

The Church From a Quaker Perspective

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The movement known to us as Quakerism, developed from various Christian influences such as Puritanism and Anabaptism. It has been an effort to distinguish what is essential to our knowledge of the Messiah and what is not. The concepts that are central to our view of God have been debated since the days of the early church.

William Penn coined the phrase "primitive Christianity revived" to make clear the ideal of basic Christianity followed by first century Christians.

Consequently, Quakers have often not seen their faith as fitting the traditional Christian categories of Catholic, Orthodox or Protestant, but as Christianity without frills. Friends have considered those who gathered together to be the church, not the building. George Fox, who helped organize the Religious Society of Friends in the 1600s, emphasized that the Christian must have an inward relationship with God and not just knowledge that comes from books. Fox realized at age 23 that education was insufficient to prepare a person to be a minister of Christ. He wrote in his Journal, "And when all my hopes ... in all men were gone, so that I had nothing outwardly to help me, then, Oh! then, I heard a voice which said, 'There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition; and when I heard it my heart did leap for joy.'" (quoted in Trueblood, *The People Called Quakers*, Friends United Press, 1971, pp. 33-34)

This has become a foundational belief for Friends, that we can wait on the Lord to hear His voice and to know His power at first hand. Jesus told His followers, "I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth...." (John 16:12-13a, *New American Standard*) Friends in the 17th and 18th centuries often referred to God as "Truth" (capital T) as well as "Guide" (capital G) and diligently listened for God to impart "Truth".

Joseph John Gurney, whose ministry in the early 1800s affected the branch of the Religious Society of Friends to which Western Yearly Meeting belongs, defined Quakerism as "the religion of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, without diminution, without addition, and without compromise." ("*Brief Remarks on Impartiality in the Interpretation of Scripture*," p.16)

The meetings for worship in which Gurney participated differ today. As a result of Methodist and other Protestant influences in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, many Quaker Meetings in the Midwest began to include a pre-arranged reading of a Scripture, the use of hymns, and a prepared message. The programmed or pastor-ized meeting for worship in most Western Yearly Meeting congregations may continue today due to the difficulty of being silent in this day and age even though it is often difficult to hear the Holy Spirit except during a time of quiet. D. Elton Trueblood noted when writing his history of Friends over 30 years ago, "The silence which modern man needs, especially in view of the

cacophony of radio and television, is not the mere silence of the lips, but a deep silence of the mind and heart." (The People Called Quakers, p.94)

Experiencing the power of the Holy Spirit caused 17th century Friends to tremble and quake. As a result their detractors began to refer to them as "Quakers", a term Friends have accepted for over 300 years. The Quaker perspective on "Church" is based on hearing God and to allowing the Holy Spirit to influence the human spirit. When one person senses God speaking she or he shares it with the congregation as well as referring to scripture. Isaac Penington wrote to Thomas Walmsley in 1670(<http://www.qhpress.org/texts/penington/letter40.html>): "It is not enough to hear of Christ, or read of Christ, but this is the thing - to feel him (as) my root, my life, my foundation..."

Margaret Fell, the wife of an English judge who became the most influential woman in the early years of the Society of Friends, wrote of the Sunday George Fox spoke in her church. Fox convinced her of the truth of his message when he asked, "You will say, Christ saith this, and the apostles say this; but what canst thou say? Art thou a child of Light, and hast thou walked in the Light, and what thou speakest, is it inwardly from God?" (Howard Brinton, Friends for 300 Years, 1952, p.16)

There is a tongue-in-cheek saying that where two or three Friends are gathered, there are three or four beliefs. The reason for this stems partly from the fact that Quakers have never had a creed or catechism for members to follow, because many have felt that reciting a creed can become a habit without conviction and therefore meaningless. Friends have also seen creeds as an obstacle listening to God's Holy Spirit. Trueblood (The People Called Quakers, p.33) remarks: "it is missing the point to ask 'What does a Quaker believe?' What is far more relevant is to ask how a Quaker seeks to relate to that on which he ultimately depends."

While Friends have become open to influences of other religious groups and therefore become diverse in our beliefs about God, Friends still depend upon listening to and hearing the Truth. Since we are fallible, the various groups of Friends began to vary in their thoughts on the different beliefs of our faith. In the Midwest, the major influence on Quaker theology came from the Methodist revivals in the 1800s and the holiness movement at the end of the 1800s. In fact the influence was so strong that representatives from the major yearly meetings of the time gathered in Richmond, Indiana, during the summer of 1887, to draft a statement on the traditional Quaker beliefs. Here are a few of the statements included in the Declaration:

"Dwelling in the hearts of believers, (the Holy Spirit) opens their understandings that they may understand the Scriptures, and becomes, to the humbled and surrendered heart, the Guide, Comforter, Support, and Sanctifier. ... We believe that the essential qualification of the Lord's service is bestowed upon His children through the reception and baptism of the Holy Ghost."

