**An Introduction to Quaker Beliefs and Practices**

"Be patterns, be examples, in all countries, places, islands, nations, wherever you come, that your carriage and life may preach among all sorts of people and to them; then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in every one." -- George Fox, 1656

**INTRODUCTION**

The Quaker movement arose in the mid-17th century in England. Its followers called themselves "Friends of Truth", as they thought of themselves as friends of Jesus (John 15:15). In time they came to be known simply as "Friends". The name "Quaker" was a nickname used by others, as it was said that they trembled or quaked with religious zeal. Friends have since adopted the term and today the words Friend and Quaker have the same meaning. The formal title of the Quaker movement is now: "Religious Society of Friends."

**1. BASIC QUAKER BELIEFS**

Quaker beginnings in George Fox

Friends began their radical redefinition of Christian Truth in England in the 17th century. George Fox was the great driving force of the early years. He was born in 1624 the son of a reasonably prosperous weaver and an intensely religious mother. He was genuinely shocked by the failure of Christians, to live their beliefs.

At the age of 19, George left home on a spiritual quest. He sought out and challenged religious leaders everywhere to answer his questions. In 1647, he heard a voice which said, "there is one, Christ Jesus, who can speak to thy condition". This experience changed his life and his view of the human-divine relationship. He devoted the rest of his life to sharing this new understanding.

George Fox was imprisoned eight times for spreading his religious beliefs. He suffered cruel beatings, great strain and deprivation. His Journal and other writings continue to be basic works of the Religious Society of Friends, of which he is generally accepted to be the founder. Most of his writings draw on biblical sources.

George Fox never intended to found a new religious sect. He believed that his discovery was universal, that he had rediscovered original Christianity.

Friends and God

At the very centre of the Quaker faith lies the concept of the Inner Light. This principle states that in every human soul there is implanted a certain element of God's own Spirit and divine energy. This element, known to early Friends as "that of God in everyone", "the seed of Christ", or "the seed of Light", means to Friends, in the words of John 1:9, "the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world".

Friends generally believe that first-hand knowledge of God is only possible through that which is experienced, or inwardly revealed to the individual human being through the working of God's quickening Spirit. This explains the attitude of Friends towards many things, including the scriptures, the establishment and authority of the church, its use of ceremonies, symbols and sacraments, and especially the obligations felt by each individual.

The concept of the Inner Light is twofold. First, the Inner Light distinguishes between good and evil. Secondly, the Inner Light opens the unity of all human beings to our consciousness.

George Fox acknowledged that there is "an ocean of darkness and death" over the world. But he also saw that "an ocean of light and of love" flows over this ocean of darkness, revealing the infinite love of God. Friends believe that the power of God to overcome evil is available in the nature of anyone who truly wants to do the will of God. To a great extent, we are the arbiter of our own destiny, having the power of choice. Salvation, in the Quaker sense, lies in our power to 'become' children of God.

Friends and the Bible

Friends consider that true religion cannot be learned from books or set prayers, words or rituals. When Quakerism began in England, the Bible had only just come into common circulation in English translation and was widely read and quoted.

Friends refused to make the Bible the final test of right conduct and true doctrine. Divine revelation is not confined to the past. They feel the Holy Spirit which has inspired the scriptures in the past can inspire living believers centuries later. Friends believe that, by the Inner Light, God provides everyone with access to spiritual truth for today.

**2. QUAKER MEETINGS**

Quaker worship happens when two or more people feel the need to be still together and seek God's presence. This can happen anywhere and anytime, but Friends usually refer to a 'meeting for worship' to indicate the meeting which takes place regularly at a meeting house or another fixed place. In attentive waiting together in silence, Friends find peace of mind for living and joy in wonder at God's creation.

The seating for a meeting for worship is usually arranged in a circle or a square to help people to be aware of one another, to be conscious of the fact that they are worshipping together. Those present settle quietly, and by corporately seeking God's will, become open to one another. This may happen quickly, or it may take most of the meeting, usually an hour long.

