UNMASKING THE IDOLS

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A Journey among Friends

by Douglas Gwyn

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For Dorian

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Introduction

In 1982 I finished an intensive period of research and writing on the life and message of George Fox. That was an exciting time of discovery for me. I learned that Fox gathered the dynamic early Quaker movement from diverse groups of Seekers, Ranters, Baptists, and other notorious sects from the radical counter-culture of Puritan England. The vision that united these groups into something new and cohesive centered in Fox's proclamation that "Christ is come to teach his people himself." In other words, "apocalypse now!" All the promises of God that Christendom awaited at the end of the world — peace, justice, wholeness, harmony with creation — were being experienced within and among these Friends of Jesus. The reign of God was breaking forth in the new social order emerging among them. For a while, it seemed the Quaker groundswell might overtake all of England, perhaps even the world. Though it obviously did not fulfil those expectations, the early Quaker movement nevertheless offers a powerful historic witness from which Friends

and others may learn. The finished product of my study of Fox and early Friends was published under the title *Apocalypse of the Word* by Friends United Press (1986).

In October of 1982 I defended my dissertation on Fox at Drew University, was married to Dorian Petri at Brooklyn Friends Meeting where we had attended for three years, and began a move to California — all in one week. (That was something of an apocalypse in itself!) We moved to California because I had been called by the Berkeley Friends Church to serve as pastor. I had pastored one Friends meeting before, in Noblesville, Indiana. Though I was well aware of Fox's incisive criticisms of pastoral ministry, I saw some intriguing possibilities in Berkeley. Pastoral Quakerism represents the merging of some Friends into evangelical Protestantism, with some practices similar to the forms Puritan spiritualists had developed in the period leading up to early Quakerism. Further, Berkeley Friends were in the middle of the most celebrated counter-cultural hotbed in North America. Could the trajectory from radical Puritanism into the long-eclipsed vision of early Friends be found in this notorious crucible of political, economic, and religious experimentation?

Fox wrote in his *Journal* that even one individual anointed with the divine power to preach the everlasting gospel would shake the earth for ten miles around. While we felt a number of minor earthquakes during my four years of ministry at Berkeley Friends Church, I confess that I was not responsible for any of them! We had many experiences of deep worship, shared vocal ministry, and precious communion in Christ which I will treasure always. But there was no galvanizing of apostolic vision and action like that of the first generation of Friends. The reasons for this are many and subtle, not the least of which was my own lack of vision. I began to realize just how thoroughly we are baffled from the light of Christ, how we are mystified by the many powerful forces working within and around us, separating us from the full liberating love of God.

I left the pastoral work in Berkeley at the beginning of 1987. I felt called to travel among Friends for the next eighteen months, to talk about the early Quaker vision, and to see what is happening around the Society of Friends. I realized that movements like early Quakerism do not begin in one place, but arise through the nurture of converging groups, as Fox's own story relates. Thus, after a fruitful but chastening

four years of pastoral ministry, I moved on in my search for Quaker renewal. Since I ended my full-time work there, Dorian and I continue to enjoy a loving bond with the Berkeley Friends Church, now creatively served in ministry by Arturo Carranza. We also have deepened our relationship with the Strawberry Creek Friends Meeting, which shares the Church's meetinghouse.

The ensuing period of travels among Friends has been an arduous but valuable time. Dorian and I have felt a little like Abraham and Sarah, striking out on an open-ended pilgrimage, based upon rather vague promises. But we have gained in depth through the uncomfortable experience of stepping out into the unknown, becoming more God-dependent. I have also gained many insights from Friends in both pastoral and unprogrammed meetings.

This book represents my theological reflections upon the experiences of these past six years. I engage with the biblical witness from the perspective of those experiences, then go on to address life issues generally and current Quaker concerns in specific. This method is chosen to address the different needs of both evangelical and liberal Friends.

By *evangelical Friends* I mean pastoral Friends for the most part, though a few pastoral meetings are more affected by liberal Christianity than evangelical. Moreover, there are a few Friends in unprogrammed meetings whose Christian faith tends toward evangelicalism. Evangelical Friends tend to rely strongly upon the Bible. We are likely to say that we are more concerned to be authentic Christians than good Quakers. That order of priority often leads to a great neglect of the specifically Quaker Christian spirituality, causing Friends to merge into a mainstream evangelical ethos. The most telling litmus of this loss of Quaker identity is when we speak of the Bible as the Word of God and primary authority for faith and practice. This is a departure from the classical Quaker spirituality, which engages in intensive dialogue with Scripture, but places primary authority upon the living voice of Christ as the Word of God.

There has been an idolatrous element in this continuing slide of Orthodox Quakerism into Protestantism over the past 150 years. Increasing mimicry of evangelical spirituality and techniques has been inspired by an idealized sense that "that's where the action is." Pastoral Friends look at other denominations and envy their doctrinal tidiness and

hearty outreach; we attempt to copy "what works." This "worked" well enough for us during the nineteenth century, as the number and ranks of pastoral meetings swelled enormously. Yet not only has that tide of growth ebbed steadily during this century, but it has also left us with a severely reduced sense of *peoplehood.* Mainstream Christianity is so diverse and often so dissipated by mass culture today that it often has no direction of its own. The spirit of the nation can easily come to fill the void left by the loss of corporate identity; the decline of Christian pacifism among pastoral Friends is one symptom of that spirit.

I am convinced that there is *no future* for pastoral Quakerism along its present course. It may not survive another generation. It has no future because it has *no present, no place, no peoplehood.* Pastoral Quakerism can offer only a pale approximation of a spirituality that mainline denominations often live out more vigorously. Pastoral Quakerism has become an anonymous Christianity, without a clear sense of identity, history, and mission. An abrupt change of direction, a return to roots, a radical repentance is our only hope.

By engaging mainly with the biblical witness, rather than Quaker history, the following chapters attempt to address the evangelical concern for Christian identity. This is the method we used on a weekly basis at Berkeley, and which produced much of the material for this book. I wanted to articulate the Quaker vision in my ministry by interpreting biblical texts in light of current experience, rather than appealing to George Fox all the time. I also aimed to exercise a pastoral leadership that fostered wider participation in the vocal ministry of the meeting. To those ends we developed what we modestly called our Wednesday evening "School of Prophets."

We began each evening with a potluck dinner, an opportunity to enjoy food and friendship together, following Jesus' own frequent practice of teaching at the dinner table. After the meal, we would study, reflect, discuss, and pray together concerning a biblical text or theme I had selected for meeting for worship the following Sunday. Our sessions not only enriched the message I would later share in meeting, but gave participants opportunity to reflect further between Wednesday evening and Sunday morning. The short-term effect was increased participation in vocal ministry during the unprogrammed part of our worship. The longer-term effect was that

certain individuals developed in their knowledge of the Bible and their gifts for vocal ministry. The biblical meditations of this book are offered with a deep sense of indebtedness and gratitude for the many insights this group contributed.

The method of this book also confronts the course of *liberal Quakerism* today. In this other major sector of American Friends the evangelical concern is inverted: here Quakerism is celebrated as social liberalism while Christian identity is held in suspension, neglect, or even rejection. Thereby, Quaker liberalism has drifted away from the Christian spirituality and into the many cross-currents of secular humanism. This is really much the same dilemma as faced by evangelical Friends. In this case, however, the idolatrous impulse seems to be toward a facile world citizenship that can embrace and even include people of all faith traditions. Liberal Quakerism's idealistic universalism seeks to subsume all things in general but embodies nothing in particular. As with evangelical Quakerism, this path has left us with a gradual loss of identity, history, and mission.

Lacking is the sense of *peoplehood* by which liberal Friends might restore the historic testimonies of Friends as a visible, coherent sign to the world. A symptom of this malady is in the peace testimony. While many liberal Friends can espouse their peace positions fluently, our overall statistics in conscientious objection during wars has declined in this century. Further, during this "post-war" era of permanent war economy, we have made little progress toward a united commitment to war tax resistance. This form of "profession without possession" is as doctrinaire as any rote recitation of the Apostles Creed. "Peace" becomes liberal Quakerism's first article of faith even as we decline in our living testimony to the Prince of Peace, who lived and died for us all.

There is *no future* for this current drift in liberal Quakerism either. While there is a legitimate, indeed vital universal aspect in any true Quakerism, it loses its dynamism once the tension with Christian particularity is lost. We cannot unite meaningfully with people of other faiths unless we regain unity with those of our own faith — present and past. The bulk and wealth of our Quaker tradition is a unique stream of Christian spirituality. Friends must reclaim and embody that birthright for a new era; let us not sell it out for cosmopolitan platitudes about "all religions." Quaker universalism is primarily a conviction about encountering God with

all people, not about comparing religions. It is a specific path of spiritual formation the world needs today — and we need it most of all!

Paradoxically, the truly universal horizon of Quakerism is in its vocation as a "peculiar people," chosen and subjected by God for a unique ministry to the nations. When our identity and mission come back into focus, we will find our relationships across religious and cultural borders developing naturally. I am confident that Friends will find unprecedented freedom to move fluidly between inter-faith collaboration, humanitarian service, ecumenical action, and evangelistic mission.

By engaging with the witness of Scripture, this book seeks to make the biblical saga fresh and compelling again for liberal Friends. Especially crucial is the issue of atonement in Christ. Ironically, reconciliation in the cross of Jesus is the single most divisive point between liberal and evangelical Friends. Evangelicals stress the blood of Christ as the cleansing from sin, but often neglect the light of Christ that leads out of sin. Liberals (including a number in pastoral meetings) often want to ignore the "blood theology" of atonement and focus only upon the light as a way of mysticism and self-improvement. Many Friends find it impossible to understand the faith of those on the other side of this "great divide" of modern Quakerism.

Yet it was the repeated claim of George Fox that the same Christ who died for all enlightens all, that justification and sanctification are of one piece, just as the light is the presence of Jesus. John Woolman was deeply immersed in the spirituality of the cross as well. Modern Quaker thought has generally lost the profound connection between the light and blood of Christ. This connection is vital to recover, however, if Friends are ever to find peace together, and renew our vocation as peacemakers among Christians and non-Christians alike. Chapter Five will explore that mystery most fully.

The above criticisms of contemporary Quakerism should not be left unalloyed with some hopeful observations. In my travels among Friends I have seen many signs of renewal. There are growing numbers of Friends pastors deeply moved by the message of Fox and the early Friends; they are teaching and preaching week by week to share that vision with their meetings. In many cases they are also experimenting with more unprogrammed worship and encouraging

more participation in the vocal ministry. In some cases, these new initiatives are coming from the meeting members, with cooperation from pastors. Peace and justice concerns are eliciting new activity in some meetings. These developments show a renewed concern for Quaker orthopraxis (right process) in a sector that has usually been more attentive to orthodoxy (right belief).

Among liberal Friends, first of all, there is the steady growth and proliferation of unprogrammed meetings. At a time when evangelical meetings pour increasing resources into church growth with limited success, many liberal meetings are growing, often with no outreach effort at all. It appears that new people find Quakerism most compelling when it manifests itself as a clear alternative to mainstream denominational options. Even more inspiring, however, are the qualitative changes in many unprogrammed meetings. There is a growing interest in Bible study and a renewed openness to Christian language in the meeting for worship. This is occuring in meetings where ten years ago such study or language often elicited condescension or outright reproach from more "broad-minded" Friends seeking to downplay the Christian rootage of Quakerism. There also seems to be a trend toward greater accountability in meetings where a decade ago Quaker life practice was scattering as rapidly as the Quaker faith. Of course, mutual accountability is never easy. The current struggles over same-sex marriage in many meetings are a time of testing: can Friends find new standards and patterns of faithfulness? Can we move beyond a conservative conformity to tradition as well as a liberal penchant for cheap and indiscriminate blessings? How will we recognize and nurture the Spirit-based commitments of gay and lesbian Friends, who have become such a powerful and renewing presence in meetings?

Meanwhile, there are surprising numbers of creative and concerned Friends emerging from all quarters, seeking renewal on many fronts: travelling ministry, war tax resistance, community-building, simplicity and alternative lifestyles, international peace witness, spiritual gifts, Quaker theology and history, just to name a few. There is a sense of convergence among these various concerns suggesting that a rebirth of vital, transforming Quaker witness may be near.

These are exciting times! There are reasons for cautious optimism among Friends today. Still, there are powerful

forces of entropy, both within and without the Society of Friends, that could easily overwhelm these modest gains and tear us still further apart. Without the dynamic tension that once held our alienated elements of Quakerism together, we will continue to flounder among the tides of culture — and most of us can see the storm clouds gathering on the horizon.

Time is running out for our beloved Society. This is more urgently true for pastoral Friends, but the same holds for liberal Friends. This is a time for repentance, reappraisal, and an unmasking of the idols — the false images that blind us to the Truth of Christ moving in our midst. To the extent we are willing to undergo this painful and doubt-plagued process, we will emerge with new vision of God's future for us.

This book addresses the inner dynamics of that visioning process. The unmasking of idols as an unfolding drama of recognition is our recurring theme. This theme follows in the prophetic tradition of the Bible and the early Friends. The critique of idolatry was implicit in the lives of Abraham and Sarah and became programmatic to the entire life of Israel in the laws of Moses. As the Hebrew prophets developed that tradition, they unmasked not only the idols of other religions but the idolatrous impulse infecting Israelite life as well. The drama of recognition became a powerful social critique and a sense of history that came to embrace all peoples and even creation itself. That final stage of the prophetic tradition is found in the apocalyptic literature of the late Old Testament and the outlook of Jesus and the New Testament writers. That apocalyptic sense of history was regained in the early, prophetic period of Quakerism (See *Apocalypse of the Word* for more on the apocalyptic quality of early Christianity and early Friends).

A deeper sense of history is urgently needed among Friends today; our vague reading of our times is related to our poor sense of our peoplehood. Evangelical Quakerism tends toward a personal pietism with a weak social consciousness and a very mechanical sense of history. When pastoral Friends do speak of the global issues of our day they are likely to lapse into the millenarian schemes of the fundamentalists: they speak of a physical return of Christ, the coming of a "Rapture" that will magically save good Christians from coming catastrophes of nuclear holocaust. Meanwhile, liberal Friends still tend toward an optimistic view of history, despite the chastening world events of recent decades: they

continue to speak of in terms of an "escalator of progress" in history. Such optimism has more to do with our position of social privilege and wishful thinking than the overcoming faith that gives substance to human hope.

There exists a "dark interval" between our experience as individuals and what we see going on in history. We find it difficult to find the connection between the two. That is not a failing unique to evangelical Christianity or liberal humanism; it is part of our human predicament. But that interval can be traversed. That dark passage is the apocalyptic moment. Early Friends called it *convincement*, the moment of unmasking, of confrontation between personal and public, when the most private experiences within become one with the widest vistas of history. The inward voice and the cosmic Christ become one great drama of recognition. That apocalyptic moment in personal experience is frightening and painful. Our familiar images of reality are unmasked, our comforting idols are toppled, and our world passes away, creating space for a new world to appear. The experience never becomes easy, but we can learn to recognize it and enter trustingly into it.

The trajectory of this book is to move through that dark interval from a number of angles, with a gradual shift from the more intimate realms of private life to the most public realms of society and history. As we go, we will see a number of ways Quakerism works to heighten this drama of recognition. We will also examine a number of ways Friends often opt out of the drama and revert to more static images. This critical aspect is not an exercise in breast-beating but an invitation to intensify the drama among us today. Therefore, let us step out in faith!

1

The Charm of Idols

When I visited the Grand Canyon for the first time, it was something like a religious experience. I do not mean simply that it was an opportunity to wonder at God's creation, though I certainly did. Standing at the canyon's rim was very much like an encounter with God. The vast expanse of it — a mile deep and ten miles wide — was a visual experience that no photograph has ever captured. My wife and I were nearly speechless; we were simply over-awed by the experience. It felt like standing at the precipice of eternity. That overwhelming feeling had a strange effect on me. Something in me wanted to launch out into it, like the cliff swallows that flew back and forth over our heads. I wanted to become one with that awesome eternal. But another part of me, perhaps in response to the initial attraction, wanted to retreat to a safer distance. The longer we stood there, the more I noticed a growing nausea in the pit of my stomach. At last it became unbearable; I took some snapshots and we retreated to the more familiar world of normal proportions.

When the photographs were developed weeks later, they were all disappointing. None captured the glory of the experience; nevertheless, they serve as reminders of the experience and make it easier to talk about. Religious literature from around the world testifies to this dynamic in human experience of the divine. Encounter with the eternal elicits a kind of spiritual vertigo. There is a mysterious paradox of feeling. One is fascinated, drawn toward the holy — yet simultaneously gripped by terror and dread. Not every experience of God will be that extreme; God can often come in subtle and comforting ways. But the real "mountain-top experiences" are often marked by some form of "holy terror." As one reflects after such experiences, they eventually become easier to talk about, though words or drawings are never adequate to portray their fulness.

Images are what we take away from life experiences. The poet writes evocatively of an arresting incident, the scientist distills a theory based upon experimental evidence, the theologian constructs doctrinal formulations around personal experience and the testimony of religious tradition, the artist captures a visual experience (inward or outward) on canvas. These images, these constructions have important power and worth, for they help express the experience of their creators. They help people share similar experiences and learn together from them. Such images may even evoke or lead others to a certain kind of experience. A poem may help others be more conscious of a certain realm of feeling. A well-drawn map may help people find the Grand Canyon! Images enhance our lives by interpreting and even eliciting experience.

Yet there are ways in which we can fixate on images so that life is depleted. Any image that has proven particularly powerful in evoking or interpreting a certain experience can begin to substitute for the experience itself, even cut us off from that experience. When this happens, our lives become distorted. A scientific principle can be employed recklessly by a technology that enhances certain life processes while interrupting others. A religious doctrine can be imposed upon individuals who do not share the religious experience from which it was derived. Art can degenerate into a commercial craft, in which once-powerful expressions become perfunctory forms. Advertising can turn an otherwise useful product into a commodity that is sought and consumed

beyond any reasonable need.

When we fixate thus upon an image, we make it absolute, an end unto itself. Then the image loses its capacity to communicate and enhance life. Likewise, we ourselves loose our capacity to receive new experience through that image. This is the point at which the image becomes an *idol.* All idols are humanly fabricated, because it is our fixation that freezes them in static form. We pursue this fixation with a devotion that can be termed *idolatry.* Modern humanistic sciences have analyzed the phenomenon of idolatry from a number of different angles, often with findings complimentary to biblical insights. Let us look briefly at three of these: psychology, sociology, and economics. They will add contemporary dimension to our biblical meditations on idols.

Psychologists observe that we often engage in behaviors that deflect and control strong emotions, whether pleasant or unpleasant. We become possessed by obsessive thoughts or compulsive, habitual behaviors in order to avoid feeling intense fear, pain, or sometimes even joy. We become addicted to work, food, alcohol, drugs, talk, or television to keep the unknown at bay. My desire to retreat from the Grand Canyon to normal experience is an example of that psychological tendency. We control our world by maintaining an atmosphere of normality, even though it leaves us with a gray, humdrum existence. We duck uneasy situations; we avoid emotional encounters; we become distracted by "diversions" that keep us "occupied," unavailable — to others, to God, and to ourselves.

Thus, any time we engage in ritualized, compulsive behaviors — even religious activities — we must suspect an idolatrous pattern. The familiar truisms, the well-worn idioms of politeness, the codes of traditional morality can all become idols we serve with a neurotic devotion. Where once they may have ordered and enriched our lives, they can come to imprison us in an elaborate maze that hedges out the unsettling mystery of Emmanuel, God with us. In our consumer society, various addictions have become so widespread that new twelve-step programs, based upon the Alcoholics Anonymous model, are springing up every day. Addiction has become a central metaphor for a society that daily seeks distraction from the spectres of nuclear war, the collapse of families, or simply the haunting fear of meaninglessness.

Sociologists have observed these tendencies on broader levels of human affairs. We do not think or act in isolation; we participate in various social, religious, and political bodies. Each group has a set of assumptions, beliefs, and rules to make its activities sensible and productive. This set of tenets, or ideology, serves to stabilize the group and justify the wider social order that supports it. Ideology tends to legitimate the existing social order as the *natural* state of things. Hence, a ruling class constructs a worldview that makes its privilege and power seem best for everyone, not just itself. Churches develop a religious ideology that usually affirms whatever place they most comfortably find in the wider society. They come to view this as the natural, God-given role for churches, and they find Scriptural citations to confirm it. As with individual habits, such ideological patterns exist to assert order and stability against chaos. If these patterns come to block and suppress the actual social and religious experience of group members, to the extent that they form a hedge against constructive change, they may be properly called idolatrous.

Religious ideology is the most powerful ideology for the maintenance of social control. As the dominant religion of Western civilization, Christianity has often served very repressive purposes set by rulers bent upon mastery of nations and peoples. The Bible has endlessly been used as the source book of controlling images to those ends. Yet the same Bible has also been the source for many alternative visions of society, and it has provided the language and images for the most benign transformations of our culture.

Economists have identified idolatrous tendencies in the business and financial realms of social life. All goods and services are produced and provided by human beings working together in some kind of organized groups. The marketplace is a vast network of human relationships. Yet we tend to treat commodities and exchange relations as entities with a life of their own. We fixate upon them and lose track of the real people who have produced goods or will buy them. As consumers, we desire the product so intensely or reflexively that we do not care about those who produced it or its effect upon our environment. Advertising helps us to focus narrowly on the commodity and filter out human considerations; we become isolated consumers whose desires are constantly being aroused.

As producers, we may become so intent upon profit as an end unto itself that we impose unhealthy conditions upon workers, or fail to consider adverse effects of our product upon the consumer or the environment. Profit becomes an absolute value, and end unto itself, which we serve with blind zeal. Workers, too, become locked into the tunnel vision of wage-value fixation. We depersonalize ourselves by identifying with "labor" or "management." Things take on personalities and people become things. Meanwhile, we pursue our idolatrous service in marketplace and place neurotic trust in a "hidden hand" to justify our excesses and take care of those we heedlessly exploit. Economists call this form of idolatry *reification.*

Thus, our modern disciplines corroborate the ancient witness to the problem of idolatry deep in the human soul. Some of these modern insights will be sprinkled in with the biblical meditations that follow. While scientific theories describe the human dilemma in modern analytical terms, the ancient biblical mode is to play it out in stories and metaphors, which often speak more powerfully to the human heart.

As we read the Bible, we find a relentless attack upon idols. They are portrayed as a dangerous impediment to faithful relationship to God. There is no place for graven images, not even representations of Yahweh, anywhere in the life of Israel. Their presence contaminates the land as insidiously as nuclear wastes do today. Where idols are present, the very life of Israel is endangered.

The prohibition against idols in the laws of Moses is strict and categorical. It comes right at the beginning of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20). The history of Israel, as narrated in Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles, becomes a great tragedy of recurring flirtations with idolatry. When the prophets address the subject, their tone often turns sarcastic in outright contempt at idols and those who worship them.

We find a good example of this tone in Isaiah 44. The prophet says quite simply that idols are good for nothing. Anyone who makes an image and bows to it is really stooping to its level: that person descends to the realm of fake existence. With mocking irony the prophet describes the manufacture of an idol. The ironsmith works so hard to fashion his god that he exhausts himself. He depletes his own energy making an idol that is supposed to have power in

itself. The carpenter makes his graven image from a piece of wood. Half the piece of wood he uses to make the idol, the other half he uses to cook dinner and keep warm. At least the latter half serves a useful purpose! Yet he falls down before his idol, worshiping, praying, crying, "Deliver me, for thou art my god!" Isaiah's portrayal seethes with prophetic sarcasm.

Here we come to the notorious stubborn streak of the prophetic faith — an insistence upon the inexpressible, total otherness of Yahweh. The early Hebrews felt they had been grasped by a God like no other — a sort of anti-god. Their way of relating to this God was something of an anti-religion. The gods of their neighbors — storm gods, sun gods, fertility gods, national gods — were mainly related to natural forces and social institutions. They had specific realms of power and control. There was a kind of divine bureaucracy in the world. If people wanted crops to sprout or wives to bear children, they would take it up with the local fertility god. Like some human bureaucrats, these gods were usually disinterested in the hopes and fears of mere humans. They had to be begged, bribed with sacrifices, cajoled, and generally pestered to help. Ancient idolators lived in a vast, impersonal world of powerful gods who just might grind them under if they did not keep the gods aware of their personal needs. Household idols were almost like a telephone — they were a way to keep in touch with the gods.

Yahweh, the God of Israel, was different. Yahweh was not a force of nature, yet could influence the natural world. Yahweh was in some respects a national god, yet had come out of nowhere to strike up a relationship with Israel. Furthermore, the status of their relationship was subject to review. Yahweh was a free-agent with regard to both the natural and the social worlds. Yahweh defied definition, except by the history of Israel's experience. And what a history! Yahweh made mighty Egypt let Israel go; but Yahweh was not an Egyptian god. Yahweh employed forces of nature in liberating Israel; but Yahweh was not the god of the Red Sea. Yahweh delivered Israel into a land flowing with milk and honey, but was not the god of milk and honey. The wide-open freedom and power of this God was revealed in the name, "I am that I am." And the total scope of relationship Yahweh demanded was commanded at Sinai: "You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven

above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth...for I am a jealous God..." (Exod. 20:3f).

Therefore, it would be a serious mistake to make representations of this God, Yahweh. To worship other gods and their images would be even worse. It would be to place God among the gods, faith among the religions. Fertility gods were relative to crops and babies. Yahweh was relative to what Yahweh chose to relate to. Other gods had specialized powers and job descriptions. Their activity followed natural cycles and national interests. Yahweh just made and fulfilled promises. This total otherness of Yahweh, therefore, could only be maintained through a total abstention from religious images. Though masculine language and metaphors for Yahweh inevitably crept into Israel's "God-talk," given the patriarchal (male-dominated) culture in which Israel developed, these were never essential to the "I am." Yahweh thus represented a stubborn blankness, a brooding empty space at the center of Israel's worldview.

Israel's acquaintance with Yahweh had grown out of a background as a nomadic people. It began with Abraham, who was called out of his father's home by an unknown deity. He left his father's house and his father's idols to begin a long saga of wanderings and sojournings through a land he would someday possess. In nomadic life, all one's fortunes depend upon which way one goes next. The wrong move can lead to barren lands without food or water for the flocks. It can lead one toward marauding tribes and total destruction.

Yahweh was the God who led Abraham and Sarah in safety. If they followed Yahweh trustingly, all their needs were met. If they drew back from God's leadings, they were subject to danger. The nomadic experience taught them that their hope was in one true God and that this God required total fidelity and attention or the relationship simply could not work. In the vast, silent expanses of the desert, they came to know the voice of Yahweh, a voice which must be listened for and obeyed. It was a matter of life and death.

This relationship was consummated and formalized with the deliverance from Egypt and the covenant made with Israel at Sinai. But as Israel settled into agriculture in the Promised Land, the change of lifestyle caused a shift in religious perspective. The open-ended nomadic life gave way to the more cyclical farming life. The Hebrew farmer asked not "Where next?" but "When will the rains come?" "Will my

crops grow?" Yahweh had no track record in that area.

The gods of the Canaanites, however, specialized in such matters. It was therefore a natural tendency for the average Israelite to want to cover all the bases and play it safe. Yes, Yahweh, the God of Israel, the liberator and preserver of the nomadic ancestors — and Baal, Astarte, and the others for the crops. Faith in Yahweh was replaced by a complex of religious impulses about gods. The descent into compulsive religious behavior took a toll on the ethical demands of Yahweh. The social justice of Yahweh's commands gave way to religious relativism. And idols made it easier to keep the gods straight. The results are recorded in the oracles of the prophets, as in the horrified words of Hosea: "And now they sin more and more, and make for themselves molten images, idols skilfully made of their silver, all of them the work of craftsmen. Sacrifice to these, they say. Men kiss calves!" (13:2). Yahweh's heart-broken reproach follows: "O Ephraim, what have I to do with idols? It is I who answer and look after you" (14:8).

Israel's spirituality became less ethical and more neurotic. The people were consumed in trying to please the gods. Even the worship of Yahweh became increasingly neurotic. For example, King Saul found it easier to offer a guilt sacrifice for disobeying God's command through Samuel than to obey in the first place (1 Sam. 15). The disobedience of the people to God's demand for justice and equity made their offerings, their feasts, and their songs of praise sickening to God, said Amos (5:21-27).

The gods and the religions were very connected to the issues of stability and reliability in life. Gods of nature were counted on to keep the cycles of life going, to insure an adequately prosperous life. National gods had special concerns for the peace, security, or military conquests of a given society, again insuring a safe and successful existence. Religious activities served to control anxieties about life.

Returning for a moment to the alternative language of modern psychology, we can see Israel's dilemma in helpful perspective. The beliefs and rituals of Canaanite religion gave Israelites a set of behaviors to deal with the frightening uncertainties of farming life. Yet this pluralizing tendency eroded the totalizing power of faith in Yahweh. Total trust in a single Creator of heaven and earth, demanding that people live with anxiety and face their dependence upon a higher

power, gave way to a complex of compulsive, ritualized behaviors adapted to maintain a sense of control. Israel's desire to manipulate life's overwhelming forces should not sound alien to us.

The issues of power and control are central to Paul's critique of idolatry in Romans 1:18ff. He argues that, even apart from the historical revelation of Scripture, the existence of a supreme Creator is evident to us as we view the creation. Yet we exchange that truth for a lie as we worship the creatures in the place of their Creator. We fix the divine in created images because we can interact with them as known quantities with somewhat predictable qualities. We can gain a sense of parity and control with the known. We can strike a bargain with the known. The long list of behaviors Paul associates with idolatry in Romans 1 suggests that he finds among them a common issue of control, of neurotic power.

But the Creator of heaven and earth dwells beyond all the knowable things that we would appropriate and control. The true God can only be trusted in total dependence. There can be no bargains — only faith. This God is by no means indifferent or capricious, but neither is God manipulated by our wishes, thoughts, and behaviors. Our fixed images will only get between us and God, insulating us in a security that is purely self-made and illusory. Our obsessive-compulsive behaviors, religious and otherwise, can appease and control only the false gods we create — and even then not forever. As the prophets tell us, we must get rid of these fixed images, or face dangerous consequences.

This was the downfall of Israel, as discerned by the prophets. Israel became like the other nations — religious. There was no longer any real boundary between them. So the armies of the nations, like their idols, flowed into Israel and Judah. At last Jerusalem fell to Babylon, a nation Jeremiah described as "idol-crazy" (50:38).

