

# Prophetic Ministry

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*While waiting upon the Lord in silence as we often did for many hours together . . . we received often the pouring down of the Spirit upon us and our hearts were made glad and our tongues loosed and our mouths opened . . . and the glory of the Father was revealed.*

Edward Burrough

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## Foreword

The term *prophetic* indicates in a single word the basic theory of Quaker ministry. He who appears in the ministry in a Quaker meeting is, at least theoretically a *prophet*, in the sense that he or she is an instrument through which God speaks to the congregation. The divine call was more deliberately waited for and consciously felt in the older Quakerism than is the case today. But even today a prophetic ministry is still the goal, however differently the word *prophetic* may be interpreted. A teaching ministry consisting of what Robert Barclay calls material “conned and gathered” may have its occasional place in a Quaker meeting, though it is generally more appropriately exercised at other times. The most satisfactory ministry in the Quaker meeting of today arises out of a flash of insight, felt in the silence and delivered with brevity and a deep sense of concern. Ministers who can speak at length and exhibit throughout the genuine spirit of prophecy are rare in any generation.

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The Dudleian Lectureship was established by a trust in 1745. The foundation requires one lecture a year on three subjects in rotation, (1) Natural Religion, (2) Revealed Religion and (3) The Validity of Non-Episcopal Ordination. The present author was invited to deal with the third subject from the point of view of the Society of Friends. It was suggested to him that he “treat the general theory of the Quaker ministry and then go on to tell how it actually operates in practice.” This he has attempted to do.

It may not be out of place at this time to recall to contemporary Friends the high aspirations of the past, aspirations often overlooked today, but never more needed than now. We are not called to imitate our forefathers. We are called to seek with consecration, humility and patience the same Source of inspiration that was manifest in them. The fire on the altar is now low but some wind of the Spirit may fan it to a new flame. Then men can say with Jeremiah, the greatest of the ancient prophets: "Is not my word like a fire, saith the Lord. and like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces."

H. H. B.

“The Law shall not perish from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophet.” (Jer. 18:18) This saying from the book of Jeremiah might be used to designate the three main types of ministry which have appeared, not only in ancient Israel but also, in widely varying forms, in the Christian Church. There is a ministry of ritual, a ministry of teaching and a ministry which waits until it becomes a vocal expression of the Divine Word spoken immediately in the heart. Other types could be added such as the ministry of healing, of art, of literature, of social service, but we are speaking here only of what takes place in congregational worship.

The ministry of priest, seer, and prophet occur in some degree in every Christian group but in general, and allowing for exceptions and limitations, they are characteristic, respectively, of the three main types of Christianity: Catholic, Protestant and Quaker; the altar centered, the sermon centered and, at least in intention, the prophetic. That which is most prominent in Catholicism is the priestly sacramental ministry, in Protestantism the ministry which expounds God’s plan of salvation as delineated in the sacred Book, and in Quakerism the prophetic ministry arising spontaneously and unpredictably under a sense of Divine urgency, while the worshiper waits silently upon God. It must, however, be emphasized that no group is without some who exercise, in some form, a priestly function, some a teaching function, and some a prophetic function. Attention is here directed to differentiations which are characteristic. It may seem extravagant to classify so small a group as the Quakers as one of the three divisions of Christendom, but in this analysis we are concerned not with numbers but with prevailing characteristics in faith and practice. The prophetic ministry, to which the Society of Friends aspires, not always or even generally with success, is not validated by a rite of priestly consecration, but solely by the inward requirement, “the mighty ordination of the pierced hands.”

