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**On the Origin and Intent of the Quaker Women's Meeting:
Promoting and Preserving the Influence of Women During and
Beyond the Period of Institutionalization**

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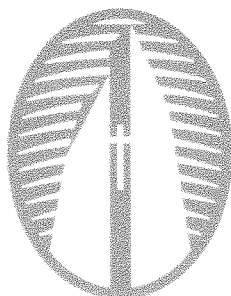
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IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS (THEOLOGICAL STUDIES)

BY
JOHN ROSS

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INFLUENCE OF WOMEN DURING AND BEYOND THE
PERIOD OF INSTITUTIONALIZATION**

Presented by: **JOHN ROSS**

Date: December 4, 2007

We, the undersigned, certify that we have read this thesis and approve it as adequate in scope and quality for the degree of Master of Arts in Theological Studies.

Carole D. Spencer

(Carole D. Spencer)

MaryKate Morse

(MaryKate Morse)

For Marissa, who has begun teaching me what it is like to be a woman in the Church.

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ABSTRACT

Title: ON THE ORIGIN AND INTENT OF THE QUAKER WOMEN'S MEETING:
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The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) had as a hallmark from its inception, a strong commitment to egalitarian theology and practice. As the movement took shape in the 1640s and 50s, women were prominent among their preachers, leaders, and evangelists. As the Quakers began to institutionalize in the 1660s, women Friends were in real danger of being marginalized, their voices lost behind a complex system of meetings for business and government. The answer proposed by Quaker leaders George Fox and Margaret Fell was the Women's Meeting.

These meetings, settled throughout England and eventually throughout the world, mirrored the monthly, quarterly, and yearly business meetings attended by the men. While scholars debate the intent and implications of the institution, this thesis argues that the Women's Meeting was introduced to purposefully protect and promote the influence of women during and beyond the process of institutionalization. By providing autonomy, responsibility, freedom, and experience to women Friends, the Women's Meeting ensured the continued presence of influential women leaders in the developing movement.

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

History

Amid the cultural and religious upheaval that was seventeenth century England, the Society of Friends¹ emerged as an enduring religious tradition. Despite immediate persecution and regular scandal, the Quakers, as they would become known, blossomed into what is now a worldwide Church, counting some 350,000 members.² One of the distinguishing features of early Quaker theology and practice was a strong witness to egalitarianism; that is the equal status of men and women both before God and in matters of the church such as office, responsibilities, and freedoms. Women were among the first “converts” to the movement and remained active even through the process of institutionalization, comprising at one point in the nineteenth century more than forty percent of the recorded ministers.³ Specifically in the 1640s and 50s, women experienced abnormal freedom to speak in gatherings, to travel, to teach, and to minister when compared with other mainstream Christian churches and with society as a whole.

¹ The terms “Society of Friends,” “Quakers,” the “Quaker Movement,” and “Friends” are used interchangeably throughout this thesis. While each may have individual connotations, they collectively refer to the same group of people. Other historical titles include “Children of the Light” and “People of the Covenant.”

² Statistics according to fwccworld.org/find_friends/map.shtml Accessed 09/14/07.

³ *Book of Meeting* quoted in Anna Louise Spann, *The Ministry of Women in the Society of Friends* (University of Iowa: Doctoral Diss., 1945), 27.

However, by the 1660s, the movement began to institutionalize in the face of scandal, internal disputes, and fierce persecution. The Quakers did so by adopting a complex system of meetings and committees. Among these innovations was the Women's Meeting, a structure for Quaker women that would come to mirror the weekly, monthly, and yearly business meetings that were attended by men only. The origin, intent, and impact of these meetings will be discussed at length in chapter four and following.

Current Scholarship

There is no shortage of material available to modern Quaker historians. In many cases, primary sources are available from early Quaker figures. Additionally, there are both early and more recent histories that tell the story of the movement in varying detail. In asserting this thesis, it is both helpful and necessary to mention the specific texts that have historically framed the discussion of Quaker institutionalization and the Women's Meeting. In recent years, there has also been a rise in scholarship specifically related to women Friends and the role of the Women's Meeting. These texts must also be mentioned as they provide much of the framework with which this thesis will interact.

Clearly, a central issue for each author is the degree of change or discontinuity between the loosely organized Quaker movement of the 1640s and 50s and the more organized version that emerged in the 1660s and 70s. Did the process of institutionalization in general and the Women's Meeting in particular signal a monumental loss for women, ending the age of the visionary female Quaker prophet? Or rather, did that same process of institutionalization, and specifically the rise of the Women's

Meeting, actually create and preserve opportunities for women within the Quaker movement?

The answer to this question often hinges on the individual author's perspective when it comes to the Quaker process of institutionalization. William Braithwaite, in what has become the standard history of Quakerism, decries the loss of the truly charismatic Quaker "soul" amidst the pressures of "tradition" and "the outside world."⁴ Other historians such as Barry Levy take a more optimistic approach, suggesting that the result of this process was the beginning of what must accurately be called the period of "true, modern Quakerism, whose chief elements are the Friends' peace testimony and the highly developed theology and social activism of Robert Barclay and William Penn."⁵ John Punshon's *A Portrait in Grey*, a more recent and concise Quaker history, paints a well-rounded view of the decade in question, pointing out the wide variety of factors, both political and theological, that moved the Society toward formalization and institution.⁶

Similarly, women's involvement in the Society of Friends is well documented. A variety of primary sources, such as George Fox's *Journal*⁷ and Margaret Fell's *Women's Speaking Justified*⁸ are of seminal importance to this discussion. Fox describes the

⁴ William C. Braithwaite, *The Second Period of Quakerism* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 324.

⁵ Barry Levy, *Quakers and the American Family: British Settlement in the Delaware Valley* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), Part 1.

⁶ John Punshon, *Portrait in Grey: A short history of the Quakers* (London: Quaker Books, 1984), 77-79.

⁷ *Journal of George Fox*, Nigel Smith, ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1998).

“convincement”⁹ of various women as well as his role in the institution of the Women’s Meeting. Fell’s text, perhaps the first on the subject by a woman in England, shows the development of Friends theology and the variety of egalitarian arguments that were used to defend the role of women within the movement. Many historical overviews mention little of the influence of women and the Women’s Meeting. However, three notable older histories are significant in their ability to highlight the role of women: Elbert Russel’s *The History of Quakerism*¹⁰, Elizabeth Emmot’s *The Story of Quakerism*¹¹, and Elfrida Vipont’s *The Story of Quakerism Through Three Centuries*.¹²

Specifically related to the Women’s Meeting, two more recent secondary works must be noted: Phyllis Mack’s *Visionary Women*¹³ and Christine Trevett’s *Women and Quakerism in the Seventeenth Century*.¹⁴ While the first three chapters of Mack’s book had previously been printed as smaller articles, the impact of her text was nothing short

⁸ Margaret Fell, *Women’s Speaking Justified, Proved, and Allowed of by the Scriptures, All such as speak by the Spirit and Power of the Lord Jesus. And how Women were the first that Preached the Tidings of the Resurrection of Jesus, and were sent by Christ’s own Command, before he Ascended to the Father* Online at <http://www.qhpress.org/texts/fell.html> accessed 04.15.07.

⁹ The word convinced or the act of convincement is used repeatedly by Fox in his *Journal* and by Friends to refer to what other Protestant groups would call conversion. Other distinct Quaker language includes terms for the process of organizing an ongoing meeting (settling) and the identity of a terminated meeting (laid down).

¹⁰ Elbert Russell, *The History of Quakerism* (New York: Macmillan, 1943).

¹¹ Elizabeth Braithwaite Emmot, *The Story of Quakerism* (London: Headley Brothers Publishers, 1916).

¹² Elfrida Vipont, *The Story of Quakerism Through Three Centuries* (London: Bannisdale Press, 1960).

¹³ Phyllis Mack, *Visionary Women: Ecstatic Prophecy in Seventeenth-Century England* (Berkley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1992).

¹⁴ Christine Trevett, *Women and Quakerism in the 17th Century* (York: Ebor Press, 1995).

of a watershed when it was published in 1992. She argues that while women were still influential figures in Quakerism following the rise of the Women's Meeting, the process of institutionalization changed the face of the movement for women drastically and for the worse. She traces the development of gender roles from the early decades into the time of the Women's Meetings, pointing out key differences between the roles, perceptions, and actions of women from each respective era. Trevett, on the other hand, sees more continuity between the early decades of the movement and the organized Society of the late 1600s. She argues that early women Friends benefited not from a primitive feminism, but rather from a limited commitment to egalitarianism, which pertained almost exclusively to women in their prophetic or religious roles as opposed to seeking to liberate the entirety of a woman's life through drastic societal change. The difference in perspective is clearly apparent in their writings. Mack argues,

For this historian, interested primarily in the development of attitudes toward gender relationships, the story of Quakerism in the final forty years of the century seemed, initially, to be both entirely predictable and quite definitely dismal. Tracking the movement's evolution from sect to church, one watched prophetic women, once the bearers of considerable charismatic authority, slowly disappear behind the rising edifice of the new structure, their voices muffled by the clearer discourse of the proponents of new rules and values.¹⁵

On the other hand, Trevett argues,

Channels for women's ministry were opened up (especially through the creation of the Women's Meetings) which in fact led them into more recognizably 'feminine' tasks. These new forms of activity for women *complemented*, rather than replaced entirely the older kinds; for there were still women Friends who traveled as ministers, who published warnings to cities and preached. Moreover, through their own business Meetings women found other means of recording

¹⁵ Mack, 274-275.

opposition to acts of injustice, to the payment of tithes and so on. They did this in solidarity with their sisters. Nevertheless it was not the Quakerism of the early, heady decades.¹⁶

This thesis, while conceding many of Mack's points, will argue more in favor of Trevett's conclusions: that the Women's Meeting did in fact open up more opportunities for women in the movement and preserve the early Quaker egalitarian commitment.

A lesser-known text highlighted by this thesis is a doctoral dissertation by Anna Louise Spann titled, *The Ministry of Women in the Society of Friends*. Regularly overlooked by contemporary scholarship, Spann paints a clear, if at times overly optimistic view of the influence of women Friends. She highlights the work of many prominent women and devotes a lengthy chapter to the development of the Women's Meeting.¹⁷ Spann is interested less in arguing a specific position on the question of the Women's Meetings but more in pointing out the continual thread of influential women that weaves its way through Quaker history from its inception to the time of her writing. Lastly, Bonnelyn Kunze's text, *Margaret Fell and the Rise of Quakerism*,¹⁸ includes an important and lengthy section on the rise of the Women's Meeting with special attention given to Fell's role in its establishment.

¹⁶ Trevett, 43-44.

¹⁷ See Spann, 11-26

¹⁸ Bonnelyn Kunze, *Margaret Fell and the Rise of Quakerism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994).

Thesis

Through an examination of the beginnings of the Quaker movement and the rise and fall of the Women's Meeting, it is clear that the Women's Meeting altered the manner of influence for many women Friends, but it did not diminish or discourage that influence. It must be admitted: institutionalization in the form of the Women's Meeting did limit and change the way women were influential in the Society of Friends. However, the Women's Meeting also preserved the early Quaker commitment to egalitarianism and ensured the continued influence of Quaker women well into the 1900s. In fact, the Women's Meeting actually created more opportunities for women Friends who would, as a community, become an influence for change not only within the movement but also in society at large. Thus, while the institution of the Women's Meeting could clearly be painted in a negative light as sexist and patriarchal, a more accurate picture starts by apprehending the overtly egalitarian and pro-woman desires of those who sought to establish the Meetings, and ends by appreciating the impact and influence women Friends were able to have, not in spite of, but rather *because of* the Women's Meetings.

Overview

This thesis will unpack these claims, beginning in chapters two and three, by investigating the origins of the movement and the prominence of its early women ministers. In chapter four, two prominent Quaker women are examined as case studies in order to understand how early women Friends were influential. The question of the Women's Meeting itself is addressed in chapters five and following. First, the story of its establishment is told in chapter five, and in chapter six, two key factors are noted that

contributed to its rise. In chapters seven through nine, the historical arguments for and against the Women's Meeting are delineated, including the successful response from Fox and Fell to those who opposed the practice. Chapter ten addresses the underlying and often latent sexism inherent in the founding of the Women's Meeting, with an attempt to focus on the historical impact for the female gender. Lastly, in chapters eleven and twelve, the legacy and uniqueness of the Quaker Women's Meeting is celebrated. Throughout, the argument is made that the Women's Meeting must primarily be understood as a vehicle intended to preserve and promote the influence of Women in the Society of Friends.

Chapter 2

FOX'S JOURNEY AND EARLY OPENINGS

Any honest telling of the story of the Society of Friends begins with George Fox. Fox's experiences as a young seeker and skill as a visionary leader forged both the beginnings of the movement and the structure of the organization. Until his death in 1691, historians argue it is proper to understand Fox as *the* "creative personality" who "supplied [the Quaker] type of experience and its fundamental ideas, and was himself its chief preacher and evangelist."¹⁹ Most important to this discussion are the stories of Fox's various "openings," or epiphanies, when God reveals specific truths which impact Fox's theology. Some of these openings, interestingly enough, would lead to both the Quaker commitment to egalitarianism and the institution of the Women's Meeting.

In 1646, young Fox left both his physical and spiritual home to wander the English countryside in search of truth. In his *Journal* he records the story of his journey, including the many openings given to him by the Lord concerning the true nature of the Church and of reality. He tells of one such opening, seminal to the eventual place of women in the developing Quaker movement:

At another time, as I was walking in a field on a First-day morning, the Lord opened unto me that being bred at Oxford or Cambridge was not enough to fit and qualify men to be ministers of Christ; and I stranged at it because it was the common belief of people.²⁰

¹⁹ Russell, 26.

