

Multiple Gifts of Ministry

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Message - Cincinnati Friends Meeting

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In one of the more beautiful passages in the New Testament, the Apostle Paul writes a letter of advice to a fledgling Christian community in Corinth—perhaps not even yet calling themselves “Christians” but still simply “Followers of the Way.” In this letter, he gives instruction and suggestions for how “the church of God that is in Corinth” should be together as disciples of Jesus’ teachings. Concerning “spiritual gifts,” he writes:

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses. (1 Cor. 12:4-11).

In essence, Paul expressed in his time and in his terms a recognition of a multiplicity of spiritual gifts. His explanation of them reminds me of the “multiple intelligences” identified by contemporary psychologists and educators, establishing that people can be smart in ways other than intellectually. This, of course, is common sense, and in the days before widespread public education, people simply knew it. Silas might be slow when it came to reading, but he was a heckuva blacksmith. Mary might not be a very good speller, but no one was better at comforting and caring for the sick. William didn’t stay in school long enough to learn geometry, but he could plan and build a house from the foundation up, with every wall, door and window on the square. Emily could never remember dates in history class, but she played the fiddle like an angel, and knew by heart hundreds of songs. Before everyone was required to attend school and to spend at least twelve years in a particular kind of academic setting, we recognized other intelligences because we experienced them.

Multiple Intelligence studies have focused on humans as thinking animals, but we are also spiritual beings. It occurred to me that the different spiritual gifts that Paul enumerated almost two thousand years ago are another way to talk about these intelligences, our ways of knowing. Psychologists have identified the following eight “ways of knowing” or “intelligences” so far. While I read through them, please think of them also in terms of spiritual “intelligences” or gifts. No doubt you will recognize that you have at least one of these “ways of knowing.” How do you use this gift in your spiritual life? How could you, through using this gift, be useful to others?

“Image Smart” – knowing that uses the sense of sight and being able to imagine and visualize an object, including making mental images inside our heads.

“Logic Smart” – knowing that uses numbers, logic, scientific reasoning, and calculating to help solve problems and meet challenges.

“Word Smart” – knowing that occurs through written and spoken words, such as in essays, speeches, books, informal conversation, debates, and jokes.

“Body Smart” – knowing that uses physical movement and performance (a.k.a. learning by doing) to understand.

“Sound Smart” - knowing through sounds, rhythms, tones, beats, music produced by other people or present in the environment.

“Nature Smart” -- knowing that occurs in encounters with animals, plants, physical features, and weather conditions of the natural world.

“People Smart” – knowing that uses person-to-person relating, communication, teamwork, and collaboration with others.

“Self Smart” – knowing which comes from introspection, self-reflection, and raising questions about life's meaning and purpose.

Now let’s move to a consideration of the spiritual “intelligences” or gifts of ministry among Friends. For many of you, nothing I’m about to say is new except that it will let you know my understanding of and approach to ministry.

Friends assert that ministers are chosen by God, not by churches, seminaries, or theological schools, and the Truth of God may come from unexpected quarters. Thus, early Quakers adamantly refused what they called “hireling ministers,”

those hired and endorsed by the State. Instead, they believed that anyone could be a minister if God so designated. Right now, you are sitting in a room full of ministers.

This belief attracted me when I began reading George Fox's *Journal* and other Quaker writing. One of the biggest problems I had when I attended traditional church services was that it often seemed the preacher misinterpreted the scripture he (and in those days it was always a "he") used in his sermon. I questioned the true spiritual authority of someone who either didn't understand what he was reading or who was deliberately mishandling it for his own purposes. I can't remember when it first occurred to me that maybe we didn't need preachers to get to God. At any rate, when I encountered this idea in the writings of early Friends, it greatly appealed to my tendency to question authority.

A "minister" is a person called to the service of others, and for Friends, that service must be characterized by Truth and Christian love. Friends recognize that God may choose any instrument to serve Truth and express Love—even women and children, even the poor and oppressed. Thus anyone may be a minister. For instance, there is a delightful story about a weighty Friend in colonial America who felt led to give a message during Meeting for Worship.

