

A Friendly Letter

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Ninth Month, 1988

Dear Friend,

Yes, that's right. I not only saw Martin Scorsese's movie, "The Last Temptation of Christ," I actually liked it. Further, I liked it both as a piece of cinema and as a work of imaginative religious fiction; that is, I liked it as a Christian. And I commend it to readers.

Given this reaction, it will come as no surprise that the crusade against the film by evangelical and fundamentalist groups distresses me. There is, of course, the vicious anti-semitism that surfaced in it, and the crudely repressive book/film burner's mentality; but those are the extremes. I was almost as troubled by the more moderately-phrased statement of the National Association of Evangelicals, eschewing censorship but urging a boycott because it found the film's Jesus heterodox, offensive to true Christians.

This is nonsense, pure sanctimony. Scorsese and novelist Nikos Kazantzakis have given us the artistic results of honest, very personal spiritual struggles. Sure the Jesus of "Last Temptation" is fictionalized, but he is not falsified. The portrayal has as much theological integrity as any of the plastic mannequin protagonists of earlier Hollywood biblical epics, and more than most. It is even largely orthodox: The film's Jesus claims to be God, works miracles, and says he'll rise from the dead as proof of a messiahship that will bring salvation to the world. What more do you want, for Christ's sake?

My suspicion is that the underlying sources of this harsh reaction are more cultural than religious: Scorsese's Holy Land is a gritty, sandy, dirty place; its prostitutes actually ply their trade; John the Baptist looks and talks like a fanatic, and the disciples are a motley crew at best; when hundreds of sheep are sacrificed for Passover, there is real blood everywhere, and entrails too; it's gross. Then, too, when Jesus

brings Lazarus out of his tomb, the guy really *looks* like he's been dead for three days; yuk. And maybe most shocking of all, when Jesus is crucified, he's actually *naked* and you can even see the God-man's pubic hair.

Most of this, of course, is close to what everyday reality must have been like then; much of it is biblically attested. But the howls of outrage are coming from a constituency whose religious sensibility has spawned such artifacts as the "Precious Moments" Bible, adorned with cutesy almond-shaped kids with big dewdrop eyes, powder-pink cheeks and whited sepulchre skin. No wonder this movie drives such people up the wall; but if you ask me, those dewdrops are a lot closer to real blasphemy than anything in this film.

Finally, the whole brouhaha is not only un-American and un-Christian, it is above all un-intelligent—*especially* from a Christian point of view. It is wasting what should have been a fine evangelistic opening. After all, any human portrait of Jesus will be incomplete, imperfect; even the Bible ended up with four versions of his story. So the film should be a starting point for exploration of Jesus' life and message, especially as portrayed in Scripture, to separate the gospel wheat from the novelistic chaff.

Instead, the protesters have squandered their opportunity in no-win, know-nothing rows about why you shouldn't see a movie most of *them* haven't seen. I can hear the Nazarene rabbi crying, "*Oi vey, these meshuggenah goyim!*" For my part I say, Stand Up For Jesus, and go see the movie.

Yours in the Light,

Chuck Fager
Chuck Fager

Among Friends, as in many other churches today, homosexuality is the issue that just won't go away. Two current cases make that plain.

One involves Indiana's Western Yearly Meeting. In Issue #84(4/88), we reported on a conflict over a minute adopted last year by one of its meetings supporting same sex marriage. The meeting, North Meadow Circle of Friends in Indianapolis, had gone on to marry a female couple under its care late last year, and a notice of the wedding was published in Friends Journal.

North Meadow is unprogrammed, and its members are primarily of a rather liberal outlook. The meeting is jointly affiliated with Ohio Valley YM, an unprogrammed YM. As Western is predominantly a pastoral YM, with a sizeable evangelical presence, strong concerns were soon voiced about North Meadow's minute, and there were demands that the YM do something about it. The main suggestions were either to make North Meadow leave Western, or to reduce it to preparative meeting status, where it could not transact its own business, including marriages.

THE POLITICS OF SUBORDINATION

Western's *Faith and Practice* specifies that local meetings are "subordinate" to the YM, and thus it has the authority to intervene in their affairs for cause. When this authority has been used, it has typically been in situations where ultra-evangelical pastors have taken churches into performing the ordinances. A case in 1982, involving a split in the Hikle Creek meeting along such lines, was reported in our Issues #20(11/82) and #50(5/85). Then, the YM supported one side in the local conflict, and when the case ended up in the Indiana Supreme Court, Western prevailed.

