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Testimonies of Truth: What Have Quakers Believed through 350 Years?

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THEY WERE KNOWN AS “Children of the Light” and “Publishers of Truth” and eventually simply as “Friends.” Like many believers of their day, Quakers sought to interpret and follow the Scriptures apart from established religious authorities. Their focus on the Inward Light of Christ in the believer distinguished them from both the established churches and other dissenting groups. William Penn described the Quaker faith as “primitive Christianity revived” in his book of the same name, but what exactly set them apart?

From the time of George Fox and Margaret Fell to the present, Friends have organized their lives around what they call central “Testimonies” (often written with a capital T). These testimonies came to define what it means to be counted as one of the Friends.

UTTERLY DENYING ALL OUTWARD WARS

The first corporate testimony of Friends came in 1660, when Charles II restored the monarchy in England. Rather than declaring allegiance to the new king, Quakers affirmed their first loyalty was to Christ and his nonviolent way. Their letter to the king declared their peace stance and was also a not-so-subtle way of showing the new monarch they meant him no harm. Margaret Fell delivered the missive, which based its argument on Scriptures like James 4:1–3, Revelation 13:10, and Zechariah 4:6:

We, as to our own particulars, utterly deny all outward wars and strife and fightings with outward weapons, for any end, or under any pretense whatsoever; and this is our testimony to the whole world. . . . The spirit of Christ, by which we are guided, is not changeable, so as once to command us from a thing as evil and again to move unto it.

The peaceable work of Friends across the centuries took many forms. In 1651 George Fox opted to stay in prison rather than lead English soldiers against the Scots, saying: “I told them I lived in the virtue of that life and power that took away the occasion of all wars.” And when William Penn established Pennsylvania in 1681 as a “Holy Experiment,” he did so without an armed approach to defense or law and order (see “All who believed in God were welcome,” pp. 17–20).

In 1947 Friends were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for their opposition to the Crimean War and their relief work during and after the two world wars. Today the Quaker United Nations Office, Friends Committee on National Legislation in Washington, DC, and local Friends meetings and Yearly Meetings still seek to promote peace work at home and abroad.

AUTHENTIC WORSHIP: QUIET PLEASE!

Another unique testimony of Friends is their manner of worship. Silence, one of the things Quakers are known by to outsiders, is not their goal; it is a means to an end. From the beginning the Quaker approach to worship embraced Matthew 18:18–20, in which Christ promises to be present wherever believers are gathered in his name.

Friends feel that God's presence is not confined to the work of human priests or liturgies; the priestly work of Christ bridges the gap between humans and God. Early Friends found the work of the Holy Spirit powerful as they waited quietly on the Lord, with each one willing to speak or minister as led.

As early Friends became involved in public ministry, they traveled about, sharing concerns and encouragement. In the second half of the nineteenth century, effective ministers in North America often found themselves establishing new congregations. This led to the development of more traditional-looking pastoral ministries and “programmed” Friends meetings that followed set orders of worship (see “Quaker speak,” p. 11). This continues today, but Quakers also still affirm the words of the 1887 Richmond (Indiana) *Declaration of Faith*:

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].

EVERY CHRISTIAN A MINISTER

Friends' third testimony embraces inclusive and empowered ministry. Since at Pentecost the Holy Spirit was poured out on women as well as men and on the young as well as the old (Acts 2), Friends have held from the beginning that effective Christian ministry is inspired in its empowerment, compassionate in its character, and inclusive in its scope. Women and men, educated and uneducated, young and old were Jesus' friends and partnered with him in ministry. The question is not if a Christian will be a minister, but how?

Friends understand effective ministry to be rooted in compassion and love rather than in position or status. As John Woolman (see “Unforgettable witness for freedom,” p. 28) put it: “[Ministry] is from the operation of his [God's] spirit upon their hearts, first purifying them and thus giving them a feeling sense of the conditions of others.” Those

who experience effective public ministry among Friends are “recorded” as being ordained, and some are “released for ministry” in subsidized positions.

LIVING SACRAMENTS

Friends do not practice the use of outward sacraments. The Bible notes that John baptized with water, but Jesus baptized with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Friends thus hold that the essential baptism is spiritual immersion in Christ and being filled with the Holy Spirit, and that the true sign of being Jesus’ followers is not participation in a religious rite, but the display of love for one another (John 13:35).

Likewise Quakers feel that the real presence of Christ is experienced fully within the gathered meeting for worship, and authentic *koinonia* (fellowship) is felt in the sharing of a meal. Sometimes the quiet waiting upon the Lord in worship is called “communion after the manner of Friends.” In a Quaker wedding, vows are exchanged in the presence of God and witnesses without the need of an officiant.

YES MEANS YES, AND NO MEANS NO

Friends also have historically held to a testimony of equality and simplicity. In seeking to follow the way of Christ, they refuse to swear or resort to oaths, based on the injunction in Matthew 5:34–37 to let their “yes” be yes and their “no” be no. Seventeenth-century Friends resisted issuing false compliments or doffing hats before magistrates and called each other by the intimate “thee” and “thou” rather than “you” (which was the more formal term at the time). They also resisted the use of references to social status and to titles. In business and industry, Quaker owners in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries frequently sought to provide housing and benefits for their workers (see “Did you know?” inside front cover).

