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Quakers and Scripture

Howard R. Macy

George Fox University, hmacy@georgefox.edu

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter explores how the Quakers’ use of the Bible has developed, recognizing changes both in the Friends movement and in its historical and cultural settings. Friends’ approaches to Scripture have varied widely as they have responded over time to the influences of the Enlightenment, revivalism, fundamentalism, Modernism, and other factors. The chapter describes how Quakers have viewed the authority and inspiration of the Bible and how they have held the importance of the Bible in tension with the inward teaching of Christ, whom they refer to as the ‘Word of God’. The chapter also contrasts various forms of Bible study with reading the Bible with empathy as a fruit of Quaker spirituality.

Keywords: authority, Bible study, inward teaching, empathy, Word of God

In the religious turmoil of seventeenth-century Britain, Quakers developed a distinctive approach to the Bible that witnessed to their experience with Scripture and to their experience of God. The vitality of their experience led to a paradoxical approach, full of tensions, which eventually brought diversity and division.

The tensions explored central questions in religious life: What are the sources of religious authority? How are God’s purposes and presence known and conveyed? How do individuals and communities receive and use God’s revelation to guide their lives?

This chapter presents the historic roots of the Quaker approach to Scripture and how this changed over time. It explores not only how these changes emerged from within the Friends movement but also how the wider religious culture influenced Quaker witness and practice. At some points it will help to distinguish descriptions of Scripture from practices in using it. It will also help to recognize that individual use of Scripture in any particular period is not uniform and may vary among users, depending on a variety of factors including temperament, training, and purpose.
Scripture among early Friends

Early Friends lived in a culture shaped by the ideas and passions of the Reformation. The Bible had come to replace the hierarchical Church as the basis of Christian authority. Though there were continuing struggles about the role of the Church, *sola scriptura*, Scripture alone, had become the dominant principle for authority. The big idea paired with this principle was the priesthood of the believer, the idea that everyone could come directly to God without human intermediaries. Applied to the Bible, this meant that all Christians should be able to read and interpret the Bible on their own. In the sixteenth century, these paired convictions led to the translation of the Bible into readers’ ordinary languages, notably German and English, and Gutenberg’s recent invention of the moveable-type press made wide distribution of the Bible possible, even when it was illegal.

By the turn of the seventeenth century, ordinary people had ready access to inexpensive editions of the Bible, notably the Geneva Bible, and wide circulation grew after King James I supported an ‘Authorized Version’ (King James Version) of the Bible in 1611. Readers used their Bibles to introduce individual interpretations of all kinds, many of them outside the confines of the Church of England. Diligent reading and study of the Bible became a cultural norm, both within the established Church and within various separatist movements.

George Fox (1624–91) and other early Friends embraced the importance of Scripture in knowing God and guiding their lives. Yet they cherished Scripture in the context of their direct encounters with God and of their conviction that the Spirit that inspired Scripture was also inwardly teaching them. Valuing the Bible and relying on the Spirit’s direct teaching are both complementary and paradoxical convictions that shaped Friends’ use of Scripture.

Early statements about scripture

George Fox knew the Bible thoroughly and used it lavishly—its words, phrases, images, and stories flood Fox’s speaking and writing. Those who knew Fox well mused that if all the copies of the Bible were lost, the whole of its text could be recovered from Fox’s memory. While he directed people to the inward teaching of Christ, the Present Teacher, he also affirmed importance of the Bible:
These things I did not see by the help of man, nor by the letter, though they are written in the letter, but I saw them in the light of the Lord Jesus Christ, and by his immediate Spirit and power, as did the holy men of God, by whom the Holy Scriptures were written. Yet I had no slight esteem of the Holy Scriptures, but they were very precious to me, for I was in that spirit by which they were given forth, and what the Lord opened in me I afterwards found was agreeable to them. (Fox 1995, 34)

In his *Letter to the Governor of Barbados*, Fox also speaks of the importance of the Bible to Friends. He writes that they are inspired, that ‘they are to be read, and believed, and fulfilled,’ and that are profitable for teaching. He continues, ‘And we do believe that the Scriptures are the words of God...We call the Scriptures, as Christ and the apostles called them, and as the holy men of God called them (vizt) the words not word of God’ (Fox 1995, 604).

Similarly, in his *Apology* the young theologian and scholar Robert Barclay (1644–90) argued that the Scriptures come from God and have unmatched value. In Proposition Three about inspiration and the Scriptures, Barclay writes:

> From the revelations of the Spirit of God to the faithful have come the scriptures of Truth, which contain [(1) faithful historical accounts, (2) prophetic accounts, and] (3) a full and adequate account of all of the chief principles of the doctrine of Christ which were spoken, or which were written, by the motions of God’s Spirit at various times in treasured declarations, exhortations, and maxims which were given to certain churches and their pastors. (Freiday 1967, 460)

As he begins his discussion, Barclay directly addresses the misunderstanding or false accusations of other Christians: ‘In spite of what has been said, we consider the scriptures undoubtedly and unequivocally the finest writings in the world. Nothing else that has been written is preferable or even comparable’ (Freiday 1967, 46).

