*Part 1, History: Quakers from Pendle Hill to Penn State*

An Unsettled Time

The mid-1600s in England was a dynamic and unsettled time. Charles I was beheaded in 1649; Oliver Cromwell came to power through civil war. It was a time of much intellectual and philosophical excitement: Descartes and Galileo had just died; John Locke and Isaac Newton were very much alive. As a result, England saw recurring outbursts of questioning, seeking, heresy and defiance. Those in power—the rich, the government, and the Church of England, with considerable overlap among them—could not prevent rebellious sects and seekers from springing up everywhere. This was happening partly because so many church officials were corrupt and self-serving, but it was more than that. Literacy was catching on, the Bible was widely available, and regular people were starting to notice that the Christianity being preached in the dominant churches did not always line up with the messages of Jesus and the apostles. The churches, as institutions, had accumulated a lot of baggage that was not part of Jesus’s message.

The Puritans led the way. Quakers sometimes see themselves in opposition to the Puritans, but we owe them a lot. As Quaker scholar D. Elton Trueblood put it, “Puritanism was the plain man’s revolt against the evils of priestcraft and all religion which centers on the mere ceremonial.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

Sound familiar? Quakers have even been called “cheerful Puritans.”

The Puritans’ biggest contribution was to point out that much of what the Catholic Church considered sacramental really had no Biblical basis. “The first Puritans subtracted the Pope, the Mass, images, and five of the seven sacraments.”[[2]](#endnote-2) What was the result? The Church of England. Then came the Presbyterians, who subtracted the bishops; and the Congregationalists, who subtracted the central church government.

What was left? Well, there was still the ritual; there was still the programmed ministry; there were still the professional clergy.

Enter the Quakers.

The Universal Christ

It is impossible to understand the early Quakers without remembering that Jesus Christ was the absolute center of their lives and everything they said and did came from their belief in a personal, transformative relationship with Him. This does not set them apart from the other faiths just mentioned, but something else does: their belief in the universality of Christ.

Here is a question that had been vexing the Christian churches for centuries: How could God deny salvation to people simply because they lived before Jesus came to visit? Or because they lived so far away they never had a chance to hear the message? How could the sin of Adam be everyone’s, but the grace of Christ be only for a few? What kind of God would do that?

No loving God would do that, say the early Quakers. Their answer was simple and powerful, that Christ was a historical figure *and* an eternal one. Christ was *universally* available. Nobody was left out. And they could say this with certainty because they had experienced it themselves. No, they did not believe that everyone would be saved, but they believed everyone had the opportunity; and they abhorred the notion of predetermination or predestination that was so prevalent at the time.

Imagining Christ, *experiencing* Christ, as a universal and eternal figure—something which seems so basic to us now—was unique then, and it gave a power to the early Quaker message (and messengers) that accounts for much of their early zeal and success.

George Fox

Let’s start with what George Fox was not. He was not the founder of the Religious Society of Friends. He was an early leader; he was a prophet; he was a skilled organizer; and the Society of Friends would not have become what it was without his powerful ministry. But in fact, there were already groups of people sitting in silent worship, “waiting upon the Lord.” Especially in Northwest England, but other places as well. They knew that this was something the earliest Christians had done, and they were finding out why. Because they found “the Lord’s power was mightily at work in their hearts and great openings there were amongst them.”[[3]](#endnote-3)

Fox in some ways embodied the dissent that was sweeping the land. He was a serious, pious boy from a good Church of England family. He was not educated or well-read, except for the Bible, and he lived in isolation from the intellectual ferment of the times. As a young man he had long conversations with his local priest, but the more they talked the less they agreed. He also spent a lot of time by himself. (He was a shepherd, among other occupations.)

He set off on a spiritual journey (which was also very much a physical, geographical one). He sought out clergy, who didn’t much help him; he encountered many he called “professors,” and that was not a compliment as it might be here in a college town; rather, it was contrasted with “possessors,” those who possessed the Spirit.

Another thing George Fox was not: he was not an especially nice person. When he won an argument, he gloated. When he saw people walking “not in the way of the Lord,” he scolded. His Journal shows him going into churches and asking the minister for permission to speak; but he didn’t always ask. In a word, he could be obnoxious.

Now because there were many dissenting sects during this time, and because they seemed to enjoy a good theological disputation, George Fox had the chance to preach to a lot of different people, contrasting their beliefs with those he had developed in his prayer, meditation and study. After one such argument, he wrote this:

*But as I had forsaken the priests, so I left the separate preachers also, and those esteemed the most experienced people; for I saw there was none among them all that could speak to my condition.* *And when all my hopes in them and in all men were gone, so that I had nothing outwardly to help me, nor could tell what to do, 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.*

Now, this is a famous passage, but does anyone know what prompted it? I didn’t. What was the argument that caused Fox to give up on those “separate preachers” (that is, the ones who, like Fox, were not associated with an organized church)? They disagreed over whether women have souls. (He thought they did.)

He started preaching in earnest, usually outdoors, and gained a huge following—including quite a few other inspired preachers. They traveled the countryside together. Often they would start with a “threshing session,” preaching to large crowds, then bringing a smaller group together for silent worship.

