

George Fox

So it was that George Fox, as a young man, wandered among many different groups, including Puritans, Baptists and Seekers, looking for spiritual fulfillment and relief from inner turmoil. As you read in his Journal, he spent long periods of time alone. He read the Bible so much that he knew many passages by heart; the Bible became, so to speak, the religious environment in which he lived.

Fox suffered deep spiritual depression and went through many periods of temptation and inner darkness. He was unable to find help for his spiritual anguish from any of the clergymen - whom he called priests - whom he visited. His Journal recounts how one clergyman recommended that he smoke tobacco and sing psalms to feel better, which was no help at all, especially since he didn't like tobacco and couldn't sing. Experiences like this convinced him that pastors couldn't provide true spiritual aid.

In 1647, he met Elizabeth Hooten, who belonged to a group of Seekers who later joined with Fox. Her group may well have been influenced by the Anabaptists.

Shortly after this he had the spiritual experience which we recognize as the turning point in his life: it is related on page 11 of his *Journal*:

But as I had forsaken all the priests, so I left the separate preachers also, and those called the most experienced people, for I saw there was none among them all that could speak to my condition. And when all my hopes in them and in all men were gone, so that I had nothing outwardly to help me, nor could tell what to do, then. Oh then, I heard a voice which said, 'There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition', and when I heard it my heart did leap for joy. Then the Lord did let me see why there was none upon the earth that could speak to my condition, namely, that I might give him all the glory; for all are concluded under sin, and shut up in unbelief as I had been, that Jesus Christ might have the pre- eminence, who enlightens, and gives grace, and faith, and power. Thus, when God doth work who shall let [prevent] it? And this I knew experimentally.

Thus, Fox came to depend on the Inward Christ directly as his teacher, and found that the Bible was opened up to him by the Spirit. His depression and temptations continued intermittently, but now he found that he was held up by the Spirit.

Fox realized that it does no good to read the Bible or preach religion if you aren't living in the Spirit. He sought to bring people to the Teacher within themselves—to the Light of Christ within, and began to share his discovery widely with others.

Fox's message was a strong one, he urged people to recognize the evil within themselves and come to obey the Teacher within themselves, who could lead them out of all sin. Fox's own dark periods of temptation enabled him to understand what was going on with other people, so he could speak to their condition. Despite the power of evil—what he called the ocean of darkness and death—he saw an infinite ocean of light and love, which flowed over the ocean of darkness. He saw that good could overcome evil if a person was willing to follow the promptings of Christ within.

As Fox traveled and shared his discovery, hundreds and ultimately many thousands of people joined with him to form Friends. There were many early Quaker leaders, women and men, who felt led directly by the Spirit to travel in the ministry, join with others for worship, and accept the risks of persecution. One of the most important people convinced by Fox's message was Margaret Fell, whose home became the center for Quaker communication and who herself nurtured many Friends.

Historically, Friends can be understood as part of the prophetic tradition; they saw themselves as carriers of a God-given message to be conveyed to others. They were also mystics who waited for God's guidance in silent worship. Their spiritual lives did not end in contemplation; they were spiritual finders with a powerful message to share. It was because this message spoke to the needs of others that the Quaker movement grew so rapidly in its first years.

First generation Friends by and large were not wealthy or influential people; they included farmers, serving maids, and a few justices of the peace. During the late 1650's and 1660's, however, several people from influential and wealthy families became Friends. They joined during a period of intense persecution, and their influence and ability helped Friends to survive at a time when many sects disappeared. Examples include Isaac and Mary Penington, who underwent long spiritual journeys before coming to Friends, and Thomas Ellwood, who edited Fox's Journal.

The most prominent of these Friends were Robert Barclay, the ablest Quaker theologian, and William Penn, easily the best-known Friend.

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