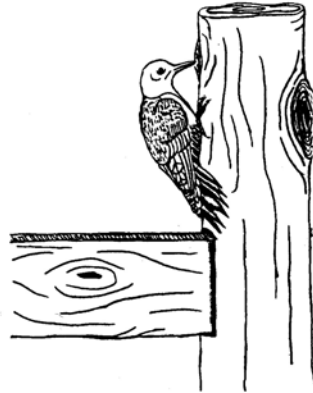


*Swallowing
Fenceposts:*



SOME LESSONS FROM THE QUAKER PAST

Thomas Hamm

In the Quaker heartland of Indiana, around Richmond, where I teach at Earlham College, there is a story told about the dangers of trying to swallow fenceposts. It goes back, as nearly as I can determine, to the 1880s, to a quarterly meeting held in Dublin, Indiana, when a certain task requiring considerable intelligence, tact and “weight” was under discussion. Suddenly, a Friend whose opinion of his own abilities was higher than strict adherence to Truth would have merited, stood and proposed himself as the man for the job. All present realized that this wouldn't do, but not wanting to hurt the good Friend's feelings, looked for some gentle way to say so. Finally, one elderly Quaker rose and spoke: “Friends, on my way to Meeting today I saw the craziest thing. It was a woodpecker, and the silly thing was trying to swallow a fencepost.” There is no record whether the meeting maintained suitable solemnity, but the task was then entrusted to the birdwatching Friend.

This point was driven home to me anew last month, when I led a discussion of *Don Quixote* in one of my classes. Don Quixote, you will remember, is a Spanish gentleman who wants to be a chivalrous knight, and so ranges the countryside, mistaking windmills for giants, herds of sheep for armies and inns for lordly castles. At one point, I asked my class if they could think of anyone today who resembled Don Quixote. Sure, one student responded, the Quakers. Isn't it quixotic to think that by love you can bring peace in the Middle East or Northern Ireland, or challenge the military-industrial complex by a few individuals refusing to pay taxes?

This, I think, points up a paradox. Friends have succeeded in doing some extraordinary things against extraordinary odds. Friends created, in Pennsylvania, the first multicultural society in North America that worked. We helped bring about that great shift by which the Western world came to see human slavery not as divinely sanctioned, but as a sin. And we showed the world that a society will do better by encouraging and nurturing the talents of women than by fearing and repressing them.

On the other hand, Friends have not been nearly as successful in dealing with each other. During the nineteenth century, beginning in the 1820s, Friends split into a bewildering variety of fragments. In Greensboro, Indiana, not far from where I grew up, there were by 1850 four different Quaker congregations. My favorite example is Salem, Ohio, in the 1870s, which had six: Gurneyites, Wilburites, Hicksites, Mauleites, Kollites and Progressives. Any reader of the Quaker press will know that many of these tensions remain with us to the present, especially within Friends United Meeting, the most diverse of Quaker bodies, which has just survived yet another attempt to dismember it.

I don't claim to have any special insights about the solutions to these problems--if I did I wouldn't have waited until now to bring them forward. As an historian, however, I think that I have some sense of how we got where we are, of the mistakes we have made. And perhaps more importantly, I have a sense of what hasn't worked in the past. I think that we as Friends have spent too much time trying to swallow fenceposts, taking on tasks that are beyond us, or at least beyond us as we have tried to deal with them. I think that we have to begin by realizing that change is inevitable, that all of us, evangelical and universalist, conservative and liberal, are the products of that change. But change invariably threatens unity. And when that happens, there are two reactions that don't work. One is to rely on structures and statements to achieve or maintain unity. The other is what I call “Quaker minimalism,” which is an attempt to reduce Quakerism to a simple formulation as a way of avoiding the hard business of facing and bringing unity out of our diversity.

That change has come to us there can be no doubt; Friends have always been changing, and had we not changed there would be no need for a Friends World Committee for Consultation. The “Children of Light” of James Nayler, Richard Hubberthorne, Edward Burrough and George Fox in the 1650s were different from the ‘Society of Friends of Fox, William Penn and George Whitehead in the 1680s. They in turn were different from the generation of John Woolman and Anthony Benezet seventy-five years later. And they were different from Friends of the age of Joseph John Gurney, Elias Hicks, John Wilbur and Lucretia Mott in the nineteenth century. Friends today, of course, are different from those a century ago.

