

Chapter 2: In the Beginning

- against mixed marriages*
- for plainness in apparel and furnishings
- against worldly sports and pastimes
- against the observance of so-called holy days, public fasts, or feasts
- called to act blamelessly in dealing with all others and faithfully in dealing with each other
- dedicated in taking up collections to meet the needs of widows, orphans, and the helpless
- careful in taking marriages under their care
- faithful in holding regular business meetings in order to provide care and conduct business

His objective was not to produce a definitive list of Quaker commandments or of the virtues of Quakers but to describe how these people had been transformed when they opened themselves to the Inward Light flowing into their hearts. You will notice that most of the characteristics listed were not things to do but worldly acts to avoid, such as shunning flattery and refusing to pay tithes. Because of the actions of the Light working within them, primitive Friends found they could no longer engage in such outward behaviors. As we will see, this often got them in trouble.

Some Essential Concepts

As a final piece of background, it will be helpful to have an understanding of several interrelated concepts to better comprehend the Quakerism of early Friends.

* In the seventeenth century, a mixed marriage was one between a member of one religious sect and another.

The God or Spirit of the World

Though the Change from Day to Night, is by a Motion so gradual as scarcely to be perceived, yet when Night is come we behold it very different from the Day; and thus as People become wise in their own Eyes, and prudent in their own Sight, Customs rise up from the Spirit of this World, and spread by little, and little, till a Departure from the Simplicity that there is in Christ becomes as distinguishable as Light from Darkness, to such who are crucified to the World.

*John Woolman*¹⁰

Primitive Quakers did not doubt the existence of spiritual forces for good and evil that might be personified as angels, devils, or demons. Although the phrase “the spirit of the world” occurs only once in scripture (1 Corinthians 2:12), it caught the attention of the early Friends and is referenced many times in their writings. For them, this spirit was real, malign, seductive, and grievously dangerous. It offered wealth, power, and recognition to those who accepted it into their hearts and their souls. It was a vital personification of wickedness, greed, ravenousness, insatiable appetites, and self-indulgence. The god of this world was the embodiment of Spiritual Darkness. It existed in opposition to God’s desire that all people live with each other in peace and harmony, mercy, joy, and justice.

Many Quakers today are distinctly uncomfortable with the idea that there is a spiritual world inhabited by supernatural beings and may find it difficult to comprehend what this meant in the seventeenth century. Even if we cannot intellectually accept the existence of angels and demons, we may come to understand what the early Quakers meant by analogy. We talk easily about the spirit of Christmas without implying that we still believe in Santa Claus.

The Christmas spirit is a realizing potential for goodwill, kindness, generosity, and love that celebrating Christmas can bring out in people.

Evil is at least as real as Christmas. In the week before I wrote this, a convoy of trucks carrying relief supplies to people trapped in a war zone was attacked. Dozens of drivers and aid workers were killed, and tons of desperately needed food and medicine were destroyed. This was truly wicked, and it surely arose from the workings of the spirit of this world. It is real. I know that same spirit is constantly in search of a toehold within me. If I fail to recognize, acknowledge, and resist it, I am lost.

The Lamb's War

Whatever the God of the world hath begotten in mens hearts to practise or to plead for, which God did not place there, all this the lamb and his followers war against. . . . Indeed their war is against the whole work and device of the God of this world, his laws, his customs, his fashions, his inventions, and all which are to add to, or take from the work of God.

James Nayler¹¹

The Children of the Light emerged in the midst of vicious religious wars in England and on the continent of Europe. These had been touched off in the sixteenth century by the Protestant Reformation and already had persisted on and off for more than a century. Both Catholic and Protestant state churches embraced the use of military force to achieve the interwoven goals of church and state. The English Civil Wars were as much between different visions of Christianity as they were about the form of government. In a sense, the Lamb's War was another episode in these wars, albeit very different in form.

Until 1689, Friends in England were subject to laws forbidding them to worship in community, to build meetinghouses, or to preach the message given to them. Traveling ministers were arrested as vagrants. Thousands of Quakers were imprisoned, and hundreds died as a result of persecution. The Lamb's War constituted the Quaker opposition to this malicious use of power by governmental and church authorities. It was an ongoing nonviolent struggle, fought with spiritual weapons.

In its narrowest sense, the Lamb's War referred to Friends' resistance to legal persecution, but defiance of religious tyranny was only one facet of a broader confrontation with the evil they encountered every day. In their eyes, they were resisting a false church with a false clergy that was marked by moral degeneracy, false outward rites and rituals, and invented doctrines. This church was supported by a government that enforced the collection of tithes to pay church expenses and selectively outlawed dissenting religious bodies. The power of the state was employed to maintain the prerogatives of the established church, and in return the official church provided religious cover for the government.