 In 1652, he climbed Pendle Hill, and reported having a vision of a “great people gathered.” I’m always a little suspicious of visions, since you have only the word of the person who had it, or says they had it. But in retrospect this was indeed prophetic. Over the next several years, thousands of people heard the Quaker message and joined the movement. These people included—and this is critical to the movement’s future success—educated, aristocratic men who were trained in theology, such as William Penn, Isaac Penington, and Robert Barclay. They added eloquence to Fox’s forcefulness; they added refinement to his rawness. Through them, the message was heard by people who would have paid no attention at all to just another unhinged country ranter. (There were so many of those.) And Barclay wrote in Latin, so the message could reach the scholars of Europe as well.

Another upper-class convert was especially important: Margaret Fell. She was the wife of a judge, and made their home—Swarthmore Hall—a refuge and way-station for traveling. Her husband’s influence protected many Quakers during the times of persecution. Some years after the judge died, she and George Fox were married. Margaret Fell was an inspiring figure in her own right; she went to jail with the others, preached, traveled, and wrote. It was Fell who spoke of the Inward Light as a terrifying force, and I especially like this quote:

Now, Friends, deal plainly with yourselves, and let the eternal Light search you, and try you, for the good of your souls. For this will deal plainly with you. It will rip you up, and lay you open, and make all manifest which lodges in you; the secret subtlety of the enemy of your souls, this eternal searcher and trier will make manifest. Therefore all to this come, by this be searched, and judged, and led and guided. For to this you must stand or fall.

Fox also showed a genius for organization, and established the structure of Monthly, Quarterly, and Yearly Meetings—another reason the Society of Friends survived while other unorthodox sects failed. The original purpose of this structure was simply so that Friends could look out for each other, in the face of persecution and prison, as well as the traditional pastoral care.

Fox died in 1691. Late in life, he dictated his Journal, which continues to be considered one of the great works of Christian theology—although the version we read was heavily edited by better writers than Fox, including William Penn.

Valiant for the Truth

These early decades are what Howard Brinton called the “Heroic” or “Apostolic” period of Quakerism. They had an evangelical fervor that enabled them to endure dreadful hardships, whether because of persecution or the self-imposed hardships of travel and sacrifice. They traveled everywhere, not just the length and breadth of England but through Europe and eventually the New World. But this evangelism, this outward-directedness, was balanced by mysticism, their continual return to the Inward Light, both alone and in group worship. Brinton puts it this way: “The peculiar power of the early Quakers was due, in part at least, to the balance in the inward and outward aspects of religion.” In secular, psychological terms, we would talk about introversion and extroversion, the hazards of going too far in one direction, and the strength of having a balance between the two. But if you could ask them, they would say simply that their strength came from Jesus Christ; that before they sought to change others, they were changed themselves.

And they needed that strength, because persecution of Quakers in the early years was rampant, and government-condoned. Some 15,000 Quakers were jailed in England between 1660 and 1685. Fox was jailed three times, once for two years.

Now, there is no excuse for persecution. But you have to admit that the early Quakers had a real knack for pissing people off.

First you had the everyday outrages. In a proudly class-conscious society, they referred to titled aristocrats by their plain names. In an age when the English language allowed for formal and familiar usage—thee and thou for family, children, and servants, you for groups and one’s social betters—they said “thou” to everybody. They didn’t doff their hats unless they were speaking to God. Quaker merchants did not haggle over prices the way you were supposed to—because after all, how can you honestly say the value of an item is three shillings when just a second before you said it was four shillings? (They later made out quite well through this principle, but that’s another story.) They didn’t recognize holidays. And they didn’t swear oaths.

This last deserves special attention. First because it is rooted in a core testimony of integrity: do you really want to say that the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth is something to be brought out on special occasions, like your best china? Do you want to swear an oath on the book that says “swear not at all”? Second, because it was always getting them in trouble. If you had it in for some Quaker, just get him into the courtroom. He refuses to take an oath, he goes to jail, regardless of what the original charge was or his innocence of it. And third, because its influence is still felt today. The legal right to affirm—which is short for “affirm that I do always tell the truth”—was written into the original Pennsylvania constitution when the colony was founded, and continues to be honored by American courts.

Even more important, though, their core beliefs were a threat to the status quo. Much of the power in that time and place rested with the officers of the church, and here were these people saying that the very existence of those offices was at best irrelevant, and possibly even an impediment to the direct experience of Christ—an experience on which the Church claimed a monopoly. This was heresy. Or so they wanted to think, except that it had powerful Biblical and theological justification behind it. It had legs. And it had a growing following. This was a foundational threat.

So Quaker meetings were banned. They met anyway. They were not the only sect that was prohibited from meeting—as I said, there were plenty of these “heretical” groups. But those groups met in secret, and the Quakers met openly, and got hauled off to jail. Then their children would gather for Meeting. Even the magistrates couldn’t bring themselves to put the kids in jail.

So a lot of them spent a lot of time in jail. And the class system was just as regimented in prison as out. The more money you had to pay to the jailors, the less wretched your life was. Some Friends (not all), in solidarity with the poor, refused to bribe the jailors and ended up in the worst conditions.

