

Introducing Quakers

By Gordon Browne

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MANY PEOPLE HAVE COMMENTED on the revolutionary change in world view that Jesus' ministry announced. God remained the Author and Creator of life, but, instead of being the stern and vengeful patriarch of earlier prophets of the Old Testament, Jesus' God reached out to human beings with unfailing love and compassion. The sinner was grieved over and actively helped. The parable pictures the shepherd God leaving the flock of 99 in search of the one that has gone astray. The parable of the Prodigal Son pictures the rejoicing when a life is turned around. In Jesus' imagery, God is like a loving father. The kingdom of God is a spiritual kingdom, not a regal one. It is within human beings, if they will but search it out. They have the capacity to be born again into total harmony with the Divine Life.

Furthermore, the world's standards are overthrown. It will be hard for the wealthy to enter heaven. The priests and self-righteous people who live by ritual and by law but not by love are vipers, are painted tombs, are hypocrites. The poor widow with her mite exemplifies human love of God; the despised Samaritan exemplifies love of neighbor. Not the powerful but the meek shall inherit the earth!

Here indeed is a new definition of the nature of the human-Divine relationship, a new definition of Truth, to which Jesus says he has come to witness. No wonder he frightened the powerful!

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George Fox: Discovering the Light

THE QUAKER EXPRESSION of this radical redefinition of Truth was first offered by George Fox in England in the 17th century. George Fox was born in Leicestershire in 1624, the son of a reasonably prosperous weaver and an intensely religious mother. A serious, introspective, physically powerful youth, he was early drawn to religious concerns and was genuinely shocked by the failure of the "professors," that is, professing Christians, to live their beliefs.

At 19, he left home on a spiritual quest, during which he sought out and challenged the religious leaders everywhere to answer his questions. Nowhere did he find satisfaction, until in 1647, having "forsaken all the priests" and in despair, he heard a voice which said, "There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition." That direct experience changed his life, his religious conceptions, and his view of the human-Divine relationship. He devoted the rest of his life to sharing his new understandings.

He was imprisoned eight times. He suffered cruel beatings, great strain and deprivation. And he proved a true religious genius, an heroic and indomitable figure whose journal and other writings continue to be basic works of the Religious Society of Friends, whose founder he is generally conceded to be. He knew the Bible so well that about 75 percent of his writing is biblical allusion. He never intended to found a new sect. He believed his discovery was universal, that he had rediscovered primitive Christianity, and its embrace went far beyond the institutional limits of the Christian Church, which in its 17th century condition he regarded as apostate.

In briefest summary, the principles at which he arrived included the following:

- that God is directly accessible to all persons without the need of an intermediary priest or ritual;
- that there is in all persons an in-dwelling Seed or Christ or Light (he used all these metaphors) which is of God and which, if they will but heed it, will guide them and shape their lives in accordance with the will of God;
- that true religion cannot be learned from books or set prayers, words, or rituals, which Fox called

“empty forms,” but comes only from direct experiences of God, known through the Seed or Christ or Light within;

- that the Scriptures can be understood only as one enters into the Spirit which gave them forth;
- that there is an ocean of darkness and death – of sin and misery – over the world but also an ocean of light and of love, which flows over the ocean of darkness, revealing the infinite love of God; and
- that the power and love of God are over all, erasing the artificial division between the secular and religious so that all of life, when lived in the Spirit, becomes sacramental. The traditional outward sacraments, again characterized as empty forms, are to be discarded in favor of the spiritual reality they symbolize.

Resistance and Outreach

THERE WAS MUCH in these principles to brand Fox and his followers as heretics. The rejection of ecclesiastical authority, of course, was paramount, for those early Friends refused to pay the tax demanded by the state church. Fox was accused of being unchristian, for, while he wrote and spoke naturally in the familiar Christian language which identified Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ Messiah, the son of God who brought salvation from sin, he also spoke of the Christ spirit as present in all persons, whether they had ever heard of Jesus or not. This universal Christ was the “logos,” the Word, which the Gospel of John said was in the beginning before all and in all that was ever created. Furthermore, filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, Fox preached, prayed, argued, and healed with a fervor that invited the enmity of those whose careers and authority were built on religious structures that not only lacked but were suspicious of such vigor and enthusiasm.