In a similar way, Elizabeth Bathurst (1655–85) wrote *Truth’s Vindication* as ‘a gentle stroke to wipe off the foul aspersions, false accusations, and misrepresentations, called upon the People of God call’d Quakers’ (Garman et al 1996, 340). Her first chapter countered the ‘great Slander’ that the Quakers ‘do not own’ the Scriptures. She responds that Quakers ‘do believe the Scriptures, so far as Scripture it self requires Faith in it self’. She argues that Quakers, in keeping with Scripture, reserve the phrase ‘Word of God’ to refer to Christ, who is the Word (Garman et al 1996, 349–50).

Witness to the importance of Scripture was common among early Friends. At the same time, however, even as they pointed to the Bible’s unique importance, they also
proclaimed the presence and reliable authority of the Spirit’s inward teaching apart from Scripture. As seen in the quotation above, for example, Fox witnessed that Christ the Present Teacher led him to insights inwardly, not rising from the reading or study of the Bible, that he later found consistent with Scripture. In confidence of the reliability of the Spirit’s direct teaching, he also did not look to the Bible as the final authority against which all leadings or openings should be tested (Palmer 2011, ch. 3, 9).

Similarly, Barclay argues from Scripture for the primacy of the Spirit as the foundation of both ancient and contemporary revelation:

Nevertheless, because the scriptures are only a declaration of the source, and not the source itself, they are not to be considered the principal foundation of all truth and knowledge. They are not even to be considered as the adequate primary rule of all faith and practice. Yet, because they give a true and faithful testimony of the source itself, they are and may be regarded as a secondary rule that is subordinate to the Spirit, from which they obtain all their excellence and certainty. We truly know them only by the inward testimony of the Spirit or, as the scriptures themselves say, the Spirit is the guide by which the faithful are led into all Truth (John 16:13). Therefore, according to the scriptures, the Spirit is the first and principal leader (Rom 8:14). Because we are receptive to the scriptures, as the product of the Spirit, it is for that very reason that the Spirit is the primary and principal rule of faith. (Freiday 1967, 460)

Isaac Penington (1616–79) makes a similar witness: ‘And the end of words is to bring men to the knowledge of things beyond what words can utter. So, learn of the Lord to make a right use of the Scriptures: which is by esteeming them in their right place, and prizing that above them which is above them’ (Christian Faith 1960, no. 204).

In their original setting, Quakers were asserting the importance both of Scripture and of direct inward experience. They declared ‘both/and’ in a time when the principal of sola scriptura threatened to diminish the importance of vital inward experience, particularly among those who insisted that truth was revealed only in biblical times and was found only in Scripture. It was an important paradoxical witness. To anticipate what happens among Friends, however, we should note John Punshon’s observation that Barclay’s use of the word ‘secondary’ opened the way for a diminishing of the importance of Scripture. ‘Secondary’, he points out, often means derivative, subordinate, or of lesser importance. ‘...Calling the Bible a “secondary” authority has led over time to many Friends not regarding it as an authority at all’ (Punshon 2006, 271, 253).
Early patterns in using scripture

One way in which Friends used Scripture was to demonstrate that Friends teaching was consistent with the Bible and, often quite pointedly, that Friends interpreted the Bible more faithfully than their detractors. As John Nickalls points out, ‘No one, in fact, knew his Bible better than Fox did, or could quote it in argument more devastatingly’ (Fox 1995, xxvii). So when Fox entered into public dispute about what the Bible said and invited people to look in the Scriptures while he taught, he usually prevailed.

Robert Barclay also used the Bible to make his case. For example, in the quotation above he argues for the Spirit as the primary rule of faith ‘because we are receptive to the scriptures’. Also, in his *A Catechism and Confession of Faith*, Barclay answers all of the catechetical questions by simply quoting portions of Scripture. He does this, he says, to disprove the ‘grossest slander cast upon these people [Quakers] that they vilify and deny the scriptures and replace them with their own conjectures’. To make his point, in answer to the catechetical questions he offers only the words of Scripture, ‘without addition or commentary...[and with] no quibbling, no academic subtleties’ (Barclay 2001, 16). He invited his readers to be fair in deciding whether he had used the Bible properly.

Barclay is best known for his *Apology*, a thorough work that builds notably on his theological training. His command of Scripture, historical theology, and argument are impressive, and the *Apology* has served Friends well ever since. Others with university and theological training, such as William Penn and Samuel Fisher, also used that in explaining Quakers to those outside the movement.