Speaking of class divisions, it’s important to note that early Friends were okay with the stratification of English society. They were not out to restructure the economy or erase the class system. There was a group called the Levellers; they were not them. They saw that people were born to differing stations and called to differing careers, and that as a result there was not equality in an economic sense. The equality they insisted on—the equality at the heart of the Testimony of Equality—was equality of *respect*. Yes, you outranked your servants, yes, you could order them around. But you did not disrespect them. You did not call them John while they called you Mr. Smith; usually it was a mutual first-name basis. It was okay that people’s vocations put them in different strata. It was even okay—at first—that some people’s “vocation” happened to be slavery. We’ll talk about that in a minute.

The Holy Experiment

I think it’s pretty well known, from regular American history lessons, how William Penn came to own Pennsylvania, so we won’t go into detail here. The King owed a debt to the Penn family, which he paid with a grant of land in America. Less known is that at the time of the grant, Quakers already owned land in New Jersey, which they bought with their own money. The Holy Experiment was a dream several years before the grant of Pennsylvania.

Penn was the son of an admiral. He was an aristocrat and a courtier; he liked hobnobbing with the well-bred, and he lived well. Few of us today would think he followed the testimony of simplicity, and yet his faithfulness and his sacrifice are indisputable. He first heard the message in Ireland when he was twelve years old, from one of the many wandering Quaker preachers of the time, Thomas Loe. Penn went to Oxford and got kicked out, for writing an offensive essay; then, as a young adult, was sent back to Ireland to manage his father’s estates. He heard Loe again, and began exploring Quakerism further. This distressed his family, and they sent him to a university in France to get straightened out. The result was that he learned theology well enough to argue convincingly in favor of the new religion. That got him imprisoned in the Tower of London. The result was that he wrote the classic *No Cross No Crown*. (“Christ’s cross is the way to Christ’s crown,” is how he put it.)

What your eighth-grade history book showed was the Quakers getting a place where they could worship in their own way and be left alone. But it was much more than that. It was the embodiment of another core belief, as stated so well by Penn himself:

“True godliness don’t turn men out of the world, but enables them to live better in it and excites their endeavors to mend it.”

Quakers have been called “practical mystics,” and here is a great example of that practicality. Even Utopia needs government, and Penn’s Frame of Government for the new colony set up the so-called Golden Age of Quakerism, a period of about 40 years that was characterized by religious freedom, tolerance, fair dealings with the Indians, prosperity and peace. In its manuscript you can read the marginal notes of John Locke, and you can find the seeds of the American constitution. Penn even wrote an essay, in 1693, envisioning a sort of United Nations.

Incidentally, the Quakers weren’t the only people who found religious asylum in Pennsylvania. In a trip to the Rhineland with George Fox and Robert Barclay in 1677, Penn learned of the persecution of religious minorities there, and later reached out to them. Hence we have the Pennsylvania Dutch.

Penn did, in the end, find reconciliation with his father.

Emancipation and Revolution

We’re now going to leave England and Europe, but not forget that there was still plenty going on there. Quakerism grew and thrived, among farmers and merchants, manufacturers and scientists. That fixed-price system mentioned earlier turned out to be a huge success. For one thing, you could send your kids to the store and not worry that they’d be cheated. But let’s look at America, in the 1700s.

As mentioned, the century began with a sort of Quaker Golden Age. Not just Pennsylvania but two other colonies, New York and Rhode Island, were governed by Quakers. The colonies attracted immigrants from all over, and Philadelphia was the second-largest city in the British Empire. The French and Indian War, which would prove such a trial to the committed pacifists, was still in the future, as was the American Revolution.

But still there was much injustice, including slavery, even among Quakers. One of the first, most vigorous activists—almost the prototype of the Quaker social activist—was John Woolman. He was far from alone, of course, but because he was so committed and so ahead of his time, he deserves some special attention. Not just abolition, but war-tax resistance, military conscription, cruelty to animals, and economic injustice.

He was the son of Quaker farmers in New Jersey, and became a tailor, a clerk, and then a businessman. He was a good businessman, and could have been more prosperous than he was, but consciously decided to give less time to his business and more to his work for abolition and social justice. As a merchant, he understood the connection between goods and labor; and how it followed that luxuries and, as he put it, “superfluities,” increased the demand for labor and the likelihood that people would be oppressed as a way of obtaining their labor. He put it this way:

“ . . . and that we cannot go into superfluities nor grasp after wealth in a way contrary to His wisdom, without having connection with some degree of oppression and with that spirit which leads to self-exaltation and strife, and which frequently brings calamities on countries by parties contending about their claims.” [[4]](#endnote-4)

To him the line from luxury to warfare was not that circuitous.

In addition, he saw the spiritual toll of luxury on those who indulge in it. “If I put forth my strength in any employ which I know is to support pride, I feel that it has a tendency to weaken those bands which . . . I have felt at times to bind and unite my soul in a holy fellowship with the Father, and with his Son . . .” [[5]](#endnote-5)

This is directly related to the concern he felt for the souls of the slave-owners, with whom he met and labored. While all abolitionists abhorred the owning of other human beings and the treatment of most slaves, Woolman added to that a sincere concern for the salvation of the owners, who by committing this terrible injustice to other humans were distancing themselves from the Divine.