Fox’s public ministry began in the northwest of England in 1652, where he found thousands of seekers already meeting in silence, hungering for the religious truths based on experience that Fox offered. The numbers of his followers soared, and they set out to carry their message to all parts of the world – to Constantinople, to Rome, to Danzig, even to America. The first Quakers arrived in Boston in 1656, and by 1657

there was a meeting established on Cape Cod, where it still exists as the oldest continuous Friends' meeting in North America.

Sufferings

THOSE EARLY QUAKERS, derisively named that because their fervor often caused them to tremble as they preached or prayed, met hardship and persecution. Thousands were imprisoned. Some, traveling to carry their Truth, were captured by Algerian pirates and held for ransom or sold into slavery.

The most brutal persecution occurred in the Massachusetts Bay Colony where four Friends were hanged on Boston Common, and others were flogged, branded, had their ears cut off or their tongues bored through with a hot iron, and were driven into exile. Only in Rhode Island, where Roger Williams had established the principle of religious toleration, were Quakers safe from persecution, and there they flourished. A number of governors of that colony were themselves members of the Religious Society of Friends. The oldest general gathering of Friends in the world began there at Newport in 1661 and became the New England Yearly Meeting. In 1672, George Fox himself crossed the Atlantic to attend and give the yearly meeting guidance. A decade later, William Penn began his "holy experiment" by establishing the colony of Pennsylvania and basing its governance on Quaker principles and ideals. Even today, with Quaker meetings in more than 60 countries around the world, nearly half the Quakers in the world live in the United States. Since the late 19th century, most Quaker missionary outreach to Africa, Latin America, and Asia has come from the United States, an outreach which has profoundly influenced the present world picture of the Religious Society of Friends.

Friends of Truth

THOSE EARLIEST FRIENDS called themselves not the Religious Society of Friends but "Friends of Truth" or "Publishers of Truth." The Truth they were talking about was capital "T" Truth, and it belonged to God; it was eternal, unchanging, and human beings could experience glimpses of it and gain fragments of it by being open and sensitive to the leadings of the Seed, the Christ, the Light within. That

Truth was so vast, and human understanding so limited, that Friends never would set it down in words as a creed or dogma. To do so would trivialize it and deny the importance of experiencing it directly. But it included the principles stated earlier. Furthermore, revelation of God's Truth did not end with the publication of the Bible but continued through history and continues now to the person or worshipping group open to receive it. It is for that reason, for example, that while scientific discoveries in the 19th century were seen as a threat to religious belief by many whose faith was based on biblical literalism, Friends have not found new truth threatening but have seen it only as an expansion of their understanding of God's creation. Though Quaker religious experience is essentially non-rational, Quakerism and science have proved mutually congenial because both are based on experience.

Let Your Lives Speak

OUT OF THE GENERAL Quaker principles enunciated above have grown some specific applications which Friends call their testimonies. Though they manifest themselves in a variety of ways, the testimonies are basically four: equality, peace, simplicity, and community.

Equality

If God is directly accessible to all persons, regardless of age, gender, race, nationality, economic or social or educational position – if every person is held equally in God's love and has equal potential to be a channel for the revelation of God's Truth, then all persons are to be equally valued. There is that Seed, that Light – there is that of God in every person. For Friends this insight has meant, from the beginning, equality of the sexes and races. In England and the English colonies it had to mean the end of privilege based on wealth or class. In Japan, Kenya, and elsewhere, where the existing cultures made the status of women subordinate to that of men, it meant the establishment of Quaker schools for girls. It has meant equal respect for all honorable work. It has meant that one could not lie to nor cheat another child of God. Thus, veracity and honesty become part of the broader definition of Truth. It has meant respect for persons without regard to age – even the very young – even the very old – even the sometimes painful adolescent!