²⁰ *Journal of George Fox*, 7.

This realization is absolutely foundational to Fox's eventual view of the equality of all persons and the sole ability of the Spirit of God to call and qualify anyone to speak or minister in the Lord's name. Readers should understand this realization as putting Fox at odds with the "common" wisdom of the age, which looked to position, title, and gender when seeking "qualification" for ministry.

Fox's logic had stunning implications: if it was not the external pedigree or qualification that made a person valuable or important in the Church, all external differences must eventually be suspect, even that of gender. It is important to note that this "opening" did not relate directly to issues of women and their position within the church. Rather, this opening concerned the nature of hierarchical relationships in general and had, as a "side-effect" of sorts within the Society, the result of freeing women from their societal bondage as well as those men who were looked down upon because of their low class or lack of education. Nonetheless, this realization would clearly drive Fox to defend the dignity of women both in the Society of Friends and in culture at large.

Just a few pages later in his *Journal*, readers see an excellent example of this reality. He writes of a meeting "with a sort of people that held women have no souls, adding in a light manner, no more than a goose. But I reproved them," reports Fox, "and told them that was not right for Mary said, 'My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.'"²¹ A second occasion marks further development in Fox's thinking. In 1648, he visited a church meeting where a woman rose to ask a question but was denied by the minister who claimed he did not allow a woman to speak in church. Fox bristled, defending the woman's right to speak, as all had been given

²¹ Ibid., 8-9.

liberty to speak by the priest, but also in her identity as “the woman that might prophesy and speak.”²² His words “broke them all to pieces and confused them.”²³ Fox was seemingly becoming more confident in his egalitarian theology. Because both men and women alike were welcome as active and equal participants in Fox’s new “movement,” this priest’s discrimination based solely on gender was simply unacceptable. Even though discrimination was in fact the “common belief” of the people, the Quakers would come to challenge this belief. Because of Fox’s openings and his commitment to non-hierarchical relationships, the first decades of the Society of Friends provided fertile soil for women to take their place as influential leaders, teachers, ministers and preachers.

²² Ibid., 24.

²³ Ibid.

Chapter 3

EARLY WOMEN MINISTERS

Female converts who became convinced of the “Truth” Fox preached quickly realized the opportunities granted them by Fox’s openings. In fact, the prominent roles regularly filled by women Friends were often shocking and surprising to those outside the movement. Often, a woman preacher was called “a base slut,” a “Jezebel,” a “Jesuit,” a “silly old woman,” or an “old trot.”²⁴ Despite this negative perception, these early Quaker women did in fact preach publicly, traveling about in pairs as they offered their prophetic message to any who would listen. Often these women spoke to “large gatherings” and were looked down on as “unfeminine and dangerous, lewd and probably heretical.”²⁵ Their numbers are unparalleled among other religious groups during this period. “Of the 360 Quakers recorded as involved in the disruption of church ministry between 1654-59, 34% were women. Of those Quakers who made the hazardous crossing to America between 1656-63, 45% were women.”²⁶

In the 1650s when the Quaker message began to spread, it was women who spearheaded the missionary effort. Mack provides a succinct and moving summary:

The first Quaker missionaries to appear in London were two women, Isabel Buttery and a friend, who arrived from the north in 1654 carrying books and pamphlets to distribute. The first Quaker in Norfolk was a woman, Anne Blayklin, who won the first important local convert and was also the first arrested. Among the first missionaries in Ireland was a woman, Elizabeth Fletcher, sixteen years old, who arrived in 1655 and who had also been the first Quaker to evangelize Oxford. A woman was among the three first pioneers to evangelize

²⁴ Mack, 17.

²⁵ Trevett, 15.

²⁶ Ibid., 15.

Holland in 1655 and 1656. The first missionaries to America were Elizabeth Harris, Mary Fisher, and Ann Austin, who arrived in Maryland and Boston at that same time. One of the first missionaries to Turkey was a woman, the same Mary Fisher, who walked alone five hundred miles to visit the Sultan, knowing 'it would be given her in that hour, what she should speak.' The youngest and oldest Quakers to preach in public during the 1650s were female: Mary Fell of Swathmore . . . was eight. Elizabeth Hooten . . . was about seventy.²⁷

Clearly, these women were powerful figures in the 1650s, ministering alongside their male counterparts and on their own as messengers of the Truth.

Women Friends were also persecuted alongside, and in some cases ahead of their male counterparts. In 1653, the aforementioned Mary Fisher, along with her friend Mary Williams were the first Friends to be "publicly flogged."²⁸ Quaker women also figured importantly, although as a minority, among those who would become known as the "Valliant Sixty," traveling throughout England to extend the Quaker message and influence.²⁹ The movement "spread rapidly" during these years and women were prominent among the preachers and the converts.³⁰

In seeking to understand the draw of Quakerism, Trevett makes an important distinction. She argues, as was noted in the introduction, that the "large number" of women who were "attracted to Quakerism" did not come because the movement was "advocating a new brand of feminism."³¹ Many Quakers still preached the "headship" of the husband and were thoroughly immersed in the male-dominated, patriarchal culture that surrounded them. However, their belief in the essential equality of men and women

²⁷ Mack, 131.

²⁸ Vipont, 44.

²⁹ Ibid., 45.

³⁰ Ibid., 46.

³¹ Trevett, 14.

before God did spill over into various societal freedoms for women Friends. Trevett writes:

Quakerism, on the face of it, did not offer women social equality at all, but it offered them unheard of opportunities for action in the sphere of religion and a rationale for public activity which was liberating. Since Friends did not acknowledge rigid distinction between the religious, the social, and the political, Quaker women found themselves with rights, indeed obligations, to have views on essential issues of the day.³²

Women Friends seized upon these “freedoms” and “obligations” in the late 1640s and well into the early 1660s.

³² Ibid., 14.

Chapter 4

EGALITARIAN CASE STUDIES

Among early Quaker women, two stand out as remarkable case studies for the role and influence of women within the movement. Both women were visible and well-known Quaker leaders. They were fearless preachers and tireless writers. Both were imprisoned and persecuted many times. Yet each continued on to become a sort of archetype for Quaker women that would follow.

Elizabeth Hooten

Elizabeth Hooten is an integral part of the Friends' story from its earliest stage. Fox records the meeting that would lead to her conviction in his Journal in 1647.

And traveling on through some parts of Leicestershire and into Nottinghamshire, there I met with a tender people, and a very tender woman whose name was Elizabeth Hooten; and with these I had some meetings and discourses.³³

Historians believe Hooten was one of the earliest preachers of Fox's doctrines and may have even been his first convert.³⁴ According to a record written by her son, Elizabeth had clearly separated herself from the state church prior to meeting Fox, being "joined with the Baptists."³⁵ Mack suggests that Hooten had likely gained experience as a preacher among the Baptists and found it natural to put her skills to use in the Quaker movement.³⁶ Following her conviction, Fox records in his Journal that she "had

³³ *Journal*, 9.

³⁴ Trevett, 16.

³⁵ Manuscript endorsed: "Oliver Huttons Certificate Concerning F: ff:" and is among other similar certificates which were read at the Second Day's Meeting. Quoted in Emily Manners, *Elizabeth Hooten: First Quaker Woman Preacher* (London: Headley Brothers, 1914), 4.

³⁶ Mack, 127.

Meetings at her house where the Lord by his power wrought many Miracles to the Astonishing of the world and confirming people of the Truth which she there received about 1646.”³⁷ Fox stayed on in Nottinghamshire and Lestershire, experiencing what Emily Manners calls “some of his deepest religious experiences.”³⁸ Manners suggests that Fox’s religious experiences in these days likely “proved an inspiration to his early disciple.”³⁹

Shortly after Fox was imprisoned in 1649, Hooten began her “active ministry,” being imprisoned herself at Derby in 1651.⁴⁰ A year later, she was again imprisoned, this time in York Castle for speaking in the “Steeple House at Rothherham, and remained there for sixteen months.”⁴¹ During these years, Hooten began her now famous letter-writing career, crafting letters to Oliver Cromwell and members of government on behalf of herself and others who found themselves at the mercy of an unjust system. A letter from Hooten on behalf of a fellow prisoner at York castle reads as follows:

You that sitt on the Bench doe Justice and Equity to those honest hearted people Called Quakers whome you putt in prison and Call them to the Barr and sett them at Liberty for they have done you noe wrong nor hurt the cause is for worshipping of God as hee requires in Spt & in Truth that they Suffer – James Holliday who hath Laine in Six Months being A North Country friend the Geoler hath very much Abused By Taking away his Victualls & Beathing of him till hee hath been black and Blew and his Skin broake & soe our desire is that you would sett this poor man at Liberty whome the Geoler keepeth for his fees⁴²

³⁷ Journal of George Fox, cited in Manners, 5.

³⁸ Manners, 5.

³⁹ Ibid. Emily Manners’ text is relied upon heavily throughout this section because of its vast incorporation of primary sources into one place.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 6.

⁴¹ Ibid., 7.

⁴² Ibid., 10.

A more famous letter from this period is addressed to Cromwell and endorsed by Fox.

Your Judges Judge for reward, and at this Yorke many which Committed murder escaped through friends and money, & pore people for Lesser facts are put to death; many lighe in prison for fees . . . They Lighe worse then dogs for want of strawe, Many beinge in greate want, that they have not to releeeve them with all; yet these Tirants keepe them in this pore Condition The Judges and Magistrates they might as well have put them to death at the Assize as put them into the hands of these two tyrants who keepes men for money starveing them in a hole till they be ruined or starved to death.⁴³

Countless more letters would follow these early documents, highlighting the corruption and abuse suffered in the prisons and boldly asking for redress. Hooten, however, was not simply interested in reforming the prisons; she was after justice for the Quakers and heartfelt repentance from everyone. Later in the same letter addressed to Cromwell, she writes,

O man what dost thou there except thou stand for the truth which is trampled under foote Who knows but thou was Called to deliver thy brethren out of bondage and slaverie, and that the Truth may bee set free to speake freely, without money or without Prize . . . O Frend thou must ligh downe in the dust and Cast thy Crowne at the feete of Jesus, how Can you believe that seeke honor one of another and seekes not the honor which of god onely; Distribute to the pore, and Denie thy honor, and take up the Crosse and followe Jesus Christ.⁴⁴

This kind of boldness marked the ministry of Elizabeth Hooten both in her letters from prison and in her preaching as a traveling minister. As can be adduced from her imprisonments and sentences, Hooten was clearly involved in the “disruptive” type of preaching that marked early Quaker practice. Just like her mentor, Fox, Hooten visited the “steeple houses” of the state church and waited until the preacher had finished and would then preach herself. Fox’s *Journal* gives evidence that at times this practice proved

⁴³ Ibid., 10.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 11.

fruitful, as people were convinced of the Truth. The same practice, however, resulted just as often in persecution and imprisonment for the preacher.

Ten years after her first stint in England's suspect prison system, Hooten and her friend, Joan Brocksopp sailed for New England to witness to the colonists. She describes her calling in her own words:

In ye year 1661 it was upon me from the Lord & my friend Joan Broksopp for God & his people to those people in the heate of persecution, & if god required us to lay down our lives for the testimony of Jesus & in love to their soules, not knowing but what they might heare & so be saved yet they might be left without excuse & God might have his glory & we clear of their bloud if they would not heare: ane old woman above three score yeares old when J went thither & my companion, but they had made a lawe of a hunder pounds fine to every ship that carried a quaker & to cary them back againe, so that no ship would carry us from England thither, but we took ship to Virginia, & when we came there many ships denied us, & therefore we knew nothing but to goe by land which was a dangerous voyage, yet God was pleased to order us a way by a Katch to carie us a part of the way, & so we went the rest by land.⁴⁵

A number of key themes stand out from this excerpt. First, Hooten was genuinely elderly at this point; the letter suggests that she was over sixty years old. Her husband had already passed away in 1657, and the un-intimidated Elizabeth had taken the opportunity to travel in support of the Quaker Movement.⁴⁶ Her age only makes her extensive travels and the persecution she endured more remarkable. Secondly, Hooten was clearly aware of the persecution that awaited her in Boston. She clearly alludes to the laws already passed against bringing Quakers into Boston. One would imagine she was aware of the severe persecution Friends had received in New England up to this point.⁴⁷ These hardships, though, did not deter her from the work for which she had been called.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 31.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 16.

Hooten's insight concerning the possibility of her own death became a relative certainty once she and Brocksopp reached Boston. They were imprisoned for visiting Friends already in jail and eventually driven out of the city and into the wilderness, left for dead without food or any recourse against the elements or the "many wild beasts."⁴⁸ But Hooten and her friends managed to "escape their hands," finding refuge in Rhode Island. There, Hooten took part in what may have been the first General Meeting in America, possibly even assisting in "calling" this first Yearly Meeting.⁴⁹ Hooten would go on to visit Barbados, return to Boston to "cry against" the city, sail home for England and then return again to New England before her death in Barbados in 1672.⁵⁰

Historians have much to say about Elizabeth and the powerful legacy she left for women Friends who would follow. Rufus Jones, in his *Quakers in the American Colonies*, gives insight into the incredible commitment that marked Hooten and her contemporaries.

It is easy for us, at this comfortable distance, in an ordered society in which one believes what he wants to believe – to say that these Friends walked of their own accord into the lion's den . . . That is undoubtedly true, but it indicates a superficial acquaintance with the spirit of these Quakers. . . . They would have preferred the life of comfort to the hard prison and the gallows rope if they could have taken the line of least resistance with inward peace, but that was impossible to them. . . . They had learned to obey the visions which they *believed* were heavenly, and they had grown accustomed to go straight ahead where the Voice which they believed to be Divine called them.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Manners tells of the bloody and violent persecution of Quakers in Boston, ranging from whipping, excommunication and deportment to death by hanging. See pages 18-30.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 32.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 31-32.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 35, 73.

