

What Canst Thou Say?



A Discussion Guide

West Hills Friends
Winter 2005

Introduction

Mary Fisher was not the sort of person you would expect to find on a transatlantic voyage. She lived in England, in the 17th Century. This was not a time when women *routinely* went on adventures. Nor did she have the advantage of wealth (in fact, she worked as a servant).

Despite the odds against her, Mary Fisher traveled far to proclaim the Quaker message. She went across the ocean to address settlers in Barbados and hostile Puritans in Boston. Then, she set her course toward the *opposite* horizon. She traveled 600 miles beyond the eastern frontier of Christendom to address the Sultan of Turkey.

Taking her claims at face value, the Sultan received Mary Fisher as an *ambassador of God*. All of his courtiers were assembled for this important audience. After a time of silence, Mary gave voice to what was on her heart. Despite Mary's good intentions, the encounter could have ended in disaster. As a Quaker, Mary was not inclined to mince words. And the Sultan was prone to execute anyone who offended him.

A moment came when the Sultan asked Mary to comment on the prophet Mohammed. This question held the potential for trouble! Fortunately, the Sultan found something of value in Mary's remarks. In fact, he received Mary with more grace than many of the people she encountered in England and North America. Sometimes, the Spirit of God is able to transcend the daunting barriers of culture and language.

We often find it difficult to discuss matters of faith – even when we're ostensibly speaking the *same* language! Words like "savior" or "sin" or even "God" seem to mean different things to different people. Some of these words come naturally to us. Other words strike us as incomprehensible or even frightening. Our society is so fragmented that *any* conversation about God can seem like a conversation across the barriers of culture and language. We no longer need to make the arduous journey to Turkey...

Mary Fisher is on the cover of this discussion guide, because her example serves as an important reminder. As Friends, our tradition includes more than silence. We have been willing to speak across the most daunting of barriers. We have found a way to communicate.

To that end, I hope we will learn to distinguish the truth we hope to convey from the words we use (or *avoid*) out of habit. This discussion guide invites you to explore some frequently used "religious" words. By hearing how others perceive these words, you may see some hidden barbs in the words we commonly use. Or you may find some hidden treasures.

The title of this booklet, "What canst thou say?" comes from Margaret Fell, another Quaker leader from the 17th Century. She wrote down her first encounter George Fox. He entered the church where she was worshipping and said,

"That Christ was the Light of the world, and lighteth every man that cometh into the world; and that by this light they might be gathered to God," &c. I stood up in my pew, and wondered at his doctrine, for I had never heard such before. And then he went on, and opened the scriptures, and said, "The scriptures were the prophets' words, and Christ's and the apostles' words, and what, as they spoke, they enjoyed and possessed, and had it from the Lord": and said, "Then what had any to do with the scriptures, but as they came to the Spirit that gave them forth? You will say, 'Christ saith this, and the apostles say this;' but what canst thou say? Art thou a child of the Light, and hast thou walked in the Light, and what thou speakest, is it inwardly from God?" &c. This opened me so, that it cut me to the heart; and then I saw clearly we were all wrong. So I sat down in my pew again, and cried bitterly: and I cried in my spirit to the Lord, "We are all thieves; we are all thieves; we have taken the scriptures in words, and know nothing of them in ourselves."

As Friends, we expect God to speak through each one of us. So, what canst thou say? And how will you say it?

Sin

My friend grew up in a conservative home. Over and over, he was told that alcohol was *sinful*. One day, as an adolescent, he carried a can of beer into his bedroom. He placed the unopened can on top of his dresser. He waited for the sin to reveal itself, but nothing happened. So, he asked his mom, “Do you have to *open* a can of beer for the sin to come out?” “Does the beer have to touch your tongue?” “What if you don’t swallow?”

As this youthful act of rebellion suggests, sin is not some *thing* that resides in cans of beer, hand guns or SUV’s. Although the *consequences* of sin might be seen with the naked eye, sin itself is a *spiritual* condition. It requires spiritual discernment to “see” sin.

It can be helpful to think of sin as “separation.” Sin is whatever separates us from God. Sin is whatever prevents us from living in right relationship with one another. Sin is whatever keeps us disconnected from our truest self. Sin is whatever undermines our proper relationship to the Creation. This understanding of sin is illustrated in the biblical story of Adam and Eve: the couple *hides* from God; they are set *at odds* against one another and the rest of Creation; and, they become *alienated* from their own bodies (ashamed of their nakedness).