Certainly anyone looking at Friends today will see this. A majority of Quakers around the world are pastoral, and despite all of the elaborate rationalizations advanced for them (I speak as a pastoral Friend), pastors are not something that any Friend before 1870 would have owned, even J. J. Gurney.

Music has become an integral part of the worship of pastoral Friends; if Fox turns over in his grave at the thought of a Quaker pastor, then he must be on the verge of rising out of it if he knows of a Quaker choir or a Quaker “minister of music.” Sorrowfully, for many Friends in Friends United Meeting and Evangelical Friends International, the peace testimony has little relevance. And even in the past fifty years pastoral Friends have seen major changes. When I go to Evangelical Friends colleges and find pool tables on campus, or classes in dance, or a copy of *Ulysses* in the library, I know that indeed the earth does move.

General Conference Friends have, in their way, changed just as much. Worship may be unprogrammed, but it is different from a century ago. There is music at times. The short talks by a variety of members and attenders is far removed from the days when virtually all preaching--and even Hicksites called it that--was done by recorded ministers, often at considerable length. Diversity has become one of the most prized characteristics of liberal Friends; in contrast, before 1860, “diverse opinions,” even among Hicksites, would have been a cause for concern, if not for a round of disownments. And the tolerance of many liberal Friends on sexual matters would be beyond the comprehension of the most open-minded nineteenth-century disciple of a Hicks or Mott.

Even Conservative Friends, who rose in the years from 1840 to 1880 as advocates of uncompromising primitivism, have been transformed. Plain dress and plain language have become exceptions rather than the rule. Disownment no longer comes for marriage out of unity. Scattergood and Olney are filled with non-Quaker students. And when one goes to Conservative burying grounds and finds tombstones, one knows again that the world does indeed move.

Change is not comfortable; it is not neat. When it has come to Friends it has often brought separation and pain. Orthodox and Hicksite, Gurneyite and Wilburite, “Fast” and “Slow,” split messily, disowning and casting out each other with imprecations, if not curses.

These experiences, of course, have haunted Friends for generations. They explain, I think, why recently Friends United Meeting chose to continue trying to work together to resolve its tensions rather than “realign,” as was suggested in 1991. It explains why a number of Friends, of all theological persuasions, continue to bear with yearly meetings or associations that they often find uncongenial. But sometimes they are too much to bear, as we have seen recently with the departure of Southwest Yearly Meeting from Friends United Meeting, and the subsequent departure of Whittier Friends from Southwest.

For these reasons, as they face change, we see Friends desperately struggle to hold themselves together. The courses they have often taken, however, have not brought the results desired. One of them has been to rely on structures to maintain unity. The other has been to resort to what I call “Quaker minimalism.”

When I speak of structures, I have several things in mind. We can rely on organizations, whether it be a monthly meeting or a yearly meeting or a wider association--EFI, for example. It can be a code of behavior, like a Discipline. Or it can be a statement of faith, of which the Richmond Declaration of 1887 is probably the best known.

That meeting structures don't always preserve unity is self-evident from our history. Every separation has involved members splitting monthly or quarterly or yearly meetings. After the separations of the 1820s, both Hicksite and Orthodox Friends saw unyielding administration of the Discipline as the best protection against future disruptions. Thus in the 1830s and 1840s, whenever dissent reared its head, both groups wielded disownments liberally. Hicksites moved against radical abolitionists, nonresistants and spiritualists. Orthodox Friends, coming into conflict over understandings of the nature of justification and sanctification, divided into Wilburite and Gurneyite bodies, once again disowning each other. And it did not stop there. The Wilburites went through a bewildering series of divisions in the 1850s and 1860s into Mauleites, Kingites, Otisites, Kollites and Primitive Friends. The Gurneyites lost much of the older generation in the 1870s, when revivalism and second-experience holiness teachings came among them.

