Seeing Beyond Our Differences: Meeting as "Covenant Community"

Tom Gates
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I have been asked to this morning to address the issue of how we in Lancaster Meeting might deal with the issue of conflict within our meeting. However, I am going to approach this topic only indirectly, because it seems to me that we cannot really deal with conflict within our community until we have a clear *vision* of what kind of community we aspire to be.

So the question I want us to start with this morning is this: What binds us together in our Meeting community?[1] In our hyperindividualistic society, what holds us together, what unites us, what gives us our common core identity? On a practical level, what allows us to "see beyond our differences?" How are we different from, say, a service organization, like the Rotary Club? Or a meditation group? How are we different from a book club? Or a political action organization? A Quaker meeting may have some similarities with all these other groups, but I think we all sense that there is a fundamental difference.

I would like to try to answer that question by looking at an idea borrowed from two of our contemporary interpreters of Quakerism, Douglas Gwyn and Lloyd Lee Wilson, the idea of *covenant* and *the covenant community*: our Quaker meetings are (or should be) covenant communities.

Douglas Gwyn, in the first sentence of his book *The Covenant Crucified*, says that "Covenant –faithful, promise-keeping relationship – is the hidden, *binding* force in society" (p. 1); and further, that "Covenant is the secret, driving force of history" (p. 4). Covenant is "predicated upon a transcendent authority", so that breach of covenant is "faithlessness toward that transcendent value and toward other parties that hold that value." There is, Gwyn says, one universal covenant between God and creation, but the manifestation of this covenant depends on the specific circumstances and history of a given community. This concrete manifestation of covenant is always partial and incomplete; and yet it is the binding force, the glue which holds communities together, "the secret driving force of history".[2]

At its most basic level, covenant is manifested in friendship, marriage and family life, and the life of intimate community; it is what makes it possible for us to transcend self-interest. It is what binds us together. In Hebrew, the very word for covenant has its root in the verb "to bind".

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[1] The question of "what binds us together" is inspired by the last line of Kenneth Boulding's First Naylor Sonnet, "…the burning oneness binding everything."

[2] Douglas Gwyn, *The Covenant Crucified: Quakers and the Rise of Capitalism* (Pendle Hill, 1995).

In covenant, the focus is on relationship: covenant both *creates* and *sustains* relationships. Furthermore, a covenant relationship is not narrow and self-interested, but open-ended, expansive, selfless. Think of yourself in relation to your family: your question is not, "What's in this for me?", but rather, "What is my role; what do I need to do for the sake of this family?"

Covenant can be contrasted with contract. In a contract, I also choose to be in relationship with someone, but it's a narrow relationship, rigorously limited in scope, and usually explicitly spelled out: "I will give this to you, in exchange for you doing that for me".

By contrast, covenant is an open-ended relationship, grounded in mutual trust and faithfulness, and rooted in a mutual commitment to some transcendent value or authority. A covenant relationship is not easily limited or delineated: who among us, when we spoke our marriage vows or had our first child, knew exactly what we were in for? In a covenant relationship, we do not keep score or count the cost, but instead we trust in that transcendent value or authority. By the values of the marketplace, we could even say there is an element of recklessness in covenant.

What has this to do with our meetings? I have said that covenant generates and sustains relationships, but covenant also generates and sustains communities. We could even say that all true communities are, at some level, the living out of an implicit covenant.

Historically, a fresh understanding of this underlying dynamic of covenant is experienced as an inbreaking of God's initiative in history, and often results in the gathering of a new community that embodies the new understanding. Certainly the early Christian Church was such a community, but another example would be early Friends, and what Gwyn calls "the covenant of light". Elements of this covenant of light included "no teacher but God, who teaches all; a law within to condemn transgression; a pure spirit within to rule and guide in all things; no priest but Christ; no light but the Light of Christ within": often summed up by the phrase, "Christ is come to teach his people himself." In mid-17th century England, people who shared this understanding of covenant were gathered into local communities that were truly transformational.

Lloyd Lee Wilson, in his essay on "The Meeting as Covenant Community", picks up on this idea of covenant, and maintains that our Quaker meetings today are (or should be) understood as covenant communities.[3] So what can we say about this idea of a "covenant community", as it pertains to our Quaker meetings today?

Most communities to which we belong are *not* covenant communities. We choose to participate because, in the end, we want to get something out of it. The benefit we seek may be economic, political, cultural, or even spiritual. Belonging is on some level important to us because associating with this special group of special people helps us to feel that we too are special. We belong because it satisfies some need or desire that we have. My desire may be crass and selfish, or lofty and admirable, but it is a need *I* have. In our association with such a community, what Fran Taber has called our

[3] Lloyd Lee Wilson, "The Meeting as Covenant Community", in Essays on the Quaker Vision of Gospel Order (Celo Valley Books, 1993), pp. 61-72.

