

A History of the Religious Society of Friends

Planting Seeds

The Religious Society of Friends was born in seventeenth-century England. Historians date the birth to 1652, when a young man in his late 20s brought a message of hope—the promise of the immediate presence of God—to a community waiting in silence. Frances Howgill, who was there, later wrote

. . . and God, out of his great love and great mercy, sent one unto us, a man of God, one of ten thousand, to instruct us in the way of God more perfectly; which testimony reached unto all our consciences and entered into the inmost part of our hearts, which drove us to a narrow search, and to a diligent inquisition concerning our state, through the Light of Christ Jesus. The Lord of Heaven and earth we found to be near at hand and, as we waited upon him in pure silence, our minds out of all things, his heavenly presence appeared in our assemblies, when there was not language, tongue nor speech from any creature. The Kingdom of Heaven did gather us and catch us all, as in a net, and his heavenly power at one time drew many hundreds to land.^[1]

George Fox, the “one of ten thousand,” was twenty-eight years old. While England was engaged in civil wars^[2]—wars in which the rights of kings did battle with the rights of citizens and in which the armies were driven by religious fervor—he had been traveling around England for nine years. Fox left his family at the age of nineteen, searching . . . for something. Today we would say he wanted a guru, but in his years of wandering, he found many who had ideas about God, but no one who seemed to answer his searching questions. Remembering this time in his life years later, he said that he struggled with “a strong temptation to despair,”^[3] but the Spirit was continually teaching him. He learned that education, institutions, books, pretty words, and experts were not sufficient—in fact, he learned that *he* was not sufficient. He described his turning point as follows:

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, O 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. 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 pre-eminence, who enlightens, and gives grace and faith and power. Thus when God doth work, who shall let [prevent] it? And this I knew experimentally.

My desires after the Lord grew stronger, and zeal in the pure knowledge of God and of Christ alone, without the help of any man, book, or writing. For though I read the Scriptures that spoke of Christ and of God, yet I knew him not but by revelation, as he who hath the key did open, and as the Father of life drew me to his Son by his spirit.^[4]

For the next five years, Fox roamed the country, debating, convincing, offending, growing. In the churches of the time, a period was often provided after the sermon for comment from the congregation. Fox was not discreet. Blunt in his expression, he was often thrown out of the building and beaten by some members of the congregation even while his message reached others. He was arrested for the first time, and he refused a commission in the army that would have gotten him out of prison. He met many who became leaders in what became the Religious Society of Friends, among them Elizabeth Hooton, James Nayler, William Dewsbury, and Richard Farnsworth. He was called a Quaker for the first time, and he called the “tender” people he met “Friends.”^[5] Still, it was not until 1652 and his meeting with the Seekers in the north of England that the society as we know it began to take shape. It was there that his message was heard and taken to heart by an entire community. This community already practiced worship in silence, with the freedom to speak given to all whom the Spirit moved. It was there that a message of individual authority—“you have an inward teacher”—found a context and practice in which the Inward Teacher spoke to all and deepened all.

From their base in the north of England, convinced Friends fanned out, first across England and then to the rest of the Western world, leading to explosive growth on the part of the Society and suspicion on

the part of everyone else. It is impossible to have a feel for this time in our history without having some understanding of early Quakers' inner fire and the consequences they bore. John Camm and John Audland evangelized Bristol, with meetings of from 3,000 to 4,000 people attending regularly in a local orchard. John Camm died, of tuberculosis, within two years of the start of his ministry, and John Audland also died young, his health damaged by the rigors of his work. Elizabeth Fletcher died at nineteen as a result of a beating by students at Oxford. Richard Hubberthorne and Edward Burrough died in jail, having imprisoned for preaching. Francis Howgill died after five and a half years in jail for refusing to take a loyalty oath. William Dewsbury spent more than nineteen years in prison for preaching. In 1660, Mary Fisher, a servant in a Quaker household, took a message to the Sultan of Turkey in the midst of his army and returned. Much of the journey was on foot, and many along the way either refused to help her or tried to force her to turn back. Four years earlier, she and Anne Austin had been jailed in Boston for five weeks. A local churchman paid the jailer to feed them, or they would have starved. Massachusetts became rigidly punitive, beating, banishing, and executing Quakers, until Charles II took away the colony's right to do so. William Robinson, Marmaduke Stephenson, and Mary Dyer stood together at the scaffold in 1659. Dyer got a reprieve at the request of her son. Still under obedience to preach in Boston, she returned a year later, but this time no reprieve was granted.

