
Levi Pennington

People

1900

A Peculiar People

Levi T. Pennington

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/levi_pennington

Recommended Citation

Pennington, Levi T., "A Peculiar People" (1900). *Levi Pennington*. 19.
https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/levi_pennington/19

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the People at Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Levi Pennington by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolfe@georgefox.edu.

A PECULIAR PEOPLE

~~#####~~

Quakers are "a peculiar people", from name to nature.

Probably most folks, when they think of the word "peculiar", think of the common meaning, odd, eccentric, different from the usual, the customary. The meaning as used in the bible is probably best expressed in the translation, "a people for His own possession" -- a special people. Take it either way, and the Quakers are "a peculiar people."

There is no intention here to go into a treatise on Quaker history, though the temptation to go farther and farther afield from personal history is ever present. But whatever a man's heredity may give him as native endowment, his environment is going to have much to do with what he actually becomes, and that means not merely his physical environment, but the other and often more important environments, intellectual, ethical, social, educational, religious, spiritual, ecclesiastical, and so on and on. And Quakerism touches those who call themselves Quakers in all these realms, and in any other that you care to name.

The name "Quaker" is not official anywhere. It was given in derision at first, as was the name "Methodist." That denomination was adopted by that denomination, and now there are Methodists in thousands of places, and in many places where the Quaker name is unknown except perhaps as it applies to a certain brand of whiskey, which I have no desire to publicize or advertise. The "Quaker" movement started as indeed a movement, not as a denomination. But presently it became a definite, organized denomination, calling itself "The Religious Society of Friends."

And here appears one peculiarity of this "peculiar" people. Without accepting the term "Quaker" officially, the word has become so generally used that the most widely read of all *Friends* publications, the official publication of the Five Years Meeting of Friends (which now meets every three years -- is that peculiar?) the publication that for so many years was The American Friend, has now become "Quaker Life", to the great satisfaction of some Friends, to the great disgust of some Friends, and to the relative disregard of many who do not care what it is called, and do not care too much what it contains.

Another peculiarity about names. The denomination was "The Religious Society of Friends", with the clear understanding that it was not "a church" and certainly not "the church." Friends held, as most Protestants do, that "the church" is composed of all true believers in Christ, all who have become part of "the body of Christ", all who are "living stones" built into the temple of which Jesus Christ is "the chief corner stone", called by whatever name, Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist -- and on and on by the dozen, by the score -- those who are genuinely Christian, even among the Catholics who recognize no other church but the Catholic Church, these in the thinking of Friends constitute the real Church of Jesus Christ. How far many Friends have moved from the early refusal to call themselves a church can be seen in the definite adoption of "The Friends Church" as the denominational name by a large share of the people who call themselves Friends. Oregon Yearly Meeting, for instance, is not "Oregon Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends" not even "Oregon Yearly Meeting of Friends," but "Oregon Yearly Meeting of the Friends Church" -- press down hard on that "Church" pedal.

*made so by that highly irreligious and highly immoral
2. murderer, Henry VIII.*

The Religious Society of Friends arose in England at a time of great religious upheaval. The Reformation, strangely enough, had completely "taken" England, and had hardly "scratched the surface" of that "right little tight little island" so far as religious life was concerned. (If that sounds like an exaggeration, you should read some really emphatic statements of that and subsequent days.) The Church of England was officially the church of England, But morally and spiritually conditions were such that those who did seek to be genuinely and personally Christian were a distressed and distressful minority.

Not in the inhabitants outside the real influence of the church, but in the church itself there was corruption, worldliness, immorality; appointments of church leadership by a secular government sometimes placed in important church positions men who were no more qualified for spiritual leadership than American post masters under the "spoils" system.

And the Society of Friends was a "rebel" group, in the best sense of that word "rebel." They rebelled against corruption in the church, against formality as opposed to personal religious life, against extravagant social customs, against what they considered false interpretations of scripture, against slavish conformity to fashion in speech and dress, ^{and} in the support of a "hireling ministry" -- against very many things. And in their non-violent way they stirred up a great deal of violence by which nearly all of them suffered more or less, and by which many of them went to loathsome prison and to death.