⁵¹ Rufus Jones, *Quakers in the American Colonies* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1962), 80.

Emily Manners observes in Hooten the emergence of a “heroic figure,” who “worthily played her part in the heroic age of the Society of Friends.”⁵² And while her assessment of Elizabeth’s life seems perhaps one-sided, arguing with her summary is difficult.

... always valiant for the truth, quick to seize any opportunity that offered to plead the cause of her fellow sufferers, even though her own sufferings made the occasion – fearless in denouncing the evils of the time – far in advance of the age in which she lived in her advocacy of prison and other reforms . . .⁵³

Quaker founder, George Fox, seems to agree.

In her Life she was very much Exercised with priests outward Professours Apostates Backsliders and Profane, for she was a Godly Woman & had a Great Dare Lay upon her for People to walk in the Truth that did Profess itt, and from her Receiving the Truth she never turned Back of itt but was fervent & faithfull for it till Death.⁵⁴

Such is the legacy of Elizabeth Hooten: preaching alongside male Quakers, embarking on dangerous travel to the New World alongside and ahead of her male counterparts, faithfully enduring harsh persecution and cruel punishment, and fearlessly calling for reform of her society’s systems and of the individual heart. Certainly, Elizabeth Hooten was, even in her own time, a clear archetype for the Quaker Woman: strong, courageous, active, mobile, fluent, and influential.

Margaret Fell

A fitting counterpoint to Elizabeth Hooten, Margaret Fell is doubtless another archetype for women Friends. Fell was an upper-class woman, married to Judge Thomas Fell.⁵⁵ Isabel Ross tells the story of Fell’s convincement in 1652 when Fox came to

⁵² Manners, 74.

⁵³ Manners, 74.

⁵⁴ Manuscript from George Fox, Quoted in Manners, 74.

⁵⁵ Punshon, 127.

Ulverston.⁵⁶ Hearing that the Fell's home, Swarthmoor Hall, was known as a "center of religious interest in discussion,"⁵⁷ Fox visited only to find Judge Fell absent with work and Margaret away for the day. The Fell children were being instructed by the town rector, whom Fox promptly engaged in such "discussion" that he reportedly "le[ft] the house in anger and distress."⁵⁸ Margaret however, on her return that evening, found Fox's message both original and inviting. Fox records in his *Journal* that his disagreement with the rector "struck something at her because she was in a profession with him, though he hid his dirty actions from them: so at night we had a great deal of reasoning and I declared the truth to her and her family."⁵⁹ Fox's words must have struck a chord with Margaret, for he stayed on a number of days, debating with the rector again the following day. A few days later, Fox visited the parish church where the Fells attended and "asked liberty to speak."⁶⁰ Fell, writing about Fox's speech, comments that it "opened me so, that it cut me to the heart and then I saw clearly that we were all wrong. So I sat down in my pew again, and cried bitterly."⁶¹ After being thrown out of the church, Fox ended up back at Swarthmoor Hall, where "most of the household," including Margaret, "accepted the Quaker faith."⁶²

⁵⁶ Isabel Ross, *Margaret Fell, Mother of Quakerism 2nd Ed.* (York, England: William Sessions Book Trust, The Ebor Press, 1984), 10-16.

⁵⁷ Spann, 65.

⁵⁸ Ross, 10.

⁵⁹ *Journal*, 114.

⁶⁰ Ross, 11.

⁶¹ Margaret Fell, *Journal Leeds I*, lxxii, quoted in Ross, 11.

⁶² Ross, 66.

Ross points out the obvious tension in Margaret's situation, as nearly three weeks passed before her husband returned home to hear that "a great disaster had happened at his home that his wife and children and household had been bewitched by a traveling preacher."⁶³ Fortunately for the Quaker cause, Judge Fell also listened to Margaret and the other Friends who came to her support.⁶⁴ Within a few days, the Judge had sided with his wife and with the Quakers, offering the Hall at Swarthmoor as a meeting place for worship.⁶⁵ While he never officially became a Quaker, his generosity and hospitality concerning the use of Swarthmoor Hall is generally understood to display his approval and "protection" of the movement.⁶⁶

With Margaret's conversion, Swarthmoor Hall quickly became the new center for the developing Quaker movement. Unlike Hooten and Fox, Fell had family ties keeping her at home, and thus engaged in a "different kind of work."⁶⁷ Ross explains:

She was for the first few years tied to her home and her family, but by her hospitality, her writings, her wide correspondence and her wisdom, she not only spread the knowledge of the Quaker interpretation of Christianity, but gave unity and fellowship to a scattered company of men and women of very varied background and experience.⁶⁸

This work of "correspondence" blossomed into a maternal role for Margaret, who through her work and communications would come to be known as "the nursing mother

⁶³ Ibid., 14.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 14-15.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 15. Judge Fell is quoted as having said, "You may meet here, if you will."

⁶⁶ William C. Braithwaite, *The Beginnings of Quakerism* (Cambridge: University Press, 1961), 104.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 32.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 32-33.

of the Church.”⁶⁹ In addition to her letters, she also authored many epistles, pamphlets, and treatises addressed to the Friends community and to society at large.⁷⁰

Fell’s literary career stands as remarkable among other women of her time. Illiteracy was the norm, and researchers believe in the early seventeenth century less than eleven percent of women were even able to sign their own name. While this improved to around thirty percent by 1690, there were some sections of England where there simply were no literate women at all.⁷¹ But what truly made Margaret a powerful woman was her passionate belief in the Quaker message. Her own words speak volumes:

That sight and convincement that God had opened in me continued with me, and I grew in it, and many more was convinced besides me, and a great astonishment there was in the country. But the Truth grew and increased amongst us, and the Lord’s eternal power seized upon many . . . and we kept our integrity and met together at our house at Swarthmoor with my husband’s consent. . . . and the priests or confessors in our parts began to write against us. And George Fox being gone out of the country, Friends brought things to me, and I answered them. And I was but young in the Truth, yet I had a perfect and a pure Testimony of God in my heart for God and his Truth. And I believe I could at that day have laid my life down for it. And I was very zealous in it.⁷²

In addition to her obvious passion, this excerpt also illustrates Margaret’s growing perception as a leader and an authority in the movement. This would only strengthen with time.

Following her husband’s death in 1658, Fell endured increasing persecution. Not only was there financial hardship with the loss of his provision, but the loss of his

⁶⁹ Spann, 65.

⁷⁰ Emmott, *The Story of Quakerism*, 37. Also, see Braithwaite’s *The Beginnings of Quakerism*, 132-136.

⁷¹ David Cressy, *Literacy and the Social Order* quoted in Adrian Davies, *The Quakers in English Society, 1655-1725* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 118-119.

⁷² Spence MSS, III, 135, 124. Quoted in Ross, 36.

protection in the religious arena was sorely felt.⁷³ Yet Margaret's passion did not falter. Brought before the court and threatened with the loss of her property and life imprisonment, she is quoted as replying, "I must keep my conscience clear, however I may suffer."⁷⁴ Indeed, she was imprisoned and forfeited her property. Not surprisingly, Margaret continued her letter writing at an even more feverish pace from prison. In the years following her husband's death, she wrote letters to "the Council and Officers of the Army and every Member of Parliament."⁷⁵

More will be said of Fell's work in the 1660s, so only a few highlights are selected here. Eventually, she was released from prison and regained her estate just over a decade after she was first imprisoned.⁷⁶ Her story includes an eventual marriage to Fox, although they spent relatively little time together due to continual imprisonments and travels for the sake of the movement. Fell outlived Fox, surviving into her eighties to see the beginnings of religious toleration toward Friends. One of the most noteworthy documents Fell wrote was "Women's Speaking Justified," which picks up where Fox left off concerning arguments supporting the Friends' egalitarian practice. She writes at length, using numerous biblical and logical arguments, none more straightforward than this pronouncement:

Those that speak against the Power of the Lord, and the Spirit of the Lord speaking in a Woman, simply by reason of her Sex, or because she is a Woman, not regarding the Seed, and Spirit, and Power that speaks in her; such speak

⁷³ Ross, 115-124.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 38.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 41.

⁷⁶ Spann, 67.

against Christ and his Church, and are of the Seed of the Serpent.⁷⁷

This kind of boldness made her a strong communicator and a strong figure in the developing movement. So important was Fell to the Friends cause, one historian remarks, “without the mention of Margaret Fox of Swarthmoor Hall, the history of Friends cannot be adequately written.”⁷⁸

Summary

Elizabeth Hooten and Margaret Fell stand out as archetypes for women Friends who would follow because of their incredible work and passion for the Quaker message. Though each took a different path, both modeled how an influential Quaker woman looked, acted, sounded, and wrote. In their preaching, traveling, writing and suffering, they became in flesh what Fox must have imagined in theory: women released to minister to the church without hindrance of gender exclusivity. But what would the Quaker woman look like in the decades of institutionalization? Would the Women’s Meeting be a place where future Hootens and Fells would rise to service and influence in the church, or would the radical Quaker female prophet and the powerful Quaker leader be silenced and lost behind the rising edifice of institution and the subtle backlash against women? These issues are examined addressed in the subsequent chapters using the story, factors, and outcomes of the Women’s Meeting.

⁷⁷ Margaret Fell, *Women’s Speaking Justified, Proved, and Allowed of by the Scriptures, All such as speak by the Spirit and Power of the Lord Jesus. And how Women were the first that Preached the Tidings of the Resurrection of Jesus, and were sent by Christ’s own Command, before he Ascended to the Father*. Online at <http://www.qhpress.org/texts/fell.html> accessed 04.15.06.

⁷⁸ Spann, 65.

Chapter 5

THE STORY OF THE WOMEN'S MEETING

Historians disagree about the exact date and origin of the separate Women's Meeting. In fact, one concludes, "the dearth of evidence precludes a decisive settlement of this issue."⁷⁹ The predominant "tradition" has been to see Fox as the initiator and creator of the Women's Meeting.⁸⁰ This tradition, represented in the standard history of Braithwaite, relies heavily on Fox's own *Journal*, and has recently been challenged by alternate interpretations.⁸¹ Particularly, the role of Margaret Fell in the creation of the Women's Meeting is "reevaluated" by Bonnelynn Kunze in her *Margaret Fell and the Rise of Quakerism*.⁸² This issue will be revisited in chapter seven, but what follows here is a rough outline of the story of the Women's Meeting, assembled from the various histories available.

According to Anna Spann, the first recorded meeting of women in the Society of Friends occurred in 1663. She cites a comment from Edward Burroughs who claims this meeting came about in London because "the men could not care for those in need and visit the sick as well as the women could and that they should have a meeting for these things."⁸³ A passage from *The London Yearly Meeting During 250 Years* explains:

⁷⁹ Kunze, 147.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 143.

⁸¹ See Kunze, 143-150 for an excellent summary of the various traditions concerning the rise of the Women's Meeting.

⁸² Ibid., 143.

⁸³ Spann 17.

This was the very occasion of the first setting up of that meeting of women, which hath continued for the body, and been happy and prosperous in the work for which it was appointed; and it in the same manner ordered in the authority of Christ, to be continued in the service aforesaid.⁸⁴

Spann points out, however, that women likely met separately but in conjunction with the Men's Meeting as early as the late 1650s, but the "exact date of the first meeting is uncertain."⁸⁵ These meetings are clearly evidenced by comments from William Crouch in 1660:

Some ancient Women Friends did meet together to consider what appertained to them, as their most immediate care and concern, to inspect circumstances and conditions of such who were imprisoned upon Truth's account and to provide things needful to supply their wants.⁸⁶

Other historians agree with Spann concerning these "unofficial" meetings of women. According to an epistle written by Mary Elson, separate women's meetings began in London around 1656 or 1657.⁸⁷ The meeting she describes was not created by the men's meeting, but rather was initiated by the women themselves in order to "do good to all, but especially to the Household of Faith."⁸⁸ According to Elson's record, the Men's Meeting then sent representatives to the Women's Meeting to express their unity, saying "they would be ready to help and assist us in anything we should desire of them for Truth's Service."⁸⁹

⁸⁴ *London Yearly Meeting During 250 Years* (London: Society of Friends, London Yearly Meeting, 1919), 97.

⁸⁵ Spann, 15.

⁸⁶ *London Yearly Meeting During 250 Years*, 95.

⁸⁷ Mary Elson, Epistle circa 1680, quoted in Kunze, 145.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 145.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 146.

William Beck and T. Frederick Ball, in their nineteenth century text, *The London Friends' Meetings*,⁹⁰ point out two additional examples of early Women's Meetings. One of these meetings, known as the women's Box meeting, came to control considerable means and distributed them without being "accountable to any beyond its own collective authority as to how and where the money should be spent."⁹¹ A second "separate" meeting, called the Women's Two-Weeks Meeting existed in London, serving the poor and imprisoned and receiving "its funds from the men's meeting and from its own internal collections."⁹² A common theme in each scholarly tradition is the Meetings' active care for the poor, sick and imprisoned throughout London.

Communication clearly existed between the Men's and Women's Meetings, each keeping the other aware of matters that would fall into the other's purview.⁹³ An optimistic summary, recorded in the *London Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends*, observes that eventually, ". . . things were carried on with cheerfulness and brotherly kindness in the infancy of the Church . . . and afterwards as the Truth grew and prospered . . . the Meetings came, through the providence of God, to be settled in that order and method as at this Day."⁹⁴ Just how these meetings came to be settled is, as has been noted, a question that will be revisited and is yet without a definite answer within scholarly circles.

