

John Woolman and ‘The Meek Shall Inherit the Earth’

Mike Heller and Ron Rembert

Roanoke College, USA, and Wilmington College, USA

Abstract

Rufus Jones observed that John Woolman was ‘almost an incarnation of the beatitudes’. Mike Heller and Ron Rembert find this an intriguing doorway into understanding Woolman’s legacy. They have chosen to focus on one beatitude, ‘The meek shall inherit the earth’, because ‘meek’ and related terms appear often in Woolman’s writings. They find meekness an essential aspect of Woolman’s spiritual journey and his ministry, both of which were grounded in faith-filled, Christ-centred living. Meekness became for him a challenge and an aspiration as he sought to distinguish between authentic and feigned meekness, to be wary of the desire to please others, and to understand our spiritual versus materialistic inheritance. In addition to meekness regarding individuals, Woolman posed the possibility of it being a quality sensed within a Quaker meeting, which enabled the group to take on values and behaviours guiding their interaction and work in the world.

Keywords

Woolman, meek, self-denial, inheritance, incarnation, beatitude

In his work *The Trial of Life in the Middle Years*, Rufus Jones, noted Quaker scholar and teacher, offered a mixed, but ultimately laudable, judgement of John Woolman:

I missed in him that radiance and joy which ought, I think, to crown a saint, but the other qualities were there in high degree. He seemed to me to be almost an incarnation of the Beatitudes of the Gospels.¹

Our thanks to those friends whose ideas about John Woolman and meekness were so helpful as we worked on this essay. These include members of our families, the Roanoke Quaker Meeting and an online course on ‘John Woolman’s Legacy’ taught in the autumn of 2022 through Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre in Birmingham, England.

¹ Jones, R., *The Trial of Life in the Middle Years*, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1934, p. 126.

What an intriguing appraisal of John Woolman. It is one which we might expect Jones to explore in greater detail in a separate essay on Woolman and the Beatitudes, but we were not able to find such a specific work among his writings. So, we have undertaken that task by approaching Woolman's *Journal*, as an account of how he was, indeed, in Jones' words, an incarnation of the Beatitudes, with our focus on 'Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth' (Matthew 5:5).

Why focus on the beatitude of 'meekness' in regard to Woolman? As we shall show, Woolman refers to meekness in many key passages in his *Journal* and essays. One purpose is to understand Woolman's attention to meekness in his writing. We find that meekness is an essential aspect not only of Woolman's spiritual journey and ministry but also of the ultimate meaning of his faith-filled life. These discoveries fortified Jones's statement, suggesting to us 'an incarnational approach' to interpreting the beatitude. We are intrigued by what such an approach might mean, and we have set out to pursue it particularly in our reading of Woolman's *Journal*. We also want to engage the reader in considering how meekness applies in our contemporary lives.

While proceeding, we caution against assuming that meekness in Woolman's case be interpreted simply as an admirable personality trait or an effective strategy of persuasion. Our discussion starts with a different assumption that emphasises the ultimate source of meekness in Woolman's life as the universal Christ or Christ Jesus. We also caution against assuming that 'meekness' for Woolman carries negative connotations that our current cultural use often attaches to this term. Notions of meekness as 'timid', 'acquiescent', 'lacking confidence' or being 'a pushover', all seemingly undesirable characteristics, do not apply in Woolman's case. These negative connotations point to a derogatory stance to be avoided, rather than the paradox, expressed by the beatitude, that meekness is a blessing.

There are many published studies regarding the Beatitudes – for good reason, since these teachings from the Sermon on the Mount are often cited as the essence of Christianity. Or, as one commentator observes, the Beatitudes are 'an MRI of Christ's heart'.² The numerous approaches taken in these studies range from the study of ancient sources to exegesis of biblical texts. Rufus Jones, however, offers a special alternative to interpreting the beatitude of meekness. Adopting Jones's 'incarnational' approach, we would expect to trace how an individual such as Woolman experienced the embodiment of spirit through his life journey. Woolman humanises the beatitude through his reported personal difficulties and challenges that he faced on the way to becoming Christ-like.

The Meaning of Meekness

For Woolman 'meekness' was part of a larger set of terms that points to an essential opening of oneself, through keeping 'low', to the mystical relationship with the

2 Riccardo, Fr. J., 'The Beatitudes', 1 November 2018. Homily. 12:43. youtube.com.

divine. He rarely used 'meekness' as a term by itself but used it in combination with words such as 'humility', 'gentleness', 'patience', 'plainness', 'self-denial', 'low of heart', 'the spirit of love', 'heavenly peace' and 'heavenly-mindedness'. He used these words in pairs and even threes, such as 'meekness and humility', 'the spirit of love and meekness', 'meekness and self-denial' and 'the spirit of meekness, gentleness, and heavenly wisdom'. This family of terms, this language used by Woolman, enriches our understanding of meekness.

Turning back to ancient sources helps us to realise how the meaning of meekness has changed over time. The Greek word, *praus*, translated meekness,³ has one meaning, which is 'anger needing to be tamed'. Thinking about this ancient definition might seem alien to our current idea of meekness. Even Dorothy Day, Catholic Worker leader and activist, appears to have struggled with this meaning of meekness. She recorded in her autobiography, *The Long Loneliness*, a time when she struggled with this notion of meekness and her own sense of anger. She says,

Jesus said, 'blessed are the meek', but I could not be meek at the thought of injustice. I wanted a Lord who would scourge the money changers out of the temple, and I wanted to help all those who raised their hand against oppression.⁴

