waiting and listening. They take the psalmist’s advice literally: “Be still and know that I am God.”¹⁵ We will talk more about programmed Quaker churches in the last session (“The Roots and Branches of Modern Quakerism”).

With inspiration and direction for worship coming from within, Friends have found that it is essential to balance the individual’s personal leadings with biblical validation, with insights from other religious texts, with the collective historic experience of Friends, and with the discernment of their present faith community. Friends accomplish this balance through a variety of ways, which we will discuss in subsequent sessions, (“Revelation Is Continuing,” “Friends Value Truth,” “Friends Value Community,” and “Friends Value Quaker Process”). This continual balancing of the individual’s inspiration with the wisdom and discernment of the community tends to prevent the individual from becoming disorderly and the community from becoming stagnant.

¹³ Matthew 18:20.

¹⁴ 1 Kings 19:12.

¹⁵ Psalm 46:10.

Unprogrammed meetings for worship can be a surprising experience for any attendee, but they can be especially surprising for *first-time* attendees. In the typical arrangement of unprogrammed Friends meeting rooms, chairs or benches face each other, signifying that all people are equal before God and that anyone present may be led to speak. While chairs or benches in traditional worship services usually face toward a pulpit, there are no pulpits in unprogrammed Friends meeting rooms.

At an appointed time each week, Friends gather and remain for worship in expectant waiting. Sometimes the Spirit moves someone to speak. When that happens, the Friend becomes a conduit for divine revelation and the message is referred to as vocal ministry. Occasionally, there is a sense in a meeting for worship that the Spirit has brought everyone present into a shared experience of the Light. Friends value this experience and refer to it as a "gathered" or "covered" meeting. Meeting for worship ends when one Friend, designated in advance, shakes hands with his or her neighbors. Then everyone shakes hands, newcomers are welcomed, and announcements are made. Not surprisingly, no two meetings are ever the same.

Many who are new to Quakerism wonder if they should speak in meeting for worship. Experienced Friends have found that some messages coming to them during meeting are for sharing immediately while others are for personal reflection or for sharing on another occasion. Ideally, spoken messages in meeting for worship come from one's experience and are prompted by the Spirit.

Often, those led to speak in meeting for worship find themselves powerfully moved. The name "Quaker" became attached to early Friends when George Fox told a judge that he should tremble at the word of the Lord. The name stuck because it accurately described the Quaker experience of ministry, in which speaking from a deep sense of leading can leave one trembling or shaken, overcome with a feeling of awe. Today members of the Religious Society of Friends refer to themselves interchangeably as "Friends" or "Quakers."

So that they can reflect upon each spoken message, Friends try to allow a time of silence after each message. Sometimes a later message builds on an earlier one, but messages are not challenged, discussed, or debated in subsequent vocal ministry, as this would interrupt expectant waiting. Sometimes a Friend will describe a message from a meeting for worship as one which "spoke to my condition," meaning that the message addressed his or her needs.

As valuable as the vocal ministry is, Friends also value the silence of expectant waiting because it allows them to listen for God's leadings in their lives. As breaking the silence to give a message in meeting is a weighty matter, Friends who are moved to speak tend to do so with humility, with a scarcity of words, and are enjoined from speaking more than once in the same meeting for worship. Corporate worship is so important to Friends that even children and babies attend part or all of meeting for worship.

Although inspiration and direction from God are experienced within, Quakerism is outward as well. Friends find that their inner experiences lead them to outer actions. In the words of William Penn, "True godliness does not turn men out of the world,

but enables them to live better in it, and excites their endeavors to mend it.”¹⁶ In later sessions (“Faith in Action,” “Friends Testimonies”), we will discuss some of the ways in which Friends have expressed outwardly their inward experiences of the Divine.

Reflection Question

Draw, paint, write in your journal or create something about, write music to, or meditate upon the question, “What is my experience of worship?”

¹⁶ William Penn, *No Cross, No Crown* (York, England: The Ebor Press, 1981), pp. 63–64.