And one of the peculiar things about this peculiar people is the way in which they presently adopted, in another form, the very things against which they had rebelled.

Take the matter of clothing, styles, and all that. The styles in the matter of clothing were so gorged and expensive that farms and homes were sometimes sacrificed that men and women might dress in cloth-of-gold and in other expensive apparel. The Friends rebelled against all this foolishness; adopted the common wearing apparel of the common people; and ~~made~~ in time made that form of apparel obligatory; the plain bonnet and the broad hat and the collarless coat were such a fixed style that you had to wear it or be "disowned", cast out of the synagogue, excommunicated.

The nobility invented the idea of calling each other by a plural pronoun in the singular. In the language of the common people it was "thou, thy and thee" in the singular second person; in addressing the "upper class" it was "you", as if one of them were as important as more than one of "hoi polloi!" Friends held that the king might be less worthy than their humble neighbors, and they called the king "Thou" and kept their hats on, even if it meant that their heads had to come off. Then when "you" in the singular had become the language of ~~thou~~ the common people, these singular people insisted so strenuously on "thou" in the singular (or "thee" in the nominative as well as the accusative) that you had to use this form of language or out you had to go.

There were so many disownments for "deviation from plainness of dress and address" that it is a wonder that the denomination survived.

"Marrying out of meeting" or "contracting marriage contrary to the discipline" meant disownment, loss of membership by official action of the monthly meeting unless confession and request brought official forgiveness. Not only must a marriage be between two Friends, but it must be according to the strict requirements of the discipline.

In the beginning there was reason for this. Friends believed in marriage, marriage for life -- divorce was unknown among them. Friends were outside the Church of England. A legal marriage had to be performed by a priest of the Church of England, who was a representative of both the church and the state. Friends could not and would not be married by such a priest. So Friends' marriages were not legal, and Friends children were illegitimate. But Friends wished to surround marriage with every possible protection, so that if and when England ever came to her senses and made the Quaker marriage legal, there would be adequate evidence that these marriages were what marriages ought to be. And so Friends embodied in their book of discipline definite and rather elaborate requirements in order that a marriage might be acceptable to the Society.

When my parents were married, these were the requirements:

The prospective bridegroom would go with an elderly Friend into the women's meeting (the sexes were segregated in their business meetings), and with the prospective bride he would stand up and they would say together, "We intend marriage with each other." Later the bride-to-be would go with an elderly woman Friends into the men's meeting, and again she would stand with the prospective groom and they would ~~say~~ say together, "We intend marriage with each other."

Nothing more until another monthly meeting, ~~at least a month later~~ ^{at least a month later} and perhaps two months or three or more, ~~when~~ ^{the} the process would be repeated, only this time they would say, "We still intend marriage with each other." Then the men's meeting would appoint a committee to see if from the standpoint of the prospective groom the marriage should occur, and the women's meeting would appoint a committee to investigate the desirability of the marriage from the standpoint of the ~~man~~ prospective bride.

And this was no mere form, but a real investigation. In most cases there was no obstacle to the marriage, but sometimes..... For instance if a man who was an "octogeranium", as the author of Leedle Yawcup Strauss called one who had reached the age of 80, wished to wed a young woman of 18, both committees would likely advise against the marriage on the basis of "disparity of age"; if the mother of the prospective bride was near death and needed the care of her daughter during her last days there might be advice for a temporary postponement of the marriage; and other things might ~~advisement~~ lead to advice that the marriage be postponed or that it should not occur at all. (Of course it could occur in later years ~~man~~ outside the Society, but if the adverse advice of the committees was accepted, it could not be an acceptable Quaker wedding.)

But ~~of course~~ adverse advice was very seldom given. Usually the report of both investigating committees was favorable,

and a joint committee was appointed to see "that the marriage is properly solemnized."

