

Questions and Reflections from Module 1

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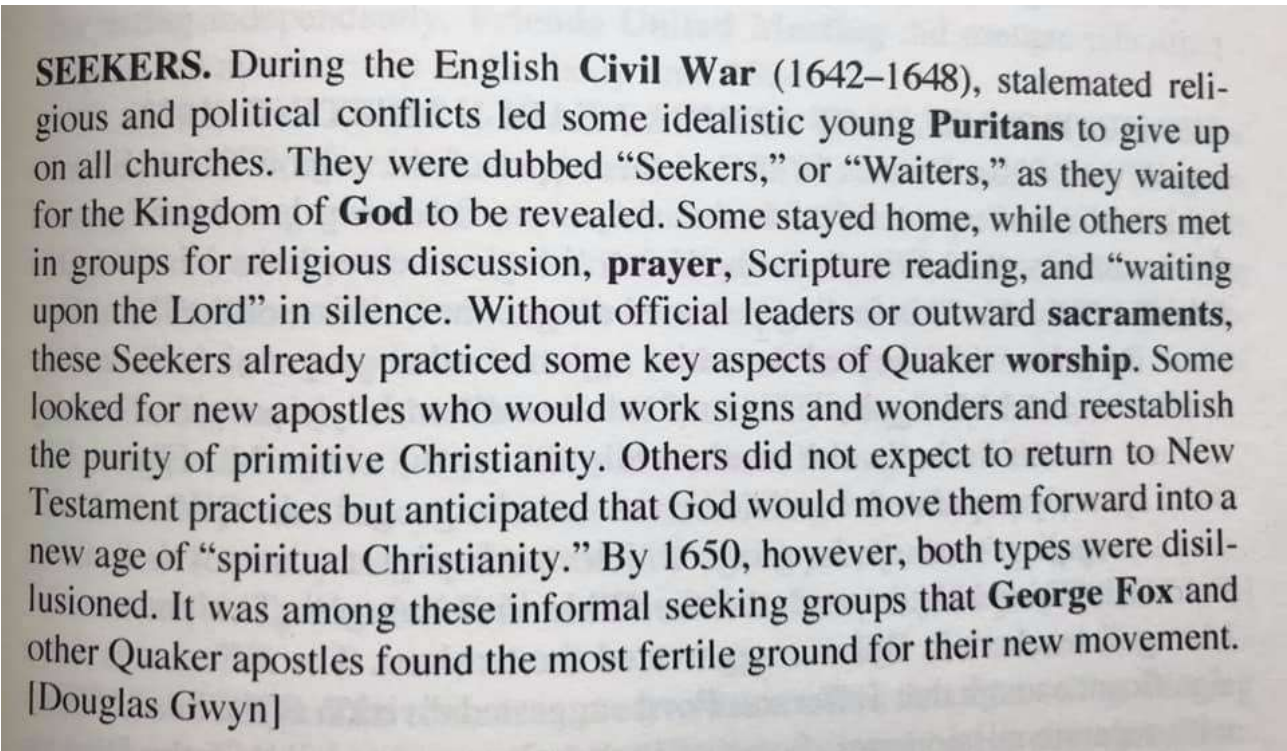
1. Seekers and Silent Waiting

A late question about 1.2a. There are lots of useful references here, but there's one bit which I've always wondered about the source(s) for:

"In desperation, [the Seekers] decided to sit in silence to wait for a fresh revelation from God."

I'd be very interested if you have a pointer to any primary sources for that, or to something which discusses and references such sources.

I have some doubts about the literal historical accuracy of this explanation, but it has been suggested by Quaker historian Douglas Gwyn (see his book *Seekers Found: Atonement in Early Quaker Experience*. I think that it also features in William Braithwaite's account in *The Beginnings of Quakerism*. My copy is in my Woodbrooke office and so I cannot check that). Here is Gwyn's entry in *The Historical Dictionary of Friends*:



SEEKERS. During the English **Civil War** (1642–1648), stalemated religious and political conflicts led some idealistic young **Puritans** to give up on all churches. They were dubbed “Seekers,” or “Waiters,” as they waited for the Kingdom of **God** to be revealed. Some stayed home, while others met in groups for religious discussion, **prayer**, Scripture reading, and “waiting upon the Lord” in silence. Without official leaders or outward **sacraments**, these Seekers already practiced some key aspects of Quaker **worship**. Some looked for new apostles who would work signs and wonders and reestablish the purity of primitive Christianity. Others did not expect to return to New Testament practices but anticipated that God would move them forward into a new age of “spiritual Christianity.” By 1650, however, both types were disillusioned. It was among these informal seeking groups that **George Fox** and other Quaker apostles found the most fertile ground for their new movement.
[Douglas Gwyn]

What recent (non-Quaker) scholarship seems to show is that, during the 1610s and 1620s a radical form of Puritanism emerged as a reaction against mainstream Calvinist Puritanism. This form of Puritanism, influenced by the writings of the radical wing of the European Reformation, emphasised a mystical spirituality of absolute surrender and passivity before God, leading to perfection/deification. In the North of England this was represented by the Grindletonian movement and it

has been suggested that many of the most important Quaker ministers recruited in the Westmorland area in 1652 had previously been Grindletonians. A worship practice of silent waiting fits well with a spirituality of surrender and passivity, so it is likely that it already existed in some form before the emergence of the Quaker movement. David Como's book *Blown by the Spirit: Puritanism and the Emergence of an Antinomian Underground in Pre-Civil-War England* is a useful source of information about this (e.g. he has a chapter on the Grindletonians and their leader Roger Brearley).

