

Following the Way of Jesus

A Quaker Challenge to Imperial Christianity

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Talking With A Street Evangelist

*What is the "heart" of Christianity?
What is most central to Christianity and to being a Christian?*

-- Marcus Borg --

I once fell into a conversation with an elderly street evangelist. He started our conversation by walking up to me, handing me a flyer, and asking, "Are you a Christian?" As a teenage Quaker deeply inspired by the Spirit and the teachings of Jesus, I answered yes. He was not convinced and began asking many questions about my religious beliefs. After just a few minutes, he informed me that I was not a "true" Christian, even though I professed to be. As he explained it, I simply did not fit any meaningful definition of a Christian because my personal interpretations of God, Jesus, and the Bible were all wrong. In fact, he said I was worse off than someone who had never heard of Jesus. I was a heretic.

For a brief moment, I tensed up and remembered Margaret Fell, George Fox, and the many other early Friends who were regularly condemned, beaten, and imprisoned on charges of heresy by the "orthodox" Christian authorities of their day. Yet, this situation was different. The sincere gentleman in front of me was not an authority, nor did he wish to imprison me or harm me in any way. He simply wanted to convince me of the error of my ways according to his own lights. I could respect that.

No longer feeling threatened, I relaxed and became interested in the man's religious beliefs. I asked him what he thought it would take for me to become a "true" Christian. He replied that at a minimum a real Christian believes every tenet of the Nicene Creed. This creedal statement, which has been the basis for the formal creeds of most Christian denominations since the fourth century, states that all Christians believe that Jesus was born to a virgin, that he is the Only Begotten Son of God, that he is in fact identical to God and part of a three person Godhead, that he sacrificed himself for the atonement of our sins, and that he rose bodily from the grave three days after his execution and then returned to heaven, from which he will come again in a final Judgment Day. The evangelist told me that the big pay off for believing all these things about Jesus was that God would forgive my sins and let my soul live forever in a spiritual paradise. In contrast, he said all non-believers, no matter how spiritually exemplary their lives, would be barred from heaven by God and they would suffer eternal damnation in hell after their deaths.

I could see why he did not think I was a Christian. This was not how I viewed Christianity at all. While the Religious Society of Friends was founded as a Christian movement inspired by the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, I had chosen it, in part, because it did not require any of its members to agree to the Nicene Creed--or any creedal statement derived from it. Early Friends, and the people in my own Friends Meeting in DeKalb, Illinois, simply did not think that any of these propositional notions about Jesus were essential to an individual's living in right relationship with the Spirit of divine love and guidance that we called God. This view was commonplace, even though many of these same Friends actually agreed with several of the Nicene Creed's beliefs about Jesus!

Personally, as a fifteen-year-old Quaker in 1970, I was far more concerned with living faithfully in the here and now than in worrying about a possible next life. I was also far less interested in people's theological beliefs about Jesus than in our collectively figuring out how to follow Jesus' way of living in our own lives and times. It did not matter to me whether people shared the view that Jesus was an enlightened spiritual teacher, a prophet of the stature of Moses and Elijah, the messianic True Prophet anticipated by Moses, or even God Incarnate--the divine, only-begotten Son of God that is part of a divine Trinity. Interestingly, all four of these views were found among participants in the early Jesus movement in first century Palestine. For me, the essence of the "primitive Christianity" embraced by Friends was not unanimity on such questions, but a heartfelt commitment to follow Jesus' example--to love God with all one's heart, strength, and soul and to love and care for one's neighbors as one's self. If people could help each other follow Jesus' transforming, Spirit-led way of life, regardless of their different theological beliefs about his status in the cosmic scheme of things, I was convinced that deep spiritual renewal was possible in our world. According to my new conversation partner, all such talk was unchristian and heretical.

After a little more talking, I also discovered that my new acquaintance had one more criterion for sorting out who was a "true" Christian from all those who professed to be. He said that to become a real Christian, I would also need to believe that every passage of the Bible is historically and scientifically accurate as well as a complete, unfiltered, and infallible revelation of God's will in all moral and doctrinal matters. Again, given this definition, the Religious Society of Friends was not Christian, not even at the group's founding. As New England Yearly Meeting's *Faith and Practice* notes, "Compiled from the inspiration of many ancient writers, the Bible has been for Friends not a blueprint or final authority, but a source of knowledge of God's ways with us." Viewing the bible as a beloved and special source of spiritual wisdom and moral guidance was clearly not enough for my street evangelist.

I finally told this man that while I appreciated his strong convictions, I could not share them. Nor could I agree with his definition of a "true" Christian. I told

him that I agreed instead with William Penn when he said, “To be like Christ then, is to be a Christian.” The street evangelist shook his head and replied that unless I changed my heretical beliefs I would go to hell and suffer eternal fire and torture at the hands of the Devil. He said he would pray for me, but he demanded that I stop calling myself a Christian. I walked away not wanting to upset this man, but neither was I willing to abandon Christianity to him either.

Primitive vs. Imperial Christianity

This controversy over how to understand the heart of Christianity is not at all new. At their earliest emergence in the 1600s, Quakers were Jesus-inspired, Bible-studying, Spirit-led seekers who felt that orthodox Christianity had become too dogmatic, too distant from the faith and practice of Jesus, and too supportive of oppression, war, and greed. Nor were they quiet about their disenchantment with what passed for Christianity in 17th century England. Back then, a core mission of Quakers was to make a strong public critique of the many deficiencies and distortions of imperial Christianity and offer the Religious Society of Friends as an alternative religious community that actively embraced the spiritual path and transformative way of life so powerfully revealed and embodied by Jesus of Nazareth and by the Inward Teacher or Holy Spirit in their midst. Early Friends did street preaching, held public meetings with traveling ministers, wrote hundreds of books and pamphlets, and even went into the established churches and debated their hired, university-trained priests in the middle of services. A couple of Friends even went to Rome and tried to convert the Pope away from his distorted version of Christianity that ignored both the teachings and life example of Jesus, as well as the simple, loving, and liberating promptings of the Inner Light.

When I was a thirteen-year-old seeker attending Friends Meeting for the first time, this Quaker challenge to mainstream Christianity was one of the things that inspired me the most. I remember being shown the Meeting’s library after my first meeting for worship and soon devouring the many books on Quaker history, faith, and practice. Wow! These folks were all right. Mystics *and* activists— *and* they had a slamming critique of the distortions of “imperial” Christianity. Score one for the Friends!

In these very early years of my own Quaker journey, I loved reading how Rufus Jones, a widely respected contemporary Friend, challenged the “long centuries of the perversion of Christianity” that had created an “imperial conception of the Church.” By making this claim, Jones illuminated how several factions within mainstream Christianity had, over time, created an incredibly distorted religion. At its best, this imperial religion provides a distracting, mechanical belief formula as a way of getting one’s ticket punched to a pleasant

afterlife while completely ignoring Jesus' call to help usher in a "Kingdom of God" of peace, justice, and compassion right here on earth. This was the position of my street evangelist. At its worst, however, an imperial conception of Christianity directly justifies and supports cruelty, war, imperialism, materialism, exploitation, and oppression as God's will. Either way, each of these two variants of imperial Christianity is compatible with, if not supportive of, worldly systems of oppression, war, and empire.

The prophetic critique of imperial Christianity made by Jones stirred my soul and helped me make sense of why I never felt comfortable in the Episcopal Church of my childhood--with its busy and elaborate liturgy, its all-male priesthood, its indifference toward the civil rights struggle, and its knee-jerk support for the US war against Vietnam. Then, reading more books from that little library, I learned how early Quaker theologian Robert Barclay had made a very similar critique of imperial Christianity back in his day.