Because sin is relational, it cannot be reduced to a laundry list of do’s and don’ts. Jesus repeatedly tried to make this point with the Pharisees (e.g. “You strictly tithe a tenth of your mint, but you don’t take care of your parents...”). Legalism provides no antidote for sin. What’s needed is a change of heart.

Jesus also admonished, “let one without sin cast the first stone.” The concept of “sin” should not be a club we use against others. The place to look for sin is within our own hearts. What separates *us* from the best that God would offer?

Sin is especially dangerous because it tends to produce its own momentum. Turning away from relationship can become a habit that leads us into ever greater isolation. C.S. Lewis captures this dynamic in **The Great Divorce**, when he describes hell as a place where people move farther and farther away from each other.

For this discussion, reflect on what separates us from God. Contemplate what separates us from one another. Do you feel comfortable calling these barriers to relationship “sin?” Why or why not? What is your own history with this word?

Take five or ten minutes of silence to consider the concept of “sin.” After the silence, the facilitator can open worship sharing by asking these questions (feel free to edit, omit or add questions!):

1. If you could only use one or two words, how would you describe your attitude toward the word, “sin?”
2. When everyone has shared briefly, say more about what the word “sin” brings to mind for you. What has been your history with this word? Has your attitude toward this word changed over time?
3. As you understand the concept, do you think that *everyone* sins? Are babies capable of sin? Explain how you have come to your conclusions.
4. Have you ever thought of yourself as a sinner?
5. As you understand the concept, is sin always an individual choice? Or can entire cultures sin collectively?
6. How does your understanding of “sin” inform your understanding of God? How does it influence your spiritual journey?
7. To what extent does the word “sin” convey something vital about life in the Spirit? To what extent is the word used in destructive ways? Is there another word or phrase that can be used more effectively?

Close worship sharing with a time of silence (so everyone can reflect on what was said). When hearts are clear, you may draw the exercise to a close.

Salvation

In a book called **Adventures in Missing the Point**, Brian McLaren observes that the word “salvation” is largely synonymous with “rescue” throughout much of Scripture. For example, the Israelites appealed to God for “salvation” from the Egyptians. The psalmist cried out for “salvation” from his enemies. During the period in which Jesus lived, the people of Israel were longing for salvation from the Roman Empire. Despite the prayers of the faithful, the Romans didn’t budge.

At this point, the Pharisees made an explicit connection between the idea of “salvation” and the idea of “sin.” They concluded that God was withholding salvation *because* of sin. People started to seek salvation *from* sin. They started looking for a Messiah who would cleanse them of their sins – so God could get busy booting the Romans out of Jerusalem.

Although the concept of salvation continues to change, many people still think of salvation as their ticket to a happy ending (either here-and-now or in the hereafter). A “ticket” approach to salvation implies that salvation as a one-time event. Like a ticket, either you have it or you don’t. This approach also reduces the spiritual journey to two peak events: “getting saved” (or obtaining your ticket) and death (at which time you may exchange your ticket for admission to paradise).

Instead of approaching salvation as something we can possess, we should probably think of salvation as something far bigger than ourselves. After all, the Spirit of God is at work in *all of Creation*. Our salvation is just a part of this larger picture. The restorative, healing work that God does in us is inseparable from the work that God is doing everywhere. We receive a blessing so we can be a blessing. We receive new life so we can extend new life. Salvation is the process of being changed by God so we can be used by God.

McLaren puts it this way: “salvation means being rescued from fruitless ways of life here and now, to share in God’s saving love for all creation, in an adventure called the kingdom of God.”

To what extent is your concept of “salvation” connected to the afterlife? To what extent do you think of “salvation” as something that happens over the course of your entire life? What is your own history with this word?