Certainly it was important to appeal to biblical texts in making their witness to people who relied heavily on Scripture. But for Friends, the Bible was more than a book of texts or principles. Friends engaged Scripture not only to learn about God, but also to encounter God. More precisely, they believed that they could only rightly know the Scriptures by first ‘com[ing] to the spirit of God in themselves’ (Fox 1995, 136) and relying on the Spirit to teach them through the Scriptures. Their experience of Christ as the Present Teacher continued in the use of the Bible. In the process of reading, everyone could be taught inwardly. As Thomas Kelly described it: (p. 191)

> We can go back into that Life within whom Amos and Isaiah lived, that Life in God’s presence and vivid guidance, then we understand the writings from within. For we and Isaiah and Hosea feed on the same Life, are rooted in the same holy flame which is burning in our hearts. (Kelly 1988, 32)
Early Friends also learned to read the Bible with empathy, entering into its teaching and narratives and its community of faith as fellow travellers. Barclay refers to the Scriptures as a ‘looking-glass,’ a mirror, that reveals our own journey and teaches us through ‘the conditions and experiences of the saints of old’ (Freiday 1967, 59). As nearly as they could, through the Bible they were entering into the story and the outlook of the earliest Christians (Birkel 2005, 1ff).

T. Vail Palmer demonstrates that the earliest Friends use of Scripture reflected this reading with empathy. The sermons, teaching, and letters of leaders such as George Fox, Margaret Fell, and Edward Burroughs were filled with allusions, images, and phrases from the Bible, but not used in a way that was simply quoting text to prove a point. Instead, out of their deep personal engagement with Scripture, they gathered up phrases and metaphors and melded them into new syntheses as they spoke in the power of the Spirit that inspired and taught them the Scriptures (Palmer 2011, ch. 3). Palmer’s reading suggests that this strikingly inward interweaving of Bible and experience diminished over time, even though Friends continued to use the Bible steadily.

**Changes in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries**

Friends continued to value Scripture as they moved into the eighteenth century and many relied on it to inform their teaching and ministry. A few, notably John Woolman (1720–72), seemed to approach the empathetic reading of Scripture—Michael Birkel shows how Woolman experienced the Bible as reflecting and interpreting his experience. The Bible also shaped Woolman’s understanding and bold ministry, especially through his engagement with the prophet Jeremiah (Birkel 2003, 39–56). Palmer finds that Woolman’s direct, generous use of Scripture seems less than that of early Friends, but that other Friends used the Bible as a source of texts to support their testimonies or more as a textbook for doctrine and ethical teaching (Palmer 2011, ch. 4). Despite varieties in method, the Bible stood as an important source for Friends and they encouraged each other to read and understand it.

During the eighteenth century Friends began to loosen their strict boundaries against outside groups and, in the process, took on some of the varied influences of that time. Three strands of religious thinking particularly influenced Friends: Quietism; rationalism in religion, under the growing influence of the Enlightenment; and evangelicalism, particularly flowing from the work of John and Charles Wesley.
Friends’ witness to the inward work of the Spirit to teach and apply Scripture provided fertile ground for the radical inwardness of Quietism in Europe, particularly in France. Many Friends gladly read Madame Jeanne Guyon, Miguel de Molinos, and Francois Fenelon and they even published an anthology of their writings in *A Guide to True Peace*, a little book still available from Quaker publishers. Quietism influenced Friends’ reading of Scripture in at least two ways. One direction was to rely on the Spirit-directed, internal understanding of Scripture and to demean external influences. Job Scott writes about reading Scripture in this vein:

> The safe state is that of a careful, inward waiting for direction...God alone can give the right turn and direction to our minds...Haste is almost always dangerous, but waiting on the Lord for clearness, direction and qualification is always, and never, if rightly exercised, fruitless. (Scott 1824, 32)

For others, the importance of the Bible as a source seemed to diminish and the direct inward teaching by Christ, or the Light of Christ, was not only superior but sufficient. Friends had mixed practice at this point. Some were sceptical about the value of Scripture, even to the point that some refused to use the Bible at all. On the other hand, many in this stream still valued the Bible highly, encouraged reading it frequently, and used it in sermons and writing. At the same time, more traditional Friends showed concern that the reading and knowledge of Scripture had been seriously eroded (Hamm 2002, 185).

Another influence among Friends grew out of rationalism, one that looked at the Bible more analytically and, in particular, insisted that the biblical text show an internal consistency. In this spirit, several prominent Friends began to question the authority or inspiration of certain parts of the Bible. In the late eighteenth century, Abraham Shackleton was among the first to argue that the loving God seen in the New Testament could never have required that the Israelites undertake wars of conquest as reported in the Old Testament. In 1799 Hannah Barnard (1754–1825) joined in this judgement, rejecting the idea that ‘the great and merciful Creator ever commissioned any nation or person to destroy another’ (Ingle 1998, 9). Rational analysis of the Bible was in its early stages and would flourish in the nineteenth century. It would continue to influence Friends in the decades to come.

