

Where Christ Presides

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A QUAKER PERSPECTIVE ON MORAL DISCERNMENT

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Dedicated to my sons,
Christopher and Matthew

Contents



Introduction	ix
1. We Are Friends	1
2. The Quaker Moral Foundation	9
3. Simply Ethics	21
4. Moral Reasoning	39
5. What Do I Still Lack?	63
6. Bioethical Choices and Challenges	85
7. Moral Responsibility	107
8. Where Christ Presides	123
Epilogue	135
Appendix A: Examples of Stage 4 Morality	137
End Notes	139
Bibliography	151

Introduction



DURING A DEBATE concerning the State of Kansas School Board's controversial decision to revise its biology curriculum to include the *intelligent design* theory, that is, modified creationism, an unidentified woman lamented, "I'm facing chaos everywhere I look. I want to go to a church where they're going to tell me what's right, what's wrong, and there's no in between."¹ This bewildered soul (I will refer to her as Helen throughout this book) probably reflects the plight of the majority of Christians who are simply too busy existing day-to-day to have time to contemplate the right or wrong of complex issues. They are more concerned with making the month's mortgage payment, rising food prices, or the safety of their children in school. "Look," they seem to be saying, "I need to pick the kids up from soccer practice. I don't have time to try to decide what is right and what is wrong. Just tell me where to stand on the issues." Their conundrum, confusion, and concerns are understandable. Average Christians, like Helen, all too busy with the practical problems in their lives, want a quick fix to even complex moral issues.

But Helen's response raises a host of morally pertinent questions. Do we have a moral responsibility to make our own ethical decisions? If we decide to abdicate all moral decisions to others, are we in some way rejecting our God-given gift of reason? Can we rest assured that

God will accept, “I did what they told me to do,” as justification for our ethical behaviors? If not, then how do we decide what is right and what is wrong?

A friend once opined that since there are conflicting Christian views on what is moral, no one could assuredly say what true Christian morality really is. I agree with his observation, but not his conclusion. I believe there is an absolute, Christian moral truth and, further, that we can determine that moral truth in most situations. Now, I will grant that there are moral dilemmas that are so complex, so personal, and so difficult that they elude absolute moral certainty. In addition, for those rare situations when we cannot know definitively what the ultimate moral truth is, I believe we can implement a process of moral discernment that is Christian in nature, and that, in itself, keeps us in the realm of a Christian ethic.

What is the meaning of *moral discernment*? The easier of the two words to define is discernment, which means insight or judgment. Defining moral is not quite so simple. Moral means different things in different cultures. The numerous American military interventions in our recent history highlight differences not only between the moral opinions of Americans but also the moral values of whatever country with which we seem to be clashing at the time. Those countries steadfastly proclaim the absolute truth of their moral code as we do ours. In that sense, morality is culturally relevant, i.e., culturally determined. Whose is correct? Of course we think ours is.

To complicate matters even more, in our everyday discourse, the term *ethical* is often used interchangeably with the term moral. Is there a difference? Yes. There is an extremely fine difference in meaning between that which is ethical and that which is moral, a difference that seems inconsequential in ordinary discourse.

The basic definition of ethics, according to the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, is: “A set of principles of right conduct,” and gives as its root the Greek term *ethos*, meaning character.² The basic definition of moral is: “Of concern with the judgment of the goodness or badness of human action and character.”³ The *American Heritage* also gives expanded meanings of both terms and to keep things simple I focused on the very first definition in both cases. So there is a

slight variation in meaning: ethics is a set of principles of right conduct, whereas when we use the term moral we are making a judgment as to whether or not something fits in our accepted set of principles of right conduct.

We can see, then, where cultures can differ because each culture evolves its own set of principles of conduct. Ours has evolved from a Judeo-Christian heritage—and that sets up another convoluted and complex set of definitions, for we know differences exist not only between the Jewish and Christian faiths but also between Christian denominations, and even within the same denomination. As evidence, one has only to reflect on the controversies that arose first with the acceptance of women as clergy, and, more recently, with the inclusion of homosexuals as clergy.