## Demonstration, Lecture, Laboratory

As a former teacher of physics I may be permitted to compare the three types of ministry to three ways of teaching science, the lecture demonstration method, the lecture method and the laboratory method. The lecture demonstration method in which the lecture is illustrated by experiments corresponds to those rituals in which the congregation observes, hears and spiritually participates in acts performed by the priest; the lecture method can be compared to the preaching of the pastor expounding the Word of God revealed in Scripture; and, finally, the laboratory method is not unlike the Quaker meeting in which direct experience is sought and where words are used from time to time as they arise from, or lead to, direct experience. In scientific instruction the three methods are used at different times and usually in different places. The same holds true in religion. A group of persons in England who were planning a garden village decided to include only three houses of worship, Catholic, Non-Conformist and Quaker. This they believed would satisfy the range of religious needs. To combine the three in one service would not allow any one of the three to reach full development. The worshiper attending sometimes one and sometimes another could, they thought, achieve a well-rounded religious experience.

To say that prophetic ministry is characteristic of the Society of Friends is to speak of the goal, not necessarily of the achievement. The Quaker meeting is designed to make possible and encourage this type of ministry. It was not originally called a meeting for worship but a meeting "to wait upon the Lord." The worshiper waits silently in a state of sensitive awareness and expectancy. He is not entirely passive, for, though the gift of the Spirit comes unpredictably as an undeserved act of divine favor, man must, through prayer and discipline, render himself fit for its reception. As

in climbing a mountain, energy must be expended to reach the top, but the view from the summit is a pure gift requiring no effort to receive. Out of the depths of the worshiper's soul arise thoughts, feelings, intuitions of widely varying value. If the will has been properly directed, some of these insights from beyond the margin of self-consciousness may be recognized as of divine origin. There is no absolute test, but if revelations come with power and create a unity not only with others within the congregation but also with the living Christ, the worshiper may truly feel that he has received strength and guidance from the supreme source. Finally some word may arise in his mind to which is added peculiar urgency and a character which marks it as intended, not for himself alone, but for the worshiping group. The heart beats faster, the prophetic word must be spoken. If the worshiper refuses the call, he is burdened with a sense of guilt; if he obeys, God's peace encompasses his soul.

### Primitive Christianity Revived

Quakerism, like most other Christian movements, initially claimed to be a revival of primitive Christianity. In the middle of the 17th Century the Bible had become thoroughly familiar throughout England. Comparisons were constantly drawn between the contemporary church and the church described in the New Testament. The varying degrees of Puritanism represented the extent to which each group desired to go in "purifying" the church of all that had been added since apostolic times. The stages of purification represent increasing degrees of radicalism in religious terms. They extend from right to left, proceeding from Catholic, to Anglican, to Presbyterian, to Independent (or Congregationalist), to Baptist and finally to Quaker. This subtractive process might seem to imply that Quakerism was reached by a negative road. But in reality something new and very

important was added. This new element was the prophetic ministry. The trait in Quakers which most shocked the more conservative Puritans was their claim to speak with the same kind of inspiration with which prophets and apostles spoke in Bible times. After describing an argument on this subject with Jesuits, George Fox says: "And many other disputes we had with such like and with all other sects as Presbyterians, Independents, Seekers, Baptists, Episcopal men, Socinians, Brownists, Lutherans, Calvinists, Arians, Fifth Monarchy men, Familists, Muggletonians, Ranters. But none of them would confess to the same power and spirit that the Apostles had and were in." (Journal, Cambridge Edition. Vol. II. p. 11, 12.) It was on this point that Quakerism put forth its claim to be "Primitive Christianity Revived," to use the title of one of William Penn's essays. Primitive Christianity had its prophets and apostles. According to the Society of Friends no true revival of it could be without them.

These Quakers did not claim to be as good as or as great instruments of the Spirit as were Isaiah or Paul, but there was, they insisted, no difference in kind. God still spoke to man directly. He needed no intermediary except His Word, the living Christ within, the Light "which lighteth every man that cometh into the world." The Puritans admitted the Holy Spirit as an aid to understanding the Scriptures, but the Quaker concept allowed for the possibility of a revelation of new truth independent of Scripture, though not inconsistent with it. This appeared to the Puritans to open the gate for anarchy and confusion.