"primary question" will always be: "Are my needs being met? Am I getting what I need out of this?"[4]

By contrast, in a covenant community (quoting Lloyd Lee Wilson) "we choose to be in relationship with God, and God gives us to one another and to the community. Our primary bond is to God…"[5], and this bond to God in turn binds the covenant community together. In a covenant community, *we are called together by God*, because it's only in community that we can learn what God wants us to learn: the transforming lessons of love, service, humility, compassion, and forgiveness. We cannot learn these lessons outside of a community. In a covenant community, "when our needs are not being met" (which of course sooner or later is inevitable), it is not a cause to withdraw, but rather an *opportunity* to learn these lessons from God.

In a covenant community, the primary question is not, "Are my needs being met?", but rather, "How can I best contribute to the spiritual life of this community?" (Sort of: "Ask not what your meeting can do for you, but ask what you can do for your meeting?") Or even better, in the words of one participant in Deepening and Strengthening, "*How can I become the kind of Friend my meeting most needs me to be?*"[6]

Let's be clear: the covenant community is an ideal to which we may aspire, but in practice most of us and most of our meetings operate most of the time at the level of the first kind of community, and all too often our primary question is some variation of, "Are my needs being met?" So perhaps our main task as we deepen and strengthen our meeting is to help one another make that transition, from the first question to the second question, the transition from seeing our meeting as just another voluntary association, to seeing it as a covenant community.

Seeing ourselves as a covenant community gives us a new way of thinking about our differences and our conflicts: that they represent opportunities, invitations from God, to change and be changed. Of course, it is not just the existence of differences and conflicts that strengthens us, but rather our ability and willingness to see beyond those differences and find common ground. The question is not *whether* we will have conflict: all communities inevitably will face a certain degree of conflict. The question is rather *how we choose to deal* with that conflict, and on what basis we deal with it. Just as our individual bodies need a certain amount of physical exercise to remain fit and functional, so our meeting community needs the "exercise" of dealing with our differences in order to keep our sense of covenant strong and functional.

Sometimes our differences are about specific issues and decisions that face us a community, but sometimes our differences are a matter of personalities. It is tempting to identify a person or a group of people as "the problem", and to try to solve the problem by trying to change "those people". But from the perspective of covenant community, we can see that such personalities are part of our community for a purpose: they provide an opportunity to learn those lessons from God which can only be learned in community. Parker Palmer has written: "In a true (i.e., covenant) community, we will not choose our companions, for our choices are so often limited by self-serving motives. Instead, our

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[4] William and Frances Taber, "Building the Life of the Meeting", 1994 Michener Lecture, SEYM
[5] Lloyd Lee Wilson, " The Meeting as Covenant Community", in The *Quaker Vision of Gospel Order* (Celo Valley Books, 1993), p. 62.
[6] From Sally Boswell, Camden (Delaware) Meeting.

companions will be given to us by grace. Often, they will be persons who will upset our settled view of self and world. In fact, we might define true community as that place where the person you least want to live with always lives!"[7]

If the ideal of the covenant community helps us to reframe our conflicts and differences, what are the practical skills that might help us to grow towards this ideal? How can each one of us become the kind of Friend our meeting most needs us to be? There are many possible answers to those questions, but let me offer two ideas that occur to me.

First, we can all be listeners. Those of you who went through the Spiritual Formation Program will remember that one of the books we read together was Patricia Loring's *Listening Spirituality*, in which she argues that listening is the most distinguishing aspect of Quaker spirituality: listening for God, listening to God, and listening for that of God in one another. Loring introduces the spiritual practice of listening by quoting Douglas Steere: "To 'listen' another's soul into a condition of disclosure and discovery may be almost the greatest service that any human being ever performs for another…"

The second chapter of Acts tells the familiar story of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit descended upon the early church in the form of a roaring wind and "tongues of fire". What happened next is often referred to as "speaking in tongues": the apostles were able to preach the gospel in such a way that everyone understood their words, even if they did not speak the same language. But implied in the story is that those who heard were able to "listen in tongues", able to hear and understand, even though the language spoken was unknown to them. Pentecostals consider speaking in tongues to be a *charism*, a gift of the Spirit. Perhaps we Quakers have been given the *charism* of "listening in tongues."

Sometimes what we interpret as conflict is really just a longing to be heard, to be acknowledged, to be understood, to be listened to. If we can respond to that longing, then sometimes the hard edge of our differences can be considerably softened. We may discover that Friends are able to accept an outcome which they themselves would not have chosen, as long as they feel their point of view has been heard and understood.

In a different context, Rachel Naomi Remen has talked about *generous listening*: "listening with a willingness to be influenced, to be touched, even to be changed." This kind of generous listening, divine listening, listening with a willingness to be present and truly hear, is the foundation on which, in a covenant community, we can learn to see beyond our differences. This listening can be in a formal or group setting, as in worship sharing, but it can also be informal and one-on-one.