Rather than focusing on the differences in our terms, I would like to point out the common thread in those definitions, which is the inclusion of *character* in both instances. I do this for two reasons. First, as Christians we hold that absolute morality derives from the immutably perfect character of God. Second, we all need to develop our own Christian moral character. Is our moral character one of acquiescing to being told what is right and wrong, or is it one of moral self-determination based on analysis of fact, rational thinking, and inclusion of Christian principles leading to a final moral discernment that falls within our faith tradition? This discussion is aimed at developing the latter. In this context then, moral means adherence to those principles that reflect a Christian character. For simplicity sake, I use the terms ethical and moral interchangeably, depending on the context of the sentence, and do not mean to imply any difference unless so stated. Moral discernment, as used in this book, means arriving at a self-determined, insightful moral conclusion within a Christian context in general, and, more specifically, within a Christian-Quaker context.

The Lord has given us two burdens in life. One is all of life's burdens; the other is a rational mind that realizes that we cannot flee from those burdens, especially the task of deciding what is right and what is wrong. Since we cannot escape the first, we must then choose either to use our rational minds and take personal responsibility for our moral decision-making according to our Christian faith, or like frustrated

Helen, allow someone else to tell us where to stand on the issues. Too many Christians, I fear, have neither the time nor resources to do their own thinking and therefore choose the latter. This book is for those who choose to take personal responsibility to find moral truth on their own. It is especially for Quakers who are concerned that our faith tradition may not be responsive to today's moral challenges. In writing this book, I came to know that our faith tradition more than meets the needs for modern moral discernment.

Why is it important for us as Quakers, indeed, for us as Christians, to concern ourselves with examining the moral life? Rufus Jones believed, "Ethical insight may enable a person to anticipate a form and type of

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Rom. 12:2

goodness that never has actually been before, but now is real"⁴

That is a very powerful statement and one that has a dual meaning. First, Jones is saying that there is another form and type of goodness that we as "ordinary" Christians have not known, but can know if we gain a better understanding of just what it means to be ethical.

"Now wait a minute," you might say, "I am a good Christian and I do consider myself to be ethical. I live by Christian values that are well regarded by my culture. I give to the poor, pay taxes, and am an all-around law abiding citizen!" Neither Jones nor I am implying anything to the contrary. And yet, ethics requires more than just civic duty; it is a complex topic – sometimes subtle, other times harsh. Each individual, each Christian, and each culture interprets it differently. If that were not so, we wouldn't have any controversy over topics such as abortion, embryonic stem-cell research, or gay marriage. I think Jones is implying that by gaining ethical insight, we will come to recognize that there is a level of goodness beyond the ordinary, everyday Christian goodness.

The second meaning, perhaps the more important one, is that this insight is available to each of us. We don't have to turn to some authority, appointed or self-assumed, to tell us what shape this "form

and type of goodness” should take. In other words, we should not have to rely on someone else to tell us where to stand on the issues. This is totally in keeping with our Quaker history of eschewing ecclesiastical authority and in keeping with our tradition of individual communion with God to achieve personal revelation. And, at the same time, we open ourselves to public reflection through sharing our concerns in our meeting for worship.

Arguably, our traditional Quaker resources lack the necessary definitive guidance we need to resolve modern complex ethical dilemmas, especially bioethical issues. Abortion, embryonic stem-cell research, termination of life support, cloning, etc. require guidance beyond what is offered in the traditional *Faith and Practice*. But thinking ethically in a Christian context about those issues is certainly not beyond our Quaker faith tradition. I believe our Peace Testimony is the foundation of all Quaker moral discernment. No matter if we are dealing with war, terrorism, or bioethical issues, our core concern is human dignity and the sanctity of life. The nucleus of our Peace Testimony is our conviction that there is *that of God* in all people. This necessitates an appreciation of the sanctity of life in all moral decisions. Please consider the Peace Testimony as backdrop throughout this discussion.