Martin Luther King, Jr. also struggled with untamed anger at times in his own life, and he learned that he could not respond to hatred with hatred. He had to lead others in nonviolent civil resistance. He became a model of 'someone who showed a kind of genius for turning that emotion into positive action'.⁵ Following his example, those who were preparing to sit in at lunch counters were trained in nonviolent resistance and taught not to react with anger. King would say, 'We harnessed anger under discipline for maximum effect.'⁶

In her essay 'Definition of Meekness', Mary Jane Chaignot, a commentator on Scripture for a general audience, suggests another way to understand harnessed anger as a more 'tamed' expression. She claims 'the *praus* person, the meek person, is one who feels anger on the right grounds, against the right person, in the right manner, at the right moment, for the right amount of time.'⁷ In other words, meekness is not a lack of anger, but a God-measured dose of it. A God-measured dose of anger does not justify harmful, abusive or violent behaviour. It is

3 The Greek word *praus*, in various Bibles, is sometimes translated as 'meek' and sometimes as 'humble'. For example, Numbers 12:3 in the New Revised Standard Version uses 'humble', while the King James Bible, which Woolman would have read, uses 'meek'.

4 Day, D., *The Long Loneliness: Autobiography of Dorothy Day*, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981, p. 46.

5 Greenfieldboyce, N., 'The Power of Martin Luther King Jr's Anger', 20 February 2019, in *All Things Considered*, produced by NPR, <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2019/02/20/691298594/the-power-of-martin-luther-king-jr-s-anger>.

6 Van Hook, S., 'The Time for Silence is Over', *The Newberry Observer*, 27 June 2016, <https://www.newberryobserver.com/opinion/columns/8645/the-time-for-silence-is-over>.

7 Chaignot, M. J., 'Definition of Meekness'. Biblewise. <https://www.biblewise.com/bible-study/questions>.

important for us to note that for people of color and women living in a society built on systemic racism and misogyny, showing anger has always been fraught with real risks, and ‘harnessed anger’ takes on additional concerns. We hesitate to speak for others beyond recognising their concerns. What we are exploring about meekness points the way to reconciliation and love rather than leading to animosity and hate.

Beyond harnessing anger, meekness further tests ‘strength under control’. We see this in another ancient source for meekness: the Hebrew Bible. We read in Numbers 12:3, ‘Now Moses was very meek, more than all men that were on the face of the earth.’ Martin Luther King, Jr. was Moses-like in his leading of the Civil Rights movement. As Chaignot points out about Moses, ‘We know that he stood against Pharaoh, he argued with God, and led the Israelites in the wilderness for 40 years.’⁸ What insights about meekness does Moses’ story illustrate? Taking strong stands, negotiating disagreements and persisting over time in difficult circumstances. Although Moses, at first, worried about his capacity for meekness along these lines, the great leader underwent the spiritual testing and developed the discipline necessary to fulfill his call among the Israelites. Meekness was not a character quality Moses inherited, but a spiritual strength he developed through guidance from God.

These ancient sources remind us that meekness has always involved emotional and spiritual struggle. Woolman’s story validates this point, but in its own unique terms. While he doesn’t specifically talk about anger, he recognises the ebb-and-flow of other strong emotions playing a great part in his meekness trials. What remains constant in all of the sources about meekness, ancient or modern, is the spiritual contest constantly faced regarding it.

‘Blessed are the Meek, ...’

Woolman refers to meekness in many places in the *Journal*. Three examples seem particularly revealing of his views of strength, which are nonetheless tied to meekness: not seeking immediate outcomes but rather a ‘pure motion’, ‘genuine meekness versus feigned meekness’ and meekness as part of making a difficult decision to stand apart, as he did in deciding to wear undyed clothing.

The first of these three examples is from a *Journal* passage where Woolman describes travelling in the ministry for the second time into the American South, in 1757, in which he opens himself to concerns leading to the importance of ‘patience and meekness’. Focusing on his journey, he claims that the ‘pure motion’ of one’s efforts, rather than the effects of one’s labour, should guide him:

Travelling up and down of late, I have had renewed evidences that to be faithful to the Lord and content with his will concerning me is a most necessary and useful

8 Chaignot, ‘Definition of Meekness’, n.p.

lesson for me to be learning, looking less at the effects of my labour than at the pure motion and reality of the concern as it arises from heavenly love.⁹

Meekness is an expression of 'heavenly love' and never to be disguised as a lesser form of love in order to achieve an effect. A Spirit-led meekness does not seek validation or verification by others. It derives from within, rather than being initiated from without.

In the same passage, Woolman does point to an outcome of one's labours, but ultimately a spiritual one:

In the Lord Jehovah is everlasting strength, and as the mind by a humble resignation is united to him and we utter words from an inward knowledge that they arise from the heavenly spring, though our way may be difficult and require close attention to keep in it, and though the manner in which we may be led may tend toward our own abasement, yet if we continue in patience and meekness, heavenly peace is the reward for our labours.¹⁰

The outcome is 'heavenly peace', whether one achieves earthly peace or not. Heavenly peace is not an achievement but an enrichment or gift that is an effect of meekness. This is a blessing, indeed, in which meekness plays an important role.

In the second example, also from the year 1757, Woolman expresses his growing awareness and appreciation of the difference between genuine meekness and feigned meekness during a military episode in his hometown, Mount Holly, New Jersey, when a draft for the militia was instigated. His insights arose from his observations of interactions between the young men and their military leaders. This event gave Woolman an opportunity to 'see and consider' the difference between the two types of meekness:

My mind being affected herewith, I had fresh opportunity to see and consider the advantage of living in the real substance of religion, where practice doth harmonize with principle But where men profess to be so meek and heavenly minded and to have their trust so firmly settled in God that they cannot join in wars, and yet by their spirit and conduct in common life manifest a contrary disposition, their difficulties are great at such a time.¹¹

We infer from this description that some draftees exhibited genuine meekness in their reluctance to participate in the militia. Woolman observed that their officers' response showed 'some regard to sincerity when they see it' in the young men, including some Friends, who expressed 'a tender scruple in their minds against joining wars'.¹² On the other hand, Woolman also noticed some draftees

9 Woolman, J., *The Journal and Major Essays*, Phillips P. Moulton (ed.) [1971], Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1989, p. 72. This edition is recognised as the most authoritative version of the *Journal* and these essays.