⁹⁰ William Beck and T. Frederick Ball, *The London Friends Meetings: showing the rise of the Society of Friends in London ; its progress and the development of its discipline ; with accounts of the various meeting-houses and burial-grounds, their history and general associations / compiled from original records and other sources* (London: F. Bowyer Kitto, 1869).

⁹¹ Beck and Ball, quoted in Kunze, 146.

⁹² Ibid., 146-147.

⁹³ *London Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends* (London: Friends House, 1977), 95.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 95.

What can be stated clearly is that these early “spontaneous” Women’s Meetings would eventually become a staple of the Quaker organizational structure. In 1666, George Fox was released from Scarborough Prison and went about setting up monthly meetings in London. Among these were meetings for both men and women. Remarkably similar to his early openings, Fox claims to be “moved of the Lord” to set up these meetings:

And then I was moved of the Lord God to set up and establish five Monthly Meetings of men and women in the city of London . . . And the Lord opened to me and let me see what I must do, and how I must order and establish the Men’s and Women’s Monthly and Quarterly Meetings in all the nation, and write to other nations, where I came not, to do the same.⁹⁵

Fox spent the following decade setting up this structure of meetings for both men and women. Traveling to Barbados and then on to Jamaica and the Americas, Fox “settled Meetings,” and “advised Friends . . . to have as many Women’s Monthly and Quarterly Meetings as they have Men’s.”⁹⁶ Before returning to England in 1673, he attended the Yearly Meeting for all New England, recording:

[the meeting] lasted six days, the first four days being general public meetings for worship, to which an abundance of other people came . . . These public meetings over, the men’s meeting began which was large, precious and weighty. The day following was the women’s meeting, which also was large and very solemn. These two meetings being for the ordering of the affairs of the Church, many weighty things were opened, and communicated to them, by way of advice, information, and instruction in the services relating there unto; that all might be kept clean, sweet and savoury amongst them. In these, several men’s and women’s meetings for other parts were agreed and settled, to take care of the poor, and other affairs of the Church, and to see that all who professed Truth according to the glorious gospel of God.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ *Journal*, 511.

⁹⁶ Fox, quoted in Spann, 19.

⁹⁷ Fox, quoted in Spann, 20.

Despite Fox's concerted effort, it seems the Women's Meeting was slow to take hold in many cases.⁹⁸ The men's Yearly Meeting⁹⁹ published official endorsement of the Women's Meeting numerous times: first in 1675, then again in 1691, in 1707, and as late as 1745.¹⁰⁰ Changes were slow in coming. In 1697, the Yearly Meeting, men only, "granted the women ministers the privilege of having a gathering during the sessions of that body and were given liberty to sit with the men in the meetings of the Ministers."¹⁰¹ Yet even where the Women's Monthly Meeting and other joint meetings were established, there was no Yearly Meeting for women until 1759. Four years prior, the Quarterly Women's Meeting in York sent a request to the London Yearly Meeting, men only, that there might be a Women's Yearly Meeting. The men took a few years to respond favorably, but in 1759, the women met in their first Yearly Meeting at Devonshire House in London.¹⁰²

From this time until 1880, Quakers generally followed this pattern: wherever Men's Monthly, Quarterly, and Yearly Meetings were established, there were also Monthly, Quarterly and Yearly Women's Meetings. Spann writes, "Greater cooperation

⁹⁸ Braithwaite, *Second Period of Quakerism*, 274.

⁹⁹ The Modern Friends system of Meetings is comprised of local weekly, monthly, and yearly meetings. A weekly meeting usually comprises a local congregation while the monthly meeting consists of a number of Friends from the weekly meetings in a certain city or area. Some variation exists on the use of Monthly or Quarterly Meetings of this type both geographically and historically. Out of the various monthly and quarterly meetings, representatives are chosen to attend the yearly meeting which cares for all Friends in a given region or country. In some cases, a Five-Years meeting is observed where friends from across the globe gather. Each meeting may appeal to its direct "superior" for advice or help with specific situations.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 274.

¹⁰¹ Spann, 21.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 22.

was gradually extended between the Men's and Women's Meetings,"¹⁰³ as evidenced by their "interchange of visits, and by the appointment of joint committees and conferences."¹⁰⁴ She then succinctly summarizes the eventual fall of the Women's Meeting as a separate entity.

In 1895, a large committee of men and women recommended that the sexes share equally in the meetings of the Church. After this time they held their meetings jointly, except in their temperance and missionary work. This was not wholly satisfactory, and a decade later a complete merger took place. In 1907, the Women's Yearly Meeting in London disbanded as a separate organization. Since 1908, the Men's and Women's Yearly Meetings have been held together . . . Since the two meetings have united, the women have shared in the official business relationship, as have the men. The first woman clerk of the merged Yearly Meetings was appointed in 1918.¹⁰⁵

The Women's Meeting, wherever it took hold, offered autonomy and leadership experience to Quaker women. The women, just like the men, had a clerk, distributed funds, took minutes, and sought the leading of the Spirit through silent worship. Margaret Hope Bacon calls these Women's Meetings the "first instance of Protestant women's participation in church business," and notes that in the meeting, "Quaker women learned to rely on their own strength and to develop their own talents together."¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Ibid., 24

¹⁰⁴ *London Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends*, 115.

¹⁰⁵ Spann, 25.

¹⁰⁶ Margaret Hope Bacon, *Mothers of Feminism: The Story of Quaker Women in America* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), 43.

Chapter 6

THEOLOGICAL AND SOCIOLOGICAL FACTORS

Women's Meetings as Part of the Larger Organizational Process

To speak of the factors that led to the rise of the Women's Meeting without talking about the Friends process of institutionalization in general is impossible. They are simply too closely associated and in some cases they were one and the same. The first Yearly Meeting for Friends occurred in London around 1658, and as noted, the informal Women's Meetings may have begun even earlier. During the late 1660s as meetings were settled across England and across the globe, Men's and Women's Meetings were both part of the structural pattern that made up the Quaker Faith. Two specific factors must be named in Friends' decisions to implement the organization structure that included the Women's Meeting. The first factor is the confusion and questions raised by the actions of "rogue" Friends, the second is increased persecution and the felt need to provide ample care for those in prison.

Disgrace and Dispute

In the 1650s and 60s, numerous scandals involving well-known Friends and internal theological disputes that threatened the unity of the movement functionally brought Quakers to a place of confusion when the exact nature of Friends theology and practice were concerned. The questions were amassing almost too quickly to be answered. What kinds of beliefs do Quakers have in common? What practices are non-negotiable because they identify Friends as a movement and which practices should be held loosely as more cultural than universal? Is there a line when it comes to outlandish

behavior on the part of those functioning as prophet or preacher in the movement? And, most importantly, who has the authority to answer these questions?

The most public of these “scandals” was that of James Nayler. Born before Fox in 1617, he met the Quaker founder in 1651, a year after finishing service in the English army. While Fox’s *Journal* records the meeting as the “convincement” of Nayler, the possibility that Fox’s “views coincided with those Nayler already held” seems more likely.¹⁰⁷ According to William Bittle, Nayler had already experienced success as a preacher during his years in the service and would come to receive a “call” from God into the ministry apart from his meetings with Fox.¹⁰⁸ Nayler did go on to partner with Fox, assisting in the transformation of Swarthmoor Hall into the new Quaker hub and traveling with Fox on various journeys. By 1655, Nayler was “approaching a peak in his career” as his fame and notoriety spread.¹⁰⁹ Described by one historian as an “imposing personage and an eloquent speaker,” Nayler may have actually “become the leading figure in the new movement” had he not taken “leave of his senses.”¹¹⁰

The acts in question occurred on October 24th, 1656. Varying accounts have at least this much in common: Nayler rode into Bristol in a scene seemingly intended to portray Christ entering Jerusalem; those who traveled with him sang songs and laid their garments down in front of him as he rode. Some suggest this was an intended “sign”

¹⁰⁷ William G. Bittle, *James Nayler, 1618-1660: A Quaker Indicated by Parliament* (York, England: William Sessions; with Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1986), 8.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹¹⁰ Punshon, 74-75.

while others see Nayler as playing a more “passive” role in the whole ordeal.¹¹¹ The demonstration did not sit well with the thousand or so Quakers in Bristol, none of whom came out to participate,¹¹² nor did it sit well with the government who took the whole group into custody.

The matter of charging and punishing Nayler was passed on from Bristol to Parliament, which was then forced to decide his fate. Punshon summarizes Nayler’s punishment and the enormous fallout for Friends.

After considerable debate, and almost certainly illegally, the House of Commons decided that it possessed the independent jurisdiction to punish Nayler. On 17 December 1656 he was pilloried for two hours in the Palace Yard at Westminster and then whipped through the streets to the Exchange in the City of London. . . . On 27 December he was pilloried again in the City, his tongue was bored through with a hot iron and his forehead branded with the letter B. He was returned to Bristol, exposed to ridicule and beaten again there, and imprisoned indefinitely in solitary confinement. Friends were mortified by this whole episode.¹¹³

Nayler would eventually reconcile with Friends upon his release from prison, but the damage was done. Punshon records:

The whole episode raised fundamental questions about the effectiveness of the Quaker movement. . . . The tension between individual leadings and the authority of the group, both parts of ‘Truth’ had to be faced. The weaknesses of the system of a loosely linked network of meetings co-ordinated by a traveling ministry were showing up, and in the period 1655-1660 the first moves can be discerned towards a greater co-ordination of effort and activity.¹¹⁴

In addition to supplying the impulse toward institutionalization, the episode with Nayler also functioned to paint Quaker women in a negative light. On the road to Bristol with Nayler were three notable women disciples: Martha Simmonds, Hannah Stranger,

¹¹¹ Vipont, 57.

¹¹² Vipont, 57.

¹¹³ Punshon, 76.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 76-77.

and Dorcas Erbury.¹¹⁵ One historian described them as “women of much enthusiasm but weak judgment.”¹¹⁶ The first of these had just prior expanded the developing rift between Fox and Nayler by visiting Fox in jail, singing in his face and taunting him, “telling him that he must yield to James Nayler, for his heart was rotten.”¹¹⁷ The last of these had fainted in prison and “afterward declared that James Nayler had raised her from the dead.”¹¹⁸ Scenes in which Nayler’s followers or “admirers” would kneel before him singing “Holy, holy, holy!” were becoming almost as commonplace as the letters he received “full of adulation, one even calling him ‘the everlasting Son of Righteousness.’”¹¹⁹

Far from the archetype embodied by Hooten and Fell, these women were seen as swooning after their leader and were even accused of having “bewitched” Nayler.¹²⁰ This “group of women” which had begun to “disrupt meetings and act in a manner that the rest of Friends found scandalous” were now considered among those who must shoulder the blame for Nayler’s fall.¹²¹ Just a decade earlier, Quaker women were thought of as valiant and brave, traveling and preaching the Truth just like the men. Now, in the aftermath of James Nayler, Quaker women were suspect and dangerous. The underlying feeling

¹¹⁵ Vipont, 57.

¹¹⁶ Emmott, *The Story of Quakerism*, 156.

¹¹⁷ Ibid. 56.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Punshon, 75.

¹²¹ Ibid., 75.

toward women Friends was almost unavoidable: they could even turn a good Quaker man bad.

Approximately one year after Nayler was released from prison, a letter arrived in England from John Perrot, a well-respected Quaker who had been imprisoned in Rome at the hands of the Inquisition.¹²² The letter was addressed to Friends who observed the custom of removing their hat during prayer. “. . . if any friend be moved of the Lord God to pray in the congregation . . . without taking off the hat, or the shoes, let him do so in the fear and name of the Lord.”¹²³ When Perrot physically arrived in England in 1661, he went on to suggest that this custom, as well as other “outward forms” observed by Friends were not only suspect but should be avoided. These included forms in worship, any judging one of the other, and finally the worship meeting itself.¹²⁴ Emmott records a pamphlet published by Perrot that claimed he had an “express commandment from the Lord God of Heaven . . . to bear a sure testimony against the custom and tradition.”¹²⁵ This claim of a “new and higher revelation” from Perrot attacked even the practice of holding meetings at specific times and places in the name of being led solely by the Inner Light.¹²⁶

With the wounds from Nayler’s fall still so fresh, it is not surprising that Perrot was treated “with severity” by Fox and other established Friends leaders.¹²⁷ In *John*

¹²² Mack, 270.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 270-271.

¹²⁵ Emmott, *The Story of Quakerism*, 175.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 175.

Perrot: Early Quaker Schismatic, Kenneth Carrol remarks that Fox's "fear of Perrot as a sort of 'Nayler risen from the dead'" may have contributed to the "hard" response Perrot received.¹²⁸ In letters and speeches, Fox "accused him of writing in Cain's spirit, betraying the children of God to persecution, throwing his 'dung and excrements' among Friends."¹²⁹ Fox's language may seem harsh, but historians make no mistake about the critical nature of this moment in Quaker history. Emmott writes, "Perrot's teaching included the denial of all human arrangements, . . . and would have resulted in the rapid disintegration of Quakerism."¹³⁰ Citing the Perrot party's unwillingness even to shake hands, as had become the Quaker custom, Carroll notes, "How could another feel that much talked about love and unity when heads remained covered as he prayed and his outstretched hand was ignored or rejected?"¹³¹ Perrot eventually left England and sailed for the Americas, signaling a type of defeat of his ideology, but the ramifications of his questions and claims would continue to haunt Friends for years to come.