The main focus of this work is an examination of that special mode of moral behavior modeled by Jesus Christ. I agree with John Frame’s statement, “We have not understood what is most important about a biblical passage until we have seen how that passage preaches Christ.”⁵ And yet, from its inception, Christianity has been plagued by disagreement over the meaning of scriptural passages: Athanasius versus Arius, Pelagius versus Orosius (et al), the Roman versus Orthodox Church, Luther (Protestants) versus the Pope (Catholics), to name just a few. Today’s highly complex bioethical dilemmas are not immune to this conflict-inducing scriptural point-counterpoint. One can see that the heart of the problem is in seeking definitive words to provide ethical guidance. Frame reminds us that, “God’s purpose in Scripture is to communicate, not to state the truth in the most precise form possible.”⁶ Fortunately, where scriptural words addressing these issues may be open to interpretation or even absent, Christ’s *behavior* is certain, offering us an ultimate model of ethical discernment. What I attempt to do in this

book is categorize Christ's moral behavior so that we can use it as a measure of our own moral discernment. This can be done most effectively

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ.

Col. 2:8

by examining scriptural passages in conjunction with Christ's actions, thus eliminating much, but certainly not all, subjective textual interpretation.

Discussing Jesus Christ, the Bible, and religious behaviors makes it difficult to avoid theological overtones. Rest assured, this is not a theological work.

Prominent theologians such as Stanley Hauerwas and James Gustafson have written prodigiously and profoundly on the topic of theological ethics. Their writings, while theologically insightful and academically pertinent, may be too esoteric and less applicable to the ordinary Christian's need for a practical solution to today's complex ethical issues.

My intent is to examine the pattern of moral behavior consistently portrayed in the actions of Jesus Christ as told to us in the Gospels, offer pertinent examples of Christianity's failures and achievements in living up to his example, and suggest a method of how we can apply a Christlike type of moral discernment to our own lives. As a Quaker, I am genuinely interested in how this all applies to my Quaker faith tradition. This method, however, is not only applicable to all Christians, but to all persons, even nonbelievers. By maintaining this focus, I want to avoid delving into theological controversies. We easily avoid debate by realizing the truth of a very simple fact: we are heirs to a movement radically different from any other; one that enables us to look beyond heavy theological arguments and accept that Jesus showed us a wholly new way to treat one another and behave in a manner consistent with the will of God.

The reader should understand that this book is only a resource to help the Christian focus on moral values involved in making decisions. It is a practical guide to recognizing the differences between certain ethical positions. It includes suggestions of what information is important to

consider when making difficult decisions. Throughout this book, I reference the behavior and teaching of Jesus Christ as *the* sole moral standard—there is no other.

This book will not tell you what to do in each and every ethical dilemma you may encounter. There are those who would take the dilemma out of these situations by telling you what to do. Those who, like Helen, want to avoid making difficult decisions, yearn for that simplicity. More often than not, however, ethical decisions are not simple; indeed, they are often quite difficult, requiring us to choose between two equally unfavorable options. No matter what else you may get out of this book, please remember that the Lord feels your pain and is there to comfort you. I know this firsthand. I have experienced it personally and professionally.

I have tried to make this presentation challenging while keeping it basic. Rather than insulting you, the reader, by dumbing down the information, I respect your ability to understand a mature discussion of these issues. If you desire more information, there are numerous books on the market that offer greater detail on the topics covered here. While I have done my very best to maintain a gender-neutral language, many of the authorities I quote did not. Most wrote in a different time and under a different literary ethic. Except where a change is needed for clarification, their words are reproduced as originally written to better capture the author's intent.

Finally, the views expressed in this book are my personal views, as I have felt led to articulate them. Some, even other Quakers, may disagree with those views, a common consequence of ethical decision-making. The point of this book is that we choose our positions in a sincere effort to understand the leading of the Spirit. If in doing so we still disagree, let us still love one another in the name of Christ.

Where Christ presides, idle speculation is hushed; his doctrine is learned in the doing of his will, and all knowledge ripens into a deeper and richer experience of his truth and love.