Quaker prophetic ministry arose partly in response to an immediate demand. Among the many religious groups which came into existence in Cromwell's England when religious freedom first existed, were the Seekers who, from study of the New Testament, had arrived at the conclusion that a church was impossible without prophets. They gave up all formal religious services and waited, often in silence,

for the prophet to appear. There are several examples of whole congregations together with their minister joining the Seeker movement. When the Quaker prophet appeared and spoke to them they accepted the man or woman as truly ordained of God, for Quaker preaching was accompanied by manifestations of the Spirit such as had been described in the New Testament. The conversion of a large Seeker congregation in 1652 lent the first great impetus to the early Quaker movement, five years after George Fox began to preach.

Though the Quakers claimed to have received their enlightenment directly from within there is no doubt that they were powerfully influenced by the Bible. The prophets of Israel were their principal models. Some early Friends even pronounced dooms through signs and symbols as did Jeremiah and Isaiah. A few attempted to perform miracles. They did not say "I proclaim to you." Their message was "Thus saith the Lord." Paul's advice to "despise not prophesyings" was often on their lips. His list of gifts in the first epistle to the Corinthians (12:28) is arranged in an order of importance to which Quakers agreed – "first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, then healers, helpers, administrators, speakers in various kinds of tongues."<sup>1</sup> The ascendancy of the prophet, or the apostle who was himself a missionary prophet, was clear. "Earnestly desire the spiritual gifts," said Paul, "especially that you may prophesy." (I Cor. 14:1)

Paul also declared that all gifts are inspired by the same Spirit. (I Cor. 12:11) There was in early Quakerism a kind of teaching ministry, but it was not exercised in the meeting for worship. So called "public Friends," men and women whose instructional capacity enabled them to expound the faith to multitudes, often sought to convince their hearers by reasoning and by Biblical examples. But convincement was not conversion. The convinced, having consented in

their minds to the faith which had been expounded, would thereafter attend a meeting for worship. Exposed to the Divine Light in stillness sometimes broken by the voice of prophecy, their lives would gradually be changed from within.

### Early Quakerism

The Society of Friends has not always held the same view of the nature of prophecy and of the prophetic call. I shall divide its history into four periods in order to indicate the major changes. The first age lasted roughly from 1650 to 1700. This period was characterized by a fiery zeal to spread the message. There was waiting for inspiration but there was also a realization of frequent and sometimes of almost continuous inspiration. Preachers of the Light traversed Europe and America in the face of severe persecution. They left behind them cell-like groups which met together to wait upon the Lord and to experience the Spirit, welding them together into an organic whole, the body of Christ animated by His Presence. Out of the silence of the meeting arose the inspired voice of prophecy, sometimes ecstatic, occasionally incoherent, frequently orderly and logical, causing the worshipers to quake in the dread and awful presence of the Lord. Edward Burrough, one of the greatest of the early preachers, wrote, "While waiting upon the Lord in silence as we often did for many hours together . . . we received often the pouring down of the Spirit upon us and our hearts were made glad and our tongues loosed and our mouths opened . . . and the glory of the Father was revealed." (Introduction to Fox's *Great Mystery*)

The second age lasted approximately from 1700 to 1800. There was no change in theory regarding the nature of

inspiration and ministry, but there was more waiting in silence for the moving of the Spirit. Real prophets, though less numerous, appeared in many meetings. Often, under a deep sense of guidance, these ministers left their homes, their wives or husbands, children, farms or shops to travel for years to upbuild the church. The Quaker movement still grew in numbers but more slowly than at first. This age was characterized by a phenomenon which appeared in ancient Israel and also in Christianity, an inevitable sequence, perhaps, in the history of religion. Gradually the priestly type of mind took precedence over the prophetic. The creator gave way to the conservator, the pioneer to him who devises techniques and disciplines for holding ground which has been gained. This was by no means all loss. Man cannot always maintain the heat of creative passion. The priestly type performs an essential function. It is the priest who transforms the oracles of the prophets into a cultural pattern, a way of life that can be handed on by one generation to the next. Behavior comes to be based on accepted norms rather than on the unpredictable, disturbing, and sometimes revolutionary utterances of prophets. Lightning from heaven is replaced by the homelike glow of the altar fire. The Spirit no longer drives its votaries to convert the world. Settled piety sheds its radiance upon the normal routines of life. But the priest becomes dangerous when he suppresses the voice of prophecy.

