**Revolutionary Roots of Quakerism:** A 5 Week Class Series on 17th Century Friends

Session #5 (February 7) **Constructing “Gospel Order” as a Way of Living with Each Other**

**“Gospel Order”** is an old-fashioned Quaker term for the radical transformation and re-ordering of lives and relationships that results from the relationship between the Quaker community and the Living God.

* “Order” refers to the many concrete changes that are made in lives and relationships - not just an inward feeling but a way of life expressed in virtually every area of living.
* “Gospel” refers not to a creed or dogma, but to a real living relationship with God. The central focus is not right beliefs or right actions but life and power in God.

As Fox says: “Many have had the letter but lost the life, the notion but lost the possession, the profession but lost the substance, Christ Jesus.” This is the “true sap” which Jesus describes so vividly in [John 15](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+15) (which, significantly, is also the chapter from which “Friends” took their name for themselves.) Fox: “Therefore take heed of the world’s fashions, lest ye be moulded up into their spirit, and that will bring you to slight truth, and lift up the wrong eye, and wrong mind, and wrong spirit, and hurt and blind the pure eye, and pure mind, and quench the holy spirit.”

Further reading:

Sondra Cronk “Gospel Order: A Quaker Understanding of Faithful Church Community” [Pendle Hill Pamphlet #297](http://www.pendlehill.org/product/gospel-order-quaker-understanding-faithful-church-community/). (provides wonderful examples of how issues are addressed & resolved in a traditional Quaker meeting community)

Lloyd Lee Wilson, *Essays on the Quaker Vision of Gospel Order.* [order from FGC Books](https://www.quakerbooks.org/book/essays-quaker-vision-gospel-order)

In the late 1660’s George Fox began devoting more & more time to setting up monthly, quarterly & yearly meetings across Britain, on the Continent, and in the American colonies. There were a number of reasons he felt called to do this:

**Sufferings.** Friends experienced imprisonment for following their faith up until the late 1680’s when King James II began to end religious persecution (presumably to protect his fellow Catholics). In some cases an entire meeting might be in prison. Others lost property because of refusal to pay tithes to support the “hireling priesthood”.

There was no formal membership in the 17th century. Meetings drew up lists of those needing support and this evolved much later into formal membership. The representative meeting of London Yearly Meeting is still known as “Meeting for Sufferings”.

**Support for Ministers.** Need to provide spiritual oversight and support for those carrying out public ministry, including providing elders to accompany those called to journey to spread the Friends message and provision for spouses or families who stayed behind.

Second Day Morning Meeting: This group may have begun as an informal gathering of those who felt a special calling or gift to vocal ministry on Second Day (i.e. Monday) in London to share with each other their experiences of worship the previous day (or perhaps week) - presumably involving many of those identified as part of the Valiant Sixty. It later came to play a much more institutional role and actually had a role of approving or censoring proposed publications by Friends. It was roundly criticized by some Friends who felt this was a usurpation of power by some individuals over other Friends.

Eventually, those who had a recognized gift of vocal ministry began to meet regularly in each meeting with those who were recognized as having a gift for nurturing spiritual gifts (“elders”). Meetings of Ministers & Elders were held on the monthly, quarterly & yearly meeting level. These are the predecessor of our current Ministry & Worship Committees.

[Eldership: Nurturing Others’ Spiritual Gifts](http://www.inwardlight.org/eldership.html) (a lot of different resources on this subject collected & posted by Peter Blood-Patterson on the website on Inwardlight.org)

**Clarity of Message.** Friends strongly emphasized inward leading (“experimental” knowledge). Many argued that no one else should judge others’ leadings. But some leadings endangered the safety of the entire Quaker community, or at the minimum risked confusing others’ about the Quaker message.

Several events led many Friends to see a strong need for corporate testing of individual Friends’ leadings:

* In 1656 a leading Friend, James Naylor, entered Bristol re-enacting Christ’s entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. He narrowly escaped the death sentence in his blasphemy trial before Parliament.
* A number of Friends took part in the abortive Fifth Monarchist uprising against King Charles II in 1661.
* Hat Controversy (John Perrot & others) 1661-early 1670s – Friends refused to take off their hats before others as a form of idolatry. But it became a practice of men to remove their hats when someone offered vocal prayer as a sign of respect for God. Others felt this was a form of programming of worship.

Further reading:

“[Tradition vs. Innovation: The Hat, Wilkinson-Story, and Keithite Controversies](http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1004&context=quakerstudies)” in *Quaker Studies*, 8:1. (discusses the controversy between original emphasis on individual leading and desire of many to provide corporate limits on individual leading)  
[Matthew 18:15-22](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=matthew+18%3A15-22&version=NRSV)

**Corporate Discernment**. Fox wanted a form of durable structure for the passionate movement that he helped launch to help it endure over the long run. Traditionally decision-making has been made in one of two ways:

* Hierarchical (e.g. Catholic Church: pope, archbishop, bishop, parish priest)
* Democratic – votes taken within the local congregation, where autonomy largely rests (Congregational, Methodist, Baptist, etc.)

Our form of “church government” as embodied especially in the practice we call “meeting for business” represents a radical departure from the above two methods of reaching decisions. It represents the 2nd great innovation of 17th century Quakerism along with unprogrammed “waiting” worship. Meeting for worship provides a practical methodology facilitating God’s direct immediate guidance over a gathering for worship. Discernment of God’s will for the meeting body through a clerk who discerns the sense of the meeting arising from a gathered meeting for business is a practical way that God can provide similar direct guidance over church decisions via inward leading in the hearts of Friends.

**Women’s & Men’s Meetings.** Separate meetings for business were set up in each meeting for women and men. This was at least as revolutionary as allowing women to preach openly. Women were “recorded” (officially recognized) as having a gift of vocal ministry and also served as elders of the meeting.

There was controversy over the fact that women’s meetings had a primary role in discerning the rightness of couples marrying. Women’s meetings probably did not consider all the same items as the men’s meetings, but they provided huge opportunities for women to develop and exercise leadership skills which led them women Quakers to play active roles in many social movements in the 19th century.

Further reading:

[Quaker View of Women](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quaker_views_on_women) (Wikipedia article) – describes significance of holding separate women’s meetings for business for first 250 years of Quakerism.

Reflection questions:  
1. To what extent have you experienced Quaker business or committee meetings as a form of worshipful waiting upon Divine Guidance in Mt Toby Meeting? In New England Yearly Meeting?  
2. What do you see as some of the major roadblocks to this form of decision-making working as it is intended? What do see as possible barriers in your self to your own fruitful and prayerful participation in this process?  
3. Are good clerks born or made? If they are made, what do or could our meetings do to help nurture the skill of clerking as a key form of spiritual leadership?

4. What are the pros and cons of officially recognizing gifts by the meeting?  
5. Friends in the 20th century emphasized an individualistic vision of faith as opposed to a communal or “corporate” vision. Was this a good thing or a bad thing? How much was it the result of Friends being influenced by “the world” (ie. values permeating the surrounding culture)