Friends had other problems besides those that arose from opposing the established churches. Testimony was not allowed in court without an oath, so Friends could be robbed with impunity. In many cases the robbers went free while the Friends were jailed for refusing to swear. Later, the crown gained the ability to confiscate property from anyone refusing to swear an oath of loyalty, and Friends (including Margaret Fell and George Fox) were hauled into court on various pretexts so that they could be put in the position of having to take the oath.

These are just some examples of the sufferings of Quakers endured for carrying out their testimonies in their lives. Nevertheless, by 1690 there were some 60,000 Friends in Britain.

Margaret Fell, mistress of Swarthmore Hall and at first somewhat protected by her position as the wife of a judge, maintained correspondence with many of the far-flung missionaries and managed the Kendal Fund, which helped to support Friends' evangelical work. The Valiant Sixty traveled in pairs, meeting occasionally with others to plan missions and spread the word. Over time, however, this personal network became insufficient for dealing with the issues that arose as the result of the exploding population of enthusiasts. There were a number of controversies—some religious and some political—that could have harmed the Society. These led to the development of a system of local and regional meetings for business and discipline (see the Organization of the Society chapter for more details).

In the developments in the first fifty years, one can see the seeds of our modern religious society planted—with all its diversity of thought, conflict over the source of authority, and strong social testimonies. Women were in evidence as strong leaders; as a matter of fact, early attacks on Friends included the charge that their old men sat silently by while serving girls preached. Use of plain speech and plain dress began during this time, driven by a self-proclamation of honesty and a discipline of simplicity. The denial of outward wars that became our peace testimony began when George Fox refused to accept a commission in the army as a way out of jail and developed through the end of the century as the Society defended itself against charges of fomenting violent rebellion while individual Friends discovered themselves unable to plan bombardments and quit their duties in the military.^[6] The first general advices were written at Balby in 1656, along with an admonition to pay attention to the Spirit behind the advices and not just the letter of them.^[7] Controversies over leadings by the Spirit were resolved in favor of discernment within the community, this discernment addressing the challenge of leaving all Friends open to the Spirit's possibility and at the same time checking rampant, egoistic individualism.

What the world knows today as civil disobedience, Friends practiced by holding open meetings for worship in contradiction of the law and suffering the consequences—eventually leading to the Act of Toleration and acceptance of the idea that people within a nation could differ over spiritual matters and remain good neighbors and loyal citizens. In his letter to the governor of Barbados in 1671, George Fox argued for a familial obligation for spiritual education between master and slave (mistaking slavery for service), but only seventeen years later, four Friends in the Germantown Meeting sent a minute to their business meeting challenging all who associated with slavery to defend it.^[8] (Unfortunately, we also find in this event evidence of other aspects of our Society. The minute was passed from monthly meeting to quarterly meeting to yearly meeting, where it was decided that the question was too complicated and no action was taken. From the time of Fox's Barbados letter, it took American yearly meetings approximately 100 years to decide that involvement in any way with slaveholding was an occasion for disownment.

Curiously, this happened at about the same time as the United States declared its independence from Britain. New England's minute is dated 1773, Philadelphia's 1774, and Baltimore's 1777.^[9]

Lying Fallow

With the death of George Fox in 1691, leadership passed to Steven Crisp and George Whitehead. Steven Crisp also died in 1691, however, leaving George Whitehead alone to lead the Society into a new century. The Act of Toleration gave Quakers freedom to worship, yet the Society^[10] had to learn to live together without the charismatic leaders it had known, many of whom had died in prison.

Friends now clearly stood for a distinct emphasis within Christianity which asserted that all people were possessed of the light of Christ within, which was sufficient to save them if they obeyed it and drew upon its power; that God's saving grace is universal and not confined to nominal, or outward Christians; that human beings are under an obligation to seek perfection; and that God's revelation of himself is not limited to nature or the printed word, but continues directly down the centuries, informing both individuals and the Church.^[11]

There is both a great deal and very little to say about this period, which could arbitrarily be dated from the death of George Fox through the great split that began in Philadelphia Yearly Meeting in 1827. Friends became wealthy through industry, frugality, and creativity, and then became uncomfortable with their wealth and the involvement with the world that it brought. In what became the United States, and especially in Pennsylvania, Friends grew in political power until the skirmishes with the Indians and the wars with the British in America led them to withdraw for the sake of conscience. Friends began the period uncomfortable with slavery, and pledged to divest themselves by the end. (Although from one angle it looks as though the Society moved much faster than their contemporaries in coming to understand the moral depravity inherent in slavery, from another angle one sees the Society diverging from the world's opinion—climbing slowly out of the pit while their contemporaries dug ever deeper.)