A visiting committee discussed the matter with North Meadow

Friends, and in Third Month of this year the YM Administrative Council, its interim representative body, decided to send out a packet of materials to all its meeting, consisting mainly of North Meadow's minute and a critical response by the Courtland Avenue Friends Church in Kokomo, and asked meetings to consider and respond to them.

Responses came in from forty meetings. Of these, thirty-seven stated clearly that in their view same sex marriage was unacceptable. Two asked for more time to study the matter; only one voiced any support for North Meadow. In addition, seven of the responding meetings said that if North Meadow insisted on maintaining its minute, it ought not to continue in Western YM, and two indicated they would consider withdrawing from Western if North Meadow's policy was allowed to stand. Four others, however, said North Meadow ought to be permitted to stay.

As the yearly meeting gathered for its annual session last month, the "North Meadow Concern" was on the agenda for Seventh Day, 8/13. The session was the most heavily attended of any in the week, with over two hundred Friends present from many meetings. They were told of the responses to the packet, and given another piece of news: At its business meeting a month earlier, North Meadow agreed to offer to withdraw from Western, in order, members said, to avoid having their group, rather than the issues involved, continue to be the focus of attention. The Executive Committee reported a recommendation that North Meadow's offer should be accepted.

In the business meeting that followed, however, a number of Friends expressed strong uneasiness about this recommendation; and although most Friends who spoke favored the withdrawal, at the end of the session clerk Les Paulsen declared there was not enough unity

to act, and proposed to postpone further consideration until the fall interim session in Eleventh Month.

This outcome, however, produced considerable chagrin among some who were intent on eliminating open support for homosexuality and same sex marriage from Western's ranks. There were numerous declarations that Friends and their meetings would leave Western if North Meadow was permitted to stay.

AN EXTRAORDINARY CALL

These declarations deeply concerned many Friends, and one in particular, Marilyn Bell, a widely respected member from Sheridan, Indiana. She felt it would be too risky for the future of the YM to wait until Eleventh Month to bring this matter to a conclusion. Thus, checking her *Faith and Practice*, she drafted a statement calling for a special called full YM session, as soon as possible to consider the matter further. Western's procedures permit such called sessions by petition of three members of the Administrative council from three different meetings. Such called sessions are very unusual; indeed, no one I talked to could recall the last one; but by the next day, the needed signatures were obtained, and the called session set for Seventh Day, 8/27.

By the time the called session opened, the tensions within the YM appeared to many to be grave. The turnout certainly underlined the depth of concern: 238 Friends were present, from 50 meetings, as many or more than had attended the regular session on the topic.

Nevertheless, reports both from North Meadow and other meetings indicate that the session was conducted in a reasonably friendly manner, although twice there was applause for anti-homosexual declarations, despite eldering by

the clerk against it.

It was quickly evident that the balance of sentiment had not changed much since the earlier discussion. One meeting reportedly had written to the clerk to say it would withhold its share of the YM budget as long as North Meadow was allowed to stay, and at least three other meetings were considered to be on the verge of similar action. This added up to the most serious threat of widespread defection and schism Western had faced in decades. Evanston Meeting in Illinois, another unprogrammed group with dual affiliation, brought in a minute urging that North Meadow be allowed to stay. But it stood all but alone in its view.

Toward the middle of the meeting North Meadow's clerk, Evalyn Kellum, whose family has been part of Western YM for generations, rose to say that she had come to understand that if North Meadow were permitted to withdraw, the YM would be able to move away from a focus on one meeting's circumstances to the larger issues involved. When the clerks drafted a decision minute accepting North Meadow's withdrawal, about eight Friends objected, but they agreed to stand aside.

WORKSHOPS, ANYONE?

For North Meadow, this means a shift of loyalties exclusively to Ohio Valley YM. Ohio Valley's polity is much more congregational than Western's, so little trouble is expected there. (One member reported that, in contrast to Western's response, when Ohio Valley officers learned of North Meadow's marriage minute, their reaction was to offer the meeting a workshop slot at the next gathering to discuss it with other Friends.)

What happens next for Western is not as clear. Several times in both of these discussions it was said that, regardless of North Meadow's fate, the issues of homosexuality and same sex marriage would not go away. At one level, this would seem

to be the case: At least two other meetings, Bloomington and Evansville, are reported to have agreed to minutes supporting same sex unions, but not calling them marriage; and Evanston is said to have before it a request for marriage from a female couple.