The second resource I commend to you is our Quaker process of decision making. This may surprise some of you, because we sometimes tend to see meeting for business as part of the problem, not part of the solution. But I keep going back to Arthur Larabee's question about business meeting: "Why is it that we persist in deciding things in this way?" His answer: not because it is quick or easy or efficient (it is not), but rather because we have found that over the long run, this way of deciding builds and nurtures

[7] Parker Palmer, "A Place Called Community", Pendle Hill Pamphlet # 212, p. 20.

community. In other words, the point of our business process is not to make decisions, but to build community.

If it is true that differences and conflict are inevitable in our Meeting community, it is also true that we have a distinctly Quaker way of dealing with those differences and conflicts. If our meeting for worship for business sometimes seems inadequate to the task, we would do well to examine our practice and see if there might be ways we fall short in our understanding and application of this time-tested process. As a way of increasing our understanding, let's look at some of the characteristics of our Quaker business procedure.

First, it is not a quick or expeditious process. We meet only once a month. Often issues or proposals will have to be seasoned in committees, so that it may take several weeks or even a few months for things to filter up to the agenda of meeting for business. This requires patience from the community, and from each of us as individuals. We have to be willing to let the process work its way out over a period of time. We will have to give up our modern expectation that problems once identified need an immediate solution. All of this can be difficult for inpatient people – and we are all inpatient people.

Second, our process is time-intensive. It requires sufficient time, which can be difficult for busy people. Remember how Arthur Larabee drew this little equation, showing that Quaker Process is proportional to the time available, divided by the agenda:

Quaker Process = Time / agenda

If we want to improve the process, and the time available remains constant, then the number of things on the agenda has to decrease. He suggested that as a general rule, any given meeting for business can only deal with 2 or at most 3 matters for discernment. As a meeting, we have basically decided that we will devote 90 minutes each month to our community affairs; when things go on longer than this, we vote with our feet, as Friends get up and leave. If we find ourselves disappointed with the quality of the process, we can either agree to spend more than that 90 minutes per month, or alternatively, we can choose to decrease the agenda, perhaps by delegating some decisions to committees. Arthur Larabee again: we do a disservice when we use a weighty process for non-weighty matters.

Third, our process requires full participation. Those who are present need to be fully present; and those who are not present detract from the integrity of the process. A rough but accurate measure of the vitality of a Quaker meeting is the proportion of members who participate in meeting for business. Here, Lancaster Meeting does considerably better than most meetings, but there is always room for improvement. This too is difficult for busy people.

Fourth, our process requires a "dual willingness" on the part of all who participate. On the one hand, it requires a willingness for each one of us to speak our truth, the truth as we see it. This can feel like risky business, so it is important to create an atmosphere that is supportive and nurturing, where people are willing to be vulnerable. But on the other hand, we have to be willing to speak our truth, and *then let go of it*. If it is truth, then it is not my truth or your truth, but simply truth. The image I have is that each of us brings a valuable gift to the table, but once we put that gift in the center of the table it is no longer our possession, but now belongs to the community. Speaking our

truth can be difficult for reticent or shy people; letting go of our truth can be difficult for willful people.

Finally, our Quaker process depends on a certain degree of restraint. Arthur expressed this as a paradox: we need to hear everything that *needs* to be said; but we don't need to hear everything that *can* be said. That implies some discernment on the part of each speaker, to distinguish between something that truly needs to be said, and something that only can be said. There are other forms of restraint as well: the restraint of not speaking until recognized, of speaking to the group and not to the previous speaker, of not speaking a second time on a given subject until we have heard from everyone who needs to speak. All of this can be difficult for talkative people.

As we think about seeing beyond our differences and dealing with our conflicts, can we put the two of these together? Our business process is our formal method, a method which may be slow and inefficient, but in the long run, properly understood and practiced, nurtures community. It provides the structure of how we deal with our differences. But generous listening provides the lubrication; it helps things run better. Long before differences bubble up to the agenda of business meeting, there is a need for generous listening. While we search for unity (a process that can sometimes take months and even years), we can from the very beginning be generous listeners, insuring that everyone feels heard.

So, let me conclude to returning to this idea of what is our primary question, by asking some questions. Are there ways we can gently encourage one another to move beyond the first question ("are my needs being met?"), to the second question ("how can I contribute to the life of the meeting?", or the variation, "how can I become the kind of Friend my meeting most needs me to be?") Can we learn to see our differences as opportunities or invitations from God? Can we develop the attitude and skills to be generous listeners? And conversely, are we willing to share our own point of view, and our own emotions, to give others the opportunity to listen to us? And finally, can we increase our understanding and deepen our commitment to our distinctively Quaker way of dealing with differences, our meeting for business? To the extent that we can begin to answer these questions in the affirmative, then we will be able to see beyond our differences, to that which truly binds us together.