By the time of Jesus, a chastened Jewish nation was no longer prone to Canaanite religions. But there remained some religious neuroses in the ritual performances at the reestablished Temple. This is evident from the way in which the system of sacrifices had turned the Temple into a marketplace, a "house of trade" (John 2:16). Jesus criticized the way in which relationship to God was reduced to a series of transactions. Ritualism can be a way of distancing ourselves

emotionally and spiritually from others, including God. It can become a way of honoring God with the lips, while the heart is far off (Isa. 29:13; Mark 7:6f).

Others, notably the scribes and Pharisees, were perhaps less fixated upon the rituals of Temple worship. They had learned the lesson of the Exile. They sought to know and do the will of God through painstaking and minute study and interpretation of the laws of Moses. Their personal sacrifice in study and devotion to legal precision was truly admirable. Yet this, too, could and sometimes did degenerate into ritual obsession. Jesus pointed out that the meticulous interpretation of laws could confound the laws' very purpose (See Mark 7:6-13). He accused some, for example, of tithing all the way down to their herbs and spices, while neglecting "the weightier matters of the law, justice, mercy and faith" (Matt. 23:23).

In patterning a procedure for every occasion, the scribes had created an entire lifestyle defined by ritual. They had left golden calves far behind, yet they had produced a monument of legal interpretation with endless filigree as beautiful as any idol's. In contrast, Jesus taught a way based on less tangible grounds. He preached the reign of God as a direct relationship with God, with absolute trust in God to provide for all needs (Matt. 6:33). This message represented a return to the desert faith of Israel's beginnings. The portrayal of God as a loving parent restated the ancient premise of faith: God seeks relationship with us; and a whole-hearted response to God cuts through all our neuroses about personal security.

God's demand for direct relationship is dramatized in the scene of Jesus' transfiguration. Peter, James, and John beheld Jesus standing with Moses and Elijah and were understandably terrified. Peter's response to this awesome experience was to deflect it by performing a religious act (offering to build a shrine). Don't just stand there, do something! This had been the human response to the divine ever since Adam and Eve put on fig leaves and hid from God. But God's response came directly to Peter: "This is my beloved Son; listen to him" (Mark 9:1-8).

In the presence of God, the most important thing is not to say something or do something, even though our neurotic tendency makes us want to. The point is to hear and follow as Christ speaks by the Spirit. Fear of God is not a bad thing. It is our natural response to the presence of God's awesome majesty. Rather than sublimating this fear through nervous

busy-ness, Christ would have us confront our fear. *Then* Christ can tell us what to do. It is when we compulsively start doing the things Christ *would have us do* that we start serving a fixed image in our imagination. That is the point where faith turns to religion, where trust turns to neurotic need to control or appease.

This truth lies at the heart of the Quaker spirituality. The practice of "waiting upon the Lord" in silence is a discipline that halts our nervous compulsions and forces us to "stew in our own juices," uncomfortable as that may be. In speaking of the true worship of God, George Fox often quoted God's gentle rebuke to Peter, to stop and listen to Christ. "Be still and know that I am God" is the way the Psalmist articulated it (Psalm 46:10). Yet pastoral Friends have greatly curtailed this discipline by replacing most of our silent worship with programmed activity. Do programmed worship "services" and pastoral leadership reveal the age-old desire to control our experience of God?

More pervasively, Friends of *all* varieties today have broken silence and simplicity as a *lifestyle.* Our daily existence becomes cluttered with the same banter and busyness that clutters our whole culture. Even unprogrammed meetings for worship represent a single hour of stillness that has become ritually denatured from the rest of our lives. The decline of stillness as a way of life parallels the way in which the Lord's Supper in the early Church declined. Initially the central symbol of an entire communal lifestyle, the Lord's Supper became the mere dispensing of wine and wafers; a new and living Way became a "medicine of immortality." Similarly, we have declined from being the disturbing "quiet in the land" to meeting for an hour of silence, broken by a few chummy remarks. We have retreated from the awe-fulness of God.

To wait upon God as a way of life requires a methodical practice of holding up — *suspending* — all our habits and preoccupations to the light of Christ. It is when we *stop* ourselves that we give space for God to do something new with our lives. Otherwise, everything remains "business as usual." This is why George Fox and the early Friends were so critical of the liturgies and calendars of the established churches: these rituals and cycles helped perpetuate an unjust and violent world. The return of Christ in human experience means "the end of the world" as a humanly

controlled realm, and the beginning of a new world in new patterns inspired by God. No wonder Fox was attacked by mobs for this message; to give up control is a scary thing. Are Friends today willing to live loosely with our own treasured rituals, that God may move more freely in our Society?

The God who is totally beyond us, who acts with complete freedom, continues to frighten us. That is why idolatry still abounds today. Perhaps we do not bow down to the images of reptiles, birds, and humans Paul describes in Romans 1. Yet our modern humanism has made the human image the measure of all things. The age of humanism began nobly centuries ago in an attempt to appreciate and understand ourselves better. This movement still bears important fruits for Christian faith, in a deeper reflection upon the faith experience as it actually occurs in us. But at some point, humanism can become "man for himself," humanity on its own terms, attempting to write God out of the equation. It is not hard to see how "man for himself" soon becomes "every man for himself," and Paul's long list of idolatrous evils becomes all too contemporary. Similarly, the disciplines of learning built by humanism can become tainted. "Art for art's sake" and "free science" create an entire new order of problems when the artist, scholar, or scientist attain a god-like status with self-serving motivations. Humanistic psychology becomes an endless hall of mirrors when the ultimate horizon of divine relationship is lost or denied.

For all their benign accomplishments, the sciences and the humanities are nevertheless a monumental edifice built by our fervent obsession to pattern a reality that works without faith. It is our grand compulsion to analyze all natural and social phenomena and to manipulate them in a way to make human knowledge and freedom absolute. Yet is it not possible to analyze natural phenomena *and* still praise the Creator of heaven and earth? Is it not preferable to develop new technologies *and* seek God's wisdom in their use?

There is no safe refuge from idolatry in Christian piety. The idolatrous system of legal righteousness engraved by the scribes has its Christian version. While we do not use the law to form a moral system as they did, we tend to form a *doctrinal* system out of the New Testament. The gospels are distilled into a set of propositions to be affirmed by the faithful. Thus faith becomes a complex of beliefs; propositions about Christ

replace actual participation in Christ. The Bible comes to stand between ourselves and our God as yet another form of those perennial fig leaves. Christ's presence and authority in our lives are deflected by a neurotic devotion to Scripture's authority. *Bibliolatry* is the name for this rarified form of idolatry. The Bible becomes an end unto itself, rather than our key to recognizing Jesus Christ among us. It becomes our club against those whose sins are not our sins. It becomes our armor against change, our grudge against the unbeliever, and our best defense against the fear of God.

For the Protestant whose emphasis is upon the authority of Scripture, bibliolatry will be a constant, hidden danger. For the Catholic, the doctrinal and procedural authority of the Church institution will embody the same danger. Pointing out each other's idolatrous lapses mainly serves to keep us from noticing our own. Most of all, it keeps us busy avoiding God. Pastoral Friends are most prone to the Protestant pitfall, sometimes with virulent anti-Catholicism added. Liberal Friends often belabor the historic sins of both Protestants and Catholics. Claiming to respect all religions, they, too, seldom immerse themselves in any of them. An elaborate etiquette of humane tolerance is played out, while God remains rigorously bracketed, off to the side.

Idolatrous patterns, then, are a common stock of human existence. Images once useful and liberating are hardened into vain idols that have no life or power, yet demand our increasing devotion of time and energies. We find ourselves serving them "religiously," whether we think of them as sacred or not. This tendency in our experience is universal and continues to creep into the lives of saints as well as sinners. The living way of faith must maintain a constant vigilance on all fronts, unmasking these idols, desecrating them, denying their power to rule our lives by denying them our devotion. When we do this, we experience new freedom, released energies, and wider horizons. We come to recognize God from new angles and learn how to serve God in joyous freedom, rather than neurotic compulsion.

Yesterday's revelation becomes today's tradition. And today's tradition is well on its way to tomorrow's idol. To receive faith is a gift; to remain in faith is an adventure. It is to remember who is the potter and who is the clay (Jer. 18). Our role is largely one of surrender — learning to let God work through us, re-molding us to new purposes. That kind of

surrender is not simply passive but profoundly creative. To surrender to God is to create always in the presence and wisdom of the Creator, not in God's absence or on God's behalf. It is to be addressed by the words, "*I* formed *you*, you are my servant" (Isa. 44:21).

2

The Ideal as Idol

The Word of God through the prophets reminds Israel that "I formed you — you were *my* idea. Whatever your imagination may dream up about me, or other gods, keep that truth in mind." The mind of God is unsearchable. We know God's mind only as the Word communicates it by the Holy Spirit. The man or woman of faith lives by that communication, "by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Deut. 8:3; Matt. 4:4). Yet it is impossible for us to avoid speculating about the nature of God and the world. After all, we have minds of our own, capable of sublime insights into reality and subtle maneuvers of reason.

The human mind is the crown of creation, able to perceive and integrate an amazing scope of the universe. It is this "putting the world together" in our minds that we call *consciousness*. The shape of the world we create determines how we will act in the world. As we mature, we become conscious of more forces and factors around us. Our world becomes more complex, requiring more subtlety in our

thought and action. The way in which we place ourselves in the world is our *self-consciousness*, or perhaps *conscience*. We are not detached observers — we must act, react, and interact in this perplexing world of ours. We must act appropriately to our place in circumstances. When we do not, we suffer pain of conscience. *Wisdom* is the ability to perceive the world's patterns and find ourselves properly among them.

The task of "putting the world together" is what our likeness to God is all about. Like God in Genesis 1, we construct our world by declaring oppositions — light and darkness, heaven and earth, waters and dry land. Like God, we continue to work out the identities and differences in greater detail, down to the endless varieties of animal and plant life, or whatever makes up our world.

We place ourselves amid this great array as surveyors and rulers over it all because of our ability to take it all in. We "master" it as we make some kind of whole out of it. This ability has to do with our gift for language: we define things by naming them, pulling them out of the chaotic swirl of experience and saying what they are — a

nd what they are not. Thus, our consciousness orders the creation by word, just as the mind of God does. Until the mind begins giving structure to the world around us, we are faced with only a raw, unformed "deep" (Gen. 1:2).

This power is the glory of our humanity, and the basis for our philosophy, our arts, and our sciences. In bestowing this power, God truly did place us at the pinnacle of creation as rulers in God's likeness.

Yet our power is not on the same order. While we construct a world in our minds, it may or may not match the world God has in fact created around us. And while we place ourselves in the world in a certain way, it may or may not be the place our Creator has in mind for us. As God said through Isaiah, "my thoughts are not your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8f). We misconstrue events and wrongly perceive objects around us. We particularly tend to misconstrue our proper place amid these events and objects. Our viewpoint at ground level tends to be myopic, and if we act according to our own distorted view, we are headed for disaster.

When we act out of our warped self-consciousness, it surely grieves our Creator, who made us for a better purpose. Yet the "wrath" that is coming upon all wrongdoers is more the ruin

already contained in sin than an emotional reaction of God. God equipped us for a successful life in divine communion, not on our own.

Even science and technology, which have developed the power to manipulate our world according to our desires, will not escape the wrath. The creation's integrity cannot be violated without the ground on which we stand giving way sooner or later. This is not to say that we must live in a primitive state, that manipulation of our environment is always wrong. But creation's laws will not be re-written to please our short-sighted, selfish schemes. They must be obeyed — *all* of them. Technology does damage when it adapts one law of nature, one process, while ignoring another, setting law against law. Certainly, we cannot anticipate the full implications of every technological innovation. But when destructive potentials are willfully unheeded, the Creator and Judge of all is not amused. A terrible judgment of malpractice hangs over our heads.

With modern science and technology our power to be co-creators with God opens vast new horizons. There is a potential for great good and for great evil. If we forget who created whom to begin with, if we are no longer content to be the "junior partner" in this great adventure, then we are headed for a tragic fate.

In the final analysis, the issue is again idolatry. We construct our world in our minds, we develop certain *ideas* about the world, based upon our observations. Indeed, the word "idea" comes from the Greek word *idein*, to see or observe. Similarly, our word "theory," meaning an abstract formulation of reality, comes from the Greek word *theoreo*, meaning to see. Our ideas really amount to our own "mental images," based upon observation of reality. And we serve our own favorite ideas with the same scrupulous devotion that ancient idolaters gave to their graven images. Our far-ranging ideas form a great pantheon of internal idols.

The ancient pagans worshiped gods representing the forces of nature and society they recognized. The attributes ascribed to the gods were formulated according to what one observed of nature. Storm gods, for example, often had rather violent-tempered personalities. Similarly, our ideas tend to be imperfect, caricatured impressions of the reality around us.

We also have our *ideals*. We might call these our *improve-*

ments upon reality. We can "imagine" things working *better* than they do. We forge a mental image, an "immaculate conception," a pure idea of how something *should* be. Our ideals tend to be so pristine and perfect in our minds that we have no idea how to live them out in present realities. The idealist is a "Man of la Mancha," dreaming an "Impossible Dream" of how things *ought* to be and not dealing very well with things as they actually are. As idealists, we tend to end up either in despair (overwhelmed by the immensity of our goal), or simply foolish, gallantly tilting with windmills.

The idealist can end up looking so pathetic that the stage is then set for the "realist." Realists have simply lowered their ideals to a base enough level that they can be lived more easily. Usually this involves narrowing the scope of consciousness to focus mainly upon oneself. In today's political scene, "liberals" often play the idealists. Liberal foolishness and despair have aided the rise of "neo-conservatives," who play the realists. Their hard-nosed policy is to "look out for number one," which always works better, at least in the short-run. So while idealists despair of their ideals, the so-called realists idealize their despair. The former would save the world, the latter only themselves. Ultimately, neither one can succeed, because neither fears God.

As usual, Christianity comes up with its own particular version of this pathetic human condition. Today, as perhaps in every age, many Christians look to the promises and prophecies of the Bible for their ideals. They read the visions of the heavenly Jerusalem in Revelation, for example, and speculate on the coming ecstasies of the "Rapture," imagining who will be saved and who will not. With a perverse twist, the unhappy realities of the present world are gleefully greeted as signs that the pristine glories of the next world are "coming soon." Biblical prophecies are interpreted so cinematically that any relation of the coming world to the present is utterly lost. God's reign becomes a fairy-tale "Never-Never Land."

With such an exotic ideal, we cannot seriously live any of it here and now. Thus, peace will be a wonderful thing someday — and until then we must have war. Justice and prosperity will be for everybody — and until then they are only for some. An exalted, misty end-time leaves us with a pretty shoddy meantime — and little concern to do anything about it. Oh yes, when Jesus comes, everything will be different...

This *millenarian* form of idealism is connected intimately with the problem of bibliolatry. The millenarian idealist lives between two golden ages, the time of Christ's first advent and the time of Christ's return. The apostolic generation had a more powerful and authoritative inspiration than anything we know today, according to the idealist. We read their writings in Scripture, believe their doctrines, obey their commands, and stand ready for the end of the world. Thus, the words, but not the experience, of the apostles can be ours. We live by a second-hand inspiration. Facing resolutely backwards, we hope to back into the reign of God. With that orientation, we are likely to experience God's reign as a stumbling block.

This is not an argument against the apocalyptic hope. The return of Christ is the heart of the Christian faith. But if our heads are buried in Scripture, we will not see that they testify to the One who is here *now* (see John 5:39ff). If we are constantly mouthing the words of the apostles, we will never hear the Word of the One who speaks to us *now*, the same as then. Faith is not our ideals about the God's future, it is the reality of it now in our lives. If we treasure our mental images of a heavenly Jerusalem to come, we will never find ourselves there *now* — or *ever*. We fail to recognize Christ now in the same ways the scribes and Pharisees failed before.

Our ideas, our ideals — all our mental images, both scientific and biblical — are an indispensible part of our process. We need them in all aspects of life. Yet these indispensible images *will* often stand in the way between us and God. It is necessary that God's revelation be a mind-reeling experience. It can be a very painful iconoclasm when our brittle ideals break down, when our ideas no longer hold water, when our fragile self-image crumbles. Yet our Creator is with us, putting us and our world back together in new and better ways and making us a "new creation."

Paul describes this work of God at the beginning of his first letter to the Corinthian church. In ancient Greece the great philosophies of Plato, Aristotle, and others presented an impressive edifice of human wisdom. Nobody had ever "put the world together" so brilliantly before. Yet Paul observes that the more passionately one trusts and serves this human wisdom, the more one may fail to perceive the wisdom of God as revealed through the cross of Jesus.

How does the cross of Jesus reveal God's wisdom, some-

thing foreign to our own? Paul emphasizes the cross of Jesus here, not the teachings of Jesus. If the wisdom of God were something that Jesus could simply have taught, his death on the cross would mean nothing more than a tragic martyrdom, like that of Socrates. But in the cross we see Jesus, the image of God, *broken*. It is precisely at the cross that Jesus is revealed as the image of God.

We already noted how our consciousness makes us like God. But we also suggested that our distorted self-centeredness often warps our understanding of the world and ourselves. When that happens, we begin to move away from a likeness to God, into a "world of our own," with our own reality and rules. Jesus remained in the likeness of God because he did not allow his own self-image to stand in the way of his walk with God. It was not Jesus' idea or self-image that he should die a terrible, violent death. Yet when it stood before him on his path, he was finally able to say, "not my will but thine."

This was no brilliant stroke of strategy, but an awful resignation in blood, sweat, and tears. It is only on our side of his cross that we can see what victory and power God made out of this defeat in weakness. In offering up his own self-image, even life itself, Jesus would be revealed as "the image of the invisible God...the first-born from the dead..."(Col. 1:15,18).

"First-born from the dead," of course means that Jesus is first in the resurrection of the dead, an event which will take place at the end of time. That suggests that the risen Christ comes to us from the *future*. Christ reveals to us by the Spirit the ultimate goal of all things. Christ shows us the final fruits of all words and actions, for good or evil. Christ reveals to us the destination of the path we are on, whether it ends in glory or shame. To live by faith is, therefore, to live by a knowledge of realities that do not yet exist. As Hebrews puts it, "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (11:1).

This same truth is witnessed in 1 Cor. 2:9 when Paul quotes Isaiah's words, that "no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him." In the revelation of Christ we are confronted by an entirely different order of knowledge, an utterly separate form of consciousness, coming from a radically different direction. All our natural knowledge comes through observa-

tion of present phenomena and our conjecture about their *origins*. Spiritual knowledge comes by revelation of the future, the ultimate *outcome* of present phenomena.

These two kinds of knowledge are not necessarily contradictory. After all, the Alpha and the Omega, the Creator of our world and its Redeemer, are one and the same. Yet the natural order of creation is distorted both in our imperfect understanding of it and in our selfish misuse of it. Even our best natural knowledge will not allow us to construe an adequate idea of where we are headed. The gospel of Jesus Christ shows us this in the fact that his death on the cross did not put an end to Jesus, as his opponents thought it would. No one guessed what lay beyond Golgotha. Jesus himself could not know, for he shared our limits as he shared in our flesh. But he knew how to trust God beyond his own personal knowledge.

That mentality of trust, and the willingness to be broken down and re-created by God, is what Paul calls "the mind of Christ" (1 Cor. 2:16). To have the mind of Christ doesn't suggest possessing a towering intellect, some kind of superbrain. It simply means the willingness to let our natural wisdom be informed, perhaps even overruled at times, by the wisdom of God. It means coming to our wits' end, letting the world be turned upside down in our minds, words, and actions.

Paul writes that this attitude will be perennially regarded as foolishness by the world. But "the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men" (1 Cor. 1:25). The gospel shows us the necessity and the power of iconoclasm. We must be willing to see our ideas, our ideals, even our own self-image re-molded by God. That action is like new wine bursting old wineskins; it is the reign of God breaking into our lives, always from an unexpected angle.

To live in the image of the invisible God requires a strong sense of Christ's presence with us every step of the way. We are constantly faced with perplexing problems and tough decisions. Often the Christian at the crossroads will wonder, "where would Jesus go from here?" Implicit in that question is the conditional phrase, "...if Jesus were here." But Jesus *is* here with us, unconditionally. So our task is not to try imagining where Jesus *would* move, but to try discerning where Jesus *is* moving here and now, and to move accordingly.

This spiritual quest requires reflection, prayer, and meditation to feel Christ's movement or leading. Fortunately, we have a second reference point to help us in our navigating life. We can also ask the question, "Where *did* Jesus move in similar situations in his own life?" Perhaps he did not face exactly the same problems we are facing, but he faced similar ones. We can pick up the general dynamics of Jesus' approach from the gospels. This historical reference point is an important "reality check" for our spiritual search. The important point is that we do not have to lapse into idealizing fantasies of Jesus as the "perfect Christian." Christ is not a pristine ideal in the distant past or future, but a very real presence now.

The same dynamic applies to groups as well as individuals. Congregations can learn much from the example of the New Testament churches. But we must resist idealizing that era as "good old days." Christ is with us no less than Christ was with them. The question remains: "Where is Jesus moving now?" A second question quickly follows: "Are we willing to wait and find out?" A third question is not far behind: "Are we willing to wait on each other so we can move together in unity?"

The Quaker meeting for business engages in this discipline of group discernment. It requires great faith both in the power of Christ's Spirit to lead *and* in the willingness of all participants to suspend their preconceived ideas, ideals, and agendas in the search for Christ's guidance. If faith and attention is lost on one side, the other side will also be distorted. For example, if the group loses sight of the identity and priority of Christ in the process, the remaining faith in the group will degenerate into a mere "consensus" process, in which personal ideas and interests interact until some mutually-agreeable resolution (often compromise) is reached. This is simply the political "art of the possible" in which democratic ideals come to displace the early Christian and Quaker sense of a covenant community. We find this declension most commonly in liberal Friends meetings where Christian specificity has been lost and secular concepts most readily fill the void.

On the other hand, if faith is lost in the determination of the group to seek the truth together (or if the group forsakes that commitment) while the group's identity in Christ is still affirmed, other problems arise. Inevitably, the body as a

whole will be excused from the discernment process, and the decision-making will fall increasingly to "experts" or managerial types in the meeting. Those individuals will succumb to managerial ideals or biblical images of Christian policy in decision-making, since the full input of spiritual guidance that resides in the group as a whole is no longer assembled. This problem is most often seen in pastoral meetings where professional expertise excuses or sometimes even excludes the group as a whole from the discernment process. That represents no less a breach of covenant community than the liberal instance.

Covenant community, a concrete body of women and men committed to Christ and to one another, requires both orthodoxy and orthopraxis. Orthodoxy is essential, not in the sense of theological speculation or credal tests, but as a shared vision of Christ moving in the group. Orthopraxis is no less essential; it is the discipline of right living and spiritual discernment by which members commit themselves to one another. For over 150 years, since the Great Separation, American Friends have tended to choose one side or the other; and we have become increasingly estranged from one another as a result. It is only as we opt for both sides of our living faith that we may find one another and find Christ among us again, drawing us together into God's future.

3

The Idol Masked in Ideology

George Orwell's famous novel, *1984*, written in 1948, has cast a long question mark over the succeeding years. I cannot read the book without looking over my shoulder, pondering whether this bleak dream has come true, wondering if "Big Brother" is *already* watching.

Orwell's story is about a ruthless totalitarian state in which people's lives are controlled and monitored. Their thoughts are shaped by propaganda. The all-powerful Party runs everything. Big Brother is the symbol of the state, the very image of ultimate power and authority, and the object of people's fear and devotion. It remains unclear in the story whether Big Brother is a person who really exists, or whether he is simply a mask, an image projected by the Party. But one thing is clear: Big Brother *rules*.

Orwell's book was intended as a warning about the direction he saw in government and technology. It was a story of what might happen in the near future. While today we debate whether Orwell was right, the New Testament tells us flatly

that 1984 has always been with us. It was 1984 in the Rome of the Emperors; it was 1984 in the Jerusalem of the High Priests; it was 1984 in the Athens of the earliest democracy. The New Testament witness helps us see that it is 1984 in communist Moscow and in capitalist Washington alike. The first century or the twentieth century — it's all 1984. It's all what Scripture calls "this present darkness" (Eph. 6:12).

New Testament Christianity believed that all government, all social conventions and institutions were simply the earthly manifestations of spiritual powers. These were "big brothers" and "big sisters" of a sort. When the New Testament speaks of these powers, it uses terms like *principalities, powers, thrones, dominions, elemental spirits of the universe.* Human rulers derived their power from the spiritual powers they represented. For example, the ruler over a city or nation represented the god or goddess of that people. If that ruler was at war with a neighboring city or nation, it was because their respective gods were at war with each other in the heavenly sphere. The world was in a mess simply because all these various deities were out of harmony.

Of course, early Christians believed in only one true God. Nevertheless, they still believed that the gods of the pagans were real spiritual powers. These powers were simply inferior to the true God. Colossians 1:16 tells us that these powers were all created by God through Christ in the beginning. Yet these powers, like men and women, are in *rebellion* against God, their Creator. Like us, they want to be absolute, complete in themselves. They are envious, self-serving, and constantly in conflict with one another. So, not only do men and women live in their own personal rebellion from God, and in alienation with one another, but they also live in the middle of an enormous spiritual bureaucracy — the powers that dictate every natural and social phenomenon in the world, from the shipping industry to agriculture. And this bureaucracy of natural and social forces is a rambling, squabbling mess.

The Letters to the Ephesians and the Colossians are very helpful to us for a Christian understanding of our social world. They give us the most complete statement on these "principalities and powers" and their relationship to Christ. They tell us that Christ came into this world with a message from the Creator, the ultimate power of the universe. This message directly from God cut through all the red tape of the

principalities and powers. Christ came to put us in direct communication with God.

But Christ did not simply shove all the powers out of the way. In his earthly ministry, Jesus willingly submitted to the powers, whether they were Jewish religious authorities or Roman military rulers. He also spoke and acted with great power and authority which threatened and infuriated the envious powers. This led to his trial and execution as a rival power. Jesus did not preempt the freedom of the powers to use their force, even at the cost of his life.

In the aftermath of that tragedy, the grieving companions of Jesus began to encounter their friend again: at the tomb, along the road, in the house, and elsewhere. Jesus was risen from the dead, offering a new relationship to all men and women. No power in heaven or on earth can break the bond that God offers us in Christ. As Paul puts it in that great conclusion of Romans 8, "neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

In Ephesians 1:20-23 we read that God raised Christ to sit at God's right hand in heaven, "far above every rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named...he has put all things under his feet...." In other words, Christ has risen to a position of final authority in the universe. Christ is far beyond every power we know.

When we follow Christ from death into life, we come out from under those dominions. We, who once walked according to their ways — in rebellion, in sin, futility, and death — come *alive together* with Christ, raised up, to sit with Christ in heavenly places (Eph. 2:1-7). Certainly, our feet are still very much on the ground! But we truly live by a new reality. We no longer live enthralled by the same powers that once determined us. We see beyond society's values, expectations, and norms.

If Christ liberates us from all the powers of this world while we are still very much among them, what do we do? Ignore them? Try to destroy them? No. In Christ God has revealed divine will for us and for the powers: in the fullness of time God will unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth (Eph. 1:9). All these rebellious creatures of God, from frail men and women to the powerful principalities,

are to be reconciled and reunited with God and with one another. Given the world of strife and contradiction that we live in, this plan is indeed a *mysterious* thing (verse 9 again).

Here the Church plays a vital role. The Church is to be the "fellowship in the mystery" (Eph. 3:9). The community of faith we share is to exhibit God's mystery to the world, because in Christ the old divisions of our world are reconciled. In the new covenant, the division between Jews and Gentiles was abolished in the cross. "For he is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility" (Eph. 2:14). In this act Christ embodies "in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace" (verse 15). This was only the first ideological enmity to be transcended by Christ. God has begun a process by which all such hostilities are to be reconciled.

Here is a new social reality, where we are *neither* Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free, black nor white, east nor west. We transcend these old divisions and self-images as we pass above the principalities and powers to sit down with Christ. Here the Church also becomes a powerful sign to the world. The way we live together and proclaim the Good News to all is a witness "that through the Church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places" (Eph. 3:10). By "manifold wisdom of God" is meant God's multi-faceted, all-encompassing, integrative purpose. God is moving to reconcile all things in divine community.

This is truly mysterious to us, because we cannot see how all the wide-ranging and contradictory realities of the world can be reconciled. It is not a mystery we can intellectually unravel. By allowing Christ to dwell in us, however, we become "rooted and grounded in love," that we "may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth" (verses 17,18). So the mystery of God's plan is comprehended only through the lived experience of love, a discovery that is made in community "with all the saints."

On this path of discovery together we join in Christ's victory. The principalities and powers which once claimed us and divided us no longer control us. In Christ, God has "disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in him" (Col. 2:15). That disarmament is manifested by the Church community,

whenever it refuses to take part in the unjust norms and violent conflicts of the powers.

But this triumph is not wrought in arrogance, spite, or vengeance. If we participate in Christ's victory, we participate in lowliness, meekness, patience, forbearance, and love (Eph. 4:2). We do so because we know that though Jesus confronted and offended the powers greatly, he also submitted to their unjust power, even unto death. Therefore, our witness to the powers may sometimes be provocative, offensive, and disobedient to their demands. Yet we accept their penalties and do not attempt to overthrow them with violence. The Christian life reconciles the powers as men and women enact reconciliation among themselves, call others to join in this new social reality, and act politically to reconcile the powers to one another.

Thus, we transcend the principalities and powers even as we find ourselves under them. We do not overpower them; we undermine them as we speak truth to power and as we answer mastery with love. This struggle for liberation requires all the strength we can get from God, "for we are not contending with flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:12).

It is crucial to remember this truth, because the powers we *see* before us are flesh and blood. Our real conflict is not with them but with the spiritual forces that control their thoughts and actions, as they once controlled us. Behind these rebellious powers stands "the evil one," the devil who led us all in rebellion from God's wisdom and love in the first place.

I say that this discernment is "crucial" in the literal sense of the cross. We may have to suffer at the hands of flesh and blood, even as Jesus did; but it is Satan's head that is bruised in the final accounting. This insight we gain in Christ is the reason why Ephesians and Colossians are written with such a great sense of victory by an apostle in prison, "an ambassador in chains" (Eph. 6:20). Even by means of personal suffering the apostle offers God's covenant of peace to all men and women.

That joyous sense of victory was constantly evidenced by the early Friends as they endured severe persecutions for their witness to God's reconciling wisdom. The conflicting powers of the Puritanism and monarchy violently fought one

another; yet they shared a common penchant for repressing the Quakers. Friends pointed English society toward a social order that would transcend all warring political factions. This movement, guided by the knowledge of God in every person, was a threat to every form of vested interest and authority, in Church and state alike.