Take five or ten minutes of silence to consider the concept of “salvation.” After the silence, the facilitator can open worship sharing by asking these questions (feel free to edit, omit or add questions!):

1. If you could only use one or two words, how would you describe your attitude toward the word, “salvation?”
2. When everyone has shared briefly, say more about what the word “salvation” brings to mind for you. What has been your history with this word? Has your attitude toward this word changed over time?
3. Can someone close themselves so completely to the work of God within their hearts that they (in effect) reject salvation? What are the consequences of such a rejection?
4. If someone asked you, “Are you saved?” how would you answer. If someone asked, “Do you think I’m saved?” how would you answer?
5. How does your understanding of “salvation” inform your understanding of God? How does it influence your spiritual journey?
6. To what extent can the word “salvation” be used to convey a valuable insight into spiritual life? To what extent is the word used in destructive ways? Is there another word or phrase that can be used more effectively?

Close worship sharing with a time of silence (so everyone can reflect on what was said). When hearts are clear, you may draw the exercise to a close.

The kingdom of God

When a powerful empire seizes control of a smaller nation, the locals tend to get resentful. True to form, the people of Israel were bitter about the Roman occupation of their land. Like salt in the wounds, Caesar presented himself as a *god*. The Emperor's power was a direct challenge to God's sovereignty over Israel.

By the time Jesus was born, the people of Israel were looking for a war hero. They wanted someone like Moses: a leader who could call on the power of God to destroy chariots. People *expected* Jesus to talk about the kingdom of God... but they also expected this kingdom to be synonymous with Israel.

Jesus envisioned the kingdom of God as something *completely* different. In a reversal of expectations, he said that rich people would find it difficult to enter the kingdom of God. On the other hand, little children would enter quite easily. With parables, Jesus described this upside-down kingdom. And he taught that allegiance to the kingdom of God supersedes every other loyalty.

The "kingdom of God" is a realm that exists *outside* the patterns and expectations of this world. By accepting a home in God's kingdom, we become strangers and aliens to the dominant culture. This phrase reminds us to live by a different set of values.

Because "kings" tend to be overbearing males, we might hesitate before applying this label to a loving, gender-inclusive God. Someone has even suggested that we substitute the phrase, "commonwealth of God" for the "kingdom of God." Rejecting patriarchal models of power seems consistent with the upside-down values of God's kingdom.

Personally, I find great value in recognizing God's status as "king" (or "queen" for that matter – "monarch?"). I believe the kingdom of God is able to exist outside the patterns and expectations of this world precisely *because* it is not a human institution. We humans don't get to "amend the constitution." We don't get to establish rules based on our collective wisdom. Instead, we must give our loyalty to a Sovereign. We must listen for the proclamations of our God and live by them.

For this discussion, reflect on God's authority. Consider how our allegiance to God can put us at odds with the dominant culture. When you hear, "the kingdom of God," what words or images come to mind?

Take five or ten minutes of silence to consider what is meant by "the kingdom of God." After the silence, the facilitator can open worship sharing by asking these questions (feel free to edit, omit or add questions!):

1. As you reflect on the "kingdom of God," what is a word or short phrase that comes to mind for you?
2. To what extent does living in the kingdom of God mean *rejecting* the culture around us?
3. Is it possible for us to live *completely* outside the patterns and expectations of this world?
4. It seems possible to reject the dominant culture without necessarily embracing the kingdom of God. How do we make sure we aren't equating a human-engineered subculture with the kingdom of God?
5. To what extent can God's kingdom *transform* the culture around us? How can the kingdom act as leaven to change society?
6. In your experience, have you felt tension between following God and conforming with the expectations of people around you? Elaborate on your answer.
7. To what extent does the "kingdom of God" convey something vital about life in the Spirit? Is there another word or phrase that can be used more effectively?

Close worship sharing with a time of silence (so everyone can reflect on what was said). When hearts are clear, you may draw the exercise to a close.

Revelation

How is it possible for us to know anything about God? To some extent, we can infer something of God from the “fingerprints” God has left on Creation. In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes, “Since the creation of the world, God’s invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from *what has been made*.”

Some have approached God on paths of logical necessity. By force of argument, they have come to understand God as the “unmoved mover” or the “philosophical ground of being.” Of course, not everyone is persuaded by these arguments. Even so, logic might teach us something about God if it can demonstrate that these conclusions *must be true*.

It’s also possible that we project onto God the things that we *want* to be true (or maybe even the things we *fear* are true). Obviously, the God that springs from our imagined hopes and fears may have nothing to do with reality.

