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By  
Elton Trueblood

Printed by  
The Book and Tract Committee  
of Indiana Yearly Meeting

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## **An Introduction to Quakers**

This pamphlet is addressed to those who are strangers to the Quaker Movement. You have heard, undoubtedly, of the importance of Quakers in early American history; you are aware of the use of the word "Quaker" in the naming of certain products; and you may be interested in the fact that there is a Quaker meetinghouse located not many miles from your home.

If you are a thoughtful person you desire to know more, and you are full of questions. Some of your questions may be as follows: "Are Quakers Christians or are they something else?" "Are Quakers similar to the Amish and other plain people?" "Are Quakers merely another Protestant denomination, with only a slight justification for continued separate existence?" "Is Quakerism antique or it is a live option for modern men?" "Are outsiders eagerly welcomed into the Quaker fellowship, or does one have to be born into it?" "Does Quakerism have a future or merely a famous past?"

## **The Historical Answers**

It is fortunate that these questions can be answered, and that they can be answered in a way which is relevant to the life of the ordinary inquirer.

More than three hundred years of history have provided the answers. Fortunately, the Quaker movement has not achieved uniformity, but it has acquired a remarkable flexibility which has helped to insure survival when so many movements tend to disappear, after an initial period of enthusiasm. Both the flexibility and durability of the "People called Quakers," to use William Penn's phrase, arise from the central commitment which Quakerism expects of its adherents.

The Quaker Movement arose in England at the time of Oliver Cromwell, the crucial date being 1652. Though many groups and individuals contributed to the new and highly charged fellowship, the chief human instrument was a young man of great gifts, though little education, named George Fox (1624-1691). As has occurred at other boiling points in human history, Fox made a powerful impact on his generation, drawing to him and his message, not only thousands of ordinary people, but also intellectual leaders such as Robert Barclay and William Penn. Penn, the son of Admiral Penn, was closely associated with the reigning Stuarts, particularly James II, with much influence at court.

Fox was not trying to start a new

denomination, but a revolution. His aim was a bold recovery of basic Christianity. He sought to bring to pass what his contemporary John Milton had in mind when he said that God had decreed "some new and great period in His Church, even to the reforming of reformation itself." Fox aimed at nothing less than the complete reformation of the total Church of Christ. It was the boldness of his purpose that made Thomas Carlyle call his start on his program of itinerant ministry "the greatest event in modern history." What Carlyle meant was that the message of Fox, if taken seriously, would undermine all artificiality in religion and all injustice in society.

### **The Name**

As might be expected in a group which arose almost spontaneously, there was at first no settled name for the new people. Often they called themselves Friends, with special reference to the words of Christ when He said, "I have called you friends" (John 15:15). The legal name today is either The Religious Society of Friends or The Friends Church, but, so far as the public is concerned, the nickname "Quaker" is more widely employed. This name was first given in derision, because the

faith was taken so seriously that the people were truly *shaken* and, indeed, sometimes shook physically. As has occurred in other historical developments, the derisive nickname has become a badge of honor and is accepted gratefully by most Friends. In short, Quakers and Friends are the same people. The wide varieties of Quaker emphasis in our time must never be interpreted as marks of different denominations. However great the variation, the same history is gratefully acknowledged and all share in Friends World Conferences, of which there have been three in the twentieth century, with a fourth one scheduled to meet in North Carolina in 1967.

Early Quakerism, having no hierarchy and the simplest of organization, not only reached many parts of Great Britain, but soon was known on distant shores. The new message, which was also an old one, in that it sought to be "Primitive Christianity Revived," made a great appeal to those who felt encumbered by either too much institutionalism or too much theology. But the very success of the Early Quaker emissaries caused them to be feared. Four, including one woman, were put to death by hanging, in Boston, Massachusetts. The American colonies in

which Quakerism was first strong were North Carolina, Maryland, New Jersey and Rhode Island. Later, in 1682, Pennsylvania was established as a Quaker colony, being named for Admiral Penn, the founder's father.

### The Real Presence

What was there in the original Quaker message which produced such vitality?

The basic answer is that Quakers had come to experience and consequently to teach the "Real Presence." They found, in their own lives, that Christ is not merely an ancient figure, but that He is available in the living present to all who will open their hearts to Him. This is why there is no need for ritual. It is also why there is no need of a priestly chain of command to mediate His presence. The vivid thing which early Quakers knew, *experimentally*, rather than as a dogma, was that Christ was present to teach His people Himself. There is no tense like the present!