Rivalry between the priest-like type of mentality and the prophetic type assumed a different form in Quakerism from that which it assumed in early Christianity. Because it was carefully cultivated through a unique type of religious practice and a unique type of church government, the prophetic type lasted longer in Quakerism than in the primitive Church.

## Priest and Prophet

Early Christian documents indicate the waning power of the prophet and the growing ascendancy of the priest. In the *Didaché* or *Teachings of the Twelve Apostles*, and in *The Shepherd of Hermas*, both dating from the early half of the second century, the true prophet is highly honored but carefully distinguished from the false prophet. The true prophet is “meek, peaceable and humble” and “contents himself with fewer wants than other men.” “When a man wishes the Spirit to speak it does not speak but only when God wishes it to speak.” The false prophet on the other hand “exalts himself,” “takes the first seat,” is “talkative,” “lives in luxury” and “takes reward for his prophecy.” In the *Epistles of Ignatius*, probably written about the same time, the priest is placed in the ascendancy for two reasons, the necessity of maintaining sound doctrine and the importance of administering sacraments. “Ye are subject to the bishop as to Jesus Christ,” writes Ignatius, perhaps not more than sixty years after Paul had written “the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets.”

A visible head in full charge of the second century church was needed to control prophets whose rhapsodic utterances were unpredictable and sometimes upsetting. The Montanist movement, a renewal of prophecy in the second half of the second century, was harshly suppressed. Prophetic ministry as an accepted tendency and a living power in the Christian Church had lasted hardly more than a hundred years. By the end of the second century the prophetic office as such had ceased to exist. Old prophecies took precedence over new prophecies. One of the chief responsibilities of churchmen was to interpret what the old prophecies meant, these utterances being by this time enshrined in what had become a sacred book.

The two causes of the decline of prophecy in early Christianity, sacramentalism and a fixed doctrine expressed

in a creed, were both absent in Quakerism. The Quakers dispensed with visible sacraments and so removed the main cause of the growth of the priestly function. They held to the primacy of inspired utterance over Scripture and so removed the main cause of the growth of authoritarianism in the church. But the Society of Friends never ceased to insist that inspiration, though independent of Scripture, must be consistent with it, having its source in the same Spirit through which the Scripture was written. This provided a broader basis of unity than a written creed. Another reason for the persistence of Quaker prophecy was the form of Quaker church government which prevented any individual or party from exercising control. Decisions are made in the Society of Friends by the meeting as a whole on the basis of unanimity. Since there is but one Light of Truth the nearer the meeting approaches this Light through prayer and worship the more complete will be the unity and the more nearly can the membership come to a decision. Theoretically the rule of the Spirit in the congregation would make unnecessary any form of church government. A few Quakers actually took this position. When a form of government was set up which ranked group inspiration above individual inspiration they withdrew from the Society of Friends. But some form of control was inescapable for the same reason that control was necessary in early Christianity. There were eccentric and ill-balanced prophets who claimed to be genuine. These were disassociated or brought under restraint even before there was any definite membership in the Society of Friends.

The growth of the Quaker discipline does not explicitly concern us here. It developed throughout the eighteenth century and had to do largely with moral behavior, but it is important to point out that the Quakers took seriously Paul's injunction to make the prophets subject to the prophets. Friends who were more accustomed than others to speak in

meeting were called ministers. These ministers often met together for mutual encouragement and criticism. In 1668 there was constituted in London a Yearly Meeting of all ministers. Permission to attend such meetings, first granted by the meeting of ministers itself and later by the congregation from which the minister came was the Quaker form of recognition. A minister so approved could travel in his ministry with an appropriate letter of introduction and, if need be, with the help of financial support. Meetings of ministers frequently issued written advices, frank counsel about consistency of life with preaching, but with little or no stress on doctrine. Of the twenty "Cautions and Counsels to Ministers" issued by the Yearly Meeting of Ministers in 1702, half are concerned with the manner and character of speaking and half with the private life of the minister. None are doctrinal tests. Instead, the minister is warned against laying stress on the authority of his message which was expected to contain its own evidence of authority.

