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TESTIMONY AS CONSEQUENCE, NOT VALUE

Ben Pink Dandelion

All religious groups necessarily reinvent themselves so change is to be expected, even desired, if survival is to be ensured; it is just important to realise what is original and what is new. When it comes to the Quaker testimonies, we can see a story of continual change. Indeed, as we will see, we can characterise the change as being from 'testimony as consequence' to 'testimony as rule' in the eighteenth century to 'testimonies as values' in the twentieth. What I want to do is first define testimony, second chart how testimony changed across time, third see how testimony sits within present-day British Quakerism, and fourth suggest we could do well to return to an idea of testimony as consequence.

Defining testimony

Testimony is the term used to describe the expression of the collective experience of Quaker faith, the experience of the group as it tries to remain faithful.

In some ways then it is similar to the way 'testimony' is used in evangelical churches when the converted relate their stories. It is about proof. For Quakers, the words have always been less important than the life, and the story of faith comes out in practical and, paradoxically (for Quakerism is based on an interiorised spirituality), outward forms. So the words reflect the experience. The words may act as aspiration but they are primarily a reflection, not a rule or a doctrine. For example, there is no 'testimony to the earth' in Britain because as yet it is not the experience of Friends here to live in that way. Thus, in one sense, Quaker testimony is the whole of the way we live our lives as Quakers, everything about it that is visible to ourselves or others.

Earlier books of faith and practice list different specific aspects of testimony, e.g. times and seasons, hat honour, plain dress and plain speech.

Quakers did not celebrate high and holy days (every day was equally special), refused to take their hats off except in prayer, rejected superfluous fashions, and refused to use the pagan-derived names of days and months or to use the polite form 'you' but only used 'thee and thou', the familiar forms. Thomas Ellwood, one of the first generation of Friends, met his friends in Oxford one day and they took off their hats, bowed before him and greeted him in the familiar form only to find him still standing upright with hat still on. So they repeated their greeting and then, bemused, one finally realised what was happening and slapped him on the back, 'What, Tom, a Quaker!' These aspects of testimony were public and identifiable, and sprang directly from a spiritual base.

So I want to suggest that testimony is (a) rooted in the spiritual life and (b) is not discrete. We may have particular issues we have a particular understanding of, such as hat honour or swearing oaths, or times and seasons, but the whole of the book of discipline is testimony because the whole book is a corporate reflection and expression of the collective experience.

It may be a convenient shorthand to talk of four or five testimonies, e.g. peace, simplicity, equality, integrity, community, but it is misleading and theologically unhelpful to see only certain Quaker actions such as anti-war protest as 'testimonies' when the very nature of Quaker worship is equally a testimony to, e.g. the free ministry, the priesthood of all believers, inward communion, direct revelation, collective discernment, and a testimony *against* the opposite of these vital characteristics of Quaker worship. Whilst William Penn apparently made a list of thirteen proscribed activities, and Barclay several in his *Apology*, looking at the 1802 British book of discipline I find it impossible to *extract* 'testimonies' to create a neat list. Every heading: oaths, dress, speech, naming of days and months, times and seasons, titles, tithes, attitudes against war and the preparation for war, frivolous activities, recreations, fixed price trading, the manner of holding marriages and funerals, gravestones, etc. were all based on the community's discernment of action and expression subsequent to Truth or God's will. The fact that these aspects of testimony changed—plainness was transformed into simplicity in Britain in the 1850s, and the testimony against war became the peace testimony in the early twentieth century—only means that as our understanding of our faith changes, so its expression changes. It doesn't alter the necessarily spiritual basis of testimony.

There is also the danger that the short list of testimonies becomes

divorced from their spiritual base. This is crucial. All of Quaker expression may be commendable for political or psychological reasons—when I was an anarchist, we did much that Quakers do, but out of an ideological place. No titles, no votes, moderation, pacifism, but these were good ideas, not the consequences of the inward baptism and communion of early Friends. It was not testimony, just ideology.

The eighteenth century

Everything is testimony that comes from God. In the eighteenth century, two Friends waited twenty-three years before marrying. They had to be sure that they were doing the right thing at the right time. John Conran saw a woman across the room and felt inwardly that this woman was to be his wife.

I fell into company with a young woman Louisa Strongman: the first time I saw her at a Friend's house, I felt, in silence, a strong draft of love more than natural, and a secret intimation impressed my mind that she would be my wife; this I hid in my heart, and it was nearly two years before I felt at liberty to disclose it to any one, waiting as I apprehend the Lord's time to communicate it ... when I felt the way open to proceed in it at that time, it was nearly six years after this before we were married.