2. The Understanding of Vocal Ministry

This section gives a good overview to the standard story about ministry as experienced by early Friends. However I think many Friends today, including many whose ministry I find valuable, share my own feeling about that story, which is that it makes me uncomfortable, because it does not apply to my own experience of ministry, or if it does it does so at best only very metaphorically.

We get into deep waters here very quickly. I think I understand that early Friends did experience ministry as God or Christ or the Holy Spirit speaking through them, with a pretty traditional Bible-ensured Christian understanding of those capitalised words. But my own very confused, inarticulate, understanding of those words does not extend to the possibility of whatever lies behind them 'speaking' at all---I've never had any experience of a personal God.

In my own experience of Meeting for Worship, I can remember only two occasions on which someone's vocal ministry struck me as inspired, as if the person was indeed almost a bystander with respect to what they were saying. I myself have never experienced that kind of inspiration. Yet I think that at least sometimes my ministry is authentic, that it does serve to "deepen [the] worshiping experience" of the Meeting, and that the same is true for other ministry which doesn't sit comfortably in the terms of the 'traditional' story.

I think one of the reasons Elders find it so hard to do their job these days, and have done for some time if the Meetings I know are any guide, is because Elders cannot in conscience tell people they should approach ministry in the way section 7 tells us about it, because Elders don't meet that standard themselves.

I think the greatest challenge we face as we try to save Britain Yearly Meeting from dwindling away is to reconstruct a genuinely religious understanding of our form of worship, one which is honest and true to our actual contemporary experience of it without secularising it. That understanding has to acknowledge our ancestry, but it cannot pretend that we approach Meeting for Worship as our 17th century forebears did.

One of my key objectives in offering this programme is to engage with the spiritual roots of Quaker ways so that Friends can reflect on their current experience and practice (not to try and enforce the traditional position). I think the issues you have outlined about vocal ministry do just that. You raise important questions about the nature of ministry, where it arises from, and what can be regarded as 'authentic'.

The first thing to say, I think, is that the understanding of vocal ministry as divine utterance that passes through the speaker rather than coming from them, has been the accepted understanding for most of Quaker history (and continues to be so for the majority of Quakers in the world today). It is not just 'what our 17th century forebears did'. This understanding, however, will vary depending on location, culture, and the particular flavour of Quakerism in that place/culture (e.g. there will be significant differences between Conservative Quakers, Christian Liberal Quakers, and Evangelical Quakers). Here is Wilmer Cooper's entry in *The Historical Dictionary of Friends*:

It has been the general belief and practice of Friends that spoken ministry is a gift from the **Holy Spirit**. In this sense, it is a **prophetic** ministry inspired by the leading of the Holy Spirit. In the Christian context, the authority for ministry is from **Christ** through the Holy Spirit. It usually takes place in the Friends **meeting**, which is the **gathered** community of faith for mutual sharing, **prayer**, and **worship**. Thus, authority for Quaker ministry is not by apostolic succession, as many churches believe, but is by endeavoring to be in the same Spirit as the apostles were. Ministry is not an office or profession; it is above all a response to the divine initiative. Historically, Friends believed in the "free Gospel ministry" without monetary remuneration. This is still true for some Friends, particularly those who still hold to **unprogrammed worship**. However, since the late 19th century, pastoral ministers generally have been paid. All too often, the practice has been the "poorly paid ministry," and the quality of the pastoral leadership at times has suffered. [Wilmer A. Cooper]

The contemporary Liberal-Pluralist expression of the Quaker way inevitably brings this traditional understanding into question. Sometimes this is because not all Friends believe that there is a 'God' from whom divine utterance proceeds. Others (such as yourself) feel that their own experience and sense of authenticity leads them to believe that valuable vocal ministry can emerge from the person giving it rather than simply passing through them.

Our current book of discipline offers quite a bit of flexibility. In advices and Queries number 13 we are encouraged to pray that "ministry may arise from deep experience" (so leaving the question of the source somewhat open). However, it also suggests that we should "trust that words will be given to you" (so indicating

that they may arise from somewhere beyond the individual speaking them). In addition, sections 2.55 to 2.75 provide a range of experiences and insights relating to vocal ministry. It will be interesting to see how the revised book of discipline reflects changes in current understanding.

I am an elder and I appreciate the comments you have made about assessing the quality and authenticity of vocal ministry. In my experience, elders rarely spend time discussing whether vocal ministry in their meeting is genuinely divine utterance. Much more attention is given to the impact of the ministry on the community (is it helpful? Does it feed the spiritual life of the meeting?). We seem to have developed largely unwritten rules (what Ben Pink Dandelion has called the 'behavioural creed'). This tends to mean that ministry may be deemed to be problematic if it is too long, too repetitious, too 'preachy', or reflects a narrow political position that is at odds with the culture of the meeting.

Given the relatively 'permissive' culture within BYM, it's not easy to deal with the issue of vocal ministry in a straight-forward way. I think elders need to take account of the book of discipline, formal guidance issued (e.g. *With a Tender Hand: A Resource Book for Eldership and Oversight* by Zelig Gross) and the particular needs and circumstances of their meeting. It is helpful for Friends to understand the traditional position, even though this is not "laid upon you as a rule or form to walk by".

Early Friends recognised that human individuals are finite and limited creatures who often get things wrong (we are not God). Discernment, therefore, is an art rather than a science and so absolute judgments about 'right and wrong', 'true and false' are not easily made. To what extent can one person judge the authenticity of the ministry of another?

So we are left with an essential question to ponder – does our current experience of worship and vocal ministry reflect the loss of traditional Quaker religious experience and interpretation (e.g. of Christ teaching his people himself, and of God speaking and acting through the human creature) or does it reflect a more realistic modern understanding of the human condition and the sources of our thoughts, motivations and actions?

I appreciate that it is probably quite a bit more complicated than that! 😊

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