In 1678, Barclay published his *Apology*--a stirring philosophical defense of the beleaguered Quaker faith and a biblical critique of the mistaken doctrines and practices that he felt had perverted both mainstream Catholicism and Protestantism. Still in print today, Barclay's *Apology* is hard hitting. In it, he makes the claim that not all of those who profess to be Christians are really members "of the true Church." He also argues that after the early Jesus movement "had been gathered in the apostles' days, the inward life of the particular churches of Christ began to decay." This process of apostasy within proto-orthodox Christianity only increased as the faith "became overgrown with several errors and the hearts of the professors of Christianity became leavened with the old spirit and conduct of the world's people." This became particularly true "after the princes of the earth took up the profession of Christianity." Barclay goes on to argue that after this happened most of the dominant Christian denominations lost "the life, the substance, and the essence of the Christian religion."

Barclay, however, was not just a critic. He had a plan. To respond to the perversion of Christianity, Barclay called for a Christian renewal movement that would help people return to the life and power of the Spirit "that were to be found in the true primitive church and her pastors." In spite of the many historical trends of decline he observed around him, Barclay felt that it was still possible to revive the key principles and spirituality of "primitive Christianity" through the grace of the Spirit and a deep reading of the Bible. He took heart in the fact that many individual women and men throughout the ages had been empowered by both Spirit and scripture to stand firm for "the meekness, gentleness, love, long-suffering goodness and temperance of Christianity"--regardless of the distortions of their denominations' official faith and practice. Inspired by this vision of rescue and renewal, Barclay soon joined with other traveling Friends ministers and

sought to expand both the size and spiritual influence of the Society of Friends, which at one point came to include ten percent of the British population even though Friends were regularly beaten up, imprisoned, tortured, and hanged because their evangelical and prophetic efforts throughout England and its colonies.

Nor was Barclay unusual in his view. A core conviction among most early Quakers in the 1600s was the belief that the Religious Society of Friends should serve as a vanguard in the revival of primitive Christianity around the world. This sentiment was the central theme of the writings of most early leaders among Friends, including Margaret Fell's powerful little book published in 1660 called "A True Testimony from the People of God" and William Penn's tract on "Primitive Christianity Revived." All of these Friends hoped that Quakerism would offer a needed and inspiring alternative to the perverted imperial Christianity that had emerged in full force in the fourth century after the Roman Emperor Constantine, with the help of several power-tempted church leaders, converted Christianity into an imperial state religion marred by superstition, dogma, hierarchy, the violent suppression of "heresy," and a nearly complete accommodation to elite rule, oppression and military power. While the Protestant Reformation helped challenge some aspects of this particular version of imperial Christianity, most Protestant denominations did not go far enough in the view of early Friends and much of Protestantism fell into its own imperial snares and traps by the mid-1600s.

As a newly convinced young Friend, I loved how the early Quakers were not going to abandon Christianity to such folks, but committed themselves instead to becoming, in Robert Barclay's words, "a growing, thriving and increasing people" that works hard so "that the life of true Christianity may be promoted and increased." I was also stirred with George Fox's vision on the top of Pendle Hill of "a great people to be gathered" to follow the way of Jesus. Thirty-five years later, I am still convinced that Friends would be wise to challenge imperial Christianity with the same evangelical and prophetic passion as early Friends. Indeed, it has become an ever more pressing concern for me as an increasingly virulent strain of imperial Christianity has come to dominate our radio and television stations, the public square, and our national politics.

Indeed, where once there were well-meaning street evangelists, today there is a booming and very lucrative imperial Christian media industry that owns over 1,600 radio stations and 250 television stations that regularly preach belief in the Nicene Creed and biblical inerrancy as the only way to salvation. Furthermore, much of this industry, in cooperation with a cadre of well-financed rightwing political operatives like Karl Rove, has turned the largely apolitical and otherworldly faith of my street evangelist into a well-organized political force of millions who support a wealthy ruling elite whose underlying political and

economic agenda contradicts many of the core teachings of Jesus of Nazareth about peace, justice, and compassion. This destructive program includes waging wars of aggression around the globe to achieve the US administration's stated goal of "worldwide command and control." As progressive evangelical preacher Jim Wallis notes, this agenda also seeks to limit popular democracy; increase corporate rule; dismantle labor unions; cut taxes on the wealthy; gut environmental and occupational health and safety standards; expand the prison population of racial minorities; and slash funds for programs that provide healthcare, housing, food, jobs and education assistance to poor men, women, and children.

Given the imperial perversion of so much of orthodox Christian faith in America today, can any Friend seriously doubt that significant numbers of professed Christians have become indifferent or even dangerous to those around them? The more secular or non-Christian Quakers among Friends today are certainly right about this. Yet, is the fundamental problem here that these Christians take God, Jesus, and the Bible seriously, or is it that these people have dramatically missed the main point of Jesus' life and teaching?

I believe the problem is not in the faith and practice of Jesus, but in an imperial perversion of a religious tradition that now makes a worshipped idol out of Jesus, but neglects following his actual teachings and example as a witness and revelation of God's will for our lives. As Jim Wallis decries:

How did the faith of Jesus come to be known as pro-rich, pro-war, and only pro-American? What has happened here? And how do we get back to a historic, biblical, and genuinely evangelical faith rescued from its contemporary distortions? That rescue operation is even more crucial today, in the face of a deepening social crisis that cries out for more prophetic religion.

Both "imperial" and "primitive" Christians share a central focus on Jesus of Nazareth, the charismatic and prophetic Jew who led a religious renewal movement in first-century Palestine. Often called by the honorific title of Christ, which literally means "one anointed by God," Jesus is normative in some key way for all professed Christians, imperial or otherwise. For us, he reveals the way, the truth, and the life. As Quaker founder George Fox put it, he "hath the key, and opened the door of light and life unto me."

Yet, for imperial Christians, what seems to matter most about Jesus are what we should believe about the circumstances surrounding his reported virgin birth, his reported bodily resurrection after his execution, as well as his reported divinity. In the entire Nicene creedal statement of Christian belief, which was created at the request of the Roman Emperor Constantine in 325, there is no

mention of anything between the events of Jesus' birth and his execution--no mention at all of the significance of his life example or his teachings as an inspired and prophetic witness and revelation of God. His entire public ministry among Jewish peasants is left out of the imperial Nicene Creed as either unimportant or, more likely, as too dangerous to include in what was soon to become the imperial state religion of the Roman Empire.

The results of this turning away from the radical faith and practice of Jesus--in order to create a superstitious mass religion about Jesus that is compatible with empire, war, and oppression--are still very much with us today. According to Christian author Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer:

The distortion of Jesus within Christianity is at the heart of numerous contradictions. None is greater than this: Jesus challenged and was executed by the domination system of his time; many Christians today proclaim the Christ of faith while conforming to, embracing, and receiving rewards from the domination system of our time. Jesus invites us out of the domination system and into an alternative community where abundant life is experienced. Rather than being at odds with imperial injustice as was Jesus, however, Christianity has often functioned as its servant.

For Jim Wallis, the most adequate response to this challenge is not to abandon a focus on God, Jesus, and the Bible—as suggested by the secular humanists and even by those well-meaning Friends among us who want to abandon Quaker Christianity. As Wallis rightly says, “The best response to bad religion is better religion, not secularism.” In his provocative book, *Jesus Against Christianity*, Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer agrees with Wallis and argues that rescuing imperial Christianity from itself will require people paying more attention—not less—to the actual faith and practice of the historical Jesus. “Christianity,” says Nelson-Pallmeyer, “must allow itself to be criticized, challenged, inspired, and changed by the historical Jesus”—that upstart Jew from Galilee.

Nelson-Pallmeyer's good advice may seem a bit startling--even to Friends representing the vital center of our faith. For many Friends today, our longstanding focus on directly experiencing the Inner Light or Seed of God has often overshadowed any significant focus on the historical Jesus in our spiritual lives. As Rufus Jones even said about George Fox, “He never thought out the complications of the inward Christ of his experience and the outward Christ of history and gospel story. In fact, he made too little of the historical Christ.” This is even truer for many Friends today.