10 Woolman, *The Journal and Major Essays*, p. 72.

11 Woolman, *The Journal and Major Essays*, p. 88.

12 Woolman, *The Journal and Major Essays*, p. 88.

who 'profess to be so meek and heavenly minded' while exhibiting a 'contrary disposition' in their everyday lives. Because these draftees professed but only pretended meekness the officers demanded that they be 'roughly handled'.¹³ It seems that the officers, along with Woolman, recognised the difference between genuine and feigned meekness among their potential inductees.

Recognising the difference between feigned and genuine meekness is often difficult. Feigned meekness may be easier to detect because of outward signs such as words used suspiciously to disguise it or, as Woolman reported, previous behaviours inconsistent with it, such as outward expressions of haughtiness, arrogance or division. Against a background of such evidence, a pretence of feigned meekness tends to raise apprehensions or mistrust. On the other hand, genuine meekness may be more difficult to recognise because of its spiritual quality. Woolman sought to discern genuine meekness by attending to 'a tender scruple'. Meekness, along these lines, is non-aggressive, quiet and steadfast. Woolman leaves us wondering whether this appraisal of outward meekness in others is separate from our own inward condition. One seems to rely on outward signs and the other is more of an inward appraisal.

There is another passage in which Woolman identifies Spirit-grounded evidence for genuine meekness. In the *Journal's* first chapter he recounts a memory of recognising meekness in others:

Some glances of real beauty may be seen in their faces who dwell in true meekness. There is a harmony in the sound of their voice to which divine love gives utterance, and some appearance of right order in their temper and conduct whose passions are fully regulated.¹⁴

The question of identifying meekness in others and in oneself touches on the question of evidence that can be perceived in others. Woolman's identification of 'beauty', the sound of 'their voice', and their 'temper and conduct' as having their source in 'divine love' implies the presence of incarnation. Woolman seems to believe that he is witnessing meekness as an embodiment of Spirit.

The third example involves Woolman's decision, in 1761, to wear undyed clothing, which he examines through an extended *Journal* passage expressing several struggles with meekness. Each of these struggles arise from encountering the world. Woolman was particularly sensitive to his appearing singular as a result of wearing undyed clothing – that is, standing out as peculiar or different. He thought a lot about the dangers of conforming to accepted customs that supported oppression and suffering. He often compared 'customs or honours of this world'¹⁵ or 'customs generally approved'¹⁶ with being faithful to 'the infallible standard:

13 Woolman, *The Journal and Major Essays*, p. 88.

14 Woolman, *The Journal and Major Essays*, p. 29.

15 Woolman, *The Journal and Major Essays*, p. 167.

16 Woolman, *The Journal and Major Essays*, p. 198.

Truth'.¹⁷ In addition, he anticipated the danger of becoming entangled in 'the prevailing of the spirit of this world' rather than living in 'the spirit of meekness, gentleness, and heavenly wisdom, which are the necessary companions of the true sheep of Christ'.¹⁸ Entanglement had several dimensions for him as he tried to come to terms with accepted norms regarding clothing.

Woolman notes his own 'inward desolation' as his decision about clothing weighed upon him. It arose from his sensitivity to 'fellow creatures' who suffered in the slavery-based enterprise of producing dyes, leading Woolman to feel he had to stop wearing dyed 'hats and garments'.¹⁹ He was clear about what he needed to do but remained entangled by his fear of the reactions of others. He struggled over the discomfort of standing out, or, as he wrote, of 'being singular from my beloved friends'.²⁰ In his next passage identified by a specific date, Woolman dives even deeper into his inner conflict by telling the reader about a time of illness:

And on the 31st day, fifth month, 1761, I was taken ill of a fever, and after having it near a week I was in great distress of body. And one day there was a cry raised in me that I might understand why I was afflicted and improve under it, and my conformity to some customs which I believed were not right were brought to my remembrance.²¹

Why might Woolman's nonconformity lead to illness? Entanglements regarding Friends might have played a role in his suffering. Being meek and taking a quiet, steadfast stance can be isolating. One runs the risk of being misunderstood, distrusted and even taunted by others. If so, we face the temptation to treat meekness as a strategy for achieving an outcome or a performance for some approval.

Woolman believed that his illness was a way for God to chastise him and help him see his errors, a result to which he remained open:

There was now no desire in me for health until the design of my correction was answered, and thus I lay in abasement and brokenness of spirit. And as I felt a sinking down into a calm resignation, as I felt, as in an instant, an inward healing in my nature, and from that time forward I grew better.²²

Remarkably, having reached a low point of 'abasement and brokenness of spirit' and having surrendered to the Inward Spirit and found a sense of peace, Woolman seems prepared to follow his leading to wear undyed clothing. It seems as if he has reached his decision, but his struggles are not over. He turns to another aspect of singularity as it might affect his ministry. Would Friends suspicious of his dyed clothing stance

17 Woolman, *The Journal and Major Essays*, p. 198.

18 Woolman, *The Journal and Major Essays*, p. 64.

19 Woolman, *The Journal and Major Essays*, p. 120.

20 Woolman, *The Journal and Major Essays*, p. 120.

21 Woolman, *The Journal and Major Essays*, p. 120.

22 Woolman, *The Journal and Major Essays*, p. 120.

grow 'shy' or detached from his offerings of vocal ministry? Acknowledging this anxiety, Woolman discloses, 'I felt my way for a time shut up in the ministry.'²³ But, again, he finds consolation by returning to the 'meekness of wisdom':

