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# THE QUAKERS

A Very Short Introduction

OXFORD

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## The Quakers: A Very Short Introduction

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## Chapter 1

# Who are the Quakers?

It is often said that the Quakers have had an influence beyond their numbers. Certainly, through their class and educational background, Quakers have had an important role in the formation of civil society on both sides of the Atlantic. Quaker opposition to war and work for peace, as well as the social witness which emerged out of their idea of spiritual equality, such as Elizabeth Fry's prison work or the opposition to slavery, is perhaps what Quakers are best known for today. People may know that some of them worship in silence or that they don't have priests, but it is their public witness that has given them the most prominence. At the same time, they are theologically and sociologically fascinating, beginning as a radical movement during the British republic, and adapting themselves forever thereafter to new theological insights and new social settings. This book outlines the movement and its history, charts how different traditions of Quakers worship, and explores what they believe. It looks at Quaker attitudes to other Churches and other faiths, and considers the future of Quakerism.

The Quakers began as a movement in the northwest of England in 1652, although, as we shall see, some of the key experiences of the early Friends (as Quakers are also called) occurred some



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years previously. Through mission and migration, there are now around 340,000 Quakers worldwide. Through the kind of schism that seems to categorize sectarian Protestantism, there are three main traditions of Quakerism: Evangelical (although there are also different varieties of Evangelical Friend), Conservative, and Liberal. Nevertheless, there are four key theological ideas still held in common by Friends everywhere:

- 1) the centrality of direct inward encounter with God and revelation, and thus forms of worship which allow this to be experienced: 'Quaker' was originally a nickname applied to the group because of the way they shook during worship;
- 2) a vote-less way of doing church business based on the idea of corporate direct guidance;
- 3) the spiritual equality of everyone and the idea of 'the priesthood of all believers';
- 4) based in part on the latter, the preference for peace and pacifism rather than war, and a commitment to other forms of social witness.

This chapter gives an overview of the founding ideas of the movement, charts the centrality of witness or 'testimony' to the movement and to how the movement has come to be known, and briefly delineates the different types of Quaker.

## Beginnings

George Fox (1624–91) is generally credited with the founding of the Quaker movement, although he came to be helped by a great number of very capable preachers such as James Nayler, Margaret Fell, Edward Burrough, Francis Howgill, Richard Hubberthorne, Richard Farnsworth, and William Dewsbury, all drawn initially from the north of England. Fox himself grew up in Fenny Drayton in Leicestershire. His religious seeking led him to leave home in 1643 when he was 19 years of age and he spent the next few years



Who are the Quakers?

**1. Wood engraving of George Fox (1624–91)**

with a Baptist uncle in London and visiting the army camps. This was the Civil War period, and it was in the Parliamentary army that the most radical religious ideas were circulating.

Fox had already realized that the national Church's notion that ministers needed to be educated at Oxford or Cambridge was

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wrongheaded, but he also found the radical preachers who had separated from the Church lacking. We see this reflected in the following passage from his journal, dated 1647, but we also read of the transforming experience that came over him in the depths of his despair.

Now after I had received that opening from the Lord that to be bred at Oxford or Cambridge was not sufficient to fit a man to be a minister of Christ, I regarded the priests less and looked more after the dissenting people ... [But] As I had forsaken all the priests, so I left the separate preachers also, and those called the most experienced people; for I saw there was none among them all that could speak to my condition. And when all my hopes in them and in all men were gone, so that I had nothing *outwardly* to help me, nor could tell what to do, then, oh then, I heard a voice which said, 'There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition,' and when I heard it my heart did leap for joy.

(Nickalls, 1952, p. 11; my emphasis)

In other words, at the very point when Fox had no hope and knew not where to turn, he claims this direct experience of God and Christ speaking to him. He continues:

Then the Lord did let me see why there was none upon the earth that could speak to my condition, namely, that I might give him all the glory; for all are concluded under sin, and shut up in unbelief as I had been, that Jesus Christ might have the preeminence who enlightens, and gives grace, and faith, and power. Thus, when God doth work who shall let [hinder] it? And this I knew experimentally.