In a broader sense, resistance to both official and socially enforced forms of injustice was an aspect of the Lamb's War that was fought throughout the course of everyday interpersonal relations. How you greeted people on the street or addressed a social superior and how you conducted business in the marketplace were frontline engagements in this struggle. Through the Lamb's War, the young Society of Friends presented an alternative way of living in every human endeavor.

In short, the Lamb's War challenged the pride, immorality, and will-worship* that they saw as rampant in English society.

Buying and Selling in the Seventeenth Century

They were at a Word in Dealing: Nor could their Customers, with many Words tempt them from it, having more regard to Truth than Custom, to Example than Gain.

*William Penn*¹²

How Quakers conducted business offers one particularly good example of how the Lamb's War was waged.

Three hundred and fifty years ago, most purchases were made at small shops owned and operated by someone in the local community. Often the proprietor family lived in rooms attached to the shop. In any business, pricing is of critical importance. Too high and customers go elsewhere; too low and you go bankrupt.

Prices were customarily settled by haggling. Merchants knew their customers and would use that knowledge in arriving at a price. They might offer to charge one amount to a member of the aristocracy and a different one to a commoner. Either way, this was just an opening bid. The merchant routinely named a price he or she knew to be too high. The purchaser was expected to counter that offer and continue to bargain until buyer and seller mutually agreed on a price. On the surface, this seems to be a fair way to deal with others—until and unless both sides agree, there is no deal. In a perfect world, that might be true, but not all buyers have the same skill at haggling, not all have the same maturity, and not all have the same civil or social authority. Some people are good

* Will-worship is putting your own will above God's will; that is, making an idol of your own desires, predilections, and ambitions.

liars. In general, the clever and powerful could expect to pay less and the weak and unskilled to pay more. Quaker merchants would have known such injustice from personal experience.

As a Spirit-led alternative, Friends in the marketplace adopted “the fixed price system.” Each item was assigned a price that reflected, to the extent possible, its inherent value. Once that price was determined, “they were at a word”; all purchasers would be asked to pay the same amount with no room to bargain. The intention was to treat all equally and, therefore, justly. If the set price was unacceptable to a customer, the merchant was willing to lose the sale and let the shopper go elsewhere. In Penn’s words, they had “more regard to Truth than Custom.”

In this case, a victory was achieved in the Lamb’s War. As a consequence of setting fixed prices, Quaker merchants were trusted in a way that other vendors were not. It became well known that a small child sent to buy bread from a Quaker baker or a candle from a Quaker chandler would pay the same price as anyone else. Although this was not the original intent of setting a single price, such confidence gave Friends a competitive advantage, and fixed prices spread through the marketplace.

The Kingdom of Heaven on Earth

See here a kingdom of God on the earth; it is nothing else but a kingdom of meer love, where all hurt and destroying is done away, and every work of enmity changed into one united power of heavenly love – but observe again and again, whence this comes to pass, that God’s kingdom on earth is, and can be nothing else, but the power of reigning love.

*Anthony Benezet*¹³

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In many Christian writings, the “kingdom of heaven” is assumed to be a spiritual paradise that good people enter after death. No doubt this was how some early Friends thought of it, too, but many believed that the Society had been called into existence so that they could build the kingdom of God on earth. One way in which some thought this would be accomplished was by the advent of the second coming of Christ. Some seventeenth-century English Christians believed they were living in the end times described in the Book of Revelation. To them, the beheading of King Charles I vacated the English throne, and they anticipated that King Jesus would soon come to claim it and establish an earthly kingdom. The restoration of the Stuart monarchy in 1660 crushed those dreams.

Although it became clear that no outward heavenly kingdom was going to be established, Quakers believed they could live in ways that made an inward kingdom of God real. By following the guidance of the Inward Light, they could contribute to the growth of the peaceable kingdom within their souls. This was a present (though hidden) reality that could be identified with the promises in chapters 4 and 5 of John’s gospel of a time that was both coming and was already present. Or, as George Fox wrote in a 1658 epistle, “the church in her glory and beauty is appeared and appearing.”¹⁴ Quakers could live inwardly in the kingdom of heaven even though their outward bodies were in the kingdom of England.

This beloved inward community was outwardly embodied in a fellowship of people who were just, kind, generous, joyful, and loving. Widows and orphans were looked after. Quakers established the Sufferings Fund to help those who were imprisoned or who suffered heavy fines for their faithfulness as well as the families of those who died as a result of persecution. Besides caring for each other, they modeled how to live justly with

their neighbors—treating all fairly and equally and forswearing physical violence and coercion.

Salvation

And all that are saved must be gathered in unto the Light of the Covenant of Life, in which is perfect Peace, and Joy, and fellowship with the Father is known by all who dwell and walk in the Light; and here stands the Unity of the Saints in Light.