During the Revolutionary War, British soldiers were stationed in the Quaker meetinghouse in Portsmouth, Rhode Island. Isaac Lawton, a minister "in good esteem" felt called to go preach to the soldiers. Confident that he had a good deal to say and the right opportunity to do so, he stood and began speaking. To his surprise, however, just as he got going, he felt "a full stop" (Quakerspeak for a nudge from the Spirit to stop doing whatever one is in the middle of) and sat down. At that point, a young black boy, servant to one of the officers, stood up and began the same message just where Isaac had left

off. He spoke for a time with “clearness and authority,” along the same lines Isaac had thought to speak; then he stopped as suddenly and unexpectedly as Isaac had and sat down. Whereupon Isaac felt called to stand and finish the message.¹

Quakers encourage the development of a variety of spiritual gifts or ministries, and identify things as “ministry” that no one else may recognize as such. For instance, at Earlham School of Religion, a Quaker seminary, one can receive a Master of Divinity degree in one of seven areas acknowledged as forms of ministry including, of course, Pastoral Care and Counseling, and Pastoral Ministry, but also Peace & Justice, Spirituality, Teaching, Unprogrammed Friends Ministry, and Writing. When a Friend goes back to the Meeting, however, even with an MDiv, he or she is just another minister among a congregation of ministers. As one Quaker writer phrased it, “we too often give to outsiders [a description] of Quakerism as a religious community that doesn’t have ministers or clergy. . . the right description is: ‘We don’t have laity.’”

This understanding of worship and ministry stems from experiences of early Friends, and especially the fiery Christian mystic named George Fox, founder of the denomination (1624 -1691). In the Introduction to his book, *Quakerpsalms*, T.H.S. Wallace describes George Fox’s understanding of ministry, the underpinning of early Quaker theology:

Coming of age in the North of England in a time of great religious and social upheaval, Fox began an intense spiritual search that led him to consult many of the great preachers of his age and to become so thoroughly familiar with the Old and New Testaments that he knew nearly the whole of them by heart. What he

¹ from “The Inspired Ministry” Copy Number 46, Tract Association of Friends.

discovered during this search was a Christianity splintered into warring factions, most grasping for State power, while its individual parishes served largely to guarantee a “living” for the sons of aristocrats in the form of a State “tithes” tax. The majority of ministers and priests had little understanding or experience of the faith they were supposedly preaching and the often crassly distorted or baldly misinterpreted Scripture for their own dubious ends.

George Fox’s spiritual search led to a series of [what Quakers call] “openings,” or revelations from God, revelations that emphasized how corrupt, misguided, and shallow the Christianity of his time had become. . . . Fox saw that being educated “at Oxford and Cambridge did not qualify or fit a man to be a minister . . . “ “At another time,” Fox tells us in his Journal, “it was opened to me that God, who made the world, did not dwell in temples made with hands . . . but that his people were his temple, and he dwelt in them.” The more he studied his bible, the more he saw that there “was an anointing within man to teach him, and that the Lord would teach his people himself.” By 1647, Fox had left the priests and preachers of his day . . . for he “saw there was none among them all that could speak to my condition.”

At this point in his anguished search for God and Truth in religion, George Fox had a mystical experience in which a voice told him Jesus Christ himself could “speak to his condition.” From this, Fox understood that people didn’t need intermediaries like priests, bishops, cardinals, etc, to communicate with God—what they needed, and what each person had within, was a grasp of the fundamental teachings of Jesus Christ. These teachings were available in the Scriptures if

they were read in the same spirit in which they had been written—i.e., as the earliest followers of Jesus meant them, and before Christianity became a state religion.

Here is a description of the Quaker approach to worship from Exeter Friends Meeting in Pennsylvania:

*“Christ has come to teach his people himself.” These words of George Fox, the founder of the Society of Friends, sum up the Quaker understanding of Christian worship and church order. . . . Because he is always available to give us inward teaching and guidance, as individuals and as communities of faith, his people need not human priest or pastor.*²

The first Friends worshipped as the earliest Christians had, i.e., without hired ministers. Many of us might be a bit uncomfortable in a Meeting for Worship with the earliest Friends who were often moved to outward manifestations of the Spirit (i.e., quaking, trembling, moaning, etc.). In the century between the founding of the Religious Society of Friends and the mid-to-late 1800s, Friends went through a “Quietist” period, meeting in their Meetinghouses and sitting silently unless and until the Spirit moved someone—and it could be anyone—to speak. This silence, called “waiting on the Lord,” amounted to deep, communal meditation and reflection. Under the influence of the Evangelical movement that swept the nation in the 1800s, however, some Quaker meetings began hiring ministers and became what are now called “programmed” Meetings.

