

A Friendly Letter

Issue Number Sixty

ISSN #0739-5418

Third Month, 1986

Dear Friend,

How better to begin *A Friendly Letter's* fifth anniversary issue than by correcting an error? It seems that in our last number we outran our guide, listing the date thereof as *Third Month, 1986*, which it obviously was not. It's a minor mistake, but of the sort that gives librarians unnecessary headaches.

Otherwise, here we are, sixty issues later. The five year mark feels like quite a milestone to me, and I have been tempted to devote this issue to a editorial reflections, or a series of testimonials from readers, or some other such self-indulgence. However, a few weeks ago one of our ever-alert correspondents phoned in a tip about some very interesting, and otherwise unreported goings-on out in Iowa Conservative YM; and how could I resist? So instead of some subjective musings, this issue reports on that very interesting, and in my judgment significant episode; in short, it does what *A Friendly Letter* was set up to do.

This is not to say that subjectivity will be entirely excluded from these columns. Especially now, when this anniversary finds me in the midst of my scheduled vocational reevaluation(a/k/a a midlife crisis): Fifteen years of the freelance writer's life seem to be enough. So what do I do now? At the moment, I work in a local post office, delivering mail on a rural route part-time. It is a reasonable stopgap, but I keep wondering if there isn't some Quaker setting where my talents and concerns might be serviceable. Teaching seems like one possibility, but I don't yet feel any clarity. Any good counsel, leads or reasonable propositions from you would be welcome.

Whatever else comes of this time of "digging deep," *A Friendly Letter* will continue for the foreseeable future. It is still growing, both in circulation(about 600 now) as well as, I hope, credibility. Besides, as this issue illustrates, there are still numerous items of Quaker news which are not being reported-adequately elsewhere, so there is no shortage of work to do.

Which reminds me: Last time we mentioned some *other* newsletters which we find very interesting. But we left out one of the newest and most interesting of all, the scope of which is broader than just Friends. It is *Religion Watch*,, edited and published by Richard Cimino, a Friend from New York. Cimino reports on interesting developments in many denominations; recent issues included reports on sectarian conflicts among American Jews, dissent within the Unification Church, controversy over Christianity among Unitarians, and even a summary of our issue on Quaker membership trends. I find it fascinating; if you want to give it a try, a year's subscription is \$12.00, from *Religion Watch*, P.O. Box 652, North Bellmore NY 11710.

Yours in the Light,

Chuck Fager

Chuck Fager

IOWA CONSERVATIVE YM AND THE CLERK WHO WASN'T

What future is there for the Conservative strain of American Quakerism? Their numbers have been steadily declining, and some have thought they would soon disappear. Recent events in Iowa Conservative YM, however, point to a different, and perhaps more promising prospect.

To be sure, some see it differently. In fact, one of Iowa's meetings, far away in Pasadena, California, was shocked to learn in 1984 that their parent body had appointed a clerk who, as they put it, "is not a member...does not believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and does not observe the Friends' testimony against the use of alcoholic beverages...." And when the other Iowa monthly meetings responded to their strongly-worded letter of protest with milder, but steadfast affirmations of that decision, it was too much.

No doubt old John Wilbur, the namesake pioneer of Wilburite Conservative Quakerism would have agreed with Pasadena. But in this case it was the clerk in question, John Griffith of Penn Valley Meeting in Kansas City, Mo., who had raised these points first, when the YM representatives first approached him about becoming clerk. He even wrote a letter outlining them as reasons why he should not be appointed. But the representatives persisted; they were nominating him, not his beliefs. So Griffith finally accepted. But when Pasadena's protest was sent to all the monthly meetings, he quickly followed it with a letter of his own affirming that he was "quite prepared to step aside if that is in the interest of our unity."

A New Kind of Conservative Friend, In a New Kind of Conservative YM

Why would Iowa's representatives want to make such a controversial appointment in the first place? There appear to be two main reasons, the first of which was their personal regard for the appointee. Griffith came in contact with Friends during World War Two, after he was arrested in South Carolina for refusing the draft. His father, a Methodist minister, was pastor of the largest church in the state, and the son's act gained considerable negative publicity. In jail, his first visitor was a Quaker AFSC worker, who heard about Griffith on the radio and came by bus to pay him a friendly call. The visit apparently made quite an impression; Griffith has been active among Friends ever since. He had served as clerk of two monthly meetings, and in 1984 was treasurer of both his monthly meeting and the larger Missouri Valley Conference of Friends. Most Iowa Friends clearly thought very highly of him, including some who did not share his strongly universalistic religious views. The very sensitivity shown in his reluctance to accept the appointment was one of the characteristics they hoped he would bring to the clerkship.