In their spiritual lives, Friends increasingly embraced a kind of quietism. In mystical terms, quietism carries the sense of self-annihilation in God or inactivity before God. For Friends, this meant waiting for a strong, sure leading before engaging in spiritual activity. In order to hold more strongly to inward, individual revelation of Truth, the Society turned away from corporate teaching and tradition. Metaphorically, having discovered that they couldn't make the horse drink, Friends stopped trying to lead the horse to water. The most they would say is that there was water around somewhere.

Paradoxically, the lack of a statement of *belief* led them to develop many statements of *behavior*. This became a period of self-containment in which Friends removed themselves from active involvement in the world around them even as they became successful merchants and manufacturers. Acceptable styles of dress became more and more restricted. Plain speech was mandated, with advices reminding Friends to use it at all times and not to speak one way at home and another way in the world. Marrying outside of the meeting became a cause for disownment. Meetings became more and more silent as Friends worked to ensure that no vocal ministry was given but by direct inspiration of the Spirit.

It is common to look at the Quietist Period (roughly the eighteenth century) as a time when the Society became rigid and required greater and greater conformity to those outward behaviors that made Friends a "peculiar people," but there were benefits to intense introspection as well. It was his focus on self-abnegation in the face of God's will that inspired the efforts of John Woolman, "possibly the greatest Quaker of all and an adornment of the period of quietism,"^[12] to clear his conscience, and then his efforts to clear the society of slavery in the face of intense economic pressure. Only a Society devoted to spiritual clarity could actively listen to such a gadfly and change its own behavior. Only a Society this disciplined could ban its members from any involvement in slavery. In addition to grappling with the issue of slavery, this inward focus made it possible for the Society to maintain the principle of the spiritual equality of women, ultimately producing in America a generation of strong female abolitionist and feminist leaders and supporting the social activism of women like Elizabeth Gurney Fry in Britain.

Object Lessons

There are a number of good histories of the Society of Friends. John Punshon's *Portrait in Grey: A Short History of the Quakers* and Howard Brinton's *Friends for 300 Years* (now with an historical update and notes by Margaret Hope Bacon as *Friends for 350 Years*) are excellent, readable, and easily available. *A Western Quaker Reader*, edited by Anthony Manousos, is a good resource for first-hand information about the development of the three independent western yearly meetings, of which Intermountain Yearly Meeting is

one. In the interest of brevity, this chapter will now touch briefly on five themes in Friends' history as they affect our way of being in the world.

Finding Fault Lines / Judging the Inner Light^[13]

There is a common switch in religious movements that base their appeal on an inward change that is expected to be manifested in outward behavior: the move from preaching the inward to judging the outward. The unifying and transforming experience of the Spirit is lost. For Christians, the problem is older than the letter of James: "But someone will say, 'You have faith and I have works.' Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith."^[14] According to Matthew's gospel, Jesus said, "A sound tree cannot bear evil fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit."^[15]

Even as Friends were clearing themselves of slavery, many among them were becoming dissatisfied with uninspiring meetings and the worldly entanglements of the wealthy and powerful in the Society. By the time Elias Hicks became a flashpoint, one of the principal sources of irritation was his attack on the wealth that many leaders in the society derived through trade in slave goods. (It was as difficult to escape slave goods then as it is today to be clear of military technology.) Today, unprogrammed Friends look at Hicks—Long Island farmer, recorded minister, and indefatigable reformer—as the defender of the Inner Light against the inroads of Biblical creedalism. Hicks and reformers of his ilk believed the world was enticing the Society away from the Inner Light. They struggled for a stricter observation of the outward standards they thought had been eaten away by Revolutionary War fervor and the American ideology of freedom. Their struggle for transformation of the Society became a challenge to the power of the elders.

The institution of the elder has deep roots in the Society. Although the model of Friends' discernment gives final authority over leadings to the community, in practice the voice of authority was given to weighty Friends. This especially applied to vocal ministry. The gift of inspiration in meeting for worship was closely watched.

And our advice to all our ministers is, that they be frequent in reading the scriptures of the old and new testaments; and if any in the course of their ministry, shall misapply, or draw unsound inferences or wrong conclusions from the text, or shall misbehave themselves in point of conduct or conversation, let them be admonished in love and tenderness by the elders or overseers where they live, and if they prove refractory and refuse to acknowledge their faults, let them be further dealt with, in the wisdom of truth, as the case may require. —1723^[16]

The people most likely to be tweaked by Hicks's preaching against worldly entanglement were the powerful, who were also the ones most likely to sit as elders. And it was the elders whose job it was to mind the orthodoxy and behavior of the preachers. In keeping with the times, and in reaction to a non-Christian deism common in society at large, this orthodoxy looked to Protestant theology extracted from an absolutely authoritative Bible. The time was passing when all Friends said the Bible was the *words* of God, but only the Spirit of Christ was the *Word* of God.