Friends touched by the other stream of influence—evangelicalism—responded sharply to challenges towards the reliability or authority of the Bible. One of the most notable was Henry Tuke (1755–1814), who in 1805 published his book *The Principles of Religion, as Professed by the Society of Friends, Usually Called Quakers*. In its first half-century Tuke’s volume appeared in twelve English editions and in editions by several North American Yearly Meetings (Williams 1987, 145–6). He argued that Friends doctrine was
based on Scripture and, using the Bible, tried to address the various issues that Friends such as Shackleton (1752–1818) and Barnard regarded as inconsistencies in Scripture.

In addition to addressing questions of doubt and reinterpretation of Scripture, Friends influenced by evangelicalism organized to distribute the Bible more broadly among Friends. Emerging Quaker leader Joseph John Gurney (1788–1847) had early on joined with Christian friends such as William Wilberforce and others in the work of the British and Foreign Bible Society, founded in 1804 (Jones 1970, I, 496). When the American Bible Society was founded in 1816, many American Friends helped lead its efforts (Jones 1970, II, 886). However, in 1829, directly after the Great (or Hicksite) Separation, Orthodox Quakers in the United States began a work of their own, the Bible Association of Friends in America. The leaders of this work were concerned that some American Friends were ‘scantily supplied with copies of the Bible’, thinking that ‘no supply of the Bible can be considered as adequate, which does not put a copy into the possession [of] every person capable of reading it’. They especially emphasized that each child should have a copy of the Bible ‘printed on good paper with large type’ and that parents should model and teach its value (Appeal 1832, 4, 7). Their appeal attributes the short supply of Bibles both to availability and to the economic conditions of some Friends. But these leaders also show their conviction that ignorance of and indifference to the Bible’s content, along with levity and scepticism, had led to false teaching and to the denial of basic truths.

The travels of Stephen Grellet (1773–1855) and Elias Hicks (1748–1830) in 1808 illustrate the complexity of the problem of Scripture at this juncture of Quaker experience. Grellet and Hicks travelled together in ministry in New York Yearly Meeting to encourage local meetings to live faithfully as Quakers. In the course of their travels, Grellet come to believe that Hicks ‘tended to lessen the authority of the Holy Scriptures’, and he ‘frequently, fervently, and earnestly laboured with him’ to turn away from that teaching. Hicks did not respond well to this concern and ten years later, Grellet was one of the leaders who confronted Hicks publicly about his teaching (Grellet 1874, I, 142).

Hicks himself warned about the misuse of Scripture by Friends who were tending to take the Bible as ‘the only rule of faith and practice’ (Hicks, 1861, 175). He also insisted that he delighted in reading the Bible, a fact attested by those who knew him well:

As to the Scriptures of truth...I have always accounted them, when rightly understood, as the best of books extant.... and [I] have made more use of their contents to confirm and establish my labours in the gospel, than most other ministers that I am acquainted with ....I have read them as much as most other
men, and few, I believe, have derived more profit from them than I have. (Hicks 1861, 215)

Friends were moving in conflicting ways away from a balanced tension that valued both Scripture and the teaching of the Spirit. Put perhaps a bit too broadly, those who emerged from the Hicksite stream came to value the inward and experiential as a primary authority; those in the Orthodox stream came to give the Scriptures as external authority a more prominent role. Both streams claim fidelity to the early Friends tradition.

Evangelically influenced Friends used another new initiative to renew interest in and knowledge of Scripture, that of organized Bible studies. While they continued to emphasize the importance of families reading Scripture together each day, a practice that had long been affirmed in Yearly Meeting ‘Advices’, this approach to Bible study set a new direction. In one innovation, they followed the lead of Protestant groups that quickly spread the use of Sunday Schools, a robust and new method initially begun in 1780 by Robert Raikes especially to reach poor children. Friends preferred to call them ‘First Day Schools for Scriptural Instruction’ (Hamm 1988, 26). Walter Williams traces the first such school to Levi Coffin in 1818 in Deep River, North Carolina (Williams 1987, 193), but the use of this model spread broadly in the 1830s and beyond. Hannah Backhouse (1787–1850), a well-regarded English Friends minister and first cousin to Joseph John Gurney, led in this development when she travelled among Friends in the United States from 1830 to 1835. During these years, especially in ministry in Indiana, Backhouse set up numerous weekly ‘Bible meetings’ in which participants would read and study Scripture and would share portions of the Bible which they had memorized. Before she returned to England in 1834 she wrote a manual, Scripture Quotations for the Use of Schools, to help Friends continue the development of this movement (Jones 1970, II, 887–8).

Friends in England showed similar innovations in teaching the Bible. Joseph Sturge (1793–1859) began the Adult School movement in Birmingham in 1845 and two years later invited Quaker teachers to a conference on Bible teaching that resulted in the founding of the Friends’ First-day School Association (Jones 1970, II, 955–6). Both initiatives grew and prospered in the ensuing decades.

Though many Friends led in these new directions, the most prominent leader was Joseph John Gurney, an influential minister in Britain who travelled in America during 1837–40. A banker by trade, he had a fine theological education and studied the Bible devoutly, even learning to read it in its original languages. He promoted systematic teaching of the Bible in meeting schools and helped by providing materials he had created for England’s Ackworth School for that purpose (Jones 1970, II, 889). His encouraging ministry to
Friends in Indiana led them in 1847 to found Earlham College, where studying the Bible was an important part of the curriculum.

