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THE QUAKER MARRIAGE

To understand the so-called Quaker marriage one needs to remember something of the background and the situation in England when Quakerism came into being.

Before the Reformation, though there had been differences in the church, and controversies that were sometimes bitter, and the Greek (Orthodox) Church had separated from the western Roman Catholic Church, Christianity was considered one, as distinguished from other religions.

When the Reformation came, one of the great landmarks that marked the beginning of modern times, it had comparatively little effect in England, though, strangely enough, it supposedly was complete, when Henry VIII broke with the pope and the established church of England separated from Catholicism entirely. The wars between Catholics and Protestants, though unlike those between one nation and another, brought persecution of Catholics by Protestants and of Protestants by Catholics -- I stood in front of a university building where seventeen martyrs had been burned at the stake for their beliefs.

Whether Protestants or Catholics were in power, there was only one recognized religion, one established church, a part of the government, supported by "tithes" which were really government taxes, the priests, whether Catholic or Protestant, appointed by the civil authorities, and some of them no more fit for spiritual guidance than the average post master appointed under the old spoils system in America.

But the established church, the Church of England, was the church, the only one whose ministers could legally perform marriages and conduct the other ordinances that had to do with governmental affairs.

Though the victory of Protestantism and the Reformation was complete so far as organization was concerned, those who were earnestly religious realized how far the Church of England was from what the church ought to be. And so there were "dissenters" of many shades, the Puritans, the Ana-Baptists, the Friends, later the Methodists, etc.

It was because nobody but a priest of the Established Church could legally perform a marriage, and because the Friends would not be married by such a priest that the Friends (and others) whose marriages were not in accordance with the law originated the so-called Quaker marriage. They wanted to make every marriage among Friends as sacred and as binding as it could be made, and in such a form that if and when England came to her senses (as she did later) the Quaker marriage would have as good standing as any other marriage. Since Friends were not permitted to marry outside of the denomination, the procedure, though varying somewhat in minor details, was substantially as follows. You will remember that the men's business meeting and the women's business meeting were separate, though usually in the same house. Courtship was possibly much the same as it is today in properly regulated households, though much more guarded than in these days of autos and greater freedom.

To start the marriage preliminaries officially, the groom-to-be, with an older and influential man, goes into the women's meeting, and at the proper time he and the bride-to-be go together to the front of the meeting and say together, "We intend marriage with each other." Later the bride-to-be goes with an older and influential woman Friend into the men's meeting. The pair stand presently before the men's meeting and say together the same words, "We intend marriage with each other."

Then there is a wait of at least a month, and it may be any longer period, when the same sort of procedure takes place, only this time they say, "We still intend marriage with each other."

Now the men's meeting appoints a committee to look into the matter of the suitability of this marriage as far as the man is concerned, and the women's meeting appoints a committee to look into the matter from the standpoint of the woman. They cannot report till the next monthly meeting. If there is no reason for the disapproval of the marriage, a committee is appointed to see that the marriage is properly solemnized.

It is not difficult to see that many things might make necessary some change in this procedure. If the bride-to-be and the groom-to-be belong to different meetings, both will "pass meeting", that is, have the approval of his or her meeting, and the meeting to which the man belongs sends official information of its approval to the meeting to which the woman belongs, and the marriage occurs in her meeting.

It should be remarked that in the early days of the Friends the investigation as to the fitness of the marriage was no routine, rubber-stamp affair. Lack of health, conflicting obligations, disparity in age, lack of maturity of one or both candidates for marriage, inability to provide for a household -- these and other things could prompt a decision that the marriage should not occur or that it should be postponed.

The marriage itself could occur in a regular meeting for worship or at a special meeting appointed for the purpose. It was not a secret nor even a private affair. There might be nothing but silence before the marriage ceremony, or a number of persons might speak "as the Spirit moved."

When the time for the ceremony has arrived, the couple take their stand in front of the congregation, and the man says, "In the presence of God and before these witnesses, I, John Smith, take thee, Mary Brown, to be my wedded wife, promising with divine assistance to be to thee a loving and faithful husband so long as we both shall live." Then the bride says, "In the presence of God and before these witnesses, I, Mary Brown, take thee, John Smith, to be my wedded husband, promising with divine assistance to be to thee a loving and faithful wife so long as we both shall live."

Before this usually the marriage certificate was prepared, usually on parchment, and the bridal pair sign it, the bride taking her husband's name; and then all the persons present at the wedding sign as witnesses.

This marriage certificate varied widely. In some cases it was little more than the statement that these two were married at this time and place according to the practice of Friends, with the undersigned Friends as witnesses. In other cases it is very elaborate, telling of the declaration of intention, the repeating of this intention at a later date, the appointment of the committees, their report, the appointment of a committee to see that the marriage is properly performed, the statement of the assembling of the meeting, the words said by the groom and the words said by the bride, and all sorts of details.

The reason for having the signatures of all those present was the hope that there would be a change in the government laws and regulations that would make the Quaker marriage legitimate, and they wanted if possible that there might be witnesses still living that were present at the wedding and could give testimony in addition to the evidence provided by the marriage certificate.

Not all of this ceremony is observed by Friends of today, and there are some things now that were not required in those days. Now a marriage ~~must be~~ ^{license} authorizing the marriage must be secured, usually from the county clerk; in many states there must be a health certificate signed by an authorized physician, and sometimes there are other requirements. In some states definite laws have been passed making legal such a Quaker marriage without an officiating clergyman or other official. In other states it is customary for a Friends minister to make out the proper report to go to the county clerk, stating that this marriage has been accomplished.

With all the care that was exercised in the early days of Friends, and with at least somewhat more than two months between the announcement of intention and the marriage, it is not strange that divorce was almost entirely unknown among the early Quakers. The men's meeting and the women's meeting no longer exist; the men and the women meet together.