He told her this only two years later and they were married a full six years later. It is like vocal ministry. There is the what and the when.

At the same time, the increasing formalisation of the Society in the eighteenth century meant that there was an increasing list of proscribed and prescribed activities. During the eighteenth century when Quakers sought to be 'a peculiar people' (after Paul's Letter to Titus), testimony became the measure of integrity and membership, and breaking testimony led to disownment. Testimony was the outward means expressing, and for Friends to remember, what they were about, visible and outward forms (again, paradoxically for a religion based on an inward spirituality devoid of outward forms!) which operated within the group and in terms of public expectation to help regulate the spiritual purity of the community. (My Quaker friend Max Carter in North Carolina wears a broad-brimmed straw hat, wears collarless shirts and sports a huge beard. People imagine he is Amish. For him, their reaction to him helps him live the way he wants to live. We don't expect to see a nun drunk on the train. Similarly Max finds himself helped in people's expectation of his pious life.)

You could be disowned for marrying before a priest, becoming bankrupt, taking another Quaker to court, publishing without permission, or even owning a piano. The consequences of the experience of the first generation of Friends became *rules*, what Margaret Fell called a 'silly poor gospel', to help nurture the second and third generations who were still waiting for the inward spiritual transformation their parents and grandparents had experienced.

Liberal Quaker testimony

Liberal Quakerism, set up at the beginning of the twentieth century, is most popularly characterised as pluralistic, as celebrating a diversity of beliefs. We know there are many Friends who are not Christian, but who may be Hindu, Muslim, non-theist, etc. Liberal Quakerism has developed into a seeking religion, suspicious of theology (because the words can never match the experience) and of theological certainty (because the spiritual search is always ongoing).

Alongside this permissive attitude towards belief, it is the *form* of Quakerism, the way in which the group is religious, that binds Liberal Quakerism together. We are fairly conservative and conformist about the way we are Quaker. Worship and worship for business has hardly changed in 350 years, whilst the theology of the group has changed six or seven times and continues to be on the move. Belief is slippery, individual and marginalised, the form of Quakerism solid and defined. Lives not labels, deeds not creeds, seem more authentic. So where does that leave testimony? Is testimony now as diffuse or suspect as belief in the Liberal tradition?

Today, testimony works in two ways. First it is part of how Quakerism defines itself. As an expression of corporate experience/witness, i.e. as part of the form of Quakerism almost as doctrine or as a given principle, it is part of the conservative and conformist way in which we are Quaker. Second, as an area of interpretation, it is open to pluralistic individualism in a way which would not have been possible a hundred years ago.

During the 1991 Gulf War, Quaker Peace and Service received many letters about the best way forward. None challenged the existence of the testimony as a principle but the letters included a whole variety of possibilities for action, including one suggesting assassinating Saddam Hussein. This was an interpretation of the peace testimony as minimisation of suffering. So in terms of the content of testimony, the expression of

Quakerism is now individual and varied. As I have said, this is a change that has taken place in the last hundred years. As Elaine Bishop and Jung Jiseok have argued, there are four aspects to this.

First, there is a loss of specificity in the move to testimony as principle. For example, plainness is much easier to define than simplicity. The move from plainness to simplicity has major consequences. Plainness was about everything visible being unadorned, whether furniture or dress. Friends in the 1850s claimed they could maintain that testimony inwardly, and the word 'simplicity' came in to replace it. Simplicity is a much more diffuse term, and we can interpret it in different ways. Does it mean owning a Volvo which may never break down or a bicycle? Similarly, peace is a much more diffuse concept than being against war. As the Gulf War example shows, what is peace?

Secondly, the pluralism of belief has meant we are less rooted in a single faith tradition, so there is no longer a single theological tradition informing our expression of faith.

Thirdly, the new aspects of Quaker testimony of the twentieth century are less prescribed. The emphasis on seeking means that Truth has become truth or truths and we are less sure about what is definitely *not* Quaker. One third of eligible Quaker men in Britain joined up in the First World War. Most Quakers in Britain celebrate Christmas now and no longer use the plain dress or plain speech. These are no longer seen as critical to the faith, to what God wants of us, of how God wants us to remain faithful. Equally, if some still feel these are important issues, that is also accepted. We believe we can maintain spiritual integrity within a more permissive attitude.