The division, when it came, was driven by theology, politics, power, and personality. It was ugly as only a family quarrel can be ugly. Hicks's movement was very attractive to the rural majority in Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, which found itself passed over and ignored by the citified merchants who had the time and opportunity to meet and lead the Society. Without time to study, and more familiar with the seasons than with theology, the country cousins were also naturally more comfortable using behavior, rather than belief, to verify transformation. Comfortable with ideas and books, comfortable with the idea of working with their "equals" in society and the Society, and comfortably in charge, the elders were also comfortable with applying these new but obviously correct standards of belief to the preaching of their opponents. In 1827, the issues were decided in favor of declaring one's opponents not real Quakers. From Philadelphia, the division spread to New York in 1828, and then to Ohio, Indiana, and Baltimore Yearly meetings. New England, Virginia, North Carolina, and London did not divide but aligned themselves with the orthodox yearly meetings. Within the Orthodox branch there were further separations as the years went by; these are beyond the scope of this chapter. In order to prevent further schism within itself, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting (Orthodox) simply stopped corresponding with other meetings. It took almost 130 years before the different branches began to recognize one another again as Quakers.

Am I not a person and a sibling? / Transform the Society, transform society

Friends can be proud of their place in the history of antislavery.

The honor [of pioneering the antislavery movement] belongs to the Quakers, for the Quakers were gentle people, living by the precept of the golden rule, believing in the inherent dignity of man, the freedom of the human will, and the equality of all men . . .

These Quakers abhorred all violence. They never spoke in harsh language. They opposed slavery from first to last on moral and religious grounds—as sin. They made tremendous financial sacrifices to rid themselves of the contamination. They never asked anything for themselves by way of profit—political, social, or economic—from their friendship for the oppressed. Nevertheless, they were violently denounced, charged with inciting rebellion, suppressed, and finally driven out of Barbados because they sought to Christianize and educate their slaves. They were denied the poor privilege of freeing their slaves in the Southern states, and in the early congresses of the United States were accused of treason and incendiarism because they petitioned for suppression of the African slave trade.^[17]

At the same time, the history of individual activism on the part of Friends is full of disownments and departures. Once the Society itself was clear of slave ownership, many Friends who worked aggressively to end slavery in the United States were seen by their meetings as getting too entangled in the world.

When Friends first testified to the equality of all people, they were testifying to equality in God's possibility. The Spirit was no respecter of social position. To doff the hat was to offer to a person what should only be offered to God. To call someone "master" out of politeness was simply to lie. It was not an attack on social distinctions, per se. Quaker households had servants, but the servants joined the families for meals, went to meeting, and when led were released to follow the Spirit's guidance (Mary Fisher, for example). At first, slavery appeared to be one calling among many, a different kind of service. George Fox, writing to calm the fears of slave owners in Barbados, could speak of mutual obligations between owner and property, obligations that went beyond care for the body to care for what made a person human—the soul. However, as the world moved to put the power of government and custom into the institution of property rights of one human being in another, Friends moved in a different direction. In his essay "Some Considerations on Keeping Negroes," John Woolman argued that the golden rule itself militated against slavery, because no slaveholder would ever wish to be a slave and be treated as a slave was treated. Friends began to see that slavery was not a calling, but an evil, and the Society moved to clear itself. It must be noted that the movement was slowed by self-interest and that the final minutes against slavery were written only after a generational change in the leadership of the Society.

Quakers actively supported free and freed African Americans in many ways, setting up schools for children and adults, providing relief for escapees, and working with the Underground Railroad. They petitioned Congress for changes to the laws until Congress reinterpreted the meaning of "petition" in the First Amendment. They also assumed that their charges were not quite suited for Friends' style of worship and were happy when they found some other church more in keeping with their character. There were special benches (at the back for some reason) in meeting houses for any who might wander in. Once clear of slavery as a Society, aid to the slave continued to be done on a societal basis, but antislavery and abolition work was left to the individual.

