

Early Quaker History

The Friends Church was begun a little over three hundred years ago (1647 to be exact). George Fox, the founder, went to church with his devout Anglican parents until he was nineteen. Then he began to feel that there's got to be more to religion than this. George Fox spent the next four years trekking all over England going from church to church and preacher to priest looking for an answer to his questions.

At that time the official church of the land, the Church of England, carried on its worship with elaborate ritual and ceremony in stately cathedrals. Another group, the Puritans, (so-called because they wanted to "purify" the Church of England) stressed the judgment and wrath of God. Neither of these alternatives satisfied many of the common people. They had been reading the newly published King James Bible and knew that vital religion was possible.

Into this situation came young George Fox, a weaver's son, searching for inward peace and a group of people that consistently practiced the Christian faith. He knew the Scripture so well that a Dutch historian would later observe that if somehow all of the Bibles in the world came to be destroyed, it could have been reproduced from memory by George Fox.

Anyway, George Fox kept on moving around the English countryside and one day the lights turned on for him (he said he heard a voice). He realized (or heard) this basic truth: "there is One, even Jesus Christ, who can speak to thy condition." Wow! There it was: the answer that satisfied him, the answer that finally got to the heart of things.

This experience led him to four basic conclusions. First, he realized that Christ is a present reality, not just a good man who lived a long time ago and said some good things. In addition to being risen and "seated at the right hand of the Father in heaven," Christ lives here in the present moment and can communicate with and give guidance and power to those who open their hearts to Him. After all, he told His followers, "...I am with you always, even to the end of the world." (Matthew 28:20)

Second, George saw that a Christian is not necessarily someone who has his/her name on a church membership list or who has done something religious. The mark of an authentic Christian is a changed life. A Christian is someone who has been transformed from death to life in a firsthand

encounter with Christ. "In Him was life, and the life was the light of men."
(John 1:4)

Third, it became clear to him that the Church is not a building at the corner of Eighth and Elm or any other site. Neither could it be identified with ecclesiastical (that means "church") hierarchy or with an institution established by the state. The church is the fellowship of people who have had their lives changed by Christ and in whose hearts Christ lives.

Fourth, George understood that a minister is one who serves and who makes Christ real to others. All of the academic degrees and learning in the world cannot make a true minister of Christ. It is Christ's call to men and women, which makes them ministers.

This became the central message of Friends--and still is. That's the good news for people who are turned off by the rules and rituals of religion. And George Fox began to tell everybody about this phenomenal discovery. Actually, this is not a new truth. The Bible had long since stated, speaking of Christ, "there is salvation in no one else." (Acts 4:12) But George Fox began to take the Biblical teaching about the adequacy of Christ more seriously than most people did.

Within a few short years there were thousands of persons throughout England who had found Christ as a living presence in their lives even as George Fox had. They became "finders" and worshipping groups of them took the name "Friends" from John 15:15 where Jesus told His followers, "I have called you FRIENDS, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you." Those who opposed the awakening that Friends were bringing to the Church called them "Quakers" in derision because when some of them spoke in a moving way they sometimes trembled in the power of the Lord. Friends felt that this was actually a compliment and eventually did not hesitate to use the name themselves.

For fifty years George Fox and his followers crisscrossed Europe and America with this simple and fresh message that Jesus Christ was the answer to everybody's problem. Thousands of people who were tired of formal religion without much life became part of the Friends movement.

Then in the early 1700's something happened that was just about the undoing of the whole thing. The next generation of Quakers began to say things that should never have been said. "Let's major on the minors." There

were certain things that Friends did that many other Protestants did not do and those things took on way too much importance. For example, George Fox would sometimes spend an hour in silent prayer and then he would preach for two or three hours. These second generation Quakers opted to forget the sermon and concentrated on silent prayer. That's where the whole idea of Quakers sitting in silence got started.

Well, once the message of Christ was diluted a whole bunch of Quakers turned inward and the dynamic of the Friends movement died. Many of the stereotypes people have of Quakers comes from this period. One historian stated that friends "settled down into a peaceable, respectful sect proud of their past and content to preserve their distinctive. Pleasure, music and art were taboo; dress was painfully plain and speech was Biblical...They gained few new converts and lost many old members.