Our quest for understanding would be much easier if God would take the initiative to *disclose* something about God’s self. Does this happen? Is God actively imparting Truth? Or does God lurk hidden in metaphysical hedges, waiting for seekers to find the hidden path? Historically, Friends have lived in the expectation that God “speaks.” Individually and as a group, we listen for God to disclose Truth.

The process of God’s self-disclosure is called, “revelation.” Quite often, what God reveals defies our expectations. People were surprised to hear God say, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice” or “Love your enemies.” Because God’s self-disclosure can surprise us, revelation can teach us things we would never infer from any other source.

How do we test the veracity of any given revelation? Friends find confidence in submitting a potential revelation to the discernment of a *group*. If a gathered body concludes that God is the source of some leading, then there is more reason to trust that leading.

For this discussion, reflect on what you know about God. From where did this knowledge come? How does God disclose God’s self?

Take five or ten minutes of silence to consider the concept of “revelation.” After the silence, the facilitator can open worship sharing by asking these questions (feel free to edit, omit or add questions!):

1. As you reflect on the concept of “revelation,” what is a word or short phrase that comes to mind for you?
2. What do you consider the most *reliable* source of spiritual knowledge? Where do you get your ideas about God? Why do you trust this source?
3. In your experience, has God ever disclosed something to you directly? What was the experience like? How did you know it was God?
4. If someone says, “God has told me (whatever),” how do you discern whether or not this claim is accurate?
5. Scripture records God’s self-disclosure through the ages. God speaks to Abraham, then to prophets and kings. The story continues through Jesus and the early church. To what extent has the biblical record helped you know God?
6. Under what circumstances would you seek group discernment for a leading you have received?
7. To what extent does “revelation” convey something vital about life in the Spirit? Is there another word or phrase that can be used more effectively?

Close worship sharing with a time of silence (so everyone can reflect on what was said). When hearts are clear, you may draw the exercise to a close.

Grace

It is said that God loves a cheerful giver. How much would we have to give for God to really, *really* love us? Would we have to give everything we possess? It is said that God loves a broken and contrite heart. How heartbroken would we have to be for God to really, *really* love us? Would we have to spend the whole day in tears?

What can we do to win God's favor? What if we fasted for 40 days? What if we read the entire Bible from cover to cover? The concept of "grace" reminds us that there is *nothing* we can do to earn God's love.

Our striving has no power to turn God's heart toward us. Before we can do anything, God's heart is *already* turned toward us. God's love does not rest on a balanced ledger. God bestows on us more love than we can comprehend. And this love is given to us freely, without condition. The word, "grace," captures this idea of God's unconditional love.

Although God's love is given without *condition*, it is not given without *effect*. Yes, we receive God's love as a gift. But receiving love beyond measure tends to have an impact on people. As we open ourselves to the gift of God, we often find the hard places in our hearts becoming soft. We find the icy places within us becoming warm. Fresh seedlings sprout from lifeless places within us.

"Grace" reminds us that the process of spiritual transformation *begins* with love. God's love is not the *reward* for change. Rather, change comes as the *fruit* of God's love at work within us.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German theologian who died in a Nazi concentration camp. In a book called, **Cost of Discipleship**, he warned people against "Cheap Grace." It is an abuse of God's generosity to accept the gift of God's love *without* opening yourself to the transforming power of that love. He said that those who rest comfortably in the assurance of God's love without bearing the fruit of that love will one day answer for their closed hearts.

For this discussion, reflect on God's unconditional love. To what extent has God's love changed your life? When you hear the word, "grace," what words or images come to mind?

Take five or ten minutes of silence to consider the concept of "grace." After the silence, the facilitator can open worship sharing by asking these questions (feel free to edit, omit or add questions!):

1. As you reflect on the concept of "grace," what is a word or short phrase that comes to mind for you?
2. To what extent has God's love changed your life? If you have experienced change, what has the process been like?
3. Is opening yourself to God's transforming love any *less* work than employing your willpower to make a change? If the process of Grace is hard, why do it?
4. What do you think of Bonhoeffer's warning against *cheap grace*? Do you think some people are tempted to rest comfortably in the expectation of God's love *without* opening their hearts to change? Do you ever feel this temptation? Are there other dangers to the idea of grace?
5. How does your understanding of "grace" inform your understanding of God? How does it influence your spiritual journey?
6. To what extent does "grace" convey something vital about life in the Spirit? Is there another word or phrase that can be used more effectively?