(Nickalls, 1952, p. 11)

The important point about this passage is that Fox realizes that it is no accident that he has not found easy answers from those

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around him. Wisdom and guidance is to come from God and those who think otherwise are ‘shut up in unbelief’, deluded. He knows this ‘experimentally’, that is, through his experience.

This experience was and remains foundational for Quakerism. In the next chapter, we shall see how its interpretation shifted over time and between Quaker traditions, but the idea and experience of direct encounter remains central for all kinds of Quaker today.

Critically, for Fox, the importance he gave revelation was not additional to Church teaching and the authority of scripture, but replaced it. ‘How do we know what is of God?’ is a key question for all religious groups. Fox claimed that direct revelation was the answer. Equally importantly, he claimed this revelation was available to everyone; it wasn’t that he had a particular spiritual authority but that he had discovered the authority available for everyone.

Fox claimed that the revelation given to him was always later confirmed by scripture but that scripture was secondary to revelation, it was the word about the Living Word, the inward experience of Christ. Early Friends used Jeremiah 31: 31–34 to affirm this experience of a new covenant with God written on their hearts, rather than in outward forms.

Indeed, Quaker spirituality placed great emphasis on the authenticity of the inward and the apostasy (the falling away from the faith) of the outward. This transforming experience available to all did away with the need for priests and sermons, for the Teacher spoke inwardly and directly.

A year later, in 1648, Fox had a second experience during which he felt himself lifted up into the state of Adam before the Fall, but then quickly into a state beyond Adam, beyond falling.

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Now I was come up in spirit through the flaming sword into the paradise of God. All things were new, and all creation gave another smell unto me than before, beyond what words can utter. I knew nothing but pureness, and innocency, and righteousness, being renewed up into the image of God by Christ Jesus, so that I say I was come up to the state of Adam which he was in before he fell ... But I was immediately taken up in spirit to see into another or more steadfast state than Adam's in innocency, even into a state in Christ Jesus that should never fall.

(Nickalls, 1952, p. 27)

The 'flaming sword' is a reference to Genesis 3 in which a flaming sword is placed across the entrance to Eden once Adam and Eve have been banished. What Fox is claiming here is a spiritual intimacy with God and Christ, entailing an ability to resist sin and temptation, that is, a doctrine of perfection.

This spiritual intimacy and the transformation it brought gave Friends a sense of being on a new and separated spiritual plane from their old selves and from the rest of humanity. They called themselves 'the saints' or 'the Friends of the Truth', and felt themselves separate from the apostate 'world'. In some early Quaker tracts, they claimed their names belonged only to their former lives, that they were now 'truly known' only by the other saints and by God.

The transformation experience that Quakers underwent, or 'convincement' as it came to be termed, consisted of six stages for most Friends:

- 1) an in-breaking of God's power;
- 2) a realization of how sinful the believer's life had been, how far it had fallen short;
- 3) the chance to repent and accept the new life;
- 4) the experience of regeneration;
- 5) an impulse to gather with others who had had this experience;
- 6) mission to those who had not yet had this experience.

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Early Friends also claimed the experience of transformation was continual. It is not clear how many claimed the perfection Fox did, but it was certainly a recognized Quaker doctrine through the 1650s.

Following his 1647 and 1648 experiences, Fox stayed in the Midlands but spent most of 1650 in jail, a common experience for Quakers in the first 30 years of the movement. When he was released, he travelled north to where groups of 'Seekers' were already sharing some of his ideas. The Seekers were a group who had separated away from the national Church and had stripped their worship of formal liturgy. They had ministers but met in silence until the minister spoke. There were strong groups of Seekers in Yorkshire and Westmoreland, and much of the early Quaker leadership was drawn from their numbers. Edward Burrough was one of the Westmoreland Seekers who became a leading Quaker, but in 1656 wrote a tract against the Seekers for merely 'waiting'. In other words, from this publication, we have a sense that the Seekers perhaps lacked a vision or a vehicle to take the next steps towards the coming of the Kingdom. For many of them, George Fox seemed to fulfil that function.