Over the past generation, we have seen the collapse of the last great attempt of Friends to resolve their differences and guard against new ones through organization, the Uniform Discipline of the Five Years Meeting. It began with the Richmond Conference of 1887, which was conceived

as a way to “check ... growing divergencies in faith and practice,” as one Friend put it. It culminated in 1902, when all of the Gurneyite yearly meetings, except Ohio, joined to form the Five Years Meeting, a victory for the cause of “unification, compactness, strength, stolidity, power of resistance and an effective wielding of our forces.” Rufus Jones and James Wood, the leading spirits behind the movement, saw it as the first step toward bringing all American Friends together again. Of course they did not. The accomplishments of the Five Years Meeting, and its successor, Friends United Meeting, have been considerable, but of course it has not united all Friends. In 1902, no one anticipated, I think, just how badly divided the Five Years Meeting would become over issues of modernism, evolution and scriptural authority in just the next decade. Indeed, the very existence of the Five Years Meeting probably exacerbated these tensions by providing a setting for dispute and a set of bureaucracies over which to struggle. First, some of the yearly meetings withdrew, then the idea of a uniform discipline disappeared. As we approach the centennial of its formation, it has become clear that FUM no longer tries to be a legislative body, but rather an organization that exists for Friends cooperatively to carry out certain missions. For the foreseeable future, I think that it will be groups like the FWCC, which are not primarily policymaking groups, that will continue to try to bring Friends together in common projects.

Faced with these realities, some Friends have resorted to the opposite extreme, what I call “Quaker minimalism.” (I think that that is a term of my invention, but if I have unwittingly appropriated it from some other Friend I apologize.) Usually this is the fruit of an altogether admirable impulse among Friends of all persuasions, to refuse to be divided by nonessentials, the desire to be “inclusive.” Yet it also leads to new kinds of tensions and risks the loss of any kind of distinctiveness, of our identity as a “Peculiar People.” And in fact even the most inclusive groups often have exacting requirements for inclusion, often as political as they are theological.

Liberal and evangelical Friends come to this minimalism by different paths and for different reasons. For liberal and universalist Friends, who consider tolerance one of the most admirable of virtues (so do I), and see far too many examples of intolerance in the world, it is often unbearable to think of excluding some good person just on the basis of theological opinions. Thus it is enough to be a “seeker,” to be sincere in the pursuit of Truth.

This sort of minimalism, however, carries risks. There is the contention that can come when some Friends are not willing to be as expansive as others. It seems to be an issue among some whether one must even believe in God, a position that would have mystified any Friend, no matter how broad-minded, before this century. This raises a question, ultimately, of identity. If Friends can accommodate virtually any belief, then what does it mean to be a Friend?

Evangelical and programmed Friends face a different challenge, one that goes back to the 1870s and 1880s. In those years Gurneyite Friends were swept up in a wave of revivalism that ultimately stretched from Maine to California. The roots of this are far too complex for me to address here, but these dramatic changes brought thousands of new members to Friends, new members to whom Quaker ways were strange. Thus there was a demand for what was called at the time a “teaching ministry,” one that would introduce them to Quaker faith and practice. Of course by 1900 this had developed into the pastoral system. When Friends ministers were not available, however, meetings often turned to ministers of other denominations, especially those of a Wesleyan background. A member of one small meeting near my home in Indiana told me that at the turn of the century they could afford to pay no salary and opened their pulpit to anyone willing to preach for free, thus subjecting themselves to an endless series of cranks. Needless to say, the spiritual life of such meetings often suffered. The unwillingness or inability of Friends to have their own seminary contributed, as Friends pastors were educated everywhere from Harvard Divinity School to storefront Bible colleges.

Perhaps even more importantly, as the “Friends Church” became just another denomination in small towns and cities, not all that different from the Presbyterians or Methodists down the street, and Quakers married Presbyterians or Methodists down the street, Friends came to a new vision of community. In many places, no longer was it the wider Society of Friends, but the brotherhood (or sisterhood) of evangelical or fundamentalist or holiness Christians. Competition for members was

often from such churches, and as some yearly meetings increasingly measured their health from the carefully compiled statistics of accessions, conversions and renewals, recruiting new members became all-important. And all too often Quaker tenets that were not helpful in recruiting members fell by the wayside--the peace testimony, the ministry of women, our understanding of marriage. It was enough "just to be a good Christian."