² Exeter Friends Meeting, Berks County, PA, newspaper supplement, 1989; quoted by Christopher E. Stern in “Quaker Worship: We Cannot Do It On Our Own.” <<http://www.qhpress.org/quakerpages/qwhp/qw.htm>

Nowadays there are two forms of Quaker worship—the traditional silent or open worship and “programmed” worship, which looks very much like any other Protestant service except that a period of silence may occur during the worship. Cincinnati Friends, a “semi-programmed” meeting, is unique in its equitable blend of the two forms, combining a brief message from a “hireling minister” with a substantial period of silent, open worship.

Most other Christian groups “ordain” their leaders. Typically, some sort of ceremony empowers these leaders to perform the duties of their office. Friends, however, believe that God alone makes ministers or spiritual leaders. Rather than trust in a human ceremony to equip leaders, Friends observe those people who exercise gifts of ministry, then record this observation of what God has done; these people are known as “recorded ministers.” Though Wilmington Yearly Meeting records only gifts of chaplaincy and pastoral ministry, in truth, there are multiple gifts of ministry as there are multiple intelligences.

Here are a couple of observations about spiritual gifts. First, when a person has a gift for something, he or she often doesn’t perceive the value of that gift. It’s easy for me to do, we think, it can’t be all that special or unusual. But when people notice you do something particularly well and acknowledge it, consider it a gift you’ve been given. Second, spiritual gifts require sharing. A spiritual gift kept to oneself is like a budding rose denied water—it may never fully open or develop. Spiritual gifts are given to us to share with others; spiritual gifts are given to us to use in serving Truth and Christian Love.

We all have some gift—what is yours? Do you have a gift of healing? prophecy? discernment? wisdom? knowledge? Do you have a gift for imagining and visualizing, making mental images? Do you acknowledge your gifts as such? Do you feel gratitude for having a certain gift and feel an obligation to make good use of it? Where and how do you apply your gifts? Can or should you use them to further your spiritual growth and that of others?

Perhaps your gift, whatever it is, can serve the spiritual needs of others. Consider how you and your community have benefited from others who have gifts like these:

- the gift of music
- the gift of laughter
- the gift of organization
- the gift of patience
- the gift of listening
- the gift of healing
- the gift of speaking truth
- the gift of offering counsel
- the gift of teaching
- the gift of loving
- the gift of understanding
- the gift of discernment

Discernment is considered a gift among Quakers and has a special meaning in the Quaker faith. Amidst the clatter and distraction of conscious, rational, everyday human life, it is difficult to hear God, who after all, communicates through the “still, small voice within.” Even the ancient Israelites understood that people tend to look for God where powerful

humans are usually found—in noise, flash, drama and excitement, but God doesn't work the way humans do. The prophet Elijah experiences “discernment” of God's presence in the following verses from 1 Kings 19:

And he said, Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the LORD. And, behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the LORD; [but] the LORD [was] not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; [but] the LORD [was] not in the earthquake:

And after the earthquake a fire; [but] the LORD [was] not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice.

And it was [so], when Elijah heard [it], that he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out, and stood in the entering in of the cave. And, behold, [there came] a voice unto him, and said, What doest thou here, Elijah?

(Verses 11-13)

And that's a good question to leave us with today. What doest thou here? What are you doing here on earth? How are you using your gift of life and time and other mental, emotional, physical and spiritual gifts or “intelligences” you've been given? Let us spend some time in silence considering gifts we may take for granted but which we can use for the benefit of others and the cause of Truth.

Ask yourself, perhaps, in what ways am I, or in what ways could I be, a minister of Truth?