The early Quaker conflict with the Church was primary, because Friends saw how the liberating power of Christ had become simply another ideology in Christendom. The classic hallmark of this perversion is found in the phenomenon of Christian anti-Semitism; the very first "wall of hostility" that Christ had broken down was rebuilt between Jew and Gentile, as the gospel of reconciliation became the ideology of Christianity in alienation from Judaism and the very people of Jesus. Early Friends not only lived in a country where Jews were banned but they also saw how Christianity served as an ideological tool for the state's control of the people and the maintenance of injustice.

Early Friends vigorously confronted Church and state with the everlasting gospel of universal reconciliation, yet they understood that violence was not an option in their struggle. They remained answerable to the authorities, bearing the rage of their oppressors in order that true, universal liberation would not be denied to anyone. They carried their witness into churches and marketplaces, into courtrooms and Parliament itself. They called this campaign the Lamb's War, a name suggesting that reconciliation in Christ often generates conflict, yet it remains nonviolent in its actions. Early Friends accordingly maintained a conciliatory attitude toward the powers, even as they relentlessly unmasked their vain glory and false authority.

Thus, the New Testament concept of principalities and powers may sound rather foreign to us at first. But as we see the role this concept plays in the gospel message, it should begin to address the world as we know it today. We know the world's divisions, such as classism, racism, sexism, and nationalism. We may not always recognize those forms of identity and difference as spiritual, but we know they are very real and that they can keep us separated from God and from each other. Divided and conquered, fighting one another, we surely are caught up in a demonic alienation in our social order.

But are these divisions real spiritual powers or simply the

projections of our own minds? A look at two great warring powers in our age — capitalism and socialism — is instructive. Here two competing theories of social and economic relationships are more or less manifested by two competing political systems on earth. Both theories make impressive claims on our socioeconomic reality. That is, both provide persuasive interpretations of the way we can and do operate in a complex society. Capital as the primary economic factor works by a logic all its own, while people as the primary consideration creates a strongly different set of priorities. One demands faith in the "magic of the marketplace" while the other asserts the priority of human needs. And each system seems to want to deny or even eliminate the other. At the present rate of international armament, they may eliminate us all.

Of course, neither capitalists nor socialists would say that they believe in these systems as gods, or spiritual powers. Yet we see people serving those systems as passionately as the most devoted pagan. *All* our great "isms" and "ologies" make important claims on our reality, on "the way the world works." Do we create them? Or do we simply discover them existing "out there" somewhere, like spiritual beings with a life of their own? As with Big Brother, we don't really know for sure; but as with Big Brother, the question is moot because *they rule* in this world.

Thus, with ideology our pantheon of modern idols moves clearly beyond the private world of personal behavior and into a wider social reality. Our ideologies and traditions routinely become idolatrous because of their habitual nature. They represent the *routinization* of our thinking on a given subject. We become comfortable thinking in a certain vein, especially if it seems to work for us. It gives us a sense of control and coherence in our lives. This tendency is very strong on the social level. Ongoing groups demand some ideology, some regularized set of assumptions in order to function as a group. The problem is that we will defend our ideologies against new or inconvenient data. The comfort and dignity of our traditions is threatened by exceptions.

So our ideologies can blind us to the "manifold wisdom" of God, the overall integrative will of the Creator who made and will reconcile all things, even the contradictions. The gospels show us that it is because of ideologies — political and religious — that the light came into the world, yet was

unrecognized.

For those to whom Christ has been revealed, however — men and women, black and white, capitalist and socialist — Christ becomes the Way of Exodus and transcends the ideologies, the powers. We are called to transcend the world's ideas of gender roles — and the world's *alternative* gender roles too. We are called to transcend the cultural backgrounds that would keep us separate. We are called to transcend all the traditions, panaceas, and utopias that philosophy and popular thought offer. "See to it that no one makes a prey of you by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ" (Col. 2:8).

This struggle for liberation means constantly unmasking the idolatrous tendencies of ideology. It means dying daily to our own assumptions and expectations, that we may be raised daily into the newness of Christ. For this struggle we need nothing less than "the whole armor of God" (Eph. 6:13). God equips us with all that we need, "that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand" (same verse). And what is that evil day? It is *every Monday*, when we return to the world's daily social, economic, and political realities and try to work with integrity among them.

Therefore, Friends, let us stand girded in the truth of God, which is the possession of no standing ideology or theology, nor the province of any expert, but the lived truth of Emmanuel, God with us. For there is no truth that is not universal, *and* no truth that is not manifested in specific acts of love.

Let our feet be shod with the gospel of peace, which does not align itself with the objectives of any political power, or the values of any social or economic enterprise, but proclaims God's amnesty by example in paths of service, evangelism, and political advocacy for any who are in need.

Let us put on the breastplate of righteousness, a conscience that is clear toward God and toward our neighbor. Christ has the power not only to forgive sin but to lead out of sin. In Christ, we can be victorious over the social conditioning of racism, sexism, or nationalism in us. In Christ, we can overcome those forces: we can love those we were taught to hate, and be partners with those we are conditioned to subjugate.

Let us carry the shield of faith, a living relationship with Christ, who teaches us how to be vulnerable to others. In

Christ we learn how to speak truth to the powers in love, renouncing self-righteousness and condemnation. We learn to be answerable to the powers, even when we must disobey them in acts of civil disobedience. This overcomes the entropy which keeps the world in constant fragmentation. Our living relationship with Christ is what shields us from the flaming darts of the evil one, which can strike us through either arrogance or despair.

And let us take with us the sword of the Spirit, which cuts more finely than even the most incisive mind (See Heb. 4:12,13). With the Spirit we may sever every tie that would hold us back; for the Spirit discerns the hardening of living faith into dead traditions, the ossification of vibrant witness into truisms, catch phrases, or doctrinal fetishes.

Thus we break through to new ground; we sit down together there with the Prince of Peace. We push back the wilderness and plant anew the garden, a haven of trust and cooperation. Here God's seeds are sown in God's order, not to compete and strangle one another, but to thrive and bear the right fruit in the right season. Here ideology is the compost, rich and valuable in its place — under our feet.

4

Idolatry on the Defensive

Idolatry is often revealed in defensive measures when people come into conflict with one another, when "my way" bumps into "your way." We find a graphic example of it during Paul's ministry at Ephesus, in Acts 19:23ff. Luke begins narrating the incident by noting, "About that time there arose no little stir concerning the Way." Perhaps the first name given to the Christian movement was "the Way." In a world (like ours) where everybody had their own way of doing things, their own pet patterns of thinking and acting—*the Way* was causing no little stir. It was the Way of Jesus, showing the Way for others to follow, the Way of the cross. This Way cut through "tried and true" ways and traditions. It threatened people's sense of order and security—it trod on their idols.

A man named Demetrius was very stirred up by this new Way. He was a silversmith who specialized in silver shrines of Artemis. This industry brought "no little business" to craftsmen of Ephesus like himself. He gathered his fellow

craftsmen together and stirred them up against Paul, because Paul was turning people away from the worship of Artemis, not just in Ephesus but all over Asia (Minor). Paul said that "gods made with hands are not gods."

Demetrius made it clear that there was much at stake. If people turned to this Way in great numbers, forsaking the goddess Artemis, the silversmith trade in Artemis shrines would soon be ruined. Demetrius rushed on to add piously that it would also mean terrible humiliation for the great goddess herself, "she whom all Asia and the world worship" (verse 27). This latter consideration helped avoid making his concern sound too self-serving in people's minds (including his own), for Artemis had surely been good to Ephesus.

Centuries before, a meteorite had fallen to earth near Ephesus, revealing their fair city to be the goddess' chosen abode. At least that's how the local Chamber of Commerce interpreted it. A kind of Artemis industry had sprung up in Ephesus: the making and selling of statues and charms of the goddess. These goods had spread around the ancient world. (Indeed, evidence of Artemis worship has been found in over thirty archaeological sites.)

These statues of Artemis did not represent the virginal Artemis of Greek myth. This Artemis was a fertility goddess, imaged as an attractive woman with many breasts. Artemis of Ephesus was rather like Fredericks of Hollywood, a line of products. Artemis shrines and paraphernalia promised to put fertility into your life.

In the ancient world, fertility meant much more than just having lots of children. It meant sprouting crops, breeding cattle, and multiplying slaves. It meant lots of children *and* lots of wealth. So Artemis of Ephesis was sex appeal, survival, success, religion, and power all rolled in one. No wonder she was worshiped by a fertility cult throughout the ancient world!

In the fertility cult we encounter an especially potent formula for idolatry, because the fertility cult is a response to our most basic anxiety — our fear of death. The ancient farmer or herder, anxious to survive, would resort to the gods to make crops grow or cattle multiply. Even with success, it was a hard life that required great physical exertion. A man and woman needed children to help them survive in their later years when strength failed them. Reproduction, therefore, was also a matter of survival; and with high infant

mortality rates, it was important to have many children.

There is a fine line where the demands of survival become the desires for surplus. At what point does security become avarice? When does a legitimate need for reserves against a bad year degenerate into a simple lust for more? That question cannot be answered easily. In any case, the fertility cult of Artemis clearly meant to serve people on either side of that moral fence. The many breasts of the goddess signalled not just survival, but prosperity. And prosperity, not just survival, was on the minds of the Ephesian silversmiths. When they heard Demetrius describe their present danger, it filled them with rage and anxiety. They cried out in panic, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!"

Soon the whole city was in an uproar. Two of Paul's companions were dragged to the theater of Ephesus. The crowd that gathered wasn't even sure why they had come together. Paul wanted to go in and take a stand, but his disciples prevented him. Indeed, some of the local rulers begged him not to go, because they feared a riot. Alexander, a representative of the local Jewish community, raised his hand to speak. But the crowd knew that the Jews were as much against idols as the Christians. In an impressive show of patriotism, they shouted him down. For two hours they chanted in unison, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" Evidently, there was no shortage of civic pride in Ephesus.

Finally, the town clerk quieted the crowd and reasoned with them. He argued that nothing, not even this gospel of Paul's, was going to dissuade people that Ephesus was Artemis' home town. This was a time for prudence, not rash behavior. A riot in Ephesus might cause the Romans to clamp down on the city. That would be much more dangerous for the Artemis industry than some new religion. At last, the clerk's tolerant, practical attitude won the day.

Of course, in the short term he was right. The Artemis industry continued to thrive for many years. But in the long term, he was wrong about the gospel. It was not merely a rival cult, a new line of products among the many. It was not another religion, but a living faith in one living God who promises abundant life, not a life of abundance. Faith in God is a life of faithfulness. It is trust in the covenant God has offered us in Jesus. In this relationship, God promises to meet all our needs.

By contrast, belief in Artemis was the basis for a contract

perhaps, but not a covenant. Artemis had no particular interest in people, but she could be approached, begged, and bribed. The relationship was part gamble and part business — but not love. In the long run, Artemis would indeed fall before the spread of the gospel. And we may assume that the Artemis industry fell too. In the long run, Demetrius was right!

The love covenant of Jesus reveals a God who seeks us out and initiates a relationship with us. God's initiative not only begins the relationship, it also maintains and builds the relationship. God also *responds* to us in our needs and our initiatives, which brings us back to the question of wealth.

Material abundance is surely a blessing of God. We have a tendency to look at these blessings as *rewards* from God — God's response to our good works, good intentions, good looks, or whatever we think pleases God. We tend to fixate the blessing of God as an end-product. But *are* these blessings rewards, or are they another kind of God's *offer*? In other words, could it be that God's blessings are more an opportunity to (do) good than a reward for *being* good? As in the parable of the Talents (Matt. 25:14-30), aren't God's stewards intended to invest God's bounty rather than hoard it? The steward who hoarded his talent did so precisely because he did not trust the master. The relationship was strictly business, and he chose to protect himself above all.

But the master wanted his stewards to spread his wealth around and to make it work for him. This parable makes God sound like a venture capitalist. It seems to reveal a tilt to the "supply side" in the divine economy. But if that is true, it also implies that the continued existence of poverty in the world is not due to a lack of initiative on the part of the poor. It is due to a poor response to God's initiative on the part of the rich. Wherever wealth is concentrated, God is smiling — *expectantly*, not contentedly. Again, as with the parable of the Talents, there will be a final accounting. The master will not reward the hoarders. When we freeze God's assets, we establish them in a fixed form, an idol we will then serve with prudent devotion. As always, the issue is control.

There is a great tradition of Quaker philanthropy, which began even while Friends were still under intense persecution in the seventeenth century. By the eighteenth century, Friends began to prosper greatly in England and America. Friends emerged during the early stages of capitalist devel-

opment and were imprinted strongly with the values of industry, frugality, and technological innovation. The new Quaker merchants, bankers, and industrialists were outstanding in their contributions to poor relief, prison reforms, the care of the sick and mentally ill, Native American relations, the education of freed slaves, and many other important causes.

This sense of wealth as the opportunity to do good has often put Friends on the forefront of many social innovations and reform movements. In the twentieth century, with the rise of a larger and more comfortable middle class in America, the American Friends Service Committee has become the main channel for the contribution of Quaker money, time, and energies for service and peace work around the world.

Yet it also must be said that there has been a perennial unease about wealth in Quakerism. John Woolman was very disturbed by the increases of wealth among Friends in colonial America. Not only was it often gained through the use of slave labor, high rents, or encroachment upon the Indians, but even apart from those considerations Woolman saw wealth inducing a spiritual turpitude and stratification among Friends. Some of those tendencies can be directly linked to the Great Separation among Friends half a century after Woolman's death.

If John Woolman feared that Friends were slipping into the bondage of prosperity two centuries ago, what are we to say for ourselves today? Quaker giving has not increased in proportion to the increases in middleclass Quaker income in our century. Many Friends are concerned that the AFSC no longer reflects Quaker priorities; yet have Friends demonstrated a high priority on AFSC work through their contributions of money and effort? Or are we caught up in the same preoccupations of economic life that consume most of our culture?

Artemis may be fallen, but the fertility cult is alive and prospering in Christian America. Look at the emphases of popular Christianity today. Large numbers of people are flocking to a gospel (not Paul's) that emphasizes the twin panaceas of *family* and *prosperity*. The point is not survival but surplus.

The private realm of family life is often emphasized as the be-all and end-all of Christian lifestyle. "The Family" has become a totem of all things good and wholesome. The

defense of the family against destabilizing forces in society has become the grand cause of many churches. The result is that the Church begins to be reshaped according to the defense of the family, rather than the family reshaped and strengthened by the vocation of the Church as a reconciler in society.

When the family of the Church becomes the Church of the family, the world turns the gospel upside down, rather than *vice versa*. Reconciliation becomes repudiation. All lifestyles that do not fulfill the family/fertility standard come under scrutiny. Single people, whether asexual, homosexual, or otherwise extra-maritally sexual are viewed with attitudes ranging from condescension to violent hostility. Yet lifestyles which fulfill the family/fertility standard are often exempt from any scrutiny, even as wife and child abuse proliferate in all forms. Poor and disadvantaged members are treated often as second-class Christians and suspected of indolence; meanwhile, wealthy members accorded highest respect, with no questions as to the sources and no counsel as to the dangers of their wealth.

When American Christian women testify to their experience with Christ, they too often speak only of their successful bearing and raising of children. This of course is a *wonderful* blessing. But it is only one of countless ways God can bless women, especially if they are open to other possible paths of discipleship. Moreover, this blessing must be viewed as an opportunity, not as a reward. It must be received with a prayer: Dear God, how can I help my daughter or son become useful to you in your world? While the joys of family life are private, they take place within a very public horizon of divine purpose.

A key symptom of the Church of the family is the furor over abortion, the ultimate blasphemy against the fertility quotient. Where a concern for the unborn does not find perspective in a broader concern for the born, the Church of the family has triumphed over the family of the Church. The Church of the family makes reproductivity sacrosanct and thus champions the unborn; yet the simultaneous sanctity of private prosperity makes it impractical to champion the needs of those not born into "my family."

The Christian male's part in the modern American fertility cult comes usually as bread winner. As wealth is the compliment to fecundity in this cult, so it is common to hear

Christian men witness to Christ mostly in terms of their business or career success. One sometimes detects less a sense of covenant relationship than an inside "deal" with God for success. The local Church is joined as a place to make business contacts; God's help is sought to clinch the key business deal; but God's counsel is sought less often for clarity of business or professional ethics. Thus, *laissez-faire* economics engender a *laissez-faire* spirituality: anyone who wishes not to be victimized economically should "get right with God" spiritually. Otherwise, they are fair game.

The Christian fertility cult firmly believes that "God helps those who help themselves" — and is still looking for that familiar-sounding proverb in Scripture. "Looking out for number one" becomes as holy as monotheism itself. It reinforces the survival instinct long after survival has become surplus. It reaffirms the family as the noble cause that can justify any usable means in the marketplace. "For the children's sake," sanctions all possible accumulations of wealth, even when the children no longer represent a cushion against old age but an escape beyond our mortality. Without that escape, such a life is absurd.

Ultimately, wealth and fertility represent a mistaken immortality. Through wealth and fertility we attempt to project our self-image in space and time beyond our true limits. For example, wealth usually serves the self-glorification of the individual through consumption. Goods and services enhance not only the personal pleasure but the personal image of that individual. The right neighborhood, the right car, the right clothes, the right spouse, degrees, and children — these ideas of "rightness" have all to do with image and nothing to do with righteousness. A carefully wrought image demands the same craft that an ancient silversmith would put into creating an idol. The goal is the same: the projection of power, majesty, and attractiveness for fun and profit. Image is an artistically contrived mask that hides the vulnerability and questionability that come with being a creature of God. Image allows us to think of ourselves as our own creation, self-justifying and self-serving — but not quite self-perpetuating.

If wealth projects our self-made image through the space around us, procreation perpetuates it through the time beyond us. To be sure, child-rearing brings forth some of our deepest feelings and inspires some of our noblest actions.

Parenthood is one of the most profoundly self-giving vocations. That fact, however, points to the very problem that infuses the human desire to procreate. Through both genetics and conditioning, our children are extensions of ourselves beyond the limits of our lifetime. And while we nurture life, we also bestow the death of our own sinful fears and behaviors. We engender our own idolatrous obsessions even as we carry out our best intentions. Thus, despite its many ennobling graces, the family is not the touchstone for the Church in God. The true Church, where there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free, is the socially transcendent family. It takes us beyond familial as well as ethnic definitions of community.

The Church of the family as we find it today, however, constantly seeks to project its own image in space and time. The Great Commission to disciple the world is wedded to the American Dream of wealth and fertility and creates an overwhelming imperative to *Church growth.* This growth is pursued on two mutually-enforcing fronts. First, the traditional family life is idealized as the life of fully-realized Christians. Second, intensive envangelism is aimed at "homogeneous groups" — communities where people share common racial, socio-economic, and cultural backgrounds. The two strengthen each other: families produce larger homogeneous groups and homogeneous groups generate more families.

Many evangelical Friends meetings are caught up in the Church of the family syndrome today. Accordingly, many are also strongly engaged in strategies of Church growth: techniques such as telemarketing are adapted from the business world; the pastor functions strongly in an entrepreneurial mode; a very mainstream, community Church experience is the "product" that is promoted; the peace testimony and other potentially disturbing aspects of Quakerism are downplayed, if not actively denied. These developments are troubling to many Friends for whom the historic Quaker testimonies are still meaningful, including many Friends in pastoral meetings. But this trend simply continues the drift of a Quakerism that has long been without a clear sense of peoplehood and mission.

Liberal Friends in unprogrammed meetings may look upon such developments with smug disbelief. But a similar phenomenon is visible in their sector, even if it has developed

despite an adamant distaste for evangelism. Liberal Friends have been troubled for some time about the homogeneous nature of their meetings. Despite their best interracial and cross-cultural values, their profile is very white, upper-middle-class, educated, professional, and academic. Moreover, a number of unprogrammed meetings are steadily growing with young families and burgeoning First Day School programs — and the profile is becoming more pronounced than ever. So while liberal Friends may not pursue actual strategies of homogeneous Church growth, they succeed at it much better than evangelical Friends, suggesting that the underlying values and socio-economic tendencies in the two groups are not as different as we often believe.

The Church of the family is at odds with the transcendent reality which is the Church in God. It serves the image of self-perpetuation, rather than helping to break it down and reform it. It encourages the spirit of defensiveness that goes with idolatry, just as Demetrius appealed to the self-serving motives of his fellow silversmiths. The Church of the family is a defensive Church that engenders fear and distrust of others.

It is, therefore, not surprising that the Church of the family, whether in Protestant or Catholic dress, has been a leading force supporting today's unprecedented *national defense*. The codification and sacralization of an "American way of life" as something to be defended at all costs has its roots in the fertility cult. As the throng repeatedly shouted "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians," so we hear the endless affirmations today that America is "number one." "America first" becomes a self-justifying principle. All questions from personal ethics to foreign policy must be answered by preserving and promoting that first principle.

The 1984 Olympic Games in Los Angeles, the American "grab for the gold," served as an astonishing manifestation of that spirit. Fertility and wealth came together in awesome splendor as America's young men and women — bred, fed, trained, pampered and promoted as none ever before — acted out a barely subconscious national dream of world domination. Not since the legendary Berlin Olympics of 1936 have international athletics augured so darkly for the world's future.

With religious fervor, America offers up its first-fruits year after year, amounting to trillions of dollars, for the defense of

its idolatry. About a third of each tax dollar is invested in the building of weapons, the research into new forms of war-making, and the maintenance of armed forces and bases around the world. "National security" has been the incessant refrain, rising in crescendo during these past thirty years that a permanent war economy has dominated American life. It makes the two-hour din of the Ephesians sound tame by comparison. But then there is much more prosperity to defend in the "American way of life" than there was in the Ephesian.

The integrity of the Quaker peace testimony today must be assessed not only in terms of the policies we advocate for the peaceful resolution of political conflicts; our witness is also made in the economic way of life we manifest, and the values with which we raise our children. If we participate in the national lust for prosperity and surplus, raise children within a private horizon of personal fulfillment, lag in our conscientious objection to military conscription, and continue our dutiful payment of taxes for war, our testimony is in words only and not in the life. Let our struggles on all these fronts be in faith and not in defensiveness.

At its most integral, the peace testimony reveals an organic unity with our traditional testimony of simplicity. The Prince of Peace came not as pampered royalty but as a lowly Galilean carpenter; our testimony to Christ must similarly combine loyalty to Christ as an authority higher than the warring powers with an overt identification with the poor and powerless. The light of Christ is life in the cross, which crucifies us from both violence and greed. The simplified life manifests a focused diligence that seeks to be productive in God's creation; it succeeds as one clears away the vain pastimes and ornaments that serve only to glorify and divert oneself. Glory, like vengeance, is deferred to God; and material surplus, like inward grace, flows on toward our fellow creatures.

The Book of Job offers not only a timeless parable of the painful mystery of suffering but a major statement on the meaning of prosperity as well. Job is described as a "blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil" (Job 1:8). Job is also very rich, with a large, healthy family. But Satan challenges God's high estimation of Job, saying, "Does Job fear God for nought?" (1:9). The implication is that Job is righteous because it serves him so well — God rewards him for it. It seems to be a contractual arrangement.

God responds by letting Satan destroy all Job's fortunes and children, then beset him with sores all over his body. Job nevertheless demonstrates the reality of his faith when he refuses to rebel from God. He surely grieves his loss, but concludes: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (1:21).

Job holds fast to his love and trust in God until his friends come along to "comfort" him. In the long chapters of debate that follow, an argument unfolds that drives Job into true misery. His friends try to convince him that all this disaster would not have befallen him if he were not immoral in some hidden way. God is punishing him for sin, even if he will not admit it.

Their prosecution drives Job off his foundation of trust in God. He begins seeking to *justify himself* against their accusations, and he finally demands an explanation from God for all this tragedy. He is driven from a relationship of covenant love and trust into a contractual demand for an explanation, to make God answerable.

The amazing outcome is that God finally *does* answer Job from the awesome fury of a whirlwind (Chapters 38-41). God issues a withering blast of questions back at Job. Does Job comprehend the majesty and mysteries of the creation, the unfathomable design of God? It is an annihilating response, but it *is* a response, reaffirming God's relation to Job. When God finally stops the quizzing, Job answers, "I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know ... I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees thee; therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes" (42:3,5,6).

Job is restored in this moment. He drops his case against God and re-enters the relationship of trust. He *returns to the dust*, repenting of the pride to which he had resorted. This pride is the only sin of which Job is guilty, contrary to the opinion of his friends. And indeed *they* are the ones who drove him to it.

Now God turns to Job's friends and declares genuine anger at them for their treatment of Job. God demands they offer a guilt sacrifice and ask Job for forgiveness. In response, Job prays to God on their behalf, and God forgives Job's friends, now truly restored as his *friends*. It is precisely at this point we now read that "the Lord restored the fortunes of Job, when

he had prayed for his friends..." (42:10). God blesses Job again *once he has been restored as a channel of God's grace.* (From Chapters 29 and 31 we can see that Job had been exemplary in his generosity to many in his society.)

God does not bless Job with new family and fortunes as a *reward* for his prayer, but because Job has been cured of his self-centeredness and passes God's blessing on to others. God blesses Job not for being good, but in order to do good. Blessing is intended as cause rather than effect. Indeed, the final verses describe Job's wider family and acquaintances again eating bread at his table (while also implying that they were nowhere to be found during his miseries!).

Thus, while the Book of Job questions whether bad fortune is intended as the effect of bad actions, it affirms that good fortune is intended as the cause for good actions. It suggests that our sense of cause and effect is backward. God is more of an active initiator than a passive reactor to us.

Our sense of cause and effect is backward because we forget that not only is Christ the original Creator of all things, but the final End of all things as well. Christ is *drawing* us into God's future. Grace seeks to draw us into a life that will end in glory and joy. When God's grace fails in us, when we are not changed, when we preserve our idols and keep to our own chosen course, then we continue in a life that can only end in shame and destruction.

In the final analysis, the fertility cult is doomed by its human idea of cause and effect. Its contractual arrangement is just not the way God acts. It attempts to defend self-interests that are not truly in our own best interest. Ultimately, we can only trust in God. We understand the origins and complexities of God's world very imperfectly; and we do not understand the destiny of God's world at all. But we do see Christ, the final Adam, the restored image of God, standing victorious in the End of all things. We hear Christ's voice which leads us in Christ's direction. We feel Christ's power which draws us forward. And that grace is sufficient.

5

The Image of the Invisible God

Human consciousness is always clothed in images. Our thoughts, ideas, and language allow us to fabricate an image of the world around us. That image of the world, imperfect though it may be, allows us to analyze, operate, and survive in the world with some success. Without it, we feel naked, vulnerable to the world. Indeed, the clothing we wear on our bodies is symbolic of our inward clothing. Our clothing witnesses to an inward sense of vulnerability. Yet the same apparel is also intended to project an image of invulnerable power to others. We "cover up" before one another.

Generally, the more impervious we want to feel, the more elaborately we cover up. In most cases, the more threatening or competitive the context the more careful the clothing. The military, for example, combines uniformity with decoration for a powerfully invincible image. The worldview behind the uniform tends toward a similarly rigid code. The business world also engenders careful morays of dress. The "dress for

success" is not always enforced, but is adopted as a voluntary strategy in the quest for advancement. The worldview behind this dress is correspondingly less dogmatically rigid than pragmatically conformist. Wherever our image of success/security finds clear definition and focus, we find a corresponding standardization of dress, both within and without.

Regularized patterns of activity likewise contribute to a sense of security and well-being in our human experience. We surround ourselves with regimens and sink into comforting habits as happily as we slip on that favorite jacket and old pair of slippers. Again, we can see the style and regularity of these behaviors in relation to worldview. "Decorum" clothes military life most fastidiously. The business world is less regimented in specific behaviors, but very circumspect about public image nevertheless. In the arts and academia, by contrast, behavior is much harder to typify, but then success and advancement in those fields are also less simple to define.

Such is life among the "children" of Adam and Eve. We are "their type of people," no matter how we vary among ourselves. In the beginning, they were naked and unashamed, without feelings of vulnerability or fear. They lived in open conversation with God and with each other. It was paradise living that way. They trusted God to provide everything they needed. They were comfortable in each other's company, without needing to compare or conform. They had the run of the garden — anything they wanted was theirs. But God made one exception: they were not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, *lest they die*. Fair warning.

Then the voice of the serpent interjected with Eve. The serpent insinuated that the one thing prohibited from them was the one thing they needed to be complete. It was the missing ingredient, the only thing separating them from God. The serpent claimed that they would not die; their eyes would be opened, to know good and evil.

It had never occured to Eve that anything was missing in her life with God and with Adam. She had never felt a separation from God, but now that the serpent suggested it, she did. That fruit, which she had never really bothered about before, suddenly looked very good.

God had warned not even to touch that fruit, let alone eat it. Indeed, Eve's reach for it really initiated a change, before she could even eat. In picking the fruit she had made her own

decision about good and evil. She had chosen a "higher good" regarding the commandment of God. She had chosen to appropriate divine power for herself, to dress her mind for success.

Eve ate and Adam ate. And indeed their eyes *were* opened. They suddenly *knew*...that they were naked. They knew shame and vulnerability, because they had obtained that which made them feel pride and invulnerability. As the world suddenly split open in their minds, the two of them split apart, and they sewed fig leaves together to cover themselves.

Then they heard God approaching in the garden — the God with whom they now supposedly had parity. But these new gods immediately fled God's approach and hid in the bushes. *God's* bushes, that is. In *God's* garden. They were imposters. They had *trespassed* in the realm of the true God. Strangely, the very act which purportedly would erase their difference from God instead *introduced* a difference with God. Now they knew separation from God as well as from each other.

The world of good and evil created *ambivalence* in Adam and Eve. On one hand, they covered themselves before each other. On the other hand, they fled God together. On one hand, they fled God. On the other hand, they answered God. When Adam answered God that he had fled out of fear because of his nakedness, God knew the score. "Who told you that you were naked?"

Who told Adam that he was naked? Adam did, of course. This is the epitome of Adam's new *self-consciousness*. With the knowledge of good and evil, the sundering of Adam's world, Adam himself was sundered. He knew ambivalence within and without. His conversation would now be mainly within himself, or rather between his selves. And he would pursue an approach/avoidance relationship with his Creator, the real God who shames and frightens, yet who attracts and compels.

Shame very quickly becomes guilt, and guilt often gets quickly transferred as blame. So when God asked Adam if he had eaten of the tree of knowledge, Adam promptly offered a reply that blamed both Eve and God. The woman that God provided gave him the fruit to eat. Eve in her turn blamed the serpent, another of God's creations. Like the serpent, they both now knew how to shade the truth. They portrayed themselves as the victims of an imperfect divine providence.