This might be at a regular meeting for worship, or at a meeting especially appointed for the ceremony. Always there was time for a period of worship, and for participation on the part of any member of the congregation who felt "led of the Spirit" to speak. At the proper time in the service, bride and groom would stand together, and the groom would say, "In the presence of God and before these witnesses, I, John Smith, do take thee, Mary Brown, to be my wife, promising with divine assistance to be to thee a loving and faithful husband so long as we both shall live." Then the bride would say, ~~I, Mary Brown, do take thee, John Smith,~~ "In the presence of God and before these witnesses, I, Mary Brown, do take thee, John Smith, to be my husband, promising with divine assistance to be to thee a loving and faithful husband so long as we both shall live."

Quaker The marriage certificate, usually in an earlier days and not infrequently in these days, was inscribed on parchment, signed first by the groom, then by the bride, taking her husband's surname, then by all the members of the congregation, that if the marriage should become legal there would be some members of the congregation still living to testify to the validity of the document. (This, last, of course, in the early day when the Quaker marriage was still not legally recognized.)

Well, when my father and mother were married, the need for all this requirement of the discipline had largely passed, and though both of them were members of Friends in good standing, they did not want to go through all this ceremony, and they were ~~married in the home rather than in the meeting house, by a Friends Minister.~~ married in the home rather than in the meeting house, by a Friends Minister. Nobody would have objected to it, unless it was some young man who desired my future mother for his wife or some young woman who had designs on my future father. But they had "contracted marriage contrary to the discipline", and the overseers had to "deal with them", and show them the error of their ways.

Each was asked to sign a paper which read, "I confess that I have contracted marriage contrary to the discipline, for which I am sorry, and I trust that Friends will pass it by and continue me in membership so long as my conduct shall render me worthy." Each one of them crossed out the words, "for which I am sorry", and signed the paper and returned it to the monthly meeting. Father was disowned for marrying my mother, which in spite of some of the results, one of which you know, I think was one of the best things he ever did. Mother thought that the women's meeting had disowned her as the men's meeting had disowned her husband. They both joined another denomination, but later came back to Friends, I am glad to say before I was born. Father was reinstated as a member; Mother learned that the women's meeting had been more lenient than the men's meeting, and that she had been a member all the time. How that many women kept that secret as long as they did I never expect to understand; I'm confident that the men would not have kept it that long.

I could go on and on with mention of things in which Friends have rebelled against something that they thought was evil only to adopt or at least to countenance the thing which they had opposed. On a recent trip to the east, the second Friends

house of worship I was in had for its main auditorium four bare walls, a bare ceiling, a bare floor, bare very plain wooden pews on three sides of the room, no platform, everything very simple and plain. The first one I had seen on that trip had cost well over \$400,000, and would reach half a million before everything was completed. In Westtown School in an earlier day a boy could not even have his mother's picture on display; I know a "Quaker Church" that has quite an art gallery in some of its rooms. In an early day music was definitely tabu -- a boy could not even whistle a tune without being peremptorily "called down" for it, and the devil was certainly in every "fiddle". There are plenty of Friends churches now that have vested choirs ~~mmmm~~ that could give successful competition to a college glee club or a capella choir, with orchestras that could do a successful job for a dance or a theatrical performance. (Even an orchestra at Westtown School, and as an aged "sing-song" ministered said in Philadelphia, "If George Fox or William Penn should hear those sounds, they would say 'Is this Westtown? And who are ye?'" Philadelphia Yearly Meeting lost all its solemnity at that, and laughed right out loud. I was there.) Friends business meetings are supposedly conducted not on the basis of "majority rule", but on the basis of all seeking together to find "the mind of Christ" in any matter under consideration. I was in a ~~mmmm~~ yearly meeting when Roberts' Rules of Order was adopted for the conduct of business, and the clerk (the presiding officer) was barred from entering into the discussion of any matter of business. Friends rebelled against a "hireling ministry", and now most Friends are in pastoral meetings, where the pastor receives a regular income, as does the choir director, the organist, the janitor and others. (These meetings insist that they are not paying the pastor for his religious services; they are just furnishing him with the physical necessities of life in order that he may devote his whole time to the work of the Kingdom of God. But there are Friends in Philadelphia and elsewhere who do not find that argument convincing.)

And so I might go on by the mile. But if I haven't convinced you that Friends are "a peculiar people," I'll give it up. A people "zealous of good works" I'll have to save for another chapter.