Faith and Practice
(North Carolina Yearly Meeting)

We Are Friends



OUT OF CHAOS

ENGLAND IN THE seventeenth century was a growing international power struggling at home with its own religious identity. The nation was still reeling from Henry VIII's rebellion in the previous century against the Roman Catholic Church. In the wake of his break with Rome, there followed a frenzy of religious persecutions and killings. Like two massive tectonic plates, the newly established Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church clashed and grated against each other, causing tremors and destruction throughout the land. In 1553 the fervently Catholic Mary Tudor acceded to the English throne. During her short reign, her relentless persecution of Protestants earned her the nickname Bloody Mary.

Queen Elizabeth I assumed the throne in 1558 and, for the next nearly fifty years, although religious tensions simmered and at times glowed, she adroitly avoided igniting a full-scale religious war. Her successors, unfortunately, were less successful. By the mid-1600s, England was plunged into a political/religious civil war pitting Catholics against Protestants, Monarchists against Parliamentarians, and the Army at times against both. The ensuing turmoil would produce several religious factions, each proclaiming its own divinely ordained legitimacy. The result was that within the major conflict arose smaller conflicts in which newly established Protestant sects battled one another.

2 Where Christ Presides

One of those sects, the Puritans, led by Oliver Cromwell, would eventually achieve ultimate political authority and social influence in England. At that time, without the blessing of separation of church and state that we know today, religious power and political power were so enmeshed that what was political was religious, and what was religious was political. Anything not Puritan was considered to be not only anti-religious, but also anti-England.

Out of this chaos came George Fox (1624 – 1691), a young Puritan conflicted by the contradictions he saw between how faith was professed and how faith was practiced in all the Christian denominations and sects. He sought an undisclosed truth and challenged clergymen of all the professed Christian denominations to provide it—but found them wanting. Toward the later part of the 1640s, after years of self-contemplation and study of Scripture, he found the enlightenment he so earnestly sought: “There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to [my] condition . . . that Jesus Christ might have the pre-eminence, who enlightens, and gives grace, and faith, and power.”¹

Fox further postulated what has become the central principle of Quaker beliefs: that there is *that of God* in all persons. Some other terms for this are: *The Light Within*, *Seed Within*, *Inner Light*, and *Christ Within*. John 1:9 refers to Christ as the true light which enlightens everyone. It is upon this passage that Quakers base their belief that, with the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, everyone is able to personally access the Light and Truth of Jesus Christ. Thus was born the Religious Society of Friends, more commonly known as Quakers.

From the simple assertion that all have *that of God* within, Fox arrived at the ultimate conclusion that God is directly accessible to all human beings, no intermediary, i.e. clergy, was necessary for spiritual guidance. Such an assertion was more than daring, it was heretical. Such a belief was a direct challenge to the ecclesiastical authority of the time—an authority that wielded exceptional political power. Fox’s challenge meant that clergy were superfluous to the human need for direct communion with God. Fox also felt that traditional religious ceremonies were a distraction from this personal communion with God, opting instead for what would become the traditional quiet period of Quaker worship. Such simple quietude did not need elaborate churches,

icons, or ceremonies; it required only a personal and sincere desire to be open to the Light of the Truth within.

Fox did not hold himself out as special or anointed. His staunch belief that “there is *that of God* in every person” means that no one can be set above another, no person could enslave another, and no person has the right to destroy another. To do any of these things to another person would be tantamount to doing them to God who is within the other person. In direct contrast to the real-world religious conflicts he experienced first hand, Fox believed in the equality of, and tolerance for, all persons. He spent the remainder of his life trying to convince others of this religious truth he so firmly held.

Fox renounced the idea of religious structure and hierarchy, advocating not a creed but a system of relating based on the assumption that everyone had that of God within. From this basic premise would spring a host of social reforms. Women would have the same rights and privileges as men; slavery should be abolished; war (actually, living in a way that could lead to war) was not within the true Christian ethic; and prisoners and the mentally ill should be treated more humanely.