God then pronounced the Curse: God described to them

the bittersweet life they would live between good and evil. The woman would live between pain and pleasure. Childbirth would be painful and frightening. Yet she would be subjected by a desire for the man. That describes one half of the fertility equation. The man would be similarly suspended between a power over the woman and an impotence over the ground. The ground would suddenly seem strangely unyielding to him. Only by toil and anxiety would he earn his living from it. That describes the other half of the equation.

This would be their condition until they died. The serpent was half-right. They didn't drop dead upon eating the fruit. Yet now they lived in a knowledge of death. This awareness would become the source of much compulsion to control life. Nevertheless, the final, deadly pronouncement in the Curse also begins the Promise of new life. They would die. Alienation, domination, and anxiety would not last forever. Taken one step further, they *could* die to it all — and be reconciled with God, with each other, and with the dust from which they came. Now that they had taken their lives into their own hands, however, accepting death became unthinkable. They clutched at life with desperation.

God sent them reeling out of the garden, for if they stayed and ate of the tree of life, they would be miserable forever. Adam, now living in a world of half-truths, renamed the woman Eve, the "mother of all life," such as it is. He also began to hack at the ground for fear of returning to it. Thus, Eve and Adam, no longer in perfect unity, nevertheless maintained a fertility pact. While they were distanced from God, they were by no means out of touch. They now walked in dangerous territory, yet no disaster struck. The full effects of their actions would take another generation to be expressed.

It was in Cain that separation from God became outright alienation, and that distrust of the other person became jealousy and paranoia. When God favored Abel's sacrifice, Cain became angry and jealous toward his brother. God offered Cain reassurance but to no avail. In his anger, Cain slew Abel, then feared for his own life. God offered Cain protection, but Cain fled the presence of God and built a city, his own defense.

It is with Cain that we see the emergence of radical alienation and radical sin. Cain's rebellion reveals violent social distrust and violent fear of God. Fear of encounter with

God becomes the fear of death itself with Cain. Adam and Eve lost confidence in God's providence; Cain lost confidence in God's beneficence. However, it is not a punitive lust in God but an implacable guilt in Cain that places the barrier between himself and God. Before God he feels the threat of death; therefore, he represses his consciousness of God. He turns away to defend and justify himself before his peers.

We see in the Fall an insight into the nature of human consciousness. Knowledge as self-consciousness amounts to the mind assuming the subjectivity of God for itself. As independent subjects, we each live in a "world of our own." In that world we are clothed in majesty, judges over all we survey. In the presence of other viewpoints, however, we feel vulnerability to contradiction, even to the point of death. That feeling gives rise to ambivalence in relationship to our peers and outright fear in relation to God. The true Creator of heaven and earth threatens to overwhelm us and our makeshift reality. In the presence of God, we know ourselves as *trespassers*, sinners, and violators of God's creative purpose. Yet that very terror is the beginning of an enlightening encounter with God, if we will not repress it. Thus the Book of Proverbs begins by saying that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (1:7).

The story of God's reconciling work with humanity begins with Abraham and Sarah. Abraham was an everyman, not specially equipped. He was self-conscious, with his own images of reality in mind, his own ideas and ideals of good and evil. The same was true for Sarah. Yet, God struck up a conversation with them, and they responded. Their conversation and walk with God developed as a wandering existence, led by God. While they certainly maintained a picture of the world in their own self-consciousness, they repeatedly allowed God to place them anew in that world.

It was not always easy. Abraham fell to temptation to be somewhere else, especially when threatened with death. Confronted with the Pharoah, Abraham presented a false identity, alleging that he was Sarah's brother instead of her husband (Gen. 12:9-20). Childless and aging, Abraham and Sarah felt threatened with death since they would have no descendents to inherit God's promise. Therefore Sarah gave Abraham her servant Hagar to bear a child (Gen. 16). But Ishmael was not the child of promise, and God would fulfill the promise through Sarah in due time. Thus, Abraham and

Sarah had to subject their self-consciousness to God's mind in both space and time.

Finally, the acid test of Abraham's faith came with God's command to sacrifice Isaac, his son by Sarah. Abraham was called to place Isaac, his life and hope, on the line for his trust in God. In the previous situations, Abraham had sought to elude death. To face God resolutely he must face death; he must face the sheer terror of his vulnerability as an independent being. As we know, Abraham finally faced that terror, and God offered the way out: a sacrificial ram suddenly appeared. God said to Abraham, "Now I know that you fear God" (Gen. 22:12). He feared God more than he feared death. Yet Abraham's fear of God consisted precisely in his resolute orientation to God. He was free to turn away from God and fear any number of things in life, as people do. But Abraham faced and feared God. With this orientation, nothing in life or death could separate him from God. This was Abraham's at-one-ment with God. At this juncture Abraham received full and final confirmation of the promise that had begun his walk with God: his progeny would become a great nation and a means of God's blessing to all the nations of the earth (22:16-18).

The next chapter in this great story unfolds with the birth of that nation many generations later, in the encounter of Israel with God at Sinai. It had been God's work through Moses that brought the children of Israel out of bondage in Egypt. They had witnessed divine power working through Moses. They had seen Yahweh's power revealed against the Egyptians. But the people had not yet faced God.

Some three months after their deliverance, Moses led the Israelites to the mountain where he himself had met God. How had Moses been able to face the Creator? Sheer bravery? Cool self-confidence? No, the Bible assigns one key attribute to Moses: he was the *meekest* man on earth (Num. 12:3). He had less pride, less of a self-image problem, than other people. So he was less threatened by God. He was less concerned to project his own weak human light, so he could reflect God's blinding light more readily. (Indeed, we are told his encounters with God sometimes left his face so dazzling that people could not bear to look at him.)

Moses knew that to enter into relationship with God, his people must face God. God said to tell them, "Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be

my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exod. 19:5f). To obey God's voice and keep God's covenant, they must get acquainted. Moses took them to the foot of the mountain "to meet God" (19:17).

Israel shared fully in the human estrangement from God. God's presence filled them with dread and fear for their lives. Thunder, lightning, and trumpet blasts from the mountain top made the people tremble with terror. Finally, God spoke to them, revealing divine will as summarized in the Ten Commandments. All they perceived, however, was a God-awful, life-threatening din. They fled and told Moses they would be happy to hear the Word through him and obey; "but let not God speak to us, lest we die" (20:19). In Eden, man and woman had enjoyed peace and easy conversation with God. There was only one commandment there: do not touch or eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge, *lest you die.* At Sinai, the partakers of that knowledge suffered terror at God's voice; they could not bear to hear the commandments. Let Moses buffer the relationship, *lest we die.*

Here again we find the fear of the Lord fused with the fear of death, the condition of the Fall. Moses tried to encourage them by telling them not to fear, because God had come to *authenticate* them in this experience. He sought to displace their fear of death with fear of God alone. Only by thus orienting them to God might he reorient them to life. As long as they clung to life, they would not cling to Yahweh. And in estrangement from Yahweh, they would live in death.

Still, the people chose to stand "afar off, while Moses drew near to the thick cloud where God was" (20:21). Although the people did not overcome their alienation, God nevertheless moved ahead and sealed the covenant. Through Moses God pointed out that they themselves had seen God speaking to them from heaven. God had struck up a conversation with them. The first thing God now commanded them was *do not sublimate the relationship with idols.* Gods of silver or gold, even if they represented Yahweh, would only serve to deflect the emotions and the communication. Idols would serve as instruments to turn creative anxiety into neurosis, to dilute fear of God into a multitude of worries and a pantheon of gods.

But how would they be able to face this God? How would they learn to live with this holy terror? Just as God suddenly

revealed the sacrificial ram to Abraham precisely at the most awful moment of truth, God now began instructing the people on the proper form of animal sacrifice. It must not be done too beautifully. The altar must not be made of carved stones, but of earth or plain rocks. Artifice, like idols, would only sublimate the encounter.

Humans must face death if they will ever face God. Otherwise, with Adam, they will continue under the Curse for life. With Cain, they will flee God in rage, pride, guilt, and terror for their lives, building their own defenses until death. To live, they must see blood and experience the loss of life. It is essential to atonement with God. Israel was not able to face God on the mountain, so God provided a less threatening way for the people to face death — the slaughter of animals — so they might then turn and face their Creator, beginning anew the conversation that had broken off in Eden.

Yet this approach to reconciliation was still oblique. It was a covenant of multiple mediations, since the people remained terrified by God's presence. They preferred to have Moses mediate God's Word to them. They had priests to offer sacrifices on their behalf. And the death of animals had limited substitutionary power for the life of sinful humanity. The biblical history of Israel, from Exodus onward, goes to great lengths to show that many of the people were not drawn into encounter with God by these provisions. From the historical books and the prophetic books we see how the people refused to take to heart the commandments of God mediated by Moses, how they appropriated sacrifice as a penitential system divorced from the motive of repentance, how they used the ministry of the priests to *maintain* distance from God, and how they rejected the providence of Yahweh in favor of a king who would, like Cain, build fortified cities and devise a military defense against death...and against God.

Still, we miss the point miserably if we write off the covenant of Moses as a crude, primitive failure. The need for a prophetic revelation of God's Word to this people, the necessity of facing death through a substitutionary sacrifice, and the requirement of a priestly agency to perform that sacrifice on their behalf — these *are* essential to atonement, or reconciliation with God. Moreover, though Hebrew Scripture chronicles the failure of Israel as a nation to enter into the Spirit of her covenant with God, we know that for many men and women of Israel the provisions made at Sinai *did*

lead to vital, transforming relationship with God. Whether we enter into that covenant or not, the issues of atonement it establishes are true for all. We ignore them at our own risk.

God's self-revelation at Sinai had proven too overwhelming an overture by the Creator of heaven and earth. Most who were there were simply traumatized by the encounter. But how was God to approach them less threateningly but no less fervently? God was not coy or disinterested, God was passionate. The challenge was to not project an image that would mislead humanity about God, but an image that would reveal God *and* humanity to a people misled about both. They must see God by seeing themselves. They must see life by seeing death. They must see love by seeing rejection. And, as God is One, they must see all this in One.

Never has a lover made an advance quite like this One. But then, greater love hath no lover than this One. The Alpha and Omega came into the world without jarring loose one iota; there was no fanfare of thunder and lightning. The Ruler of the universe appeared as "one from whom men hide their faces," not because of awful glory but because of overwhelming commonness: "he had no form or comeliness that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him" (Isa. 53:2f). Emmanuel, "God with us," came with such lowliness that witnesses were *underwhelmed*. "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?" (John 6:42).

Because of his humble humanity, those who looked at Jesus saw themselves. Likewise, we who view him even today through reading the gospels can readily identify with his humanity. Not thundering on a mountaintop, he operates on our scale of existence. He shares our joys and sorrows, our hopes and fears, our pleasure and pain. If our vision of Jesus does not descend to eye level, we will never quite embrace him, and we will never face God.

But through identification with Jesus, we begin a movement with him toward Golgotha, toward death and toward God. When we encounter Jesus at the cross, we reach the moment of truth. We see him hanging, stark naked and dying — and there we face our own nakedness, vulnerability, and death. (Through the ages, modesty and censorship have almost always kept Jesus from being represented on the cross in complete nakedness. Yet this was part of the torture and public humiliation of Roman crucifixion.) It is a low

point, to be sure — *the* low point of the gospel and our experience of it.

The Gospel of John, however, is also right in portraying the cross as the *high* point, the lifting up and enthronement of Jesus, the glorification of Christ. For it is in this awful moment of human wretchedness that divine victory begins to be revealed. It has been said that the *humanity* of Jesus is revealed in his cry of pain and abandonment, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" and that the *divinity* of Jesus is revealed then in his words, "Forgive them Father, for they know not what they do." Suddenly we are at last brought into the presence of God, no longer trembling, covering up, and running away, but — in Christ — naked and spent.

The Curse has not been commuted; we have struggled with ambivalence and fear unto death. The covenant of Moses has not been broken but fulfilled; the people have been reconciled with their God, through the sacrifice made on their behalf by the High Priest. This sacrifice was not with the blood of animals but by his own blood. Through Christ we may now draw near to the throne of God and receive mercy ourselves. In this fulfillment, God now goes back to fulfill the *prior* covenant with Abraham. Jesus, the Lamb of God who was crowned with thorns, is revealed as the ram which had suddenly appeared to Abraham with its horns caught in a thicket (Gen. 22:13). Abraham's covenant thereby receives its complete confirmation, fulfilling God's final promise that by his seed shall all the nations of the earth bless themselves. Thus, Abraham's final atonement with God is simultaneously his ultimate at-one-ment with all humanity in Christ.

In a sense, therefore, Christ's work is simply the confirmation of the covenants of Moses and Abraham. What has been accomplished, however, can be adequately described only in terms of a *new covenant*, for in the resurrection from the dead, Jesus is the firstborn of a new creation. Here is a new Adam, a new type of humanity in which we may participate, once we have experienced the fulfillment and end of the Curse. In Christ we therefore return to the *still prior* covenant of Adam with a fundamentally new beginning. In Christ we may return to conversation with God and one another; we may regain trust in God and one another. In Christ we may shed the images with which we clothe our minds and be clothed again in the image of God, which is nakedness, openness, self-giving humility. "Have this mind among your-

selves, which you have in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:5-8).

When we have this mind within and among us, we know the experience of being crucified and buried with Christ. We know it by faithfulness in Christ — following that path in the world, playing that servant role for one another. In this movement of surrender and death we also come to know the power of the resurrection. "Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (verses 9-11). To know Christ is to know God and live (See John 1:19). To confess Jesus is to glorify God, subjecting every name and image to God.

Likewise, the Letter to the Colossians describes Christ as the "image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15), God in a form that we can see and live. Christ embodied the full creative power and authority of God: "For in him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. And you, who once were estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him, provided that you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel which you heard" (1:19-23).

Colossians warns not to let ideologies, traditions, or rational systems get between us and Christ. This would be simply another way of letting idolatry sublimate the divine encounter. It would erode the reconciliation that Christ has made. "See to it that no one makes a prey of you by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ. For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to the fullness of life in him, who is the head of all rule and authority. ... He disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in him" (2:8-10,15). Those in Christ must

follow through in subjecting all ideas, ideals, and ideologies to Christ.

Nevertheless, if we follow Christ to rise above all these things, we must not revert to a self-glorious existence of mastery. Quite the opposite: just as the risen Christ is hidden to all but the eyes of faith, so our life in Christ is also hidden. "Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these things the wrath of God is coming" (3:2-6). As covetousness was the first step away from God in Eden, so that idolatrous impulse must be progressively rooted out of our lives. Its end is death: therefore, be separate from it.

"Put on, then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony" (3:12-14). By Christ's example and Spirit with us, we are led along the path of humility, reconciling ends and means in forgiveness. We receive new clothing to "put on." It is the apparel of vulnerability instead of power, openness instead of guardedness. As God's image, God's Word, Christ is at work within and beyond us, re-ordering all creation. Christ is creating *coherence* out of the chaos of disobedience and alienation from God. Yet it is God's love in Christ that is the glue, that "binds" all things, makes them "hold together" (1:17), causes them to *cohere*. As the Word of God gives order, it is the Spirit of God's love that actively moves and maintains us in that order. In the unity of the Word and Spirit/breath of God we again hear God's *voice* and have life.

When the Israelites gathered at Sinai under the covenant of Moses and resisted drawing near to God, that resistance culminated in the expulsion of Israel from the Promised Land, just as Adam and Eve had been expelled from Eden before. The coming of Christ was a renewed approach by God to an estranged humanity. We would be remiss to stop there, however, as if to suggest that in Christ God found an irresistable way to get close to us, or that the Church stands

as a new Israel thoroughly reconciled with God and with humanity. One need only look around the Church of this or any age to see a great deal of "Christianity" operating in alienation from God, in the desperate pride of Adam, or even in the paranoid rage of Cain.

Clearly, the approach of God in Christ has been resistable for millions of those who have for various reasons rejected the gospel by choice. There are many ways in which cultural Christianity has held up distorted images of Christ and driven sensitive souls away from the gospel. There are also many ways in which willful self-glory has immunized many less tender souls against the Good News. In either case, Paul is right in concluding that, "In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the likeness of God" (2 Cor. 4:4).

But it is more pressing for us to ask why so many *within* the Church remain so unreconciled. Why do we persist in ignorance of Christ even while mouthing the ideology of Christianity? Why do we flee God even while coming to Church?

Many liberal Friends, in both unprogrammed and pastoral meetings, have felt disgust with the "blood" language of the gospel and its contemporary preaching. For them, the atonement manifests a primitive, brutish mentality. They are put off by the image of an angry God who is alienated from humanity, and who demands blood to settle an ancient grudge. They imagine a more friendly, less threatening God instead — one who doesn't scare people to death.

The desire to emphasize the loving, forgiving nature of God is commendable. But it does no good for us to domesticate God. The Creator of the universe ultimately *does* dwarf us; the reality of God *is* overwhelming. Our attempts to whittle God down to our size through cool-headed rationalism only place a system of images between ourselves and God, and deflect the real power of relationship with God. True confrontation with God means losing control of our lives and our world. We resist that at all costs. The issue of control, however, is the issue of who is God. To fear God is to have a healthy respect for the enormity of God next to us, as well as a healthy confidence in God's power for our welfare.

In the final analysis, the grudge, the barrier between ourselves and God is much more on our side than on God's.

The image of God as the brooding ogre is the projection of our own condition upon God. The repeated testimony of Scripture is to a God who seeks a way to break down that barrier so that trust and communication can flow again. Nevertheless, God's Curse and "wrath" are real and must be satisfied; these are not punitive measures of God but implications of life in Adam's rebellion. God did not create us for alienation, but for fellowship with God and with one another. It should not be surprising, therefore, if our misdirection creates problems for us. But thanks be to God who in Christ Jesus reveals the end of that existence and the beginning of new life!

Friends in the evangelical tradition embrace the atonement enthusiastically. They perennially rejoice in being "washed in the blood of the Lamb," in Christ's death on their behalf. They experience a release from guilt, from their past life in Adam. The predominant mood is certainly not one of cool-headed rationalism but expansive triumphalism in the cross of Jesus. Here, however, we sometimes also find a stopping short of the *purpose* of Christ's sacrifice: that we draw near to God and renew the conversation. In worship and daily life, we may be too busy praising God to stop and listen for God's direction for our lives. It is no random coincidence that evangelical Quaker emphasis upon the blood of Jesus has usually gone hand-in-hand with a decreased emphasis on the light of Jesus and reduced time spent in silence to hear Christ's voice.

The message of George Fox emphasized the reality of the cross as an *experience* in Quaker worship. He spoke of the necessity of *dying* to our own thoughts, feelings, and motives through the discipline of silent waiting. Here the first birth according to the flesh passes away, that the second birth according to the Spirit may arise, to speak and act according to God's will, not our own.

If we glory in the cross of Jesus but do not take up our own cross and follow, we frustrate God's triumph in Christ. We become complacent in sin, relying upon Jesus's death to "cover" for us. As Paul urges the Philippian Christians, "Therefore, my beloved...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:12f). The early Quaker phenomenon of trembling in worship was a bodily witness to this awful inward drama in Friends. Whether due to cool-headed liberal rationalism or warm-hearted evangelical cele-

bration, we Friends just don't tremble like we used to.

An easy Christian triumphalism indicates that we have attempted to appropriate Christ's sacrifice while still maintaining distance from God. A symptom of this problem is emphasis upon the atonement as an act in distant history, or an agreement between Christ and the Father far off in heaven on our behalf. While the historical rootedness of the cross and its transcendent power are essential, the reality of it all must be in the heart here and now. We accept Christ's sacrifice on our behalf not as a theological and historical proposition but an inwardly realized experience that is "too close for comfort."

We also distance ourselves from God when we idealize Jesus in super-human ways, when his sacrifice begins to sound as if it were easy for him while impossible for us. God has already raised Jesus to heaven; we don't need to put Jesus on a pedestal besides. If we do, Christ will never reach our hearts. The Letter to the Hebrews is a wonderful antidote to this mentality. While it makes a very strong statements for Jesus' divine identity, Hebrews nevertheless reminds us that Jesus was "one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning" (Heb. 4:15). As we accept the human weakness Christ shares with us, we more fully approach the divine communion Christ opens to us: "Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (verse 16). In Adam we have only ourselves to talk to. But in Christ we can talk to God as well. The purpose of Christ's sacrifice is to "purify your conscience from dead works to serve the living God" (9:14). Thus, atonement serves the ultimate purpose of opening up our conscience/consciousness to God that we may serve God in an informed manner.

Re-entering into the presence of God, we reverse the flight of Cain, the murderer, who fled God's presence to build up defenses. In the presence of God, we can no longer take up arms in fear of the world. In Christ, we no longer need to justify ourselves or defend ourselves; indeed, following the suffering servant of God, we *cannot* engage in these things any longer. The visible sign and concrete witness of our inward atonement with God is in our actual peacemaking. In Christ, we stand again next to our brother or sister, no longer driven like Cain by jealously and paranoia. We bring our fear, rage, and distrust to the place of the cross, knowing that here

Christ overcame and we, too, may overcome our temptations and drop our defenses. We can no longer fortify ourselves; we can no longer study war.

It is remarkable that Friends, along with the Anabaptists and Brethren, are the only standing communions which unite today around this overwhelming lesson of the cross. It, therefore, remains one of our primary vocations in ecumenical relations to witness the peace of Christ to our wider Church family. In this nuclear age, the churches are becoming more tender to the peace of Christ than ever before. There is an opportunity here to encourage the wider Church not only in its emerging nuclear pacifism, but toward a more complete Christian pacifism. But to make that leap, Christians must move beyond the self-preservational motive that often inspires nuclear pacifism, to the self-offering love that the cross communicates. Are Friends ready to make this witness today, in our lives as well as our words?

If we deny the humanity of Jesus and the struggle he endured, we stop short of the mercy seat of God and end up *pardoning ourselves* from that struggle. That usually means settling into some code of easy piety instead of seeking the will of God for our lives. The Christian life becomes something we live out of a sense of *gratitude* toward God. Gratitude is good, but it may inspire only a cringing attitude and a strong sense of obligation. Gratitude stops far short of the kind of *passionate desire* for God that true reconciliation inspires.

An idealized Jesus is only one of the images pious, well-meaning Christians can hold up between themselves and God. We can hold up pastors and other religious leaders as ideals as well, with much the same effect. We can hold up Scripture, quote it as God's final Word for all times, and drown out God's own voice which speaks a Word for these times. These are dangers Friends in pastoral meetings must especially guard against. But liberal Friends, patricularly universalists, often hold up figures and teachings from non-Christian traditions in a similarly idealized fashion; this habit can serve as a rhetorical foil against coming to terms with Christ and the Christian heart of the Quaker spirituality. Continued dabblings in comparative religion may simply keep a person from coming to the spiritual maturity that the early Friends called "perfection;" it can also keep entire meetings from attaining a cohesive and nurturing state.

Finally, these distortions and the mutual distrusts be-

tween evangelical and liberal Friends belie the atonement we preach. How can evangelical Friends approach the altar of forgiveness while they remain alienated from their liberal Quaker cousins? Jesus explicitly warned against this (Matt. 5:23f). And how can liberal Friends say "peace, peace" when there is no peace between them and their evangelical counterparts? Jeremiah identified that hypocrisy long ago (Jer. 6:14). The continuing alienation among Friends today makes us a by-word among the peoples. It keeps us divided and paralyzed in our mission; it makes a mockery of the Prince of Peace.

There are always creative ways to turn down God's offer of love and reconciliation. Sometimes we do it even as we think we are accepting that offer. As always, the issue is one of control. When we relinquish control, we at last may move on from the religious ideology of atonement to the living experience of it. To be "controlled by love," as Paul describes the Christian life, is to be clothed in Christ. In Christ, we may at last stand naked before God. A God who is God will always be at least a little frightening to be around. But for humans who do not mind being human, it's alright. They know that next to God, there is nothing to fear.

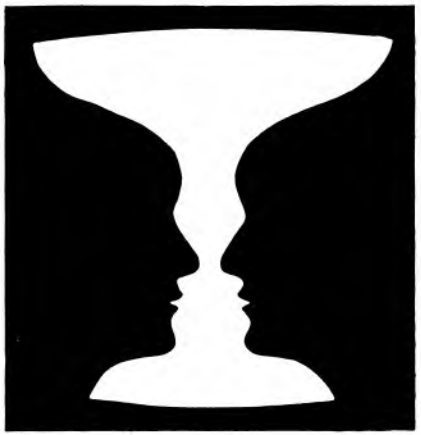
6

The Drama of Recognition

Unmasking the deep-seated problem of idolatry in our lives is necessarily our first task, just as John the Baptist's ministry of repentance was vital to "prepare the way of the Lord." John "cleared a space" for the revelation of Christ by inspiring people to repent of their religious assumptions. For example, John demanded that his fellow Jews repent of their equation of salvation with ethnic identity (Matt. 3:5-10). He invited them to be baptized not only as cleansing from sin but as initiation into a new Israel. Similarly, he demanded they repent of their assumption that the blessing of material abundance was a private affair; that blessing was to be passed on to someone who lacked the necessities of life (Luke 3:11).

These points of John's ministry of repentance amounted to a radical unmasking of idols and readied men and women for the coming Messiah. John's repentant vision allowed him to recognize the Messiah in Jesus of Nazareth. The preaching of Jesus sustained John's emphasis upon repentance (Matt.

Ronald C. James. Dalmation Dog. *1966.*



2:2; 4:17), and moved on to stress God's reign and how it is to be recognized. This perceptual emphasis is seen most clearly in the parables of Jesus.

The issues of repentance and God's reign, of unmasking and recognition, continued to sharpen in Jesus' ministry and culminated in his death and resurrection. The final idol to confront is our idea of life itself. Jesus' sacrifice allows us to face vulnerability and death, to renounce our parody of independent existence, and face God. Yet, as Christ substitutes for our own death, Christ is also revealed to us as the image of the invisible God. The two aspects are intimately intertwined, though we will always emphasize one or the other at any given time.

So we move now from crucifixion to resurrection, from repentance to the reign of God, from unmasking idols to the drama of recognition. To discern the profile of Christ is no easy task, as each of us knows. It is a search frought with ambiguities. Since these spiritual issues of recognition have points in common with the issues of sensory-based perception, let us begin with some examples of the latter. The three figures on the preceding page are literally "textbook examples" in the psychological study of visual ambiguity. Each one illustrates a different kind of perceptual problem.

The figure at the top first appears to the eye as a chaotic mass of black and white. Only slowly does the eye work out an interpretation of the data. Do you recognize the dog? A Dalmation was a good choice for the experiment!

The figure at the lower right may appear first as a white vase on a black background. But you may also interpret the figure as two black facial profiles facing each other on a white background. Here we have two different impressions of *foreground* and *background*. You can almost feel it physically as you switch back and forth between the two interpretations.

Finally, the figure at the lower left offers another kind of ambiguity. It is not a matter of foreground and background but simply two different interpretations of the figure. In both cases, one sees a woman. Do you see a young woman looking away? Or do you see an older woman facing straight to your left? Here, once you see it one way, you will have trouble finding it the other way.

Psychologists of perception have widely diverging interpretations of the way perception takes place in the brain. All

would agree, however, that we see images by some combination of sensory input, memory, and thought. In other words, as an image is received by the eye and sent to the brain, that image begins to interact with our memory of images we have seen before. Image and memory also interact with our cognitive process: what do we *expect* to see in the circumstances? what concepts do we *associate* with that image? It is a subtle and fascinating process that allows us to interpret, make sense, and choose how to relate to the jumbled mass of experience coming at us. For the newborn baby, experience remains a very chaotic jumble until enough memory and associative processes are built up to make some order of it.

The newborn creature in Christ faces some of the same challenges as a newborn baby. Instead of facing a world that is a jumbled chaos, however, we face a world that we already recognize and interpret in a certain way and with which we also tend to relate in a certain manner. Our task is now to suspend that interpretation, to recognize a radically different reality in the midst of the same data, and to alter our behavior accordingly. No one characterizes that perceptual shift more incisively than Paul does in the third chapter of his Letter to the Philippians.

Paul describes two types of perception. Once he had viewed the world and himself "according to the flesh." By this he means that he (then Saul) had viewed things according to ordinary sense perception, according to the traditions and ideology he had received from his teachers, and according to his own mental powers of reason. Saul applied these outward perceptions and criteria to categorize righteousness and sinfulness. Those with outward circumcision who measurably performed the laws of Moses were the righteous; the others were not.

His faith in these outward criteria allowed Saul to place considerable confidence in himself. After all, he was himself circumcised in accordance with the law, a member of the tribe of Benjamin, and a model performer of the law. He was a "Hebrew of the Hebrews." From this vantage point it seemed easy enough for Saul to perceive righteousness and sinfulness, true Israel and false. If you were a Jew and did not "see the picture" as Saul did, you could be in trouble. Saul had no time for ambiguity; in his zeal he became a persecutor of Jewish Christians.

Acts 9 shows the confident Saul as he travelled to Damas-

cus to carry on his work against the Church. A tremendous light felled him right there in the road. This great light *blinded* him, so that he could not see according to the flesh. The light and the voice that came with it identified itself as Jesus, whom Saul sought to blot out by persecuting his followers. "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But rise and stand upon your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and bear witness to the things in which you have seen me and to do those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from the people and from the Gentiles — to whom I send you to open their eyes, that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God" (Acts 26:15-18 — Paul's account to King Agrippa). After Saul encountered Christ, his mission was to bear witness to the circumstances and ways in which he continued to recognize Christ in his life, and to *act* according to the ways he perceived Christ. In this work, he turned Gentiles from darkness to light. The very things in which they thought they knew life would become as darkness compared with their new knowledge in Christ, awakened through hearing the gospel.

Saul regained his outward sight and could again see according to the flesh. But his experience of Christ permanently altered his perception of things. He perceived righteousness no longer in terms of criteria like the law, circumcision, or ethnic identity; he perceived righteousness according to Christ. This perception was "inward" in that it was not received by the senses, from other people, or by his own rational processing of those inputs. It was straight to the heart. Indeed, often it came as a completely private experience. For example, those who were with Saul when he was struck down on the road to Damascus could not tell to whom he was speaking. But often the recognition of Christ in a situation might come through outward phenomena. For example, he came to discern the body of Christ in the gathering of the faithful.

Suddenly Saul saw himself differently, too. He recognized himself no longer as the upstanding champion of the law but as the persecutor of the Church. He had to change: Saul had to become Paul, a new creation with a new relation to the world around him. In Philippians Paul states that everything about his confident old self-image he came to regard as "refuse" next to Christ. (We might mistake "refuse" as imply-

ing something suddenly worthless, like garbage. But in Paul's case it seems more appropriate to consider that refuse as *compost*, given how well he put his rabbinic background to use in reaching out to his fellow Jews.) Paul was determined not to let his background and his credentials stand in the way between himself and Christ. He no longer "took them to heart." They were outward; Christ is inward. Perceiving Christ changed his perceptions of everything; it changed his associations, his expectations, and his attitudes. The proud persecutor became the humbled sufferer of persecution.