Many interpreters believe that Gurney also led Friends more fully to a new way of thinking about Scripture, one that gave prominence to the Bible over the work of the Spirit. One of the key evidences of this is a statement that grew out of a controversy about the Bible in London Yearly Meeting in 1836. The statement, which Gurney heavily influenced, came from Westmorland Quarterly Meeting and was endorsed by London Yearly Meeting. The substance and specific language of it shaped Friends’ witness for decades to come, as, for example, in the Richmond Declaration of Faith of 1887, to be discussed later. The core of it reads:

> It has ever been, and still is, the belief of the Society of Friends, that the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments were given by inspiration of God: that therefore the declarations contained in them rest on the authority of God Himself and there can be no appeal from them to any other authority whatsoever: that they are able to make us wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus; being the appointed means of making known to us the blessed truths of Christianity: that they are the only divinely authorized record of the doctrines which we are bound as Christians to believe, and of the moral principles which are to regulate our actions: that no doctrine which is not contained in them can be required of any one to be believed as an article of faith: that whatsoever any man says or does which is contrary to the Scriptures, though under profession of the immediate guidance of the Spirit, must be reckoned and accounted a mere delusion. (Jones 1970, I, 510)

Some Friends objected to these new developments in emphasizing Scripture for several reasons. They worried, for example, that Friends’ cooperation with other Christians in these enterprises would distort and diminish the distinctive Friends witness. So John Wilbur (1774–1856), a leader among Friends who objected, warned against such ‘departures’ by ‘joining with hireling clergy’ and ‘Bishops, priests, and people of divers other denominations’ in working to spread the Scriptures (Jones 1970, I, 512). Opponents of these new directions were also troubled by how much, especially in teaching the Bible in schools, Friends relied on materials prepared by scholars and ministers outside the Friends’ tradition.

Even more importantly, these Friends objected to the nature of Bible study itself. They believed that the approach to study used in the new movements abandoned some of Friends’ key insights about how they valued and used Scripture. They felt that study of this sort brought external means and abandoned the work of the Spirit in interpreting the text. As Rufus Jones notes: ‘The prevailing theory, in conservative circles, was that this
revelation of truth was too sacred to be openly discussed and argued about. It was to be read with reverence and awe...not to be ‘worked over’ by the intellect’ (Jones 1970, II, 885). Before 1860, Friends did not read the Bible aloud in meetings for worship; speaking directly out of the Spirit’s guidance would not need this aid. So this move to public discussion and systematic study of the Bible seemed like a betrayal of core Quaker values. In a letter, John Wilbur even spoke of it as the work of the devil to study ‘to preach the letter only instead of Christ Jesus in the demonstration of the spirit and power’ (Jones 1970, I, 515).

This sharp rejection of the emerging approaches to Scripture among Friends, along with a variety of other issues, eventually led John Wilbur and those who joined him to separate from other Friends in the Orthodox Quaker stream. The Wilburite Separation culminated in 1854 and became a movement that Friends have called ‘Conservative’; (see Wilson’s chapter 8 within this volume entitled ‘Conservative Friends 1845–2010’).

**Challenges to the Bible in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries**

Several factors emerged to challenge traditional understandings of the Bible in the nineteenth century. This prompted a variety of responses that continued into the next century. The main sources of challenge were new scientific theories and broad changes in analysing and interpreting Scripture.

Early in the nineteenth century, the science of paleontology began to show from the fossil record that ancient creatures had existed that long outdated known human history. At the same time, geologists were working out a sequence of the earth’s geological strata and argued that the development of the earth was long and gradual. These two related streams of thought brought into question the common interpretation of the Bible that the world was created about 6,000 years ago.

In 1859, Charles Darwin published his *On the Origin of Species* in which he argued for the evolution of species through the process of natural selection. Within twenty years, his theory was widely accepted in the scientific community and by the general public. This theory, in effect, challenged traditional interpretations of the Bible’s teaching about creation.

The nineteenth century also saw the emergence of archaeology, though it wouldn’t mature as a science until early in the twentieth century. Nonetheless, important ancient sites, such as Nineveh, were excavated and their treasures taken to museums around the
world. Among the remarkable discoveries were ancient texts contemporary with the events of the Bible. By the 1870s scholars had deciphered the ancient writing systems of cuneiform Akkadian and hieroglyphic Egyptian, and this revealed much about the life of ancient Israel’s neighbours that had previously been unknown. The texts included ancient laws, historical annals, economic texts, and various religious texts, not least some creation stories, flood stories, and myths about the gods of Israel’s neighbours. Insight into these texts also raised questions about traditional interpretations of some biblical texts.