This ministry of his did have gradations, however. Quaker slaveowners who treated their slaves decently, and worked alongside them, got less of a hard time from Woolman than those who lived lives of ease while their slaves labored. When he visited the homes of slaveowners, he insisted on paying the slaves for however much of their labor was spent on him. He would not be served from silver. He wore simple, undyed clothing. He was, evidently, a very gentle spirit—but obviously a very persistent one.

Woolman took his message to England, where the Quakers were not immediately impressed. Here are these well-dressed Quaker merchants, and here is this ragged guy who just spent a month travelling in steerage and didn’t smell too good. But they did warm up to him eventually, and helped in the Abolitionist cause. Unfortunately, he caught smallpox while in England, and died there. His Journal, published posthumously, is another classic work of Christian literature.

John Woolman has been credited with ridding the Society of Friends of slavery sixty years before Emancipation. That’s not strictly true. First of all, he didn’t do it singlehandedly; and second, the job was not completed before he died. But most Friends freed or manumitted their slaves. Most Meetings minuted their opposition to the practice; in fact, entire Meetings moved north of the Mason-Dixon line because freeing your slaves was illegal in the South. Pennsylvania banned slavery; and in 1790, Quakers in Philadelphia petitioned the Constitutional Convention to outlaw it nationwide.

You can’t talk about slavery and abolition without mentioning the Underground Railroad, but that’s such a big subject I’m not going to try to cover it. Yes, lots of Quakers were conductors on that line, at great personal risk. But most conductors were not Quakers and most Quakers were not conductors.

I’m also going to give short shrift to the American Revolution, except to say that some Quakers did fight in it. In fact, there have always been some Quakers who went to war. The reaction of the Society of Friends to those members has depended on the circumstances. The Peace Testimony, as we understand it today, does not really have its roots in the earliest Quaker testimonies. The famous “we utterly deny all outward wars” quote was meant to assuage concern that Quakers would join in a rebellion against the Crown. As Howard Brinton puts it, “Pacifism, as we understand it, did not play as large a part in the life and thought of early Quakers as it has in the thought of some subsequent generations." He goes on to say, “. . . Quakers are devoted to freedom as well as to peace and nearly all realize the road to peace is far from simple.”[[6]](#endnote-6) The “Free Quakers” separated from the main body of Friends so that they could follow what they considered a true leading to take up arms in the cause of Independence. (Their Meetinghouse is not far from Fourth and Arch Street Meeting, near the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia.)

Plain and Peculiar

In the early 1800s a distinctive Quaker culture is emerging. This is the period that gives us that stereotype of the wide-brimmed, low-crowned hats, the bonnets, the gray clothes, and the apparent aversion to fun of any kind. This is where we get the image of the guy on the Quaker Oats box. (And for the record, the connection between the Society of Friends and Quaker Oats is very simple: They stole our name. Friends were averse to suing people, so the Oatmeal Empire got away with it.)

For Friends in those days, the Meeting was the central point of life. It was school, social life, and courtroom. There were clear codes of behavior, and they were enforced by “elders” who sat on the “facing benches.” (To be “eldered” is still a term.) The facing benches gave them an acoustic advantage, although they were not supposed to monopolize the vocal ministry. (Meetings for Worship in those days would go for three or four hours, and a message might be fifteen minutes or half an hour.)

Quakers were a peculiar people, and that term was used without derision. Although they had plenty of interaction with the outside world, their plain dress and speech set them apart. You always knew if you were dealing with a Quaker. They had a reputation for honesty, fair dealing, and bluntness to the point of rudeness. They didn’t drink, they didn’t dance. Music, theatre, and the arts were discouraged if not forbidden.

This makes the Quakers sound like a bunch of killjoys, but to them there was no joy greater than the real, experienced life; the *lives they led* were their creative expression. Art and theatre were just representations, inauthentic. Your time was better spent seeking the reality, the joy, of experiencing God.

Although they set themselves apart, they were not all wrapped up in themselves. This is the same period that saw the establishment of Quaker schools and colleges, and of schools for African-Americans and Indians (yes, they were part of that now-infamous cultural-eradication travesty). This was also the era that produced Susan B. Anthony and Lucretia Mott. (By the way, although Quakers believed in the spiritual equality of women, and that women should be allowed to preach, they did not believe in men and women worshiping together. There were men’s and women’s Meetings, and some old Meetinghouses still have the sliding divider, or the place where it used to be, to separate the two.)

Divisions

This was also the period when some long-simmering divisions came to a boil, resulting a series of branchings, the most well-known being the Hicksite/Orthodox split beginning in 1827. Sometimes the elders on the facing benches overstepped, going beyond the enforcement of behavior, and trying to enforce what Friends actually could say when they spoke during Meeting for Worship. Some, whether they were elders or not, thought that was okay. Others, tending to be more mystical than evangelical, objected. This came to a head when elders in Philadelphia tried to forbid Elias Hicks—a powerful minister from Long Island—from speaking.