Friends made a most profound affect on the course of American history. The first Quaker missionaries arrived on America's shores in 1656, one hundred and twenty years before the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Mary Fisher and Ann Austin landed at Boston where the Puritan authorities had them seized and kept under close guard. A hundred of their books were burned in the marketplace and they were dispatched to Barbados on the next departing ship. Their bedding and even their Bibles were confiscated to pay the jailer's fee. The Pilgrim Fathers wanted religious freedom for themselves but offered it to no one else.

Friends were welcomed in Rhode Island which was founded as a haven from the intolerance of Puritan Massachusetts. So overwhelming was the response there that at one time half of the population were Friends, and the colony elected Quaker governors for thirty-six consecutive terms--more than a century. Friends were also well received in Maryland. Lord Baltimore established the colony as a refuge for persecuted English Catholics and was willing to give liberty of conscience to others in religious matters. Spokespersons for the Quaker faith made some deep inroads into Virginia as well.

In 1657, a boatload of Quaker missionaries from England landed on Long Island. One of them, Robert Hodgson, drew large crowds to his meetings. He was arrested, imprisoned, flogged and treated very severely. At last some of the Dutch colonists interceded on his behalf and secured his unconditional release. Many continued to respond to the Friends message in spite of a firm edict issued against it by Governor Peter Stuyvesant. Finally on December

27, 1657, the citizens of Flushing drew up a magnificently worded protest reminding their Governor that their charter allowed them "to have and enjoy Liberty of Conscience according to the Custome and manner of Holland, without molestation or disturbance." This came to be known as the Flushing Remonstrance. It was the first time that a group of settlers in the New World petitioned the government for religious freedom. It was commemorated in a United States postage stamp issued three hundred years later.

Meanwhile the persecution of Friends in Puritan Massachusetts grew more intense. Friends were lashed behind carts and whipped from town to town. They were branded with a "H" for heretic; they had their tongues bored through with a hot iron; their ears were cut off; they were banished. Finally Governor John Endicott succeeded in having the death penalty invoked for any Friends who returned to the colony after being banished beyond its borders. Four Quakers were hung on Boston Common--William Robinson, Marmaduke Stephenson, William Leddra and Mary Dyer. She was the first woman to suffer death on these shores for her religious convictions. Today a statue of her stands on Boston Common, a reminder to all that our religious freedom was bought at a precious price.

In 1671, George Fox along with twelve others came to America and trekked up and down the Atlantic Seaboard. In 1672, he and a William Edmondson, who had already preached successfully in Ireland, became the first preachers who ever held any kind of Christian worship within the borders of the Carolinas. Later, John Archdale would become the Quaker Governor of the Carolinas and one-half of the representatives of the legislature were Friends.

The outbreak of persecution of Friends back in England again led seventeen Quakers to purchase East Jersey to serve as a refuge where Friends could practice their faith without interference. Robert Barclay, the brilliant young Scottish Quaker theologian, served as Governor of the colony for a time.

Then, in 1681, William Penn accepted the grant of land, which became Pennsylvania as the payment of a debt which King Charles II owed his father. The Duke of York, who later became King James II, threw in the territory of Delaware in on the deal. Penn landed in his colony on the good ship "Welcome" in 1682. He met with the Indians under the great elm at Shackamason, the ancient meeting place of the tribes and made friends with them. He purchased land from them at a fair price and concluded a treaty

with them that was agreeable to all. A century later the humanistic French philosopher, Voltaire, would observe that his was the only treaty ever made between white men and the Indians that was never sworn to and never broken.

In his carefully worded Frame of Government for Pennsylvania Penn gave the citizens both liberty and responsibility. He designed a government dedicated to religious freedom, to equality and peace. He laid out Philadelphia as the first planned city in the New World. Pennsylvania was Penn's "Holy Experiment," his attempt to apply the Christian principles held by Friends to the practical business of government. The guidelines of the Frame of Government gave the citizens the freedom to develop to the fullest of their potential and they and the colony prospered. For decades Pennsylvania stood as a model to the world of democracy, liberty and harmony.

When the Founding Fathers met in the latter part of the 1700's to write the Constitution that would design the government of the United States, they turned to William Penn's Frame of Government for Pennsylvania. If they had turned to Puritan New England for their model there would have been an established state church. If they had turned to aristocratic Virginia for their model there would have been a privileged class. Most of the rights and freedoms that we take for granted as a part of our way of life in America today were originally set forth in Penn's Charter of Liberties for his colony. Friends were the original architects of the free society that we enjoy.