With this emphasis on the present leading of Christ, there came a strong insistence that the roots and the fruits of religion must be held together. Almost from the beginning, it was recognized that Christianity is both an inner experience and an outer social witness. It was no accident that, in the next



century, Quakers were the first Christian body to see, unequivocally, the evil and sin of slavery. In the life of John Woolman, the intense inner encounter, particularly in group silence, led to a bold and imaginative social witness.

### Applied Christianity

One way in which the Quaker story can be told is by reference to the emerging Quaker applications to hard human problems. In Elizabeth Fry's experience the problem was that of prisoners, who were kept in foul conditions with little or no recognition of their intrinsic human importance and slight hope of reformation. Mrs. Fry saw these as people made in God's image and, consequently, her sisters and brothers. In a similar way, Samuel Tuke recognized how terrible it is to chain the insane and do nothing to help to heal their sick minds. Consequently he established *The Retreat*, in York, in 1796 and thus began to show the world how treatment can be redemptive.

In the same way Quakers, as a result of their experience with Christ, have been led to see the sinfulness of war and the necessity of both justice and love in race relations. More than sixty years before the Emancipation Proclamation, all American Quakers, includ-

ing those in the South, had already emancipated their slaves. Most of them had made careful provision for the life of these injured people after liberation was accomplished. Many Quakers helped to operate the underground railroad which took Negroes, by stages, from slave territory to the Canadian border.

### Worship

In the middle of the seventeenth century, Friends, having no prescribed plan of worship, began to meet in the simplest possible way. There was no liturgy, no necessity of a particular type of building, no necessary officiant. The consequence was that they made an unintended discovery. They discovered that, in meeting together with no prearrangement and with much willingness to listen to the inner voice, they had a sense of Christ's present leadership and a consequent release of power in their lives. Every meeting became an adventure, the exact opposite of a ceremony in which people watch a performance and in which every step is known in advance.

Sometimes worship, in this simple manner, is called worship on the basis of silence, but this is a misnomer. In reality it is worship on the basis of

*holy obedience.* If the individual is not conscious of the divine leading to speak or to pray or to sing, he remains silent. Thus it is not strange if there are long periods of silence and no one should be embarrassed if there should be an entire hour of silence. One of the most able of Quaker leaders, the Frenchman, Stephen Grellett, was converted in such a time of silence. The Lord reached him as he listened! But such long periods of silence were rare in the days of early Quakers because the vitality was so great that there was an abundance of speaking. Almost never, however, was speaking limited to the words of one man.

### **The New Testament Pattern**

In the practice of worship which was really free and with much participation on the part of many, the first Quakers were inspired, in part, by the desire to follow the pattern of the first Christians, as described in the New Testament. They knew that the only adequate description of early Christian worship is one which assumes many participants. "You can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged" (I Cor. 14:31). Here is no audience listening to a priest, but all are involved.

Early Quakers, in their period of greatest vitality, had many different kinds of meetings, each with a different purpose. Some were based on holy obedience and some were "threshing meetings" designed for what we should call an evangelistic purpose. In the twentieth century, the majority of Friends have developed another kind, the one which you are likely to experience in your own community. This is one which, superficially, seems to be much like any Protestant worship with which you are familiar, but a deeper analysis will make you realize that the pattern is really unique. It is clear that some thought and prayer have gone into advance planning, in the choosing of hymns and scripture readings, but there is absolutely no liturgy. The sense of divine leading continues to the end, and any advance plan can be altered for a reason. It is not uncommon for a speaker to alter his topic completely as the hour advances or to remain silent if others are led to speak. Even the speakers must never stop listening!

### **The Sacramental Idea**

One way of describing Quakerism is to say that it takes the sacramental idea with complete seriousness. The

sacramental idea is that common things can be the means which God uses for our growth in grace. Common water can be holy, because it can be the means employed by a mother to send her children to school in clean clothes. Common food can be holy because a family, at their table, may sense the divine presence. It is no surprise that it could be truly said of the Apostles, after the Resurrection, that "he was known to them in the breaking of the bread" (Luke 24:35). In the same way He can be known, if we are open to Him, in the chopping of the wood and the lighting of the fire. "Cleave the wood and thou shalt find me." Because the physical world is God's creation, any element of it can become sacramental. Thus Quakers agree with the late William Temple, who pointed out more than once that Christianity is the most materialistic of all the world religions. Quakers believe, along with other Christians, that the Christian life involves, not merely prayer and worship, but also the distribution of material food and the healing of broken bodies. Ours is not a merely spiritual religion, and for this we are deeply thankful.