Before long, however, this "higher school of the Holy Spirit" suffered an intrusion. The earliest reference to this circumstance in American records occurs in the following minutes of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of 1714. "This meeting agrees that ... each Monthly Meeting ... choose two or more Friends out of each Monthly Meeting (where meetings of ministers are or shall be held) to sit with the ministers in their meetings, taking care that the Friends chosen for that service be prudent, solid Friends." Such Friends appointed to advise the ministers came to be called elders. The history of the Society of Friends in the 18th century is largely characterized by the growing influence of these elders who developed a priestly type of mind as did the elders, or presbyters, in the early Christian Church. These Quaker elders were priestly, not in the sense of being qualified to administer sacraments, but in a broader sense. They tended to cultivate a definite, clearly defined, cultural pattern.

Toward the end of the century a Quaker was distinguishable by the way he talked, dressed and behaved. This uniformity was brought about by elders who magnified outward appearances as evidences of inward grace. At the same time every effort was made to encourage the spirit of prophecy. Eldership was itself looked upon as a divine gift. There is no doubt that the elders of the 18th century were frequently men and women of acute spiritual discernment whose advice was of benefit to those who spoke in meeting and especially to the young who sometimes lacked courage to break the solemn silence. "Begin with, keep with, and quit with the Life" was the substance of their counsel.

But on the whole our records show that more repression was exerted by the elders than encouragement. Entrance into the ministry became a more difficult and exceptional undertaking than it had been before. Religious journals or autobiographies of hundreds of 18th and 19th century ministers are extant. In nearly every case the inner call to the ministry was resisted by the one who was called, sometimes for many years. This resulted in acute mental distress, occasionally physical illness. Finally the journalist manages to utter a few words in a meeting, perhaps only a single verse of scripture. This was a very important event. What had been stirring in his breast was now known to his family and friends, sometimes to their surprise. Further progress was often slow and intermittent until finally recognition occurred, uncertainty vanished and the speaker became an approved minister. As such he was privileged to attend the meetings of ministers and elders.

During this phase of the development of Quaker ministry which gradually came to an end in the latter part of the 19th century there was an intense effort to guard the spring of inspired utterance from human contamination. Famous ministers sometimes sat "in suffering silence" when visiting meetings which might be crowded with persons who

had come expressly to hear them. No external pressure could prevent them from waiting for the turning of “the key of David” which, according to the book of Revelation, “shutteth and no man openeth and openeth and no man shutteth.” Yet they did not hesitate to prepare themselves for their service. They pondered the Bible and were faithful in preserving daily periods of retirement. When growing business interfered with religious duties it was the business which was curtailed. Much time was devoted to visiting families and holding small religious meetings with them. Here the prophetic voice was often heard. Sometimes it was directed to the peculiar state of an individual person.

### Later Quakerism

The third period in Quaker history, approximately 1800 to 1900, may be designated as a time of conflict. The prophetic type of mind which derived truth from deep springs of inward life could not come to terms with the priest-like type which emphasized tradition, organization and doctrine. A fair degree of unity was maintained until the elders attempted to regulate the ministers on matters of belief. This broke the prophetic-priestly synthesis or what might be more properly called at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the mystical-evangelical synthesis which had continued for nearly two centuries as a genuine source of power. Separations occurred, resulting finally in three bodies of Friends. These were the liberal, non-authoritarian and non-doctrinal group placing the primary emphasis on the Inward Light or the Inward Christ, the evangelical, authoritarian or doctrinal group emphasizing the Bible and the historic Christ, and a group between these two which in a measure avoided both extremes. This third group was properly called Conservative because historically they continued to be nearest to Friends of the earlier time.

