

The Gathered Meeting

by Thomas Kelly

The Gathered Meeting is a time of group mysticism where the worshippers experience a sense of unity and the Real Presence of God.

Scripture: Psalm 27:8, Psalm 46:10, Ecclesiastes 3:11, Matthew 18:20, Romans 12:5, 1 Corinthians 12:12, Colossians 3:16, 1 Thessalonians 5:16, Hebrews 10:25, James 4:8

Topics: "Corporate Worship", "Holy Presence"

Description

Thomas Kelly delves into the Quaker practice of group worship, describing the special moments of divine presence and unity experienced when worshippers gather in silence. He explores the concept of group mysticism, where individuals are bonded in a super-individual Life and Power, feeling the touch of God and standing on holy ground. Kelly emphasizes the importance of the Real Presence of God in gathered meetings, highlighting the ineffable, knowledge-quality, transiency, and passivity of the experience. He discusses the conditions that favor a gathered meeting, such as deep spiritual preparation, internal work of prayer, and the significance of spoken words that continue the silence and enhance the moving Presence.

Transcript

In the Quaker practice of group worship on the basis of silence come special times when an electric hush and solemnity and depth of power steals over the worshippers. A blanket of divine covering comes over the room, and a quickening Presence pervades us, breaking down some part of the special privacy and isolation of our individual lives and bonding our spirits within a super-individual Life and Power--an objective, dynamic Presence which enfolds us all, nourishes our souls, speaks glad, unutterable comfort within us, and quickens in us depths that had before been slumbering. The Burning Bush has been kindled in our midst, and we stand together on holy ground.

I.

Such gathered meetings I take to be cases of group mysticism. It is commonly supposed that mystical experience is an individual affair, in which the lone soul is caught up into the first or second or third heaven and given to see things which it is not lawful for men to utter. And this, I presume, is most frequently the case.

Yet there are some cases recorded of two people sharing an experience of ascent together into the amazing Presence of God in His immediacy and glory. The most striking instance of which I know is that of Augustine and his mother Monica who, as they were together leaning in a window overlooking a garden and talking of the wonders of the life of dedicated souls, were together caught up into a sense of divine immediacy and given the bliss and rapture of the Touch of God.

But we need not go to places remote in space and time to find similar experiences of joint elevation into the light of the Eternal Love. For today it occurs again and again that two or three individuals find the boundaries of their separateness partially melted down. It is not necessarily, or frequently, as exalted an experience as that of Augustine and Monica, nor does it involve losing touch with the world of sense. But after conversing together on central things of the spirit two or more friends who know one another at deep levels find themselves wrapped in a sense of unity and of Presence such as quiets all words and enfolds them within an unspeakable calm and inter-knittedness within a vaster life. God's reality and His love become indubitable; His presence, like a living touch, is over them. As one friend speaks in such a silence, the words are found to join on closely to the thought of the others, so that words become needless and silence becomes a bridge not of separation but of communication.

The gathered meeting I take to be of the same kind, still milder and more diffused, yet really of a piece with all mystical experience. For mystical times are capable of all gradings and shadings, from sublime heights to very mild moments of lift and very faint glimpses of glory. In the gathered meeting the sense is present that a new Life and Power has entered our midst. And we know not only that we stand erect in the Holy Presence but also that others sitting with us are experiencing the same exaltation and access of power. We may not know these our neighbors in any outwardly intimate sense, but we now know them, as it were from within, and they know us in the same way, as souls now alive in the same areas and as blended into the body of Christ, which is His church. Again and again, this community of life and guidance from the Presence in the midst is made clear by the way the spoken words uttered in the meeting join to one another and to our inward thoughts. This I presume, has been a frequent experience for us all, as a common life and current sweeps through all. We are in communication with one another because we are being communicated to, and through, by the Divine Presence. Such indeed is a taste of "the communion of the saints."

John Hughes once told of two Friends sitting side by side in such a gathered meeting. The secret currents of worship flowed with power and then encountered a check. One man moved nervously but did not rise to his feet. Finally the other Friend arose and spoke a few words of searching power, and the meeting proceeded in a sense of covering. After the meeting had broken the man who had spoken nudged his silent neighbor and said "Next time, Henry, say it thyself".