Another challenge to traditional interpretations came from the work of what was then called ‘higher criticism’—new approaches to interpreting the Bible based on analytical methods emerging from the Enlightenment. One of the most controversial subjects in the nineteenth century was the question of who wrote the Bible. For example, the new methods led to the conclusion that Moses was not in fact the author of the Pentateuch—the first five books of the Bible—as had been traditionally thought, and that the Book of Isaiah came from multiple authors and times. Not only the conclusions, but the methods themselves sparked strong debate since many readers of the Bible worried that the underpinnings of their faith, strongly reliant on biblical teaching, were being threatened.

People who cherished Scripture tended to respond in two ways to these new realities. Many people of faith challenged the validity of the new scientific theories, considering them wrong since they disagreed with what they understood to be the plain teaching of the Bible. They also rejected the new approaches to analysing Scripture, regarding them as arid and dangerous, not arising out of genuine faith. Friends, too, had to respond to these new challenges, and they tended to divide into those who would reject the new directions and those who, while desiring to remain faithful to Scripture, were willing to explore new ways of interpreting and studying it.

Many of the Friends who had been influenced by Joseph John Gurney not only developed new practices among Friends, but also continued to cooperate with other groups in the evangelical stream. In America they shared in the work and energy of the Great Revival and came to share in theology, notably in teaching about Holiness, and in adopting new methods. So it is not surprising that these ‘Revival’ Friends also shared evangelical responses to the challenges of new scientific theory and new methods in biblical study. They largely resisted and attacked the new approaches. David Updegraff (1830–94), a prominent leader among these Friends, warned against ‘higher criticism’ and how it brought ‘fearless attacks of unsoundness in high places’. At this point there were few trained biblical scholars in this group of Friends, and such training was looked at with suspicion (Hamm 1988, 109). In his history (decades later), Walter Williams (1884–1973), an Evangelical Friend from Ohio, expresses a similar spirit when he says: ‘...considerable numbers of Friends on both sides of the Atlantic were drinking of the waters of
knowledge, sometimes polluted with doubt, from the fountain bearing the high-sounding name: *Modern Biblical Scholarship and Progressive Religious Thought* (Williams 1987, 211). These responses persisted for decades and, among some, found similarity and support in the fundamentalism that emerged among American Protestants.

A defining moment in American Evangelical Quakerism came at a gathering of Friends in Richmond, Indiana in 1887. This was a diverse group, but all from the Gurneyite stream. They agreed on a statement entitled the ‘Richmond Declaration of Faith’, a statement that is still widely used among Friends even though the religious context has changed over time. The statement itself was decidedly evangelical, but more moderate in tone than emerging responses among some Friends and in the larger Protestant culture. The statement affirms the inspiration and authority of Scripture, but it does not use the words ‘infallible’ or ‘inerrant’ that were becoming important to other evangelicals at the time. This may well be in part because Friends’ confidence in the Spirit working through Scripture undercuts the worry that we can only know God through a text that is perfect in every way. One of the principal contributors to the statement was Joseph Bevan Braithwaite, an Evangelical Friend from England.

Others Friends gradually accepted and engaged in the new approaches to science and biblical study. English Friends moved in this direction earlier than their American counterparts, and they influenced changes in America. The Modernist or liberal stream included freedom of thought, a growing sense of progressive revelation, coupled with a sense that modern methods of study could deepen one’s understanding of the Bible. When English Friend David Duncan used methods of ‘higher criticism’ in the 1870s, his work was unwelcome. However, within thirty years, the directions he had pioneered had become commonplace in England (Dandelion 2007, 117-18).

In England in 1884, three young Friends published the book *A Reasonable Faith*, which stirred discussion about moving towards more liberal approaches. In 1893, London Yearly Meeting opened the way for such movement, recognizing the need to meet the younger generation and to stir Friends from a kind of lethargy (Russell 1979, 501ff). John Wilhelm Rowntree (1868–1905), still in his twenties, was one of the most compelling English leaders. He influenced London Yearly Meeting’s decision in 1893 and two years later emerged as a leader among young liberals at the conference at Manchester that attracted a thousand people to address the topic of Friends and modern thought. Friends organized a series of summer schools to bring qualified scholars to teach about the new movements in Bible, science, and theology. The first of these was at Scarborough in 1897, with more than 650 people attending (Punshon 1984, 241), and they continued (p. 198) for a couple of decades. In a similar move, Friends established Woodbrooke in 1903 as a study centre near Birmingham (England) that invited people to come for short and longer periods of study (Brayshaw 1953, 317ff.). Among the scholars and thinkers who influenced this
movement were Rowntree, H. G. Wood, Rufus Jones (1863–1948), Rendel Harris, and Caroline Stephen.

