

Discerning Which Way Now Brent Bill

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I want this lecture to be both a combination of information and challenge – information about how I see the best of Quaker discernment and how it can be used by Friends to determine "Which way now?" and a challenge to think about what God is calling us to do with this people in this place at this time.

I want to say something about the second part first – the reason that this topic matters to me. First, besides being a writer and Quaker minister (no longer a hireling for the Society – I have hired out to some Christians who actually pay very well), I spend my days as a congregational consultant. In my role as executive vice president of the Indianapolis Center for Congregations, I see all sorts of congregational dynamics at work – in Indiana congregations large and small, rural and urban, Christian and other. And that includes Friends. I also actually read such journals as the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* and peruse statistics on The Association of Religion Data Archives.

All of these have a sobering effect. They mostly show that Friends are losing ground. In North Carolina since 1980, Quakers have posted a twenty-seven percent decline, losing almost 3,000 members - though there are fifteen more congregations than in 1980. Nationally, Friends United Meeting has lost 20,000 members in the past thirty years. The Evangelical Friends International has barely stayed even. Only Friends General Conference has increased in numbers.ⁱ

That is why a question that was raised recently at the worship group meeting at our farm seems especially relevant. The question was whether Friends would even exist one hundred years from now. I think that is more than a rhetorical question or an interesting mental exercise – it is a real one. But behind it is an even deeper question – *should* Friends exist in another 100 years?

I think the Sacred Compass model is a way for us to determine, if not complete answers to those questions, at least a positive way forward in our life together.

But first I need to explain what I mean when I use the words Sacred Compass. I do not mean some vague, new-age-y, feel good method of self-discovery, though self-discovery is

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certainly a result of following the Sacred Compass. What I mean is to heed the Holy Spirit, the direction of God at work in our lives for God's purposes.

The compass is a metaphor – and only a metaphor – to help us think in a fresh way of how the Holy Spirit works in our lives. I picked it over other metaphors because, instead of giving exact directions like the synthesized voice in a GPS system (which can often be wrong), I believe the Holy Spirit points us to God's will for us. A compass, no matter what direction we turn, always points us north. So, too, does the Holy Spirit point us to God – our spiritual true north.

Our job, as Friends, then is to learn to follow the Divine compass. This, I think, means stopping and paying attention to the journey we are on instead of looking for a magical map with the shortest route highlighted in yellow. In the context of this particular setting of Friends, learning what God wants of us means letting the Holy Spirit guide us into the deep places of our souls and our communal life. The Sacred Compass teaches us to look for God in all the places our lives together have taken us.

So how is this different from any other form of discernment? Well, in this way: I feel that we have lost the idea of discernment as a lifelong enterprise and instead have come to look at it as primarily a way of making decisions at crucial times. “We are losing members, what should we do?” “Is it time to lay down one of our local meetings?” When we think about discernment that way, then the focus is about us finding our way. Sacred Compass thinking changes this – turns it upside down.

It does so because it is not about learning five easy steps to uncovering God's will for me/us. Rather it is about going to the destination that is ultimately the face of a loving God. Sacred Compass thinking teaches us that true spiritual discernment is not 1/6th billion about us. Unlike the t-shirt that has a picture of universe and says, “Copernicus was wrong – I am the center of the universe” the Sacred Compass model proclaims that discernment is first and foremost about God. Second it is about others – the ministry we are called to do for them. Third it is about Life. Fourth it is about love. And fifth it is about participating with God in God's work in the world.

Let's look at each of these in a bit more depth. First that true spiritual discernment is about God. Robert Barclay reminds us of that fact when he says, “The church [is] no other thing but the

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society, gathering or company of such as God hath called out of the world and worldly spirit to walk in his light and life”ⁱⁱ We are called to work in God's light and life – a life which is much bigger than our own. Indeed, your own book of Faith and Practice says, “This Spirit is the love of God, implanted in all, overcoming the ambivalence of conscience and leading us to a powerful conviction of God's will for our lives.”ⁱⁱⁱ “Leading us to a powerful conviction of God's will for our lives” Indeed.

This conviction shows us that true spiritual discernment is centered in others – the ministry we are called to do for them. Notice I say “for them” not “to them.” The question is not, “What would Jesus do?” The question is “What would Jesus have us do?” Whenever I think of that question I am reminded of the exchange between Jesus and Peter on the shore of the Sea of Tiberius after the resurrection.

When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?”

Yes, Lord," he said, “you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.”

Again Jesus said, “Simon son of John, do you truly love me?”

He answered, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Take care of my sheep.”

The third time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?”

Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, “Do you love me?” He said, “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Feed my sheep.”^{iv}

Well, we may be hurt at how many times Jesus asks us, “Do you want to do my will?” and we answer “Yes, Lord, I want to do your will” but don't seem to get any clearer directions than “Feed my sheep.” But perhaps that's precisely the point. We may want to do Christ's will but forget that means serving others. “But if someone comes asking for bread,” says Harvey Gillman, “we cannot say, sorry we are too busy discovering our own riches; when we have found them, we'll offer you a few. Our riches are precisely our sharing. And the world is very, very hungry.”^v So I would ask, “Is having one query about outreach really enough?”

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Third, true spiritual discernment is about life. God sets before us every day the choice of Life or Death and says, “Choose Life!” according to Deuteronomy 30: 19-29. So following the Sacred Compass is about looking for the Life in service we see set before us. By Life, I mean that which brings a sense of beauty, wonder, rightness – everything good and wholesome – to our endeavor: a motivation that feeds our souls; not a sense purely of obligation. The choice is rarely between good or bad; instead it's almost always between the good and better.

The writer and theologian Frederick Buechner says, “The vocation for you is the one in which your deep gladness and the world's deep need meet – something that not only makes you happy but that the world needs to have done.”^{vi} That's what I mean when I say the Sacred Compass leads us toward Life – deep gladness and deep need meet in God's Life.

This sort of living is an art; and, as Horace B. Pointing says:

The art of living must be studied, as must every art. It calls for imagination, so that every advance, every change, is not merely a difference, but a creative act.

Achievement, at any level above the lowest, calls for courage to hold on, in spite of current moods, and for exacting self-discipline. The art of Christian living calls for the same self-preparation; but its reward is not merely aesthetic satisfactions. The soul, hungry for God, is fed. Life itself takes on new meaning. Thus it is that we break from the confines of the prisons we have built about ourselves. Thus it is we are brought into the freedom of the Kingdom of God which, every day, through the wide world, is being realized in the hearts of men.^{vii}

Fourth, following the Sacred Compass is about love. Now there is no shortage of talk about love in our congregations, but is there a shortage of paying attention to the motions of Love? Do “they” know we are Christians by our love, as the song says?

George Fox urged us to “Take heed of the promptings of Truth and Love, for those are the leadings of God” and John Woolman reminds us,

Our gracious Creator cares and provides for all his creatures. His tender mercies are over all his works; and so far as his love influences our minds, so far we become

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interested in his workmanship and feel a desire to take hold of every opportunity to lessen the distresses of the afflicted and increase the happiness of the creation. Here we have a prospect of one common interest from which our own is inseparable, that to turn all the treasures we possess into the channel of universal love becomes the business of our lives^{viii}

To "... turn all the treasures we possess into the channel of universal love" as "the business of our lives" is no easy task. Perhaps that's why William Penn said, "Love is the hardest lesson in Christianity." He did not stop there, however, but continued to say, "for that reason, it should be most our care to learn it"^{ix} No lesson worth learning, even the lesson of Love, is easy. And yet, as your Faith and Practice reminds us, "... love is the highest law of life"^x

And fifth, following the Sacred Compass is about participating with God in God's work in the world. As George Fox wrote from prison to Friends,

In the power of life and wisdom, and dread of the Lord God of life ... Let all nations hear the word by sound or writing. Spare no place, spare not tongue nor pen, but be obedient to the Lord God and go through the world and be valiant for the Truth upon earth... Plough up the fallow ground ... And this is the word of the Lord God to you all, and a charge to you all in the presence of the living God: be patterns, be examples in all countries, places, islands, nations, wherever you come, that your carriage and life may preach among all sorts of people, and to them; then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in everyone.^{xi}

In addition to the five things I mentioned above, another thing that following the Sacred Compass teaches us is that our lives speak. We Friends are all familiar with that concept, especially personally – the admonition that we are to let our lives speak as a witness to the power of the Gospel at work in us. That is one thing that Fox's words reminds us – that we are patterns and examples. But I would propose also that our corporate life speaks, also. It speaks in two ways. One way it speaks is the one with which we are familiar – as a witness. So our corporate life speaks to others about what we believe about our faith through our practice.

But our corporate life also speaks to ourselves. It does, anyhow, if we will examine it

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through the lens of faith, searching Scripture, praying, and sharing our faith stories.

This latter is especially important because it tells us we are not alone on this journey – this pilgrimage. We then have the opportunity to learn from God through each other. As we tell our corporate story, God shows us the trajectory of our lives and souls. Our stories point to the places where way opened for us. And they show us the subtle hand of God resting upon us lightly or not so.

One of the things our faith story shows is that throughout our history, God has opened the way for us to develop some powerful and fresh ways of understanding the Gospel and living it out. I am thinking of our testimonies here – simplicity, equality, peace-making and the like. And these speak to others – religious research studies show there are people looking for what Friends have to offer. Thirty thousand people visit Beliefnet.com daily. Many take the Belief-o- Matic. One-third of those people find the organized religion (if we can call Quakerism organized) that best fits what they are looking for is Quaker.