And in this condition, my mind turned toward my Heavenly Father with fervent cries that I might be preserved to walk before him in the meekness of wisdom, my heart was often tender in meetings, and I felt an inward consolation, which to me was very precious under those difficulties.²⁴

A 'meekness of wisdom' frees Woolman from being overly concerned about 'superficial friendship' and even the need to explain himself to 'valuable Friends'. He begins to re-evaluate both types of friendship along different lines:

I had at times been sensible that superficial friendship had been dangerous to me, and many Friends being now uneasy with me I found to be a providential kindness. And though I had an inclination to acquaint some valuable Friends with the manner of my being led into these things, yet upon a deeper thought I was for a time most easy to omit it, believing the present dispensation was profitable and trusting that if I kept my place the Lord in his own time would open the hearts of Friends toward me ...²⁵

It is comforting to know that Woolman, like many of us, felt anxious about what others would think of him. At the same time, it is important to realise that he faced a critical question of weighing the difference between 'superficial friendship' and 'valuable' friendship. Woolman's recognition of two types of friendship invites consideration of the different sources and different expectations in each relationship. It seems a crucial distinction to make, especially when considering whom we might trust in our faith communities to provide spiritual guidance.

Beyond the examples above that are about the individual, Woolman introduces another dimension of meekness: that is, meekness as a shared experience essential to a Quaker meeting. This aspect of meekness is especially intriguing. In a letter 'To Friends at their Monthly Meeting at New Garden and Cane Creek in North Carolina' in 1757, he states:

And though we meet with opposition from another spirit, yet as there is a dwelling in meekness, feeling our spirits subject and moving only in the gentle, peaceable wisdom, the inward reward of quietness will be greater than all our difficulties. Where the pure life is kept to and meetings of discipline are held in the authority of it, we find by experience that they are comfortable and tend to the health of the body.²⁶

It is challenging to consider meekness as a quality of an entire meeting of Friends. As a group experience, how might 'dwelling in meekness' look? Is meekness

23 Woolman, *The Journal and Major Essays*, p. 121.

24 Woolman, *The Journal and Major Essays*, p. 121.

25 Woolman, *The Journal and Major Essays*, pp. 121–22.

26 Woolman, *The Journal and Major Essays*, p. 68.

within a Quaker meeting an aspect of finding unity in the Spirit? Woolman appears to emphasise meekness as a corporate health issue requiring our attention.

Such attention arose at the end of a meeting for business at the Quarterly Meeting at London Grove in 1758, about which Woolman reports:

And near the conclusion of the meeting for business, Friends were incited to constancy in supporting the testimony of Truth and reminded of the necessity which the disciples of Christ are under to attend principally to his business, as he is pleased to open it to us, and to be particularly careful to have our minds redeemed from the love of wealth, to have our outward affairs in as little room as may be, that so no temporal concerns may entangle our affections or hinder us from diligently following the dictates of Truth, in labouring to promote the pure spirit of meekness and heavenly-mindedness amongst the children of men in these days of calamity and distress, wherein God is visiting our land with his just judgments.²⁷

Woolman connects 'constancy' with the necessity of 'following the dictates of Truth'. In doing so, he stresses that part of Christ's business, hence a disciple's business, is to labour 'to promote the pure spirit of meekness and heavenly-mindedness'. Meekness isn't itself the goal, but it is essential to attending to 'the dictates of Truth'.

'For They Shall Inherit the Earth'

The phrase 'inherit the earth' must have resonated with Woolman, partly because he wrote wills for others and was often in conversations about inheritance. We are not aware that he wrote about wills with direct reference to the meekness beatitude, but in several of his writings we see how the theme of inheritance took on various meanings for him. He wrote about inheritance as a gift to be greatly treasured, a responsibility and a trust, and a commitment to justice for posterity, each of which relies upon an aspect of meekness. He was particularly concerned about inheritance that furthered harm to God's creation – whether that be harm to the slaveowner's children, the enslaved person or the land.

In his first anti-slavery essay, published in 1754, he appealed to slaveowners, not by directly addressing the cruelty of slavery but rather by asking them to consider the burden they placed on their own children when they inherited enslaved people as chattel property. He approached this on two levels: first as a problem of reason and then as a dimension beyond reason. He argued that to 'become heirs with him [Christ] in the kingdom of his Father' and enjoy the blessings of God, and yet deprive our fellow human beings of freedom and education, is 'a contradiction to reason'.²⁸ Those who 'in the midst of high favours remain ungrateful ... wander in a maze of dark anxiety, where all treasures are insufficient to quiet

27 Woolman, *The Journal and Major Essays*, pp. 94–95.

28 Woolman, *The Journal and Major Essays*, p. 208.

their minds'.²⁹ Eventually, he drew his readers into the meaning of inheritance by moving from the materialistic wealth laid up for one's heirs to much greater spiritual treasures. He said, the 'gifts bestowed on' us by God are 'an inheritance incorruptible',³⁰ a phrase he quoted from 1 Peter 1:4. He called this inheritance from God 'a kindness beyond expression'.³¹ These claims may not have reached all readers – some may not have shared his faith or may have become hardened to the ugly and terrible demands of slave ownership. But Woolman spoke to an audience of fellow Christians 'of Every Denomination'³² who valued and shared the faith he described.