Part of the problem here is that turning to the Inward Teacher is immediate, direct, and experiential in a way that the search for the historical

Jesus can never be. In some ways, it is harder to know about the historical Jesus than to experience the Inward Christ in our hearts and in the midst of our meetings for worship. For starters, Jesus never wrote anything down about his life story, his hopes and dreams, or his spiritual practices and teachings. This leaves us with only second hand reports by biblical writers. Paul, who wrote more pieces included in the New Testament than anyone, never even met Jesus and only came to the Jesus movement after Jesus' execution. Paul's letters also show little interest in the activities and teachings of Jesus' public ministry. For Paul, says biblical scholar Geza Vermes, "the history of Christ began with 'the night of his betrayal' and ended three days later with his resurrection." Paul was concerned only with the Risen or Inward Christ of faith, not with the public ministry of the historical Jesus--the flesh and blood Galilean mystic, rabbi, faith healer, social prophet, and Jewish renewal movement leader.

The four gospels of the New Testament that do focus on the faith and practice of Jesus are incredibly valuable then, but also problematic in filling in these blanks. For example, the gospel attributed to John, which is glaringly different from the three earlier synoptic gospels, was written over 70 years after Jesus' death and strongly reflects the Hellenistic theological thinking that was becoming relevant within a second century Gentile Christianity—a faith tradition becoming completely separated from Jesus' own religion of Judaism. Even the gospel attributed to Mark, the earliest gospel included in the New Testament, was written over 35 years after Jesus' death, making memory and accuracy trickier and leaving the author of Mark vulnerable to writing, either consciously or unconsciously, from the frame of later theological developments within his evolving religious community. As Vermes notes, the authors of "Mark, Matthew, and Luke were not professional historians in search of critical objectivity."

Added to these challenges is the fact that we have no originals for any of the gospels included in the New Testament and biblical scholars have documented many significant editorial inconsistencies in the various copies and translations of the four gospels that are available. Furthermore, many of us have grown up with imperial interpretations of Jesus in the churches that we used to attend or in the mainstream culture around us. These distorted, imperial images of Jesus can get stuck in our heads and block many of us from understanding the power and spiritual beauty of his witness and revelation.

Finding the "real" Jesus of history--the Jesus that the friends and followers of Jesus are actually supposed to follow--is clearly a task that one can only approach humbly. Yet, this effort to understand the public ministry of Jesus is important if we are ever to overcome the situation highlighted by bible scholar Albert Nolan. As he notes in his groundbreaking book *Jesus Before Christianity*, "Many millions throughout the ages have venerated the name of Jesus, but few have understood him and fewer still have tried to put into practice what he

wanted to see done.” Our call as Quakers has long been to put into practice what Jesus wanted to see done—for that is the essence of the primitive Christianity we have historically championed as the needed alternative to imperial Christianity.

Happily, for advocates of primitive Christianity like ourselves, thousands of people of faith have refused to abandon the search for a deeper understanding of Jesus’ public activity and teachings. Indeed, the last twenty-five to thirty years have seen an explosion of biblical research aimed at better understanding Jesus. This work has also been integrated with a deep background study of Roman imperialism, the variety of religiously-inspired resistance movements that emerged in Palestine during the inter-testament period, and, finally, the overall culture and contending religious perspectives operative within first century Judaism in Palestine. This background research has helped create a more informed and grounded context for interpreting the gospel stories about the awe-inspiring mission, practice, and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth.

Reading books by the likes of Marcus Borg, Keith Akers, John Dominic Crossan, Richard Horsley, Karen Armstrong, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Carter Haywood, John Howard Yoder, Walter Wink, Geza Vermes, and others can thus be very helpful and eye-opening for Friends and other primitive Christian revivalists. Yet, these useful books on the historical Jesus and the early Jesus movement are just that--useful. They are not essential in seeing the broad outlines of the faith and practice of Jesus. The portrait of Jesus that is emerging from this research is but an amplification and refinement of the broad strokes portrait of Jesus’ faith and practice that one can find in the gospels, particularly the synoptic gospels. The trick is simply to read the gospels with a key question in mind--what is the spiritual path or way of life most consistently advocated by Jesus in word and deed. For all the theological elaborations (and distortions) that may have made their way into the official scriptural canon, the way of Jesus is still there for all to see—if we but take the time to look.

The Way of Jesus

Focusing our attention on the way of life advocated by Jesus is not a far-fetched approach to reading the gospels. In the book of Acts, Jesus’ early followers called their movement “The Way,” or “The Way of God.” Yet, what exactly is the “Way of God” that was so powerfully revealed to these people—and us--through the prophetic life, sacrifice, and teachings of Jesus?

To answer this question, it is helpful to look first at what the “way of God” is not. From the gospels, it is clear that Jesus regularly denounced and rejected the worship of wealth, power, and social rank—the false gods that motivated both the Roman Empire’s oppression of his homeland and the local political and

religious elites who collaborated with Rome's imperial system of domination. Following a long line of Hebrew prophets, Jesus explicitly cast God's judgment against the wealthy and rulers of empires and kingdoms whose inherent social arrangements violate God's eternal call for peace, justice, and compassion. Regardless of whether the lure of imperial power was embraced by Roman governors, Herodian client kings, or the Temple high priests in Jerusalem, it was not God's way. Indeed, Jesus saw the worship of wealth, power, and rank as idolatrous--as the worship of the demons of Satan. As he put it, "You cannot serve both God and Mammon."

If the idolatrous worship of wealth, power, and rank is not God's way, then what is? Some of the details of Jesus' thought on this question cannot be known for sure, and some are still subject to considerable debate. Indeed, Jesus himself is recorded in the gospel of John as saying, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, it will guide you into all truth." Still, several key elements of Jesus' answer to this important question are remarkably clear and compelling. They are, in fact, hard to deny for anyone who gives the gospels a careful reading. Let's look at just four of these elements to get a better sense of the "primitive Christianity" that has long been ignored, downplayed, distorted, or suppressed by the rise of imperial Christianity.

Love God and Your Neighbors

The first broad stroke in any reliable sketch of the historical Jesus is his fundamental orientation as a prophetic Jew. This shows up most dramatically in his judgment against the power-drunk rulers of his time, but it also revealed itself when Jesus was asked about his core message. In the synoptic gospels, Jesus repeatedly says that the two most important responsibilities of the faithful are to love God with all of one's heart, strength, and soul, and to love one's neighbor as one's self. To be a follower of Jesus, then, is to dedicate oneself to living out these two core principles—the first from the *Shema*, the sacred twice-daily prayer of Judaism, and the second from a key passage in the Torah. This was his fundamental alternative to the ways of Satan.

These two core commandments make up what Christian theologian Scot McKnight calls the "Jesus Creed." When asked how to live a life that could bring true salvation from sin, this was Jesus' regular answer. He did not answer, "Believe that my mother is a virgin and that I am God." He instructed folks in the Jesus Creed, not the Nicene Creed. Love God, and love each other. That's the basic take home message of Jesus in the synoptic gospels.

Embrace the Spirit and a More Contemplative Life

Jesus' life and teachings also reveal a very intimate way of loving God. Jesus was what Marcus Borg calls a "Spirit person" or a mystic—"one for whom God or the sacred was experiential reality, not simply an article of faith." Indeed, at the opening of his public ministry Jesus said, "The Spirit of God is upon me." Jesus was simply not content to adopt a purely second-hand belief system that looked only to past scripture, ritual, or formal leadership for guidance. He repeatedly went direct to the source of his faith tradition by opening himself to first-hand experiences of divine love, presence, and guidance. This aspect of Jesus' faith and practice stands in sharp contrast to the "tradition only" perspective of so much of the Catholic Church's history or the "scriptures only" perspective of so much of Protestant history. Yet, this mystical, Spirit-led approach has surfaced repeatedly from underground springs in both traditions over the centuries and has produced some of the most inspired and inspiring followers of Jesus. It has also been central to the spiritual life of the Religious Society of Friends in its 350-year history.