Hicks (whose brother, Edward, painted the famous lion-and-lamb Peaceable Kingdom) saw Quakerism as based entirely on the experience of the Inward Light. He had little use for the Bible, tradition, or even education. He had a lot of followers, and there were also a lot of Friends who defended his right to speak even though they disagreed. To oversimplify enormously, Hicksites emphasized the Inward Christ, Orthodox Friends the historical Jesus; and both forgot that the genesis and genius of the Society of Friends lay precisely in the belief that they are one.

The result was that in many parts of the country, there are two Quaker meetinghouses, sometimes literally across the street from one another. The breach was not formally healed until the 1950s, although it ceased to have much day-to-day effect much earlier—overshadowed, perhaps, by other controversies, and also because it was somewhat mystifying to the huge number of newcomers to the Society.

Sister Suffragists

The prominence of Quaker women in the suffragist movement arises partly from doctrine—remember the bit about women having souls?—and partly from the practical effect of educating women. Lucretia Coffin, for example, a Quaker girl from Nantucket, went to a Quaker boarding school and later became a teacher there. She married another teacher, James Mott. She also discovered that the male teachers earned three times what the women did. That might have affected her thinking about women’s rights. She was a traveling minister in the Hicksite tradition.

The Motts moved to Philadelphia, where they were active in the Abolitionist movement and the Underground Railroad. But the men in the Abolitionist movement didn’t want women there. And only promiscuous women spoke in public. So she founded the women’s anti-slavery society. She impressed a lot of people, including Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and they co-led the Seneca Falls convention for women’s rights of 1848.

The irony of this is that Lucretia Mott didn’t really believe in politics. She thought it was corrupt. But women had as much right to participate as men did; she was very clear on that.

The life of Susan B. Anthony—the only Quaker to appear on any US currency—started out with some parallels to that of Lucretia Mott. Susan B. Anthony was also a Quaker girl who went to a Quaker boarding school (although only briefly, because her family lost all their money), became a teacher, and noticed the extreme differences in pay between male and female teachers. In addition to anti-slavery, she became a leader in the temperance movement as well. She and Elizabeth Cady Stanton sought to unite the suffragist and abolitionist movements, seeing the same principles of injustice at work. She was close friends with Frederick Douglass. They founded *The Revolution*, a magazine dedicated to these causes.

She may well have been the first woman in America to vote in a federal election—in 1872, right after the passage of the 14th Amendment, which was meant to give blacks the right to vote, but whose wording neither allowed, nor prohibited, women voting. She was arrested for it. The trial was an excellent platform for her ministry. She was found guilty, and fined $100. She never paid it. She died in 1900, age 86. Twenty years later, women got the vote.

Pacifists in Wartime

As I mentioned, John Woolman was speaking out against military conscription as early as the 1700s. But World War I and World War II saw conscription on such a huge scale that Quakers and other pacifist churches needed an organized way to deal with it. They sought, and won, the right to alternative service, or conscientious objection, based on religious principles. This did not necessarily remove them from combat; in the First World War, especially, many COs were on the front lines. They drove ambulances, carried stretchers, gave first-aid, sometimes got shot at and sometimes died. “There was a great determination,” says Brinton, “to make personal sacrifices as great as those made by persons who supported or took part in the war.” [[7]](#endnote-7)

First in England, then in America, Quaker committees organized relief work and provided opportunities for alternative service. They brought food, clothing, and medical supplies to the civilians devastated by the war; they helped rebuild and replant. This followed a tradition of Quaker service to war-torn areas going all the way back to the Irish War of 1690, and continuing to today.

I have to say a few words about AFSC, the American Friends Service Committee, and not just because they gave me my first real job. For millions of people over the last century, AFSC *is* Quakers. Refugees of war or natural disaster, victims of oppression—political or economic—all they know about Quakers is that these were the people with the sacks of grain, the bales of clothing, the vaccines. They’re the ones heading the community-development projects that bring in fresh water, or build schools or clinics, or help women find ways to earn income. AFSC was started in 1917 and won the Nobel Prize in 1947. Most of its staff are not Quakers (kind of like Quaker schools), but they are putting into practice our testimonies on behalf of peace, justice, and health, in the US and all around the world. Its sister organization in England is called Quaker Peace and Service.

That there is such a thing, legally, as conscientious objection is largely due to Quaker influence. In World War II, the Draft Board only granted that status to members of the traditional peace churches—Quakers, Mennonites, Amish, Brethren—with a few exceptions. During the Vietnam War, many others argued (not always successfully) that they, too, qualified as conscientious objectors based on their own religious beliefs. They weren’t all as famous as Mohammed Ali, but the ranks of COs expanded considerably.

We Started the Sixties a Little Early

We think of the Sixties and we think of the peace movement. Peace movements? Quakers have been doing that all along. We think of civil rights. That too. Equal rights for women? Check. Activists who had never heard of Quakers, but were passionate about these causes, crossed paths with Quakers who’d been there all along. Some of those activists came to worship with us. Some of them stayed.

When it comes to gay rights, the Society of Friends went through the same wrenching process of division and healing that the larger society is undergoing today—but we did it twenty years ago.