All three branches cultivated the gift of prophecy, but it was inevitable that prophecy should decline in the more authoritarian sector. In the course of the evangelical revival in the latter part of the 19th century which affected all religious bodies, this group was reinforced by influences and membership from outside. The priestly mind prevailed. In many areas the older form of Quaker meeting, the waiting worship, was given up in favor of a conventional prearranged form of preaching, prayer, and singing. Two-thirds of the more than 100,000 Friends in America have now programmed their meetings, leaving small leeway for spontaneous, prophetic ministry arising unpredictably out of silence. Here, as elsewhere in the Christian church, professional ministers may, and often do, rise to prophetic utterance. But prophetic utterance is no longer the basic assumption underlying all ministry.

The twentieth century may be called the fourth period in Quaker history. Two new influences have considerably modified the character of the earlier prophetic ministry; these are intellectualism arising from higher education and the modern social gospel. Earlier members of the Society of Friends, while they made great sacrifices to give their own children and the children of those under their care a good grounding in education, were afraid of the higher learning as tending toward what they called a "notional religion" or a religion "afloat on the surface." They were not afraid of the historical study of the Bible but they feared that ideas about religion might take the place of religious experience itself.

In the twentieth century most Friends send their children to college. As a result of this training and similar causes, rhapsodic, unpremeditated utterance has become "sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought." Modern preaching in Friends meetings tends to be thoughtful, instructive and self-conscious. The ancient fervor is replaced by a deliberate, sometimes a conversational tone. A new

philosophy of the divine-human relationship has developed which is more akin to the Hellenic ancestor of Christianity than to the Hebraic ancestor. According to this view the highest in man is divine and all Truth, whether reached by intuition or by a process of self-conscious thought, is from God and truly inspired. Spirit has given place to intellect, prophecy to teaching. This change has occurred within a generation. But just as there has been at all periods some teaching ministry in the Society of Friends, so today the authentic voice of prophecy is occasionally heard. The change is one of degree.

The second cause of change is the predominance of the social gospel. Friends have always been socially minded. The works of service which have brought them into the public eye today can be paralleled in every generation of Quaker history throughout the past three centuries. But the older social activity resulted from individual concerns which generally originated in periods of worship, either when the worshiper was alone or in the group. The mind being directed to the ultimate source of all Light and Truth, some quite unexpected sense of responsibility might arise. The ability to face freshly and directly in the silence the facts of existence, unobscured by a mist of words, made the Quakers pioneers in several lines of endeavor. The process at present is less conducive to originality. Social responsibility is often delegated to committees or to persons who may not escape the limitations of specialization.

Today ministry not infrequently includes the statement of public problems with suggestions for their solution. Formerly ministry directed the worshiper to the divine Source of all solutions. The modern type of ministry has its use and importance, but it tends to be set in a secular, pragmatic frame of reference. Having less depth it is delivered more easily, hence more frequently. A Quaker minister who had spent eight years on a single religious journey once wrote,

“Much talk on religious subjects may be compared to great auctions, which are pretty sure indications of approaching bankruptcy.” (George Dillwyn, Occasional Reflections.) The state of some Quaker meetings today might attest the truth of this observation.

### Prophecy and secularism

The fact should not be overlooked that we are considering changes which have affected all forms of ministry, both lay and professional, throughout the Christian world. These changes grow out of the increasing secularization of modern life. The urbanization of our society surrounds us with controllable man-made objects. The increase of scientific knowledge appears to have robbed the universe of its mystery. The great demands made upon men by the external world leave little time or inclination to develop the inward life. Such tendencies have contributed to the elimination of a truly prophetic ministry either in the Quaker meeting or the pulpit.

In my boyhood there still existed a prophetic ministry which exerted moving power. Sometimes it was poured forth in a torrent with complete abandon, sometimes slowly and laboriously as if brought forth with enormous effort from unseen depths. It had in it a quality of the numinous, inspiring awe and reverence and a sense of the infinite realm of mystery surrounding man's finite existence. Such voices are seldom heard today.