The early Jesus movement certainly followed this way of Jesus by embracing an unmediated, direct relationship with Spirit as something available to themselves and to all people. As noted by historian Bard Ehrman, the early Jesus movement "understood themselves to be under the direction of the Spirit." In such a charismatic community, "the gift of 'prophecy,' that is the ability to speak direct revelation from God under the spontaneous influence of the Spirit" was poured out on both men and women and was not limited to the priests or any other specific castes of people. This is perhaps clearest in the book of Acts and the letters of Paul, but examples of Jesus' disciples engaging in deep communion with the Spirit also exist in the gospels. Similar examples of engaging in an intimate relationship with the Divine are also common in the Torah, the prophets, and the wisdom scriptures that were held sacred by the early Jesus movement and all other Jews of their time.

Friends have learned from their own history, of course, that a Spirit-led religion needs both personal and community discernment to discover the validity of its leadings--as well as the active use of the spiritual resources of both tradition and scripture to keep its balance. Yet, as Jesus clearly experienced, mystical communion with the Spirit offers some of the deepest, most powerful spiritual experiences and insights available. This openness to Spirit, this getting up close and personal with the Divine in whatever measure is possible for you, is therefore something to be cultivated. Indeed, it offers the inner spiritual power that allows us to be successfully "born again," to experience a new life attuned to the power and joy of the eternal and to find the strength to act in harmony with the Divine guidance received.

Cultivating a life of deep experiential connection with the Spirit was assisted in the early Jesus movement by a wide variety of spiritual practices or disciplines, many of which were used by Jesus in his own spiritual life. The spiritual practices of Jesus that are mentioned in the gospels include meditation, prayer, fasting, wilderness retreats, solitude, living simply, religious study, group worship, and engaging in a variety of acts of healing, sharing, and service to others. He also taught these practices to his disciples. The reason is not hard to understand. Such practices ground our spiritual lives in a recurring attention to God and what God loves. According to Friend's minister Richard Foster, who wrote the Christian classic *Celebration of Discipline*, "The purpose of the Disciplines is liberation from the stifling slavery to self-interest and fear."

Foster goes on to point out that the use of spiritual disciplines was not limited to prophets and saints within the early Jesus movement. Bringing this insight back to today, Foster reassures contemporary Christians who want to bring this way of Jesus more fully into their own lives. As he remarks,

We must not be led to believe that the Disciplines are only for spiritual giants and hence beyond our reach, or only for contemplatives who devote all their time to prayer and meditation. Far from it. God intends the Disciplines of the spiritual life to be for ordinary human beings; people who have jobs, who care for children, who wash dishes and mow lawns. In fact, the Disciplines are best exercised in the midst of our relationships with our husband or wife, our brothers and sisters, our friends and neighbors.

Such practices are all about deepening relationship—our relationship with God, our relationship with our inner selves, our relationships with other people, and, for many of us today, our relationship with God's good earth and the more-than-human world.

Be Devout, But Not Fundamentalist

It is also very clear from the gospels that Jesus was not a casual or unreflective Jew focused only on keeping out of trouble and getting by in the world. Nor was he a "fundamentalist" like some of the Pharisees. He was a deeply devout Jew who engaged in an ongoing discernment process. Over and over again, you can see him in the gospels trying to sort out what was best, essential, and truest in his faith tradition from the idle rules, errors, and distortions that accumulate in any religious tradition over time.

He was unafraid, for example, to use his own experience of the Spirit and his *Shema*-plus-Leviticus creed as the criteria for examining the validity of the other laws, commandments, and customs within Jewish scripture and tradition. This led him, like many prophets and rabbis before him, to differ with several Jewish leaders and scriptural passages on key points within the complicated and often contested faith tradition of Judaism. Jesus was very willing to disagree, for example, with the Pharisees' interpretations of Sabbath regulations. He also seemed to reject an image of God as a jealous and violent tyrant in the sky that people should obey out of fear--an image that still exists in some scripture and some streams within modern Judaism, Islam, and Christianity.

Very provocatively, Jesus also appears to have rejected some of the 613 Mosaic laws that had been passed down in Jewish scripture and tradition. One section of Leviticus, for example, details a series of laws that require the faithful to stone to death all children who talk back to their parents, all gay men who have sexual relations with each other, and all women who have sexual relations with anyone other than their husbands. According to these laws, not executing these people is, literally speaking, a sin against God. There is no ambiguity about interpretation here. To object to the death penalty here is to object to these particular laws--to question the validity of these passages of scripture. Yet, Jesus risked the ire of an angry mob of law-abiding Pharisees intent on stoning an adulterous woman. In a remarkably moving way, he persuaded the men to leave her unharmed. He persuaded these "fundamentalists" to open their hearts, admit their own sins, and violate this particular scriptural law in order to keep faith with the deeper, underlying spirit of God's way. In these and other ways, Jesus tried to rescue and renew the people of Israel, as did so many of the prophets before him.

In *Meeting Jesus Again For The First Time*, Marcus Borg highlights another important fact about Jesus—his persistent attack against the purity system that dominated the post-exile faith of the priesthood and even Jewish reform groups like the Essenes and Pharisees. According to Borg, most of the dominant forms of Judaism in first century Palestine were committed to a strict ethos of purity and exclusiveness—a hierarchical ranking of individuals and social groups “organized around the contrasts or polarities of pure and impure, clean and unclean.”

At the bottom of this very segregated social ranking system, were the poor, the chronically ill, the lame, the “sinners” who did not observe all the Mosaic purity laws, those born out of wedlock, Gentiles from nearby regions, people in disreputable occupations, and, to a large degree, women. As Borg notes,

Purity and impurity also were associated with the contrast between male and female. As with the wealthy, there was nothing that made

one automatically pure; clearly, there were men who were outcasts. And there was nothing about being a woman that automatically made one impure. But generally speaking, men in their natural state were thought to be more pure than women. The natural bodily processes of childbirth and menstruation were considered sources of impurity, and these led to a more generalized sense of the impurity of women.

Women were thus separated from men in public life and were not taught the Torah. To be respectable, women also had to be veiled when outside of the house and travel in the company of a family member. They were not to speak with men or dine with them outside of their homes. Independent women, who did not follow these restrictions, were considered particularly impure and shunned by “the righteous.”

Time and time again, Jesus scandalized the “pure and holy” of his day through his egalitarian inclusiveness that negated the segregation and disrespect of the dominant purity system. The Jesus movement included among its members “women, untouchables, the poor, the maimed, and the marginalized, as well as some people of stature who found his vision attractive.” Jesus healed the sick by touching them and being touched by them. Jesus also talked with women in public, embraced them as disciples, took their advice, and ate with them in open table fellowship. Women also clearly served as apostles and leaders in the early Jesus movement before the rise of imperial Christianity.

For all these transgressions against the hierarchical purity system, many Pharisees, scribes, and priests repeatedly reproached Jesus. They called him “a glutton and a drunkard” as well as “a friend of tax collectors and sinners,” including “prostitutes,” for his practice of open table fellowship. In turn, Jesus charged that all these purists “neglect justice and the love of God.” He challenged their often repeated quotation from Leviticus encouraging people “to be holy as God is holy” with his own teaching to “be compassionate as God is compassionate.” To follow the way of Jesus, then, is to engage with the poor, the oppressed, the outcast, and the despised in compassionate and loving ways. The principle is quite clear—treat all people with respect, justice, and kindness, especially “the least of these,” and avoid flattery and subservience to the “high and powerful.”

Work for God’s Kingdom

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that Jesus was simply creating a countercultural movement of loving Jewish mystics who rejected the ways of empire, embraced egalitarianism, and did a bit of good whenever they could.

