

The Spiritual Benefits of Simplification in the Society of Friends

Paul Parker's address to Quakers in Yorkshire held at Doncaster on 26 April 2025

Thanks for asking me to speak about the spiritual benefits of simplification in the Society of Friends.

Friends, I think this takes us right back to our testimony of simplicity, and what that's all about. Here's *Quaker faith & practice* on that:

20.27 (from the Faith & Practice of North Carolina Yearly Meeting) reads, in part:

Outwardly, simplicity is shunning superfluities of dress, speech, behaviour, and possessions, which tend to obscure our vision of reality. Inwardly, simplicity is spiritual detachment from the things of this world as part of the effort to fulfil the first commandment: to love God with all of the heart and mind and strength.

The testimony of outward simplicity began as a protest against the extravagance and snobbery which marked English society in the 1600s. In whatever forms this protest is maintained today, it must still be seen as a testimony against involvement with things which tend to dilute our energies and scatter our thoughts, reducing us to lives of triviality and mediocrity.

Simplicity does not mean drabness or narrowness but is essentially positive, being the capacity for selectivity in one who holds attention on the goal. Thus simplicity is an appreciation of all that is helpful towards living as children of the Living God.

20.29 (from William Penn):

*Some are so taken with themselves it would seem that nothing else deserved their attention. Their folly would diminish if **they could spare but half the time to think of God, that they spend in washing, perfuming, painting and dressing their bodies.***

William Penn was talking about individuals, but I think we can apply this to our area meetings too. If all we're doing is looking after the body, making sure it looks OK from the outside, but not worrying about whether it's serving God's purposes, then we're missing something.

When we think of simplicity, we often think of the outward bits – not buying a new washing machine if the old one can be repaired; avoiding excess; *'a simple lifestyle, freely chosen, is a source of strength'* (Advice 41) - we find it quite hard, and we don't all make the same choices. And we tend to think of it as an individual thing.

But what these passages from *Quaker faith & practice* remind us is that the spiritual understanding of our testimony of simplicity is that we try to take away the things that stand between us and the Spirit. If we genuinely believe we are living the lives of seekers after truth, listening for the voice of our inward guide, we have to remove the things which get in the way of that. And we have to think of it as a collective thing.

If our meetings are taken up with the things of this world, how do we attend to the things of the spirit? I remember going to an area meeting, years ago, where they talked about faith in action - and they said 'we should have an agenda item at every meeting about putting faith into action. **And if there's nothing to take under that item, we should**

all just go home!

So if our meetings are taken up with looking after their own outward appearances, worrying about how we look to the world, how we look to the charity regulator or the auditor, then for a lot of the time we're doing that, we're not focused on the life of the spirit.

There's a trap here, of course, which is that we make the mistake of thinking that we can deal with the affairs of the world without doing so in a spiritual way. That's why, when we hold our business meetings, we hold them in worship - we don't just knock off the material stuff without weighing it carefully, consulting our guide, carefully discerning the way through. But we don't need to spend all our time on that stuff - and all too often, if I think about my own area meeting, that's what we do.

Keeping these things - the spiritual and the material - in appropriate balance is one of the distinctive things about the Society of Friends. We want to be at the same time a movement and an organisation. This goes right back to the beginning of things in the C17. Quakers at the start had all the hallmarks of a movement - they were spiritual activists, constantly getting into trouble for challenging the status quo. The valiant sixty rode out to spread the word, there were big meetings and gatherings, charismatic preachers, a great sense of energy and life.

But movements are ephemeral things - they come and go, they fragment into cells, they lack internal discipline, leading to fallings-out and schisms. If you look at something like the Occupy movement a few years ago, that's what happened to it. And Extinction Rebellion now - it's in the process of fragmenting into a more moderate wing and the more radical - Just Stop Oil. And JSO in turn is fragmenting into a group who've had enough of getting arrested and a youth wing, who as we discovered at Westminster Friends Meeting House a few weeks ago, haven't!

But people love being part of a movement - it's energising, life-giving, innovative and constantly new. And people who enjoy that get frustrated with the people who say - hang on a minute, how's this meant to work? What are the rules?

So the reason Quakers haven't taken that path of fragmentation (which for a while back then it looked like we would), is that we also had people who understood that for the movement not to dissipate it needed the infrastructure of an organisation - some rules and discipline, people who take responsibility for things, ways of making and recording decisions, ways of managing relationships - with the world, and with other Quaker meetings. And that led us to the structure of monthly and quarterly meetings, of membership processes, that persists today. And people like being part of an organisation - it feels like you belong, you can control things, it feels safe and predictable. So some people who enjoy that get frustrated with the people who question everything, and think we should have fewer rules, all be involved in every decision and make things feel a bit more turbulent.

But the trouble with organisations is they are the very opposite of ephemeral things - they ossify and become rigid and inflexible. They're hard to change, and they suck up energy. And over time they accrete more and more structure to themselves - a bit like how an onion grows. They lead to constant discussions about the structures themselves - how they work, how we find the people to populate them, the expertise needed to understand them and keep them going.