For Woolman, inheriting the earth involved matters of responsibility and trust. As an orchard keeper, he must have intimately felt what it means to care for one's land and prepare for it to be honoured by those who continue that care. In another writing, from 1772, he expressed these concerns in a memorable way: 'The produce of the earth is a gift from our gracious Creator to the inhabitants, and to impoverish the earth now to support outward greatness appears to be an injury to the succeeding age.'³³ His thoughts about caring for the earth and prioritising these gifts were far ahead of his time.³⁴

Woolman's writings at the end of his life reach the fullest statement of what meekness meant to him. In the spring of 1772, as he prepared to leave his family and sail for England, he did not know if he would return. A month before departing, the Meeting for Sufferings³⁵ within the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting accepted for publication one of Woolman's last writings: 'An Epistle to the Quarterly and Monthly Meetings', which some editors have called his 'Farewell'.³⁶ He wrote in the epistle that 'A trust is committed to us ... [and] a breach of this trust' lays 'the foundation for future sufferings',³⁷ and that 'There is justice due to our posterity'.³⁸

29 Woolman, *The Journal and Major Essays*, p. 209.

30 Woolman, *The Journal and Major Essays*, p. 205.

31 Woolman, *The Journal and Major Essays*, p. 208.

32 Woolman, *The Journal and Major Essays*, p. 198.

33 Woolman, J., 'Conversations on the True Harmony of Mankind & How It May Be Promoted', in *John Woolman and the Affairs of Truth: The journalist's essays, epistles, and ephemera*, James Proud (ed.), San Francisco: Inner Light Books, 2011, p. 169.

34 Mike Heller, 'John Woolman's Environmental Consciousness', in Bock, C. and Potthoff, S. (eds), *Quakers, Creation Care, and Sustainability*, Quakers in the Disciplines, Vol. 6, Philadelphia, PA: Friends Association for Higher Education, 2019, pp. 11–29.

35 James Proud notes that in 1771 the Overseers of the Press was renamed the Meeting for Sufferings, in Woolman, *John Woolman and the Affairs of Truth*, p. 181.

36 Woolman, J., 'An Epistle to the Quarterly and Monthly Meetings', in *John Woolman and the Affairs of Truth*, p. 180.

37 Woolman, 'An Epistle', p. 188.

38 Woolman, 'An Epistle', p. 188.

The epistle is remarkable for its richness of expression, although few scholars have written about it. In the epistle he explains the meaning of inheritance within the beatitude:

Where the wisdom from above is faithfully followed, and therein we are entrusted with outward substance, it is a treasure committed to our care in the nature of an inheritance, as an inheritance from him who formed and supports the world. Now in this condition the true enjoyment of the good things of this life is understood, and that blessing felt in which is real safety. This is what I apprehend our blessed Lord had in view when he said, blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth.³⁹

In this passage, he defines what he understands this 'blessing' to mean. Leading the reader through this series of clauses, he arrives at a statement about 'that blessing felt in which is real safety'. As often happens in Woolman's writing, there is much to unpack here. An inheritance is usually understood as a gift, passed from one generation to another, perhaps with no more conditions than hereditary ties. It is not necessarily earned or deserved. It may involve no expectations on the part of the inheritor about how an inheritance might be used. It is basically a transfer of wealth or possessions. An inheritance by the meek is different in several ways. There are expectations provided by 'him who formed and supports the world'. This is a significant difference because the source for this inheritance is not human, but divine. What an unusual statement this is, at once to express joy, which is not seen often in Woolman's writing, and then to invoke a blessing of 'real safety'. It's as if the joy results from overcoming apprehension, fear and insecurity.

Referring to his own experience, Woolman goes on to explore further the meaning of inheritance by distinguishing between selfish landowners and those who are meek. He returns to the theme that those entangled with 'customs (contrary to pure wisdom)' are 'prevented from a perfect attention to the voice of Christ'.⁴⁰ In contrast, he describes those who faithfully follow the wisdom from above and become blessed:

Selfish men may hold lands in the selfish spirit, and depending on the strength of the outward power of armies be perplexed with secret uneasiness lest the injured should sometime overpower them, or that measure meted to them which they are measuring to others. Thus, selfish men may possess the earth, but it is the meek who inherit the earth, who enjoy it as an inheritance from their heavenly Father, free from all the defilements and perplexities of unrighteousness.⁴¹

It is common to yearn for *freedom to* acquire and accumulate, but *freedom from* the complications of possessions brings truer blessings. *Freedom from* draws our

39 Woolman, 'An Epistle', p. 192.

40 Woolman, 'An Epistle', pp. 185, 189.

41 Woolman, 'An Epistle', p. 192.

attention away from egocentric worries and anxiety about protecting or overidentifying with possessions. Woolman was very aware of these potential self-centred entanglements. Meekness does not invite these distractions but rather helps us to overcome or avoid them. To fail at this allows an inheritance to turn possession into the work of a 'selfish spirit'.

Woolman's emphasis on inheritance as a gift from God suggests that it brings with it great responsibility. Perhaps the meek are most suited to honour that responsibility because their actions are not self-serving. Amy-Jill Levine, the New Testament scholar and professor at Vanderbilt University, writes on the meekness beatitude that

Only the meek, those who would not use the inheritance to reinforce their own already privileged position are worthy to care for the land. They understand stewardship, they understand restriction of activity (for what one can do is not necessarily what one should do), and they understand their responsibility in turn to pass the land to others.⁴²

Meekness, then, opens one to greater understanding.