Who are the Quakers?

Travelling from Yorkshire to Westmoreland in May 1652, Fox felt 'moved by the Lord' to climb Pendle Hill, near Clitheroe in Lancashire. At the top and on the way down, Fox had a vision of a 'great people to be gathered, dressed in white raiment' (another reference to Revelation) (Nickalls, 1952, p. 104). This was a critical moment in Quaker history as it marked the idea of starting the new Church rather than just preaching truth. Two weeks later he arrived in Sedbergh, at the time of the hiring fair for flax workers, who dressed in white, and the following Sunday afternoon on Firbank Fell, where there was a Seeker meeting in the morning, Fox 'drew many hundreds to land'. In other words, he had a major preaching success which began the Quaker movement more formally. Two weeks after that, in Ulverston, he converted Margaret Fell, part of the local gentry,

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and her household at Swarthmoor Hall, to the Quaker experience, and secured in Fell the co-leadership of the movement in the early years and huge pastoral, administrative, and theological skills, as well as the protection of her husband, Judge Thomas Fell. Swarthmoor Hall became the headquarters of the Quaker movement for the next few years. In 1654, the mission to the rest of England and Wales, and later to Ireland, the Vatican and Constantinople, and the Americas, left from there.

## Quakerism in context

In some ways, we can say that the Quaker movement began in the 1650s in response to two aspects of Christian history: first, the Protestant impulse to more fully reform Christianity; and second, the waiting for the Second Coming upon which Christianity as a formal religion is founded.

The Quakers

Since the Reformation of 1534, when Henry VIII had set up a national Church separate from the Roman Catholic one, some had wished his reforms to go further. His reformation was more political than theological and left many radical thinkers frustrated. The availability of the Bible in English after 1590, and especially after 1611 when an English-language Bible could be found in every church, fuelled the desire for fresh interpretations of liturgical form and ecclesiology (the way the Church is structured). The Civil War period gave new momentum to the discussion of radical religious ideas and a new sense of possibility. The moderate religious settlement that characterized the 1650s and rule under Oliver Cromwell frustrated many, but also gave enough freedom to sectarian groups to allow the Quakers to present themselves as the new true Church, the model of a fully reformed Church.

Christianity itself emerged as a religion as the early Christians came to realize that the Second Coming of Christ, prophesied by Paul, was not necessarily going to take place immediately.

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Humanity needed help to wait faithfully and the institution of the Church and its officers and practices was a pragmatic response to that need. Official Church documents are explicit about the temporary nature of these rites and institutions. Visit an Anglican or Roman Catholic church today and you find the liturgy of the Eucharist is explicitly about the remembrance of the First Coming and the anticipation of the Second. As the theologian Albert Schweitzer commented, the history of Christianity has been about the delay of the Second Coming.

Early Quakers felt they were in the vanguard of this Second Coming which would come to all and bring about global transformation. Again, building on Jeremiah, but also Revelation in particular, these early Friends claimed that this Second Coming was an inward experience. This new reality available to all meant that the way Christianity had been operating was now redundant and anachronistic, belonging only to an age now past.

Thus, as well as not needing priests and sermons, this interpretation of the direct encounter between humanity and God, and the continual nature of the transformation it brought, also meant that churches and outward sacraments could be dispensed with. Revelation 3:20 talks about Christ supping inwardly with those who respond to his knocking, and Friends thought this communion replaced the passage in 1 Corinthians 11:26 that instructs the believers to break the bread until the Lord comes. The Lord had come again. There was a new supper to celebrate, the marriage supper of the Lamb. Equally, the Church calendar set up to help remember and anticipate could be ignored. Every day was equally holy and special. Neither Sunday nor Christmas or Easter was marked by these early Friends. Every place was equally holy given the continual and personal nature of transformation, and Quakers met to preach and worship anywhere: often in barns or by the roadside. The Quakers built 'Meeting Houses' only when their own homes became too small.



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