Just like the episode with Nayler, the confrontation with Perrot in 1661 raised confusion among Friends and exposed the need for both doctrinal clarification and strong central leadership. The fallout from these successive incidents may be difficult to

¹²⁷ Mack, 270.

¹²⁸ Kenneth Lane Carroll, *John Perrot: Early Quaker Schismatic* (London: Friends Historical Society, 1971), vii.

¹²⁹ George Fox, *Hidden Things brought to the light* quoted in Mack, 271.

¹³⁰ Emmott, *The Story of Quakerism*, 175-176.

¹³¹ Carroll, 59.

underestimate. Mack writes that Perrot's defeat "did little to resolve the confusion he had wrought."¹³² She concludes,

Perrot's disgrace, coming so soon after that of Nayler, must have caused the ground to shake, for a moment, under Friends' feet, for if men like these were capable of misinterpreting God's message, surely an ordinary friend . . . must have been ready to doubt the authenticity of her own small testimony.¹³³

In this sense, the negative impact of Perrot was similar to that of Nayler. It seemed more and more necessary for the leadings of individuals to be subject to some sort of oversight in order to prevent instances like these. Emmott declares outright, "One result of this controversy was that it made Friends realize the necessity of subordinating individual to corporate judgment."¹³⁴

A key text from William Penn in 1673 highlights the Quaker awareness of the possibility of one of their own being led astray, even while wholeheartedly believing him or herself to be in the right. In *Judas and the Jews Combined Against Christ and His Followers*, he writes:

In short, that a man may follow a wrong spirit when he thinks he follow the right; and though he ought to follow the light and spirit, yet is to be judged when he does not act thereby (though he may think he doth) by such as walk thereby.¹³⁵

Not only is Penn arguing for following the Light and the Spirit, he also speaks of the need for the community of those who "walk thereby," to judge and confirm such a leading. Here again, the individual must submit to the collective sense of the community, even in matters that he or she believes to have been led directly by God.

¹³² Mack, 272.

¹³³ Ibid., 272.

¹³⁴ Emmott, *The Story of Quakerism*, 176.

¹³⁵ William Penn, *Judas and the Jews Combined Against Christ and His Followers*, quoted in Mack, 301.

A final similarity to the episode with Nayler lies in the subtle association of Quaker women with those “in the wrong.” Elizabeth Hooten, herself an archetype for women Friends, wrote a telling letter to the community in which she condemned Perrot’s party and specifically the women who had bought into his ideology.

Your bawling women come . . . in a wailing manner in defiance of the army of the living God . . . For you do not only envy George Fox whom God hath set as a pillar in his temple because he hath stood fast from the beginning . . . but your enmity is against God . . .¹³⁶

She goes on to compare Perrot’s party with the Ranters, an activist religious/political movement contemporary to the rise of the Quakers. This comparison is clearly not a compliment; rather it is a stunning rebuke to those who would threaten either the unity or the reputation of Friends at this touchy moment in their development. While her letter clearly addresses Friends in general, her explicit reference to the women of Perrot’s party sounds a dubious tone for Quaker women who were seen just a decade prior as valiant leaders among the first Publishers of Truth.

The net result of episodes like that of Nayler and disputes like those of Perrot was a crumbling confidence in the loosely organized Quaker sense of authority. While a Friend’s “weightiness” or reputation used to provide some slack or at least the benefit of the doubt, the reality was becoming clear that even leading Quakers could go too far. And while disagreements used to be solved simply by appealing to the Inner Light which illumined all Quakers to the Truth, it was becoming clear that some areas remained murky enough to require some sort of arbitration to resolve the intense but honest differences of opinion. Mack paints a vivid picture of this trend, “personal reputation and

¹³⁶ Elizabeth Hooten *To Friends*, quoted in Mack, 265.

Inner conviction were castles in the sand; good Friends could err!"¹³⁷ If this was so, who could stand as judge over these matters? How could Friends maintain their belief in the Spirit's universal teaching to all believers yet also reign in the splintering movement?

Another result of the Nayler and Perrot incidents was a growing distrust of sorts in Quaker women. In the 1640s and 50s Friends enthusiastically answered the criticism and persecution heaped on them because of their prominent women. But now the attitudes from society at large seemed to be finding their way into the movement itself as prominent Friends began to debate the proper places and roles for women. In practice, a patriarchal ideology was already beginning to take hold in the early business meetings in which women had marginal influence at best.

By the early 1660s the Quakers were feeling the need to find organizational answers to these problems. How would they ensure the subjugation of the individual to the community without losing their emphasis on the individual leading of the Spirit or Inner Light? How would they deal with societal pressures from within and without the community to subdue and control their women while at the same time continuing to emphasize the equal status of men and women before God and in the church? The answer Quakers chose was the system of Men's and Women's Meetings introduced by Fox.

Persecution

A second factor in Friends' decision to implement the organizational structure that contained the Women's Meeting is persecution. Since the beginning of the movement, Quakers faced constant and at times brutal persecution. As was alluded to in chapter one, the seventeenth century was a time of incredible instability in England, both

¹³⁷ Mack, 273.

politically and religiously. In 1625, the year after Fox's birth, Charles I ascended to the throne. A rift between Charles and Parliament, namely over which party would lay hold to greater power eventually erupted into civil war. The war ended in 1653 with the beginning of the "Protectorate" under Oliver Cromwell. The Puritans, of which many types existed in England, now had relative power, including the support of the state in the form of mandatory tithes. And while Cromwell was thought to be sympathetic to the Quakers, indeed meeting personally with Fox a number of times, his support of the more established Puritan churches put Friends in a difficult position. For a variety of reasons, discussed subsequently, Quakers were persecuted regularly under the Protectorate, but nothing would prepare them for the hardship that came in the 1660s.

In 1660, Charles II reclaimed the throne of England in what is known as the Restoration. While some believe Charles "had no wish to persecute" it seems he "easily gave way" to the wishes of Parliament and the persecution of Quakers continued.¹³⁸ In 1662, Parliament passed the Clarendon Code, also referred to as the Quaker Act, forbidding groups of five or more to meet for worship outside the established Church. Then, in 1664, the Conventicle Act was passed, giving the government further grounds on which they might imprison Friends. This intense persecution continued until 1687 and the Declaration of Indulgence by James II, granting religious toleration that would be finalized in the Toleration Act of 1689. These decades marked unparalleled persecution of religious non-conformists and in many cases, Quakers received the brunt of the punishment.¹³⁹

¹³⁸ Emmott, *The Story of Quakerism*, 11.

Several distinctions embraced by Quakers made them an easy target for persecution. They, like other non-conformist groups in England, had a general distaste for hierarchical relationships and sought to treat all men and women the same. Most notably, they addressed everyone using the informal “thee” and “thou” as opposed to various titles, which were used to show honor or reverence to cultural superiors. In many cases, this was enough to unnerve local judges and magistrates who had the authority to send Friends to prison. Quakers also refused to give what they referred to as “hat worship,”¹⁴⁰ that is the removal of one’s hat in the presence of a superior to show respect. This kind of distinction between one set of people, worthy of such an act, and others not so fortunate was an affront to the theological convictions which took hold among Friends following the openings of Fox described earlier. In addition to annoying those in power, these practices also caused many to lump Quakers together with the other groups, such as the Ranters and the Fifth Monarchists, who shared many of the same commitments. Thus, when one of these groups found themselves on the wrong side of the law, Friends were often mistakenly punished along with the offenders.¹⁴¹

In addition, Quakers took literally Jesus’ command against swearing oaths, both compounding previous persecution and creating new cause for suffering. In some cases, Friends were brought before a judge and charged with blasphemy, a common charge, but committed to prison instead for their refusal to swear an oath in court.¹⁴² Once this

¹³⁹ See Emmott, *The Story of Quakerism*, 42-60, Punshon, 81-92, and Braithwaite, *Second Period of Quakersim*, 21-54.

¹⁴⁰ Emmott, *The Story of Quakerism*, 43.

¹⁴¹ See Emmott, *The Story of Quakerism*, 72 and following.

¹⁴² Vipont, 41.

method of persecuting Friends was discovered, it quickly became an effective tool for “envious magistrates [who] made use of that oath as a snare to catch Friends in.”¹⁴³

Emmott records the fate of Francis Howgill, a prominent Quaker leader who was arrested in 1663 while “attending to his ordinary business in Kendal Market.”¹⁴⁴ When he was brought before the local magistrate, who happened to be located in a tavern, he naturally refused to take the oath of allegiance. While he “repeatedly stated that he was a loyal and peaceable man,” he was still sentenced to prison where he remained, suffering regular beatings, until his death over five years later.¹⁴⁵ This was not an uncommon story for Friends during these years.

Quakers also refused to pay the prescribed tithes to the state-supported Churches, claiming instead that preaching should be done free of charge, motivated solely by the leading of the Spirit. Many Friends were persecuted under existing vagrancy laws when they traveled to preach. However, the first and most common charge against Quakers was blasphemy. Fox himself was accused of blasphemy many times, most notably in 1652 when a warrant was issued for his arrest.¹⁴⁶ Judge Fell, who by this time had come to protect the Quaker movement, accompanied Fox to his trial. While “the evidence proved to be untrustworthy” and his release was secure, Fox could not resist the opportunity to preach.¹⁴⁷ Many who were present, including those there purely as spectators were

¹⁴³ George Fox, Quoted in Vipont, 41.

¹⁴⁴ Emmott, *The Story of Quakerism*, 45.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 45.

¹⁴⁶ Vipont, 40.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

convinced, such as Thomas Briggs, who went on to become “one of the early ‘Publishers of Truth’.”¹⁴⁸

Unfortunately for Friends, these moments of victory became few and far between as persecution increased. With the Restoration came hope for redress and initially Charles II seemed inclined to listen to the Quakers pleas. Margaret Fell was among those who traveled to London to speak to the King and the House of Lords. The King responded by releasing some seven hundred Friends who were imprisoned.¹⁴⁹ However, a “sudden rising of Fifth Monarchy Men in London” put a swift end to Friends’ hope for favor from high places.¹⁵⁰ Too similar in public perception to the Fifth Monarchists, the Quakers were immediately recipients of renewed persecution aimed at the non-conformist groups in general.¹⁵¹ Emmott records that “several thousand” Quakers were imprisoned in response to the uprising, many of whom “fell sick and died.”¹⁵²

The following years brought more of the same. The laws passed by Parliament in 1662 and 1664 made the persecution of Quakers even easier, and in many cases more severe. Fox and other key leaders spent the majority of their time in prison for various offenses and were the victims of regular violence from their jailers. The story of James Parnell serves as an extreme but poignant example of the persecution that Friends endured.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Emmott, *The Story of Quakerism*, 72.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid., 73.

At the age of sixteen Parnell visited Fox in prison and became convinced. Having been trained in literature, he became a “powerful preacher” throughout England.¹⁵³ However, his preaching was cut short in 1655 by his first jail sentence for disrupting a church meeting. He was then fined, according to Emmott, forty pounds for “contempt of the magistracy and ministry” and “sent back to prison until the fine should be paid.”¹⁵⁴ Unlike other prisoners, Parnell was not allowed visitors nor was he given a bed on which to sleep. Emmott tells of how he was regularly beaten and deprived of food, eventually being forced to sleep in a small hole in the wall.¹⁵⁵ William Sewel, a Quaker historian and contemporary of Parnell compared the hole to a “baker’s oven.”¹⁵⁶ He writes:

Being confined in the said hole, which was, as I remember about twelve foot high from the ground, and the ladder too short by six foot, he must climb up and down by a rope on a broken wall, which he was forced to do to fetch his victuals; for, though his friends would have given him a cord and a basket to draw up his victuals in, yet such was the malice of his keepers that they would not suffer this.¹⁵⁷

Parnell’s story ends tragically with a fall from his “hole” upon which he was presumed dead. Remarkably, he survived the fall and lived almost a year longer, being further confined to a smaller hole closer to the ground until his death.¹⁵⁸

This kind of regular and violent persecution had profound implications for the Quaker community, especially when related to the role of women and the rise of the

¹⁵³ Ibid., 49.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 50.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ William Sewel, *The History of the Rise, Increase, and Progress, of the Christian People Called Quakers Intermixed with Several Remarkable Occurrences* (London: Printed and sold by the assigns of J. Sowle, 1725), quoted in Emmott, *The Story of Quakerism*, 50.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Emmott, *The Story of Quakerism*, 50.

Women's Meeting. Namely, the sheer volume of prisoners created an overwhelming need for personal and pastoral care. If the story of seven hundred Quaker prisoners being released by Charles II at the beginning of the Restoration is accurate, it may be safe to assume that perhaps as many as a thousand Quakers were imprisoned at one time. Emmott places the total number of Quakers imprisoned between 1661 and the Toleration Act in 1689 at twelve thousand.¹⁵⁹ One could see how this burden might prove too much for a local business meeting and how a Women's Meeting would have helped care for these needs, specifically the prisoners, who might otherwise have fallen through the cracks. The Women's Two-Weeks' Meeting in London was specifically started to help "in visiting the sick, the prisoners and the poor."¹⁶⁰ This meeting, which would become "a model for other Women's Meetings later on" may have come about as a direct result of persecution, but it also signaled Fox's concern to "give women their right place of service in the church and to stir them up to take it."¹⁶¹

To understand the significance of this responsibility given to the Women's Meeting, the disparity between their time and ours must be distinguished. The prisons in seventeenth century England were nothing like those of the modern western world. Provision of food, bedding, clothing, and correspondence were not the duty of the prisons or the state, but rather of the friends and family of the prisoner who would come regularly to visit. And while prisoners faced the prospect of harsh guards who regularly used violent force, they were also given more freedom in many cases to write letters and visit

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 80.