If the Religious Society of Friends is going to thrive and attract these new people, it must come to a place where it is ultimately concerned about proclaiming good news by living out – in community – these testimonies in this fractured, fractious world. Friends must learn express and live our theology in such a way that women and men of good faith and goodwill will see that there is a point to be made for what we say and how we live.

We Christian Friends put great stock in that the Friends message is, in George Fox's words, “There is one, even Christ Jesus who can speak to thy condition...”^{xii} If we Friends believe that hearing this good news will cause the listener's soul to “leap with joy,” then we must affirm that we exist to preach about this God of love and joy, that we endeavor to be a people of love and joy, and that the congregations of our beloved Society, with God's help, must be places that model radiant love and joy. They must become places where, again in Fox's words, we bring them to Christ and leave them there – and let God work with them as God will.

Now this may mean that people might come to us who think differently theologically than we do. This is one reason I have become an advocate of theological hospitality as the best way of being Friends in this post-modern world.

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What do I mean by theological hospitality? First, theological hospitality is based in a hunger for encountering the Divine through worship while sharing an attitude of spiritual exploration that honors other' experience of that which we name God. Isaac Penington wrote in 1659 that

... oh, how sweet and pleasant it is to the truly spiritual eye to see the several sorts of believers, several forms of Christians in the school of Christ, everyone learning their own lesson, performing their own peculiar service, and knowing, owning, and loving one another in their several places and different performances to their Master, to whom they are to give an account, and not to quarrel with one another about their different practices. For this is the true ground of love and unity, not that such a man walks and does just as I do, but because I feel the same Spirit and life in him, and that he walks in his rank, in his own order, in his proper way and place of subjection to that: and this is far more pleasing to me than if he walked just in that track wherein I walk.^{xiii} 13

It begins with asking questions about why and how our individual souls seek to know God. Why do we each hunger for the Divine? Why do we each feel the pull of the Spirit in our souls?

It seems to me that this idea of theological hospitality is an attempt to answer the question God asks in Isaiah 43:19: “Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” Theological hospitality offers a possibility for perceiving what new thing God is doing among God's people. It is a way of discovering anew what George Gorman describes in *The Amazing Fact of Quaker Worship*:

... in this unlikely setting that I came to know what I can only describe as the amazing fact of Quaker worship. It was [there] that I discovered the way to the interior side of my life, at the deep centre of which I knew that I was not alone, but was held by a love that passes all understanding. This love was mediated to me, in the first place, by those with whom I worshipped. For my journey was not solitary, but one undertaken with my friends as we moved towards each other and together travelled inwards. Yet I knew that the love that held me could not be limited to the mutual love and care we had for each other. It was a signal of transcendence that

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pointed beyond itself to the source of all life and love.^{xiv}

Now what theological hospitality does not mean is that we dilute our religious experiences and speak of them in some lowest common denominator (or is that denomination?) language. No. Conservative Friends need to be Conservative – and to live up to the best of their faith. Being true to what we believe – and understanding that we have theological and language differences – is no small matter. Our theological beliefs and the language we attach to them are rich and deep and important precisely because they are how we try to make sense of the spiritual hunger that drives us and how we try to name that which we have come to know experientially and intellectually. So we would do well not to denigrate another's theological beliefs or doctrine as a way of denying another's search for that which is eternal. When we do so, we do violence not only to a fellow child of God of inestimable worth, but also to the faith and God we profess.

What is important, I feel, about this idea of theological hospitality is that, as I said, the non-dilution of our own faith experience. Theological hospitality means speaking of my faith with my language openly while allowing you do to the same. We need to stand inside our beliefs while be willing to be informed or even formed by the “other.” This also reminds us that God is big enough and strong enough to defend God's own self and does not require us to partake in that defense. We are called to be witnesses, not prosecutors. What we are called to be is to be authentic to our faith experiences, open to the Light we've been given, listen for God in our life together, share as we are led, and not neglect showing “hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”^{xv}

These are all lessons, I believe, that if we are following the Sacred Compass model, are revealed as we let our communal life speak. Our greatest work as Friends – be it in evangelism or social justice – has occurred when we bore witness to the powerful love of God and His transforming grace and immediate presence. People are searching for the sacred. Could we dare to become “like-hearted” people? I say like-hearted, notice, and not like-minded. We don't all have to think alike – which is a good thing, since few of us do. Sometimes I'm of two minds about things all on my own!

When we become like-hearted people, we come to experience God in a way that changes us. We actually encounter the Divine. At our best, we are not inviting people to come and just to be

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told about the Divine through story, sermon, song, and silence. Rather we are inviting them to join with us in actually gazing into the face of our loving God and listening for God's words to our souls. What more winsome invitation could there be than that?