And Here We Are

There have actually been Quakers in central Pennsylvania since at least the 1790s, farmers mostly. Their Meeting was Centre Monthly Meeting, also known as Halfmoon, and it belonged to Baltimore Yearling Meeting. As Penn State grew, so did the number of Philadelphia Quakers sending their kids here, and the State College Meeting—part of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting—began worshiping in 1912 and built a meetinghouse in 1927. Centre Meeting united with State College in 1933, and we became this dual-status Monthly Meeting belonging to two Yearly Meetings—part of Baltimore’s Centre Quarter, and part of Philadelphia’s Upper Susquehanna Quarter. It’s confusing sometimes, but I just think of us as being ambidextrous.

Left Out

I have left so much out. If I’ve spent a sentence on a topic here, you can bet there’s a book about it somewhere. Friends and mental health, for example—we viewed mental illness as the medical condition it is, we cared for the souls of the afflicted, and the results transformed the treatment of the mentally ill. Prison reform—the penitentiary system, the belief that no one is beyond salvation, that prisoners have rights. Science—Quakers are enormously overrepresented in the sciences.

All I can say is, dive in and read more.

*Part 2: Structure of Our Meetings and Quaker Decision-Making*

The notion that “there is that of God in everyone” is hardly unique to Quakers, but we have taken it to its logical extreme, dispensing with the clergy—or, as some would put it, the laity. How then do we fulfill the spiritual, pastoral, and temporal duties that in other churches are the province of paid clergy?

Even harder, how do we find Spirit-led unity in the face of divisive and contentious issues?

Quarterly Meetings, as we’ve seen, were created for the purpose of pastoral care, to look after Friends in general and those in trouble, in particular. (Their original name was “Meeting for Sufferings.”) Their function was also, as Fox put it, “to take care of God's glory, and to admonish and exhort such as walked disorderly or carelessly, and not according to Truth.” In short, they were taking on the role of the paid clergy—to look out for you, but also to keep you in line. But the more people there were to look after, the more frequent and local those meetings needed to be, so Fox established Monthly Meetings in addition to Quarterly. Ever since, the Monthly Meeting has been the basic congregational unit of Friends.

We are conditioned, by the wider society, to think of authority expanding with geographical reach—the local store, the regional manager, the world headquarters. The parish priest, the bishop, the pope. By that thinking, the Monthly Meeting would be subordinate to the Quarterly Meeting, which in turn is subordinate to the Yearly Meeting. Not at all. Every Monthly Meeting stands on its own feet, makes its own decisions, and is responsible for its members. (Sometimes people forget this. Sometimes Yearly Meetings forget this. Temporarily.) In fact, the Quarterly and Yearly Meetings exist to serve the Monthly Meetings, or, more accurately, to enable Monthly Meetings to better serve each other—and to offer opportunities for worship, fellowship, and service on a larger scale. But it is the Monthly Meeting that approves membership, that marries couples, that raises money, that preserves records, that oversees Quaker social service in its area.

The Monthly Meeting accomplishes these various tasks through standing committees and ad hoc committees. How each Meeting does this is its own decision, but there are some traditions that have held firm over the years.

* There is usually a Worship and Ministry committee, whose charge is the spiritual vitality of the Meeting, including the quality of its vocal ministry.
* There is usually a committee of Oversight, or in our Meeting, Care and Concern, responsible for the pastoral care of members—who is sick, in financial trouble, in jail, in emotional distress, grieving—and what can the Meeting do about it. They’re also responsible for membership. Sometimes Worship and Ministry and Oversight are combined.
* There is usually a committee on social action, or witness, which we call Peace and Social Action, which coordinates the Meeting’s work in support of peace, social justice, and community service.
* There is a Finance Committee, which is just what it sounds like; this is sometimes combined with Building and Grounds (although not in our Meeting).
* Religious Education is responsible for First-Day School and other youth activities.
* Some Meetings, including ours, have an Outreach Committee, to tell the wider community who we are and what we’re about.

And there are lots of others. And sometimes they’re more active and sometimes less, depending on what needs to be done and who’s willing to do it. There is no rule that any of these committees have to exist; in fact, there are Meetings which do all of this as a committee of the whole. (They tend to be small.)

Spirit-Led Decision Making in the Society of Friends

“Friends are not to meet like a company of people about town or parish business . . . but to wait upon the Lord.” -- George Fox

 “We are here to worship and not to get through an agenda.”

 – Arthur Larrabee

So we’ve seen now how these core beliefs took root and shaped the Society of Friends, in our inward journeys and our daily routines, in our relationship to the Divine and to the temporal world around us. Now let’s look at one particular place where—ideally—they all come together: the Meeting for Business. And really, when I say Meeting for Business, let’s think of not only our official Monthly Meeting, but whenever Friends meet to seek the divine will on a particular matter.

Let me pause here on the subject of divine will. Because we’re going to talk about the Sense of the Meeting, and we tend to see that as the goal, the end point, the success. But really it’s the means to the real goal, which is knowing God’s will, for our group, at this moment. We seek a Sense of the Meeting because we believe it to be a reliable indicator of that will.

What do I mean by a Sense of the Meeting?

We speak sometimes of our unprogrammed meetings for worship being “gathered,” in that there is a profound and evident sense of the presence of the Divine. The Divine was there all along, of course, but we’re generally so caught up in our own little heads that we don’t sense it. But when the Meeting is truly gathered in the Spirit, we know it. And that’s a little like the Sense of the Meeting when we’re trying to reach a decision. The rightness of this course is evident; everyone present can sense its rightness and the divine presence within it. As Michael Sheeran writes in Beyond Majority Rule, we see “an authenticating dimension beyond the mechanics of the process.”