¹⁶⁰ Elizabeth Braithwaite Emmott, *A Short History of Quakerism [earlier periods]* (New York, George H. Doran Company, 1923), 180.

¹⁶¹ Emmott, *A Short History*, 181.

with those who came to see them. In these ways, those Quakers who were imprisoned “were often dependent on their friends” for both physical and emotional care.¹⁶² As the Women’s Meeting spread throughout England and throughout the world, a growing majority of these visitors were female.

¹⁶² Emmott, *The Story of Quakerism*, 53.

Chapter 7

ARGUMENTS IN DEFENSE OF THE WOMEN'S MEETING

Having presented the factors that influenced Friends toward institutionalization, this thesis now examines the process of creating this structure, which was established in large part by Quaker founder, George Fox, and the new “mother” of the movement, Margaret Fell. In their efforts to establish this new system of meetings, Fox and Fell had to defend both a woman’s right to speak and prophesy in the church and a woman’s rightful place in caring for the needs and concerns of the church. As such, they would argue against those who opposed the spiritual liberty of women but also against the general tenor of societal attitudes toward women. Combating those who wished to repress women during worship was a relatively easier task, as the Friends’ position on these matters had been well established from the beginning. Nonetheless, this doctrine needed to be fleshed-out and strengthened among the Society in order to ensure a lasting commitment to egalitarian practice. The issue of defending women’s authority outside the meeting for worship, specifically in the governmental decisions made by the Women’s Meeting, would prove more difficult. Not only would they be arguing against “the common belief of the people,” they would also have to argue against those in their own movement who found the institution frightful and problematic for a host of reasons.

The Cultural Landscape

In framing this discussion, it becomes important to remember the place of women in seventeenth-century England. To begin with, English society at that time was not a kind place for women. Few were literate, and the lack of anesthesia and hygiene made

childbirth a likely death-sentence.¹⁶³ Working class women were likely to die of starvation and even upper-class women had only a forty-five percent chance of reaching their fifties.¹⁶⁴ In addition to these physical difficulties, seventeenth-century women faced a dominantly patriarchal culture filled with negative presuppositions about “the weaker sex.” Examples abound of the type of “latent misogyny”¹⁶⁵ that Mack identifies in Quaker men such as William Penn. Fox himself, when he condemns those who refuse to remove their hat in prayer, says they are “being like a company of women.”¹⁶⁶ William Penn, who was a staunch defender of the Women’s Meetings, did not choose to defend “ordinary women” in his new colony, where they, “along with infants and idiots,” were denied the right to own property.¹⁶⁷ Patriarchal attitudes were indeed the norm for the time, both without and within the Quaker movement.

More optimistic histories take this reality into account when they tell the story of the creation of the Women’s Meeting. Braithwaite calls the institution of the Women’s Meeting a “daring” venture that “taxed seventeenth-century feminine capacity to the utmost.”¹⁶⁸ Emmott suggests this initiative was “so far ahead of the thought of the times that we cannot be surprised that many women held back and were unwilling to take up their responsibilities, nor that those who responded to the call were subjected to severe

¹⁶³ Trevett, 3.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 5.

¹⁶⁵ Mack, 308.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 278.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 301.

¹⁶⁸ Braithwaite, *Second Period of Quakerism*, 274.

criticism.”¹⁶⁹ Braithwaite comments further, praising the advent of the Women’s Meeting as a “landmark in the movement for giving woman her true place of equal partnership with man.”¹⁷⁰ Russell points out this tension between Quaker belief and cultural expectations:

According to Quaker theory women were entitled to an equal place in all phases of the Society’s life and work, but the status of women in English society in the seventeenth century made the realization of this a slow process.¹⁷¹

Even though the process was indeed slow, Fox and Fell’s commitment to seeing the Women’s Meeting established did not waiver.

The Role and Theology of George Fox

Clearly, George Fox was intimately involved in the establishment of the Women’s Meeting. In fact, many historians see Fox as the main instigator of the Meetings, with an honest motivation to see women’s continued involvement in the Quaker movement.

Russell writes:

Fox realized that lack of experience in public affairs and modesty alike would prevent the adequate participation of the women in the affairs of the Society; and so he violated logical consistency in deference to actualities.¹⁷²

In other words, Fox knew that if men and women attended business meetings jointly, women would not speak up or serve the church as they ought because of cultural expectations and the desire to be “modest.” Therefore, he “violated” the early Quaker commitment to pure egalitarian practice by creating a separate Women’s Meeting in

¹⁶⁹ Emmott, *A Short History*, 181.

¹⁷⁰ Braithwaite, *Second Period of Quakerism*, 274.

¹⁷¹ Russel, 132.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 132.

order that women Friends might have, in actuality, the authority and opportunity which he envisioned them having in theory.

This argument, or some form of it, is common among Quaker historians and largely corroborated by Fox's own statements regarding the establishment of the Women's Meeting. In an Epistle titled, "An Exhortation to set up Women's Meetings," he writes:

Concerning the women's meetings; encourage all the women of families, that are convinced, and mind virtue, and love truth, and walk in it; that they may come up into God's service, that they may be serviceable in their generation, and in the creation, and come into the practice of the pure religion, which you have received from God, from above; that every one may come to know their duty in it, and their service in the power and wisdom of God. . . . And so that none may stand idle out of the vineyard, and out of the service, and out of their duty; for such will talk and tattle, and judge with evil thoughts, of what they in the vineyard say and do.¹⁷³

Fox seems sincere in his desire for women to be "serviceable," knowing "their duty" in creation and in the community of faith. He also seems to suggest that the Women's Meeting could functionally protect the movement from those that would "stand idle" with nothing to do except cause problems for the community. While this secondary motivation may be infused with the same latent misogyny described earlier, Fox obviously wants women to be involved in the Society's affairs, not idle or passive.

A second passage furthers this view of Fox as sole initiator. In another epistle, written "To all the Women's Meetings," Fox's commitment to women's continued activity through the Women's Meeting is evidenced as stemming from his unique anthropological reading of the Genesis account of the Fall. He reveals, perhaps more succinctly here than anywhere else, this theological twist.

¹⁷³ George Fox, *The Works of George Fox, Vol. 7*, T.H.S. Wallace, Ed. (State College, PA: New Foundation Publications, 1990), 283.

For man and woman were helps-meet in the image of God, and in righteousness and holiness, in the dominion, before they fell; but after the fall in the transgression, the man was to rule over his wife; but in the restoration by Christ, into the image of God, and his righteousness and holiness again, in that they are helps-meet, man and woman, as they were before the fall.¹⁷⁴

Since men and women who had been restored by Christ could now relate on a pre-fall “help-mate” level, women should be encouraged, urged even, to work alongside men in the service of the gospel. “Take your possession of that which you are heirs of,” he instructs, for “women are to take up the cross daily, and follow Christ daily, as well as the men; and so to be taught of him their prophet, and fed of him their shepherd, . . .”¹⁷⁵ Just as early Quaker women were encouraged to travel and preach with the men, now women Friends were being encouraged by Fox to take their place alongside the men in the form of Women’s Meetings.

A final piece of support for this view comes from Fox’s response to those who suggested it was unnecessary for women to meet separately. A letter from Fox in 1675 acknowledges “There are some dark spirits that say, that for women to meet together to worship God, apart from the men, is monstrous and ridiculous.”¹⁷⁶ A “more complete”¹⁷⁷ version of this letter, recorded in Kendal Early Record Book continues, “which women cannot for civility and modesty’s sake speak amongst men of women’s matters, neither can modest men desire it, and none but Ranters will desire to look into women’s

¹⁷⁴ George Fox, *The Works of George Fox, Vol. 8*, T.H.S. Wallace, Ed. (State College, PA: New Foundation Publications, 1990), 39.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Fox’s Letter, 30th Jan. 1675 in Kendal Early Record Book, p. 59, Quoted in Braithwaite, *Second Period of Quakerism*, 274.

¹⁷⁷ Braithwaite makes this distinction in *Second Period of Quakerism*, footnote, 274.

matters.”¹⁷⁸ At first glance, this passage may seem nothing more than another case of latent misogyny, but Fox is making a subtle point that must not be missed. Not only does “modesty” preclude women from over-speaking in the general business meetings, but it also, according to Fox, precludes men from being present when women are assembled to look into whatever is meant by “women’s matters.” Since “civil” men cannot be present when women are attending to these “matters,” Friends are left with only two choices: either create and endorse the separate Women’s Meeting or deny the community the ability to properly attend to these matters. The argument, while subtle, must have put those opposed to the women’s meeting on the defensive. Clearly, Fox wanted women to get and stay involved in the Society of Friends, and the Women’s Meeting was the avenue he thought best to accomplish this purpose.

Some, however, disagree about the singularity of Fox’s motives. They argue that the political turmoil within the society and the relationship between Fox and Fell necessitate the presence of numerous motives and creative interchange of ideas between the Quaker founder and his wife. Mack points out that those who would oppose Fox’s system recognized that the “new women’s meeting was unquestionably a political institution.”¹⁷⁹ Those who opposed Fox’s system reacted with the strongest criticism to these political implications, namely the Women’s Meeting’s role in church government. This subject will be revisited in the next chapter as the exact nature of this opposition is examined.

¹⁷⁸ Fox’s Letter, Quoted in Braithwaite, *Second Period of Quakerism*, 274.

¹⁷⁹ Mack, 296.

The Influence of Margaret Fell

The primacy of Margaret Fell, however, in the institution of the Women's Meeting cannot be passed over at this juncture. As was alluded to earlier, some scholars have more recently argued that Fell was at least a co-creator of the Women's Meeting alongside Fox and quite possibly its "chief architect."¹⁸⁰ Her *Women's Speaking Justified* was published in 1666, showing an early and strong commitment to her egalitarian beliefs. Kunze points out several clear historical evidences of Fell's influence on the process. First, she notes that Fell was imprisoned at Lancaster Castle from 1664 to 1668, where Fox himself was imprisoned until 1666. "Their concurrent imprisonment at Lancaster Castle gave these two leaders an extended period of tangible contact . . ." she writes, noting that only shortly after Fox's release in 1666 did he first publicly endorse the Women's Meeting.¹⁸¹ Fox's next public endorsement of the Meetings was in 1669, "the same year Fox and Fell were married."¹⁸² Kunze argues the timing of these endorsements were not coincidences, instead she paints a compelling picture of the possible collaboration between Fox and Fell, which produced the eventual Quaker structure and the Women's Meeting.

George Fox was an itinerant, charismatic preacher who spent most of his adult life wandering about England and America, while Margaret Fell maintained her home base at Swarthmoor and hammered out, year in and year out . . . an organizational format that worked on the practical level and that borrowed from the experience and organization of the London Quaker women's meetings. It is reasonable to suggest that it was in keeping with Fell's personality, wealth, permanence of place, and organizational skills learned in the domestic sphere, that she, and not Fox, was the main ideologue and instigator of the women's meetings outside

¹⁸⁰ Kunze, 145.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 155.

¹⁸² Ibid.

London. There is strong evidence that she and Fox were cofounders of equal importance in the Quaker administrative structure.¹⁸³

One could certainly see how Fell would have influenced Fox, perhaps even providing the initial ideas and practical theology, especially following their marriage in 1669. Rather than looking to one or the other as the prime mover in the creation of the Women's Meeting, Fox and Fell must be seen together, as a team, as the origin of the meeting. Their theological and practical work propelled the system; each one's strengths proving essential in the process. Working from this construct, one can read Fox's claims in an honest manner, being "moved of the Lord" to establish the meetings, but also acknowledge Fell's rightful place as co-initiator and perhaps purposely behind-the-scenes architect.

This powerful partnership of Fox and Fell brought their collective theology to bear on the issue of women's role in the community. Fox's exhortations to setup the Women's Meetings, first in 1666, then in 1669, and then again in 1771 were each accompanied by theology and logic. He made clear that the goal for women was to "come up into God's service," but he also claimed to be explicitly "moved of the Lord" to set up the Women's Meeting.¹⁸⁴ Fox's theology was rooted in what Kunze calls "the restorationist principle," namely that "Women were no longer under the curse but were restored to become the mutual companions Adam and Ever were before the Fall."¹⁸⁵ For Fox, this meant not only that women could speak prophetically with the same voice and

¹⁸³ Ibid., 167.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 152-153.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 153.

authority as a man, but also that women could lead and administrate in the church, as was evidenced by the life and career of his now wife, Margaret Fell.

Fox's theology is revealed in his epistles as well. One such letter, written in 1672 points to the long tradition of prominent women in the biblical narrative including Deborah, Miriam, Pricilla and Mary Magdalene. He writes:

So in the church there were women instructors, and prophetesses, and daughter prophetesses in the church; and there were women disciples in the church, and women elders in the church, as well as men. So women are to keep the comely order of the gospel as well as men.¹⁸⁶

Four years later he published a more complete pamphlet on the subject, entitled, "The Station of Women in the Church." In it he writes:

And now, must not all receive the grace, and believe in the light, and receive this gospel, and walk and labor in it, both men and women, sons and daughters, old men and young, servants and handmaids. For the power and spirit of God gives liberty to all; for women are heirs of life as well as men, and heirs of grace, and of the light of Christ Jesus, as well as the men, as so stewards of the manifold grace of God. So all women, in all their assemblies in the time of the gospel . . . are to be encouraged, as they were in the time of the law, and to be stirred up in the wisdom of God to their diligence and service of God and Christ.¹⁸⁷

Just like her husband, Fell herself wrote extensively on the subject, and argued in favor the Women's Meeting on numerous occasions. Her *Women's Speaking Justified* is again helpful here. "God hath put no such difference between the Male and Female as man would make," she writes, arguing against the common reading of Paul's words in I Corinthians 14 and I Timothy 2.¹⁸⁸ She also put her theology into practice, establishing what Kunze claims was the "earliest women's meeting formed outside London" in her

¹⁸⁶ Samuel Tuke, *Selections from the Epistles of George Fox* quoted in Spann, *The Ministry of Women in the Society of Friends*, 5.