Friends may worship entirely without words, but anyone may feel the call to speak, man, woman or child, Friend or first time visitor. Friends try to receive positively what is said and to look for the underlying truth, regardless of the words in which it is expressed. If

Children and young people are also important members of the meeting. However, many of them find it difficult to remain in the silence of the meeting for worship for the whole hour. If they attend it is usual for them to stay in the meeting for the first ten or fifteen minutes or to come in towards the end.

**3. QUAKER TESTIMONIES**

The word 'testimony' is used by Friends to describe a witness to the living truth within the human heart as it is acted out in everyday life. Basic Quaker testimonies are: truth, equality, peace, simplicity and community.

*Truth*

It is the search for truth that led Friends to act in ways which others thought odd and even provocative. For early Friends, witnessing to Truth involved the keeping up of public meetings for worship, whatever the penalties involved. It also involved preaching, for which many Friends were imprisoned. The concern for truthfulness led Friends right from the first day to refuse to take oaths. An oath according to them was a sign that there were two different levels of truthfulness and they believed that you should tell the truth all the time. M

*Equality*

If God is directly accessible to all persons, regardless of age, gender, race, nationality, economic, social or educational position - if every person is held equal in God's love then all persons are to be equally valued. There is "that of God" in every person. For Friends this insight has meant, from the beginning, equality of the sexes and of races. In England and the English colonies this had to mean the end of privilege based on wealth or class. It resulted in the establishment of Quaker schools for girls. It also formed the basis for opposition to slavery and the death penalty.

*Peace*

The peace testimony is based on the same understanding of the nature of God and of human beings. How can one kill another child of God, a potential channel of Truth, no matter how misguided he or she may seem at the moment? This testimony has led Friends to oppose all wars and preparation for wars. At the time of the American Revolution, many Friends were 'disowned' by their meetings for participating in military actions. Later, Friends, faced with military conscription, worked to establish the right of conscientious objection.

The peace testimony has meant efforts to ease suffering of victims of war on all sides. It means efforts to be or to seek a reconciling force between peoples and nations in conflict. It means a constant search for nonviolent means of conflict resolution through institutions of law, such as international treaties and structures like the European Union or the United Nations. It means a continuing search for peace and social justice through personal and group nonviolent techniques for mediation and social change.

*Simplicity*

There is certainty among Friends that the world offers many distractions from the Truth, for example the pursuit of wealth or power or pleasure, extravagance in language, fashion or behavior, and too great an emphasis on business, even for good causes.

The testimony of simplicity seeks to focus our attention on what is essential, without distraction by the trivial. Plain and honest speech is an expression of simplicity. Respect for God's creation and, therefore, concern for the environment and the right use of the world's resources is another obvious expression of this testimony. A growth economy based on extravagance, wastefulness and artificially stimulated wants is seen to be a fundamental violation of the testimony of simplicity.

*Community*

As equally beloved children of God, all human beings are brothers and sisters, one human family, no matter how great our differences of experience, of culture, of age, of understanding. Friends see it as their task to build a broader community throughout our world, by seeing in each other the divine potential, the Light within.

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1.  What is the “official” name of the Quaker faith?

2.  How did they get the name "Quaker?"

3.  What are some of the early stories in the life of George Fox?

4.  What does the "inner light" mean to Quakers?

5.  What does Fox mean by "an ocean of darkness and death?"

6.  How do Quakers feel about the Bible?

7.   Describe a Quaker "meeting."?

8.   How do the Quakers use the word "testimony?"

9.   What were Quaker beliefs regarding "oaths?"

10.  How did Quaker views on "equality" conflict with established norms in English society?

11.  How do Quakers apply the beliefs in "peace?"

12.  What do Quakers feel about living a simple life?  Explain?

13.  What does "community" mean to Quakers?