But our interest in the gathered meeting is not in such striking side-phenomena as lift the eyebrows of doubting Thomases, but in the central fact of the overshadowing presence of the Eternal One. For it is God Himself who graciously reveals Himself in such holy times. The gathered meeting, as group mysticism, shows all the four characteristics which William James applies to mystic states, namely, indescribability a knowledge-quality, transiency, passivity.

The experience is ineffable; it is not completely describable in words. We live through such hours of expanded vision yet never can we communicate to another all that wonder and power and life and re-creation which we knew when swept along in the immediacy of the Divine Presence. To an absent friend we can only say what Philip said to Nathaniel concerning Jesus, "Come and See." And such must

always be the report of any experience of God, by individuals or in groups. "He is wonder and joy, judgement and power. And he is more than all these. Come and see."

The experience has a knowledge-quality. The covering of God in the gathered meeting carries with it the sense of insight of knowledge. We know Him as we have not known Him before. The secrets of this amazing world have been in some larger degree laid bare. We know life, and the world, and ourselves from within, anew. And lo, there we have seen God. We may not issue from a gathered meeting with a single crisp sentence or judgment of capsuled knowledge, yet we are infinitely more certain of the dynamic, living, working Life, for we have experienced a touch of that persuading Power that disquiets us until we find our home in Him. And, in the old phrase, we have directly known the healing which drops from beneath His wings. We have been re-energized with that Power and re-sensitized by that tenderness to meet the daily world of men with new pangs and new steadiness.

It is transient. The sense of Divine covering in a group is rarely sustained more than three-quarters of an hour, or an hour. One can not seize hold upon it and restrain it from fading; or restore it the next Sunday at will. Each such meeting is a gracious gift of the Eternal Goodness, and the eyes of all must wait upon Him who gives us meat in due Season.

It Carries a sense of passivity within it. We seem to be acted upon by a More-than-ourselves, who stills our time-torn spirits and breathes into us, as on Creation's day, the breath of life. When one rises to speak in such a meeting, one has a sense of being used, of being played upon, of being spoken through. It is as amazing an experience as that of being prayed through, when we the praying ones are no longer the initiators of the supplication, but seem to be transmitters, who second an impulse welling up from the depths of the soul. In such an experience the brittle bounds of our selfhood seem softened; and instead of saying "I pray " or "he prays," it becomes better to say "Prayer is taking place." So in a truly covered meeting an individual who speaks takes no credit to himself for the part he played in the unfolding of the worship. In fact he deeply regrets it if anyone, after the service. speaks in complimentary fashion to him. For the feeling of being a pliant instrument of the Divine Will characterizes true speaking "in the Life." Under such a covering an individual emerges into vocal utterance, frequently without fear and trembling, and subsides without self-consciousness into silence when his part is played. For One who is greater than all individuals has become the meeting place of the group, and He becomes the leader and director of worship. With wonder one hears the next speaker, if there be more, take another aspect of the theme of the meeting. No jealousy, no regrets that he didn't think of saying that, but only gratitude that the angel has come and troubled the waters and that many are finding healing through the one Life. A gathered meeting is no place for the enhancement of private reputations but for self-effacing pliancy and obedience to the Whispers of the Leader.

A fifth trait of mystical experience may well be added to James' list--the sense of unity, unity with the Divine Life who has graciously allowed us to touch the hem of His garment, unity with our fellow-worshippers, for He has broken down the middle wall of partition between our separate personalities and has flooded us with a sense of fellowship. This unity with our fellow-worshippers, such that we are "written in one another's hearts," is in one sense created and instituted in the hour of worship. But in a deeper sense it is discovered in that hour that we are together in one body, which is the true and catholic church invisible. And in a fashion the vividness of our unity fades, is transient, grows weaker after the rise of the meeting. But the fact disclosed in the meeting, namely that we are one body hid with Christ in God, remains secure from the ebb and flow of feelings and emotion.

II.

What is the ground and foundation of the gathered meeting? In the last analysis, it is, I am convinced, the Real Presence of God.

It is easy to call this sense of covering a mere psychological phenomenon. Psychological notions have so permeated our contemporary thinking that it is very easy to rush hastily to popular concepts, lying ready at hand, and apply them to all experience. In one sense all that we think and experience is "merely a psychological phenomenon."