But at another level, it is not so obvious whether those who were anxious to banish North Meadow really are gearing up for a continuing purge of other offenders. As one weighty Westerner remarked about the other meetings, "If they don't call it marriage, and don't flaunt what they're doing, it may be easier just to ignore them." It seems evident that North Meadow has paid for the high visibility its minute and marriage have attained; such is often the fate of those who set out on new ways.

A WITNESS FOR QUAKER VOLUNTEERS?

The other "showdown" mentioned at the beginning is one that has not happened yet, but for which the groundwork is being laid. It involves the Quaker Volunteer Witness program of Friends United Meeting, and again the problem is homosexuality.

Last spring QVW was considering applications for several openings, among them slots working in a legal aid program with Beacon Hill Meeting in Boston, or in sanctuary efforts with Pima Meeting in Arizona. One applicant, who seemed well-qualified, was Pablo Stansfield, from University Meeting in Seattle.

Stansfield's application was proceeding toward acceptance until one of his references, in what the writer considered a favorable aside, referred to him as a well-adjusted gay man. QVW staffer Ben Richmond, noting this, turned for advice to two members of the North America group of FUM's World Ministries Commission. The advisors responded with an opinion as follows:

We agreed that FUM simply does

not have unity on making the appointment of a homosexual, so we cannot move forward with this appointment. We also agreed that FUM cannot appoint members of a same sex marriage. It was agreed that this policy should be discussed in the fall committee meeting and ultimately will need the attention of the General Board." (The General Board is FUM's highest policymaking body, with all member YMs represented.)

As news of this action spread, so did indignation, especially among gay Friends and those concerned with discrimination in hiring. The Friends for Lesbian and Gay Concerns adopted a minute at its summer business meeting opposing this decision. There was a very contentious discussion of it at New York YM, and a less contentious but weighty exchange at New England YM, which QVW's Ben Richmond attended. Both Beacon Hill Meeting and its Salem Quarter adopted minutes in opposition.

The highest level response came from Baltimore YM, which has staunchly supported QVW in the past. It adopted a strongly-worded minute which said, in part, "Baltimore Yearly Meeting has long borne testimony against prejudice and discrimination. This testimony is currently expressed in...our... Faith and Practice as follows: "Do you search yourself for and strive to eliminate prejudice such as those related to race, religion, gender, age, sexual orientation, and economic condition?"

"Baltimore Yearly Meeting opposes the adoption of any policy in Quaker Volunteer Witness or any other Friends United Meeting program based on discrimination on any of these grounds. We direct our representatives to clearly communicate this conviction to Friends United Meeting."

Thus it seems that the issue that won't go away will be with Friends for a few more rounds at least.

I have a running dispute with Friends that I want to surface here. And since this dispute, like others, has(at least) two sides, this section will include an opposing viewpoint. Here my friendly opponents are represented by Damon Hickey of Guilford College; his comments are on the next page.

The dispute is over the way most Friends groups write minutes. My contention is that too many of these minutes, and related records, are so sanitized, euphemized, and depersonalized that, not only are they of little lasting value, they often become to a significant degree untruthful and un-Quakerly.

Let's consider a few examples: I recently visited Ohio Yearly Meeting and sat in on a session marked by considerable contention. At issue was a proposal to include a contribution to the American Friends Service Committee in the YM's budget. This was questioned by several Friends who opposed AFSC's support for gay rights. Such debate was no surprise; AFSC's policy has been debated since day one; and the AFSC contribution was ultimately approved.

The surprise came when the minutes of the session were read back: they spoke of a deep exercise and of leaning on the spirit of Christ, but there was no mention of the deep questions that had just been raised. None. I left shaking my head at this, as did others unfamiliar with local ways. Inquiries brought explanations but no satisfaction: the matter had been discussed earlier and mentioned in prior minutes; it did not affect the decision, which was recorded and was the important thing; and the issue was a very difficult one for that group to handle.

Hmmmmmm. I know that because Friends are human there has always been a tendency to go easy on ourselves when putting down matter

that is troublesome, or becomes so. More than minutes are involved in this: George Fox's *Journal*, for instance, was extensively expurgated, and much material left out: his claims of miracles, the full sweep of his Quaker universalism, and much of his early political radicalism. As Oxford historian Christopher Hill remarks plainly, "The Quakers survived, prospered, and rewrote their history...." Some of John Woolman's more vivid dreams were edited out of his *Journal*. And in the 1840s, when *The Friend* of London began reporting on the proceedings of London Yearly Meeting, its reports were so elliptical they included absurdities like the following, from the 1848 sessions:

A Friend laid before the meeting some views and considerations which had impressed his mind.