After Woolman and Anthony Benezet, a Quaker school teacher whose pamphlets were copied rather exactly by John Wesley when he wrote *Thoughts upon Slavery*,^[18] male leadership in the antislavery movement quickly moved beyond the Society, especially following the Great Revival in 1825. Friends continued to be the largest single source of women in antislavery leadership, including Lucretia Mott, Abby Kelley, Angelina and Sarah Grimké (by conviction), and Susan B. Anthony.^[19] Of these five, only Lucretia Mott remained an active Friend for her whole life, and it wasn't easy for her. Abby Kelley resigned from her meeting because of lack of support, after which she was disowned. The Grimké sisters were disowned when Angelina married Theodore Weld and Sarah attended the wedding. Susan B. Anthony chafed at the Society's limited involvement with radical abolition and the women's movement and attended the Unitarian church after 1848, although she remained a lifelong member of her meeting in Rochester, NY.

Men, Friends or not, found it easy to focus on freedom for slaves alone. For the women in the movement, it quickly became obvious that their position was remarkably similar to that of the group they were trying to free. The 1848 Seneca Falls Convention, with its Declaration of Women's Rights, was planned over tea at the home of Jane Hunt. Hunt was joined by Lucretia Coffin Mott and her sister Martha Coffin

Wright; Mary Ann McLintock; and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia's long-time friend, fellow antislavery activist, and the only non-Friend present. Part of the impetus for the meeting and the ensuing convention was a promise Mott and Cady Stanton had made to each other when the World's Antislavery Conference in London in 1840 refused to seat women delegates accredited by American antislavery societies. The revolutionary tea followed the 1848 Genesee Yearly Meeting, at which the Michigan Quarter had been terminated for "demanding more freedom to engage in the antislavery cause, less authority for the ministers and elders, and equal rights for women."^[20]

There is a great deal of complexity to Friends' involvement in societal transformation. Looking back, we see giants of human endeavor speaking for equality and justice, leading the Society and society in general to new ethical understandings. At the same time, we see others in the Society who believed that involvement in a sinful world was probably wrong and at least wasted effort. Friends' business process is essentially conservative, because change must be validated through unity; once achieved, however, that unity has immense power. The value Friends place on individual conscience allowed them to stand against the world on ethical issues. It also accustomed them to difference, to the point where they were comfortable with *not* making an effort to teach freed slaves how to be Quakers.

War After War After War

The Quaker movement was born in the midst of civil war. Quakers quickly moved to disavow any inclination to go to war for any cause. In their declaration to Charles II in 1660, they stated:

That spirit of Christ by which we are guided is not so changeable, so as once to command us from a thing as evil, and again to move unto it; and we do certainly know, and so testify to the world, that the spirit of Christ which leads us into all Truth will never move us to fight and war against any man with outward weapons, neither for the kingdom of Christ, nor for the kingdoms of this world.^[21]

In 1938, Mao Tse Tung said, "Every Communist must grasp the truth, 'Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun.'"^[22] Friends suspect that, in their heart of hearts, most political leaders agree with that proposition. To declare that we would not use outward weapons against anyone for any cause was to make us, in the eyes of kings and presidents, something less than loyal and less understandable (even less dependable) than any traitor.

War is a flexible tool. It can be used for many purposes, and it always makes sense to someone. For American Quakers, the French and Indian Wars, the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, and World War II each presented special challenges to our testimony against war.

Quakers dominated the legislature in Pennsylvania during the French and Indian Wars. The non-Quaker residents of western Pennsylvania suffered under the attacks by Indians, and the crown demanded that the legislature enact a specific tax to support the war. Friends had already determined that it was acceptable to pay taxes that fed a general fund, even if some of that fund was used for military purposes. This specific tax would not be acceptable, however, and Friends would refuse to pay it. They believed that they could not in good conscience authorize the tax when they knew that they would not pay it themselves; they also knew that the legislature would lose its charter if they did not. It was also one thing for an individual Quaker to say that he would not fight but quite another for Quaker legislators to apply their principles to the acts of government and not defend their western citizens. Friends resigned from the government and never exercised real political power again.

The Revolutionary War represented a different trial. The double-edge of the peace testimony made Friends a suspect population for both revolutionaries and royalists. Philadelphia Yearly Meeting disowned more than 1,200 members for their participation in the war, and the ideology of liberty led many to depart the Society on their own. At the same time, the colonies/states confiscated property to cover unpaid war taxes.^[23] When the war was over, American Friends lived in a land where the question of government had become a personal issue. They could never again say that a war belonged to a king and had nothing to do with them.