While there is little question that Jesus embraced all these elements of the Jewish wisdom tradition, Jesus--like several devout, prophetic Jews--also had a very demanding, revolutionary edge to his faith and practice. Jesus did not just want to create a few utopian communities tucked away forever in the cracks of an empire still possessed by a lust for wealth, power, and rank. He wanted people to turn to God and find the inner power to exorcise and vanquish the demons that possessed the fallen powers and principalities of this world. He also wanted to put an end to the petty cruelties and self-inflicted wounds that oppressed and marginalized people so often visit upon themselves and each other.

Jesus came to preach good news to the poor, the oppressed, and the captive. He thus called on his followers to help usher in the Kingdom of God, the same vision Martin Luther King called the Beloved Community when he helped launch the civil rights movement. Jesus clearly sought ways to foster a growing community of liberation, compassion, justice, peace, equality, simplicity, healing, and service—first in the cracks of the kingdoms and empires of the world, but ultimately serving as a challenge and replacement of all social, political, and economic systems of domination, elitism, exploitation, and violence. For Jesus, the creation of the Kingdom of God was the hoped for salvation of the world, where God’s will is once again honored “on earth as it is in heaven.” He considered the people who joined him in this holy task as his spiritual family. As he said at one point, “Whoever does the will of God are my brothers, sisters, and mother.”

While God’s Kingdom is only mentioned two or three times in the gospel of John, Jesus speaks of the Kingdom of God over one hundred times in the three synoptic gospels. It is clear that helping to usher in the Kingdom of God’s Shalom was at the very core of Jesus’ own sense of mission in life. His focus on God’s Kingdom also had deep cultural resonances for the people in Galilee and Judea. However, the Kingdom of God tradition most common in first-century Palestine was the longstanding hope for the rise of a new Davidic King anointed by the Spirit of God as a Messiah. The hope was that the new Messiah would then raise a revolutionary army to crush the enemies of God’s people, provide political salvation for the Israelites, and finally establish a just kingdom over the entire Mediterranean region under his and his descendants’ monarchical rule. For these Jews, this longed for military revolt and insurrection was seen as redemptive, justified, and essential to ushering in the Shalom of God.

From the gospels, it is clear that some members of the early Jesus movement hoped that Jesus was this military Messiah—the anointed King that so many Jews yearned for while suffering under imperial occupation. Yet, according to the gospel of Matthew, after Jesus experienced the Spirit telling him that he was a beloved and inspired child of God, he went into the wilderness to fast for forty days and discern his mission as one of God’s anointed. During this fast, he

was even tempted to see himself as the hoped for Messiah come to rule the world. Yet, this gospel tells us that he ultimately rejected this monarchical vision as a devilish, though understandable fantasy of the oppressed. (Later, as mentioned in the gospel of John, Jesus even hid from thousands of his followers when he thought they would try to come and make him a King).

Jesus also rejected the understandable delusion that it was only possible to bring about the real Kingdom of God through armed insurrection and violence. This, too, was a hard lesson to teach his disciples, schooled as they were in the conventional wisdom of their day. To awaken his people to the possibility of finding an alternative path between either submission to evil or holy war, Jesus offered his own life as an example as well as his many teachings about blessing the peacemakers, loving one's enemies, being compassionate as God is compassionate, and refusing to meet evil with evil, but instead overcoming evil with good. Interestingly, the Jesus movement faithfully followed the nonviolent way of Jesus for close to three hundred years before the rise and consolidation of imperial Christianity. They did not take up arms against their persecutors, but chose nonviolent non-cooperation against the illegitimate orders of the kingdoms and empires that dominated the areas where they lived. This resistance went up to and included martyrdom with some regularity—as modeled by Jesus himself when the Roman Empire crucified him for treason.

The inner liberation that Jesus taught on the cross was to not fear death—to not be so fearfully attached to your own personal life that you are too afraid to take risks, to stand up for what is right, to do whatever your faith requires even when faced with a threatening and violent opponent. The potential impact of this nonviolent fearlessness soon came to worry Roman imperialists. As theologian Walter Wink notes, “The pagan Celsus attacked Christians for disloyalty to the empire, since they refused to serve in the army. If everyone behaved as Christians did, he charged, the empire would be ruined.” This, of course, was exactly Jesus' goal. He wanted to see Spirit-led people, committed to the “Jesus Creed,” nonviolently engage the powers and principalities of this world, and bring the just and compassionate Shalom of God ever nearer at hand. He even encouraged people to experience the Kingdom's growing presence in the world through here and now acts of hope, healing, sharing, and serving others.

In their travels from village to village in the Galilean countryside, Jesus and his closest disciples were in many ways like community organizers. As noted by religious historian Richard Horsley, Jesus and his key disciples met together with community people one-on-one, in house parties, in synagogues, and in open village assemblies. At these meetings, they helped people identify how the destructive ways of Satan's empire were infiltrating their own communities. They also inspired people to abandon self-hatred and fatalism and offered several concrete ideas for how people could rebuild their community life in ways that

were consistent with the Jubilee principles of Israel's ancient covenant with God. What were these "good news" ideas spread by the early Jesus movement?

Instead of blaming each other for the poverty that plagued them all, they could come to each other's aid in a restoration of mutual assistance. Instead of suspicion and rancor, they could rekindle a spirit of solidarity. Far from imitating the exploitative practices of the wealthy, taking advantage of others' poverty and desperation to defraud their neighbors, they should renew commitment to covenantal principles of justice in the confidence that God's restorative action was imminent. Instead of imitating the imperial patterns in which "great ones" wielded power over others, those who would provide leadership must become servants of others... In the context of covenantal renewal, "love" refers not just to a feeling or an attitude, but to concrete economic practices in village community, such as canceling debts and generous mutual sharing of resources.

The early Jesus movement did not just engage in dramatic nonviolent resistance activities, such as disrupting the activities of the High Priest's money changers in the Jerusalem Temple. Even more often, the movement engaged in what Gandhi referred to as a "constructive program." Through the constructive program at the village level, imperial values were rejected, the poor were released from some of their debt burden, the hungry were fed, the mournful were comforted, widows and orphans were protected, and the outcast were welcomed back into the bosom of the community. In all such moments, the Shalom of God is near at hand. Indeed, it has already come upon us. It is something we can enter into here and now, and not just at "the end of the world" as we have known it. Entering the Kingdom of God is to enter an eternal, God-centered way of life. This is the way of Jesus as revealed in the synoptic gospels. It is also the way of Friends—when we have been at our best. As noted in New England Yearly Meeting's book *Faith and Practice*, "Friends are called, as followers of Christ, to help establish the Kingdom of God on earth."

Imagine what the world would be like if the many millions of people who now profess to be Christians actually followed the way of Jesus instead of accommodating to the ways of empire and arguing over the details of the Nicene Creed! Imagine the state of the world if even half of them did this, if even a quarter or a tenth did. Imagine the impact if the Religious Society of Friends once again gave unambiguous testimony against imperial Christianity to the world and actively witnessed to the power and wisdom of following the way of Jesus instead.

Quakerism at It's Best

What William Penn called “Primitive Christianity Revived” is nothing less than the Quaker faith at its best. The vital core of our faith tradition is to love God and our neighbors; to embrace the Spirit and a more contemplative life; to be devout, but not fundamentalist; and to work for the Beloved Community or Shalom of God. In all of this, we are being faithful friends and followers of Jesus.

Our approach to group worship--the opening of our hearts to the Spirit and waiting expectantly together in silence to experience divine presence, love, and guidance--is also consistent with the faith and practice of Jesus and is one of the most beautiful wild flowers in the garden of Christian spirituality. Our egalitarian approach to lay church governance and the priesthood of all believers also offers a clear alternative to those denominations enthralled by the hierarchical notions of imperial Christianity. Similarly, when we have been faithful, we have rejected the way of empire and the worship of wealth, power, and rank far more consistently than most professed Christians--and most secularists. At our best, we have not only professed, but actually embodied our historic testimonies on peace, justice, equality, simplicity, civic engagement, and personal integrity that have emerged directly from our attempt to follow the way of Jesus and our shared Inward Teacher.