Self-Denial and Being Crucified with Christ

From his early twenties, Woolman made decisions that would be both self-denying and a response to harmful, accepted customs. Self-denial was another way of expressing his concern for the damaging effects of material wealth, whether inherited or acquired. In his mid-thirties, he gave up his successful retail business because its demands interfered with his spiritual calling. Was his self-denial tainted with a desire for greatness? There were moments when Woolman had 'greatness' on his mind, as he considered letting go of the retail business and becoming a tailor:

My mind through the power of Truth was in a good degree weaned from the desire of outward greatness I saw that a humble man with the blessing of the Lord might live on a little, and that where the heart was set on greatness, success in business did not satisfy the craving But through the revelation of Jesus Christ, I had seen the happiness of humility, and there was an earnest desire in me to enter deep into it.⁴³

It seems significant that Woolman was sensitive to his own ambition, even to thinking about 'craving' success, but that he chose to turn away from this temptation.

In his early forties and beyond, expressions of self-denial remained an essential aspect of his spiritual practice of meekness and witness. We have

⁴² Levine, A-J., *The Sermon on the Mount: A beginner's guide to the Kingdom of Heaven*, Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2020, p. 21.

⁴³ Woolman, *The Journal and Major Essays*, p. 35.

already looked at his decision to wear undyed clothing. In the last 11 years of his life he continued to make many such decisions to express his opposition to the accepted economic and military systems of the British empire. He refused to pay war taxes; on his journeys in the ministry, he began walking instead of riding horses so that he might identify with enslaved people; and he gave up sugar as well as using silver goblets and dinnerware because of the oppressive conditions in which they were produced. Sailing to England in May 1772, he refused to take passage in a comfortable, ornate cabin but instead chose to sleep below decks in steerage, where it was dark, continually wet and difficult for him to breathe. The young sailors were constantly coming and going, leaving their sea-battered clothes in a heap near him. After arriving in England, he refused to send letters in the post or to ride in the stagecoaches for which the postboys and horses worked in brutal conditions. During his last years he had become ill, bled himself and adopted a diet of mostly bread and milk. Gradually, his body weakened. On this three-month walking journey northward toward York, he became further weakened. His self-denial intensified as did his suffering. But his spiritual experience deepened.

While in England, he wrote what would become the final chapter of his *Journal*. He had reached a point in his spiritual journey where he wanted to record a profound vision that came to him during a time of serious illness over two years earlier, but which he had only partly described in the *Journal*.⁴⁴ Perhaps he was not ready until two years later to commit this to writing. During this illness, he felt near to death and saw himself as part of the most miserable of humanity:

I was brought so near the gates of death that I forgot my name. Being then desirous to know who I was, I saw a mass of matter of a dull gloomy colour, between the south and the east, and was informed that this mass was human beings in as great misery as they could be and live, and that I was mixed in with them and henceforth might not consider myself as a distinct or separate being.⁴⁵

Here he expressed not only compassion for the poor and oppressed but also a deeper sense of lowness in his own life. His last years can be seen as a journey of merging with the poor, the oppressed and the enslaved. Was he experiencing a new level of meekness and even the loss of ego identity? Meekness evidently allowed him to recognise oneness with others and especially the most miserable of humanity.

Later in that same vision, Woolman felt that he had relinquished his self-will to the will of God. In the vision, he heard an angel's voice say, '*John Woolman is dead*'. He lay for a time not able to speak and not knowing what the angel's words meant. But then, quoting Gal. 2:20, he said

44 Woolman, *The Journal and Major Essays*, pp. 159–60.

45 Woolman, *The Journal and Major Essays*, p. 185.

'I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live, yet not I, but Christ that liveth in me' Then the mystery was opened, ... and that language *John Woolman is dead* meant no more than the death of my own will.⁴⁶

Perhaps this relinquishment of self-will was the ultimate expression of meekness.

These passages describing the vision represent a major turning point for Woolman. In saying that he had become one with the crucified Christ, he had arrived at the pinnacle of the mystic's spiritual life journey. His life of self-denial, humility and meekness may have brought him as close as one might get to the incarnation of which Rufus Jones spoke. In his epistle of 1772, Woolman expressed this Christ-centred experience with the following phrases:

To take a holy profession upon us is awful; nor can we keep this holy name sacred but by humbly abiding under the cross of Christ ... the afflictions of Christ's mystical body are yet unfinished, for those ... baptized into his death, ... and brought forth in newness of life, we feel Christ to live in us.⁴⁷

Our attention is especially drawn to the claim that 'the afflictions of Christ's mystical body are yet unfinished'. For Woolman, merging his self-will with the Inward Spirit meant Christ's work and suffering were continuing in Woolman's life. Through his labours arising from his feeling of oneness with the poor and the oppressed, he took on the suffering of Christ. The phrase 'humbly abiding under the cross' expressed an ideal of Woolman's faith, of which meekness was only one part but an important part of 'bearing the cross'.

Woolman's vision represented for him a profound transformation taking place in himself and his ministry. For nearly a year after that time of illness he did not speak in worship. For a person widely recognised for his spoken ministry, this was unusual. However, he did not hold back non-verbal expressions carrying a powerful message. He says, 'my mind was often in company with the oppressed slaves as I sat in meetings' in which 'the spring of the gospel ministry was many times livingly opened in me and the divine gift operated by abundance of weeping in feeling the oppression of this people'.⁴⁸ How remarkable that the 'divine gift' took the form of weeping.

