

Vocal Ministry: The Message & the Medium

2/2006

Recently I was asked if, and to what extent, the vocal ministry is Christ-centered in the Meeting I attend. The question came from a dear, Christ-centered friend and former member of the Meeting in question. Several years ago we had discussed this issue; I remarked that little had changed in the past several years: Christ-centered messages were few and far between. This was not a point of detraction or criticism; criticism was not our intent, either in the question or the answer. I added that I took each message in and listened intently in expectation that the Lord may be using the medium to speak to me and to those gathered. The question and my answer got me to thinking about the content of messages and the words used to express that content. The following came to mind:

“And why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?” (Luke 6:46)

“Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven.” (Matthew 7:21).

In both of the above quotes, Jesus is telling us that the right words, without actions and behavior commensurate with them, are insufficient and meaningless.

Then I thought about John Woolman’s desire to go among the American Indians to witness the truth that moved among them and to be a witness of the truth:

“Love was the first motion, and then a concern arose to spend some time with the Indians, that I might feel and understand their life and the spirit they live in, if haply I might receive some instruction from them, or they be in any degree helped forward by my following the leadings of Truth amongst them.” (<http://www.quakerinfo.com/woolman.shtml>).

Woolman clearly believed that despite the cultural and language differences, that the Indians did not use the same words to express their experience of the Truth, did not, in Woolman’s eyes, detract from their potential to teach him something valuable in terms of his walk with the Lord.

The words chosen to express the truth can be a valuable indicator of one’s ground and foundation, but this is not the sole indicator. It is also a fact that many people have little or no foundation in the Bible and biblical language; here I am not speaking of Hebrew, Greek, Aramaic, etc. It is the form of the language: the words, the cadence, the images, the metaphors and analogies, and the narratives or parables themselves used by the

prophets, Jesus, and the apostles; the same permeated the writings of George Fox and the early Friends. Contemporary Friends, including me, who are grounded in the Bible and biblical language, may find it difficult to discern the message because of the medium used by those who are not so grounded.

I encourage each of us to seek to become better listeners so that we may faithfully attend to a given message regardless of the medium. I also exhort each of us to regular reading of the Scriptures and the writings of early Friends. Also, encourage and promote regular reading of the Scriptures and the writings of early Friends to longtime as well as new Friends. Forming reading groups with a focus on the Scriptures and/or the writings of early Friends is one way to accomplish this.