

## Quakerism – The Religious Society of Friends

Although founded as a Christian movement Quakerism does not fit most people's definition of Christianity. It does not require belief in any creed and today not all Quakers see themselves as Christians; some regard themselves as members of a universal religion that (for historical reasons) has many Christian elements. Some would describe themselves as agnostics or even atheists.

### Historical background.

1534 - Henry VIII's reformation split Church of England from papal authority. Over the next 1 ½ centuries – attempts were made to settle the true nature of this split.

1611 - Availability of bible in English democratised interpretation of scripture & diminished authority of clergy.

1642-51 - A new sense of possibility brought on by the civil war - many independent religious groups separated (Levellers, Diggers, Ranters, Seekers, Baptists etc.). None of these gained a wide following as Cromwell's moderate alternative was accepted by the majority.

1650's Quakerism emerged into this atmosphere of disappointment. George Fox brought his message to Cumbria - a fiercely independent region where the Levellers were already strongly established. They met in silence and waited for their minister to be moved to speak – they resented paying tithes to the established church. Cumbria proved fertile ground for Fox's message.

### *George Fox and early Quaker history.*

Fox's revelation gave him the belief that Christ was available personally and directly to all - without the intercession of priests. He believed the Church had left the true path and he did not see the need for sacraments, sacred buildings (steeple houses) or even for the Sabbath.

He saw biblical scripture as valuable for teaching and said that in his own experience Christ's direct revelation never contradicted scripture. His egalitarian insight that revelation was available to all - including women and children - led to a "priesthood of all believers". Fox did not see himself as a leader and when he died there was no leadership crisis.

Fox interpreted the second coming of Christ as the individual personal experience that he called “convincement”. He believed convinced Friends were given the power to resist sin.

Quaker worship involved simple unadorned silence with no programme or specified duration. Anyone could minister as moved by the spirit; music was acceptable (but not singing from a book). (This is essentially the same today in British Quakerism – some American and African Quakers have more structured services and employ ministers).

Early Quakers refused to use pagan names for the days and months and used numbers instead. They would not use titles or flattery so used “thee and thou” instead of the more formal “you” to “social superiors”. They refused to take their hats off to anyone but God and refused to take oaths as they always told the truth - a reputation that was to have spin-off benefits in business later. They were persecuted for their beliefs and the name Quaker was first used as a term of abuse at one of Fox’s blasphemy trials (Quaking in the presence of the Lord) – the term spread and became adopted as an unofficial name – though more official names were “Friends of the Truth” (from John’s gospel Ch 15 v.14)) and “Children of Light”. “The Religious Society of Friends” emerged as the accepted name in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Quakers try to see “that of God” in everyone. Thus, all people are valued equally, and Quakers are opposed to anything that might harm or threaten them.

**Among key Quaker beliefs are:**

- **God is love**
- **the light of God is in every single person**
- **a person who lets their life be guided by that light will achieve a full relationship with God**
- **everyone can have a direct, personal relationship with God without involving a priest or minister**
- **redemption and the Kingdom of Heaven are to be experienced now, in this world**

As tolerance is part of the Quaker approach to life, Quakers are willing to learn from all other faiths and churches.

They do not regard any book as being the actual 'word of God'.

Generally, Quakers regard the Bible as a very great inspirational book, but they don't see it as the only one, and so they read other books that can guide their lives.

Quakers have no collective view on what happens after death. They tend to concentrate on making this world better rather than pondering what happens after leaving it.

A book of Christian discipline compiling advice and counsel called "*Quaker Faith and Practice*" was first produced in 1738 and is regularly updated.

A section of this is called "advices and queries" contains the wisdom of many friends from many generations.

### **Quaker testimonies**

Quakers try to *bear witness* or testify to their beliefs in their everyday life - an expression of "spirituality in action". The ways in which they testify are often known as *Quaker testimonies* or *Friends' testimonies*: these are not a formal, static set of words, but rather a shared view of how many Quakers relate to God and the world.

This leads to each Quaker having a different understanding of what the testimonies are and, while the ideologies remain quite similar for all Quakers, they go by different names, and different values are included throughout the Religious Society of Friends.

The list of testimonies is, like all aspects of Friends theology, continuously evolving — so as to be relevant to today, but the following are common:

- **Truth and Integrity**
- **Equality and Community**
- **Peace (best known – most controversial?)**
- **Simplicity**
- **The Earth and Environment**

Some Friends also include other testimonies, such as Unity, Compassion, Justice, Stewardship, and Sustainability.

Modern Quakers no longer insist on plain dress or teetotalism and most have fairly liberal views on sexuality – same sex partnerships can be solemnized in a Meeting House. Gambling is still discouraged (for some including raffles).

Friends tend to be active in causes promoting social justice.

Chichester Meeting has close contacts with the Haslar Refugee center in Portsmouth, individual members are actively involved in projects in Gambia and Zimbabwe. We have contacts with Transition Chichester, Amnesty International, Campaign against the Arms Trade, Christians Against Torture.