Attendees at a Friends Meeting soon note that there is no Quaker liturgy

involving water baptism or the Eucharist. This is not because Friends do not believe in sacraments, but because they believe in them so deeply that they cannot be satisfied with symbolic substitutes. Friends believe in baptism so sincerely that they are unwilling to settle for a mere ceremony. Baptism means real immersion into the life and death of Jesus Christ. If we have the reality, nothing else is required; if we do not have the reality, nothing else will suffice.

### **The Lord's Supper**

A sacrament may be defined as "an actual conveyance of spiritual meaning and power by a material process." Because a family meal meets the qualification of the definition, each meal should be sacramental. The Quaker ideal is to make every meal at every table a Lord's Supper. The Christian should seek to remember Him, every time he breaks bread. The reality lies, not in the nature of the material substance, but in the way in which it can stir up the human heart.

It is a serious mistake to think that Quakers are negative about the sacraments. They are, indeed, vigorously affirmative. The sacraments are not

merely two, or merely seven, but seventy times seven. Friends can appreciate the experience of other Christians who feel that they need the ceremonial observances, and can share with them, when invited to do so, but the life to which we are called is one which is deeper than all ceremonies.

### **Contemporary Quakerism**

The Quaker experience of our generation is that of a willingness to combine, in worship, the direct leading of the hour of worship and the direct leading of the preceding days. Since it would be absurd to limit God's direct leading to one hour on Sunday morning, there must be preparation for worship by keeping open in advance. God can inspire a man on Tuesday as well as on Sunday. But the uniqueness of Quaker worship, even in its characteristic twentieth century form, is that the sense of leading is never brought to finality. Those contemporary Quakers, who exhibit the greatest vitality, are trying to combine the "Holy Obedience" of an earlier day with a thoughtful consideration of what will reach the seekers of our generation. The consequence is that change is always occurring. A religion that is not changing is already dead.

It is especially important that you should attend a meeting, when you come, not as an observer, but as a participator in an exciting adventure which is unpredictable for the precise reason that we are seeking to do God's will rather than our own. The best way in which to attend a meeting for worship, on the New Testament pattern, is with a mood of expectancy and wonder. You are coming, not primarily to hear a sermon and not to repeat ready-made phrases, but, with your fellows, to sense the presence of the Living Christ and to be led by Him. Properly understood, it is the most ambitious endeavor a finite human ever undertakes.

We believe, with Martin Buber, that "all real life is meeting." We are called to meet together to make our meeting with Christ more real. Because we are not adequate alone, no Christian can practice religion as a separated individual. Places of worship are called meetinghouses, because that is their function. The building is not a "church" for the church is the fellowship and not identified with bricks and stones. Since no place is more holy than another, God is worshipped, not in holy places, but in spirit and in truth (John 4:23).



## Ministry

The early Quaker Movement grew chiefly by virtue of a powerful ministry. Quakers were very critical of the clergy, because so many of the clergymen of their generation made the ministry a profitable occupation, with little work, much prestige and adequate financial reward. Some of these men, having no burning sense of God's call, had simply found jobs which suited them. But, while this perversion of the ministry seemed blasphemous, Fox and his associates laid great stress on a true ministry in which men and women minister to others because God has reached them. They must enkindle others because they are on fire themselves.

So much did early Quakers stress the ministry that nearly all seemed to be preachers. From the beginning this enkindled women as well as men, for in Christ there is neither male nor female (Galations 3:28). Not one was a settled pastor, and not one was paid a salary, though fellow Quakers helped each one who needed help in traveling and caring for his family. William Penn, who was a great preacher, received no help, because he was personally wealthy. The poorest man was, however, held in

equal honor. It was generally assumed that a person who became a Quaker would engage in some kind of ministry, though not all were capable of the ministry of the spoken word.