The changes in the 20th century represent gain as well as loss. It is important that the mind be won as well as the heart. The older ministry which claimed to contain no human element was often obviously very human. “The water,” as someone expressed it, “tasted of the pipes.” A new philosophy was needed to bridge the chasm between flesh and spirit so as to render religion acceptable to modern minds. But such

a philosophy can go too far. If the chasm be completely filled and all boundary stones eliminated, “inspiration” may become routine and commonplace and the voice of prophecy stilled.

What then can we learn from these three centuries of experiment with an unordained ministry exercised by men and women with only such training for their service as they have been able to give themselves. It would have been more illuminating to have drawn our examples of success or failure in prophetic ministry from a wider range of experience than that of the Society of Friends, but the subject would have been too vast and, as it is, we have only been able to outline general trends in one small group.

### Prophecy and Christianity

First it must be made clear that prophetic ministry of the type of which I am speaking serves a purpose different from that of most ministry from the pulpit. In the Catholic Church there are Spiritual Directors who aid those engaged in the spiritual exercises of prayer, meditation and contemplation. The director guides by suggesting definite subjects for meditation. These are gauged to the degree of progress of the person in training. In a Quaker meeting there are worshipers who need spiritual guidance to enable them to make proper use of the silence. This help is not likely to be provided by a sustained discourse. If someone arises with a brief message which seems to grow out of the life of the meeting and which harmonizes with the silence, wandering thoughts may become focused on the Way, the Truth and the Life. Such spiritual direction seeks to eliminate the need for itself. “It is a mighty thing,” wrote George Fox in 1658, “to be in the work of the ministry of the Lord God and to go forth in it for it is not a customary preaching but to bring people to the end of all preaching.” (*Journal*, Cambridge Edition Vol. I, p. 321)

As has been pointed out, prophetic ministry continued longer in the Society of Friends than in the early Christian community because of the preservation of conditions which gave it an opportunity. Can the Christian Church today offer such opportunity?

There are Seekers today as there were in the 17th century. They know, and psychologists agree, that something more is needed than right ideas. Souls need help which will go beyond the mind to reach the springs of the will. This ministry must pierce the self-conscious, ego-centered surface of ideas. It is only in the depths of the soul that the meaning and purpose of life can be realized. An over-intellectualized religion of theories, concepts, and calls to social action can discover what is relative. The result is likely to be a sense of futility and bewilderment. The Absolute lies deeper. When the Spirit of God moves upon the chaotic waters of the soul a new creation of Life arises. Not by arguments or explanations but by a few simple words spoken while the heart lies fallow may the seed of divine grace accomplish a new birth. "Deep calls unto deep," wrote the Psalmist. Such ministry can occur only when the deep in one soul calls to the deep in another. For such service there is no training save that of the Spirit.

The experience of the Society of Friends would indicate that there are spiritual gifts in the laity which are lost through neglect. Given the right conditions, a powerful lay ministry might emerge. But the same freedom which would permit the development of a powerful ministry would give opportunity for weak, uninspired ministry. This is a price which many are unwilling to pay. Because we cannot endure the weak, we deny opportunity to the strong. The wind of the Spirit bloweth where it listeth. We cannot control it. Therefore men are tempted to place their reliance on what they can control.

A truly inspired prophet delivering his message is free from the cramp of self-consciousness. He speaks with freedom and self-surrender, aware only of the truth welling up from within. For the moment he is the Truth, for he sees it not from the outside, as a subject viewing an object, but from the inside, as one who feels it as part of himself. The typical camp-meeting evangelist moves within a narrowly restricted theological system. His methods frequently resemble those of high-pressure salesmanship. But the true prophet, like the true artist or the true poet, is freely creative. He puts himself in unity with the living Word through which as John says "all things were made." The new does not arise through deliberation, but through flashes of insight. It is on intuition rather than on deliberation that the prophet depends, on feeling rather than on thought.

