All About Quaker Worship

The way Quakers worship is an instinctive reaction to ‘that of God’ within us. It is so natural and simple, one can worship alone. Yet, when we join with others in this unique way of worshiping that is based on expectant waiting amidst silence, we may discover a deeper sense of God's presence in our life. Quaker worship lends itself to the “inner Light” coming forth from within each worshiper to teach and transform us. Quakers call their worship experiences together “meetings for worship” rather than “services”. Quaker meetings for worship are open to everyone, including children.

Quaker worship is very different than the worship of most Christian churches, in that it doesn't follow a set liturgy or code of rules – there is no structure, and no one leads it. Quakers do without a liturgy because they believe that worship happens when two or three people come together for the purpose of worship - nothing more is needed. This belief comes from Jesus' statement that "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them".

In a Quaker meeting for worship a group of people sits in a room in silence for an hour. From time to time someone may speak briefly, but sometimes the entire hour may pass without a word being spoken. A Quaker meeting for worship is not a time for individual meditation. The people taking part are trying to become something more than just a collection of individuals; they want to become aware of being part of a 'we', rather than just a solitary 'I'. Quaker meetings for worship take place in “meetinghouses”, not “churches”. These are simple buildings or rooms. A meeting for worship begins when two or more worshipers come together to be in the presence of God. They usually sit facing each other in a square or a circle to emphasize that everybody has an equal status. This seating arrangement also helps worshipers to stay aware that they are sharing a spiritual experience with everyone in the room.

The silence in a meeting for worship is of great importance to the worshipers. It provides a sacred space for people to separate themselves from the pressures and events of daily life and to get closer to God and each other. The people who are present try to create an internal silence - a silence inside their head. They do this by quieting everyday thoughts and anxieties. Quakers believe that if they wait silently for God in this way there will be moments when God will speak directly to them. This is why during Quaker worship everyone waits in the shared silence in the hope they will be moved by the Spirit in some way. It could be in the form of a private, personal revelation that is profound and meaningful just for them, or it could be a leading from the Spirit to vocally minister to others who are present. A person will only provide such a vocal message if they are convinced that they have something that must be shared, and it is rare for a person to do so more than once during the hour of worship.

The words spoken are usually brief and may include readings, praying, or speaking from personal experience. Each message is enveloped in the experience of silence that all present are sharing. Quakers believe that God speaks through the messages spoken during the meeting for worship. Some people say there is often a feeling that a divine presence has settled over the group. Any message spoken should come from the Spirit – the inner light - rather than the mind. Quakers know that even if the words they feel moved to speak have no particular meaning for themselves, they may be carrying a message from God to others in the room. There may be no outward response to the message from others, but if there is it will be something that builds positively on the previous message. Discussion, conversation, questioning of another, and argument are never part of the meeting for worship. The meeting ends when one of the worshipers shakes hands with those next to them. The handshake then naturally spreads throughout the room.

If pressed to say what they are actually doing in a meeting for worship, many Quakers would probably say they are waiting - waiting in their utmost hearts for the touch of something beyond their everyday selves. Some would call it “listening to the quiet voice of God” - without trying to define the word “God”. Others would use more abstract terms like “just listening” (though no voice is heard), or “looking inward” (though no visions are seen), or “pure attention” (though nothing specific is attended to). The word “inward” tends to recur as one gropes for explanations of the Quaker worship experience.

William Penn, the Quaker founder of the colony of Pennsylvania, said in 1699, *“True silence is to the spirit what sleep is to the body: nourishment and refreshment”.*