

Introduction to the Discipline

[Seeking Second Approval]

This latest revision of *Faith and Practice: Book of Discipline of North Carolina Yearly Meeting (Conservative) of the Religious Society of Friends* represents the efforts of members of this yearly meeting to re-examine their faith and practice and set them down in a way that is both faithful to their religious heritage and applicable in the contemporary world.

The first books of discipline were collections of relevant minutes that had been approved by yearly meetings over a period of years.¹ Particular minutes were chosen for inclusion that would be helpful to Friends encountering an unfamiliar life situation or spiritual challenge. In this way isolated groups of Friends, many new to the Quaker faith, could have access to the counsel of experienced Friends in their own discernment process. When North Carolina Yearly Meeting issued its first *Discipline* in 1755, a handwritten copy was distributed to each monthly meeting for its use. The first printed *Discipline* for North Carolina Yearly Meeting was produced in 1809, making it possible for each family to have its own copy. The *Discipline* was revised again ten more times between 1823 and 1983, each revision incorporating changes that had been made in the intervening years.

In a body of Friends that places its highest authority in the immediate and perceptible guidance of the Holy Spirit, a written *Discipline* is a collection of advice and counsel offered from seasoned Friends of many generations to the current membership. It is not intended to be the final authority on any subject. However, the guidance of the *Discipline* on any subject should be carefully weighed and considered, in the same way that a traveler over a difficult and unfamiliar mountain pass would consider the advice of an experienced guide before beginning the ascent.

We believe that the promptings of the Holy Spirit have guided members of the monthly meetings that make up North Carolina Yearly Meeting (Conservative) to find unity in the organizational structures, methods of operation, and faith commitments included in this *Discipline*. The authority of the *Discipline* in any given circumstance stems from the continuing perception that it expresses the ongoing guidance of the Holy Spirit. A specific situation may lead Friends to follow a different course of action than what the *Discipline* recommends without changing the authority of that recommendation in general. If, however, it appears that a section of the *Discipline* is no longer relevant to present circumstances or in unity with Friends continued growth in understanding of God's guidance to us as a faith community, then it is our responsibility to consider whether it would be right to revise the *Discipline*, or some part of it, once again.

Another name for a book of discipline is a book of faith and practice. This reflects that the guidance in the book concerns both the faith of Friends and their practice of that faith in living out their lives. The older name, book of discipline, reflects the experience of Friends over the centuries that living in accordance with the guidance of God is a discipline - a body of knowledge that involves both head and heart and requires long practice and dedication to attain.

This *Book of Discipline* or *Book of Faith and Practice* is offered to the members of North Carolina Yearly Meeting (Conservative) in the same manner as the Quaker Elders at Balby offered their twenty specific items of guidance to Friends in 1656: "From the Spirit of truth to

¹ For a fuller history of the development of books of discipline, see Evans, William and Evans, Thomas, "Institution of the Discipline", *Friends Library* Vol. 1, pp. 109-141, Philadelphia: Joseph Rakestraw, 1837.

the children of light, to walk in the light; that all in order be kept in obedience; that he may be glorified, who is worthy over all, God blessed for ever.”²

And like those elders of an earlier day, we affirm that:

*Dearly beloved Friends, these things we do not lay upon you as a rule or form to walk by; but that all, with a measure of the light, which is pure and holy, may be guided: and so in the light walking and abiding, these things may be fulfilled in the Spirit, not in the letter; for the letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life.*³

² <http://www.qhpress.org/texts/balby.html> , accessed 8/31/2016.

³ Ibid.