We call this “Spirit-led decision making.”

The Bible describes “the harvest of the Spirit,” or sometimes “the fruits of the Spirit,” as “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, fidelity, gentleness, and self-control.” [Galatians 5:22]. To seek a Spirit-led group decision in the absence of these is to invite failure. Yet they are not fully present in all of us all the time. This is one reason our process takes a while and why we should not apologize for it taking a while. The reward for our patience is reaching a good, Godly outcome and experiencing all these fruits of the Spirit even more abundantly when we are done. And I like the term “fruits of the Spirit” because this is an organic process, not a mechanical one. Something new is coming to life here, and living things grow at their own pace.

Speaking of pace. There’s a perception that Quakers are slow to make decisions. And it’s true that in the name of unity, we will often set things aside for a month, or a year, or a number of years. But if we’re so slow, then how is it that in all these matters we’ve just talked about, things that really matter, Quakers have been so far ahead of the society at large?

So now let’s take a closer look at this slow process, and how it grows out of our testimonies, and uses them.

*Peace*

In one way, our practice of seeking Sense of the Meeting derives directly from the Peace Testimony. The Peace Testimony comes from—among other places—our belief that Jesus actually meant it when he said to love your enemies. That if we take his teachings to heart, we reject violence as a means to any end. I won’t explore the whole basis of the Peace Testimony here, plenty has been written about that, but I think we can accept it as a given: Quakers don’t resolve differences by fighting.

"We utterly deny all outward wars and strife, and fightings with outward weapons, for

any end, or under any pretence whatever: this is our testimony to the whole world."

--1660, part of the Declaration to Charles II

Now, “utterly” doesn’t leave much wiggle room, but what about “outward”? Does this mean we can move the fight from the physical world to the world of the mind, of ideas, to a place where nobody gets shot or has their nose broken? Would that be okay? Let’s replace clenched fists with clever phrases. Let’s replace an army of soldiers with an army of facts, strategically deployed. Let’s take away the advantages of size and strength and firepower, and replace them with the ability to argue well, to think quickly on your feet, to sway the crowd. Let’s replace the rules of war with Robert’s Rules of Order. Now the battlefield is nonviolent, strictly speaking; it may even be courteous. It is certainly the model for the legislatures of most modern democratic states. But it’s still a battlefield. It still has winners and losers. It still relies entirely on human ingenuity and effort. And if we, as Quakers, had adopted it as our own model, we would be in the untenable position of refusing to do outward battle with our enemies, but consenting to a modified, sanitized form of battle with our friends.

*Integrity*

Integrity is the next thing we bring to this party. We think of the word as a synonym for honesty, and it is, but it’s also much more. It encompasses the notion of wholeness. Think of the mathematical term “integer,” for example. Whole numbers. Five is an integer. Five point one is not. There is not a fraction of you that speaks truthfully in a court of law and another fraction that misleads people in other circumstances. You do not love God with two-thirds of your heart on weekdays, three-fourths on Sundays and 99 percent on Christmas and Easter. You do not present one fraction of yourself to your employees, another to your boss, another to your family and yet another to your Meeting. (Ideally you don’t. Nobody’s perfect.) Integrity in this sense is far more than not lying—which would never occur to most of us anyway—and far more than uncovering and sharing all the truth we have available. That’s actually the easy part. But to commit our whole and unfractionated selves to the process—all of our gifts, undistracted by our desires; all of our passion, undistracted by our wills—that is the real challenge.

*Equality*

We spoke earlier of equality of respect. I like this quote from Arthur Larrabee:

“Decision-making in the manner of Friends is a spiritual process, rooted in the belief that God is present, available to the meeting through each of its members.”

Through *each* of its members. We might be talking about installing a bathroom in the basement and you might be a plumbing contractor, and in some settings that might give your voice some added weight, but not here. Your expertise doesn’t give you any greater insight into God’s will for the Meeting. Nor does another Friend’s total ignorance of plumbing give him any less. Education, social status, eloquence, your ability to pay for the new bathroom—all of this is set aside, by you and by everyone.

 To use a musical metaphor (again from Art Larrabee), “each of us brings a different note, and all the notes are needed.” And maybe sometimes a note sounds unharmonious; but then maybe a careful listening reveals it to be a more complex harmony than we thought.

Equality of respect also demands from us the effort to discern not just God’s leading for ourselves—which is tough enough—but also the effort to discern God’s leading for others in the Meeting.

*Community*

“It is love that brings into harmony the apparently contradictory concepts of unity and freedom.” [Brinton 135]

I should, for the sake of the SPICE acronym, find a way to include Community in this list, but it seems to me that a strengthened community is more the *result* of our worshiping together, and finding Godly solutions to challenges, than it is a *means* to those things. So instead of community let me talk about love and trust. I can let go of my own wants because I can trust you to do the same. I can speak quite plainly, and so can you, without fear of harming our friendship, because of love. And love, as Paul said, does not insist upon its own way. [I Cor. 13:5].