And:

Two Friends were engaged in some brief and weighty remarks.

The editor justified this type of reporting thus: *We have always endeavoured, by avoiding the publication of names and by the selection of subjects and the employment of general terms, to shun everything which might be deemed a betrayal of confidence on the one hand, or an unsuitable treatment of religious matter on the other.*

Indeed; but then what's left? It also, rather conveniently, avoided rocking any boats. But this kind of reporting not only produces howlers, it also leads to experiences like that of historian Larry Ingle, when he set out to understand the Orthodox-Hicksite separation for his book, *Quakers in Conflict*. He found that the "monthly, quarterly and yearly meeting reports and minutes...were a singular disappointment, for they contained little of the substance of discussion and only sketches of

formal action." Moreover, such sanitizing is never done in a vacuum; it exaggerates the biases of the editors/censors. This is shown clearly in the incident described in this month's Quaker history vignette on the back page.

So my plea to recording clerks, and to the meetings they serve, is this: Don't forget that the testimony of truthfulness, on which we so pride ourselves in outward dealings, applies to our Society and its affairs as well. And please remember that the "audience" for our minutes includes not only those present but other Friends, interested outsiders, and generations of Friends to come. When future readers turn to these records, they will as often as not be seeking just those items which we may be tempted to leave out, for the sake of our own immediate comfort.

CARRYING OUR PARTICULAR CROSS

Or let me put it another way: Beware of "comfortable" minutes. Truth-speaking and comfort do not always go together. Sometimes the truth hurts. And no truth can hurt more, none can be harder to tell, than truth about ourselves. Speaking truth about ourselves can often become an example of what early Friends called "the daily cross." It is a burden we ought to take up with resolution.

But let me not wax too solemn about this, because not only the big controversies are involved. We don't know today who or what will be of importance to Friends in the next century, or even next year. So we need as much information in our minutes as we can concisely manage.

That should mean naming more names, and summarizing as candidly as we can the course of our life and struggles together. This is not just good practice; for Quakers, it is also a testimony.

A Major Essay By Chuck Fager:

ABORTION AND CIVIL WAR

Where is the conflict over abortion in our society heading?

Can America come to terms with this issue peacefully? Or will it produce, as some anti-abortion advocates are already predicting, something approaching a new civil war?

What are the frightening parallels between the current anti-abortion movement and the bloody outcome of the struggle over slavery?

What alternatives are there for those who are opposed both to abortion and to the current anti-abortion movement?

These are some of the questions Chuck Fager considers in this essay, the expanded original text which was the basis for an article in The New Republic issue of 5/30/1988.

Chuck Fager has followed the abortion conflict since before the Supreme Court's Roe v. Wade decision in 1973. In this essay he sums up fifteen years of conflict and presents an original and unsettling forecast of where it is headed, and what could be done about it.

This essay will be of interest to anyone who has been concerned about the abortion issue. To get a copy of the full text, return the coupon below.

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CONCERNS, NOT PERSONALITIES: MINUTING CONFLICT IN A FRIENDS MEETING

By Damon D. Hickey

(Damon D. Hickey is curator of the Friends Historical Collection of Guilford College and recording clerk of North Carolina Yearly Meeting (Conservative). He is past recording clerk of the Guilford College faculty and served as one of three recording clerks at the 1985 Triennial of the Friends World Committee for Consultation.)

The young woman was nervous. Attending Ministry and Counsel at yearly meeting for the first time, she had been pressed into service as recording clerk. In this yearly meeting, all minutes were written and read aloud on the spot, "in the face of the meeting." No wonder she was nervous! Her minutes were full of names: "So and so said this. So and so replied that." Finally a Friend well steeped in the meeting's traditions suggested gently, "It has been customary in our meetings to omit from the minutes the names of those who speak." Flustered, she rewrote the passage, translating blunt statements into questions and concerns and omitting the names of the speakers: "Friends wondered whether...Concern was felt that..." The meeting approved her minutes and several Friends thanked for doing well a difficult task.