Saul's attention was fixated on his background, his heritage, his training, and standing: his background was his foreground. But Paul's words in Philippians show that since encountering Christ, his background had receded into the background. Christ's resurrection was now foreground. The presence of the future in the risen Christ became foremost in Paul's mind. In his writings, he is quick to admit that he is still not perfect or complete. He does not always "see the picture" clearly in every new situation. He makes mistakes. But because Christ has "apprehended" him — put his life in a new light — Paul struggles to find himself anew: "one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (3:13f). Paul puts his background behind him; he repents of his strengths and standing as well as his weaknesses and sins. He does this so he can strain forward with single-mindedness to the prize, the future, the new image. He is not at rest in the resurrection, as some others might imagine themselves, but his eyes are fixed on that while he strains forward and lives in the reality of it.

In not claiming perfection, Paul aims to maintain the tension between foreground and background, which is the ambiguity of the Christian life. That ambiguity is not simply a matter of preference. The drama of recognition must be maintained in life, because we must constantly recognize Christ anew in shifting circumstances and act accordingly. To stop with satisfaction is to let our background catch up with us. It is to sink comfortably into an established tradition, a set pattern of thinking and acting in disregard for our changing situation. This is the beginning of idolatry. It is not that traditions and inherited truths must be disregarded; indeed, Paul speaks in the same chapter that we must "hold

true to what we have attained" (verse 16). But tradition must be kept in tension with new revelations from Christ.

If we may speak of a Christian perfection, it exists in life lived in that tension. Otherwise, only when life ends, is *finished*, may we speak of perfection or completion. It is only in the End, standing with Christ in the resurrection, that we will see things fully: that is, from the perspective of the completion of all things. There we shall see the ultimate fruits of all things for good or evil. Until then, we only catch glimpses of that perspective. Yet we see enough to find that the ultimate fruits of human pride and earthly power are shame and destruction (verses 18f).

Friends have traditionally affirmed perfection, wholeness in Christ, from that experience of lived tension. In an age when churches taught the inescapability of human sin, early Friends witnessed the overcoming power of the risen Christ, returned to teach and lead people out of sin. The future was invading the present, freeing men and women from the past. Friends testified to this liberating power of Christ with full appreciation for the insidious power of evil. Fox's vision of an ocean of darkness testifies to the gravity of our situation. But flowing above that he saw an infinite ocean of light, in which he recognized the surpassing love of God. Indeed, Fox preached that victory over sin and evil begins with the light's revelation of our darkness within. Similarly, John Woolman's *Journal* shows that his love became more universal and self-giving as he immersed himself ever more deeply into the mystery of Christ within himself. The path of perfection is a lifetime in the "daily cross." Only at the end does the struggle cease, as the dying words of George Fox suggest: "I am clear, I am fully clear."

Modern Friends still testify to perfection in various ways, and we often demonstrate an attendance to God's power that substantiates that testimony. However, we sometimes fall prey to misperceptions of perfection that are probably similar to those Paul was countering among the Philippians. Influenced by strains of nineteenth-century "holiness" preaching, evangelical Friends have sometimes drifted into a belief in perfection as a single, sudden gift of the Holy Spirit that leaves a person unable to sin. Liberal Friends, laboring under the classical liberal optimism about human nature, have sometimes absolved the individual of all responsibility, blaming society for all human ills. Both approaches lose the lived

tension so powerfully witnessed by Paul and by early Friends. Only that tension can sustain the vibrant passion of true discipleship.

The dynamics of finding new perspective in Christ are much like those in the textbook figures we have examined. Ambiguity like that of the first figure (the Dalmatian) is common in human experience. Life may seem a senseless jumble without discernable meaning or purpose. We may feel lost, without reference points. There seems nothing to do but get through life in whatever way is possible. The gospel suggests an interpretation to us and offers a meaning to life and death, suffering and joy, in Christ. We must see this interpretation for ourselves, however. The gospel heightens our sensitivity to the light of Christ as it comes to us. It is that light, that revelation of Christ, that begins to make sense of our picture, of our life. It does this in two ways: it reveals Christ, the Good News of the gospel, in the circumstances of our life; and simultaneously, the light reveals us in the drama of the gospel story.

Returning to the first picture, at a certain point the Dalmation in that pattern *comes out; it emerges to us.* Yet simultaneously, *we also enter the picture* in a certain spatial orientation to the Dalmatian. So it is that Christ emerges to us out of the chaos while at the same time we enter the gospel story in a certain orientation to Christ, as disciple. Thus, to see Christ is to be a witness; Christ is here as we were there.

Another kind of difficulty common in human experience is suggested by the second figure. Sometimes we encounter problems of foreground *versus* background, like that we found in the faces and the vase. Like Saul, we are fixated on our background. It becomes foreground for us in dangerous ways and can lead to pride, self-importance and confidence in our own powers and righteousness. On the other hand, we may be fixated negatively on our own sinfulness and weaknesses. We may have poor self-image and low self-esteem. Secretly, even unconsciously, we do not really believe that God could love us and empower us.

This is a tough problem. People are not easily shaken loose from this fixation on background. It may be hard to snap out of a self-glorying or self-hating interpretation. Sometimes only a shake-up like Saul received can allow us to break loose and see things anew. Like Saul, a person may have to go through an experience of loss or blindness to gain a different

outlook. In the sample figure, many people see the white vase on black background first. To get around that perception, we must ignore the vase as foreground and focus on the black background in order to find the two faces.

Thus, we experience a reversal of foreground and background. This reversal is similar to the experience the New Testament describes when it speaks of the gospel turning the world upside down. But while it makes little difference whether our eyes tend to see a vase or two faces, it makes a great difference if we continue to focus on our own background as foreground while Christ remains unrecognized as background. Colossians states that Christ is "the beginning, the first-born from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent" (Col. 1:18). It is only as Christ becomes preeminent in all things for us, foreground in every situation in our lives, that may we see to follow Christ from death into life. As we enter into that movement with Christ, we recognize our background as background; it becomes by no means worthless but rather like the substratum where a new plant sprouts and grows to maturity. Ironically, even as the plant daily strains to the "upward call" of the sun, its roots also reach deeper into that soil for strength and support. Similarly, while the call of Christ takes us through progressive transformations in life, those changes force us to delve ever deeper into our past history and identity. In the final analysis, this irony is simply inherent to our dealings with a God who is both Alpha and Omega, our Creator and our Redeemer. It is in following our Redeemer to the end that we sense what God's purpose was in creating us in the beginning.

Finally, the third example of visual ambiguity illustrates another somewhat different ambiguity in faith. Remember how difficult it was to find the older woman if you had already recognized the younger woman in the picture? Here the problem was not an initially chaotic appearance, or a question of foreground *versus* background, but two different ways of organizing the same obvious foreground. This relates to some problems in our perceptions of God. We may be hung up with an image of "the old man with a beard," the patriarchal God of traditional Christian culture. This image is satisfying for some and infuriating to others.

The masculine image of God does enrich our experience in some important ways. That image can help us focus on the

many qualities of God we have known similarly in good men. That's good! It draws upon half of the human species for understanding our relationship with God. Yet it is also limiting. It ignores half of the human species! It can cut us off from experiences of God as similar to the good women we have known. Therefore, by itself, patriarchal image of God is ultimately unsatisfactory. After all, God created man *and* woman in God's own image (Gen. 1:27); both men and women should inform the image of God in our minds.

It may be necessary to avert our gaze from the perception of the younger woman in order to come back to the picture and see the older woman (or *vice versa*). The image of the patriarchal God has forced a similar aversion for many Christians in our day. Many have felt compelled to *look away* from the biblical tradition and from the Church, which *have* certainly emphasized a patriarchal image of God. But is it possible to *look again* and see another image of God emerging in the Bible, one that traditionally has not been suggested to us by Christian culture? We will explore this possibility in our next chapter. But first let us explore a New Testament story, a drama of recognition, that offers a helpful paradigm for the life of faith.

In Luke's account of the resurrection, we are told that the women disciples of Jesus came to his tomb on the first day of the week, ready to give final anointing to the body. They found the tomb open and the body missing. Two strange men there asked them, "why do you seek the living among the dead?" (Luke 24:5), and reminded them that Jesus had prophesied his own death and resurrection long before. The women's report of this encounter was met with skepticism among the male disciples.

Later the same day two of the disciples were walking to the village of Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. As they walked, they discussed the traumatic events of recent days. A stranger overtook them on the road and joined their conversation. Luke informs us that this stranger was Jesus, but that "their eyes were kept from recognizing him" (verse 16). There is a wonderful ambiguity here: what kept their eyes from recognizing him? Was it something God did? Was it a different appearance of Jesus? Or was it their attitude: were they simply so immersed in their grief and disappointment that they had no *expectation* of seeing him? Perhaps there are both divine and human elements at work here.

In any case, Jesus started them recounting the story. They shared their anger at the chief priests and rulers who had delivered their prophet and friend to the Romans. They also shared their bitter disappointment and grief over the outcome. They had believed that this Jesus was the Messiah who would deliver Israel. And now, if that were not enough, even his dead body was reported missing.

Jesus replied to them, "O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" Jesus then went through the whole of Scripture and showed them how it all pointed toward Jesus and his outcome. Without denying the reality of their pain, Jesus helped them discern the meaning of the recent events and pointed out the hand of God in them. Again, human and divine elements are intricately intertwined.

They arrived at Emmaus and it appeared as if they were about to part. Just then, something crucial happened: they offered this stranger hospitality, just as they and others had offered hospitality to Jesus so many times before. Hospitality was of course the context of much of Jesus' teaching during his ministry. In fact, he taught at table so much that he was accused of being a glutton and drunkard (Luke 7:34)! Those who offered dinner and lodging to Jesus received much in return through his teaching; and before his death Jesus had said that whenever they offered hospitality to needy strangers, they would be offering it to him.

Well, just as so many times before, Jesus accepted the offer. And just as before, Jesus offered the blessing on the bread and broke it. Suddenly, "their eyes were opened and they recognized him" (verse 31). They realized they were in the presence of the risen Christ. And just as suddenly, "he vanished out of their sight" (same verse). They said to each other, "did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?" (verse 32). They connected the table fellowship with the teaching experience. This new revelation, this new experience of Jesus, though discontinuous and unfamiliar to them at first, was identifiable by its continuity with their earlier, familiar experience of Jesus.

This first experience of the risen Christ becomes figural for all our subsequent experiences of Christ. The Christ who walks with us is always "going further" (verse 28), and the

next time we encounter Christ we will likely encounter an initial unfamiliarity. Circumstances change and our previous encounters with Christ do not completely prepare us for the next one. From those past encounters we have formed an image of Christ that may be true and adequate up to that point, but must now be suspended, even broken, if we are to recognize Christ anew. With the death of Jesus, the disciples had had to renounce their popular expectations about the Messiah. On the road to Emmaus, Jesus showed them how those expectations were in fact confirmed, but in a new light. That new light, that new perception, was finally crystallized in the familiarity of the table fellowship: they suddenly recognized their companion. Now they would be able to encounter and follow Jesus the Messiah in profoundly new ways.

The experience of those first disciples becomes important for all Christians since them, because of the continuity of their experience of the risen Christ with their experience of Jesus of Nazareth. That new experience of theirs did not *conform* to their previous image of Jesus, which had been blown apart by Good Friday. But the continuity lay in the way the new experience *confirmed* something about the previous one in ways that were surprising, even unthinkable before. Such is the interplay of continuity and discontinuity.

Likewise, our experience of Christ need not — *cannot* — merely conform to the biblical witness to him. That would be a matter of bibliolatry, forcing Jesus into a fixed image from the past. Our true experience of Christ will sometimes confirm the biblical witness in comforting and familiar ways, but at other times we will experience Christ in disturbing, unfamiliar ways. New revelations of Christ may confirm past revelations in ways unthinkable to us before, perhaps unthinkable to the entire Church before. In America, we saw this discontinuity occur in Christian consciousness of slavery in the nineteenth century. Today, we see it occurring in the role of women in the Church. Friends have been on the cutting edge of new perception in both cases.

Maintaining the tension between continuity and discontinuity is difficult and sometimes painful. But the revelation of Christ constantly confirms our faith at its limits and heals us where we are wounded. If we abandon the tension and opt for discontinuity, embracing the new for its own sake, we soon start finding "Christ" anywhere and everywhere; Christ soon

loses focus and definition. If we abandon the tension and opt for continuity, we gain focus and definition quickly on a Christ who has become an idol, an icon ready for the museum, a commodity ready for the marketplace.

That brings us finally to the mysterious disappearance just as the two disciples recognized Jesus. That sudden fading of experience should not surprise us; it is the same tantalizing element *we* experience in Christ. The moment of recognition was that point when the disciples became fully conscious of their encounter with Jesus. Their full awareness implies *self-consciousness*, reflecting on themselves before Jesus, reflecting back on the conversation on the road. Eve or Adam before the Fall did not have that capacity of self-awareness. They could remain in continuing conversation with God in Eden. But in the Fall they — and we — are not able to sustain the encounter with the divine without reflection back upon ourselves, and that reflection begins to distance us from the encounter.

While we might wish to be in constant communion, always at the mountaintop with Christ, our condition is not necessarily bad. In fact, this reflective aspect of perception is vital to Christian discipleship. Reflection allows us not only to savor and interpret our experience, but to move on to action as well. We see that the very next thing the two disciples did was to return to Jerusalem and tell the others what happened. Likewise, reflection on our Christian experience should lead us on to witness to Christ, to proclaim the Good News in words and deeds. Christian witness in this world is far removed from the simple trust of Eden. It requires self-consciousness before God and before our fellow humanity. Thus, we must constantly be shuttling between heaven and earth in Christ, between revelation, reflection, and action. That is the activity Jesus described when he spoke of heaven opened, with God's messengers ascending and descending in Christ (John 1:51).

Just as psychologists point out that perception involves the interplay of sensory input, memory, and thought, we may conclude that the same basic pattern applies to the revelation of Christ. Of course, the revelation of Christ is not an outward, sensory experience, even though it may come in part through our perception of outward events. Christ's revelation comes in a variety of ways: a sense of leading that defies description; the "hearing" of words that do not seem to

be the product of our own thought or senses; the reception of spoken or printed words that have an unusual impact on us; or the pattern of events around us.

Those impressions begin to interact with our memory of past experiences of a similar nature. Do they fit with past experiences we have identified with Christ? This reflective process clearly involves a degree of analytical thinking. For memory, we draw upon not only our own past experiences but the collective experiences of our community of faith as well, going back ultimately to those recorded in Scripture. This sorting process is the "testing of spirits" mentioned by Paul (1 Thess. 5:20f) and John (1 John 4:1). Without this critical function of discernment, the community and its individuals will be drawn out from Christ and into the confusion of competing spirits. In that confusion Satan may draw us into destruction.

The Quaker spirituality offers a heightened drama of recognition in its approach to Christian worship and ministry. In line with John the Baptist's demand for repentance, Friends "clear a space" for the revelation of Christ by sitting together in silence. In the stillness, we attempt to quiet our restless hearts and minds; we must let go and die to our own thoughts, motives, and plans, whether we are ashamed of them or proud of them. Our assumptions of goodness are as much a block to God's grace as our sense of sinfulness.

Emptying ourselves, we "prepare the way of the Lord" within. This is the inward experience of baptism, the immersion into depth, darkness, and death of self that must precede any authentic new light and life. Friends eschew the rite of water baptism. We realize that immersion in water may sometimes lead men and women into Christ's true baptism of the Spirit; but we also realize that it can serve as an outward observance that allows one to avoid the inward reality. We believe that one must experience baptism not once but countless times, if the drama of recognition is to be a way of life. Thus, the silence of Friends becomes a pool into which we are all submerged together, an experience in depth we share in the expectation of rising together to new life.

It is in that sunken state that we discover Christ in our midst, the sweet communion in the Spirit. Therefore, Friends also eschew the rite of communion with bread and wine. We realize that this observance does lead many Christians toward the inward encounter with Christ; but again, we see

how it can simply become a "medicine of immortality" and an obstacle to true communion. Our path is to find our teacher within. If someone is given a message to share out of the silence, that person speaks out of a sense of service to the group's shared experience. Other messages may follow along the same lines, adding further dimension and detail to the emergent figure of Truth. The sense of joy and discovery that comes with this hushed drama leaves each worshipper in a spirit of thanksgiving. In silence and in speaking, each has both served and partaken of a wondrous gift. No appointed mediator can deliver such a gift. It is the disciplined obedience of the entire group that enables and enjoys each gift of the Spirit.

The discernment of Christ in our midst is our hope. The communion with Jesus enjoyed by those first disciples goes on. The messianic banquet is a "progressive dinner" that proceeds mysteriously from place to place, from time to time. "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me" (Rev. 3:20).

7

From Glory to Glory

The interplay between masculine and feminine in the image of God is essential to growth in our relationship with God and with one another. This interplay lies at the heart of the community of faith and raises crucial questions about the structures of Church authority. Who rules in the Church, and how?

To begin, we must return again to the story of Creation and Fall in Genesis 2-3. It is important for us to bear in mind that the stories of Genesis 1-11 share considerable material in common with the myths and religions of several ancient Near Eastern cultures. Generally speaking, the function of myth is to interpret the life experience in narrative form, to make some sense of, and peace with, the confusing and painful existence people share. Myths aim to explain why the world is the way it is, often giving divine approval to social orders.

The materials included in Genesis 1-11 were developed in patriarchal (male-dominated) societies. They reflected and often sanctified that social order. Yet the way in which those

materials come together in Genesis makes them serve a rather different function. Certainly, much of the time they continue to describe and make sense of the world as it is, but the goal is no longer to sanctify the social world that is described. Genesis 3-11 pointedly portray a human condition of progressive alienation from God — within people, between people, and in society at large. The drama that ends with the tragedy of Babel sets up the human problem. That dilemma of alienation starts moving to resolution in the long salvation history beginning with Abraham in Genesis 12. Genesis 3-11 therefore adapts mythic materials to serve an over-arching *anti-mythic* purpose: to inspire dissatisfaction with the social world they portray.

Given that paradox, we should not be surprised that the story of Creation and Fall contains both patriarchal and anti-patriarchal motifs. For example, it has often been noted that the story of Adam's creation, followed by Eve's, suggests a primacy in man and a derivative nature in woman. Surely that reveals a male (androcentric) viewpoint. We should also note, however, how that viewpoint is partially subverted. Remember that God decides that Adam should not be alone. After creating the variety of animals as helpers for Adam and letting him name them, it becomes clear that none is truly fit for him as a helper. *Nothing lower than he will suffice.* So God places Adam in a deep sleep, takes a rib from him, closes the hole in his side, forms a woman from the rib, and then presents her to him.

Adam's reaction is one of wonder and joy. He recognizes in the woman a part of himself. He *sees himself* in her and in so doing realizes that with her he may find wholeness: "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (Gen. 2:23). Thus, in Eden before the Fall, wholeness and self-knowledge are found in mutuality with the helpmeet. An atmosphere of love and trust, of integrated life, is portrayed in the verse that ends the chapter: they were both naked and unashamed before each other. It is regretable that we do not get to hear Eve say what she thinks of all this. It seems logical that she would also see herself in Adam. The identification would seem natural and mutual. The rest of Adam's response appears to emphasize Eve's derivativeness: "she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man" (same verse). Despite the fact that we are left with Adam's standpoint only, the idea of woman as derivative is counter-

balanced by the theme of woman as essential; and that is significant for a document written primarily by men for men.

It is only in the tragic events of the next chapter, in the Fall, that the man and woman become self-conscious. The self-aggrandizing knowledge they gain separates them from each other. In grasping knowledge for themselves, they begin to objectify each other; each forms a mental image of the other from a new sense of distance. This causes them to realize their nakedness, their vulnerability before each other. Only then do they cover up and attempt to be self-sufficient apart from each other. This profound shift in consciousness is highlighted as the man blames the woman before God. "The woman whom thou gavest..." (Gen. 3:12): no longer "flesh of my flesh," woman and man are separate creatures. They no longer share the same experience; they are no longer each other's "helper" in God's created path of wholeness.

In the Curse, God describes the way of life they have chosen, the implications of their decision. The woman will experience pain and terror in childbirth, yet she will also feel a compelling desire for the man. This bittersweet paradox is symptomatic of her sense of separateness from the man. For his part, the man will no longer feel innocent joy and wonder before woman. He will instead attempt to subordinate her to himself out of a feeling of vulnerability. He will sweat in toil and anxiety to gain a living from the ground and "make good" on his dominion. Again, we see the symptoms of an isolated self-consciousness. At this juncture, Adam no longer calls her "Woman" but "Eve, because she was the mother of all living" (3:20). The essential quality suggested in the first name gives way to the objectified, functional image of maternity in the second name. Paternity and maternity thus become the key to gender image in the Fall. In fertility (production *and* reproduction), male and female will seek and (sometimes) find a degree of unity, wholeness, and hope.

The parental experience now forms the reference points for masculine and feminine consciousness. The maternal experience is one of close, graphic connection to the child. Since children emerge from the mother, their relatedness is obvious to the senses. The paternal experience is not so obvious. The father's connection with the child is not perceived by the senses, but is deduced by inference, by a premise about the father's history with the mother. The father feels the looseness of his connection with his progeny and attempts to

enforce the family structure through dominance over the mother and through his role as "provider." This desire to establish relation is also seen in the tendency of patriarchal societies to enforce strict patterns of social conventions to keep relations clear. Issues of *legitimacy* become vital to the patriarchal society; they arise out of the paternal concern to establish clear relationships. So it seems significant that the language of the Curse describes the maternal experience in terms of sensation (pain) and the paternal experience in terms of reflection (anxiety).

Some concepts of masculine and feminine identity are based more on psychological traits of rationality *versus* intuition, intellectuality *versus* sensuality. But all men and women are made up of differing combinations of these traits, which do not really segregate according to male and female. To use paternity and maternity as universal poles of human identity, as both our story and some leading modern theorists do, seems more satisfactory. Hence, the passion for analysis so prevalent in our own patriarchal culture, for example, is connected with the paternal concern for inference and history, rather than some capacity supposedly more inherent to the male than the female. The story of the Fall, without being a modern sociology, suggests to us that images of paternity and maternity will dominate interpersonal relationships and culture. Men and women will understand themselves and each other from an alienated perspective. Patriarchal tendencies will dominate in social and religious organization. A paternal image of God will make these social structures seem sacred or simply natural, while women are devalued, alternative social structures are repressed, and maternal images of God are ignored.

The drama of Genesis 3-11 thus defines the problem to be overcome by God's saving work. It "sets the scene" in a patriarchal culture that still exists today. Genesis describes the scene while simultaneously beginning a critique of it. Genesis 3 defines patriarchy as normative yet tragically repressive. Therefore, if we give a one-dimensional interpretation of the story as the propaganda of patriarchy, we miss the strongly anti-mythic purpose that underlies its final form. The story plants in the biblical faith a seed (the seed of the woman — Genesis 3:15) whose growth has been perennially stunted and whose full fruition we have not begun to see. The biblical faith intimates a dimension of our salvation

that is never fully envisioned, even in the final glories of the Book of Revelation. The biblical faith, therefore, projects an unfolding drama of revelation that extends beyond the Bible itself. That drama is coming to the surface only now, in this age.

We now turn to the salvation drama as it begins with the saga of Abraham and Sarah. That drama is set in an ancient Near Eastern culture where religious life was focused on the issues of fertility, of generativity. The images of God were the images of gods and goddesses, images of the paternal and the maternal engaged in the drama of fertility. These gods were identified with the forces of nature which powered the recurring cycles of agrarian life and with the social forces such as kingship, by which nations survived and prospered.

In the story of Abraham and Sarah, a different sort of god begins to emerge. Fertility and nationhood are key themes in the story. Progeny and productive land are central issues in God's dealings with Abraham and Sarah. Yet these issues are placed within a larger sense of relation to God. Fertility is bestowed in the context of faith; progeny are given in the context of promise, beyond the natural processes. The promises of land and descendents are hinged on following the voice of this strange, obscure deity. The result is that Abraham and Sarah are taken out of the cyclical world of nature religion and placed in an open-ended, wandering existence. They are drawn into faith in a God who has no "job description" in nature, but simply promises to supply the necessities.

The God of Abraham and Sarah is more fully disclosed in the Exodus experience and the covenant established through Moses. With Moses, the paternal image of God receives its real definition. The God of Moses is fully transcendent, totally beyond the boundaries of this world. This God created the world and governs it by means of the Word. Similarly, God begets the children of Israel from Egypt by drawing them through the birth waters of the Red Sea with an "outstretched arm." At Mount Sinai, God gives definition to the children of Israel by means of the written code of laws issued through Moses. Here a pattern of strict social conventions and expectations is established to define who the legitimate children of Israel are. The relationship of this paternal God to the Israelites is further defined by the history of God's dealings with them. That history begins with the Exodus and continues with the conquest of the Promised Land. Here the

Yahweh is revealed as a Divine Warrior, a military strongman who fights for the people and achieves their victories.

All these key characteristics of Israel's God are strongly paternal in image: the abstract, inferred relation to the world by means of Word; the strict prohibition of all sensible images of Yahweh or any god or goddess; the vital issues of legitimacy for the children of Israel; the relationship of Yahweh to the nation through history; the military profile of God as national leader. Thus, the Fatherhood of Israel's God was strongly established as Abraham's seed (not Sarah's) became a powerful empire in the Promised Land.

As long as Israel survived as a political entity, the historical traditions, even the legal codes, remained fairly fluid. But as the national status of Israel dissolved before the Assyrian and Babylonian onslaughts, the people were thrown back on their history and law as the *primary* relation between themselves and their God. It is therefore during and after the exile experience that we see an increasing formalization of Israel's history and laws. Yahweh as military strong man was in eclipse. The people deepened their understanding of their God as a loving God. Nevertheless, this Father demanded greater faith from corporate Israel as wife, so that the family might yet stay together during those hard times and that their children be demonstrably legitimate. Legitimacy thus becomes the religious question of orthodoxy: Israel must not only eschew idols and other gods, but know and obey the laws given to Moses much more seriously than before.

So, as we view Israel's situation during the last centuries before Jesus, we see an increasing concern to tighten the people's identity and social conventions under God. This issue of legitimacy was expressed as a legal orthodoxy, spearheaded by the rise of the scribes and the Pharisaic party in Judaism. Intense scholarship was devoted to discovering the will of God in every facet of life. And where the laws of Moses were not specific, a body of oral interpretation grew to fill in the gaps.

It was also a time when the national and military hopes of the people were by no means abandoned. The Macabbean revolt briefly fulfilled those hopes, as the Syrian overlords were driven out and Judea enjoyed a brief period of independence. The Roman domination that came later, however, was not about to be budged by any effort the Judeans could muster. The situation of long-term, unbearable oppression

gave rise to extensive Jewish speculation and expectation of a new deliverance by God, as dramatic as the liberation from Egypt. That hope focused around the patriarchal image of the Messiah, the Anointed One, a king like David, sent by God to drive Rome out of the land and re-establish the national pride of Israel.

At the time of Jesus, therefore, the patriarchal profile of Israel's faith was fully intact, perhaps even more distinct than ever before. The issues of legitimacy were reaching their classical formulation in the Pharisaic movement, and the militaristic definition of Israel's national hope was clear-cut.

All of this is clearly paternal in flavor. It expresses the interests of paternity, which were foremost in a male-dominated culture. Let us be clear about one thing, however: a paternal image of God is not something wrong in itself. It is a powerful image in which men and women alike may encounter the strongly *personal* quality of God. The passionate outbursts of Yahweh for Israel recorded by the prophets represent God's fervent, heart-broken love for the people, validly expressed through the male persona. What goes wrong with the personification of God in paternal themes is when these are enforced to the exclusion of equally valid themes of maternity — *and* when they are used to enforce the social subordination of women. In that case, paternity becomes idolatrous, and that is the case which the revelation of Christ would test, and still tests today.

The advent of Jesus marks an alternative definition of Israel's faith. In fact, it is by no means an overstatement that the Church gathered in Jesus' name constitutes a *new Israel*: it is still to be called Israel, for Israel's belief in God as Father is confirmed; but it must be called radically new for the way in which that same God is now known in a light that can only be called maternal. Once again we must grapple with issues of continuity and discontinuity.

From the beginning of his ministry, Jesus made it clear that he sought to establish and fulfill the law, not to abolish it. Also from the beginning, however, he came into conflict with the scribes and Pharisees, the leading interpreters and practitioners of the law. His ethics and sense of legitimacy derived less from legal application than from a personal revelation. Likewise, Jesus apparently acted and spoke enough like the popular image of the expected Messiah that he drew the interest and following of many, including Zealot

revolutionaries. His Beatitudes, however, were opposite to the vengeful tone of ones like Psalm 137:8f, for example, and his entry into Jerusalem on a donkey colt must have poured some cold water on that enflamed scene. Finally, he was of course a male — the most basic qualification for Messiah or Son of Man roles. Yet he was apparently unmarried and without children. If paternity is the key to the patriarchal image of God, there may be significance in that detail.

These points could be further elaborated from the abundant examples in the four gospels, but they are probably clear enough already. The full deconstruction of the patriarchal image in Jesus begins with his crucifixion. There he accepted the summary rejection of the Mosaic law: "cursed be every one that hangs upon a tree" (Deut. 21:23). And he completely overturned the military definition of Messiah by not even resisting arrest by the chief priests and execution by the Romans.

When his followers met Jesus risen from the dead, the profound meaning of Jesus the Messiah, the Christ, began to unfold. They encountered Jesus now without the limiting factors of their own images and expectations about the Messiah. Those had been exploded on Good Friday. They encountered Jesus now in the Spirit, present with them, even *within them.* Whether we point to John's post-resurrection language of the "Comforter," or Paul's usage of "in Christ" or "Christ in you," we must not miss the enormous significance of this language about Christ as representative of God, even equal with God. *It is a shift from the language of transcendent paternity to that of immanent maternity.* Relationship with Christ is spiritually *sensed* in the heart more than historically *inferred* by laws or doctrines.

In Paul, we see a man who was once strongly invested in the paternal questions of legitimacy. He vigorously persecuted, even to the taking of life, the movement he viewed as an illegitimate interpretation of the law, inspired by a false prophet. In his dramatic conversion, however, he came to a sweeping critique of paternalistic legitimacy. He rejected circumcision as the mark of certified sonship. Moreover, he rejected the law as the criterion of uprightness before God. He insisted, rather, that true circumcision is an inward matter of the heart and that true righteousness is inwardly received, not according to the law but according to Christ.