Practical Application

This all sounds beautiful. But like a beautiful work of art, it is usually a combination of inspiration and perspiration. Yes, you have a vision—but you have to mix the paints and stretch the canvas, you might have to fail a few times. (Or, as Edison said about the light bulb, he didn’t have ten thousand failures and then success; he simply completed a 10,001-step process.)

So how do we actually do this?

There are some expectations. The first one is that you show up. That you have made yourself familiar with the process and with the subject under discussion, as well as you can. If the clerk is on the ball, you have an agenda ahead of time. Read it. It will probably change, but read it anyway.

Take the time for silent worship. When the agenda looks to be time-consuming, because it’s long or it’s controversial, there is a temptation to get started. But this is exactly when we need to be gathered as a worshipful group. We are still worshiping while we’re talking, of course, but a sustained period of silent helps foster the love and sense of community we will rely on.

Respect the process, the group, and everyone’s time. Raise your hand and be recognized. Speak to the clerk, not any individual; this is your way of speaking to the whole Meeting. Don’t paraphrase a point that’s already been made, even though you could have said it better. Be patient with others while they digest things that you already know.

Embrace conflict. Conflict is not failure. But fear of conflict inhibits creativity and curiosity. Where we have created a space of love and trust, there is no need to fear conflict.

Take responsibility for the outcome. As part of the group, you own it. Whether in the majority or the minority, you must own your responsibility to seek unity, and do so eagerly and cheerfully. If you cannot unite with a decision that seems to be favored by most in the Meeting, you are as responsible as everyone else for finding a way to unity. And if you stand aside (more on that later), you are as responsible as everyone else for the successful implementation of that decision.

Share and release your truth. You have now put it in the care of the group. It’s not yours any more. You don’t have to defend it or regret it.

Support the clerk. Sometimes this means “holding the clerk in the Light” as he or she labors over how to frame a minute or a question. Sometimes it means keeping him or her honest.

Express your love. Even with the best of intentions, we can get impatient with our fellow Friends. Even if you’re shy about saying it out loud, try to convey the love that is, after all, the main reason we’re here.

 [share Larrabee 16A and 16B]

When Unity is Elusive

Sometimes the Sense of the Meeting is clear, but there is one person or a small group who nevertheless cannot unite with it. Those people are not “standing in the way.” Rather, it is the absence of unity that is standing in the way. There are several ways to preserve unity without having unanimous agreement.

* The individual or small group can “stand aside.” This is an expression of trust in the community. You’re saying “I see that this is the direction the Meeting chooses; I cannot approve, but I trust that you are sincerely following a divine leading.” This preserves the unity of the Meeting and allows the decision to be made. As noted, those standing aside share in the responsibility for the decision. Also note that the Meeting may decline to move forward even with the objector’s permission; they may instead continue to labor towards a way of resolving the objection.
* Those standing aside can ask to be identified and have their objections minuted.
* The individual or small group can “disapprove.” This is a serious matter that comes from a very strong, clear leading that the Meeting is making a mistake. It is not “veto power,” because that implies an objection born of individual will. What I am saying by disapproving is, “even though the Meeting is convinced that it has discerned God’s will in the matter, I am equally convinced that I have discerned it more clearly.”

Of course, if someone is intentionally abusing the process, or just doesn’t understand it, the way is clear. You can ignore the objection, hold in love the objector, and move on. But it’s more likely the objector is quite sincere. Then what?

Everyone seems to have a story of the one holdout who prevented his Meeting from acting and was later proved right, but in fact, this is fairly rare. And it should be. If you’re right and everyone else is wrong, and if everyone else is sincerely trying to understand your reasons, what is it that stands in the way of mutual understanding—and how do we all work together to remove those obstacles?

Well, in good Quaker fashion, we can form a committee. Perhaps a small group will find a way where the larger one could not.

We can hold the matter over to another time. Sometimes just a week or a month of “seasoning” can help. Sometimes a year or a decade.

We can hold a “threshing session” or worship-sharing in which the aim is *not* to make a decision, but to share ideas and insights.

Finally, as a last resort, if the matter is of great importance and urgency and the Sense of the Meeting is very clear, we can override that individual’s objection, acknowledging that we are deeply wounding our community and committing to the healing that will be necessary.

Now, can we follow all these rules, do everything right, and still come up with a bad decision? Sure. Can a democracy elevate its best and brightest to positions of power, and still screw everything up? Seems so. God may be present in our process, but so are we, and we are flawed. We’ve all sat through a Meeting for Worship or two that felt empty and spiritless, and Meeting for Business is Meeting for Worship, so it can fail in that regard. Hopefully we recognize that, and put off important decisions in the face of such emptiness.

Conclusion

Winston Churchill once said that “Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the other forms.” Like democracy, Spirit-led decision making is time-consuming and difficult. And it’s tempting to say, You get out what you put in, but somehow I think you get a little bit more.

1. Trueblood, D. Elton, *The People Called Quakers* [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Brinton, Howard, *Friends for 300 Years*, p. 13. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. *First Publishers of Truth*, [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Quoted in Friends for 300 Years [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Brinton, p. \_\_. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Brinton [↑](#endnote-ref-7)