

Movers and Quakers: The Society of Friends (2)

Already before the death of George Fox, the founder of the Society of Friends, the centre for the Quakers, shifted from the British Isles to America. Their migration to America included a variety of motives - such as political, economic, and religious. But the line was very hard to draw between the economic and religious motives in the American Quaker settlements. Among the religious motives was the desire for refuge and for a missionary witness. The first ones to visit America were Mary Fisher and Anne Austin, who arrived in Massachusetts in 1656.

They said that they had come "not to settle but to preach and warn." They were sent back by the magistrates, but others arrived after them. Some embarked on the perilous ocean with a blithe spirit heedless of dangers and difficulties. The log of the Woodhouse, a small vessel which carried a company of Quakers across in 1657, reported that the work of navigation was "performed by the Lord like as he did Noah's ark wherein he shut up a few righteous persons and landed them safe even at the hill Ararat." The travelers thought it quite unnecessary to set a true course. "We regarding neither latitude nor longitude, but kept to our Line, which was and is our Leaders, Guide, and Rule."

Quakers who persisted with their mission received punishments characteristic of their time - imprisonment, whipping, cropping of ears, etc. In desperation the authorities resorted to the death penalty. In 1659 William Robinson and Marmaduke Stephenson were hanged.

William Penn (1644-1718)

The most prominent Quaker settlement was unquestionably the Holy Experiment of William Penn. Penn had been imprisoned in the Tower of London in 1668 for writing in defense of Quaker practices. Acquitted in 1670, he was granted a charter to land in North America by King Charles II, using it to found the colony of Pennsylvania as a sanctuary for Quakers and other Nonconformists in the same year. He made a treaty with the Indians - the "only treaty never sworn to and never broken." He was also the co-founder of the city of Philadelphia.

For many years Quaker merchant princes and political leaders dominated the life of the city and the province despite the rapid growth of the non-Quaker population. The Quakers were dominant. They tended to neglect the early counsel of George Fox: "My friends, that are gone, and are going over to plant, and make outward plantations in America, keep your own plantations in your hearts, with the spirit and the power of God, that your own vines and lilies be not hurt."

Historian Sydney E. Ahlstrom comments, "One may see the trend illustrated in the return to Anglicanism by William Penn's own sons, or the tendency in Philadelphia for Quaker membership to become a birthright." Quakers controlled the Pennsylvania

legislature until 1756, when they refused to vote a tax to pay for a war against the Shawnees and Delawares, and consequently stepped down, withdrew from public life, thus bringing to close the Holy Experiment.

Lifestyle and Beliefs

In time Quakers turned inward and began to enforce such strict discipline upon their members that they became in fact a "peculiar people." Members were dismissed for even the most minor infractions. Thousands were cut off for "marrying out of Meeting." Entertainment, music, and art were taboo; dress was painfully plain, and speech was biblical. They became not only different, but also dour. They gained few new converts and lost many of their old members. Until the 20th century Quakers were distinguished by their dress and forms of speech.

Quakers hold to absolute adherence to truth, spiritual democracy in meetings, universal peace, and brotherhood regardless of sex, class, nation, or race. They have no written creed. Their ideal is to pursue the truth at all cost and believe in teaching by example. But their philosophical differences have caused them some embarrassments. For example, the late president Richard Nixon was born a Quaker, which made him automatically a member, but his lifestyle and practice contradicted the core convictions of the Society of Friends.

The Underground Railway

The Society of Friends was the first religious body to oppose slavery. In 1688 the Friends of Germantown, Pennsylvania, announced that slavery violated the Golden Rule and that it encouraged adultery. It took nearly a century for the Quakers to rid their own society of slavery, but they did it years in advance of any other religious body in America. Sellers or buyers of slaves were forbidden membership in their society by the end of the 18th century. John Woolman (1720-1772), a devout, modest, largely self-taught shopkeeper and tailor, is honoured today for his early advocacy of the abolition of slavery and the slave trade. In 1754 his book *Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes* was published. He traveled in many colonies in the interest of setting slaves free. It was said that he hated slavery so much he could not taste food provided by their labour. In 1775 a group of Philadelphia Quakers organized America's and possibly the world's first anti slavery society.