Rufus Jones’s participation in these events in Britain nurtured a strong friendship with John Wilhelm Rowntree and convinced him to seek similar changes among American Friends. His leadership and advocacy, along with scholars such as Elbert Russell (1871–1951) of Earlham College and Mary Mendenhall Hobbs (1852–1930) of Guilford College, did bring more Modernist approaches to Scripture, trying to acknowledge the advances in science, and to discover the value of new approaches to biblical texts. Summer schools were offered at Earlham (the Earlham Bible Institute) beginning in 1897 and at Haverford College, beginning in 1900 (Russell 1979, 508–9) Friends established a similar institution, Woolman School, at Swarthmore in 1917, and it continued for ten years. It was succeeded in 1930 by Pendle Hill, a study centre similar to Woodbrooke, in Wallingford, near Philadelphia (Punshon 1984, 276).

About the same time, and in contrast to these summer schools and study centres, Evangelical Friends also established schools to teach Bible and to prepare people for the work of public ministry. In 1892, Walter and Emma Malone founded the Cleveland Bible Institute, later to become Malone University. In 1917, Scott T. Clark founded the Kansas Central Bible Training School in Haviland, Kansas, where it became a two-year, then the four-year Bible college, Friends Bible College, and was renamed Barclay College in 1990. Other Friends colleges, such as Pacific College, now George Fox University, also had a strong commitment to Bible teaching, but teaching that continued traditional views and resisted changes introduced by Modernism.

In the early twentieth century, especially in America, the conflicts between Modernism and Fundamentalism raged and affected all Christian groups. How people regarded and treated the Bible was, of course, one of the central issues. Friends had their own history of conflict and change, but the larger controversies influenced Friends as well.

Also in the early twentieth century, Friends, mostly from evangelical roots, established new missions in a variety of places, notably Kenya, India, China, Guatemala, and Bolivia. From these early efforts vigorous Yearly Meetings have grown, the missions have expanded into new areas, and the membership of Friends in the Global South now far exceeds the membership of Friends in America and Britain. Virtually all the Yearly Meetings that grew out of this mission effort now belong to either Friends United Meeting or Evangelical Friends Church International, both of which still point to the Richmond Declaration of Faith to characterize themselves. The Yearly Meetings that arose from the missions’ effort generally share the outlook on the Bible that their founding Yearly Meetings held. They distribute and teach from the Bible. Several maintain Bible schools or Bible institutes to prepare leaders for public ministry. Such
teaching was also offered to those who could not be resident students through programmes such as Theological Education by Extension. Often the Bible has been the primary resource for both teaching literacy and providing religious instruction. As Esther Mombo of Kenya notes: ‘The Bible became central to the work of evangelism and literacy, which went hand in hand’ (2006, 87). The Bible was the basic textbook. People learned it well, often memorizing much of the Scriptures, and passed its message to one another in story and teaching.

Diversity in modern practice

Beginning in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Evangelical Friends in America gradually adopted practices of programmed worship and pastoral ministry. These practices are now the norm among these Friends and are also the most common forms in the Friends movement. In this context, Friends give the Bible a prominent place in their attention and activities. The statement about the Scriptures in Northwest Yearly Meeting’s *Faith and Practice* illustrates the importance of the Bible for these Friends:

> We believe the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments were given by inspiration of God. They are the divinely authorized record of the doctrines that we as Christians are bound to accept, and of the moral principles that are to regulate our lives and actions.... Interpreted by the Holy Spirit, they are an unfailing source of truth. We believe the Spirit will not lead person or groups contrary to the teachings of the Scriptures (‘God’s Revelation’).

Such regard for Scripture shapes the life of these Friends meetings. Prepared sermons are a regular part of worship, and members expect that such preaching should be ‘biblical,’ some even expecting that it should be ‘expositional’ in style. Most Friends churches have Sunday Schools for both children and adults. The classes may use curricula developed specifically by Friends or developed with like-minded groups, such as other groups in the historic Holiness movement. In any event, the lessons are based on particular biblical texts. Most of these Friends churches will also have a variety of other activities based on the Bible: Vacation Bible Schools, youth Bible quiz teams and contests, Bible study groups, and strong encouragement of personal Bible reading. Many Friends also give copies of the Bible to children and youth in their meetings.

Friends in the ‘liberal’ tradition continue a sharply different view of the authority and singular importance of the Scriptures. Excerpts from Philadelphia Yearly Meeting’s *Faith and Practice* illustrate the contrasts:
Friends’ appreciation of the Bible and other scriptures springs from our faith that there is in everyone the capacity to be open and responsive to the experience of the Divine...Like Fox, Friends since have found the Bible to be the record of direct experiences of the Holy Spirit, serving as an important touchstone against which to test our leadings...Friends know from experience that knowledge of the Bible widely shared in a Meeting deepens the spiritual power of both spoken ministry and inward listening...Given the Bible’s importance in shaping the ways Friends have expressed their experience of the presence and leading of God and its power to illumine our worship and our vocal ministry, we are encouraged to know it well. We do not, however, consider scriptures, whether Hebrew or Christian or those of other religious faiths, to be the final revelation of God’s nature and will. Rather, we believe in continuing revelation (‘Friends’).