Furthermore, while we do not automatically reject the notion of an afterlife, we have been steadfastly focused on enacting God's will--as we perceive it through scripture, tradition, and Spirit--right here on God's good earth in this present life. Also, like the handful of historic peace churches, we do not just decry the war spirit as tragic when it rages through the world. We have refused to join armies and murder other people in the name of the State, God, or Jesus. Some of us have even refused to pay war taxes and all of us have been called to root out the seeds of war and violence within our hearts, our families, our communities, and our business dealings.

We have even experimented with engaging the world's powers and principalities through active nonviolent resistance, community organizing, and a constructive program aimed at building the Beloved Community based on equality, justice, democracy, and compassion within the wider world. The work of the American Friends Service Committee is just one example of this. Such nonviolent Kingdom work is, in fact, vital to our identity as Friends—even if we have not always been as faithful as we should be. Early Friends, in particular, showed incredible nonviolent fearlessness when the government and imperial Christians in 17th century England attacked, fined, imprisoned, tortured, and killed Friends as well as confiscated their homes and businesses—all because they would not abandon the way of Jesus.

The spiritual path of Friends at our best also shows the value of being open to new or deeper understandings of God's ways. Just as Jesus added a key passage from Leviticus to the Jewish *Shema* to create the so-called "Jesus Creed," many Friends now add another core concern to this quick distillation of the way of God. This emerging concern is about caring for God's good earth and the rest of creation.

This leading can be seen emerging as early as the writings of George Fox. On the second page of his journal, for example, Fox talks about how Jesus calls us "to act faithfully in two ways—inwardly to God and outwardly to man." Yet, Fox goes on to add a third kind of loving that is touched on in both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, but not often put up front and center--what Fox calls "unity with the creation." This deep commitment to an ecological ethic has only grown stronger over the last 350 years among Friends. In this way, the revealed core of Christian faith is becoming enlarged for many of us into loving God with all one's heart, soul, and strength; loving one's neighbors as one's self; and loving God's good earth and the rest of creation. This specific addition seems essential to any revival of primitive Christianity in the 21st century. Yet, the overall principle of remaining open to ongoing revelation is also important in the Quaker conception of primitive Christianity. It is certainly why Friends were able to reject slavery as a sin well before the US revolution--even though some passages of the scriptures actually endorse slavery.

Similarly, at our best, we have always rejected basing our Christian faith on the Nicene Creed, or any creedal statement derived from it. Today, many Friends still believe in the virgin birth, bodily resurrection, and the divinity of Jesus. Yet, such beliefs are simply not seen as the essence, or the beating heart, of authentic Christianity. Early Friends rightly rejected the notion that salvation was only possible through belief in Jesus as the only begotten Son of God. While claiming that belief in Jesus being the Son of God can be "very beneficial and inspiring," Quaker theologian Robert Barclay also argued that it is "not absolutely necessary." What is necessary is for people to listen to God's Spirit and follow the ways of God—just as Jesus did. It is on this basis that William Penn asserted, "The humble, meek, merciful, just, pious and devout souls are everywhere of one religion; and when death has taken off the mask they will know one another though the divers liveries they wear make them strangers."

Interestingly, the current diversity of beliefs among modern Friends about Jesus is actually quite consistent with the early Jesus movement. As modern research has shown, a wide diversity of "Christological" perspectives existed within the early Jesus movement from the very beginning. For example, perspectives about Jesus as a spiritual teacher, a major prophet, or a human messiah show up frequently in the early layers of Christian scriptures (as has been so well documented in Vermes' *The Changing Faces of Jesus*). These

various perspectives appealed most strongly to Jewish Christians--the people who were Jesus' first disciples and who made up the core of the early Jesus movement in Palestine for the first few of decades after his death.

The somewhat later belief about Jesus' divinity, which only officially became orthodox in the fourth century, appealed more to the growing number of converts outside of Palestine who had been pagan, polytheistic Gentiles and did not have as much grounding in Jesus' own religion of Judaism. Indeed, the dramatic growth of this particular belief about Jesus in the second and third centuries is ultimately what led to the historical transformation of the Jesus movement from a spirited renewal movement within Judaism into the separate religion of Christianity--which unfortunately then degenerated into a very anti-Semitic, imperial state religion by the fourth century.

Personally, I have the strongest affinity for the Jewish Christian Christologies represented by most of the early Jesus movement. These Christologies see Jesus as an awe-inspiring, Spirit-led, revelation and embodiment of the nature of God and God's way, but they do not see Jesus as God or part of a Divine Trinity. History has shown repeatedly, however, that Friends who do hold more "orthodox" Christian beliefs about Jesus' divinity can be just as focused on following the way of Jesus as those Friends who do not share these particular beliefs. When these more orthodox beliefs about Jesus are combined with an active life of discipleship, Marcus Borg is right to say that they can "nourish lives of deep devotion, faith, and love." As he wisely notes about the orthodox paradigm in *The Heart of Christianity*.

The Spirit of God can and does work through it. It has for centuries and still does. When it leads to a strong sense of the reality and grace of God, to following Jesus, and to lives filled with compassion and a passion for justice, as it sometimes does, all one can say is "Praise the Lord."

A key contribution that contemporary Friends can make to any revival of primitive Christianity then is our history of creating a living Christian fellowship that includes people who hold to this doctrine and others who hold beliefs about Jesus that have more in common with the Jewish Christians who made up the very early Jesus movement. This respect for theological diversity challenges all Friends to realize that following the way of Jesus, and thus listening and responding faithfully to the Spirit of God in our hearts, is more central to our common Christian faith than our differing theological beliefs about Jesus—as important as these differing beliefs may be to individual Friends.

For many Friends, this seemingly old-fashion vision of the Religious Society of Friends as a daring spiritual community committed to following the way

of Jesus is very exciting and inspiring. There is still “a great people to be gathered” to the way of Jesus. As Fox wrote in his *Journal*:

Let all nations hear the word by sound or writing. Spare no place, spare not tongue nor pen; but be obedient to the Lord God and go through the work and be valiant for the Truth upon earth.... Be patterns, be examples in all countries, places, islands, nations, wherever you come; that your carriage and life may preach among all sorts of people, and to them.

Ironically, though, just at a time when hundreds of thousands of people are actually seeking a meaningful alternative to both imperial Christianity and modern secularism, most Quakers today have not really risen, even as a clear group intention, to undertake the evangelical and prophetic witness that so powerfully animated the earliest Quakers--and that made them so incredibly influential in the wider world, despite their being just ten percent or less of the British population. Indeed, there are now problematic features about modern Quaker culture that actually inhibit or interfere with the full expression of the best of our Quaker faith in the world today. Like Jesus, we need to sort out what is essential and truest in our faith tradition from all the idle rules, errors, and cultural distortions that have accumulated among us over the last 350 years. If we don't, we will still be a community of faith, but we will not be a faithful community. And, we will not raise a useful challenge to imperial Christianity or offer a meaningful alternative to it in the midst of the ever more materialistic and militaristic American empire.

Quaker Culture vs. Quaker Faith

Samuel Caldwell made much the same point at his November 1998 Monday Night Lecture at Pendle Hill. In that talk “The Time Has Come To Choose,” he argued we need to choose between the vital core of our faith and the negative aspects of our corporate culture that have come to strangle our ability, and even our desire, to act valiantly for the Truth. As Caldwell notes, “Make no mistake about it. It is not because our faith is too obscure to understand or too difficult to practice that we are declining in influence and numbers; it is because our culture is so silly, so off-putting, so pedantic, so irrelevant, and so inflexible.” He goes on to argue, “The dictates of Quaker culture have very little to do with the tenants of our faith. In fact, if we were to examine them closely we would find that they are often at odds.”

