

A Great New Vision of the Church

by Richard J. Foster

What is needed for a Quaker renaissance today? We need a great new vision of the Church. It is completely possible to have a high doctrine of the Church without being high church.

My plea is that we once again recognize a high doctrine of the Church. In terms of polity we are a connectional fellowship. We need each other and we need the Church. The Church has two sides to it — the divine side and the human side — and our frustrations with the human side of the Church must never blind us to its divine

side. In fact, I think we have lost one of the great feminine symbols of the faith — the Church as the

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bride of Christ, the Church as the mother of the faithful, the Church as the holy mother. Many Quakers today are much closer to the Hindu philosopher Rata Krishna than to

the Christian tradition. Rata Krishna said true religion "is essentially the private achievement of the individual won by hard effort in solitude and isolation." This, of course, is the theology of Western individualism but it is not a true doctrine of the Church.

We are the Body of Christ together. No religion in the world is committed to community like Christianity. Members of other faiths can go to their temples in complete isolation from other human beings but for the Christian, worship is an intently corpor-

ate experience. We do not sing or pray or worship in isolation. No, we do it together. We need each other. We are absolutely interdependent. Our doctrine of the Church demands a corporate witness. We are the Body of Christ together.

The apostle Paul compared our interconnectedness to the human body. The eye cannot say to the foot, "I don't need you," and the foot cannot tell the eye to bug off. Now the foot could find plenty to complain about. "What a dirty deal. The eye gets to see everything — beautiful mountains, colors everywhere — but here I am in this smelly old shoe. It's dark, hot, dusty and all I get is athlete's foot!" But if we were one gigantic eye, we would not have a functioning body. The eye needs the foot and the foot needs the eye. If we were all feet, we might get someplace but we would never know it because we'd be banging into everything everywhere.

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It was this high view of the Church that kept the early Quakers from the craziness of many of the other purification movements during the seventeenth century. There were the Muggletonians and the Fifth Monarchy men and the Ranters who, along with the Quakers, all believed in personal revelation. But as the movements took hold, beliefs shifted from personal illumination to holy baloney. One man said he was a Christ and another man said he was a prophet, but the Quakers escaped these excesses because all inspiration was judged by the body of believers.

There were no solitary Quakers. Friends were to bring their illumination to the congregation as a whole and their individual experiences were to be judged by the experience of the fellowship. They believed that Christ was among them and as they waited together, they received guidance. They believed that Christ was the leader of their worship, their business, all that they

were, and all that they were about. For example, there was a great tradition of meetings for clearness in which individuals who were seeking guidance would gather together a group of discerning persons to speak the corporate wisdom. The group would wait together upon the Holy Spirit for guidance about the particular concern that had been brought to them. This is a great high view of the Church.

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We need a whole new explosion of a powerful itinerant ministry that is appropriate for today. The itinerant ministry must be specifically "powerful" because just going around and being friendly to each other will not do the job. We need to wait upon God, to seek God's face, to seek God's empowering, and then to go out under the exercising of that power.

Associate Professor of Theology and Writer in Residence at Friends University in Wichita, Kansas, Richard Foster has challenged the Church in North America and Europe to move beyond lukewarm superficiality to the white-hot spiritual power of its early years in his three best-selling Harper & Row books — Celebration of Discipline, Freedom of Simplicity and Money, Sex & Power: The Challenge of the Disciplined Life. He has made four tapes entitled "The Liberty of Discipline" with Word, Inc., for congregational study. (They are based on Celebration of Discipline.) Before coming to Wichita in 1979 he served on the ministry team of Newberg Friends in Oregon. He and his wife,Carolynn, are the parents of two children — Joel, 15, and Nathan, 13. Richard will lead gathered Friends in the Great Celebration at 11:00 a.m., Thursday, June 18, at the 1987 FUM Triennial at Guilford College in North Carolina.

We need a greater interrelatedness between our leaders and our people so that we can avoid the grand and dangerously debilitating isolation that plagues so many of us. People need to know that we hurt and that we need their help and that we need their prayer. It has always been such a help for me to encourage people to come to my office and to pray for me. However, I don't want them to feel that the only time they can come to my office is when they have some deep need or trying problem or when they are angry or upset. They must feel welcome when things are going very well and feel free to just slip in and give me a little "booster shot" of prayer. It doesn't take more than a few minutes, but it lets them know that they are special to me and that they can help me. This is not meant as a put on. It is meant deeply. I desperately need their prayers. There have been many times, times just recently, when someone would drop in for a few moments right at the time when I needed it the most. No one can feel lonely and isolated when surrounded by a mighty avalanche of prayer.

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Yes, people need to sense our confidence and our spirit of authority, but they also need to know us in our frailty and our fear. They need to know that we hurt, too. This religion of the stiff upper lip is not the way of Christ: I am a rock, I am an island. We must remember that a rock never cries and an island stands alone. Jesus knew how to weep. In his hour of greatest trial he sought the comfort and support of the Three as he went through the night in unashamed agony. Most often our stiff upper lip religion is not a sign of piety, but of arrogance. People are priests to us when they pray for us. How dare we think that we can do without their prayers. We need a great new vision of the Church. Q