On baptism, the Declaration states, "We reverently believe that, as there is one Lord and one faith, so there is, under the Christian dispensation, but one baptism, (Eph.4:4,5) even that whereby all believers are baptized in the one Spirit into the one body. (1 Cor.

12:13 RV) This is not an outward baptism with water, but a spiritual experience; not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, (1 Pet 3:21) but that inward work which, by transforming the heart and settling the soul upon Christ, brings forth the answer of a good conscience towards God, but the resurrection of Jesus Christ, in the experience of His love and power, as the risen and ascended Savior."

On communion the Declaration states, "We are well aware that our Lord was pleased to make use of a variety of symbolical utterances, but he often gently upbraided His disciples for accepting literally what He had intended only in its spiritual meaning. ... The presence of Christ with His church is not designed to be by symbol or representation, but in the real communication of His own Spirit. 'I will pray the Father and He shall give you another Comforter, who shall abide with you forever.' (John 14:16)"

The Declaration also states: "Worship is the adoring response of the heart and mind to the influence of the Spirit of God. It stands neither in forms nor in the formal disuse of forms: it may be without words as well as with them, but it must be in spirit and in truth. (John 4:24) ... Where two or three are gathered together in the name of Christ there is a church, and Christ, the living Head, in the midst of them. ... By the immediate operations of the Holy spirit, He as the Head of the church, alone selects and qualifies those who are to present His messages or engage in other service for Him ... (because) the Lord has provided a diversity of gifts (1 Cor. 12:4-6) for the needs both of the church and of the world. ... While the church cannot confer spiritual gifts, it is its duty to recognize and foster them, and to promote their efficiency by all the means in its power. ..."

When members of various denominations met in August, 1948, to form the World Council of Churches, the arrangements committee asked each of the major groups to conduct a period of worship characteristic of that group. More than 600 attended the assembly sponsored by Quakers, most of whom had never attended a Quaker meeting for worship. As the worshippers entered the sanctuary that day, one Friend called their attention to the pew cards that said:

WORSHIP, according to the ancient practice of the Religious Society of Friends, is entirely without any human direction or supervision. A group of devout persons come together and sit down quietly. with no pre-arrangement, each seeking to have an immediate sense of divine leading and to know at first hand the presence of the Living Christ. It is not wholly accurate to say that such a Meeting is held on the basis of Silence; it is more accurate to say that it is held on the basis of "Holy Obedience." Those who enter such a meeting can harm it in two specific ways: first, by an advance determination to speak; and second, by advance determination to keep silent. The only way in which a worshipper can help such a Meeting is by an advance determination to try to be responsive in listening to the still small voice and doing whatever may be commanded. Such a Meeting is always a high venture of Faith and it is to this venture we invite you this hour.

Friends are well known for their social justice activities. Recently an acronym to describe how Friends relate to society has become popular. It is SPICE -- Simplicity, Peace, Integrity, Community, Equality. Quaker testimonies can be considered a means of living one's faith, a

view of how Quakers relate to God and the world, or an expression of "spirituality in action". (Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quaker#Testimonies>) For instance Friends consider that all Christians are ministers. Some however, whether man or woman, are given spiritual gifts that fit them for pastoral ministry. These gifts are then recognized and recorded, but titles like "reverend" are not assigned due to the testimony of equality.

Friends are so well known for their testimonies and social justice activities that laws have been changed to conform with Quaker practice. One example is the practice of swearing in court or when asked to take an oath as a government official. Another illustration comes from the July 31, 1880, issue of "Littell's Living Age," a weekly magazine of Littell & Co., Boston, The article titled "The position of Quakerism" (www.quaker.org/visalia/subpages/Littell.htm) says, "So great is the respect for the Friends, that legal and social rules are alike waived in their favor; that they, and for years they alone, were exempted from the obligation of taking oaths; and that when the first Quaker accepted Cabinet office, the queen unsolicited offered him exemption from the usual etiquettes which regulate court costume." The author went on to say, "The non-priestly character of the ecclesiastical organization of the society excites no annoyance or reprehension, while the great secular object of its teaching, the duty of philanthropy under the guidance of Christian principle, is the inspiring motive of the age, the ideal of, hundreds of thousands outside Quakerism."

Friends are also known for their unique business practice and the fact that they are congregational in hierarchy. Friends recognize and emphasize the fundamental and essential truth that Jesus Christ is the Head of His Church; that He dwells in the hearts of His believers; that, as they look for His guidance, their understandings are enlightened and they are enabled to do His will.