The second force behind his appointment was more institutional, namely that, despite its heritage as an outpost of Orthodox Quaker culture, Iowa Conservative YM has evolved into a very different body than it once was. The old atmosphere of stern dealings with "unsoundness" within and isolation from other bodies who did tolerate it has all but vanished--not by design, but more as a result of other changes, no less profound for being unplanned: Many older meetings are slowly dying out, as farm youths moved to the cities; much of Iowa's new growth has come in places like Ames and Iowa City, university towns where diversity is accepted, even prized. Add to this the steady dilution of traditional Conservative Quaker isolationism by exposure to AFSC, FCNL and other Quaker bodies, and it is not hard to see how some such appointment was bound to come eventually. This evolution is very evident in the YM's latest *Discipline*, adopted in 1974. Indeed, strictly speaking Pasadena had no grounds for its protest, since the *Discipline* does not specify a Christian commitment or total abstinence as a qualification for its officers, or even for membership.

Speaking Plainly, and Shockingly

Even so, Griffith's frank statement that he "did not feel a need to believe in [Jesus'] death was a blood sacrifice required by God as an atonement for our sins", reportedly came as a profound shock to the Pasadena representative at the 1984 sessions, as was his admission that even though his "consumption of alcoholic beverages is very moderate(almost rare)...I wish to be honest with Friends" about not abstaining totally; nor could he help but add that "Friends should remember that neither Jesus nor George Fox totally abstained from alcoholic beverages." He was, however, willing to give up his detached stance, and applied for formal membership in Penn Valley Meeting immediately after his appointment as YM clerk.

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Few if any Quaker publications have caused as much talk and controversy per page as **A Friendly Letter** since it first appeared in mid-1981. That's because every month since then it has brought a growing number of readers a unique series of solidly-researched, searching reports on the key issues, problems and prospects of American Quakerism in the 1980s. A great many of these reports have been the first, or the only accounts of major issues to appear in a Quaker publication. Maybe that's why, among the hundreds of letters to editor-publisher Chuck Fager from Quakers of all varieties, so many have praised it. Here are a few of the comments:

"This is a chance for me to say again how important A Friendly Letter is to so many of us and what a superlative job you are doing with it." --A liberal New York Friend.

"Thy objective of reaching out to Friends of all varieties is essential, if the Religious Society of Friends is to survive." --A conservative Friend, Ohio.

"You would have been pleased to hear the discussion about renewing A Friendly Letter at our last Monthly Meeting. We agreed firmly that we did not always agree with you-- but we agreed even more firmly that we appreciated your willingness to talk about and present information on subjects Quakers wish would just go away." --Des Moines, Iowa.

"I think you are doing the most important work among Quakers today and I have wanted you to know it for some time." --A California Friend.

To be fair, **A Friendly Letter** has also occasionally been called irresponsible, inaccurate, even "a gutter press." But if you are concerned about the present and future of Quakerism in America, perhaps you should form your own opinion about it. It's easy to subscribe; just use the coupon below.

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Furthermore, he affirmed that "I value the spiritual companionship of many Friends who do believe that Jesus died as an atonement for our sins. When we join in the depths of silent worship, theological differences seem to lose their importance." He wrote a similar conciliatory letter to Pasadena Friends as well.

During the rest of 1984 and into 1985, Iowa's monthly meetings grappled with Pasadena's challenge and formulated their responses. And one by one, they wrote to their California brethren affirming Griffith's appointment. This judgment, however, was not always easily reached. For instance, Whittier, Iowa Meeting reported that "The past year has been a time of testing," during which "Five people found they could no longer remain members of the Yearly Meeting and withdrew membership because they disagree with the theological beliefs of the appointed clerk and the large trend in agreement with him." The chairperson of the YM's trustees, a member of Paullina Meeting, tendered his resignation with the committee's annual report, "In view," he said, "of the various accumulative past events and decisions undermining the 'DIVINITY of CHRIST as LORD and SAVIOR....' (His emphasis.) In their letters to Pasadena, the meetings reportedly emphasized mutual love, the tolerance of differing beliefs as Friends sought truth and spiritual guidance, and the value of unity.