Caldwell, a former general secretary for Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, describes two interrelated phenomenon that I have also seen in some of the monthly meetings in which I have participated. The first problem is that a number of the people who tend to gravitate to leadership in our Meetings today are not

really committed to working for the Kingdom of God through evangelical and prophetic witness in the wider world, but are instead focused almost completely on preserving our customs as a “peculiar people” set apart from the world. Caldwell describes such folks as “fuss budgets and reactionaries” who, for various reasons, have turned away from the way of Jesus and the liberating core of our faith.

Nor is this problem just a problem with some of our formal leadership. According to Caldwell, it also includes the activities of folks that he calls “self-appointed conservators of an empty tradition.” As Caldwell describes this aspect of the problem:

What’s worse, there has arisen in the Society of Friends a whole posse of self-appointed culture mavens—I call them the “Quaker Enforcers”—who diligently police our behavior and regularly pronounce on what is “Quaker” and what is not based on these cultural norms. You know the sort. They’re not interested in whether something is faithful or well led; they’re interested exclusively in whether we’ve ever done it that way before. “That’s not Quakerly,” they say.

In this process of “Quakerly” enforcement, these folks often use those cultural norms that they have elevated to articles of faith to suppress any innovative, joyful, and passionate leadings or initiatives by members of their Meetings that focus on making an evangelical and prophetic witness to the larger world and offering the Religious Society of Friends as a growing, vibrant, and challenging alternative to imperial Christianity. According to Caldwell, some examples of these faithless customs are the frequent statements by key Friends that “thou shalt not proselytize or evangelize” or “solicit meeting members for money” or “talk about Jesus in meeting.” Another example is the often-echoed claim that it is unQuakerly or secular for Friends to show any concern at all for what one Friend has called “the values of efficiency, decisiveness, effectiveness, and dispatch” as we make our decisions about group life and action together. None of these cultural norms are required by, or are even consistent with, the way of Jesus, or with Quakerism at its best. Yet, these customs are among the many norms that now, consciously or unconsciously, guide the group life of many of our Monthly, Quarterly, and Yearly Meetings.

It is not hard to see the reality of some of these cultural patterns among us. For example, as reported in Margaret Hope Bacon’s 1969 book *The Quiet Rebels*, “Friends of the silent meeting variety make absolutely no effort to recruit new members.” This cultural norm, so different from the early Friends, is still with us in many of our Meetings today. It is argued by these folks that it would be

“unQuakerly” to do this kind of public outreach in order to encourage newcomers to visit our Meeting and explore the Quaker faith.

Caldwell’s main point here, however, is not to demonize people in formal or informal positions of leadership in our Meetings that subscribe to such customs and notions. They exist in every faith tradition. The key problem, he says is those of us who allow such people to take formal and informal leadership and not provide them with honest feedback, support for their growth, and real accountability if they are unable to refocus on our vibrant Quaker faith instead of enforcing an insular, almost cultish way of being a marginal and peculiar people disconnected from the religious world around us. As Caldwell notes, the rank and file of our Meetings are often so fearful of the stress and conflict that would emerge if they were to honestly and directly challenge people in leadership positions that they too often choose to keep quiet and just endure what they know is destructive and inappropriate behavior on the part of some of their formal and informal leadership.

Part of this problem is that many concerned rank and filers are often unwilling to serve in needed leadership positions themselves--thus leaving a leadership vacuum that is easily filled by the folks that Caldwell calls the “fuss budgets and reactionaries.” Caldwell also goes on to say that the corporate cultures in several of our Meetings have also dramatically turned away from directness, honesty, and accountability and succumbed instead to an organizational culture “where indirectness and obfuscation are virtues.” He also adds that a common custom now is that “no one is ever fired for incompetence.”

I, like many of us, can probably think of several examples of these kinds of problems in the culture of some of the Meetings we have been a part of. Yet, this situation is not unique to Friends. Indeed, many other congregations and religious denominations also struggle with similar issues as those cited by Caldwell. These congregations also need to be periodically shaken up and renewed in order not to lose the essential “juice” of the core commitments of their particular tradition’s faith and practice—which in the case of primitive Christians means following the way of Jesus that calls us to attract and nurture disciples who are engaged in living Spirit-empowered lives of openness, integrity, peace, justice, and earth care in the wider world.

Thomas Bandy, a Protestant leader in congregational and denominational renewal, makes just this point in his book *Kicking Habits: Welcome Relief for Addicted Churches*. In it, Bandy draws a distinction between a declining church culture and a thriving church culture. The declining church, according to Bandy, does little outreach or prophetic witness. It also tends to put up many roadblocks to new initiatives by its members and places its primary emphasis on maintaining the cultural status quo instead of faithfully helping its members to follow the way

of Jesus in their own lives and in their larger communities. Furthermore, a declining church doesn't foster many mid-week opportunities for small groups within the church to get together for informal worship and prayer, to read and talk about the bible (and other devotional literature), or to share intimately with one another about their own struggles and successes as followers of Jesus. The focus of the declining church is to keep existing members in line with the tight cultural norms of the church, not to help them deepen their faith or find a way to reach out to the wider world in service, witness, and outreach.

In a declining church culture, say Bandy, energetic new members are frequently told: "We never did it this way before. We can't afford it. You will have to join an existing committee. We don't think your calling is legitimate. Or, we need to see long reports and approve each step of the project." In the thriving church culture, however, the dynamic is different. The thriving congregation finds many ways to say to its members:

Go for it. We will help motivate you, support you, and equip you. We will help you refine, share, and build your vision. If ever you worry about stepping beyond the perimeters of our basic congregational beliefs, values, and vision, we will help you clarify your direction. If you fail, we will love you anyway and help you learn from the experience to find another way to exercise your gifts. If you succeed, we will praise God together.

The main focus in a thriving church culture is not on belonging, being subservient to fuss budget leaders, maintaining the cultural status quo, or endlessly working on internal organizational matters. The focus of the thriving church is on its larger mission in the world, which becomes most alive when "the member-ministers of the church are released into the community to do whatever it is God has gifted and called them to do." The pulse of such a congregation is worship, witness, worship, witness, worship, witness.... As Bandy notes, members in a thriving church culture are "not in the business of maintaining institutions, but of birthing new ministries" to address the needs of "a morally turbulent and spiritually hungry world." Rather than putting up roadblocks to the ministry work of its members, the thriving congregation applies simple tests to see whether it should embrace the leadings or callings of its members as part of the group's approved ministries. According to Bandy, the relevant tests used by thriving churches are simple:

- *Does it contradict our basic vision, values, or beliefs? If not, no matter how crazy it is, let's try it.*
- *Does it address the real needs and spiritual yearnings of the public? If so, no matter how creative it is, let's do it.*

- *Does it emerge from the spiritual maturity of an individual who has been changed, gifted, and called by God? If so, let's trust it.*

Bandy claims that one of the most important focuses of a thriving congregation is to equip its members for profound interaction and conversation with the public. Early Friends, as prophetic, Jesus-inspired, Bible-studying, Spirit-led, primitive Christians, were particularly well-prepared to challenge the imperial Christianity of their day and serve as a powerful magnet calling many spiritually yearning, but institutionally alienated people to a new way of worship and witness in the world. Today, though, much of our Quaker culture poorly prepares us for such public work.

Part of this lack of preparedness has to do, as noted, with our general organizational cultures. Several of our meetings fall far short of the organizational ethos of what Bandy calls thriving church systems. As Bandy notes:

The thriving church system is best served by an organization that encourages individual initiative, self-discovery, and deep spirituality. It will be an organization that nurtures the multiplication of small groups, even as "cells" multiply in the organic body. It will be an organization with an overarching sense of identity and purpose, but which allows the many parts of the organism absolute freedom to do what they were created to do. Such an organization will concentrate on motivating, communicating, and training, rather than controlling...

How many Monthly Meetings fully embody such an approach to group life anymore? According to Caldwell, not enough.