NOT ALWAYS FRIENDS

It is widely accepted that the term “Friends” was applied to this denomination based on the scriptural passage of John 15:15, where Jesus asserts, “I no longer call you servants . . . instead, I have called you friends” Originally, Quakers were known as the *Friends of Truth* and *Children of the Light*. There are various stories of how the Religious Society of Friends received their more common name—Quakers. Most agree that it was a term of contempt, as followers were perceived to rapturously *quake* during worship. According to Fox it was first applied by “Independents and Presbyterians.”² Regardless, it seems to fall into the custom of the times to apply a derogatory epithet to any group (for example, Levelers, Diggers, Shakers, Ranters) that rejected the beliefs and authority of the established denominations. These splinter groups were to the Puritans in power what the early Christians were to the Roman Empire—a heresy that threatened the social order, a heresy needing elimination.³ Thus were justified the persecutions that followed. In 1661, alone, as many as 5,400 Quakers were imprisoned.⁴

4 Where Christ Presides

Most often the persecutions were a result of the Quakers' refusal to swear an oath. During the English Civil War, the warring factions required citizens to swear an oath of allegiance to prove their loyalty. Those loyal to the king required an oath to the Crown, those loyal to Parliament required an oath to Parliament, and, of course the Puritans required an oath of faith to themselves, not only as a sign of loyalty but also as proof of the oath taker's rejection of papacy, since Catholics were considered enemies of the state.

The oaths proved problematic for Quakers because, in addition to the biblical admonition against swearing of oaths (Matt. 5:34; James 5:12), they took James 5:12 ("Above all, beloved, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath . . ."), as a directive to always tell the truth. To swear an oath for some things would be admitting one had two levels of honesty.

The refusal to swear an oath became so problematic that in 1661 the English government passed "an act for preventing the mischiefs [sic] and dangers that may arise by certain persons called Quakers, and others refusing to take lawful oaths."⁵ On more than one occasion, Fox was called before a magistrate, and even Oliver Cromwell, the Lord Protector, to explain that his refusal, and that of Quakers in general, to swear an oath of allegiance to the Puritan government was not politically oppositional but rather a manifestation of their religious beliefs.

Other Quaker beliefs and practices also brought them into conflict with the authorities. These can probably be summed up in this brief quotation from Fox: "Moreover when the Lord sent me forth into the world, he forbade me to put off my hat to any, high or low; and I was required to 'thee' and 'thou' all men and women, without any respect to rich or poor, great or small."⁶ Removing one's hat in the presence of a social "superior" was a traditional sign of respect, but the Quakers held that only God deserved such respect as the ultimate Superior, and only in worship did they remove their hats.

Another conflict arose from a quirk in the English language. The Quakers addressed one and all as "thee" or "thou." The pronoun *you* had not yet gained universal acceptance. Those in an inferior social position always addressed their superiors with *you*, while the superior used *thee* or *thou* to address a socially inferior person.⁷ The Quakers consistently

used thee and thou to remind others that they were all inferior to God. It is easy to see why their impudence and “. . . their refusal to accord those in authority the usual marks of respect, irritated squire and parson.”⁸ Despite their persecutions the Quakers never ceased to carry on. It was noted that, “In spite of the persecution . . . they never ceased to preach, speak, and write boldly Though the gaols were filled with their brethren, they met to worship after their fashion.”⁹

FRIENDS TODAY

The Quakers, like any other organization, have changed over time. Gone are the customs of simple dress and the use of thee and thou. Formally trained clergy now lead many, but not all, monthly meetings (a monthly meeting is a particular congregation). What hasn't changed is their firm belief in the basic mark of their faith—that there is *that of God* in everyone. This dictum has remained the foundation of the practice of their faith and interaction in society. From this basic religious testimony grew the more familiar *Social Testimonies* that are unique to, and serve as generic guides for, Quakers. (The Social Testimonies will be explored in detail in the next chapter.)