But against the devastating implications of Psychologismus there has been, in the last three decades, a sharp rebellion in favor of realism. Knowledge of all kinds, realism claims, is not merely subjective; it attains the real. The mere fact that knowledge is entertained in our minds does not create a presumption of falsity, or of lack of fidelity to the real. But in such a return to realism we are opening the gates again to the contention of the mystics that mystical experience is not merely a matter of subjective states but a matter of objective reality.

I believe that the group mysticism of the gathered meeting rests upon the Real Presence of God in our midst. Quakers generally hold to a belief in Real Presence, as firm and solid as the belief of Roman Catholics in the Real Presence in the host, in the bread and the wine of the mass. In the host the Roman Catholic is convinced that the literal, substantial Body of Christ is present. For him the mass is not a mere symbol, a dramatizing of some figurative relationship of man to God. It rests upon the persuasion that an Existence a Life, the Body of Christ, is really present and entering into the body of man. Here the Quaker is very near the Roman Catholic. For the Real Presence of the gathered meeting is all existential fact. To use philosophical language, it is an ontological matter not merely a psychological matter. The bond of union in divine fellowship is existential and real, not figurative. It is the life of God Himself, within whose life we live and move and have our being. And the gathered meeting is a special case of holy fellowship, of the blessed Community.

III.

What conditions favor a gathered meeting? Let us venture upon the question in an attitude of humility, not in the spirit of the masterly man, so characteristic of our modern post-Baconian age. We seek at best to discern merely favoring conditions and releasing stimuli, not the full control of the event.

One condition for such a group experience seems to be this: some individuals need already, upon entering the meeting, to be gathered deep in the spirit of worship. There must be some kindled hearts when the meeting begins. In them, and from them, begins the work of worship. The spiritual devotion of a few persons, silently deep in active adoration, is needed to kindle the rest, to help those others who enter the service with tangled, harried, distraught thoughts to be melted and quieted and released and made pliant, ready for the work of God and His Real Presence

There is a real invisible work of kindling and of mutual assistance in worship which some of the worshippers must do, directing it upon others along with themselves. It is an internal work of prayer. Its language is not "I," or "You," but "We." It is an awakening and an attuning that goes on with energy in the soul. In power and labor one lifts the group, in inward prayer, high before the throne. With work of soul the kindled praying worshipper holds the group, his comrades and himself, high above the sordid and the trivial, and prays in quiet, offering that the Light may drive away the shadows of self-will. Where this inward

work of upholding prayer is wholly absent I am not sure that a gathered meeting is at all likely to follow.

This means a preceding preparation for worship. Worship, and preparation for worship, begin before one has left one's home. They begin when one wakes on Sunday morning, before one has gotten out of bed. Worship in a meeting-house with one's friends should be only a special period of a life of worship that underlies all one's daily affairs. Such worship is no intermittent process, but a foundation layer of the life of the children of the kingdom. And such special sense of bondedness and unity with others as is experienced in the gathered meeting is only a time of particular enhancement of the life of bondedness and fellowship in love among souls which is experienced daily, as we carry one another in inward upholding prayer.

A second condition concerns the spoken words of the meeting. Certainly the deepness of the covering of a meeting is not proportional to the number of words spoken. A gathered meeting may proceed entirely in silence, rolling on with increasing depth and intensity until the meeting breaks and tears are furtively brushed away. Such really powerful hours of unbroken silence frequently carry a genuine progression of spiritual change and experience. They are filled moments, and the quality of the second fifteen minutes is definitely different from the quality of the first fifteen minutes. Outwardly, all silences seem alike as all minutes are alike by the clock. But inwardly the Divine Leader of worship directs us through progressive unfoldings of administration, and may in the silence bring an inward climax which is as definite as the climax of the mass, when the host is elevated in adoration.