Fourthly, testimony is less enforced: Elders no longer visit us in our homes to check up on us, and disownment today is rare.

Testimony no longer functions as an automatic consequence to our spiritual experience as it did for Thomas Ellwood and seventeenth-century Friends or as a rule of life in the way that it did in the eighteenth century. Testimony as a necessary corporate category has become smaller as less is collectively agreed on as vital and also as the corporate experience reduces more and more to what happens at meeting, with the home life outside the control of the meeting. In the late 1850s and early 1860s Quakers in Britain relaxed the rules about marriage and about plain dress and plain speech. Quakers could be invisible outside of the meeting house. We have had the option to be private about what happens outside the

meeting house and generally the meeting acts as if that is our preference. When I had a very large and thirsty, albeit utterly beautiful, Bentley motor car, I decided if and when I shared the fact that I owned this with the meeting.

So, that aspect of agreed corporate witness in the book of discipline reduces in line with the increased freedoms afforded by Liberal Quakerism. It is the completion of the shift in the operation of testimony from consequence to rules to values. So where does this leave us in our journey of faith?

Recreating testimony

The challenge of the freedom to be private about our theology and the lives we lead is that we can be left isolated. Meetings rarely feel confident to venture into what is now seen as a 'private life' outside of the meeting. Couples experiencing difficulties have complained that they feel unsupported, but it is often that meetings don't know how far they can get involved with life outside of the meeting house.

In Britain some of us have also felt a lack of accountability. In other words, we haven't felt able to regulate our life without help. If the meeting wasn't feeling able, we felt we needed to recreate a system of shared testimony and therefore mutual accountability.

So, some of us created rules based on the frameworks of monastic or tertiary order rules. For example, we would use the kinds of questions they used but come to our own answers. Typically for Liberal Friends, we did not all come to the same answer or even feel that was appropriate. For some of us, private prayer was at the heart of our rule, for others Sunday morning worship. We all had different aspects of our lives we wished to work on. In many ways we created our own personal booklets of discipline: I wanted to better balance work and sleep, act on my materialism, bring my romantic life into order. Again, perhaps typical of being Liberal Quakers, what we agreed on was process: regular meetings, ways of maintaining accountability.

If we have had any difficulties, it has been whether we bother to take notice of each other! Knowing that my friend is human and falls short makes it easier for me to do that. Maybe we know each other too well. Maybe we aren't serious enough.

For earlier Friends, spiritual integrity and church purity was at stake, salvation the ultimate goal. Today, we are easier about our spiritual life,

less worried about original sin and redemption. Rather we want to reform the world, but as busy people we have to fit that in when we can. Testimony today, as I have said, is reduced both in size and as ultimate import. We can see its value in the past, but I suggest we need to become far more explicit about our theology to get excited by what underpins our present day testimony. Is peace a spiritual impulse or just a good idea? What is God or 'God' leading us to do? Do we believe in a God who leads? A God? Collective spiritual experience?

I am not trying to be negative, but I want us to understand the real sea-change that has taken place in this new form of Quakerism. It is a beautiful form of spirituality. The worship and its understandings of inward communion and direct revelation, the emphasis on seeking and the certainty that we can only be slightly less than certain theologically, that none of us have the whole or final truth for everyone theologically. But our witness could disappear altogether if we are not more careful. Again, what is God leading us to do? How do we express the essence of our Quakerism? Is that essence still a spiritual one?

I want us to return to a sense of testimony as consequence, not as a set of rules or a set of principles. I don't want to have to recreate a faithfulness or accountability group outside of my meeting. Ultimately, I also don't want to buy another Bentley. I want to be a part of a group with a clear corporate sense of at least principles to live by and support to help us achieve that. It doesn't mean a return to uniforms or plain dress, but surely in today's materialistic Western world, it does mean living in an alternative way. It does mean finding ways we can support each other to live a faith which transcends the values of our society. I don't believe God wants all of us to do our own thing.

If our spiritual experience remains as the basis of testimony, Quakerism then will not be reduced to worship method and a set of good ethical practices, nor will we need our own artificial accountability groups. Rather we will use that precious pearl of silent worship as a springboard and basis for the whole of life, the whole of our testimony to the world. Testimony is thus the fruits of the essence—it is the public expression of our faith. If we have no faith, we have no testimony. If we have a grounded and fun and honest and clear faith, imagine how we will live and how those lives may preach to the whole world.