People who don't want the Civil War to be about slavery will point to economic differences or states' rights questions, but slavery drove those issues. Others who don't believe the war was necessary may say that slavery was dying out and not economically viable, ignoring evidence that an efficient market existed between the old slave states and the new cotton states. Cotton work was so difficult that the slaves died before they could reproduce. Though much is made of the underground railroad, and it was a dangerous and marvelous undertaking, when comparing the number of slaves freed to the total slave population, it was no more than a flea-bite on the body of slavery. John Punshon puts the problem succinctly: "The Civil War

(1861–1865) was a grave challenge to the Quaker conscience, willing the end but being denied approval of the means.”^[24] The result of this dilemma is interesting. Friends became skilled in refugee work. The Society did not go to war, but rather it began to work healing the effects of war.

By the time of World War II, Friends seem to have come to some kind of accommodation regarding the claims of conscience in relation to particular wars. Disownment was no longer a common response to enlistment. In *A Quaker Book of Wisdom*, Robert Smith points with some pride to his own decision to fight in that war.^[25] However, beginning with Friends’ work with displaced former slaves, and moving through the founding of the various service committees during and following World War I [American Friends Service Committee (1917); in Britain, the Council of International Service (1918), which joined with another group in 1928 to become the Friends’ Service Council; and the Canadian Friends Service Committee (1931)], Friends were able in an organizational way to work to heal the world rather than harm it.^[26]

Although there is a place in law for conscientious objection—a place where one can in theory remain a good citizen without having to actively support one’s country’s military ambitions—the double edge of “will not fight for x against y” still puts Friends’ opinions at odds with many in government. The American Friends Service Committee was recently classified as a “criminal extremist organization” by the police department in Denver, Colorado, and people associated with it have been followed and interviewed by the FBI.^[27]

You can’t just declare yourself to be a meeting, can you?

In the United States, Friends colonized different areas. These areas of colonization quickly developed yearly meetings: New England, Philadelphia, New York, Baltimore, Virginia, and North Carolina. As the population moved West, new yearly meetings formed: Ohio Yearly Meeting spun off from Baltimore Yearly Meeting, for example, and Indiana Yearly Meeting subsequently spun off from Ohio. The Midwestern meetings tended in the orthodox and then evangelical vein, some eventually developing a pastoral ministry.^[28] In the 1880s, from Iowa, one of these pastoral yearly meetings, Hannah and Joel Bean set up a meeting in San Jose, California, but they established it along unprogrammed lines. Iowa Yearly Meeting eventually disowned the Beans and officially laid the meeting down. The Beans and their meeting ignored this proceeding, however, and became an “independent” meeting—a meeting founded and overseen by no prior yearly meeting. As originally conceived, it was not to be a new yearly meeting but rather a place where Friends from anywhere could worship in the unprogrammed manner and where they would retain membership in their old meetings.^[29] Their College Park Association became the nucleus of Pacific Yearly Meeting, which eventually divided into the Pacific, North Pacific, and Intermountain Yearly Meetings.

As was the case with the Beans and the meeting they started in San Jose, other monthly meetings that were established in the West were composed of Friends from various Quaker branches. The independent yearly meetings still reflect this diversity.

Emphasis Shift

The principle of science, the definition, almost, is the following: The test of all knowledge is experiment. Experiment is the sole judge of scientific “truth.”^[30]

Until the Reformation, a European believer found his or her faith reinforced at every turn: the Church blessed the culture along with the crops, animals, children, and couples. The Church was woven into every aspect of life, including death. After the Reformation, everything changed, and yet nothing did. Everything: Culture and the institution of the Church were no longer bound together. In order to criticize the institution, the authority of tradition as embodied in the Church was discarded and replaced with an original source—the Bible as reconstituted by Martin Luther. Nothing: Reality still had an ultimate, single, creative source, a One Person who stood over against His creation, loving it, judging it, and calling it to a perfection that He best understood in His wisdom.

Early Friends knew the Bible backwards and forwards, but reading the Bible wasn’t good enough. They, too, turned to an original source: the Spirit of the Author Himself. From there, their experience of the Spirit led them within the Bible to what was important. As we have already seen, this set up a later conflict between the clarity of a visible and culturally accepted interpretation of the written source and the invisible and individual interpretation of the inward source.