Living in the way of theological hospitality is how, I believe, we Friends can follow the Sacred Compass. Our lives have spoken – we are most effective when we have lived in a way that was growing, generative, missional, and a way of friendship as an invitation to meet God. I do think it has a lot to offer who hear about us and wonder if we are really a place they can connect with a people who seek to be known as the Friends of God in an open and welcoming way.

Theological hospitality is ultimately based in those five things I said following the Sacred Compass was about – God, others, life, love, and working with God. If we follow this model, then we will become the people that Thomas Kelly described when he said:

The light for which the world longs is already shining. It is shining into the darkness, but the darkness does not apprehend it. It is shining into the darkness, but the darkness is not overcoming it. It is shining in many a soul, and already the new order has begun within the kingdom of the heart. It is shining in many a small group and creating a heavenly-earthly fellowship of children of the light. It will always shine and lead many into the world of need, that they may bear it up into the heart of God.^{xvi}

To be that "small group" known as the "children of the light" would be to mirror the early Church. Those people were a very study in diversity – Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, married and widowed. But they had two loves – for God and for each other. Their tender caring for each other caused others to look at them and remark, "Behold how they love one another."

Such love is contagious. People, even those around us who act as if their hearts are hard, long to be swept up in the mighty passion of God's loving-kindness and rest secure in our heavenly parent's embrace. The closest thing to that on this earth is our caring for one another. We need to care as we've never cared and in so doing become known again as the Friends of Jesus.

Now while I have been talking about how this can attract folks to us, this is not about what

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is commonly called “church growth.” No, I long ago gave up on the idea of the Quaker mega-church. But it is, interestingly, about church growth – personally and spiritually. It moves us from our past – and its’ glories – to the present and our future: to what our call is today; to where the Spirit is leading us now. It takes us to a fresh way of seeing and thinking about George's vision of a great people to be gathered.

In 1652, George Fox journeyed towards the north-west and we are all familiar with what he said happened as part of that journey:

As we went I spied a great high hill called Pendle Hill, and I went on the top of it with much ado, it was so steep; but I was moved of the Lord to go atop of it; and when I came atop of it I saw Lancashire sea; and there atop of the hill I was moved to sound the day of the Lord; and the Lord let me see atop of the hill in what places he had a great people to be gathered.^{xvii}

Perhaps the greatness is not meant to be in numbers, but rather in depth of spiritual living and obedience to the Living Christ: to be a people whose places of meeting offer a glimpse of the Light of God at work in the world.

So, the central issue in discerning “which way now” will always be, “Where is the Spirit leading?” Where is God, others, life, love, and service in the direction forward? Where is a sense of caring, beauty, rightness, feeling in harmony with God, and surrendering of our wills to God present in the direction we are feel being led to follow?

The Sacred Compass offers us an invitation: the invitation to join in creation's continuing dance to the Spirit's song. It is the invitation to experience God. It is the invitation to, “Stand by the roads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is; and walk in it.”

ⁱ The Association of Religion Data Archives, <http://www.thearda.com/>

ⁱⁱ Robert Barclay, *Apology for the True Christian Divinity* (London, 1678), pp. 181- 182

ⁱⁱⁱ *North Carolina Yearly Meeting (Conservative) Discipline* (1983), "The Inner Light", <http://www.ncymc.org/fpframes.html>

^{iv} John 21: 15-18, New International Version

^v Harvey Gillman quoted in *Quaker Faith and Practice: Second Edition* (London: The Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain), #28:10

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- ^{vi} <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week936/profile.html>
- ^{vii} Horace B. Pointing, *The Society of Friends* (1946), p. 20.
- ^{viii} John Woolman, *The Journal and Major Essays*, edited by Phillips P. Moulton (1971), pp.241,262
- ^{ix} William Penn, *A Collection of the Works of William Penn, vol. 1* (1726), p. 843
- ^x North Carolina Yearly Meeting (Conservative), *Discipline* (1983), "Civil Disobedience",
<http://www.ncymc.org/fpframes.html>
- ^{xi} George Fox, *Journal*, edited by John L. Nickalls (1952), p. 263.
- ^{xii} *ibid*, p. 11
- ^{xiii} Isaac Penington quoted in *Christian Faith and Practice in the Experience of the Society of Friends* (London: London Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends, 1960), #222.
- ^{xiv} George H. Gorman in *The Amazing Fact of Quaker Worship* (London: Friends Home Service Committee; 1973), p. 149.
- ^{xv} Hebrews 13:2, Revised Standard Version
- ^{xvi} Thomas Kelly quoted in *Quaker Faith and Practice: Second Edition* (London: The Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain), #26:62.
- ^{xvii} George Fox, *Journal*, edited by J. L. Nickalls (1952), pp. 103-104.