As we have thought about what it means to be 'almost an incarnation of the Beatitudes', we have circled around various aspects of how transformation is visible. In the final months and weeks of Woolman's life, how did he appear? We found it helpful to turn to comments about his appearance in surviving records. To some who saw Woolman as he walked toward York and as he spoke in meetings, his appearance seemed both meek and humble. Large numbers of people came out to see him, especially because many were curious about his unusual dress. Some of those present left written records of his white clothing and commented on the

46 Woolman, *The Journal and Major Essays*, p. 186.

47 Woolman, 'An Epistle', pp. 183, 185.

48 Woolman, *The Journal and Major Essays*, p. 187.

'singularity' of his dress. One of them wrote, 'Some were startled, others amused, and many were disturbed', but after hearing him speak many were impressed.⁴⁹ Tabitha Hoyland wrote in a letter, dated 8th mo 9th 1772, that she was at a meeting

which was exceedingly crowded, part through curiosity to see John's particular dress, and part I hope from a better motive, whom I apprehend went away well satisfied with what they heard from the man whose uncouth appearance will be likely to prejudice many. But he is certainly a very deep minister that searches things quite to the bottom, greatly exercised in a life of self-denial and humility.⁵⁰

Another observer, William Forster, in a letter dated 8 mo 16 to his cousin Rebecca Haydock (an American), wrote that he was struck by Woolman's 'meekness and unaffected humility':

The remarkable appearance of your countryman John Woolman who is now with Sarah Morris and her niece in Yorkshire, attracts the notice of many. His steady uniform deportment, his meekness and unaffected humility, his solidity, no less in conversation than in his ministry, which is instructing and edifying, creates much esteem and well corresponds with his appearance.⁵¹

Despite his unusual clothes, Woolman appeared impressive to many in terms of his outward meekness, humility and even a 'sweetness' about him,⁵² but the descriptions from people who came out to see him were largely limited to outward and brief impressions. They did not know the weight of the concerns he was carrying.

For the best record of Woolman's inward life we still turn to his *Journal*, where he recorded his struggle with oppression connected to wealth and commerce, and at the same time to live the spiritual life he envisioned. Note the intensity of this *Journal* passage, written in July 1772, as he reflected on those who acquired great financial gain from the suffering of others:

the weight of this degeneracy hath lain so heavy upon me, ... and desires in my heart been so ardent for a reformation, so ardent that we might come to that right use of things where, living on a little, we might inhabit that holy mountain on which they neither *hurt nor destroy!* And may not only stand clear from oppressing our fellow creatures, but may be so disentangled from connections in interest with known oppressors, that in us may be fulfilled that prophecy: 'Thou shalt be far from oppression' [Is. 54:14]. Under the weight of this exercise the sight of innocent birds in the branches and sheep in the pastures, who act according to the will of their Creator, hath at times tended to mitigate my trouble.⁵³

49 Plank, G., *John Woolman's Path to the Peaceable Kingdom: A Quaker in the British Empire*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012, p. 210.

50 Cadbury, H. J., *John Woolman in England 1772: A documentary supplement*, Philadelphia: Friends Historical Society, 1971, p. 94.

51 Cadbury, *John Woolman in England*, p. 89.

52 Plank, *John Woolman's Path*, p. 213.

53 Woolman, *The Journal and Major Essays*, p. 185.

In Geoffrey Plank's description, Woolman was "under the weight of this exercise" as he passed through the north of England. He saw a cosmic drama playing itself out in the landscape of Yorkshire.⁵⁴ When we are faithful at the most profound levels, in the words of Levine, 'the kingdom becomes incarnated inside us. Both we and the world in which we live become transformed.'⁵⁵ Woolman, in his last years, may well have experienced this transformation.

Woolman was deeply invested in two additional kinds of inheritance: the Quaker journal tradition and Quaker ministry. The early Quakers passed on a journal tradition that Woolman and his colleagues took to heart. They felt inspired to leave in writing for future generations their own journals, telling their experience of the Spirit of God acting in their lives. They wrote these spiritual autobiographies for publication with the purpose of strengthening the spiritual life of their immediate community as well as that of posterity. By Woolman's time the Quaker journal tradition had acquired fairly fixed literary expectations that were embraced by Woolman and his journal-writing contemporaries.

Woolman also inherited expectations and responsibilities of Quaker ministry. He was deeply committed to ministry and served the community in multiple ways. He was by no means a solitary individual working alone. He served for many years on multiple committees. For example, from 1752 to 1769 he served as Clerk of the Burlington Quarterly Meeting of Ministers and Elders, and from 1764 to 1772 he was a primary writer and editor of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting's important annual epistle to London Yearly Meeting.⁵⁶ He thought about what advice he could pass on to Quaker ministers who would come after him. This advice included thoughts about addressing slaveowners and others who had fallen away from the faith's discipline. To fellow ministers of the faith, he expressed his hope 'that none of us become a stumbling block in the way of others, but may so walk that our conduct may reach the pure witness in the hearts of such who are not in profession with us'.⁵⁷ It was not enough to take on the task of labouring with offenders; he also cautioned his readers not to judge them harshly but to act with 'tender compassion'.⁵⁸ This is a difficult lesson and a challenge that is still with us: to accept the faults and shortcomings in others and yet not judge them.

While in England, Woolman wrote a brief essay that later editors called 'Concerning the Ministry'.⁵⁹ In this, he speaks of a change that was happening within him on his journey. For a man who had been successful in business and

54 Plank, *John Woolman's Path*, 213.

55 Levine, *The Sermon*, 125.

56 Boroughs, Philip L., 'John Woolman's Spirituality', in Heller, M. (ed.), *The Tendering Presence: Essays on John Woolman*, Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill, 2003, p. 4.

57 Woolman, 'An Epistle', p. 182.

58 Woolman, 'An Epistle', p. 193.

59 Woolman, 'Concerning the Ministry', in Olmsted, S. P. and Heller, M. (eds), *John Woolman: A Nonviolence and Social Change Source Book*, Wilmington, OH, and Richmond, IN: Wilmington College Peace Resource Center and Friends United Press, 2nd edn, 2013.

who held a weighty place among Quaker leaders, it is remarkable that here in his final weeks he was reaching a spiritual place of letting go of his own plans:

Thus I have been more and more instructed as to the necessity of depending, not upon a concern which I felt in America to come on a visit to England, but upon the fresh instructions of Christ, the Prince of Peace, from day to day.⁶⁰

Having come this far on his physical and spiritual journey, Woolman expressed what it felt like to experience the deepest spiritual surrender:

Now I find that in pure obedience the mind learns contentment in appearing weak and foolish to that wisdom which is of the world; and in these lowly labours, they who stand in a low place, rightly exercised under the cross, will find nourishment.