In addition to plain speech and forthright discourse, Friends embraced simplicity in clothing, architecture, and design. Quaker meetinghouses still tend to be simple in their design, with benches or chairs facing each other to emphasize communal interests.

DO WE ALL AGREE?

Quakers also upheld and still express today a testimony of consensus and discernment. They hold “meetings for worship in which business is conducted” as a spiritual means of discerning God’s will, not through negotiation but through attaining a common sense of

God's truth. As perspectives are shared, the clerk of the meeting ensures that a broad representation of understandings is shared on the floor of the meeting.

Once shared Friends are urged to release the decision to the larger gathering; if it is compelling as a way forward, this will be evident to others as well. Where disagreements emerge, Friends distinguish between matters of preference, which should not hold the meeting back, and matters of conscience. They seek a common sense of leading, although they have not always been successful in achieving it.

LEARNED FRIENDS

Early Friends were denied access to formal venues of learning in England, but they were deeply concerned about education, particularly literacy and Bible reading. It was once said that if the Scriptures were lost, they could be reconstructed from the memory of George Fox. Friends also encouraged learning in applied fields and the sciences. They came to represent more than their share of the population as members of England's prestigious Royal Society and made many advances in medicine, pharmacy, business, banking, science, technology, and food industries.

In 1798 Quaker Joseph Lancaster opened a free elementary school in London and soon found it filled to the brim with children wanting to learn to read. With too few teachers to serve them all, Lancaster created a tutorial system still in use in which advanced students teach beginners. Quakers have been founding schools ever since. Today famed Quaker primary and secondary schools include Sidwell Friends School in Washington, DC, known for educating children of presidents, and Ramallah Friends School in Palestine. Quaker colleges and universities in North America include Barclay, Bryn Mawr, Earlham, Friends, George Fox, Guilford, Haverford, Malone, Swarthmore, Whittier, William Penn, and Wilmington.

All seven testimonies (peace, silence, living sacramentalism, inclusivity, equality, consensus, and discernment) are foundational to Quaker faith and practice. Early Friends opposed the dogmatic use of creeds by churches, but they found other ways to publish the tenets of their faith. In addition to the testimonies, Friends have "upheld doctrines of faith and practice"; every Yearly Meeting makes its own articulation of common beliefs that its members are expected to uphold. Friends also make use of "advices and queries" designed to provide guidance for living out one's

religious convictions and to be read by a clerk or a pastoral elder in a gathered meeting for worship or reflected upon privately.

THINKERS AND THEOLOGIANS

George Fox claimed that one need not be “bred” at Oxford or Cambridge to be a minister of the Gospel. But it would be the educated who ultimately influenced and recorded the theology of Friends, expressing the Quaker testimonies and their implications for the movement and for observers.

Isaac Penington, William Penn, and Elizabeth Bathurst were fine early Quaker theologians, but Robert Barclay’s *Apology* put Quaker theology on the map. Barclay (1648–1690) received his education at Scots College in Paris. Upon returning to Scotland in 1667, he joined the Society of Friends. After writing several defenses of Quaker faith and practice, Barclay laid out 15 key propositions of Quakerism in his *Thesis Theologicae* in 1675 and expanded them into the Latin version of his *Apology for the True Christian Divinity* the following year. It would soon be circulated among the intelligentsia of Europe and translated into English.

Central to Barclay’s *Apology* is the idea that humans experience directly mediated revelation, conveyed by the Holy Spirit through Scripture, reason, experience, and conscience. This revelation is rooted in relationship with God, and such is the basis for receiving the saving grace of Christ and experiencing the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.

A century after Barclay, controversial and influential Joseph John Gurney (1788–1847) was born at Earlham Hall in Norwich, England, the tenth son in a Quaker banking family. As a Quaker he could not officially enter Oxford University, but with the help of private tutors there he learned biblical languages and became well versed in theological studies. Gurney’s most famous work may be *Observations on the Distinguishing Views and Practices of the Society of Friends* (now called *A Peculiar People: The Rediscovery of Primitive Christianity*).

In his travels to America (1837–1840), Gurney preached before both houses of Congress and was greeted by President Van Buren. He also traveled among Friends, calling for more robust biblical literacy and triggering a major split. Orthodox Quakerism, which

followed his teachings, centered around Richmond, Indiana. Earlham College was founded there in 1847 in the wake of Gurney's influence.

In the twentieth-century, D. Elton Trueblood (1900–1994) followed in the steps of Quaker writer and magazine editor Rufus Jones (1863–1948) and carried the theological torch. Known as “the dean of American religious writing” in the mid-twentieth century, he expressed convictions about the ministry of every Christian, the liberating power of spiritual disciplines, and the value of the devotional classics. Trueblood encouraged dozens of emerging writers and inspired modern devotional writer Richard Foster (b. 1942).

Trueblood founded the devotional movement Yokefellows International, and his protégé Foster's book *Celebration of Discipline*, originally published in 1978, launched Renovaré, an international organization promoting spiritual renewal of the church. Trueblood's *A Place to Stand* (1969), which he considered a sequel to C. S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*, took its title from Greek philosopher Archimedes: “Give me a place to stand [in this case, Christ], and I can move the entire earth.”

From the days of George Fox to the present, that kind of passion has inspired many Friends to live as “Children of the Light” and “Publishers of the Truth.” **CH**

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