It's important to understand that God can move through any kind of structure - the Spirit is

there in the movement, guiding and shaping, energising and empowering the individuals and cells which make it up. And the Spirit is there in the organisation - moving through the faithful service of the people who make it work, infusing its decisions and expressed through its corporate life. It's not that one is right, and one is wrong.

One of the reasons Quakers have persisted, when so many of the other radical Christian movements of the C17 have not, is that we have managed, over the years, to keep these two dynamics in balance. There have been times when we have been more of a movement, and times when we have been more of an organisation. But we have always been both. And if the movement-lovers ever win the argument, we'll fragment and dissipate. And if the organisation-lovers win, we'll ossify and become irrelevant.

Where I think we are now, though, is that we have a movement which has become de-energised, and an organisation which has allowed too much to accrete to itself. It has become over-encumbered, and placing too many demands on the movement to maintain itself. That's partly because we are better at saying yes to things than no to things - so we don't lay things down when we know we should. And we're spending too much time on our structures - as Penn said - **washing, perfuming, painting and dressing their bodies**. But it's also because the world has changed around us - in a whole range of ways.

Our lives and our working patterns have changed enormously. Sunday is no longer a space in the week where no-one is working and nothing else happens apart from religious activities. Most households need two incomes these days, so there's less spare time around for people to get involved and do the work that's needed.

Quaker demographics have changed. The majority of us Quakers now live in households where we're the only Quaker. Quaker families and all-Quaker households are the exception, rather than the norm. That makes a big difference to how we think about time, money, and service. We can't all just say yes to things.

We're seeing a continuing secularisation of society (although interestingly there are new statistics out which suggest this is starting to bottom out - Christianity in the US is on the rise, for instance). But it's very easy for us to see our Quakerism as 'just another leisure activity' that has to be fitted into a busy schedule, rather than something which infuses the whole of our lives and informs the choices we make.

The ills of the world are demanding more attention - we have the crisis of climate change; the crisis of democracy and loss of trust in institutions; the crisis of war on the borders of Europe, the crisis of migration; the crisis of inequality. These are becoming all-pervasive crises in ways which increasingly remind us of the 17th century inequities which led to the formation of our Quaker movement in the first place.

The regulatory environment has changed - we operate in the most regulated charity sector in the world - and people's expectations of us are high. These expectations are not unreasonable - things like good accounting and fraud prevention, safeguarding, health & safety are rightly important, but there is now far greater accountability for whether we do them well.

Online opportunities have ballooned since the pandemic. We can meet in new ways, come together whenever we need to, worship together. There's even a new online local meeting (in North Wales AM) with proper eldership, pastoral care and a regular business meeting – so new types of Quaker community are possible and are with us now.

And although we have convinced ourselves that formal membership is in inexorable decline, there is evidence of meetings growing, especially in large urban meetings we are seeing large numbers of young people emerging and young adults reconnecting with faith. An interesting report just published by the Bible Society suggests there is a resurgence of Christianity among the young in ways we might not have expected a few years ago.

So it's time we cleared some space. It's exciting to see what's happening in Yorkshire with the emergence of new structures. None of what's proposed here is out of step with what's happening elsewhere. Think of all the things that won't need to happen. 52 fewer trustees. 6 fewer trustee bodies. 6 fewer sets of statutory accounts. Massively fewer treasurers reports to AM. And a critical mass which will mean you can afford to pay for help rather than trying to convince yourself that some of these tasks are spiritually rewarding.

What are you going to do with all that time, all that Quaker energy, all that space for discernment, for action under concern, for worship, for witness, for putting faith into action, for work on peace, on climate justice, on inclusion? You'll need to be careful not just to fill it up with stuff! Maybe we need to see it as a kind of sabbath - a breathing space. Or maybe you already know how to fill it with meaningful spiritual work. Time to set up the children's meeting no-one has had time to run so that families are welcome. Time to do the outreach event no-one has had the space to organise. Time to visit one another and look after each other better. Time to share what's going on in our spiritual lives, not just sort out the practicalities. Time to set up the community project everyone's been too busy to start. Time to engage with Quakers nationally, to come to the continuing YM sessions that will start next year. To get involved with our central work to change the world into one where our Quaker values can flourish.

What an amazing opportunity!

Let's end with Thomas Kelly

20.36 (Thomas Kelly) I wish I might emphasise how a life becomes simplified when dominated by faithfulness to a few concerns. Too many of us have too many irons in the fire. We get distracted by the intellectual claim to our interest in a thousand and one good things, and before we know it we are pulled and hauled breathlessly along by an over-burdened programme of good committees and good undertakings. I am persuaded that this fevered life of church workers is not wholesome. Undertakings get plastered on from the outside because we can't turn down a friend. Acceptance of service on a weighty committee should really depend upon an answering imperative within us, not merely upon a rational calculation of the factors involved. The concern-orientated life is ordered and organised from within. And we learn to say No as well as Yes by attending to the guidance of inner responsibility. Quaker simplicity needs to be expressed not merely in dress and architecture and height of tombstones but also in the structure of a relatively simplified and co-ordinated life-programme of social responsibilities.