Paul came to view righteousness by the law as a form of

idolatry, a fabricated image of godliness, since obedience to the law is humanly contrived. His critique of the law is the recognition that the paternal concern for legitimacy becomes idolatrous if not grounded in a maternal certainty through intimacy. Without intimate, maternal connectedness with God in Christ, the question of legitimacy is dead — and death-dealing.

Paul saw that the law could become a system of abstract images, served with the same neurotic devotion paid to the natural images he and his fellow Jews so abhorred. For Paul, true legitimacy is revealed in a living faith, like a letter of recommendation, "written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts" (2 Cor. 3:3). He even went so far as to call the law a "dispensation of death" (next verse) that by itself becomes a veil to the human mind (verses 14f). Only when one "turns to the Lord the veil is moved" (verse 16). Only when one turns to Christ are the images of righteousness we construe from the law swept away.

That turn inward is a radical turn to the maternal in that it portrays God as strongly contiguous with our own being. Christ's presence in the heart gets between us and every system of images we can devise, inside every set of clothing we can put on. We will continue to generate images and change clothing in response to Christ's inward revelation to us. But that is the life of Christian discipleship: "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another, for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit" (verse 18). We find true freedom in the Spirit of Christ (verse 17).

The revelation of Christ was a new thing; yet at the same time *it had always existed at the heart of Israel's experience.* The inward, iconoclastic power in Israel's faith always flourished in its *prophetic* tradition. The prophets of Israel steeped themselves in the law and salvation history of the people, to be sure. But their special role was as attentive recipients of God's living Word, hearers of God's voice within, beyond the reach of the law. The prophets recorded in the Bible are nearly all men, due to the patriarchal focus of the culture. We do not know how many women may have carried forward this charismatic faith, while remaining unrecorded by the scribes, who formulated the history of the people. In any case, these women and men carried on a channel of direct commu-

nication with God and mediated for the people in a tradition that went all the way back to Abraham and Sarah. Whatever superior status the roles of king and priest achieved in the life of Israel, the role of prophet remained most central.

Furthermore, throughout the literature of Israel hope is expressed that the prophetic experience might become universal. In the wilderness, Moses was the only prophet until God poured out his Spirit on seventy male elders. When an additional two men began to prophesy without being appointed by Moses, some thought Moses would be disturbed. Moses replied, "would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would put his spirit upon them!" (Num. 11:29). Not just all Yahweh's men; all Yahweh's *people.*

That theme in the prophetic tradition is amplified by two prophecies of the "latter days" which the early Church would find fulfilled in Christ. The first is Joel 2:28f: "And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even upon the menservants and maidservants in those days, I will pour out my spirit." Note *all* flesh: sons and daughters, old and young, high and low. The gift of the Spirit is to subvert every hierarchy of gender, age, and class. Joel's prophecy is quoted by Peter at the Pentecost event (Acts 2:17). The second prophecy is Micah 4:1-4, in which the nations shall flow to the mountain of God to receive direct teaching; the result will include the end of nationalist militarism. The early Church, receiving God's teaching in Christ's Spirit, saw in the way of the cross the end of nationalism and violence.

The speeches of Peter and Stephen (Acts 3:22f; 5:37), as well as numerous references in the gospels, indicate that the earliest Christian preaching understood Jesus as a long-expected prophet like Moses. That prophetic identity surely makes the most sense of Jesus' style of earthly ministry. It also makes the most sense of Christ's risen power in the Church. Christ is the living Word of God speaking among God's people, while simultaneously interceding for them with the Father. As early Christians preached the gospel they revived the prophetic tradition; they declared the living Word of God to the world.

The opening Prologue of John's gospel gives the highest expression of Christ as the Word of God. The Word who was

with God in the beginning, equal with God, by whom all things were created, in whom is life and light — Christ *is* the Father's relation to the world. Christ is the presence of God in the world, sensed by all who will receive the gift. The divine Word functions in a maternal relationship to humanity. She embodies themes of divine wisdom and presence which had always carried feminine overtones in Hebrew and Jewish faith, despite the overarching dominance of patriarchy.

That maternal imagery is most evocative in John 15: "I am the true vine." The vine is an obliquely maternal imagery, to be sure. Yet the vine's relation to the Father (vinedresser) and to believers (branches) has overtones too strong to deny — and implications too important to ignore. The genesis, connectedness, and nourishment of each branch in the vine provides a striking image of the Church in Christ. It remains a strongly maternal imagery, unlike Paul's image of Christ as the head of the body, which plays into a patriarchal ideology of the man as head of the woman (1 Cor. 11:2ff; Eph. 5:22). The branches abide in the vine, are nourished by the vine, and are fruitful in the vine. Christ remains central for all, rather than excusing a hierarchy among the faithful.

The Father as vinedresser relates to the branches through their relation to vine. He prunes fruitful branches in order to bear more fruit and cuts off branches that do not abide in the vine or bear fruit. These latter are gathered and thrown into the fire. This imagery raises for many the spectre of the Father as bogeyman and cruel ogre. But the imagery makes abiding and fruit-bearing the decisive factors in each branch's fate. It strongly implies that we detach and divest *ourselves* from Christ. The Father's work carries out the implication of our decision. Pruning and cutting suggests a concern for the overall vitality of the vine as a corporate entity. Also, as this is the Father's work, it is taken out of the dangerous clutches of over-zealous humans.

The passage on the vine also includes John's consistent theme of Christ's subjection to the Father's will. While this would imply a subjection of the maternal to the paternal, we must also recognize that this "heavenly" hierarchy is inverted on earth. The primary authority of the Church is Christ in our midst. Our connection with the immanent presence of Christ demands we follow a leading that is justly called *hers*. In effect, the true Church, where men and women grow together in Christ's formation, is *matriarchal*.

But the language in this passage does not stop with an interplay of paternal and maternal imageries. Jesus concludes that "if you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love" (verse 10). Then the imagery shifts in verses 12-17, as Jesus gives his summary commandment, "that you love one another as I have loved you." Suddenly the interplay of maternal and paternal gives way to a peer imagery of friendship, just as the question of human interrelations arises. We are Jesus' *friends*, "for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you" (verse 15). As we pass on the love which Jesus passed on to us from the Father, we become the friends of Jesus, beloved in a cohortative sense. In other words, the distance between us and the divine is closed in acts of love. Serving one another in the Spirit of Christ, we regain the mutuality and trust of Eden. The garden is rediscovered in the growth, fruitfulness — and pruning — of the true vine.

So we see the gospel move through images of paternity, maternity, and finally community. The dynamics of faith will lead us to flow constantly among these imageries. Resistance to that flow — fixation upon a certain image — is the essence of idolatry. The paternal image of God has been the traditional idol of the Church and has been used to repress our experience of not only the maternity of God but even community in the fullest sense. A fixation upon community, however, has sometimes become the counter-idolatry of our age. Democratic and proletarian ideals have led many to scorn the paternity of God, embrace Jesus only as brother, and miss entirely the maternal orientation of the risen Christ. To agonize over the paternalism contained in the Bible, while remaining oblivious to the undercurrent of maternalism which is so strong in the New Testament suggests that we are controlled by modern paternalism even as we reject it.

Of course, it must be acknowledged that maternalism *remains* an undercurrent in the New Testament. The vine is an obliquely maternal image of God. Paul can proclaim "neither male nor female" in Christ, call Christ the wisdom ("Sophia") of God, and accept women as co-workers in his ministry; yet he succumbs to patriarchal social assumptions regarding men and women. The gospels give ample evidence of women in the inner circle around Jesus, yet they name only men as his disciples. The substance of the New Testament witness thus points to a truth that never quite emerges

formally, but needs to be understood and lived out in the body of Christ today.

Here we can only repeat the revolutionary re-reading of Scripture enacted by the first Christians themselves. They read the law and prophets of Israel in light of their experience of Christ and found new meaning in old prophecies. They were not bound by historical concerns about how those ancient prophets had intended to be understood. They instead read in the same Spirit that had inspired those prophets. Likewise, let *us* read the words of the prophets *and* the apostles in the light of our own experience of Christ. Let us be sensitive to the historical realities of the apostolic era, but not bounded by them. Let us read them with the mind of Christ, not with the mind of Paul or John. Then let us speak and act accordingly. In this revolutionary activity we become true *successors* to the apostles.

Let us then embrace *Christ present as our primary authority.* Our attention to that intimate authority requires a deep sensitivity to Christ's voice, light, or promptings within us. Our knowledge in Christ therefore has a strongly intuitive character. Each one of us must seek and know Christ first of all in this deeply personal experience. We must read Scripture first of all in the light of that experience. Unless we find and continue to seek that experience, we will not abide in Christ. We will operate out of our own motives, knowledge, and love, which cannot sustain us.

Nevertheless, sooner or later, questions of legitimacy must arise. The motions we feel deep within us can lead in many different directions, not all of them Christ's direction. That is simply because not every intuitive sensation is the Spirit of Christ. Likewise, not every reading of Scripture is given by that Spirit which originally flowed in the writers of Scripture. We can be unduly influenced by the culture around us, just as Scripture betrays the influence of its patriarchal cultural setting. Our own thoughts and feelings can well up in mysterious ways that seem to be divine. But many spirits move around and within us. Without a way to test the spirits, the vine will lose coherence and fruitfulness. It will become like the vineyard run wild in Isaiah's song (Isa. 5).

With the question of legitimacy we flow inevitably back into the realm of the paternal. How do we discern legitimate personal leadings and legitimate readings of Scripture? How do we prune away the false and contrary ones, inspired by

false and contrary spirits within and around us? In the long, patriarchal history of the Church it is not surprising that these questions have routinely eclipsed the concern for engendering a deep, abiding knowledge of Christ among all the branches. Orthodoxy has dominated nearly two millenia of Church life and has created countless mutations and disfigurations in the vine. This tragedy has occurred as men have assumed the place of the Father, cutting at the branches, separating the unity of the vine, and literally *burning* those who do not fit into their categories.

Since the second century, the vehicle of orthodoxy in the Church has been hierarchy, a male chain of command, a stairway of authority with its top aimed at heaven, as arrogantly as Babel's tower. Babel is the story of social alienation from the present voice of God; Church hierarchy is the Christian version of that story. The Reformation sought an alternative solution to the problem of legitimacy; it reduced hierarchical structure through a new emphasis upon the authority of Scripture. The interpretation of Scripture became the legitimation of the Church. Christian experience and activity had to be scrutinized next to the Bible, the history of God's dealings with humanity, so that the legitimacy of beliefs and practices could be inferred or ruled out. Here we are still raising the estate of paternity above that of maternity or community. The patriarchal profile of authority in Protestantism is visible in the emergence of the biblical scholar and preacher as the Christian scribe. Over time this scribal authority produces a body of orthodox interpretation to which Christians must conform. Like legal righteousness, this fabricated righteousness is ultimately a paternal system of fixed images that separates men and women from Christ.

But the question of legitimacy cannot be simply abandoned. Paternity and maternity belong together in the family of God. If they are separated, we the children suffer. Just as Adam recognized himself in Eve, paternity and maternity are essential to one another in the mystery of the true Church. That divine community amounts to nothing less than the restoration of the Edenic relationship.

We find the resolution of this problem, the integration of intimacy with legitimacy, in the third image of John 15, community. The intimate authority of Christ's presence within remains primary and extremely personal. The historical record of God's dealings with the people (pre-eminently

but not solely as recorded in Scripture) is the key to inferring the legitimacy of personal leadings attributed to Christ. The place where these two authorities are to be harmonized is in the community of God's children, Christ's friends — not by leaders who act in the place of either God or the community, but by the whole community itself. Here the transcendent sweep of history and the immanent movements of the Spirit must be reconciled in the hearts and minds of men and women who are prepared to lay down their lives for one another, as Jesus did for them. That self-sacrifice can take the form of relinquishing our own self-interests in favor of the claim of Truth as it speaks through an individual. It can take the form of risking the loss of another's affection by denying that their words or acts are in Christ's Spirit. The love that Jesus showed us will accept those sacrifices and risks. The Spirit will show us when and how to accept them. Christ, who both fulfilled and ended the Scriptures, will keep us in unity with the Father and with one another.

This discipline of group discernment is what I picture in John's reference to testing the spirits (1 John 4:1ff). Not every spirit is from God. Not even every apparent spirit of love is from God. The key to legitimacy John offers is the confession that "Jesus Christ has come in the flesh" (verse 2). At first glance, this might appear to be simply a test of creedal orthodoxy. But this statement provides the key to Christ's love, which forms the bond of friendship in the Church. Jesus' love was not a cosmic sentiment or an erotic longing, but a self-giving, life-surrendering act. That love brings new children of God into the world and nourishes them to fruitful lives.

That love flows in the true vine. Hierarchy obstructs that flow, whether it is hierarchy of gender or hierarchy of office. Orthodoxy saps love from the vine and inspires enmity in its place. Only the community can embody the love of Christ; only the vine as a whole can know and do the will of God. The community can recognize the particular fruits of some branches for certain tasks and can make special allowances so that such fruitfulness may be optimized. In the vine, however, there can be no office where established roles set individuals apart from the community. It is as false for a woman to exercise such office today as it has always been for a man. Such exercise is a disorientation from the Spirit of Christ. The word for that disorientation is *apostasy*, a

turning away.

Only through community with one another as daughters and sons of God, as friends of Christ, may we experience the loving paternity and maternity of God. Loving God as Father and Mother comes by loving one another as sisters and brothers. Again, let us note how Christ reveals to us *true humanity and true divinity*; in Christ the two become one lived reality. *Christian community* is the family that must be saved today. The hope for all our other families lies in the health of this one. *This* is the seed that is planted in the Creation and Fall story of Genesis, and which has still not seen full fruition. *This* is the seed of the woman that crushes the serpent's head, as God promised (Gen. 3:15). As the serpent inspired alienation between man, woman, and God, leading to Adam's domination of Eve, *this* seed shall overcome that spirit of mastery. In *this* seed of Abraham and Sarah shall all the families of the earth bless themselves (Gen. 12:3). *This* seed, sown in dishonor, breaks through the hard, stony earth of the heart and rises to glorious new life, where neither male nor female is enthroned, but Christ is all, and in all. *This* seed is one — and all are one in this seed.

Once again we witness the drama that unfolds as our idols begin to fall, as our images are displaced. It is a drama of recognition in Christ. In Christ, we recognize humanity more fully in the divine. Simultaneously, we recognize the divine image in humanity. This drama unfolds in the interplay of personas — mother, father, friend. The eternal is thus heard in the conversation between maternal, paternal, and mutual. It is not sufficient to state the truism that God is surely beyond human gender identity. That reality must be *lived* through the ongoing drama of recognition.

The authority of Christ present in all men and women forms the focal point of the Quaker vision. The participatory experience in discerning and following that authority in community is the formative experience behind the name "Friends." It is an experience and message that shook the patriarchal, militaristic, and class structures of seventeenth-century England, and continues to shake those persistent structures down to this day. It led Friends in colonial America to be the first religious body to renounce slave-holding. It empowered Quaker women to take leadership positions in the abolitionist and feminist movements of the nineteenth century. It has placed Friends on the vanguard of many

modern movements for a peaceful and just society.

Friends often take pride in the considerable impact of Quakerism, given our very small numbers. Friends are indeed a noteworthy phenomenon. At its best, Quakerism has represented a creative tension between group solidarity in the Spirit and an ability to reach out to people across all boundaries in the conviction that there is an inward knowledge of God that can be addressed in all people. But that tension is hard to maintain. Some Friends will attempt to strengthen unity through greater emphasis upon the Bible's authority and deference to pastoral leadership. These steps often preempt the full participation of all Friends in the search for true unity in the Spirit. Orthodoxy and hierarchy begin to compromise the full commitment to community. Other Friends will be more concerned to "answer that of God in every one" throughout our broadly pluralistic culture. As a result, the solidarity of the group often becomes diffuse and loses direction. Democratic ideals of equality, borrowed from secular culture, turn the search for true spiritual unity into a forum for personal expression and a consensus among viewpoints. Christ becomes marginalized as "the religion of our parents" and the creative interplay of paternal and maternal is barred.

These digressions among Friends constitute in differing ways the same problem of apostasy that Fox and early Friends assessed in the Christendom of their day, and they offer us no occasion for smugness. When we fall into these digressions, we draw back from the powerful tension that has energized Quakerism at its best; we draw back from the full drama of recognition that lies at the heart of the gospel and we repress for yet another generation that wonderful seed that awaits full fruition in this world.

8

The Form of this World Is Passing Away

With the unmasking of patriarchal idolatry, the traditional divisions according to gender roles begin to break down. The domestic sphere of home and hearth can no longer be maintained as a private domain against the public sphere of economic and political life. A vision that brings the private realm of personal faith together with the more public realm of Church and society is important for an integrative faith. The social structures of our world have profound influence on our private thoughts and behaviors. If we ignore the public dimension, we will be blind to important forces in our personal lives. At the same time, if we ignore our personal spirituality and focus only on public questions, we will lose our spiritual center altogether.

As we unmask our idols from within and then move outward, we see our drama of recognition open ever-widening vistas. We eventually embrace the full historical sweep of this drama and we arrive at that apocalyptic moment where *mystery* and *history* come together.

John the Baptist called people to that apocalyptic moment as he prepared them for the revelation of Christ. His preaching of repentance was radical iconoclasm; he urged men and women to renounce their idolatrous ways. From the brief accounts the gospels give of his message, it is clear that he preached repentance from both their habits of sin *and* their assumptions about salvation. They should no longer assume, for instance, that their identity as children of Abraham would deliver them on that coming day when the Messiah would shake the wheat from the chaff.

John spoke to a situation of mounting crisis in first-century Palestine. The Roman occupation had created social, economic, and religious difficulties for the Jewish populace. Heavy taxation caused debt and insolvency among many, especially peasant farmers. Also, the presence of Romans — Gentiles — made the land "unclean," ritually impure for those who attempted a strict observance of the law. How would the economy of the region survive? How could a devout Jew worship God adequately in an unclean land? Different parties within Judaism advanced different solutions to this painful crisis. The Sadducees simply collaborated with the Roman occupation, even as they administrated over the Temple; the Pharisees engaged in a scrupulous regimen of ritual washings (to maintain purity); the Zealots attempted armed insurrection. The different parties chafed at each other while tensions mounted.

The climate of crisis intensified popular expectation that God would soon intervene for the people: the Messiah would come to release them from these intolerable, degenerating circumstances. As we noted in the preceding chapter, the teachings and the fate of Jesus did not fulfill the messianic expectations of most people, especially those who were unwilling to suspend religious and political assumptions, as John had urged.

Nevertheless, Jesus' message spoke to their circumstances. In an atmosphere of debt crisis, Jesus preached debt forgiveness — in every sense of the word. He announced God's Jubilee, a time for releasing debts and freeing people from slavery. In circumstances of impending insurrection, he healed the servant of a Roman centurion. And amidst a rising concern for scrupulous legal purity, he countered that what defiles a person is what comes out, not what goes in.

Those who responded to this surprising message found

themselves disoriented from the society around them. They no longer fit in with the existing parties, the contending factions. They discovered God's reign already starting in their midst. It did not have to be constructed, like a political platform, or violently seized, like a military fortress.

We have no way of knowing just how such a groundswell might have developed if there had been more time. It is clear that there was a rising tide of *anticipation* of God's reign — both expectation of its appearance and partial enactments of its reality — until the Romans feared they might soon lose control. The death of Jesus as a political and religious threat suggests that Jesus' ministry had considerable social impact within a short timespan.

After the death of Jesus, his followers remained in the synagogues of Palestine. They preached Jesus and God's reign to their fellow Jews, bringing some into this new order. This lasted until sometime after the Jewish Revolt and the destruction of the Temple in the year 70; Rome crushed the Zealot-led insurrection and might take still harsher measures if Jewish unrest continued. Jewish leadership prudently sought to clear the synagogues from inflammatory revolutionary rhetoric. Christians and other groups that preached the Messiah and emphasized the reign of God were excluded. That move marked the end of the Christian movement within the religious and social life of Judaism.

By that time, however, the gospel of Jesus had already moved beyond the Jewish community. In Syria, Asia Minor, Greece, Rome and beyond, a Christian community made up of both Jews and Gentiles was beginning to thrive in urban centers. This surprising development was due to the work of a number of itinerant preachers who moved around the eastern Mediterranean, including the apostle Paul. We know very little about those early Christian congregations. We have mainly the oblique descriptions made by Paul in his letters, as well as the historical sketch recorded in Acts. In *The First Urban Christian*, New Testament scholar Wayne Meeks has sifted through the approximately sixty people's names dropped by Paul in his letters. He infers what he can from them with our knowledge of Greco-Roman society in the middle of the first century.

There does not seem to be a very consistent social or economic "type" among those early Christians. That diversity in itself is significant. But one factor emerges with notable

frequency: a number of the people mentioned by Paul probably experienced a marked degree of social role tension in their lives. In a society where social standing was important and fairly rigid, many of these individuals found themselves in a mixed status. Examples would include: Jews with Greek names moving in a Gentile cultural world, sometimes even as Roman citizens, like Paul; Gentiles who had been worshipers in Jewish synagogues; slaves who had been freed, but were still marked by their slave background; women who exercised an unusual degree of independence. These people did not quite fit into the usual categories. They probably felt a certain degree of discomfort with the society around them.

So while these people were perhaps not part of a society in crisis, like Judea of Jesus' day, they experienced their own personal identity crisis, a dissonance in their social roles. We can well imagine that these were not the only people who responded to Paul's preaching, but they seem to show up in significant numbers. Like those who responded to John the Baptist's demand to repent of their social assumptions, these men and women might be especially open to the gospel "turning the world upside down." Their idols might not have been completely out of the way, but they were by no means organized into a tidy system.

Meeks notes that the highly paradoxical person and preaching of Paul would speak powerfully to this audience. First of all, imagine Paul the rabbinic scholar and Roman citizen, the persecutor of Jewish Christians turned apostle to the Gentiles. Now there was a walking paradox! Then consider the profound ironies in his preaching of Christ, the crucified Messiah. Jesus offers the ultimate paradigm for social dissonance: unrecognized for who he is, he is rejected, condemned, and executed; dead and buried, Jesus is raised from the dead and ascends to the right hand of God. Added to this powerful personal paradigm of Jesus, Paul maintained the strong expectation of social change — indeed, world transformation — that both John and Jesus had preached. The reign of God was being revealed to the eyes of faith.

This gospel message spoke profoundly to people who felt "out of synch" with their world. It did not make them "well-adjusted" or suddenly comfortable with their situation. It in fact heightened their friction with society. "In Christ," they were harder than ever to categorize, and their rejection of the

standard idols (religious and otherwise) aroused outright suspicion and hostility from neighbors, friends, and families. More than just not fitting in, they were cast off from normal society, even as they continued to live very much in its midst.

This would have been a grim, forlorn existence if not for the great joy these same individuals felt when they met together in the Christian community. Here they shared one another's trials and temptations, joys and victories. In Christ, a wide variety of people became understandable to one another. Their many paths converged in the person of Jesus who lived and spoke through the faithful. The boundaries that kept different types of people strictly organized and separated in the Greco-Roman world at large were breaking down in the Christian community.

We see a wonderful vignette of this new community in Paul's brief personal letter to Philemon. Apparently the runaway slave of a wealthy Christian householder has been brought to Christ by Paul. Paul sends him back to his master, Philemon, and asks that he be received "no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, as a beloved brother" (verse 16). In addition, Paul seems to be asking Philemon to send this new-found brother back so that he can help Paul in his imprisonment. Ironically, the slave is now free, yet more compelled by his love for Paul than he had ever been bound by slavery to Philemon. For his part, Philemon has lost a valuable servant but gained a beloved brother.

The Christian community Paul describes is not an adventure of tolerance among slaves and free, Jew and Greek, but *neither* Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free. The community of disciples is a new social reality. The old categories no longer obtain. What is decisive in the Christian community is the person of Christ. All suffering and all glory are shared together in Christ. And all status in Christ is according to the gifts of service bestowed upon men and women in the Spirit.

With the liberating community they experienced among themselves and the increasing friction they experienced with the outside, these early churches lived in *anticipation* of the end of the world. By anticipation I again mean both an *expectation* (inherited from the apocalyptic preaching of Jesus) that their world was soon to collapse *and* the advance *enactment* of the new world order. In other words, they looked around themselves and saw a world coming apart at the

seams. Yet they did not simply sit back and wait for it to happen. Not only did they try to alert others to the impending crisis, but they gathered into a new social pattern which suggested the world order to come. That new order was characterized by compassionate community of material and spiritual resources. In the risen Christ, the ultimate future, the end of the world, they lived the reign of God *now*.

Of course, this was no easy life. God's mysterious reign (or "righteousness" more often in Paul's usage) was hard to find and maintain among the nuts and bolts of daily existence. It slipped away as mysteriously as it was revealed among them. The very letters of Paul show us some of the many ways those early Christians lost the thread: they resorted to the law, got lost in Hellenistic and Persian philosophies, carelessly scandalized one another on sensitive matters, and slipped back into patriarchal patterns in their social relationships. Yet Paul tirelessly worked to steer them back to the faith they first received, the love they usually demonstrated to one another, and the community they had known before.

Paul's thinking on these questions becomes vivid in the seventh chapter of his first letter to the Corinthian Church. Evidently, some of the Christians there had concluded that following Christ required a sexual asceticism. Jesus had apparently remained unmarried. Perhaps they also knew of his words, "in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven" (Matt. 22:30). Should the community of Christ exclude marriage? From Paul's answer, we can see that he personally tended toward the ascetic path. He urged his readers to remain like himself, unmarried (verse 7).

Still, he stops far short of forbidding marriage. His perspective is summed up with the words, "he who marries his betrothed does well; and he who refrains from marriage will do better" (verse 38). What viewpoint leads him to that conclusion? The answer is found in verses 25-31. The perspective of his counsel is the view that "the appointed time has grown very short" (verse 29). Paul sees an "impending distress" (verse 26) upon the world. In his view, "the form of this world is passing away" (verse 31). This imminent world trauma is what he calls in other places "the wrath" (Rom. 1:18).

From that perspective, Paul presses his urgent desire that his friends be "free from anxieties. The unmarried man is

anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; but the married man is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided" (verses 32f). (He goes on in the next verses to say that the interests of unmarried and married women divide the same way.) Here Paul is giving the basic definition of "fear of the Lord": a primary orientation toward God. In a world situation of "impending distress," to fear God is crucial. Otherwise, one will be overwhelmed by a world of fears. Whether Paul is completely right in his characterization of married life *versus* unmarried life, the important thing here is his focus upon a single-minded fear of God.

In that light, Paul advises the married to remain married and the unmarried to remain unmarried: "it is well for a person to remain as he is" (verse 26). He expands this principle from the question of marriage to questions of circumcision and slavery in verses 17-24. "Every one should remain in the state in which he was called" (verse 20). If a slave can gain his freedom, go ahead. Often the Christian community was able to help a slave member obtain freedom from a pagan master. Otherwise, do not be consumed by desires and schemes to gain freedom. Develop the freedom that is in Christ. Live it out in the new social order emerging in the Church.

Paul believed that the total transformation of the world was imminent, that Christ would soon sweep away the violent and unjust order that prevailed around the Church. A new order would instate the new relationships that Christ was already developing in the Church. In that case, it was wise for believers to focus their energies upon the life of the Church and be faithful foremost to one another in Christ. Why attempt to become more comfortable in relation to the world? Its social categories were soon to pass. Marriage was one of those categories. Entering it, one would enter into all its worldly contingencies: "those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I would spare you that" (verse 28).

Paul offers a dictum for living provisionally among the world's categories without living by them: "I mean, brethren, the appointed time has grown very short; from now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, and those who deal with

the world as though they had no dealings with it" (verses 29-31). His counsel remains intentionally allusive, rather than prescriptive, leaving his Corinthian brothers and sisters to work it out creatively in the Spirit of Christ.

Reading Paul's words some two thousand years later, we conclude that he must have been wrong. His timetable was way off. The end of the world was by no means imminent. Actually, it did not take long for the Church to begin suspecting as much. By the early second century, the vision of the Church had begun to shift. The "end-time" imperatives of Paul started giving way to the "meantime" rationalizations of an institutional Church. Certainly, Christ *would* return someday and change everything. But in the meantime, peace must be made with the worldly categories. Life must go on: marriage must be established by the authority of the Church, which was already beginning to accommodate to the world's hierarchical categories. The official authority of bishops eventually came to eclipse the charismatic authority of apostles and prophets like Paul; and the qualities of a good bishop were defined in great degree by patriarchal norms of marriage and family life (See 1 Tim. 3:1-7). Henceforth, the circular logic of the world's systems quickly permeated the life of the Church.

But *was* Paul really wrong? Certainly, the world did not end. It was not replaced by the peaceful and just order promised by God. Nevertheless, *the world as Paul knew it in Christ was dying, just as the world as we know it in Christ is too.* It is simply one of the long parade of world orders in history, each of which begins to crumble even as it is formed.

While this digressive progression of the world may be observed from a study of history, it is most acutely discerned in Christ. "The world as we know it" in the present often seems anything but passing. It seems overwhelmingly established, grinding everything into conformity by its sheer weight. We may feel totally awed and overcome by it, just as John felt when he viewed Babylon (Rev. 17:6). Yet the world as we know it *in Christ* is dramatically transformed by a different perspective. In Christ, we view all things from the future of the Risen One. We see the end of all things as we ourselves come into the end. We are no longer conformed to the world but transformed by the renewal of our minds, as we come to our "wits' end" in Christ. We see the end, the outcome, of the world, just as our perceptions shifted with

the figures we looked at in Chapter VI. The world is no longer the "be all and end all;" Christ is.

When we gather into the community of Christ's Spirit and discern the new order emerging in our midst, it is the beginning of the new world. The new social patterns we form among ourselves belong to God's reign, no matter how incomplete, changeable, or transitory. God's new order remains fluid because it forms in relation to, in response to, the constantly changing forms of the world. Instances of true Christian community throughout these two millenia cannot be all identical. They break out in different historical situations, yet they have important points in common. We can expect to find the same shifting of social categories found in Paul's congregations, the same reconciling convergence among diverse backgrounds, and the same kind of friction with the world.

Furthermore, we can expect to find the same consciousness of a world order in crisis. In Christ we see that "the form of this world is passing away." The patterns of the Christian community may help influence the next "form of this world," if that community is creative and resilient enough to have that kind of effect. Thus, community can be a catalyst of change between one social order and another. But that is a secondary consideration; faithful discipleship has its own integrity. The mark of true Christian community is the way it presently embodies the ultimate promises of God, and the manner in which it confirms the previous incarnations of those promises. It doesn't have to be accepted by the world in order to be validated. We may conclude that Paul was wrong about the end of the world mainly insofar as the Church in succeeding generations failed to *live* in the end of the world.