Peace

The peace testimony arises from the same understanding of the nature of God and of human beings. How can one kill another child of God, a potential channel of Truth, no matter how misguided he or she may seem at the moment? For Friends, this testimony has meant opposition to all wars. At the time of the American Revolution, many Friends were disowned by their meetings for participating in military actions on one side or the other. Later Friends, faced with conscription, worked to establish the right of conscientious objection. Some Friends today work to end conscription for military purposes not only of their bodies but also of their tax money.

The peace testimony has meant efforts to ease the suffering of victims of war on all sides. It has meant efforts to be or to seek a reconciling force between peoples and nations in conflict. It has meant opposition to capital punishment. It has meant a constant search for nonviolent means of conflict resolution through institutions of law, such as international treaties and structures like the United Nations. It has meant a continuing search for peace and social justice through personal and group nonviolent techniques for mediation and social change.

Simplicity

There is no uncertainty among Friends that the world offers many distractions from the Truth — pursuit of wealth or power or pleasure, for example — extravagance in language, fashion, or behavior, for example — too great busyness, even in good causes, for example. But Truth is usually discovered in quiet, undistracted waiting for its leadings in the human heart, in the humble simplicity of spirit that acknowledges that ultimately God is in charge of our world, not we ourselves.

The testimony of simplicity seeks, therefore, to focus our attention on what is essential and eternal, without distraction by the transitory, the trivial, and the ephemeral. Plain and honest speech is an expression of simplicity. Respect for God's creation and, therefore, concern for the environment and the right use of the world's resources is another obvious expression of the testimony of simplicity. An economy such as that of the United States, to the extent that its growth is based on

extravagance, wastefulness, and artificially stimulated wants, is a fundamental violation of the testimony of simplicity. Like most of their fellow citizens, Quakers in the United States are privileged beyond the wildest imaginings of most of the world's people. This fact is the occasion for special awareness of responsibility for good stewardship and for commitment to social justice.

Community

Finally, as equally beloved children of God, all human beings are brothers and sisters, one human family, no matter how great our differences of experience, of culture, of age, of understanding. Quakers have found that the Light may illuminate a gathered group as well as an individual heart and bind the group together in a community of faith, of conscience, or of experience.

The Quaker task is to build broader and broader community throughout our world, by seeing and affirming in each other, in each person we meet, the divine potential, that Seed, that Christ, that Light within. We must learn to deal with one another by affirming and nurturing the best we find in each other – or, in the words of George Fox – by “answering that of God in everyone.” In such community, Friends believe, human beings witness the sovereignty, compassion, and love of the God of their experience.

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TO LEARN MORE ...attend a Friends meeting or Friends church. Quakers in North America worship in "unprogrammed" meetings where spoken ministry arises spontaneously out of silent waiting, or in meetings or churches with pastors and programmed worship. Most local Friends meetings in North America are associated with one or more of the following organizations. For locations, and for further reading, contact any of these offices.

- *Evangelical Friends International*, 5350 Broadmoor Circle NW, Canton, OH 44709, (800) 334--8863 (pastoral Friends churches)
- *Friends General Conference*, 1216 Arch St. 2B, Philadelphia, PA 19107 (mostly meetings with unprogrammed worship)
- *Friends United Meeting*, 101 Quaker Hill Drive, Richmond, IN 47374 (mostly pastoral meetings with programmed or semi-programmed worship)
- Conservative Meetings: unprogrammed worship "in the old style." No central organization. Active groups primarily in Ohio, North Carolina, Iowa and neighboring areas. For information contact FWCC (see below)
- Independents: some meetings are part of the following independent yearly meetings which are unaffiliated with any of the above groups: Central, Intermountain, North Pacific, and Pacific. For information contact FWCC (see below).

Information is also available from:

- *Friends World Committee for Consultation (FWCC)*, Section of the Americas, 1506 Race St., Philadelphia, PA 19102, (215) 241-7250
- *Quaker Information Center*, 1501 Cherry St., Philadelphia, PA 19102, (215) 241-7024



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