Dorothy White¹⁵

For Christians, salvation is a core principle and the ultimate goal of our life on earth. Christians believe Jesus came into the world so that people could be saved and that this life is a probationary period—we live our mortal lives in order to qualify for life eternal.

In this respect, early Friends were no exception. Even a cursory reading of early Quaker writings will reveal that they were deeply concerned with salvation. This was not a metaphorical or allegorical concept. To be saved was ultimately to enter into heaven after death. To them, salvation encompassed several related beliefs.

First, salvation was necessary. People sin, and, by so doing, they alienate themselves from God. Sin is an act of willful deceit; it is putting our own desires first—ahead of what God wants for us and from us. This estranges the creature from the Creator. For Quakers, reconciliation is strictly an inward event. Friends did not have an outward baptism ceremony to wash away the stain of an original sin, nor was there a ritual (for example, the Anglican Sacrament of Reconciliation) by which people could confess their sins and have them forgiven.

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Second, Jesus died for our sins, but this did not mean that people would be automatically saved by his death. By dying, Jesus made salvation possible (in traditional terms, his death “justifies” people in the eyes of God), but for an individual to be saved, she or he needs to faithfully follow the guidance of the Inward Light (by which a person becomes “sanctified”). This is constant work. As Matthew 6:34 reminds us, each day holds its own store of troubles and temptations. Backsliding is a constant threat for every human creature. Reconciliation requires repentance and conversion, a genuine change of heart that is demonstrated thereafter by the way a person lives.

Many contemporary Quakers struggle with the concept of sin. In some cases, this is the product of their experience as members of other churches where they felt shamed and humiliated by the label of sinner. This may have been paired with an image of a vengeful God and the claim that only by following the dictates of that denomination could they be protected from the eternal torture they deserved.

The first Friends did not privilege their own members or Christians in general. They asserted that the Comforter’s love is universal, that the Light Within could guide everyone to a life of faithfulness and hereafter into everlasting paradise. The declaration that everyone ever born is freely offered this guidance is the most important belief differentiating Quakers from many other Christians.

This means an individual may be saved even if he or she has no knowledge of Christ or the Bible or the doctrines of Christianity. A person doesn’t even have to believe in God. The Inward Light reveals our failings to all of us, points the way to salvation, and offers to empower each of us to stay on that path. But to faithfully follow that guidance requires acknowledging and

renouncing our sins. This sounds like an act of will—we decide to “be good.” On the contrary, it is surrendering, giving up our own hopes and dreams, and instead seeking what God desires for us. Reconciliation is an ongoing surrender of our own will.

Today, there is a multiplicity of beliefs about the afterlife. Some believe that a traditional heavenly paradise awaits where we will be greeted by those who died before us and in which we will live forever. Others expect to experience a purely spiritual union in which their sense of personhood is subsumed into the oneness of the Eternal Being. Others are unsure what, if anything, lies ahead.

Regardless of what is to come, the guidance of the Inward Light is available to lead each person in faithful living. Salvation is walking in the Light every day. If this world is all there is, that life will have contributed to the unfolding of the covenant community. It will have testified. If another life is waiting, following the Inward Guide will have prepared us for it.

Perfection

And so they go on, and preach up sin, that none can be free from sin, so long as they are upon earth, and impossibility of perfection, and so they get the Apostles and Christs words, and quite deny that which they spoke for, preached and prayed for, and laboured for, which was to present every man perfect in Christ Jesus.

*Margaret Fell*¹⁶

Closely related to salvation is the question of whether people in this world are capable of perfection. Early Friends utterly rejected the concept of human depravity. Sin is not our natural

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state. It is not inevitable, and ministers who claimed it was were, in Margaret Fell's words, "preaching up sin."

The early Quakers believed that when Jesus said "Be ye therefore perfect" (Matthew 5:48), it was as much a commandment as "Thou shalt not kill." This is a statement about our essential human nature. We can be commanded not to kill because killing is not a necessary and unavoidable element of human nature. In the same way, people are innately able to avoid all forms of sin. Unless it is within our capacity, we would not have been commanded to be perfect.

This is not the same as claiming that people are naturally "good." People have free will, and being perfect requires freely choosing to follow the direction of the Light Within at all times and in all things. That may or may not result in doing what others might consider "good." What is essential is faithfulness.

Like salvation, perfection is not a state that is attained once and then continues effortlessly. It is a lifelong struggle to live up to the measure of Light we have received, always knowing that more can be asked of us. I think of it as acting your age. When you were two years old and acted in ways appropriate to that age, you were a perfect two-year-old. But, if you have continued to act in the same way, you are now far from being perfect.

Perfection is not necessary to be loved by God. Divine love is unconditional; God loves each of us as we are but yearns for us to grow into perfection and to continue to grow in perfection as long as we live.