A helpful illustration of this principle may be gleaned from the Hebrew prophecy of Amos. Amos prophesied during a time when Israel had forsaken the righteousness of God; the poor were victimized in order to build glorious imperial buildings and create a powerful war machine. The Israelites had abandoned the purpose for which God had delivered them into the Promised Land. Israel now acted by the same motives and employed the same economic and political strategies as its neighboring states.

Amos prophesied the doom of Israel by placing it among the violent and calamitous ranks of its neighbors (Amos 1 and 2).

Because Israel's social order was degenerating to that of its neighbors, it would be caught in the same web of violent rise and fall that entangles the rest of the world. Israel's doom was not so special — it was simply the way of all the world's nations. What had been *special* was Israel's previous adherence to God's justice. God had promised to protect that order against all of Israel's enemies. That order no longer existed to be protected. So Israel's *fall* was not the end of the world. Israel's earlier *faithfulness* had been the end of the world.

The saga of the churches over these two millenia tells the same story. As their way of knowing has conformed to the world's way of knowing, they have been conformed to the world, even dedicated to undergirding the world. Their patterns of authority have been conformed to the world's. Their social patterns have come to mirror the world's, with only cultic and idiosyncratic exceptions. Therefore, as with Israel, God has given them up to their ways. So the churches enter the world's pattern of rise and decline and become alternately victims and victors in those patterns. They duplicate the shattered and scattered image of an incoherent world. They step back from the end-time and re-invest their interests in the meantime.

One comment is important to make at this point. When Paul wrote to the Corinthians in their place and time, he urged them generally to remain as they were in relation to the outside world, since it was passing away before their eyes. The important transformation was the new order of things experienced among themselves. Slaves should remain slaves, unless their freedom was readily obtainable. In nineteenth-century America, some used this advice to uphold the institution of slavery. Yet there were also men and women of faith who worked for the end of slavery. Which group of Christians had the mind of Christ in this matter? Only those who fully immerse themselves in the drama of recognition can discern.

Paul was not wrong about his times. It is *we* who are wrong when we do not discern our times as he discerned his. When we persist in knowing the world as it knows itself, then the world becomes overwhelming and the end of the world recedes into a distant future. The perceptual shift that we must make requires the preparative role of repentance. It requires that we ravage our personal pantheons of idiosyncracies, ideas, ideals, and ideologies. A space must be cleared

for the revelation of Christ, for *the coming of Christ* in our experience.

Yes, there *shall* be a terminal point in history when Christ will be revealed to *all* (and in a way that will surprise Christians as much as non-Christians!). The time and manner of that event, however, is not our concern. The time and manner of Christ's coming in our own experience must be our all-consuming concern. The apocalypse, the revelation of Christ, the Day of God, the day of our visitation is *now*. *This* is the judgment, that the light *has come* into the world. To know and do the truth is to come to the light that our thoughts and actions may be unmasked. And coming into the light, we shall come *together* — for the light, the truth, is one.

How then are we to come together in the light, the truth of Christ in our present circumstances? How shall we come to know our world as Christ knows it, as Paul came to know his world? Again, we are engaged in the drama of recognition.

The question of knowing today involves a dilemma that is unprecedented in history. Over the past thirty years, a phenomenon has appeared in our culture that has radically accented our ways of knowing. That phenomenon is commonly referred to as *the media*.

The media have a profound influence upon the social, economic, and political processes of our culture. Today we know the world too often as the media would have us know it. The media are the source of information about local, national, and world events. The media also display to us certain social roles, political values, and economic functions — and invite us to find ourselves among them. What products will we buy? What candidates will we elect? What roles will we play? We tend to see our options as they are portrayed by the media.

So the media function as the *image brokers* of our society. They provide us a dazzling (if incoherent) image of the world, its meaning, and its options. Our self-consciousness is construed by the way we place ourselves in that world, the self-image we construct out of available products, options, and values. The media, therefore, have offered us the most exotic hybrid of the fruit of the tree of knowledge. And all the dangerous side-effects of consuming that fruit — alienation, fear, distrust, objectification, domination, violence — have found exotic new expressions with this hybrid. Mass murder, child abuse, violence against women, theft, drug addiction —

any number of the symptoms of despair — have been reshaped and mass-produced to great degree by the media's way of knowledge. The media create an unreality of experience that makes violence and compassion, lust and love, all equally appealing and equally threatening to us. We withdraw from the world of real human interaction to view all things by the cool light of cathode rays.

This critique of "media consciousness" is not to be confused with the recent attacks by religious conservatives regarding the content of television programming and news reporting. I am questioning the *context* set by the media experience even more than the *content* the media present. Whatever the harmful effects of sexual and violent content in the media may or may not be, the problem I am pointing to is much deeper and more insidious.

With the media, the world's forms are reinforced upon the human mind. The media are the medium of the world. If the world is the fragmented, incoherent realm of forces estranged from God, then the media will impress those forces and their estrangement upon us. They will inspire us to seek salvation through the world's images — political images of power, social images of prestige, and economic images of advantage. But those images will never add up to a coherent whole.

The incoherence of the media is well illustrated by their coverage of religious issues. Not necessarily antireligious, the media do devote some attention to religious phenomena. But as the medium of the world, they mainly project the world's images of what religion is about. Therefore, the media deal mostly in truisms and stereotypes. For example, when a group of Southern Baptists makes slurs against Jews, it passes for news; it fits certain popular images of Southern Baptists. When a group of Southern Baptists works for world peace, however, it does not make the news. For one thing, it does not fit the stereotype for that group. For another, it does not make for dramatic pictures. Lies, hate, scandal, war, and disaster — alienation and fragmentation of all kinds — these are images the world can recognize. The reconciling reign of God, working like leaven in the dough, or like the tiny mustard seed, will not make the news most of the time. When it does, it will usually be misrepresented.

Friends today are sometimes disturbingly gullible to the images purveyed by the media. Liberal Friends, themselves often alienated from Christianity in all forms, are sometimes

willing to reduce all Catholicism to the collaboration with Nazis, and all Protestantism to the sleazy antics of television evangelists. Such a jaundiced view can be maintained only through isolation from many exciting movements in both realms. For their part, evangelical Friends have more critical perspective on the media's portrayal of religious issues, but often lack the discernment of liberal Friends on many social and political issues. They are often mystified and enthralled by the norms of nationalism, militarism, sexism, and racism that the media represent as self-evident and acceptable.

I am not arguing here for the media as the cause of all the world's problems. There is much competition for that distinction! But because images are a powerful force in our ways of knowing, the media today become a key issue. As the media reinforce the world's categories, they work against Christ, who shifts those categories. The medium of Christ is the Spirit, just as breath is the medium of the word in the human voice.

As the media are the medium of the world, the world is the medium of Satan, who employs confusion to draw us into evil. When we recall the three temptations of Jesus in the wilderness, we remember that Satan tempted him to exercise his power according to the world's economic, political, and religious categories. If Jesus had fallen to those temptations, the power of God in him would have been thwarted. Satan would have successfully *captivated* Jesus, using the world's forms. Satan would captivate us too, using the seemingly benign conventions of our world. The media magnify those conventions, glorify those forms, and seduce us to accept the American Dream in all its private bliss — to live under house arrest. But Christ has overcome the world, and seeks to liberate us from captivity to the world, guiding us by the Holy Spirit. In Christ we, too, can overcome.

How, then, shall we live? Shall we retreat from society, to form a separate reality? That has sometimes been done admirably, but it is harder to escape today's world, with its pervasive, interlocking systems. Besides, the first Christians lived very much in the world. How shall we buy as though we had no goods and deal with the world as though we had no dealings with the world?

"How-to" books are very popular today. But this is not one of them. My goal is not to supply the answers (as if I had them!), but to invite men and women to dethrone their idols

on all fronts and to enter the drama of recognition. We start with *repentance*. Today, as perhaps never before, we are faced with the need to repent. New theories proliferate daily to explain the world's problems. New technologies are devised to solve them. Yet the truth is that we do not have the answers, much less the solutions. We attempt to shout back the chaos with words — the media's words, the experts' words, and our own words. Yet when we see the true depth of our dilemma we are left speechless.

When we at last face up to the overwhelming complexity and the unfathomable depths of our existence, we can only, with Job, sit silent in dust and ashes: "...therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know" (Job 42:3).

In the mounting din of our world, nothing speaks more eloquently than silence. Nothing will allow God to be heard as fully. In repentant stillness a space is cleared and a way is prepared for the coming of Christ. The stage is set for the drama of recognition. That drama is nothing other than the reliving of the story told in the four gospels. It is the drama of God's power revealed in the humble and lowly. It is God's salvation revealed in humiliation. It is God's Word incarnated in silence.

God's Word is to be revealed in the midst of a people who are quiet. Not complacently quiet, but disturbingly quiet. God's glory is to be revealed in their plainness. God's multifaceted wisdom is to be revealed in their humbled simplicity. This people shall bear God's Word into the world — "pure speech" in words and acts — through pregnant silence, expectant quietness. Therein is the fulfilling of the prophecy of Zephaniah (3:8-13): "Therefore wait for me," says the Lord, "for the day when I arise as a witness. For my decision is to gather nations, to assemble kingdoms to pour out upon them my indignation, all the heat of my anger; for in the fire of my jealous wrath all the earth shall be consumed. Yea, at that time I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call on the name of the Lord and serve him with one accord. From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia my suppliants, the daughter of my dispersed ones, shall bring my offering. On that day you shall not be put to shame because of the deeds by which you have rebelled against me; for then I will remove from your midst your proudly exultant ones, and you shall no longer be haughty in my holy

mountain. For I will leave in the midst of you a people humble and lowly. They shall seek refuge in the name of the Lord, those who are left in Israel; they shall do no wrong and utter no lies, nor shall there be found in their mouth a deceitful tongue. For they shall pasture and lie down, and none shall make them afraid."

Early Friends understood themselves as the fulfillment of that prophecy. In waiting upon God in silent expectation, they experienced the witness of God arise within and among them. This presence often came as a powerful force that shook the earth within them, causing them to quake. Yet through that experience of "the wrath" they came to feel their speech purified; through the death of self, a new Word communicated new life and a new unity that was deeper than any unity constructed from creeds or political positions. In the midst of an arrogant society built upon sexism and classism, they became a humble people, identifiable through their plain speech, their refusal to swear oaths, their refusal to bow or use titles to their social "betters," their plain dress and simple lifestyle that eschewed the "vain fashions" of their culture. Though they suffered much abuse for these testimonies to Christ, they took their refuge in God's care, finding that "the Lord's power is over all."

It is very important that modern Friends discover new ways of fulfilling that prophecy for these times. The casual clothes that we wear to our meetings do not communicate the same plainness or simplicity that early Quaker dress did. And dressing up like "old-time Quakers" for special occasions, like the centennial celebrations of local meetings, is camp at its worst. Yet many Friends do struggle today to find ways to simplify their lives and live in humility and harmony with our environment. We need to be in greater communication with one another about our experiments and findings; we also need to consider how these lifestyle alternatives can communicate truth to the world by our united commitment to them. Friends have a rich tradition of awareness that everything we say and do communicates to others. Therefore, let our lives preach Good News to that of God in every one.

Zephaniah's prophecy offers powerful images for our continuing reflection in these times. What is meant by "in the fire of my jealous wrath all the earth shall be consumed"? Nuclear holocaust? The end of the world? Perhaps. God has given us freedom to destroy ourselves if we prefer. As Paul

portrays the pervasive blight of idolatry in Romans 1, he emphasizes three times that "God gave them up" to their alienation from the Truth, suggesting that this release itself expresses God's wrath. So if we choose to incinerate ourselves, it will be an expression of our freedom, not God's will.

The stakes are indeed high, higher today than ever before. The form of this world *is* passing away — perhaps ultimately. The end of the world is near, nearer today than ever before — it always is. But the question is this: will we continue to be swept toward it, dreading it, denying it, denouncing it, and all in vain? Or will we, with Paul, turn resolutely to face it? Will we come to the end of the world before it comes to us?

It is God's fervent desire that the judgment upon the earth be fulfilled *inwardly* in our hearts, that we know the end of the world *now* in *hope*, rather than later in regret. Turning to God in freedom, we enter into the end. The earth is consumed by fire in our hearts. Our earthly images are consumed — our neuroses, our ideas, our ideals and ideologies are melted away in the white-hot fire of Christ's inward apocalypse, Christ's revelation in our hearts. By faith we see the house we have built on fire, the clothing we wear on fire. We must get out of that house; we must strip away that clothing. Doing that, we pass through the flaming sword at the gates of Eden to stand naked once again in the garden before God. This is the path of spiritual transformation described in the opening chapters of George Fox's *Journal*, which was typical of spiritual formation among early Friends, and which continues to be experienced by some among us down to this day.

That transformation is not made in a day. We shall not be saved at an altar or in a single evening of remorse and rebirth. It takes time to bring low the mountains, to straighten the crooked ways, to fill in the valleys of the heart (Luke 3:5). The way of Christ is prepared by the Spirit of Christ in our hearts. We need only submit to the power within. It may feel devastating at times. Yet, through all the critical judgment in the burning intensity of God's light, we will also feel the sustaining, alluring warmth of God's love.

As judgment/repentance/iconoclasm comes to its fullness in us, we feel the fiery baptism of Christ that John promised. The chaff will be removed from us and consumed, so that we stand naked at last before God — then at last the kernel of truth in us may be *gathered* together into the granary of God

(Matt. 3:12). This gathering begins to fulfill God's purposes in the world. The purpose, however, is not that we be stored away in a sheltered place. The harvest gathering of God is the culmination of a growing season which also looks forward to a new season of productivity.

The true gathering of the Church creates a new social reality that is not removed from the world but remains in the world. It manifests new social patterns and new outlooks which begin to interact with the world in dynamic ways. As with the first Christian congregations, that newness may elicit hostile reactions from the world. The new community may be called to suffer for its living witness to God's peace and justice, its message of reconciliation in words and acts. This witness is simply the community's reseeding itself into the world for a new season. "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24).

The early Quaker movement boldly proclaimed a new order in English society: through preaching in the marketplaces, through confronting the vested authority of the clergy, through modeling new patterns of social, economic, and gender relations, through challenging every form of hierarchy in society, through calling all men and women into their joyful new order, and through suffering the violent abuses of the defensive old order. The rich harvest of Quaker convincements was thus extravagantly resown into witness and sacrifice in the world.

Friends in 1652 thought they were participating in the beginning of the end of the world. Yet by 1700, it seemed all too clear that God's wonderful reign on earth had been successfully repelled once again. Were the early Friends proven wrong? Or, have subsequent generations of Friends been mistaken,when we have stepped back from the imperatives of the end-time and accommodated ourselves to the more prudent options of a reasonable, respectable, and profitable meantime?

The fertility of God's realm is different from the fertility religions of the world. Its generativity is grounded in trust instead of anxiety. It is self-giving rather than self-preserving. It is not defensive. Here we know one another in the eternal. Here the marriage is known that was seen by John in Revelation, where a new heaven and a new earth meet in a new Jerusalem, a new community where God's light is the

central authority. Here the end of the world is known and the new world begins. Here the gate of the city stands open all the time. Here the peoples have access again to the tree of life. Here are its leaves for our healing. Here is now!

9

Darkness at Noon

Christians often read the four gospels of the New Testament simply as historical information. We read the Sermon on the Mount to learn how Jesus taught us to live. We read of the crucifixion and resurrection to know that Jesus died for the sins of the world and leads us into newness of life.

That *propositional* knowledge is important. But at the deeper level, the gospels portray an unfolding drama of recognition, one that we ourselves enter if we allow Jesus, its central figure, to speak directly to us. When this happens, we come to a *participational* knowledge of the gospel story. We enter the story of Jesus as we allow Jesus into our story. Christ is here as we were there. That deeper experience suggests that the gospel drama is always being played out in our world. The word of the cross is perennially "folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Cor. 1:18). The gospel brings into focus a drama that is going on everywhere in our midst, but which

usually remains diffuse and unconscious.

Nowhere are the universal dimensions of this drama more resonant than in the Fourth Gospel. John establishes a fundamental paradox in his Prologue (1:1-18), where he describes the Word of God. This Word, this life and light from God, illuminates everyone who comes into the world, though often they do not recognize it (verses 9f). Yet, this Word came into the world in a special way, with particular power and purpose, in the person of Jesus. That paradoxical tension — between the *universality* of the Word's revelation in all, and the *particularity* of Jesus, his historical context, and life — is played out in John's gospel with a singular force. Indeed, much of the gospel's power is in its unresolved, at times unbearable, tension between the universal and the particular. Scientists tell us that life is sustained by various forms of oscillation. Likewise, the light is life as it produces this paradoxical tension in the Christian experience.

John the Baptist is the first character to appear as the drama begins. In many ways, the Baptist epitomizes the particularity of the Jewish context. He embodies the fervent hope of Israel, awaiting the Messiah, its promised deliverer. John's prophetic voice is first to witness to the identity of Jesus, as the Lamb and Son of God. Those are two titles with definite history in Jewish tradition. Still, John also speaks once of Jesus in a more allusive, even hidden sense, as "one whom you do not know" (John 1:26).

The sense of Jesus as an unknown, as someone who transcends existing images and categories, continues throughout the Gospel of John. Even as more titles from Judaism are ascribed to Jesus, there is a continuing sense that while these are crucial identifying marks, Jesus is somehow all these and more. Thus, while Jesus is given such particular titles as Messiah (1:41) and Son of God (1:49), he goes on to embody other, more general symbols within Judaism, such as the temple (2:13-22), manna (6:35-40), and shepherd (10:11ff) of Israel. But this movement carries even beyond these broader historical and sacramental images of Judaism into more universal metaphors for Jesus as revealer and savior: light (8:12), door (10:7ff), way, truth, life (14:6), and vine (15:1ff). The identity of Jesus repeatedly *confirms* Jewish expectation, yet cannot be entirely *conformed* to the outlines of its images.

Modern scholars have often noted how the Gospel of John

seems to move radically in two different directions. It offers profound insights into the meaning of Jesus as fulfiller of the Hebrew tradition. At the same time it makes Jesus comprehensible in the categories of the wider Greco-Roman culture that surrounded Judaism. The prime example of this double movement is found in John's description of Christ as *logos*, or Word. The Word is central to the Hebrew faith, as the relation of God to the world, both in creating and redeeming. But the Word is also the key to cosmic reality in the philosophical traditions of Greece. Thus, as *logos*, John presents Jesus as the embodiment, or incarnation, of a divine reality recognizeable to Jew and Greek alike.

Significantly, John's paradox is accentuated precisely in Jesus' only "interfaith" conversation, his encounter with the Samaritan woman. The woman's initial testiness exemplifies the serious frictions between Samaritans and Jews in that period. For his part, Jesus speaks very much as a Jew. Referring to their respective religious backgrounds, he says to her, "You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews" (4:22). Jesus strongly affirms the particular value of the historical revelation to his people through Moses and the prophets. Nevertheless, is his description of the Samaritan spirituality really a put-down? In the context of John's continuing theme of Jesus as *unknown*, it is debatable. Moreover, Jesus goes on to put the particularity of his Jewish tradition in a very different light: "but the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such the Father seeks to worship him" (next verse). The particularity of those who "know" and the universality of those who "do not know" will be joined in a place that is (neither) the Jews' temple in Jerusalem, nor the Samaritans' shrine at Gerazim (verse 21). That "place" is spirit and truth.

The conversation between Jesus the Jew and the woman of Samaria takes place at a well. In the Bible, encounters between men and women at wells typically lead to marriage (Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel, Moses and Zipporah). The symbolism here is too strong to ignore. John portrays a betrothal of sorts, the first movement toward the later "marriage" of Jew and Gentile in the early Church. Their new "home" will be in neither Judaism nor any religion, but in spirit and truth. That place is the joining of the particular and the universal in Christ. It is a marriage made in heaven,

though it is rife with earthly tensions.

This new revelation necessarily implies the eclipse of the old revelation through Moses and the traditional worships of both Jew and Gentile. That is not something to be casually proclaimed, however, even by Jesus. It is not simply a "neat idea." The old is eclipsed only as it is fulfilled and validated. Jesus performs this radical act in his own body, with his own blood. In embodying the life and hopes of Israel, Jesus offers himself as the perfection of Israel. Yet in his evident commonness as a Galilean rustic, he is not recognized by his own people. He is rejected as an imposter and as a threat to the very life of the people (11:45-53). (Remember: this is the same problem John described in 1:9f with the light that illuminates every one. The rejection of Jesus is at one with all human rejection of the light of God in them.) Jesus, this man who is known yet unknown, is handed over to the Gentiles, the Roman military, who execute him as a political threat. The revelation of God in Jesus goes into *eclipse*. He is repudiated, executed, and buried in a stone tomb.

That eclipse reaches its final expression on the third day, when the women come to the tomb and find his body gone. The *emptiness* of the tomb completes their sense of loss, brokenness, and woundedness. Yet this moment of *total eclipse* serves an important role. It *clears a space*, it *prepares the way* for a tremendous new revelation to be received. For it is at the tomb that Mary, weeping in her utter grief, encounters the Risen Christ. Significantly, *she does not know* right away who it is. This does not look like anyone special. She takes Jesus to be the gardener of the place. It is only as this gardener calls her by name that she recognizes Jesus; she makes the connection between her beloved teacher and this stranger.

Eclipse is thematic in all four gospels as the pivot point in the Christian revelation. Matthew and Mark narrate that as Jesus hung from the cross, darkness covered the earth from the sixth until the ninth hours. The sun was in eclipse from noon until three, when Jesus suddenly cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:45f; Mark 15:33f). The Greek version of Jesus' anguished cry uses the verb *ekleipo*, which we translate as "forsake" or "abandon." *Ekleipo* is the root of our English word, "eclipse," and was also used in ancient times for solar eclipses, when the sun failed, or forsook the earth. The experience of eclipse, of darkness at

noon, of abandonment by God, is the awful reality of the crucifixion of Jesus. That very experience, however, accentuated by the empty tomb in all four gospels, is pivotal to the new revelation of the Risen Christ.

The variations on this theme in Luke and John are noteworthy. Luke includes the same account of solar eclipse at the crucifixion, but omits the words of Jesus. At the Last Supper, however, Jesus tells the disciples he has prayed that their faith will not fail (*ekleipo*] again) in the awful hours to come (Luke 22:32).

John's Gospel emphasizes the cross as the beginning of Jesus' glorification. Truly it is, in the most profound sense. John does not refer to a solar eclipse or any cry of abandonment on the cross. He places the moment of darkness, the "high noon" event, during Jesus' trial before Pilate (18:28 - 19:16), which he develops more fully than the other three gospel writers do. Here Jesus is brought to Pilate by the chief priests with charges that are vague but ominous. Pilate is puzzled by the situation and does not want to be drawn into a religious controversy. (He has learned by bitter experience not to insult the religious sensibilities of Judaism.) Still, the chief priests insist that Jesus is a troublemaker Pilate must handle himself.

Pilate's real concern is to maintain Roman control over this troublesome province. That has thus far been accomplished by a combination of military presence and a working relationship with local elites, the chief priests and Sadducees. So what is the problem here, a political threat? "Are you the King of the Jews?" Pilate queries Jesus. Pilate could not humor a rival power. Jesus' reply is affirmative but paradoxical: "My kingship is not of this world;" otherwise he would have resisted arrest. "So you are a king?" "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Every one who is of the truth hears my voice." Pilate gives his famous counter-question: "What is truth?"

Pilate's question is not an invitation to philosophical debate. It is an impatient outburst. What does truth have to do with this? Truth is moot. What matters is to manipulate the competing interests and contending powers in order to maintain overall control. Pilate is *neutral* to truth, and as he encounters the embodiment of truth, he aims to be neutral toward Jesus. He attempts to inspire some "power realism"

in this Galilean's mind when he threatens Jesus, saying, "Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?" Jesus replies disarmingly, "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above...." Something about Jesus is very unsettling to Pilate. His presence stirs something within that Pilate does not want to acknowledge: the light that illuminates — exposes — every one who comes into the world.

Doggedly, Pilate attempts to maintain control by maintaining neutrality. But the chief priests continue to press him. No "friend of Caesar" would allow a troublemaker like Jesus to go free. Pilate scourges and mocks Jesus in an attempt to appease the priests, but without success. The final descent into this darkness occurs at the sixth hour, at noon, when Pilate teasingly asks the priests, "Shall I crucify your King?" Their answer is a pledge of allegiance that warms the Prefect's heart and seals the fate of Jesus: "we have no king but Caesar." The authority of divine truth is fully repudiated in favor of human power arrangements. Jesus is sent off to his death.

Christian readers are perennially tempted to sympathize with Pilate, who seems so anxious to spare Jesus in John's story. The blame appears to rest upon the chief priests. But John intends that our sympathy for Pilate expose our worst self-deception. It is *precisely* in our attempts to be neutral to the truth that we end up crucifying Christ. The cloak of neutrality turns light into darkness in the most subtle, mystifying ways.

Darkness at noon — it was the warning to God's people from the beginning. At the end of Deuteronomy, after Moses has recited God's laws to Israel, he sets before them life and death, blessing and curse. If they obey the voice of God and do God's commandments, life will abound in Israel. If they do not, if they turn aside and go after other gods, then God will utterly confuse, frustrate, and undo the people; "and you shall grope at noonday, as the blind grope in darkness..." (Deut. 28:29).

Much later, Amos attacked the bad faith of God's people. He ridiculed them for their smug confidence in the day of reckoning, the day of God's justice, because they resisted God's justice among themselves. "Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord! Why would you have the day of the Lord? It is darkness and not light" (5:18). "And on that day I will make

the sun go down at noon, and darkness in broad daylight" (8:9).

That awful day of darkness and terror was revealed on earth preeminently the day Jesus died. Still, it is relived in the life of every man and woman, often at moments of their greatest confidence and strength. Think of Saul, traveling to Damascus with his packet of letters, eager to advance his onslaught against the Church. He was struck down and *blinded* by a great light *at noon* (Acts 22:6). At the height of his powers and the zenith of his career, the day of accounting came upon Saul and started him on a very different path.

I have related these things not as a curiosity of Bible study, but as a key by which we may discern something in these times, in our own world. The Church has never been more in the dark about its identity and role than it is today, because the Church is unclear in its vision of who Christ is and where Christ is moving. This is a time of eclipse, of confusion and frustration. Yet this terrible moment of despair "prepares the way" for a powerful new revelation — at least to those who are willing to feel the pain and grief of the present moment, like the women who returned to the tomb of Jesus. How did we come from the glory of that Easter morning to the "present darkness" we sense today?

The new revelation that began with Mary soon became a widespread movement. It extended out from Palestine across the Mediterranean world within its first century. The conversation at the well between Jesus and the Samaritan woman was consummated in a new mission, first to the Samaritans, then to Gentiles of all kinds. A trans-cultural community in Christ blossomed from the preaching of this strange new message, the "word of the cross."

Despite savage Roman efforts to the contrary, Christianity proved an irrepressible force that spread all over the Empire. Its threat was not one of revolutionary overthrow, but a subversive undercutting of the controlling images and behavioral norms that supported Roman political and cultural domination. Social conventions such as the patriarchal household were threatened, and the worship of Caesar as ruler of the universe was resisted. The Christian menace continued to grow, until Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity early in the fourth century. That event marked an astonishing victory for the Christian movement — *and* a profound subversion of its meaning and purpose.

The rise of imperial Christianity was opposite to God's victory in Jesus at the cross. It was a new vision of Christ, received not through an awful moment of eclipse, but by imperial decree. Pictorial images of Jesus soon gained a rather imperious cast: the Risen Christ was portrayed seated upon a throne all too similar to that of the Emperor, who now ruled on earth as the embodiment of divine authority. A wedding of truth and power had taken place. It was as if the emerging hierarchy of the Church had joined the chief priests of Jerusalem to proclaim, "we have no king but Caesar."

From the start, significant voices expressed grave reservations about this new marriage of Church and Empire. Those dissenting voices remained an undercurrent in Christendom through the centuries. Meanwhile, the imperial promulgation of Christianity throughout the Roman world initiated an enormous missionary enterprise. Evangelization of the many nations, tribes, and peoples necessarily inspired new interpretations of the gospel, making use of indigenous religious concepts. Liturgical innovations ingrained Christian worship into existing pagan rites and festivals. These developments culminated in the vast system of European Christian culture of the late Middle Ages. A great symbolic universe of theology, ethics, liturgy, social and political orders united most of reality into an interlocking complex of institutions.

That *institutional* integration represented the fulfillment of the Costantinian model. The hierarchical order of Christendom made it prone to repressive abuses of power and sometimes caused great suffering among Christians and especially Jews, who became handy scapegoats for a system that could not acknowledge its own evils.

At the same time, there were many benign innovations and good fruits in Christendom's institutions that should not be ignored. The Church served as a preserving vessel of culture during an era of socio-political chaos, and was often a civilizing influence upon ruthless rulers. Moreover, many great spiritual traditions developed through the monastic movements of those centuries. Through those movements, and beyond them, a stubbornly prophetic undercurrent of critique never subsided, even during the period of Christendom's greatest dominance. In fact, during the late Middle Ages dissent rose to the surface more insistently than ever, disturbing the waters of what some viewed as Babylon.

As that critique continued to grow, *humanism* became the

driving force of Renaissance thought. In the midst of an institutional Christian culture, the meaning of the gospel was increasingly reexamined in terms of human experience. A human scale was applied to Christ's activity in the world, and a new flowering of devotional life blossomed among the laity. That lay renewal was intimately related to the gradual rise of a new middle class out of feudal society. A new sector of European society thrived, not by the religious and economic hierarchies of traditional Christendom, but by the dynamism of personal spiritual renewal and economic enterprise.

Tension between the old institutions and these new elements grew, coming to maturity in the Reformation. The Reformers' stress upon individual religious experience, along with their radical attack upon Church institutions, catalyzed a broadly-based movement in European culture. Personal piety and the rise of capitalism became the spiritual and material forces powering Protestant culture, enabling Catholic renewal as well. In *Apocalypse of the Word*, I sketched the trajectory of those forces in the development of the English Puritan movement, culminating in the Civil War of the 1640s. I showed how the early Quaker movement spoke to the last stages of the English Reformation, representing a new Christian revelation emerging out of the eclipse of Puritanism.

With increasing speed the grand edifice of Christian culture began to break down, as the Church was split by the Protestant movement. Not only was the Church divided, but by the seventeenth century the official bond between states and churches became decreasingly operative. In the eighteenth century it was even abandoned in America. With that division, the Constantinian image of truth synonymous with power broke down as well. Truth receded into the realm of private spirituality, while power remained in the increasingly desacralized realm of political and economic life. In its disengagement with religion, power began to assert a position of neutrality toward truth. The modern state posed itself as an impartial "referee" among competing forces of political and economic self-interest and as a benign protector of various religious viewpoints. The mechanisms of the market were declared a "free zone" in regard to truth; the rules of efficiency and competition were championed as the best guarantors of the public good.