The practices of individuals and meetings vary widely. Some individuals know the Bible very well, even committing large portions of it to memory; others scarcely know it at all. Some meetings encourage the use of Scripture and may even offer some teaching to deepen members’ understanding. Other meetings marginalize or neglect it in practice. Some members have come to Friends partly in reaction to personal experiences in which they felt the Bible was misused or even used abusively. So they and their meetings are sometimes cautious about using the Bible.

Some leaders among liberal Friends actively encourage the steady reading and study of the Bible. Chuck Fager, a writer and publisher among liberal Friends, often invites serious Bible study in works such as Reclaiming a Resource. Joanne and Larry Spears have taught and written about a method they call Friendly Bible Study to help guide groups into attentive, spiritual listening to biblical texts.

Conservative Friends continue to hold that they are the most faithful to early Quaker faith and practice. After reporting the work of Fox and Barclay, Stanley Pennington summarizes, ‘Barclay affirms the great benefit for Friends in the ongoing use of Scriptures, as a resource for us as we seek to know and follow the presence of the Living Word of God’. He then points to Ohio Yearly Meeting’s Book of Discipline, Advice No. 16: ‘Be diligent in the reading of the Bible and other spiritually helpful writings.’ Many individuals and families practise daily reading of the Bible. In their gatherings for business and worship, Conservative Friends do use forms of reading Scripture, generally accompanied by a period of waiting worship. Some meetings have Bible study groups to read and explore the Bible (Pennington 2010). Also from this tradition, Lloyd Lee Wilson urges the importance of daily Bible reading, directed Bible study, and ‘soaking’ Bible reading in his lecture ‘Why do you still read that old thing?’.
A notable trend in the twentieth century came as Friends of all sorts engaged in and even embraced biblical scholarship. Instead of regarding seminary education as suspect, many came to welcome it and even regard it as necessary. Seminaries typically include the academic study of Scripture, and Friends came increasingly to accept that study and the Quaker leaders who had become outstanding biblical scholars. Recognized leaders and scholars included Moses Bailey in Old Testament studies and Henry Cadbury, Alexander Purdy, and George Boobyer in New Testament studies. In recent decades, among the many fine scholars who have emerged among Friends, a growing number of specialists in biblical studies have given new leadership.

The shape of biblical scholarship in the academy has also changed in recent decades, with new approaches to analysis displacing the historic centrality of ‘higher criticism’ with its focus on authorship and sources. Instead, new methods have emerged drawing on insights and methods from literature, the social sciences, feminism, and other creative and interdisciplinary approaches. They have broadened and deepened our understanding of Scripture and the community of faith from which it first came. This new diversity in methods has also helped lower defences against critical analysis.

Recognizing that sound scholarship is making a substantial contribution to Friends colleges, seminaries, and serious journals, it is useful to note that, for a variety of reasons, much of this work does not find its way into the life of many Friends meetings. Friends who want to learn these methods and results more deeply often still rely on special schools, workshops, and conferences, and now sometimes through study on the Internet with extension courses available through programmes such as those at Earlham School of Religion, the first Quaker seminary.

**Reflections on the path ahead**

The Bible will continue to play an important role in Quaker life and practice. The current differences among Friends take their shape from long history and habit, and it seems unlikely that these differences will change markedly in the near future. Virtually all Friends claim to value Scripture’s witness and they encourage active engagement with the Bible as a part of faithful living. Friends have tended to stray from the difficult tension of the paradox of God speaking to us through both Scripture and the Spirit. To hold that point of paradox, Evangelical Friends could steadily encourage the Spirit-led reading of the Bible. Liberal Friends could embrace the Bible’s role more fully as an authoritative guide. All Friends could do more to deepen Bible literacy.
Michael Birkel’s *Engaging Scripture: Reading the Bible with Early Friends* is one indication that the renewed interest in reading Scripture through the lens of spirituality may open new paths (or recover older paths) for Friends. Another fresh path may come from listening to those who teach and minister out of the Friends meetings in the Global South. Cross-cultural listening could well deepen the understanding of Friends in Britain and North America. New insights could come from Friends in Africa, Asia, and Latin America who may hear and live out the Bible more ably than those steeped in traditions of Western Europe. Their treasure of cultural practices, social organization, and varied histories can deepen our understanding of the biblical texts. The work of Friend Esther Mombe of Kenya is one example of how throughout the Global South the gifts of traditional cultures combined with contemporary scholarly tools are bringing fresh and valuable readings of Scripture.

**Suggested further reading**


**Howard R. Macy**

Howard R. Macy is Professor Emeritus at George Fox University in Newberg, Oregon. His publications include *Rhythms of the Inner Life* (F.H. Revell, 1988), *Laughing Pilgrims: Humor and the Spiritual Journey* (Paternoster Press, 2006) and *Stepping in the Light* (Friends United Press, 2007), as well as numerous articles in Friends publications. He currently serves as editor of Quaker Religious Thought and continues research interests in the Hebrew prophets, in spirituality, and in the role of humor in Christian living.