Close worship sharing with a time of silence (so everyone can reflect on what was said). When hearts are clear, you may draw the exercise to a close.

Sacred

What makes something “sacred?” As Quakers, we are not inclined to draw an airtight line between what is sacred and what is secular. We don’t, for example, look upon our meeting house as a uniquely sacred place. We don’t have ceremonies to consecrate people or things. Nor do we make a sharp distinction between sacred music and any other kind.

Rather than reject the idea of “sacredness,” Quakers have actually applied it rather broadly. We have assumed that God’s presence has the power to make *any* place or situation “sacred.” A hospital room or a stretch of rocky coastline can be just as sacred as a cathedral. Giving your baby her first bath or making a special meal for someone you love can be just as sacred as singing a cantata in the church choir.

The danger of seeing everything as sacred *in theory* is that you start to see nothing sacred *in practice*. We can spread sacredness too thin – like a dab of butter on too much toast. Other religious traditions have physical or ceremonial cues to set apart what is sacred. Without those clues to guide us, we can blunder across the boundaries of the sacred without ever taking notice.

The world around us is full of empty sound and fury. We’re constantly bombarded with advertising. We are the first people in history to lose the stars behind a glut of artificial lights. In this context, we must work extra hard to cultivate a sensitivity to the sacred. How do you stay connected to what is sacred? Have you found a practice or an attitude that helps you stay mindful?

Finally, there is no such thing as “sacredness on demand.” A place or situation that felt sacred on one occasion may no longer feel sacred when revisited.

So, to sum things up: the sacred is everywhere, but it is hard to see (and impossible to capture in routine). Why is the sacred so elusive?

For this discussion, reflect on what you consider *sacred*. When you hear the word, “sacred” (or “sacramental” or “consecrated”), what other words or images come to mind?

Take five or ten minutes of silence to consider the concept of “sacredness.” After the silence, the facilitator can open worship sharing by asking these questions (feel free to edit, omit or add questions!):

1. As you reflect on the concept of “sacredness,” what is a word or short phrase that comes to mind for you?
2. What is a place or situation that seems sacred to you? Have you found some way to set this place or situation apart? Have you found some way to acknowledge it as sacred?
3. By what practice do you keep yourself attuned to what is sacred all around you?
4. Have you ever returned to a place or situation that you found sacred, only to find that sense of sacredness was no longer present? Did you recapture that sense of the sacred? Did you decide to look elsewhere? What was that process like for you?
5. How does your understanding of what is “sacred” inform your understanding of God? How does it influence your spiritual journey?
6. To what extent does “sacred” convey something vital about life in the Spirit? Is there another word or phrase that can be used more effectively?

Close worship sharing with a time of silence (so everyone can reflect on what was said). When hearts are clear, you may draw the exercise to a close.

Covenant

In the process of buying a house, my wife and I found ourselves in the office of a mortgage broker. Again and again, she put a document onto the table between us. Every single document was a mind-numbing work of legalese. The font was nearly microscopic. As the document hit the table, the mortgage broker would say something like, “This just says that you won’t burn down your house to collect the insurance money.” Or “This just says that we told you about the dangers of carbon monoxide poisoning.”

Again and again, I signed my name. But each time, I had to wonder, “Why does it take three pages to say something so simple?” Of course, this is what we have come to expect from a legal document. A contract has to be very specific, because a contract is all about the *letter of the law*.

A covenant is a different sort of agreement. Instead of addressing every fine legal detail, a covenant is an agreement about the *orientation of our hearts*. By definition, those who enter into a covenant are not looking for loopholes to exploit.

Marriage is one example of a covenant relationship. A good marriage is built on a meeting of hearts (not on a negotiated contract). In the same way, a good relationship with God is not defined by our technical adherence to the letter of the law. Rather, it is a meeting of hearts.

A handful of states have now adopted laws to recognize a “covenant marriage.” If a couple wants to enter a “covenant marriage,” premarital counseling is legally required. The law also makes divorce more difficult. In Arkansas, for example, those who seek to dissolve a “covenant marriage” may face a two-year waiting period and mandatory counseling.