SOME INTERESTING TIDBITS

Friends have tried to apply their faith to every aspect of their lives. This has often led them to be social pioneers and to come up with discoveries in a variety of fields.

When Friends came on the scene in the England of the mid-1600's it was the common practice to bargain for goods in the shops. The potential buyer would name a price far below that he expected to pay for the item. The shopkeeper would state a price far above what he anticipated receiving. From then on it would be a battle of wits to see who could get the best of whom. Friends felt that this practice was not Christian in the sense that it made people try to cheat one another. Quaker shopkeepers began to put what they believed were fair prices on all of the items in their stores and would not budge a bit on the downward or upward side. At first people

avoided the Quaker shops like the plague. After all, what fun was it to go shopping if you could not try to outwit the shopkeeper? Later, people came to realize that they could send even their six-year-old child on an errand to a Quaker store and he or she would be treated just as fairly and charged the same price as any adult. As this awareness grew the Quaker shopkeepers got much more than their share of the business. Eventually other establishments began to follow the Quaker way.

Shortly before 1743, a young Quaker clerk in a store in Mount Holly, New Jersey, was asked by his employer to draw up a bill of sale for a slave for whom he had found a buyer. Since the request was sudden the young man complied. As he executed the transaction he did manage to stammer that he believed that the keeping of slaves was inconsistent with the Christian religion. Gradually he came to see that he must devote the rest of his life to convincing his fellow Quakers that slaveholding was an evil practice. In those days a great number of Friends families in both the North and the South owned slaves just like their neighbors. In 1746 John Woolman undertook his first long journey into Pennsylvania and the South and quietly tried to persuade the heads of households with whom he was staying that they were hurting themselves and their families by keeping slaves. He did not argue. He only shared the insights that he had been given in a gentle and loving way. He was as concerned for the well being of the slaveholder as he was for the well being of the slaves. In the next twenty-five years he traveled up and down the East Coast from New England to the Carolinas in the pursuit of his mission. Within a few years after his death in 1772 all Friends in America had freed their slaves. They were the first Christian group on these shores to do so.

In the latter 1700's, it was still the practice in England to keep mental patients locked and chained in institutions where they were treated like criminals, laughed at, humiliated, and brutally punished for variant behavior. William and Esther Tuke, Friends living in York, began to be convinced that the mentally ill might make substantial progress if they were looked after in a loving way. In 1796 William Tuke opened "The Retreat" in York, the first institution in the world devoted to compassionate care for the mentally disturbed.

In 1817, Elizabeth Gurney Fry, a Friends minister and the wife of a banker, walked alone into the woman's quarters of Newgate Prison in London. Surrounded by the most jaded, bitter and dangerous women prisoners, she picked up one of their children and all became quiet. She suggested that

they might start a school for their children who were in prison with the, serving as teachers themselves. They discussed the idea for awhile. She told them a Bible story, prayed with them and then left. Soon the women were clamoring to be taught to read and sew. They began to meet daily in a work room under the direction of monitors of their own choice. The days began and ended with Bible readings sometimes given by Elizabeth Fry herself. As time progressed even those who had shown almost every sign of depravity were transformed into industrious, contributing members of an orderly community. Elizabeth Fry came to be recognized as the pioneer of prison reform the world over.

In the summer of 1840, Lucretia Mott was excluded from the anti-slavery Convention in London because she was a woman. In 1848 she joined with a few other women in calling the first women's rights convention at Seneca Falls, New York. Friends have always believed in the equality of sexes and have given equal place to women as ministers in their churches.

In England, the Quaker Rowntree and Cadbury families ventured into the chocolate and cocoa business because they saw hot chocolate as a possible alternative to alcoholic beverages. In Philadelphia, a Quaker grocer named Joseph Hires developed a concoction he came to call Root Beer in the hope that his employees and others might come to drink it instead of alcohol.

In 1768, a Quaker doctor, Thomas Dimsdale, was invited to Russia by Empress Catherine II to introduce vaccination against smallpox. Another Quaker doctor, Joseph Lister, is regarded as the father of antiseptic surgery. Today a widely used product in the United States bears his last name.

One could go on and on citing examples of the applied faith of Friends. Often the result has been a breakthrough for mankind. Friends have always endeavored to further Christ's Kingdom in the face of the challenges of their day.

This information is excerpted from the Vancouver First Friends Church Home Page, used here for historical reference purposes.