

Friends' Faith

What is the Quaker faith? It is not a tidy package of words which you capture at any given time and then repeat weekly at a worship service. It is an experience of discovery, which starts the discoverer on a journey, which is lifelong. The discovery in itself is not uniquely a property of Quakerism. . . . What is unique to the Religious Society of Friends is its insistence that the discovery must be made by each of us individually. No one is allowed to get it secondhand by accepting a ready-made creed. Furthermore, the discovery points a path and demands a journey, and gives you the power to make the journey.

Elise Boulding, 1954 (Revised 2000)^[1]

Friends have faith that the direct and unmediated experience of the Divine is available to everyone. That which Quakers call the inward Light lives in each human being. Faith is inseparable from practice. Friends are encouraged to assume personal responsibility for making their lives an active and living witness to their faith—every thought, word, and deed testifying to the transforming power of the divinity within themselves and others. Friends feel called to obey the Light and Power that leads and guides them. Each person is asked to practice the personal discipline that leads to growth of the spirit. The presence of the Spirit is often described as “that of God in everyone.”

During the three and a half centuries of our history, Friends have used many names for the source of our faith—among them God, the Inner or Inward Light, the Divine Principle, the Seed, the Christ Within, the Inward Teacher, Jesus, Holy Spirit. The names we use today are appropriate to our experience. Some of us may use different names at different times, for our experiences may vary throughout our lives.

Our traditional testimonies—truth, equality, peace, simplicity, community—are outward and visible signs of our faith. The testimonies point the way as we put our faith into action. Communal and individual concerns and actions are weighed in the light of these testimonies. The critical question remains “Is this of God?” not, “Is this right?” From the early days of the Religious Society of Friends, individuals sought truth in the seasoned discernment of the Meeting. In our experience, this process reveals the full creative possibilities of the spirit.

Meeting for worship embodies the source and expression of many of our cherished practices. We come into meeting from our separate journeys. Our personal acts of devotion and service prepare us for our worship together. As we join together, we seek that sacred realm where our spirits unite with the Divine and with one another. We meet in expectant waiting as we become centered on the Divine Presence. “As we enter the depths of a living silence . . . we find one another in ‘the things that are eternal’. . . .”^[2] We listen for the Divine by endeavoring to become still within, thus opening our minds and hearts. When we succeed, that which we call “the Divine Voice” is made known to us in both silent and vocal ministry. Waiting in stillness, a message may arise out of the depth of one’s soul that seems intended not simply for oneself but for the gathered meeting. It is our practice that before speaking one tests this “opening” of the Spirit, but does not fear it. When someone accepts the call to speak, fellow worshipers are called to listen with openness to the message expressed. At its best, vocal ministry is drawn from the Divine Presence, the message coming not from us but through us. We find in meeting an experience of the Divine—one eternal reality present for and directly accessible to everyone.

Friends live in the faith that the Divine Spirit exists, whether perceived or not. The Spirit has been active throughout time. Although the roots of the Religious Society of Friends lie in Christian England, today the Spirit speaks to Friends through a wide range of sources, including the religions, spiritual practices, texts, and teachers of many cultures.

For Quakers, living life is a sacrament. Knowledge of the Spirit is enhanced by the practice of spiritual disciplines—worship, study, contemplation, prayer, action. For early Friends, the *Bible* was a rich and sustaining record of inspired revelation. The Spirit they knew in their hearts spoke to them through it. They also made a profoundly important distinction: the power that inspired the *Bible* is still speaking. For this reason, Friends avoid using writings as a final or infallible authority.

The vitality of our community lies in our ability to see that the life and power of the Spirit reveals itself in diverse ways. George Fox and the early Quakers offered a radical response to lifeless religion. Friends found that the presence of the Spirit needs not be mediated by rote ceremony. The absence in our worship of traditional rites grows out of our faith in the primacy of the inward experience of the Spirit. In every generation, Friends have found new paths and revitalized the ways we live our faith.

Inspiration comes from the Spirit, which reveals itself to us in many ways.

^[1] Elise Boulding, revised by her in a letter to Robin Powelson

^[2] *Quaker Faith & Practice: The Book of Christian Discipline of the Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain*, London: the Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, 1995: 2.01