The higher standards of a “covenant marriage” reflect how deeply we must commit ourselves to be in a covenant relationship. Paradoxically, codifying these high standards into a legal contract returns us to the *letter of the law*. Can a more demanding law help us change the orientation of our hearts?

For this discussion, reflect on your relationship with God. To what extent is your relationship built upon a meeting of hearts? To what extent is your relationship with God built upon the letter of the law?

Take five or ten minutes of silence to consider the concept of “covenant.” After the silence, the facilitator can open worship sharing by asking these questions (feel free to edit, omit or add questions!):

1. As you reflect on the concept of “covenant,” what is a word or short phrase that comes to mind for you?
2. Have you ever been in relationship with someone based on a “meeting of your hearts?” How does your experience in that relationship inform your understanding of God?
3. Even if our relationship is based on a meeting of hearts, there’s no avoiding the details of our life. How does a covenant relationship handle the details? How do we keep from making the details the focus of our relationship?
4. Within the context of a covenant relationship, how do we respond to those who anger us or disappoint us?
5. Regardless of what they say in Arkansas, what do you think would drive a covenant relationship beyond the breaking point?
6. Do we, as people who worship together, have a covenant relationship with one another?
7. To what extent does “covenant” convey something vital about life in the Spirit? Is there another word or phrase that can be used more effectively?

Close worship sharing with a time of silence (so everyone can reflect on what was said). When hearts are clear, you may draw the exercise to a close.

Prayer

Theologians have identified several different *kinds* of prayer. They distinguish one type of prayer from another based upon the *intent* of that prayer.

In a *petitionary* prayer, we ask God to take some action on our behalf. Some people brazenly ask God for material wealth and power. Others feel that we should *only* ask God for noble things (like wisdom, perhaps). Many of us fall somewhere in the middle: we ask for God's help with everyday matters, but we don't ask for luxury. If we ask God to take action for someone else, that kind of prayer is called *intercessory*.

It's worth noting that some people feel uncomfortable asking God to take any specific course of action. Rather than pray, "Please help me find the right job" or "Please heal my aunt," some people prefer to pray, "Your will be done." They invite God to be active, then they trust God to do what is best.

A prayer of *thanksgiving* is when we express our gratitude to God. *Adoration* is when we communicate our love to God. Some people give *confession* its own category, too.

I doubt God cares much about all these various categories. But reviewing them can remind us how one word ("prayer") can cover a lot of territory. People even look different when they pray. Some people kneel when they pray. Some people raise their hands in a certain way. Some people employ an external tool (like rosary beads or a prayer wheel). Is there any device or position which helps or hinders your time in prayer?

The psalmist models brutal honesty in prayer. Without pulling any punches, he hurls anger and disappointment at God. How "polite" are your prayers?

Jesus offered some specific advice on prayer. If you have time, your group may want to read Matthew 6:5-13. Is there anything in particular that characterizes a "Christian" prayer? What does it mean to pray for something "in the name of Jesus?"

For this discussion, reflect on your experience or prayer. When you hear the word, "prayer," what other words or images come to mind?

Take five or ten minutes of silence to consider the concept of "prayer." After the silence, the facilitator can open worship sharing by asking these questions (feel free to edit, omit or add questions!):

1. As you reflect on the concept of "prayer," what is a word or short phrase that comes to mind for you?
2. What do you remember about your earliest experience of prayer? Has your approach to prayer changed over time? What has changed it (or kept it the same)?
3. What type of prayer comes most easily to you? What kind of prayer is hardest for you? Why do you think this is so?
4. Do you ask God for specific things? Why or why not?
5. As Quakers, we're inclined to see *listening* as an important aspect of prayer. Is listening its own *type* of prayer? Or is it a more general approach to prayer? Are some categories of prayer better suited to listening than others?
6. Who are your role models for prayer? How do you begin your prayers? How do you end them? If there is a pattern to how you begin or end prayer, why do you use this pattern?
7. To what extent does "prayer" convey something vital about life in the Spirit? Is there another word or phrase that can be used more effectively?

Close worship sharing with a time of silence (so everyone can reflect on what was said). When hearts are clear, you may draw the exercise to a close.