¹⁸⁷ *Journal*, 6.

¹⁸⁸ Fell, *Women's Speaking Justified*.

own home in 1671.¹⁸⁹ Kunze also suggests that later Women's Meetings may have been established according to the format that Fell forged at Swarthmoor in the years following.¹⁹⁰

Robert Barclay

While the team of Fox and Fell proved formidable enough to overcome opposition and establish the Women's Meeting, neither of them wrote anything that could rightly be called a systematic theology. For this, Friends would look to Fox and Fell's contemporary, Robert Barclay. A highly educated scholar, Barclay was convinced in 1663 after attending a Quaker worship meeting. He recalls:

When I came into the silent assemblies of God's people, I felt a secret power amongst them which touched my heart, and, as I gave way unto it, I found the evil weakening in me and the good raised up, and so I became thus knit and united with them, hungering more and more after the increase of this power and life.¹⁹¹

At age twenty-eight he wrote his *Apology*, which has since served as one of the chief systematic theologies among Friends writings. According to Spann, his writings clearly "preserve the early Quaker tradition concerning the ministry of women."¹⁹² Most significantly, Barclay included the arguments developed by Fox and Fell, which they used to support the institution of the Women's Meeting.

In his *Apology*, Barclay reiterates Fox's conviction that "theological schooling . . . does not bring a man one whit nearer to God" or "make a man any less wicked, or any

¹⁸⁹ Kunze, 156.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 157-168.

¹⁹¹ Robert Barclay, *Barclay's Apology* ed. Dean Friday (Newberg OR: The Barclay Press, 1991), 254.

¹⁹² Spann, 7.

more righteous, than he was.”¹⁹³ He also shows the same egalitarian commitments as Fox, but further develops and protects these beliefs over and against alternative interpretations of difficult scriptural passages. Of particular note is the section from his *Apology* titled “The Ministry of Women.”

Since male and female are one in Christ Jesus, and he gives his Spirit no less to one than to the other, we do not consider it in any way unlawful for a woman to preach in the assemblies of God’s people when god so moves her by his Spirit. Nor do we consider Paul’s reproof . . . to be in any way contrary to this doctrine. The same applies to 1 Tim 2:11-12 . . . It is clear that women prophesied and preached in the early Church, or else it would not have been appropriate for Peter to quote Joel (Acts 2:17) to the effect that ‘your sons and daughters shall prophesy.’ In fact, in the same epistle, Paul gives rules on how women should conduct themselves when preaching or praying publicly. This would obviously be contradictory if the other citation were construed in a larger sense than its context. Paul also speaks of a woman who labored with him in the work of the gospel.¹⁹⁴

Here, one sees a number of key developments in the Friends’ theology of women. There are numerous continuations of Fox’s ideology, from his belief in the equality of all persons in Christ to his recognition of scriptural precedence of women in various ministerial roles. However, and most importantly, there exists a development particular to Barclay; the ability to defend this belief in harmony with even the most difficult and controversial sections of the New Testament. He argues that Paul’s comments in 1 Corinthians 14:34 and in 1 Timothy 2 must be understood as contextual (historically and culturally) and must be read within the larger context of the epistle and of the New Testament as a whole. Any other option, according to Barclay, would be so “obviously contradictory” that it simply could not be believed.

¹⁹³ Barclay, 254.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 218.

Barclay picks up on the strength of Fox and Fell's practical arguments as well. He has seen women lead, teach and preach effectively. Women like Elizabeth Hooten and Margaret Fell had effectively modeled the possibility of strong women leading alongside their male counterparts. This praxis, he argues, must inform Friends' theology.

Finally, it has been observed how God in this day has effected the conversion of many souls through the ministry of women. He has also used them frequently to comfort the souls of his children. Certainly this demonstration of actual practice should place the question beyond controversy.¹⁹⁵

Barclay was both right and wrong in his optimistic assumption. On the one hand, his argument did indeed place the matter beyond controversy for the generations of Quakers that would follow. While the movement has at times struggled to adequately incarnate its beliefs in each cultural context, the theological position solidified by Barclay remains foundational for Friends worldwide. On the other hand, Barclay's thought may have been overly optimistic. Certainly the subsequent centuries of debate surrounding the issue of women in ministry in protestant circles in general seems unanticipated by Barclay. But even within the Quaker movement some saw a distinction between a practical theology that allowed women to teach and minister and the proposed system of meetings that included the Women's Meeting. Thus, as is illustrated in the following chapter, one could agree with Barclay that women ought to teach, preach, and speak, but still question Fox and Fell's Women's Meetings as proper forms of church government.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 219.

Chapter 8

OPPOSITION TO THE WOMEN'S MEETING

The new system of Men's and Women's meetings proposed by Fox was not accepted without opposition. There were those who, like Perrot, felt the system implied a hierarchy that infringed on the Quaker belief in the leading of the Spirit in *all* believers. In particular, the Women's Meeting met with severe opposition for a variety of reasons. The nature of this opposition and the response from Fox's party illustrate the various attitudes toward institutionalization in general and the Women's Meeting in particular.

Perhaps the most surprising feature of this opposition from a twenty-first-century perspective is that those opposed to the Women's Meetings were not in favor of including women in the monthly and yearly business meetings attended by the men. In other words, the voices speaking out against the Women's Meeting were anti-women rather than pro-women. It was Fox's party, including Margaret Fell, who fought for and eventually established these meetings by defending the role of women within the Society of Friends. In this sense, the story of the institutionalization of the Quakers defies the idealized picture of a young charismatic and egalitarian movement transitioning into a stale and hierarchical church whose structure suppresses its women. "Most curious of all," writes Mack, "it was the bureaucrats [Fox's party] who advocated the protection of the female ministry and the autonomous women's meeting, while the defenders of individual liberty instructed their women to stay at home and wash dishes."¹⁹⁶

While these voices of opposition may have been a relative minority, the issues they raised had to be addressed by the movement's leadership if the new system was to

¹⁹⁶ Mack 276.

take hold and the Women's Meeting firmly established. One such voice was Richard Smith, a Friend who wrote against the Women's Meeting in 1677.

Now it lyeth on your part to prove, that females were ever entrusted to look after the government of the church . . . that women had meetings separate and apart by themselves on purpose, as they have now here once a month, and one a quarter, as men . . . to look after . . . the church's business: for though I grant, those that have received a measure of God's spirit, may as it moves, prophesy, . . . according to their several gifts; yet every member hath not the same office.¹⁹⁷

Smith seems careful not to question a woman's right to prophesy, as led by the spirit, but is adamant in his opposition of women's involvement in the governance of the church.

He questions the historicity of this practice and seems convinced that some "gifts" are distributed to one gender and not the other.

Another Friend, William Mather, agrees with Smith in his objection to women's involvement in church government. He explains he is not against

a woman's declaring in a religious meeting, what god has done for her soul, by silently waiting at the feet of Jesus . . . Nor are we against women meeting by themselves, upon a particular occasion, but not monthly for government.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁷ Richard Smith, *The Light Unchangeable: and Truth and Good Order, Justified against Error and Disorder Being a Narrative of the Proceedings in the Meetings of Some Great Professors in Religion, in This County, Who Pretend More to Truth, Justice, and Righteousness, Than Others. With a Vindication of the Scriptures from Their Private Interpretation ... and Their Setting Up Womens Meetings* (London, 1677), 33.

¹⁹⁸ William Mather, *A Novelty: or, a Government of Women Distinct from Men, Erected Amongst Some of the People, Call'd Quakers. Detected in an Epistle, Occasionally Written to a Man-Judge, Upon a Young Man's Refusing (for Good Conscience Sake) to Submit to Their Authority in Marriage, Seeing That Relations and Friends Were Already Satisfied. To Which Is Added, a Lamentation for the Fall of so Many of That People. Published for No Other End, but to Deter All Honest Hearts of the Said People, from Erecting the Like Unscriptural Government. Tho' This May Not so Far Prevail with Such Women As Has a Secret Command of Their Husbands Purses; Together with Those Preachers That Reap Profit by Such a Female Government, As to Consent to the Disanulling the Same. Written by William Mather, a Dear Lover of the Said People, Who Has for Several Years Been Much Troubled, That Some of Them Should Fall from There Primitive Institution, As to Set Up Women's and Men's Meetings, As Guides in Government* (London: Printed for Sarah Howkins, in George-yard, Lumbard-street, 1694), 4-5, 9.

Again, the complaint seems to be with the regular meeting of women for church government. In particular, Mather objects to the Women's Meeting having authority over those who wish to be married in the Quaker movement.

Can there be greater imposers in the world, than those that judge all people, not to be of God, for not submitting to a female government in marriage? . . . Was not that eminent man, William Penn, ashamed to mention this frivolous government of women . . . fearing . . . the world would laugh at it, as indeed well they might, having never heard before, that a meeting of women must be advised with before marriage . . .¹⁹⁹

While this argument may be understandable from one who attempts to take the scriptures regarding not allowing women to have authority over a man literally, some of the other arguments raised against the Women's Meeting were comparatively childish and pointedly aggressive.

Phylliss Mack tracks down a quote from Tomas Curtis who sounds a similar note but in a much more abrasive tone. "We did not build the [meeting] house for women to meet in apart from men . . . we never had unity with such meetings to draw young lasses from their homes to learn to preach."²⁰⁰ Curtis brings up the point of drawing women away from the home, which was another common objection to the Women's Meeting. If women were at the church, meeting for business, often at the same time as the men, who would be at home? And if these Women's Meetings continued in their encouragement of those "young lasses" to become traveling preachers, who would fill the void and provide stability and consistency in the Quaker home? The aggressive tone of Curtis's statement provides proof that the argument over the Women's Meeting was no longer civil. Rather,

¹⁹⁹ Mather, 4-5.

²⁰⁰ *A Record Belonging to the Quarterly Meeting of the People of the Lord in Scorne Called Quakers in the County of Berks*, transcribed Beatrice Saxon Snell and Nina Saxon Snell, 30, Library of the Society of Friends, London, quoted in Mack, 297.

Mack states, "as the argument progressed, the note of hysteria among Separatists became even higher-pitched; some even accused Fox of a conspiracy to lead unsuspecting friends into a nightmare world ruled by himself and his fanatic female disciples."²⁰¹

William Rogers, in his 1680 treatise against Fox and the Women's Meeting, accuses Fox of falling victim to the same female "bewitchment" that had grounded Naylor.

Hast thou forgotten, how thou hast testified against James Naylor's spirit, whose great fall was his owning, or at least not reproving the women, when they cried with a carnal tongue Hosanna to him?²⁰²

Earlier in the same text, Rogers accuses Fox of turning these Meetings, first designed to assist the poor and imprisoned, into a means for women to rule in the church. "Friends," he writes, "who in simplicity assented to the . . . meetings, as supposing women in some cases fitter to pry into the necessities of the poor than men," might then become leery of these very meetings and the women who ran them.²⁰³ He continues, worrying that these women may "instead of being servants to the poor for truth's sake, and taking the weight and burden of that care from the men, they should become rulers over both men and women."²⁰⁴

Each of these authors expresses different fears concerning the Women's Meeting. Was it really scriptural? Was it really necessary? Was there some sort of conspiracy to

²⁰¹ Mack, 297.

²⁰² William Rogers, *The Christian-Quaker Distinguished from the Apostate & Innovator In Five Parts, Wherein Religious Differences Amongst the People Termed in Derision Quakers, Are Treated on : George Fox One (at Least, If Not the Chief) Reputed Author Thereof, Is Deducted : Doctrines of Truth Owned by the Children of Light (and Cleared from Objections) Are Laid Down According to Holy Scriptures and Revelation of the Spirit* (London, 1680), 212-213.

²⁰³ Ibid., 202.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

get women involved when the men needed help, only to keep them involved when these tasks were no longer delegated? And, perhaps most importantly, there was fear of a power struggle; of the women "ruling over" the men. The negative light in which women Friends had been painted as a result of the Nayler and Perrot controversies served only to heighten these fears. Each of these had to be answered if the Women's Meeting was to continue and be universally accepted.

Chapter 9

FOX AND FELL'S RESPONSE TO OPPOSITION

In defending the Women's Meeting, Fox and Fell went about addressing these fears and reiterating the meetings' egalitarian theological foundation. They did so by means of a careful balance between asserting the proper authority of women in the Quaker community and clarifying the proper roles and avenues through which women were to express this authority. This balance featured, on the one hand, a new central metaphor for the authority women would take in the community and, on the other, a strong argument for the practical strengths of having women take on tasks for which they were better suited than the men.

First, there was the matter of reasserting the authority of the Quaker woman in the new structure. By the late 1660s, the days of "disruptive" preaching and traveling ministers were beginning to yield to regular settled meetings and institutional structure. If women Friends were to continue in the tradition of Hooten and Fell, they would need new ways to be influential in the new structure. The central metaphor proposed for the continued authority of women was that of "Mother in Israel." Mack records Fox's project as:

To broaden the accepted parameters of political discourse by defining parenthood – not mere fatherhood – as a position of public stature and parental activities and values as identical to those of the upright citizen of the Quaker community. The informal authority of the earlier mother in Israel was thus superceded by the female elder's formal decision-making power over Friends' personal, social, and economic activities.²⁰⁵

²⁰⁵ Mack, 288.