For the prophet higher education has certain advantages. It may save him from fanaticism, from errors of fact, from isolation from the currents of thought of his time. But modern education does not develop religious insight and intuition. Its emphasis is on analysis and experiment in a highly secular frame of reference. It covers the inner depths of the soul with a surface layer of ideas which are valuable in manipulating man's environment, but which reveal no truth regarding his destiny. Higher education, whether in a college or theological school, tends to dampen the spirit of prophecy, whereas under proper conditions it could strengthen it by furnishing powerful tools. There is no reason why the insight of the prophet could not be so integrated with the critical mind of the scholar that each would strengthen and supplement the other.

### **Inward and outward authority**

I think Quaker history shows that the optimum conditions for prophetic ministry are realized when there is

an appropriate balance between outward control and the sense of inward inspiration. Of the three Quaker groups in the 19th century it was the middle one which longest retained the spirit of prophecy. This was midway between the most and the least authoritarian. We may conclude that too much regulation quenches the spirit and too little leaves open the door for unedifying utterance. By outward regulation I mean not only the judgment of the congregation expressed through its members appointed for the purpose, but all objective standards which embody the insights of previous prophets and teachers, especially those of Biblical times.

Quakers have been called mystics but they never intended to be exclusively mystics. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, partly because of Calvinistic influences, Christianity showed a serious lack of the mystical ingredient. This was the element which the Quakers were in a position to add. They had no intention to found a sect. If the Quakers had been religious anarchists with no outward controls it is unlikely that they would have survived. If they had been more authoritarian than they were the spring of prophetic ministry would probably have dried up. Too much inwardness leads to vagueness and formlessness, too much outwardness to a rigidity which hampers the freedom of the Spirit.

But outward and inward are not of equal value in religion. The Spirit is primary. Its fruits in doctrine and organization are secondary. It is better to err on the side of too much rather than too little freedom. A Quaker saint once wrote, "Dear people of God, be tender over the least breathings of God's Spirit in one another." (William Dewsbury, *Works*, 179) Such tenderness toward the weak is a source of spiritual strength to both speaker and hearer.

Quaker prophets and mystics have seldom attempted to work out a theology or philosophy of the Inward Light. Their mysticism has been God-centered, Christ-centered or Spirit-centered. Sometimes it can be said to be centered in

all three, as when Robert Barclay, the first systematic Quaker thinker, wrote of “a spiritual, heavenly and invisible principle in which God as Father, Son and Spirit dwells.” (Barclay, *Apology*, Prop. V., XIII)

I think it can be shown that prophetic ministry has had the greatest driving power when it has been of a Christ-centered type. Here there is both a subjective and an objective reference. The Inward Light becomes less diffuse and more focused when associated with Jesus as its supreme revelation in history. This may result in an appropriate balance between inward and outward. Revelations from within may be accepted as genuine when consistent, not only with the words but also with the whole spirit, tone and temper of the life of Jesus. This is the positive advantage of an activist Hebraic type of mysticism over a contemplative Hellenic type, though both have an essential and important place in the Christian religion. Though the Church may be in one sense a people of God gathered out of the world it is, in another sense, in the world, for the human and divine founder of the Church was himself in the world, seeking to establish a society that should be both human and divine. Jesus called himself a prophet and prophetic religion is the religion of Jesus rather than the religion about Jesus.

Christianity was itself a revival of prophetic religion after a long period of priestly domination in Israel. Doctrinal elements were subsidiary to the one great experience shared by every convert, the outpouring of the Spirit, the divine energy permeating the soul. The Greco-Roman culture had reached its limit in philosophical and religious development. Its creative time was past. In spite of every evidence of vast material power, dissolution had begun. In this cultural barrenness appeared a new creative outburst of spiritual power. It came among ordinary men and women engaged in humble tasks. The age in which we now live presents many resemblances to that epoch in the Greco-Roman world when

Christianity began. There is the same evidence of cultural and religious non-creativity in the midst of great material power, the same searching of the inward because of the failure of the outward. Can we look for some similar outpouring? It may be in a new and unexpected form, which will once more fulfill the prophecy of Joel – “Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy.”

**Notes:**

1. This and subsequent quotations from the New Testament are taken from the *Revised Standard Version*.