The quiet Quakers practiced what they preached. They became involved in the Underground Railway. Slaves in search of freedom used this train, which had no carriages and no tracks, to travel to Canada. The journey was made through secret trails, swamps, and was surrounded by danger from either animals in the forests or the whips of the slave catchers. One of the most famous conductors in the Underground Railroad was a woman named Harriet Tubman who had escaped from slavery in 1849 and subsequently helped 300 Southern slaves to escape to Canada. She relied on

Station Masters who were Quakers and freed black people. Uxbridge, Ontario, had a special connection to the abolition movement through its Quaker settlement.

Peace Movement

The Quakers' well-known opposition to war is not based primarily on Scripture, but on their conviction that warlike feelings are a sign something is wrong in the thinking and attitude of human beings. They are optimistic about the purposes of God and the destiny of mankind. Their ultimate authority for faith and practice resides within each individual. Consequently, for the Quakers the 20th century has been very difficult. Although pacifists, Quakers have not been united in their opposition to war. Some of their members joined the armed forces during the first and second World Wars. They have a notable record of valiant service on and off the battlefields. Already during the first World War, Quakers were at work in the American Friends Service Committee in relief and reconstruction projects abroad. This committee also provided young conscientious objectors with alternative service opportunities. Hence, many of them served in a medical corps of both world wars.

Quakers have worked consistently toward the elimination of war, militarism, and injustice. Peace Conferences have had a prominent place in the Society, ranging from local to international meetings. In 1947 the international bodies of the Society of Friends were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for their postwar relief and reconciliation work.

Quaker Diversity

The Society of Friends is not a unified religious body. In the 19th century division arose. I will mention two major separations. In 1827-28 a number of Quakers led by Elias Hicks (1748-1830) withdrew from the Society of Friends. Hicks' liberal and rational theological views brought him into conflict with those more orthodox and evangelical. He contended that man was capable of saving himself, and described the Bible and church doctrine as merely functional but not authoritative. His group included those who had been influenced by Unitarianism. Its members became increasingly involved in social activism.

Another separatist group was led by Joseph John Gurney (1788-1847), who was able to combine the Quaker lifestyle with evangelical revivalism, warmhearted piety, and Bible study. His efforts to reorient the Society of Friends toward evangelism prompted a schism. His followers became known as Gurneyites who adopted the pastoral system of ministry rather than the traditional Quaker use of itinerant, unpaid, and untrained ministers.

Evangelical Friends Alliance

In 1965 a coalition of Quakers with evangelical sympathies, including the descendants of Gurneyites, formed the Evangelical Friends Alliance. It supports Malone College in

Canton, Ohio. This liberal arts college is affiliated with the Evangelical Friends Church - Eastern Region. It was founded in 1892 by Walter and Emma Malone, a dedicated evangelical Quaker couple. It was originally called The Friends Bible Institute and Training School.

A well-known evangelical Quaker philosopher-theologian, prolific author, and popular lecturer was David Elton Trueblood, who was born in 1900 in Pleasantville, Iowa. In the 1930s he came under the influence of C.S. Lewis. He was named Churchman of the Year by American Heritage in 1960. He edited *The Friend* (1935-47), and was a defender of the evangelical spiritual tradition.

Much more could be said about the small, diverse, and influential Quaker movement. But I'll conclude with a John Calvin reminder, which should be taken to heart by all Christians: "Our wisdom ought to be nothing else than to embrace with humble teachableness and at least without finding fault, whatever is taught in Sacred Scripture." (Institutes I, xvii, 4).

Johan D. Tangelder.
June, 2002