Pasadena finally replied to these letters in their State of the Meeting report, delivered just before the 1985 YM sessions. Amid a long list of biblical passages, they made plain that they were having none of it. The letter is too long to quote in full here (the complete text is in the Iowa YM 1985 Minutes, it is an excellent concise statement of the separatist theological position which characterized not only old-time Conservative circles but which is still a strong current in many pastoral YMs as well. It reads in part:

Standing Alone For the Old Ways

"Last Eighth Month we wrote to all the monthly meetings...to ask if [John Griffith's appointment] was representative of the beliefs of Iowa Yearly Meeting....The answers indicate that belief in Christ as Lord and Savior has become a doctrine that is subordinate to a concern for unity with, and tolerance of, unbelievers and their non-Christian doctrines.

"In your answers to us, you spoke of the power of love, and quoted 1 Corinthians 13. The Apostle Paul, who wrote this letter...called himself an apostle of Jesus Christ....

"You spoke of seeking truth. John said, 'The law was given by Moses but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ' (John 1:17), and Jesus said, 'I am the way, the truth and the life: no man cometh to the father, but by me' (John 14:6).

"You spoke of life...Jesus said (John 3:16), 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only...Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life....'

"You spoke of differing beliefs. Paul said in Romans 16:17-18--'Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions... contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them. For...such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly....' And John said in 1 John 1:9, 'Whosoever...abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God.'

"You spoke of spiritual guidance...John says in 1 John 5 that it is the Holy Spirit that bears witness of Christ both in heaven and earth. If you are led by a spirit and deny Jesus Christ, then the spirit that is in you is not the Holy Spirit of the Scriptures....

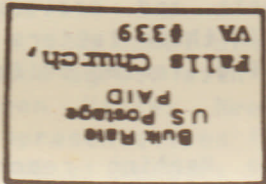
Paying the Price of Purity

"And you spoke of unity. Paul said in 1 Cor 6:14-17, 'Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what communion hath light with darkness? and what concord hath Christ with Belial? Or what part hath he that believeth with an unbeliever?...Wherefore come ye out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing....' If we are united with unbelievers then we will be separated from Christ. If we are to be united with Christ then we must separate ourselves from those who deny Him....Therefore, we...do hereby withdraw our membership in, and affiliations with...Iowa Yearly Meeting of Friends (Conservative), effective as of Eighth Month 11, 1985."

Iowa YM wrote each member in Pasadena, asking them to wait before taking such a step until representatives of the YM could meet with them. But the withdrawal went forward. However, Pasadena's protest and withdrawal were among its last corporate acts: its members are few and elderly; they have since sold their meetinghouse and now meet only once a month, in a member's home. These choices in Iowa and Pasadena seem to confirm the pattern of Wilburite history, that they can have their strict soundness, or a future, but not both.

INSIDE: Iowa Conservative YM
And the Cost of Change
FIFTH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE!
POSTMASTER--PLEASE RUSH!

From: Chuck Fager, A Friendly Letter
P.O. Box 1361
Baileys Crossroads, VA 22041



This Month In Quaker History

A month of battles, this: on 3/21/1778, British forces searching for American rebels in southern New Jersey got word that a group of twenty or so of the enemy were spending the night in the home of William Hancock, a Quaker who was also a local magistrate. A force of British raiders, led by "Jersey Volunteers," American Tories who knew the area, sneaked up on the house under cover of darkness, attacked it and killed all the occupants by bayonneting, without firing a shot. Among the dead were Hancock and three other elderly Friends, all members of Alloway's Creek Meeting. Hancock's house is still standing.

Almost three years later, in the last months of the war, Friends further south were caught in a prelude to the memorable Battle of Guilford Court House in North Carolina. The nearby New Garden Meetinghouse was occupied by both British forces under Cornwallis and American troops commanded by Nathanael Greene (a disowned Quaker from Rhode Island), on their way to the larger, more famous battle. There was intense fighting around the meetinghouse, though, and Friends tended the wounded of both sides and buried many of the dead. As often happened in this early guerilla insurgency, the British forces seemed to carry the engagement, but the American units got away, to fight and win another day. The Friends, meantime, attempted to maintain their testimony while their farms were repeatedly pillaged of supplies by foraging soldiers.

Quaker Chuckle

Speaking of Nathanael Greene, I have read that when his Quaker mother realized that he was determined to go off to the war, her parting words to him went something like this: "Well, if thee must take part in this carnal warfare, Nathanael, don't let me hear of thee being wounded while having thy back toward the other side."

And maybe it was during the same war that a young Quaker farmhand, leading a donkey, passed by an army camp. A couple of recruits saw him and decided to have some fun. Leaning over the fence, one said, "Hey, what are you holding on to your brother so tight for, sonny?"

"To keep him from running off to join the army," replied the youngster without missing a beat.