The Quaker Peace Testimony is, perhaps, most familiar to others. Foundational to the Peace Testimony is the belief in the sanctity of human life. Because of this stated belief that there is *that of God* in everyone, killing would mean killing *that of God* in the other person. For the same reason, they consider all persons to be equal. Among Christian denominations, Quakers were leaders in officially opposing war, renouncing slavery, treating the Native Americans fairly, and advocating for more humane treatment of both the mentally ill and the incarcerated. This belief also underscores their stand against the death penalty. Throughout their history and continuing today, Quakers have put their testimonies into practice throughout the world. In 1947 the British Friends Service Council and American Friends Service Committee were jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.¹⁰

The Quaker testimonies grew out of believers' close encounter with Christ.¹¹ To say they oppose taking another's life because *that of God* abides therein is not incorrect, but it is more correct to say they would

6 Where Christ Presides

not do such a thing because Christ Jesus would not do such an abhorrent thing as take another's life. The reader will come to see that this is a type of moral reasoning that differs from the norm.

Quakers are religiously diverse. Indeed, it has been noted that Quakerism is as much a way of life as it is a Christian denomination. Over the years they, like most other Christian denominations, have split into different branches: evangelical, conservative, liberal, and a mix of all of those. Such differentiation has been facilitated, in part, by the fact that Quakers do not have a central lay authority, creed, or dogma to serve as a unifying force. Quakers do have an organizational structure referred to as a *Yearly Meeting*, which is similar to a diocese, that oversees several monthly meetings. Yearly Meetings publish a *Faith and Practice: The Book of Discipline*. This is not a rulebook of do's and don'ts but instead reminds Quakers of their history and faith tradition. It offers a series of *advises* and *queries* that assist in prayerful contemplation of moral challenges according to Christian and Quaker tradition.

Quakers are a different denomination from the Amish or the Mennonites with whom they are often confused. Quakers are not distinct in their dress, speech, or interactions with the world. But they are distinctive in their desire to practice their testimonies and their firm belief that there is *that of God* in all persons.

SUMMARY

The Religious Society of Friends derives its official name from John 15:15, "I have called you friends." The more popular name "Quakers" derives from the perception that adherents used to rapturously quake during worship. Quakers are a Christian denomination that was founded in mid-seventeenth century England by George Fox. It grew out of the chaotic times of the English Civil War, a period dominated by the religious conflict which pitted the Puritans and Oliver Cromwell against the Roman Catholic Church and any other religious belief system with which the Puritans did not agree. It was a time of severe persecution of the Quakers. George Fox became disillusioned with established churches and church authorities. He realized that the only true authority is Jesus Christ, that one does not need an intermediary, that is, a minister

or priest, nor an organization (institutional church) to further one's relationship with Christ, and that one could best achieve communion with God in silent worship.

From this basic religious testimony grew the more familiar *Social Testimonies* that are unique to and serve as generic guides for Quakers. The Peace Testimony is, perhaps, most familiar to others. Foundational to the Peace Testimony is the conviction that all human life is sacred. Because of their stated belief that there is *that of God* in everyone, all persons are considered equal. This is demonstrated in the official Quaker stand against war and the death penalty, their early opposition to slavery, their fair treatment of Native Americans, and their work to establish more humane treatment for both the mentally ill and the incarcerated.

Quakers are religiously diverse. It has been noted that Quakerism is as much a way of life as it is a Christian denomination. Over the years, like most other Christian denominations, Quaker groups have split into different branches: evangelical, conservative, liberal, and a mix of all of those. Such differentiation has been facilitated, in part, by the fact that Quakers do not have a central lay authority, creed, or dogma to serve as a unifying force. Each Yearly Meeting (a Yearly Meeting is an umbrella organization, like a diocese, made up of monthly meetings, which are geographically local meetings, that is, congregations) publishes a *Faith and Practice: The Book of Discipline*. This is not a rule book of do's and don'ts but instead reminds Quakers of their history and traditions, and offers a series of *advises* and *queries* that assist in prayerful contemplation of moral challenges according to Christian and Quaker tradition.

Quakers are often confused with either the Amish or the Mennonites. Although there are some similarities, Quakers have a different origin and different faith tradition. Quakers are not distinct in their dress, speech, or interactions with the world. What is distinct is living a life putting into practice their testimonies and firm belief that there is *that of God* in all persons.