The "Mother," according to Fox, was one that "gives suck and nourishes, and feeds, and dresses, and washes, and rules and is a leader in the Church, . . . and an admonisher, and instructor, and exhorter . . ." ²⁰⁶ An anecdote served Fox well as support for this argument.

So the elder women as mothers are to be teachers of good things . . . And if the unbelieving husband be sanctified by the believing wife, then where is the speaker, and where is the hearer; surely such a woman is permitted to speak, and to work the works of God, and to make a member if the Church, and then as an elder to oversee that he walk according to the gospel. ²⁰⁷

If then, these "mothers" could express authority, even over a man, what would be said of the possible power struggles between the Men's and Women's Meetings? Fox's answer here was to clarify the appropriate roles for both men and women; making sure each had and knew their place. Mack is again insightful, pointing out that in this new community, "matters involving charity, marital problems, discipline of women, and healing were viewed as women's work, while problems dealing with censorship, business, organization of the ministry, and debates with non-Quakers were viewed as men's work." ²⁰⁸ Fox comments further:

All things must be done in [God's] power and name: and there is many things that is proper for women to look into both in their families, and concerning of women which is not so proper for the men, which modesty in women cannot so well speak of before men as they can do among their sex; and women are more in their families, and have more of the tuition of their children and servants than the men, they being always among them either for the making of them, or the marrying of them . . . And many women are of more capacity than others are, and so they must instruct and inform the rest . . . concerning ordering of their children and families. ²⁰⁹

²⁰⁶ George Fox, *Epistle to Friends*, quoted in Mack, 289.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Mack, 286.

²⁰⁹ George Fox, *To Men's and Women's Quarterly Meetings*, quoted in Mack, 290.

In Fox's view, each sex needed the freedom to rise up in service, and since women were more "qualified" in some areas than were the men, the Women's Meeting was a necessity. He envisions the meetings working in tandem, each recognizing their jurisdiction, as it were, and yielding to the other where appropriate.

And what the women cannot do they may three or four of them go from their Meeting to the Men's, and lay it before them which is more proper for them: And what is more proper for the women than the men, the men may three or four of them go and lay it before the women; so that they may be helps meet together in the restauration, in truth and righteousness as man and woman was before they fell.²¹⁰

However, as has been noted, disagreement existed most bitterly over the "properness" of the Women's Meeting specifically overseeing Friends' marriages. But in this case particularly, Fell would not budge. "Margaret Fell rigorously asserted that women's meetings held the prerogative in the marriage contractual procedure, especially insofar as it pertained to the clearing or certifying of women before marriage."²¹¹ Kunze understands this practice as an example of the "co-authority" of the Men's and Women's Meetings.²¹² Thus, while Fox and Fell acknowledged Friend's fears of a power struggle, they insisted that stripping women of authority altogether was not the answer. Instead, the Men's and Women's Meetings would promote the influence and leadership of both genders within specific bounds.

Lastly, a key feature of the system of meetings proposed by Fox and Fell was the continued existence of meetings attended by both men and women. The regular meetings for worship always included both genders, but they wanted to ensure that at least some

²¹⁰ George Fox, *Epistle to Friends*, quoted in Mack, 289.

²¹¹ Kunze, 157.

²¹² Ibid.

meetings for business and church government be made up of both men and women. Braithwaite writes of "one select meeting of London Friends" which began in 1671 as a "joint body" and "seems to have worked well."²¹³ Consisting originally of thirty-four men and thirty-four women, possibly being chosen by Fox himself,²¹⁴ the Six Weeks' Meeting "became for a time the prime meeting in the city, to which all the Monthly Meetings could appeal; and its minutes cover a wide range of important subjects."²¹⁵ According to Braithwaite, other business meetings across England were also attended by both genders, especially as the Women's Meeting was slow to catch on in some districts.²¹⁶ "The men and women met together," he writes, "as is now again the practice in the Society, but, under the limited conceptions of the age, such joint Monthly Meetings do not seem to have given women their freedom in the affairs of the Church."²¹⁷

²¹³ Braithwaite, *Second Period of Quakerism*, 275.

²¹⁴ See Beck and Ball's *London Friends Meeting*, p. 92.

²¹⁵ Braithwaite, *Second Period of Quakerism*, 275.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 274.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*

Chapter 10

NEGATIVE FALLOUT FROM THE WOMEN'S MEETING

When it came to giving women “their freedom in the affairs of the Church,” it seems the institution of the Women’s Meeting had mixed success. It is easy to see how the Women’s Meeting may have functioned to marginalize women, indeed to remove them from the “main” meetings for business and delegate to them more menial tasks. Certainly this theme is picked up on by scholars who note that the Women’s Meeting “appear[ed] to be quite explicitly aimed at excluding women from a magisterial role within the community.”²¹⁸ This view of gender roles placed women at a distance from the official “business” of the Society. In contrast with early female ministers, who regularly preached and operated in offices and roles usually reserved for men, women were now encouraged to find their place among other women, leaving the Men’s Meetings for the more “proper” home of the Women’s Meeting.

Beyond the embracing of gender roles, it seems the Women’s Meeting may have played a role in the suppression of women’s voices. Mack points out that some Friends “defended the women’s meetings on the grounds that they actually *prevented* the empowerment of women in relation to men.”²¹⁹ She quotes William Loddington:

Women Friends meeting by themselves, may without the least suspicion of usurping authority over the men, confer and reason together, how to serve truth in their places, in such things as are most proper and suitable for them, still submitting to the wisdom of God in the Men’s Meetings: whereas being mixed together, if a man should make a motion about any business, and a woman should stand up and signify her dislike of it, though in most middle and tender words,

²¹⁸ Mack, 286.

²¹⁹ Ibid., 288.

would not any man, yet, an unbeliever . . . conclude the women in such meetings had as much power as the men?²²⁰

While this scenario seems impossible from a twenty-first-century perspective, even from an early twentieth-century perspective when the Women's Meeting was officially laid down, it was an honest concern on the part of many seventeenth-century Quakers. One is reminded of Mack's vision, cited in chapter one, of "prophetic women, once the bearers of considerable charismatic authority, slowly disappear[ing] behind the rising edifice of the new structure . . ." In many ways, this "dismal" picture was becoming reality.

Women's voices were muffled and women in general were marginalized.

However, the matter must be viewed from a more even-handed and optimistic perspective, considering the fact that while some may have seen the Women's Meeting as a tool for female subjugation, it functionally provided women Friends with many valuable commodities. It gave them a place and a voice. Despite the gender roles embraced by the Quakers, the decision to give the Women's Meeting authority over marriages marked a clear distinction. Mack elaborates:

. . . the women's meeting was not a form of seventeenth-century tokenism, for while women's jurisdiction over marriage did not belong to the sphere of public policy, it did involve the authority to instruct and discipline male relatives and neighbors.²²¹

Perhaps most importantly for these Friends, the Women's Meeting gave them autonomy in an age where such was indeed rare, and it gave them experience in business, meetings, and the like, which would prove invaluable once Quaker polity changed in lieu of

²²⁰ William Loddington, *The Good Order of Truth Justified; Wherein our Womens Meetings and Order of Marriage . . . Are Proved Agreeable to Scripture and Sound Reason*. p. 5, quoted in Mack, 288.

²²¹ Mack, 288.

advances in societal expectations, bringing about the joint Monthly and Yearly Meetings attended by Quakers from 1908 until the present.

In some cases, the message from the Men's Meeting could not be any clearer. Women were warned to "be careful not to interfere with their brethren in their public mixed meetings"²²² and advised in a similar minute:

This meeting finding that it is a hurt to Truth for women Friends to take up too much time . . . in our public meetings, when several public and serviceable men Friends are present and are by them prevented in their Serving, it's therefore advised that the women Friends should be tenderly cautioned against taking up too much time in our mixed public meetings.²²³

One wonders if it were not for the institution of the Women's Meeting if ordinary Quaker women would have had *any venue left* in which they might have a voice in the affairs of the church. Certainly, the place afforded women Friends in the Women's Meeting was not as prominent or magisterial as the Men's Meetings. However, it was a place, and it did promise autonomy. From this perspective, it must be admitted that the Women's Meeting actually preserved the influence of women and strengthened their role during a season in which these voices were in danger of being lost completely.

²²² Braithwaite, *Second Period of Quakerism*, 287-288,

²²³ Ibid., minute dated from 1701.

Chapter 11

THE LEGACY OF THE WOMEN'S MEETING

As the Women's Meeting spread throughout England and into the New World, the original meetings in London and the Swarthmoor were looked to for precedence and advice. Bacon writes:

Having no models to follow, women Friends in the new American colonies carefully read the epistles addressed to them by George Fox and by the Lancashire Women's Meeting, and they tried to develop their organizations exactly as suggested. Like the men, the women were supposed to organize meetings on four different levels: the preparative meeting, made up of Friends in an immediate neighborhood; the monthly meeting, consisting usually of five or six preparative meetings, representing groups of monthly meetings in a county; and a yearly meeting, covering a regional area.²²⁴

As this organizational structure of women grew and expanded, the meetings took on additional significance and responsibility. Some Women's Meetings had what appeared to be "exclusive" control over the "clearness" of couples for marriage, and others engaged in discipline and "disownments . . . before consulting the men's meeting."²²⁵

In addition, the Women's Meeting served as a sort of "training ground" for some of the most notable women in American history. Elizabeth Comstock, an English Friend who emigrated to the American Midwest, contributed to "prison reform, the Underground Railroad, and relief for Negro refugees during and after the Civil War."²²⁶ In the fight for the emancipation of American slaves, women Friends Laura Haviland and Cornelia

²²⁴ Bacon, 42.

²²⁵ Ibid., 44.

²²⁶ Hope Elizabeth Luder, *Women and Quakerism: Pendle Hill Pamphlet 196* (Pennsylvania: Sowers Printing Company, 1974), 17.

Hancock both played significant roles.²²⁷ Perhaps most noteworthy is Lucretia Mott, a Quaker minister and noted abolitionist, who called the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848, marking the official beginning of the Women's Right's Movement.²²⁸ Remarking on one of Mott's speeches at the convention, another woman wrote:

When I first heard from the lips of Lucretia Mott that I had the same right to think for myself that Luther, Calvin, and John Knox had, and the same right to be guided by my own convictions . . . I felt at once a newborn sense of dignity and freedom.²²⁹

Other important figures include the Englishwoman Elizabeth Fry and American Susan B. Anthony.²³⁰ Commenting eloquently on this strong heritage of leading women, Hope

Elizabeth Luder writes:

For over two centuries the Society of Friends was the only well-known religious group to give women a chance to speak in public, to participate in making group decisions, and to develop and use their gifts for moral and practical leadership. Quaker girls grew up in an atmosphere which encouraged them to become capable and self-confident adults, who in turn could serve as role models for others. They saw women around them who were respected and influential, and thus more easily developed a faith in their own potential.²³¹

This legacy is difficult to imagine without the formative influence of the Quaker Women's Meeting. Surely, these young Quaker women would have had role models in a spiritual dimension simply by observing the meetings for worship. However, one wonders if history would have produced the wealth of role models in the "moral and

²²⁷ Ibid., 20-21.

²²⁸ Ibid., 23-25.

²²⁹ Gerda Lerner, *The Woman in American History* (Menlo Park, CA: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co., 1971), 82.

²³⁰ Luder, 18-19, 30-31.

²³¹ Ibid., 33.

practical leadership” dimension without the autonomy, responsibility, and experience granted by the Women’s Meeting.

Chapter 12

CONCLUSION

In his book *Women in the Church*, Stanley Grenz observes a general historical trend. He notes that normally, “renewal movements initially open the door to greater female involvement, only to shut the door as they subsequently become institutionalized and seek respectability in the broader culture.”²³² He cites numerous other studies supporting this basic premise and makes a strong case for the trend. Against this backdrop, the story of the Quakers in general and the Women’s Meeting in particular, stand out as uniquely inspiring.

True to form, the Quaker movement opened a huge door for women’s involvement in its early days, creating space for the likes of such archetypal women as Elizabeth Hooten and Margaret Fell. Led by the Spirit, the free-flowing movement encouraged women to preach, teach, travel and minister. As has been shown, women Friends were up to the task. Again and again throughout the 1650s and 60s, Quaker women were prominent alongside, and even before and above, their male counterparts.

During the institutionalization process, Friends had the potential to follow the trend noted by Grenz and squeeze out their once influential women. However, this is where the story of the Quakers, to a large degree, diverges from the sociological norm. While there were certainly “bumps in the road,” so to speak, women Friends stayed involved and influential through the process of institutionalization and have continued to comprise an historically varying but strong minority of leadership in the movement to

²³² Stanley J. Grenz and Denise Muir Kjesbo, *Women in the Church: A Biblical Theology of Women in Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 37.

this day. Surely this was due, in large part, to Fox and Fell's passionate commitment to egalitarian theology from the start. Also, the lasting impact of Barclay's theology is felt as he preserved the early egalitarian witness. But to this list of factors must be added the Women's Meeting.

Designed with a view toward spurring women on to take their rightful place in the affairs of the church and stoutly defended by its proponents, the Women's Meeting fulfilled the vision of its originators. Providing autonomy and influence, it secured a continued voice for women Friends and released the gifts of ordinary women in the service of the body. The Women's Meeting, while changing the manner and venue in which women Friends were influential, did not silence their voices. Rather, it preserved and protected these voices, ensuring that as the movement developed, the presence and prominence of women leaders would not disappear. Just like the early days of the movement, Quakerism, through the process of institutionalization and into the twentieth century, remained a beacon of egalitarian theology and practice. Friends accomplished this feat not in spite of, but rather precisely because of the Women's Meeting.

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