### **The Priesthood of All**

When you approach contemporary Quakers, perhaps feeling drawn to them because of the vitality of their message of the Real Presence, look below the surface for any uniqueness. Though the majority of Quakers now employ pastors, you will make a mistake if you think that this fact prevents the ordinary members from being in the ministry. All *must* be in the ministry, for all are called by Christ. Quakers, in short, really believe in the priesthood of every believer. Each must be a priest to somebody and perhaps to many. A pastor is not *the* minister. He is one minister among many. His unique vocation is not to minister, for this belongs to all, but rather to stir up and to equip the others for *their* ministry (Ephesians 4:12).

As you study more carefully a contemporary Quaker congregation, you will soon learn that the members, who may be engaged in business or farming or homemaking, have heavy responsibilities in decision making and in the

total work of Christ's Church. For example the present clerk (chairman) of Indiana Yearly Meeting of Friends is, by profession, a business manager. Many workers in the American Friends Service Committee come from secular occupations.

The Friends Meeting near you may or may not have a pastor. If it does have a pastor, he will probably be very helpful to you. Remember that he is not a clergyman, as he is not the only minister of the congregation. He is not ordained! That is, no status has been conferred upon him, to set him apart. He does not wear a clerical collar and he would rather not be called "Reverend." It is probable that his gift has been "recorded," but that is not the same as ordination, and it does not relieve the members of the responsibility of developing *their* gifts. A good pastor is performing a vital function and certainly it is one recognized in the New Testament, but it is intrinsically different from that of a separated priesthood.

### Quakers in the World

Contemporary Quakers are very deeply imbedded in the life of the world around them. They serve on school boards; they engage in business; they

seek election to political posts; they write books; they work for social reforms. One Quaker, the late Herbert Hoover, became President of the United States, after a varied career which included mining engineering and child feeding on a vast scale. When this is understood, no thoughtful person will identify Quakers with Amish and other separatist groups. The confusion probably occurs because Quakers in the eighteenth century, and part of the nineteenth century, adopted a plain garb, as a testimony against fashionable dress, and used "Thee" and "Thou" to all persons of all persuasions and ranks, as a testimony for equality. Though something can be said for these ancient practices at the time, they were essentially a mistake, and are not practiced today. The contemporary Quaker dresses as others do, and he speaks the language of those about him, saving his non-conformity for bigger issues.

Far from living behind a wall, protected by peculiar customs, the contemporary Quaker seeks to penetrate the entire Christian world, somewhat as Fox and Penn sought to do three centuries ago. Several contemporary Friends have opportunities to address a great variety of Christian bodies, being especially welcomed, not in spite

of being Quakers, but *because* they are Quakers. The works of contemporary Quaker authors are read by people of all denominations, there being far more readers of these works outside the Society of Friends than there are inside. Indeed, modern Quakerism is again assuming the role of a disturber of the peace of the complacent of all faiths. Because so many are being shaken, the nickname "Quaker" is coming to have genuine meaning again.

### Invitation to Pilgrimage

The very worst misunderstanding about Quakers is the widespread belief that they do not seek to grow. There are many reasons for the misunderstanding, one being the obvious smallness of the Quaker population. There are, in fact, more Methodists in Indiana than there are Quakers in the whole world. The total Quaker population of the globe is only about 200,000. All recognize, however, that the Quaker influence is vastly disproportionate to its numbers.

It needs to be made very clear that Quakers do wish to make converts, to change seekers into finders, and to bring a meaningful faith to the millions who are now floundering in confusion. It is true in our day, as it was in the

earthly days of Christ, that the crowds are "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matt. 9:36). If we care about people, and if we think we have found reality, we are bound to try to share it with all who are willing to listen.

The hope is that this pamphlet will fall into the hands of persons who are struggling for an honest faith. Quakerism proposes exactly this. It seeks to make a witness in the modern world that is neither strange nor esoteric. Its purpose is to represent the religion of Jesus Christ, without additions and without subtractions. It seeks to help people to sit at the feet of Christ, their present Teacher, without the impediments of priestcraft and intricate dogma, which often become hindrances rather than helps. Quakerism tries, in short, to be "Christianity writ plain." As such, it is neither an antique faith nor an interesting historical exhibit, but a live option for modern man. If it appears to be a live option for you, come and join us in our unending pilgrimage. You will not find all of us to be ideal persons, but, of course, you are not such, either. Even inadequate persons can walk together on the pilgrim way.