Here is where I venture one of my outrageous statements. I am a great believer in ecumenism and interfaith contacts. I think that the ability of Friends to attract new members is a measure of health. But I do not think that it is enough "just to be a good Christian" in order to be a Friend. Billy Graham and Mother Theresa are good Christians, but they are not Friends, and unless they cast their faith in different ways, would not belong in a Quaker meeting as members. I think that to be a consistent Quaker requires more. What the "more" should be is beyond the bounds of the time we have here, but I think that while Quakerism enjoins simplicity, to be a Friend is not a simple matter. To be faithful in a complex world that confronts us with very unsimple questions is a complicated thing. I think that we will do better when we stop trying to swallow the fencepost of reducing Quakerism to a simple phrase or idea.

What, then, are we to do? As I said before, I don't claim to know all of the answers. But I think that we may find it useful to keep these things in mind.

1. Separations may not always be the worst of evils. I won't minimize the pain that they cause. I think that we are wise to consider them as the last unhappy resort, embraced only when there seems no other choice. But they may also be liberating. It is standard for us to lament past separations. But always involved is the assumption that if Friends had remained united, it would have been on my basis. The past separations may in fact have each helped keep alive some part of the essence of Quakerism that might have been lost.

2. Minimize the chances for number 1 becoming necessary by not elevating every conflict into one of fundamentals. Differences do not have to become divisions. Homosexuality is an example of the kind of issue that is tearing apart Friends at all levels. I won't minimize the implications of the matter, but I think that our discussion would be better if those for whom homosexual acts are sinful would not assume that those who disagree with them are rejecting Scriptural authority or rejecting Christ. They may simply understand the Bible differently. On the other hand, to hold to a more traditional view of morality does not make one a hater, and it is unjust to say or assume that it does.

3. Most importantly, trust the Spirit. Ultimately, unity, or even peaceful coexistence, must be fruits of the Spirit; human devices will not secure them. I think that I can do no better than to quote the advices of London Yearly Meeting in 1735:

It is earnestly recommended, as a means very conducive to the preservation of Friends as a people of one heart and one way, for the good of themselves and their children after them, that the discipline of the church in the several meetings instituted for that purpose, be kept up and managed in a spirit of love and wisdom. Let all things in those meetings be done with charity; let the love of God, in an especial manner, rule in your hearts; and therein, though sometimes different sentiments may arise, yet will every member have the same thing in view, the glory of God, and the good of His church and people; and in this singleness of heart, will best promote the great end and services of those meetings. We advise therefore, upon this occasion, that nothing be done through strife and contention, or from any private views; or by the influence of numbers; but in lowliness of mind, let each esteem another better than himself.

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Thomas Hamm is a member of First Friends Meeting, New Castle, Indiana. He directs the Friends Collection in the Lilly Library and teaches history at Earlham College, Richmond, Indiana. His book *The Transformation of American Quakerism: Orthodox Friends 1800-1907* won the 1986 Brewer Prize of the American Society for Church History.

Thomas Hamm delivered this talk as the keynote speaker at the Friends World Committee for Consultation, Section of the Americas Annual Meeting held in St. Louis, Missouri, March 17-20, 1994. Representatives from yearly meetings across the Section, which includes North, South and Central America, are invited to gather each year to conduct the business of the Section in the manner of Friends. The Section office, located in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, is one of four Section offices throughout the world; the World Office is in London.

The Section of the Americas of Friends World Committee for Consultation seeks to be for Friends a wellspring of living waters, moving us ever towards a shared future in the Spirit, a world community of Friends, whose diversity of tradition, culture and historical experience serves as mutual education and spiritual enrichment and whose unity in God's truth becomes the ground of our varying vocations in the world.

FRIENDS WORLD COMMITTEE FOR CONSULTATION

Section of the Americas
1506 Race Street
Philadelphia, PA 19102 USA
(215) 241-7250
Fax (215) 241-7285
Email Americas@fwccamericas.org
Web www.fwccamericas.org
1st printing: 7-94/500/GS