The gift is pure; and while the eye is single in attending thereto, the understanding is preserved clear, self is kept out, and we rejoice in filling up that which remains of the afflictions of Christ for his body's sake, which is the church.⁶¹

The first sentence above expresses a meaning much like the meekness beatitude: those 'appearing weak ... will find nourishment'. The second sentence focuses on 'the gift'. When 'self is kept out', one can receive 'that which remains of the afflictions of Christ'. A message to those wanting to understand ministry is that meekness is centred on suffering with Christ:

In this journey a labour hath attended my mind, that the ministers amongst us may be preserved in the meek feeling life of Truth, where we have no desire but to follow Christ and be with him; that when he is under suffering we may suffer with him; and never desire to rise up in dominion, but as he by the virtue of his own Spirit may raise us.⁶²

Woolman's journey was long and hard. He yielded again and again. As he walked, he appears to have deepened his understanding of the receptive power of meekness. Thinking of his fellow ministers, he calls them to abide with him in that receptivity, the 'feeling life of Truth' which meekness opens. In this feeling state, desire is transformed from grasping for power to being raised by the Spirit to 'follow Christ and be with him'. Meekness provides spiritual space for being weaned away from ego-protecting desires that hinder one from being open and committed to suffering with Christ.

What We Have Learned

Woolman opens for us a personal approach to the beatitude. Meekness involves spiritual leading and practice. It is not an expression of a personality trait but of being genuinely centred on others through God-centredness. In regard to

60 Woolman, 'Concerning the Ministry', p. 93.

61 Woolman, 'Concerning the Ministry', p. 94.

62 Woolman, 'Concerning the Ministry', p. 95.

meekness in an individual, Woolman struggled to identify it in outward, visible terms. He sensed a difference between authentic and feigned meekness, but judging one from the other remained a challenge for him. It is tempting to reduce meekness to expressions of certain attitudes and behaviours, but such reductionism may overlook its spiritual quality. Woolman shows us that meekness is neither a personal achievement nor an expression of a desire for acceptance from others, but faith-filled, Christ-like living.

Woolman poses the possibility of meekness as a quality sensed within a Quaker meeting. Friends valued solitude and silence as opportunities to listen to the guidance of the 'still, small voice' within. One might think the individual could do this alone and there would be no need to worship in silence with others; however, worshipping in community made things happen that could not happen for the individual alone. Community created a further opportunity not only to avoid the distractions and noise of the world but also to wait together for the inward leadings of the Spirit. At least part of this waiting upon the spirit was a practice of meekness. The group took on and supported values and behaviours that expressed a way to interact and work in the world. Meekness could extend beyond the practices of worship to other aspects of community life.

Woolman enlarges for us the meaning of 'the meek shall inherit the earth' with a range of views of inheritance. He encouraged not only slaveowners but all of his readers to see the spiritual 'gifts bestowed on us' as a transcendence to be treasured beyond property to be earned or gained by accident. For Woolman, the entire creation and the Kingdom of God revealed through the teachings of Christ are such a gift. Another view of inheritance in Woolman's *Journal* involves striving to avoid selfish entanglements that lead one away from Christ-centred living and toward corruption and oppression. Inheritance also stresses the need to pass on to future generations the guidance and inspiration to work for justice. In this way, Woolman's *Journal* is itself an inheritance for later generations.

Woolman's spiritual journey, as told in his *Journal*, humanises meekness as a struggle and an aspiration. His choice to wear undyed clothing ushered in worries about negative judgements and even losing friends, concerns we might face when deciding to stand apart. At the same time, his moments of self-denial are impressive and uplifting. He embodied a life of compassion for the poor and oppressed. He struggled throughout his life not to be drawn into the destructive 'customs or honours of this world' – and this too is our struggle. His many decisions of self-denial were inseparable from his 'humbly abiding under the cross of Christ'. Woolman provides us with a personal account of trying to live the beatitude. From Woolman's story, we see him experiencing a gradual growth in his spiritual understanding of relinquishing his self-will to the will of Christ.

Despite his suffering, Woolman experiences a life journey of profound spiritual growth. His words and actions, originating from a place nourished by meekness, begin to embody the Spirit expressed through the Beatitudes. Maturing into meekness is coming into wholeness with oneself and creation. As we reflect on

Woolman's *Journal's* opening words, 'I have often felt a motion of love', we see that motion as a 'blessing' that shines through his writing and guides his whole life.⁶³

Author Details

Mike Heller is Professor of English Emeritus at Roanoke College in Salem, Virginia. He has written 'From West Point to Quakerism' (Pendle Hill Pamphlet); edited *The Tendering Presence: Essays on John Woolman* (Pendle Hill Publications); and recently written essays on Woolman and economics and Woolman and the environment. He is on the Executive Committee of the Roanoke Branch NAACP and is a member of the Roanoke Quaker Meeting.

Email: heller@roanoke.edu

Ron Rembert is Professor of Religion and Philosophy Emeritus from Wilmington College in Wilmington, Ohio. While officed in the Kelly Religious Center there and guided by many in Campus Friends Meeting, he grew in appreciation for the life and work of Thomas Kelly, which inspired several writing projects over the years.

Email: ron_rembert@wilmington.edu

63 We dedicate this essay to Phillips Moulton and Sterling Olmsted who, through their manner and scholarship, embody for us the spirit of John Woolman and continue to inspire us.