Yet, part of our modern lack of preparedness to do the public work of outreach, ecumenical debate and dialogue, and prophetic witness has to do with deep flaws in our approach to religious education. We are increasingly unclear of our deepest spiritual message, let alone prepared to share our message with the world in faithful and creative ways. While early Friends offered a dynamic alternative to being enmeshed in the apostasy of imperial Christianity or abandoning the way of Jesus and "primitive Christianity," these once-rejected viewpoints are now actually represented in some sizable numbers within the modern Society of Friends. As Bacon noted in *The Quiet Rebels*, "The differences within the Society of Friends [today] are probably as great as the differences between fundamentalist Southern Baptists and the liberal Unitarians."

Bacon's observation was written in 1969, but it is not hard to see that even today the pull of imperial Christianity has clearly entrapped some of our members

worldwide and the pull of a nearly phobic reaction to all talk of God, Jesus, and the Bible has entrapped another large segment of modern Friends, who often come to us as emotional “burn victims” from the orthodox and imperial Christian communities of their childhoods. The key problem with this extreme, though quite understandable, polarization within our faith community is that the heart and soul of what the early Friends called “primitive Christianity” is all but lost.

Today, when asked about the core faith commitments of Friends, you will often hear “liberal” Friends say there are as many answers to that question as there are Friends and the only common commitments are a tolerance for each other’s personal beliefs along with an attachment to several elements of Quaker culture that have grown up over time. Many Friends have just not been helped by their Meetings to understand and explain the difference between primitive and imperial Christianity. In fact, many do not even know that early Friends publicly challenged the distortions of the imperial Christianity of their day and widely spread the good news of their primitive Christian faith and practice. Because of this lack of knowledge, many of us don’t engage in ecumenical circles with other Christians who also reject the “easy beliefism” of imperial Christianity and embrace instead the joyful, but “costly discipleship” of following the way of Jesus in their daily lives and in their communities. We may not even know such circles exist or ever read such ecumenical Christian journals focused on following the way of Jesus, such as *Sojourners* or books about the growing “emergent church” of real friends and followers of Jesus, such as Nancey Murphy’s *Beyond Fundamentalism and Liberalism* or Brian McLaren’s *A Generous Orthodoxy*. This ignorance leaves us increasingly insular and parochial.

Many Friends today have also abandoned Bible study--thus leaving this extraordinary cultural and spiritual resource in the one-sided hands of imperial Christians, who as a matter of doctrine ignore its most important, soul-satisfying, and beautiful teachings. One of the best attempts to address this negative aspect of modern Quaker culture is the Baltimore Yearly Meeting’s curriculum on the differences in bible interpretation between primitive Christians like Quakers and the increasingly imperial, “fundamentalist” Christians that now dominate religious discourse at all levels of our society.

This amazing curriculum guide, written by Sallie B. King and entitled “A Quaker Response to Christian Fundamentalism,” was originally designed for high school students, but it can be easily adapted for study groups of college-age young people and adults. As King, notes, “This curriculum was born out of necessity.” The necessity was that she and others in her Meeting “discovered that, despite their Quaker upbringing and First Day School education, a number of our children were unprepared to meet the challenges of Christian fundamentalism.” In response, King and others in her Meeting set about to create a Bible study curriculum “to help our Quaker youth understand Christian

fundamentalism and our differences from it, so that they will not be intimidated, overpowered or confused in their interactions with Christian fundamentalist peers.”

If such study groups and educational programs were expanded to include many more of our highschool students, college-age young people, and adults, we would go a long way towards reviving the Quaker ability to offer a compelling vision of primitive Christianity that speaks from the depths of our faith tradition to thousands of spiritual seekers in the wider world today. Indeed, according to King, it is not just our children that are at “a disadvantage in discussions with fundamentalist peers” due to “our liberal Quaker avoidance of doctrine and, in many cases, Bible study.” She is right, I think, that this significant avoidance in our Quaker religious education programs has made most “of our youth (and adults!) rather tongue-tied when faced with fundamentalist peers.”

Yet, even King hesitates to use her compelling curriculum to help our youth or adults publicly question or challenge the religious claims of imperial Christians and speak up for the primitive Christian alternative of following the way of Jesus. As she suggests several times in the curriculum, “The goal is not to enable our youth to argue better with fundamentalists.” Yet, what if we pushed beyond this modern cultural timidity and renewed the daring, outspoken, and fully-engaged challenge to imperial Christianity that was once so common among Friends? What if we once again increased our capacity to do outreach and offer up the Religious Society of Friends as a dynamic modern revival of primitive Christianity? What if we once again refused to abandon Christianity to today’s “imperial conceptions of the Church?” What if we stopped cultivating a declining church culture and once again fostered a thriving, faithful church culture?

Looking around at the New England Yearly Meeting of Friends--and at the larger associations of Friends General Conference and Friends United Meeting that my Monthly Meeting in Putney belongs to--I already see some healthy signs of primitive Christianity still being rooted among us. I also see many people taking steps to deepen the mystical, prophetic, pastoral, and evangelical spirit of primitive Christianity that runs through the vital center of our faith tradition. I especially see this among those Friends who have sometimes been dubbed “Convergent Friends,” As noted by Quaker blogger Robin Mohr, there is a converging spirit among many “from the politically liberal end of the evangelical branch, from the Christian end of the unprogrammed branch, and from the more outgoing end of the Conservative branch.” Wess Daniels adds that for all their differences, these increasingly “convergent Friends” find unity as “a group of people who are in love with early Quakerism, Jesus, the Bible, following the Spirit, and sharing God’s love for the world.” I believe that these efforts need to continue and gather even more strength if Friends are to offer a significant contribution to a wider revival of primitive Christianity in our world today.

My hope is that modern Friends will ask themselves: How can we offer a sharper, public critique of the dominant imperial Christianity of our time and reach out to the hundreds of thousands of spiritual seekers in the world willing and able to become genuine friends and followers of Jesus--either within the Religious Society of Friends, or in other denominations and congregations of what is increasingly being called "the emergent Church." There is still "a great people to be gathered" to the way of Jesus. Fox says this, of course, and Barclay says that. The key question for us today is: What will each of us say and do in the effort to revitalize primitive Christianity in our world today? Much is riding on that decision.

Discussion Questions for Friends Groups

How faithfully do you embody what early Friends called “primitive Christianity” in your life? To what degree have you been pulled away from the vital center of Friend’s faith and practice by either “orthodox” creedal Christianity or a phobic reaction to any talk of God, Jesus, and the Bible?

What attracts you to a revival of primitive Christianity among Friends? How does it relate to your own sense of spiritual mission? How would it challenge you to lead a life of deeper discipleship?

Does an expanded focus on God, Jesus, and the Bible scare you—even within the framework of primitive Christianity outlined here? Why? What do you fear losing in your experience of Friends Meeting? What might you gain?

How would a revival of primitive Christianity change how your Meeting handles ministry, religious education, membership decisions, outreach, or ecumenical activities?

Which beliefs about Jesus do you personally hold? Can you comfortably worship in a community where other followers of The Way hold different theological beliefs about him? What stands in your way of embracing this level of theological diversity? How might you get past your concerns or objections?

When asked about the religious faith of Friends, what do you say? Does the spiritual mission of Friends seem clear to you or muddy? How would a stronger revival of primitive Christianity as the vital center of Friends faith and practice help or hinder you in offering a satisfying and coherent answer to this question?

What topics or themes about Quaker and wider Christian history, faith, or practice does this paper make you curious about? How might you deepen your knowledge of these topics? How might people in your Meeting do this together?

If someone applied for membership in your Meeting--and said that she could not view Jesus as even a useful spiritual teacher and could not embrace some key aspects of the way of Jesus outlined in this paper—would you be inclined to accept or reject her request for membership? Why? Do you feel it is OK to even ask about an applicant’s views on such topics? Why or why not?

When other Friends derive a significant benefit from their exposure to and practice of other faith traditions--and bring this into their ministry or religious education work in your meeting--does this please you or worry you? Can you see that other faith traditions can be consistent with the way of Jesus?

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