Shortly before the turn of the nineteenth century, J. Rendell Harris introduced his friend Rufus Jones to another friend of his, John Wilhelm Rowntree. Out of this meeting came the “Rowntree Histories,” ultimately penned by Jones and William Charles Braithwaite. Their purpose was to identify Friends,

especially Friends of the first generation, as a part of the long tradition of Christian mystics. The project was a great success and sparked a liberal Quaker renaissance.^[31] It also moved the foundation of Quakerism from the Spirit to human experience of the Spirit. The difference can be illustrated by posing a hypothetical question to George Fox: “Are you part of a long tradition of Christian mystics?” Fox’s answer would clearly be “No.” The early Friends believed they were the rebirth of the apostolic church of the first Christian century, from which Christianity had strayed, even been apostate, for 1,200 years. Although they recognized that the Spirit had been present and could be seen in individuals in history, their experience had a different quality. Rowntree, Jones, and Braithwaite placed Friends in the mystical line, just as other historians have placed Friends among the Puritans or as a “third way” between Catholicism and Protestantism.

The base has widened even further. For early Friends, their experience was *normative*—that is, it was the proper, true way to relate to God. Even if God, in His mercy, had supported others in the past despite their erroneous ideas and practices, and even though the Spirit made itself available to all people in all times and places, there was a “best practice,” and it was theirs. The next generation saw itself as *peculiar*—that is, specially called by God, a light in the wilderness. When the Rowntree historians placed Quakers in the mystical tradition, they claimed membership for us in an ongoing spiritual movement, but in so doing reduced our claim to originality. In the last fifty years, some branches of Friends have opened themselves even further. What was once normative has become part of a broad human possibility rather than the only path to union with the divine.

Intermountain Yearly Meeting stands on this new foundation: *The test of all spiritual knowledge is experience*. It is not the easiest basis upon which build a community. We have more than three centuries of tradition and experience behind us as Friends, but we also have several thousand years of other human experience that we can draw on. We are open to the possibility that the Spirit leads us to inspiration using all of human history. The tension between individual perception and community acceptance continues as it did in the first Quaker century. Finding common language is difficult because the words some find comforting can be experienced by others as bludgeons. Yet, if we rely on personal experience as a shared possibility instead of as an escape from mutual responsibility, we can move beyond words to their source and join the stream.

Conclusion

According to Jesus of Nazareth,^[32] the primary principles of a properly ordered life are to love God with one’s entire being and to love one’s neighbor as if the neighbor and the lover were one and the same. The history of Friends is the history of a people who have held these principles to be so intertwined that one is neither more nor less than the flip side of the other. Historically, Friends began by loving God, but they never found a time when that did not lead them into concern for their neighbor—first to share the good news of God’s intimate presence and then to express that caring in service to others. When their neighbors did not choose to join them, Friends cared for them anyway. Today, Friends’ care for others is the more visible of these two principles, but inquirers who come into our meetings soon learn that loving our neighbors doesn’t happen without the inward support and guidance of the Spirit.

The world is messy, and the means of loving God and caring for our neighbors has not always been clear. Sometimes the love of God has seemed to require being as clear of entanglements as possible, whereas at other times love of neighbor has seemed to require every sacrifice—for some, even going to war. Friends have been active in prison reform, against slavery, for the rights of women, against war, for religious tolerance, and against social distinctions. Friends have also been rigidly doctrinaire, sometimes racist, and blind to situations close at hand. Friends have rocked the boat, and they have disowned people for being too loud. Still, and always aware of the contradictions in our past, we can say with our seventeenth century forebears that this road of ours may be difficult and demanding, but it is worth the effort of walking it.

^[1] Frances Howgill, quoted in *Quaker Faith and Practice*, The Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, 19.08.

^[2] In 1642, conflict between the Puritans in Parliament and King Charles I and his supporters turned into war. The First Civil War ran from 1642 to 1646 and ended with Charles’s surrender to the Scots. They turned him over to the English. The Second Civil War (1647–1648) began almost immediately as royalist

supporters tried to free Charles and return him to the throne. Oliver Cromwell defeated an invading Scottish army to “end” this war. Convinced that Charles’s very existence was a danger, Cromwell allowed the army to put Charles on trial for causing the civil wars. Charles was executed in 1649 and the Commonwealth declared shortly after. A third civil war followed, which ended in September 1651 with the defeat of royalist forces under Charles II. Cromwell died in 1658, and the Commonwealth followed him to the grave soon after.

^[3] George Fox, *The Journal of George Fox*, rev. and ed. John L. Nickalls (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1995), p. 4.

^[4] Fox, *Journal*, p. 11.

^[5] To Fox, “tender” people were open to the Spirit and its possibilities. “Friends” is a reference to Jesus’ statements in John 15:14: “Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you . . .” and John 15:15: “I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you.” The language is from the King James Version, which Fox knew so well that even his enemies said that if the Bible were lost, he could reproduce it.

^[6] Hugh Barbour, *The Quakers in Puritan England* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1964), p. 121.