But more frequently some words are spoken. I have particularly in mind those hours of worship in which no one person, no one speech stands out as the one that "made" the meeting, those hours wherein the personalities that take part verbally are not enhanced as individuals in the eyes of others, but are subdued and softened and lost sight of because, in the language of Fox, "The Lord's power was over all." Brevity, earnestness sincerity and frequently a lack of polish characterize the best Quaker speaking. The words should rise like a shaggy crag upthrust from the surface of silence, under the pressure of yearning contrition and wonder. But in another sense the words should not rise up like a shaggy crag. They should not break the silence, but continue it. For the Divine Life who was ministering through the medium of silence is the same Life as is now ministering through words. And when such words are truly spoken "in the Life," then when such words cease, the uninterrupted Silence and worship continues for silence and words have been of one texture, one piece. Second and third speakers only continue the enhancement of the moving Presence, until a climax is reached and the discerning head of the meeting knows when to break it.

In a truly gathered meeting restraint in one's utterances is often more releasing than are multiplied words. Words that hint at the wonder of God, but do not attempt to exhaust it, have an open-ended character. In the silences of our hearts the Holy Presence completes the unfinished words far more satisfyingly.

The themes made central in truly gathered meetings are infinite. But one might venture to raise the question whether some types of themes are more congruous with such a meeting than others. Some text that suddenly recalls the eternal, abiding relation of man and God seems particularly apt to serve as a releasing stimulus, but by no means as compelling the arrival of the covering. Such a passage as "Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations" opens up a vista of gargantuan yet delicate proportions. (Would we have sufficient courage to say these words in a bomb shelter?) "Deep calleth unto deep at the noise of thy waterspouts; all thy waves and thy billows are gone over me."

But humble, personal, daily incidents, or wisps of openings that have dawned with vividness in some quiet soul, or the tragic-heroic turmoil of events of the day, set in the frame of the Eternal Patience and Persuasion may equally serve as themes within such a meeting.

Vocal prayer poured out from a humble heart frequently shifts a meeting from a heady level of discussion to the deeps of worship. Such prayers serve as an unintended rebuke to our shallowness and drive us deeper into worship and commitment. They open the gates of devotion, adoration, submission, confession. They help to unite the group at the level at which real unity is sought. For unity in the springs of life's motivations is far more significant than unity in phrases or outward matters. Such prayers not only "create" that unity; they also give voice to it, and the worshippers are united in a silent amen of gratitude.

IV.

But what if the meeting has not been a gathered meeting? Are those meetings failures that have not been hushed by a covering? Quite definitely they are not. If we have been faithful, we may go home content and nourished from any meeting.

Let us be quite clear that mystical exaltations are not essential to religious dedication and to every occurrence of religious worship. Many a man professes to be without a shred of mystical elevation, yet is fundamentally a heaven-dedicated soul. It would be a tragic mistake to suppose that religion is only for a small group who have certain vivid but transient inner experiences, and to preach those experiences so that those who are relatively insensitive to them should feel excluded, denied access to the Eternal love, deprived of a basic necessity for religious living. The crux of religious living lies in the will, not in transient and variable states. Utter dedication of will to God is open to all, for every man can will. Where such a will is present, there is a child of God. When there are graciously given to us such glimpses of glory as aid us in softening our will, then we may be humbly grateful. But glad willing away of self, that the will of God, so far as it can be discerned, may become our own--that is the basic condition. In that steadiness of spirit one walks serene and unperturbed praying only "Thy will be done." Confident that we are in His hands, and that He educates us in ways we do not expect by means of dryness as well as by means of glory, we walk in gratitude if His sun shines upon us, and in serenity if He leads us in valleys and dry places.

And as individual mystics who are led deep into the heart of devotion learn to be weaned away from reliance upon special times of vision, learn not to clamor perpetually for the heights but to walk in shadows and valleys and dry places for months and years together, so must group worshippers learn that worship is fully valid when there are no thrills, no special sense of covering. The disciplined soul and the disciplined group have learned to cling to the reality of God's presence, whether the feeling of presence is great or faint. If the wind of the Spirit, blowing whither He wills, warms the group into an inexpressible sense of unity, then the worshippers are profoundly grateful. If no blanket of divine covering is warmly felt, and if the wills have been offered together in the silent work of worship, worshippers may still go home content and nourished and say, "It was a good meeting." In the venture of group worship, souls must learn to accept spiritual weather without dismay and go deeper in will into Him who makes all things beautiful in their time.

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