Modern disciplines of science also developed along with

Protestant culture. When Copernicus showed that the earth revolved around the sun, rather than *vice versa*, a profound shift in consciousness began. The Church, God's institutional rule on earth, was no longer the center of the universe. And as early scientists continued to amass empirical data in conflict with Church teaching, institutional authority continued to crumble. Momentum was added to this trend by the Reformers. Classical Christian culture had maintained a broad sacramental consciousness through a highly developed system of rituals and codes, which invoked the divine presence in all major facets of life. When Protestantism rejected Church canon and reduced the sacraments from seven to two, the timeless realm of the sacred universe collapsed. As personal experience became the measure of spiritual reality, so scientific experimentation re-mapped the natural world.

Simultaneously, the technological innovation of the printing press had enormous implications for Christian life. The mass production of Bibles added new impetus to the devotional movement already underway. Scripture quickly moved to the center of the Christian conversation. Reformers established the Bible as the primary authority for Christian faith and life. The stabilizing authority of the Church institution was swept away, leaving a book — a *history* book — as the primary reference point for understanding the world and for locating the Church's place in it. Protestant devotion to Scripture saturated culture with a new awareness of the God who acts in history. Thus, just as the God of the Israelites had desacralized the static universe of ancient nature gods, so now the Reformation, and the sciences it fostered, now gave reality a historical flow.

Moreover, the Reformers interpreted their conflict with Catholicism in light of Scripture. They saw their struggle dramatized by the apocalyptic visions of Daniel and Revelation. They viewed themselves as taking part in the great cosmic struggle of the end-time. That sense of crisis and imminent end naturally added further to the emerging historical consciousness. Yet, as the Reformation period ended, as the Protestant churches became more established, and as the conflict with Catholicism cooled, apocalyptic awareness receded. The churches settled into new, looser relations to state power, and Europe and America were swept up in an unprecedented period of economic development. Colonial-

ism and the "new world" replaced end-time expectation as the new historical consciousness. As a result, the Church's vision was again de-historicized: the end-time seemed to fade into the distant future and allowed the Church to accommodate to meantime considerations. Christian spirituality became increasingly privatized, as historical consciousness and its social dynamism were secularized in the burgeoning realms of state, economics, and scientific inquiry.

The sciences, which required increasing financial investment, but which also promised enormous returns in wealth and power, rapidly allied themselves with political and economic power. But rather than joining them in an alleged neutrality to truth, the sciences came to rival the Church for the claim to truth. Modern science overwhelmed the Church in this area, because science was rapidly building a vast, unified model of reality, whereas the Church in its newly quietist posture, became increasingly conservative of its truth. The Church became guardian of ancient verities; it rapidly retreated into the private sphere and became defensive toward scientific truth. That shift was epitomized by the controversies over evolutionary theory. Darwin's theory gave new historical dimension to the creation through a scientific consciousness deeply indebted to the Bible. Yet the Church responded defensively to this theory, seeing it as an affront to biblical truth as a timeless principle.

Under these circumstances, the sciences progressively monopolized public truth and became the oracles of objective reality. Scientists became the prophets of a new age; their theoretical pronouncements and technological applications set the course of history — reshaped the future. Meanwhile, the Church became the recessive repository of nonhistorical, private truths, a sanctuary for subjective reality. The institutions of political and economic power became the patrons of science and technology to insure national security and material abundance. Today, science and technology have completed a strongly integrated model of our natural and social universe. In league with political and economic powers, science has consummated a new marriage of truth and power, stronger than anything the Constantinian project ever produced. As in the case of Christendom before, the benign intentions and good fruits of our modern secular institutions should not be ignored. At the same time, the self-serving motivations of the technological-economic-political

complex often produce disastrous consequences, especially for those outside the realm where decisions are made. The political and corporate hierarchies, in their professed neutrality to truth, find such misfortune only mildly disturbing.

The pragmatic question of "what works" remains the only truth in the public realm, while the question of moral truth is tightly sequestered into the private realm of religious and family life. This state of moral "apartheid" is maintained most fundamentally by the continuing system of patriarchy. In modern society, the domestic sphere of women becomes the retreat of moral truth and the last haven for religious values, while the public sphere of economic and political life, dominated by men, is ruled mainly by pragmatism. And "what works" is in fact what functions to keep that particular system going. Men may retreat daily from that soulless realm to the private comforts of domestic life. But only recently have women been allowed to venture very far into the public sphere in business and politics, and then only if they leave the moral and religious questions at home.

The modern relationship between truth and power can also be discovered in the modern tendency toward comparative religion. Historical consciousness, in service to the "higher truth" of scientific inquiry, has objectified spiritual experience sufficiently to fixate Christ among a wide variety of world cultural phenomena generally classified as "religious." Jesus becomes one object among others, to be addressed analytically — not a subject who addresses us passionately. When this happens, Jesus quickly becomes quietly enigmatic, just as before Pilate; we are free to dabble among various religious truths, accountable to none, and the powers go on making their own deals. Truth becomes relative; that is to say, moot. The only binding truth in our culture is scientific truth, through its pragmatic application in technology, as it serves the interests of power.

The scientific and systematic subjection of truth to power has been a hallmark of the twentieth century. And for most of this century, it has seemed self-evidently benign to most Christians, particularly as modern faith has surrendered historical consciousness. Nevertheless, in the past three decades our modern, post-Christian world has grown increasingly ominous. Political, economic, and scientific-technological developments have produced a twentieth-century apocalyptic vision — nuclear war, toxic wastes, environ-

mental degradation, social decay, and economic collapse pose multiple threats of catastrophe. Behold: apocalypse, the biblical drama that science found most ludicrous, has been produced in the laboratory. The wrath of God, the biblical teaching that modern psychology found most unhealthy, is now wielded in human form by earthly powers who use psychological warfare to intimidate and terrify the masses into submission. Suddenly, it has all become *very* credible, on quite human terms. The domesticated Christ of private experience has little to say to our public condition. The non-historical God of popular Christianity is effectively barred from this drama of history at the brink.

We must remember: Christ enters our story as we enter the gospel story. This is crucial, since we have lost touch with Jesus, historically speaking. We know Christ in private life and in the life of the Christian community, but not at large in the world. *Christ is in eclipse in our experience.* If we reference our condition to the gospel story, we find ourselves at the pivotal moment of Good Friday. *Christ is crucified anew* by the powers of this age, despite *indeed, by way of* their professed neutrality. As we turn a blind eye to this tragedy, we are complicit in that death.

Darkness at noon, the day of God, is upon the earth. The curse pronounced by Moses is upon God's people again, as we have fled from the voice of the One who rules history. Today we grope at midday, as if it were midnight. Christ is hidden to us because we are mystified by the powers. When Christians *believe* the powers in their alleged neutrality, we participate in Jesus' betrayal. We hand Jesus over to Pilate all over again. We pledge our allegiance, saying, "We have no king but Caesar." Then, Christ's reign is not only not *of* this world, but it finds no place *in* this world.

This "present darkness" is a dangerous time. Faith is easily swallowed up in complacency. An easy acquiescence to private piety and public pragmatism allows Christians to pray for peace while simultaneously paying taxes for war, for example. James warns that God will not respond to such double-minded prayer (James 1:5-8). This is the apostasy, the turning away, whereby we crucify Christ anew and hold Christ up to contempt (Heb. 6:6). Still, Jesus has prayed that our faith will not completely fail in this awful hour (Luke 32:22).

The opposite of complacency and acquiescence is a heightened sense of crisis. Rather than pretending that the dark-

ness is only grayness by adopting the world's neutrality, it is necessary to go straight to the heart of darkness. Like the women disciples of Jesus who stayed with him at the cross, we must not flee the pain and horror of this hour. Like them, we must remain devoted to Christ even in eclipse, anointing our friend in death, even unto the third day. For it is out of thick darkness, total eclipse, that the new revelation of Christ comes. It comes to those who are broken-hearted enough to keep the vigil.

These dynamics of crisis and eclipse were essential to the formation of the Quaker movement and remain a strong undercurrent in our spirituality today. It was heartbroken grief and "hope against hope" that led the Seekers in Commonwealth England to begin worshiping in silence, without official leadership. They had seen all their hopes and dreams of God's reign dashed by the confusion of Puritan parties, by the captivity of truth to power in state-controlled Church life. They met in a sorrowful silence that mourned the death of their dreams and kept a vigil for the One whose new life is revealed through death.

When the Seekers heard George Fox preach in 1652, it was a new revelation that completely transformed their moment of eclipse. Fox's message that "Christ is come to teach his people himself" came like Mary's encounter with Jesus at the empty tomb: in a moment of total eclipse a stranger appeared and gave new meaning to everything that had happened. The moment of darkness the Seekers had experienced became the moment of a great new light; they discerned the power of Christ emerging out of the emptiness; the deep silence into which they had fallen became the background of a new voice heard within, the living Word teaching and leading them in righteousness; the moment of brokenness and pain became an event of healing and unspeakable joy. Thus, the very practice of silence which had symbolized grief and despair for the Seekers now became the way of wholeness and hope as they became the nucleus of the Quaker movement. They understood their practice of "waiting upon the Lord" as nothing less than the power of the cross in their midst.

Looking at Quaker beginnings from a slightly different angle, the meeting of George Fox and the Seekers has overtones resonant with the meeting of Jesus and the Samaritan woman. The Quaker movement grew out of the marriage of the known and the unknown. Gathered in the

place of eclipse, the Seekers worshiped in darkness, keeping faith with a God they no longer could fathom. In the message that Fox preached, they heard the language of the gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ, so familiar, so well-known throughout their culture. Yet that message was not the preaching of the Protestant culture; it pointed to Christ emerging from a radically new place of spirit and truth. The Quaker movement that came into being was the province of neither the Jerusalem of the Puritans nor the Gerazim of Seekerism, neither the traditionally known Christ of Christendom nor the unfathomable deeps of eclipse. The place of spirit and truth is where people come together out of those habitations and follow a Christ who is familiar yet radically new.

Thus, a profound paradox lies at the heart of the Quaker spirituality. It continues to generate great power, whenever men and women will live in its tension of known and unknown, of particular and universal. But modern Friends have too seldom been willing to gather at the uncomfortable center of that tension. The great cleavage of modern Quakerism represents the divorce of that marriage of Jerusalem and Gerazim, of the particular and the universal. It represents the abandonment of that holy ground of spirit and truth. As evangelicals, we have chosen to retreat to the familiar ground of traditional Protestantism, where Christ is neatly defined and ambiguity is repressed. As liberals, we have appropriated Seekerism to mean an eternal search for a truth that must never be named. We have embraced the earnest despair of the Seekers and renamed it wholeness; we have taken refuge in ambiguity as a place to hide. Thus, two opposing camps of Quakers have emerged, embodying the same mutual distrust and disrespect that Jews and Samaritans harbored in Jesus' day.

On a feeling level, we can describe the modern Quaker dilemma in a slightly different way: we do not allow ourselves to feel the pain and grief the Seekers and early Friends experienced. We avoid the discomfort of seeing how truth is captivated and sacrificed by the power arrangements of our age. We do not wish to see how we are complicit in the death of Christ today. As evangelicals, we want to celebrate the forgiveness we obtain from Jesus' death two thousand years ago, but we do not want to enter that drama and feel the pain of it here and now. As liberals, we want to place Jesus among

the great teachers, Christ among the holy names of world religions, and thereby enact an etiquette of global consciousness that makes us feel worldly, not noticing that the world is an incoherent Babel of contending powers. We do not manifest the heart-broken repentance of the Seekers and early Friends in our meetings today, neither in warm-hearted evangelical celebration nor in cool-headed liberal rationalism. We have fled the cross.

In effect, despite the cherished quirks of our Quaker subculture, we Friends generally have played our part in the development of modern culture sketched out in this chapter. Liberal and evangelical Friends alike have taken part in the de-historicizing of Christian faith, in the division of life into separate private and public spheres. Through the evangelical emphasis upon personal salvation and the liberal insistence upon religious truth as a private matter of choice, we have lost touch with Christ in history. The God whose awful judgments and wonderful salvations are played out in the widest vistas of human affairs is as hidden among Friends as in any religious group today.

The segregation of public and private spheres is particularly ironic among Friends, since that hallmark of patriarchy was so vigorously challenged by Friends in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when women's leadership and separate meetings for business flew in the face of paternalistic dominance. Among evangelical Friends, pastoral leadership, which at first included many women, increasingly became male-dominated, due to the social patterns of professionalization in twentieth-century America. Among liberal Friends, secular values of democracy have flattened all sense of spiritual gifts among particular individuals and suppressed leadership among both women and men. Using the images defined in Chapter VII, we could say that the image of mutuality has been fixated to the extent that the free flow between paternity, maternity, and mutuality has been frozen. Liberal Quakerism today thereby remains feminist mainly on the secular level of equal rights; the more profound and revolutionary spiritual dimensions of feminism that resonated in early Quakerism are barely realized.

Yet there are growing numbers of Friends no longer satisfied with these arrangements. For us, the despair can no longer be celebrated or rationalized. We live with the pain; we grieve for what has been lost among Friends; we hope against

hope for a new revelation in our midst. We continue to keep the vigil, returning to the empty tomb of our local meetings, being baptized into Christ's death, even as some continue to proclaim that "all is well." But there is danger even here: we must resist the temptation to make a piety of our grief. If we idealize the glories of earlier Quaker generations, we may be consigning ourselves to an eternal twilight, oblivious to a new revelation emerging in our midst. We must learn from our tradition; but let that make us all the more vigilant and open to this present moment.

Like the repentant Seekers of 1652, we must learn to discern the risen Christ emerging from this place of eclipse. If Mary Magdalene had difficulty recognizing Jesus here, we should not be surprised if we have trouble, too. Yet here the form of a new revelation begins to take shape. Here Christ will not conform to the outlines the Seekers discovered at Firbank Fell; but neither will Christ become the incoherent sum of all world religions. Christ will *confirm* previous revelations, rather than conform to them. Remember: neither Jerusalem nor Gerazim.

We will discern Christ anew as we gather to worship in a variety of new situations, taking up our vigil wherever we find Christ in eclipse in our society. This means that we take our worship and witness out of the comfortable shelter of the local meetinghouse and into the public places of our local communities. We must discern the shape of Christ emerging amidst the very structures of commerce, government, education, and religion that determine our social life. Yes, I mean literally to worship and proclaim in a public fashion that Friends have not exercised since the 1600s, when they gathered in the fields, in the marketplaces, in the steeplehouses, in the jails, outside Parliament — sometimes in the face of mob harrassment and police arrest.

Therefore, in this very hour of darkness let us proclaim the mighty day of God on earth! Let us now answer the wisdom of this age, deciding to know nothing except Jesus Christ crucified (1 Cor. 2:2). Let our worship be "in weakness and in much fear and trembling" (next verse). Let us point to Christ crucified, making Jesus painfully present in a world that claims benign anaesthesia. Let us discern Christ among the poor, the hungry, and the homeless (Matthew 25:31-46) — those who find no place in this world, but who are being pushed out by arrangements among the powerful, the priori-

ties of the privileged, the indifference of power to truth. Let us point to the blood of Christ, spilled from the innocent victims of domestic and political violence. Let us witness to the burial of Christ in the "disappearing" of those who are targets of political repression, in the imprisonment and "warehousing" of those who are victims of prejudice, neglect, and abuse. Let us discern Christ in the parks and recreational areas, pointing to the truth of the Creator in the beauty of creation, calling for its protection and respect.

In his own day, Jesus preached the day of God during a period of mounting crisis in Judea. Jerusalem was on a collision course with disaster. The gospel of Jesus was a prophetic call for the people to turn and avert calamity (Luke 13:1-9). Indeed, some forty years after Jesus' rejection and death, a Jewish revolt against Rome ended in the destruction of the Temple and much of Jerusalem, with terrible human suffering. Let us likewise preach repentance and the gospel in this time of apocalyptic crisis. Let us preach Christ crucified by a world that rushes headlong toward any number of potential disasters of its own devising. Amidst an international arms race, we witness to Christ crucified wherever nations rob the poor to build up their arsenals, storing up wrath for themselves (Romans 2:5). We preach Christ crucified in the "holy wars" of those on the right who, like Caiaphas, are ready to shed innocent blood to ensure their dominions (John 11:45-53). We preach Christ crucified in the "holy wars" of those on the left who, like the zealous mob, choose the murderous revolutionary Barabbas over Jesus (Mark 15:6-15).

We preach Christ crucified in a world foreshadowed by calamity. Who will deny it? Science has provided all the evidence. Economics has added up the figures. Politics has drawn up the sides. In preaching Christ crucified, we call people to repentance, to turn from the world's collision course, and to believe in the gospel, Christ's *alternative apocalypse*. To unmask the idols of this age, to recognize the figure of Christ crucified under them, is to come to judgment *now*. It is to come out of the "suspended judgment" of neutrality to Christ. It is to discover the Christ of personal faith in the public world. Where the private and public worlds collide, apocalypse takes on its true meaning as *revelation*. Our personal experience of Christ begins to *reveal history* in the public domain. We see and we witness to the unfolding

drama of Christ crucified. Our words and actions begin to shake the powers of the earth as the risen Christ becomes historical again, teaching and leading us forward.

The meeting place of personal Christian *experience* and the public realm of *history* is the Christian *community*. The Church, when it embodies the full stature of Christ, mediates between the reign of God emerging from within and the passing regimes of this world. The Church in the power of Christ therefore becomes the primary focus of the alternative apocalypse, God's offer of salvation to the world. We span the gulf between God's reign and the earthly dominions with our own living bodies, united as a sign to all.

Certainly, Quakers will not be alone in enacting this sign. Other faith communities, Christian and otherwise, will surely move on convergent trajectories, as men and women struggle faithfully in their respective spiritual traditions. We may find increasing opportunities for collaboration with different groups. Our primary focus, however, must remain faithful to the great spiritual tradition we have inherited. Friends have a unique contribution to make, particularly as we renew our disciplines of worship and ministry, our testimonies, and our mode of Spirit-led decision-making. Our faithfulness in this particular path of Christian spirituality will only deepen our sense of relationship to all peoples, as John Woolman discovered. Therefore, let us be faithful to one another as the Friends of Jesus; in this we will build the sure foundation of universal Friendship.

Conclusion: Glorifying God

We are called to unmask the idols in our lives, to see them for what they are, and to recognize Christ's vital, transforming presence with us. In so doing, we will have "turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come" (1 Thess. 1:9f). The unmasking of idols is *apocalyptic* in the most basic sense of that word: when we "take away the veil" that blinds us to our present reality, we receive a revelation of the ultimate reality that underlies all things and calls all things toward their final fulfillment.

The experience of waiting is therefore not simply marking time until the culmination of history when all things reach their final fulfillment. Waiting upon Christ is an experience that has *present* fulfillment in our lives, as we *stop* the controlling behaviors of our neurotic and religious existence. We *forbear* from the obsessive-compulsive habits by which we have held God at arm's length and kept Christ off in

heaven. When we "wait upon the Lord," Christ comes from heaven into our experience and diverts our path from the wrath to come.

In the end of history, all will recognize the truth in Christ. That moment of recognition will contain elements of joy and regret, confirmation and surprise, for Christians and non-Christians alike; both Paul (Rom. 2:5-11) and Revelation (20:13) affirm that all will be judged according to their actual deeds, not their beliefs. But the point of the gospel is that we may recognize Christ now, that we may come to the end of history before it comes to us. That recognition occurs inwardly in the heart. Yet, it does not — it *must* not — end there. The apocalyptic revelation of Christ has an explosive force. It moves from the inside out. The recognition of Christ begins inwardly as a new way of knowing, but it moves outwardly into the ethical and social realm as a new way of acting. The present apocalypse of Christ, therefore, reaches its true power as we actively *give recognition* to Christ in our words and deeds. This is what it means to *glorify God* in Christ. When this activity takes place in a social setting, it enacts the *drama of recognition* in its fullest, historical sense.

To give recognition to Christ in our lives is to set ourselves at variance with the patterns of thought and behavior we once pursued so "religiously." It also sets us at variance with some of the patterns that society expects us to adopt. Recognizing Christ "turns the world upside down" and upsets others in their minds. It will often generate confusion and conflict, because it disturbs the world's sense of rightness and control. Life in Christ thus fuses ethics with witness: to give recognition to Christ means to preach Christ with our lives.

In our daily patterns of life, recognizing Christ may mean unmasking the habits and dependencies by which we maintain a sense of equilibrium. Those habits may include food or chemical dependencies, consumer preoccupations, television, sports, books, music, or needless conversation. To wait upon Christ is to thin out or even eliminate some behaviors, to experience a hunger, a nervousness, an incompleteness, a need. That emptiness may be just the space that Christ needs to move into our lives.

In our beliefs, interests, and learning processes, we begin to recognize Christ when we open up our thought patterns and question the well-worn paths of truth as we know it.

Whatever the depth and breadth we may have in knowledge and understanding, the truth of Christ is all that and more. Christ opens up the "manifold wisdom of God," a multi-faceted truth that can reconcile different theories and ideologies that seem fundamentally opposite in our minds.

At the same time, the truth of Christ is also all our knowledge and *less*. We will find that some of our most dearly-held convictions will not stand up to the light of Christ. Perhaps we will have to relearn them in completely new ways. Our best-loved ideas and ideals, even those we adapt from Scripture, will always be humanly construed and may limit our growth as much as fostering it. To wait upon Christ, therefore, will be to carry our intellectual baggage loosely, always ready to turn loose of it when Christ shows us greater truth. Waiting upon Christ is a posture of humility, a recognition that Christ's triumphant truth is not a leap of logic made one day in a library, but the surrender of love made one night in a garden. The wisdom of God is a gift we receive as we rest from our own wisdom.

As our ideas and knowledge enter the social sphere, patterns of thought become especially "religious." Group identity and values are tied to shared thinking. To fit into the groups with which we identify, we often sense the need to conform to their patterns of thought and activity. Communities are defined by shared language and worldview. This is true for the community of the Church as well. Still, the Christian community, if it claims to consist in the *lived* reality of Christ present, must not succumb to the ideological tendencies of tradition and doctrine. When our religious ideologies become fixed and conformist, we dwell no longer in the truth, but in our truths.

The Christian community, therefore, must be constantly open to redefinition by the Spirit of Christ. It must be continually in the discipline of waiting upon Christ, of living in the end-time. Here the Church's true authority is the *newly-arriving* Christ, rather than a long-departed one. Here Christ teaches disciples by the power of the Spirit more decisively than the written code of Scripture. Here the Holy Spirit ministers directly to all who love Christ truly, rather than indirectly through those who claim to represent Christ officially. To recognize Christ is to repent of all Church ideologies and structures that do not partake of our actual experience of Christ.

To recognize Christ is also to root out the persisting cult of fertility in all its contemporary forms. It is to recognize that immortality is not found in projecting our own image through space and time by means of wealth and procreation. It is to recognize that immortality is found in following Christ, in joining that "great cloud of witnesses" that extends all the way back to Abel (Heb. 12:1). In God's image, we again come into dominion over the creation. We renounce serving and worshiping the creatures out of our anxieties and our lust for power. We recognize that there is nothing to defend but the truth; we understand that we further the truth not by taking the lives of others but by offering up our own. We recognize that God's blessings are not rewards accrued permanently to us for "being good;" they represent God's faith in us to be creative in *doing* good. Therefore, to wait upon Christ is to expect to serve God. We thereby become not the fixed reservoirs of God's goodness but the flowing channels of God's grace in the world.

In all of this, we begin to recognize that life in Christ is life in flux. Life becomes something we do not preserve or prolong; it is something to promote. Through death, Christ helps us with our fear of death and need for control. Christ helps us to face death in order to face God. We may be reconciled to God when we fear God alone. With Adam and Cain, we have fled God in fear of death. With Christ, we draw near to God in fear of any life apart from God; we draw nearer to one another, seeking to answer the knowledge of God in one another. To wait upon Christ is, therefore, to die to our defensive strategies and to let Christ show us a living way. To recognize Christ is to be conformed to Christ's death.

In Christ, the meaning of every aspect of our humanity is transformed. Sex difference no longer excuses a system of fixed gender roles, but represents the poles of our human experience of God. Paternity and maternity become the dialogue of eternity, the interplay of God's transcendence and immanence, the intercourse of history with experience. To recognize Christ is to give full freedom to that interchange in both personal relationships and social institutions, so that no one is obstructed from full participation in Christ's authority on earth. To wait upon Christ is to give first and final authority to the whole community in Christ. No patriarchal system of hierarchy or expertise may be allowed to short-circuit the authority of the Spirit of Christ. Only she can move

the community into true unity.

Finally, to recognize Christ is to anticipate the end of the world, to declare and enact the transformation of the social, economic, and political categories that separate us from one another and from God. It is to recognize the name and authority of Christ above every other name and authority, and obey Christ's commands above all others. To wait upon Christ, to seek and do God's will in God's time, is *the* radical act: it is to wait for God to judge the world in God's own wisdom; it is to forbear from taking vengeance into our own hands, from using violence to enforce justice.

To wait upon Christ is, therefore, the true fear of God, true belief in God's coming wrath, true confidence in God's encompassing love and providence, true reconciliation with God, true conformity to God's image, true life. In waiting upon Christ, every image, every idol, every form of this world passes away. Every act in Christ recognizes Christ, witnesses to Christ, and glorifies God.

The community in Christ, reconciled to God, raised up together into the image of God, takes part in the oneness of God, manifests coherence in the midst of an incoherent world, the world of Babel. Against the raging din of the world, the people of God today are a quiet people, a community whose silence stops the mouths of the vain talkers. They are a people whose simplicity shames the adornment of the vain dressers, whose humility confounds the monuments of the vain builders, whose gentleness disarms the violence of the vain protectors. They are a people whose plainness cuts through the falsehood of vain advertisements, promotions, and campaigns.

The drama of recognition today brings us to a strange moment of silence, a place of deep darkness and near-despair. We come to recognize how Christ is in eclipse — crucified and buried — in our world today. The historical drama that began with Abraham has come to a dark passage, the "valley of the shadow of death." In a world where the vast powers of economic and political life claim neutrality to any form of ultimate truth, we must recognize and witness that Christ — the way, truth, and life — is crucified anew. This horrible spectre is seen in the victims of economic injustice and political violence. Our testimony to this stigmatizing vision is the prophetic announcement of the day of God. It is the beginning of the Good News: the horror of Good Friday

leads to the glory of Easter for those willing to feel the pain and grief.

In all the various idolatries explored in this book, we modern Friends may recognize our own missteps. The powerful forces of modern culture have torn the Quaker witness asunder, though we can point to many instances of prophetic faith still subsisting here and there in our midst. To enter the drama of recognition, to witness the apocalyptic unveiling of our condition, we must be willing stand still and see ourselves more clearly. Doing this, we return to the cradle of Quakerism, that place of crisis, eclipse, and repentance that once forged men and women into the most potent spiritual force in mid-seventeenth-century England. Waiting upon Christ in that place of spirit and truth, our faith will not be disappointed.

Finally, the idol of idols, the one that underlies our worship of all other idols, proves to be the *heart of stone*. The hardened heart remains unmoved to compassion toward others and is unyielding to God. Hard-heartedness is the condition of alienation that we have to grapple with repeatedly in our lives. It is produced by the spirit of fear, of *petrification*, which we unconsciously allow to pervade our souls. A *rigor mortis* insidiously sets into one facet after another of our lives.

The heart of stone is produced as we internalize the fixed images and objects that we have made out of living persons, our living world, and most of all the living God. Thus, the Pharoah's heart was hardened when he refused to stop objectifying the Israelites as his slaves (Exod. 14:5). It was the hardness of the Pharisees' hearts that remained unmoved by Jesus' healing on the Sabbath (Mark 3:1-6). It was the hardness of the disciples' hearts that sometimes kept the words of Jesus from sinking in (Mark 8:17).

Yet from the beginning, God pleaded with the people of Israel to open their hearts, to circumcise their hearts against stubbornness (Deut. 10:16). God warned them especially not to harden their hearts against compassion for the poor (Deut. 15:7). The prophets urged the people to turn to God with all their hearts, rending their hearts instead of their garments in ritualized gestures of repentance (Joel 2:12f). The Psalmist counseled people to pour out their hearts to God. Jesus exhorted women and men to set their hearts upon the reign of God and its righteousness, rather than the things of the world; "for where your treasure is, there will your heart be

also" (Luke 12:34). Paul warns us that "by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed" (Rom. 2:5).

In the final analysis, however, only God is able to save us from this hardened, alienated state. God promises, "I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh" (Ezek. 36:26). In following Christ, we are slowly transformed, becoming letters to the world from Christ, written not on tablets of stone but on the fleshly tablets of humanized hearts (2 Cor. 3:3). The heart of stone is worn down and swept away in the relentless torrent of God's love. The heart of flesh, that God originally gave us and can finally restore in us, is the heart that lives, that changes, that yields to God and is moved to compassion toward others.

True, "all flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades..." (Isa. 40:6f). Our truths and our accomplishments are rooted like the grass, in particular circumstances of time and place. These glories fade and die. Sooner or later, we fade and die with them. "But the word of our God will stand forever" (next verse). When we renew our minds and our efforts in God's wisdom and power, fading glories are replaced by new seasons of growth and fruitfulness. Eventually we pass on to another realm where we shall be rooted fully in eternity.

Likewise, Isaiah also states that "surely the people is grass" (verse 7). Not only individuals, but the *people of God* have their seasons of glorious beauty and fruitfulness; these also fade and must be renewed by the power of the eternal, living Word. The living Church experiences its own ebb and flow of life. Yet each season of growth partakes of that final harvest, when the family of God shall be fully and finally assembled.

Every act of faithfulness participates in the heavenly glory of God, because it is rooted in both time and eternity. While earthly time unfolds in a linear fashion, the eternity of heaven is nonlinear. Every act of faithfulness along the ribbon of our lifetimes takes its place somewhere on the canvas of eternity, as part of a great tableau around the throne of God. Imagine it as something like van Eyck's great "Adoration of the Mystic Lamb," which portrays the scene of New Jerusalem at the end of the Book of Revelation. Saints from the four corners of the earth converge in one eternal moment of joy and praise.

That eternal moment begins *today*. The immense canvas of

eternity is woven from the threads of human lifetimes. Therefore, let us heed the advice of the Letter to the Hebrews: "Today, when you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts" (Heb. 4:7; See Ps. 95:7f). Living and dying, in triumph and in defeat, let us glorify God!