^[7] Quoted in full in Appendix 1.

^[8] Quoted in full, with business meeting responses attached, in Appendix 2.

^[9] *The Old Discipline: Nineteenth Century Friends’ Disciplines in America* (Glenside, PA: Quaker Heritage Press, 1999). In addition to those of New England, Philadelphia, and Baltimore, disciplines from the New York, North Carolina, and Virginia Yearly Meetings are included in this publication, but their final determinations on slavery are undated. All were first printed between 1800 and 1820, and all make involvement with slavery a disownable offense. North Carolina is a special case. Because manumission was illegal there, when the yearly meeting made ownership an offense all slaves were given to the yearly meeting, which then let them live in freedom.

^[10] The Society of Friends: “ . . . the first recorded use of the phrase in the modern sense seems only to date from 1793.” John Punshon, *Portrait in Gray: A Short History of the Quakers* (London: Quaker Home Service, 1984), p. 71.

^[11] Punshon, *Portrait in Gray*, p. 103.

^[12] Punshon, *Portrait in Gray*, p. 119. Punshon’s succinct summary of Woolman (pp. 118—119):

[John Woolman] is still admired—and imitated—by Friends the world over for the way he testified to the power of his beliefs by the quality of his personal life. He could not write a bill of sale for a slave. When soldiers were billeted on him, he refused payment. Believing that the light of Christ was in all, he sought and found it among the Indians, to whom he made a special journey in the ministry. Devoted to the art of persuasion rather than debate, he sought to move Friends to free their slaves by enlisting their consent, again making special journeys in the ministry for the purpose.

He avoided the temptations of wealth by avoiding wealth when it could have been his, seeking holy sufficiency rather than holy poverty. He felt what we would call the environmental damage of the dyeing industry, so he wore undyed clothes as a personal testimony.

^[13] This section relies on the work of H. Larry Ingle in *Quakers in Conflict: The Hicksite Reformation* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publications, 1998).

^[14] RSV, James 2:18.

^[15] RSV, Matthew 7:17.

^[16] *The Old Discipline*, p. 74, from Philadelphia Yearly Meeting.

^[17] Dwight Lowell Dumond, *Anti-slavery: The Crusade for Freedom in America* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1961), pp. 16–17.

^[18] *Ibid.*, p. 18.

^[19] This and the following paragraph lean on *Mothers of Feminism: The Story of Quaker Women in America* by Margaret Hope Bacon (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986). Abby Kelley Foster's name is spelled differently in different sources—sometimes Kelley and sometimes Kelly.

^[20] Bacon, *Mothers of Feminism*, p. 114.

^[21] Britain Yearly Meeting, *Quaker Faith & Practice: The Book of Christian Discipline of the Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain*, 1994, section 24.04.

^[22] Mao Tse Tung, *Quotations from Chairman Mao*,
http://www.wsu.edu:8080/~wldciv/world_civ_reader/world_civ_reader_2/mao.html.

^[23] Ingle, *Quakers in Conflict: The Hicksite Reformation*, p. 4.

^[24] Punshon, *Portrait in Gray*, p. 181.

^[25] Robert Smith, *A Quaker Book of Wisdom*, pp. 64 ff.

^[26] A short history of the AFSC and its work can be found at <http://www.afsc.org/about/history.htm>.

^[27] Jim Spencer, "Authorities Terrorize Dissenters", *Denver Post*, May 20, 2005). Online at http://www.denverpost.com/ci_2746311.

^[28] This can be squared with Friends' ancient testimony against the hireling ministry by recognizing that a Quaker pastor is a released Friend—someone whose leading in the world is recognized and supported by the monthly meeting.

^[29] Chuck Fager, <http://www.quaker.org/liberal-history/bean.html>.

^[30] Richard P. Feynman, Robert B. Leighton, and Matthew L. Sands, *The Feynman Lectures on Physics: Commemorative Issue*, vol. 1 (Redwood City, CA: Addison-Wesley, 1963, 1989), p. 1-1.

^[31] Punshon, *Portrait in Gray*, p. 221.

^[32] Mt 22:34–40, with slightly different versions in Mk. 12:28–31 and Lk. 10:25–28. Jesus was not alone in this summation. Perhaps a generation before Jesus, when challenged to teach a gentile the Torah while standing on one foot, Rabbi Hillel the Great summarized it this way: "That which is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the whole Torah; the rest is commentary. Go and study it." Jesus's contemporary, Rabbi Akiba, said of Leviticus 19:18—"... you shall love your neighbor as yourself ..."—"This is the greatest principle in the Torah."