



IYM Quakers

Session Five

Spiritual Worship



Experiencing the Presence in the Midst

- *Worship in Spirit and Truth*
- *Led by the Spirit, Not by People*

John 4:20-24

To understand Friends worship today it helps to glance back at how worship was characterized in the churches of 17th Century England. The Church of England, at that time, featured elaborate buildings with steeples reaching to the skies. Worship services included ritualistic observance of The Lord's Supper. Creeds were recited. Priests, sometimes men with little spiritual qualifications, presided over services as church members dutifully went through these motions week after week.

What was regarded as "worship" in these churches has been described as lifeless and devoid of meaning. When George Fox and early Friends experienced first hand encounters with the living Christ, they realized that the true nature of worship had little to do with buildings or ceremonies. True worship could be experienced in the simplest of surroundings.

Friends to this very day understand that worship can take place anytime and anywhere. In fact nothing less than moment by moment communion with the living Christ is what Friends embrace. When Christians gather together for genuine corporate worship the presence of Christ in the group is palpable.

We believe that from the very beginning God has been seeking those who would experience His presence first hand; folks who would worship Him in Spirit and in Truth.

Acts 2:42, 46

Worship in a Friends church tends to lack much of the formality found in the services of other denominations. For over two hundred years Friends worship arose out of the silent waiting of those who had gathered together for "meeting." While many Indiana Yearly Meeting Friends today make use of pastors, music, and even printed outlines for worship, our intent is not to be led by these outward forms. Our goal is to be led by the Spirit of God.

The pattern of the early church in the book of Acts provides a similar picture. The earliest Christians often experienced corporate worship in homes, along riverbanks, or even in prison. Their worship wasn't dependent upon a worship leader who orchestrated some kind of event. Their worship was a spontaneous response to the shared experience of Christ's presence.

At times Spirit-led worship is full of words. At other times it is characterized by a reverent, awesome silence. At times it may include singing or expressions of praise. At other times it may include prayer that is so deep that words would be an inappropriate interruption.

What does Friends worship look like? All of the above! Some make the mistake of insisting that Friends worship is "silent." That's sometimes the case, but a better description of Friends worship is "spiritual."

Conclusion

Friends worship services may sometimes resemble those of other Christian groups, but we carry valuable understandings of the nature of true worship into such services. We understand that worship is not dependent upon a person, a plan, or a place.

A pastor or worship leader is not necessary for worship to take place. In fact Friends pastors will often change their planned message, or eliminate it altogether when it is obvious that the Spirit is leading otherwise.

An order of service doesn't guarantee that true worship will be experienced. Sometimes it even gets in the way. Friends are comfortable operating without such plans, or altering them in mid-course.

Elaborate "steeple-houses" are not what makes worship genuine. Friends prefer to simply refer to their places of worship as "meeting-houses" where we meet together with God.

What Friends worship does depend upon is the presence of Christ. The overwhelming characteristic of any Friends meeting for worship should be a sense that those gathered have experienced the very presence of God.

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Experiencing the Presence in the Midst



This classic Quaker print by Doyle Penrose, *The Presence in the Midst*, depicts a typical Friends worship group in previous centuries. You will notice that there is no pastor presiding at this time of worship – the Spirit of God is the leader. The building where they are gathered is not an ornate cathedral. There is no exterior steeple and no interior statues or symbols. The simplicity of this Friends meetinghouse is striking.

The presence of Jesus Christ superimposed over the visible gathering is the central theme of this painting and the central theme of Friends worship. Friends take seriously Jesus' promise in Matthew 18:20 and expect His very presence when they gather for worship. When the presence of Jesus is manifest in a gathering of worshipers, everything else seems less significant.

Songwriter Helen H. Lemmel used these words to describe what is commonly experienced when Friends gather to worship:

*Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in His wonderful face,
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim
In the light of His glory and grace.*