The incident illustrates several points about minute-taking in a Friends meeting that I have tried to make in my "Unforeseen Joy: Serving a Friends Meeting as Recording Clerk" (available for \$2.50 postpaid from North Carolina Yearly Meeting, 903 New Garden Road, Greensboro, NC 27410). First, writing minutes in the face of the meeting gives the recording clerk the immediate feedback needed to make them an accurate reflection of the sense of the meeting. Second, identifying speakers can be problematic. Third, translating statements of position into questions

and concerns can facilitate conflict-resolution, as noted by Roger Fisher and William Ury in their Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In.

But why not include people's names? To quote from Unforeseen Joy,

In the course of a Friendly discussion people may change their minds as they listen to others and are led into fuller truth. Associating them with positions they have taken makes it harder for them to be flexible. Doing so may also mean that the concerns of certain Friends will be taken more (or less) seriously than those of others because of the way different people are regarded in the meeting. Stating concerns without attaching names to them helps to assure that they will be dealt with without prejudice.

As a historian, I wish every detail were included: who said what, the tone of voice, the body language. A full-color videotape of the meetings that precipitated the great Quaker divisions would be priceless to me. I wish the cameras could have followed the participants home to record their private discussions too. But as a recording clerk, my task is less to make future historians happy than it is to further the work of the meeting: listening carefully and arriving at a sense of unity about the Spirit's leading. Only if Friends ask that their names be minuted along with their concerns would I be likely to include them.

The story of the young woman makes one other important point. Clerks are servants. No matter what they prefer, the minutes belong to the meeting. What is to be included or omitted and how it is to be expressed should be discussed thoughtfully by the meeting before it is minuted by the clerk.

INSIDE: AMAZING BUT TRUE--
I SAW "THE LAST TEMPTATION OF CHRIST"
AND I'M STILL A CHRISTIAN!!
(Plus the usual Quaker stuff.)

From: Chuck Fager, A Friendly Letter
P.O. Box 1361
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THIS MONTH IN QUAKER HISTORY

The official accounts of the 1881 sessions of Iowa Yearly Meeting in Ninth Month, as historian Thomas Hamm puts it, "painted a picture of harmony and united soul-saving activity." But the diary of one of Iowa's most distinguished ministers sketched a very different scene. To Joel and Hannah Bean, the yearly meeting was a severe trial. Joel Bean had once been Iowa's clerk, and he and his wife were still widely respected ministers. But they were also staunch champions of traditional orthodox Quakerism, centered on commitment to the Inner Light, silent worship and unpaid ministry.

All this was being swept aside in Iowa, as elsewhere, by the revival movement. Many traditionalist Friends had left Iowa YM in 1877 to form their own Conservative yearly meeting. Bean had sympathized with them, but he was opposed to separations; and anyway, he had once hoped that the revival efforts could produce some renewal in the Society of Friends. But what he now saw was that revivalism meant not reform but revolution,

"designed," as Hamm says, "to put the society on a new doctrinal basis under new leadership." This leadership was pastoral, its worship highly programmed and emotional, and its doctrines included fierce rejection of the Inner Light.

Joel Bean had argued against the excesses of revivalism in an article, "The Issue," published in England a few months before, and widely reprinted by American Friends opposed to revivalism. "The Issue," Bean, and the Inner Light were all repeatedly attacked at the yearly meeting, and revivalist leaders even demanded a vote of censure. Hannah Bean strongly defended her husband, and no vote was taken. But the Beans returned home discouraged, seeing clearly that revivalist forces had the upper hand. Within a year they had left Iowa for California.

But the sanitized minutes of the sessions, historian Hamm concludes, offer "a classic example of how the official minutes and reports in periodicals tell only part of the story."

QUAKER CHUCKLES

Who says Quakers are ignorant of the classics? At Baltimore Yearly Meeting last month, a new Faith and Practice was approved, after twenty years of labor, with little difficulty. The next day, the clerk of the epistle committee offered this one-line summary of the sessions: "'We came, we saw, we concurred', or as the Latin has it, 'Veni, Vidi, Whoopee!'"

Also at BYM, yours truly conducted a Bible study group centered on the wisdom books of the

Old Testament. One morning we sat in a circle, reading aloud various proverbs that seemed particularly striking or pungent. One that caught my attention was Proverbs 18:8, in the Good News rendering: "Gossip is a tasty morsel. How we love to swallow it." I read it to the group and we sat for a moment in silence.

Then a person across the circle said, "And did you see the next verse? It says, 'Does thee read A Friendly Letter every month?'"
