

The Origin of the SPICES

Delivered at South Central Yearly Meeting 2012 by Paul Buckley

Testimonies

Good morning, Friends. We are here today to talk about THE QUAKER TESTIMONIES you might not have noticed that that was all in capital letters. “THE QUAKER TESTIMONIES.” We all know what they are - SPICES, simplicity, peace, integrity, community, equality, and the other one that starts with ‘s’. Specifically, I have been asked to address the Origin of the SPICES.

What is the question?

Is it historical? In other words, when, where, and how did the testimonies originate? Or, is it theological? Which is to ask, why did they come to have their particular expression in the Religious Society of Friends? As often is the case with Quaker questions, a good answer requires both.

Historical #1

It may surprise some of you to know that SPICES is a relatively recent invention. If you were to go back 50-60 years and ask Friends what the six SPICES are, they might start with cinnamon and nutmeg, and it is unlikely they would have named simplicity or peace. And, if you had asked what the Quaker testimonies are, it is also unlikely that they would name community or integrity. My guess is they would start with “that of God in everyone” or “Christ Jesus has come to teach his people himself.” This is because the word ‘testimony’, as used in a religious sense, is most often a description of spiritual or religious beliefs. You might think there is a notable exception among Quakers, “The Peace Testimony of 1660,” but that, too, was an expression of religious beliefs and their scriptural foundations, written originally to reassure the King of England that we were not seeking his overthrow.

Howard Brinton

To find the origin of the SPICES, you have to go back to 1943. In that year, Howard Brinton published a booklet entitled *A Guide to Quaker Practice*. Brinton had mined the Quaker literature from the 17th to the 20th centuries to extract a summary of our faith and practice in 22 pages. It's really quite a remarkable little book and is still in print nearly 70 years later. If you haven't read it, you should.

One of the sections is titled "Social Testimonies." In it, Brinton describes a process by which Friends have over time have come to realize the social implications of our religious positions and acted on those insights. He writes, "At the price of oversimplification let us outline the Quaker social doctrines under four heads—community, harmony, equality, and simplicity."

What I never realized, despite reading this pamphlet several times, was that this was the first listing of what have become known as the Quaker Testimonies. For that insight, I have to give credit to Anthony Manusos, a California Quaker who is working on a biography of Brinton. Anthony posted it on October 6, 2009 in his blog, LA Quaker.

Howard Brinton further developed this idea in *Friends for 300 Years*, published in 1952. That book, I'm sure, many of you have read. For some reason, he gave up the term 'testimonies', instead writing about the 'Social Concerns' of the Religious Society of Friends. These he described as *behaviors* or habits, originally learned in the meeting community that are exercised, to one degree or another, in the larger society.

Significantly, Brinton was careful to note that these are not the products of logic or a human authority. They are revealed by the action of the Inward Light on the participants in Meetings for Business or Worship. As he puts it, "Light from God streams down into the waiting group. This Light, if the way is open for it, produces three results: unity, knowledge, and power.

... Because of the characteristics of the Light of Christ, the resulting behavior can be described in a general way by the four words: Community, Harmony, Equality, and Simplicity."

Brinton he is well aware of the limitations of his list. As he points out, these are “an oversimplification,” “not all-inclusive,” and equally important, that they are “closely interrelated” with each other. He expects his readers to take them as exemplary of the kinds of corporate and individual behavior that Friends will be led into by the Inward Light, not as a definitive inventory of Quaker social concerns.

Wilmer Cooper

Let’s fast forward 39 years. Despite Brinton’s cautionary notes, the idea of listing several, discrete, outward practices as THE QUAKER TESTIMONIES has caught on. Typically, four or five, sometimes six are listed. “Harmony” has been supplanted by “peace.”

In 1991, Wilmer Cooper writes *The Testimony of Integrity*. One premise of this book is that the testimonies have become “the Quaker equivalent of the creeds of the churches.” While they are not a list of theological beliefs, they serve to define us and our relationship to God in much the same way as a creed. Like Brinton, Cooper sees them rooted in the divine, noting that the testimonies “Grow out of our inward religious experience and are intended to give outward expression to the leading of the Spirit of God within...” He sees them as the “moral and ethical fruit of the inward leading of the Spirit.”

Cooper argues that we should not treat them as independent of each other, but rather as having a common denominator in the testimony of integrity. Cooper considers integrity as having several nested aspects. At its simplest, integrity is truth-telling. We usually think of this as involving what we say or do not say, but Cooper expands truth-telling to include all the ways we present ourselves to the world. This he calls authenticity - in other words, not trying to be what we are not. The result of living authentically is an integrated life - that is, one in which all aspects of our lives are consistent with each other; and one that is guided by obedience to one’s “conscience illuminated by the Light Within.” The Truth that guides us into integrity, he tells us, “is not grounded in dogma, creeds, abstract philosophical ideas, or theological affirmations. It is not to be found

in religious textbooks or Quaker books of discipline, but it is grounded in a living faith and experience of the present moment. It is the basis for the Quaker testimonies.”

While Cooper’s goal had been to demonstrate the unity of the testimonies, this was not achieved. Instead of ‘Integrity’ being seen as a common denominator of the other testimonies, it was merely added as another, equivalent testimony, providing the ‘I’ in SPICES.

Historical #2

So how can our “traditional testimonies” be so young? Aren’t our present testimonies rooted in the practices of the earliest Friends? Well, the answer to that is, “yes and no”. Let’s take a look.

Early Friends

The Society of Friends emerged in an era of enormous religious turmoil in England. So much so, that the English fought a civil war over religion. There was great religious diversity among English Christians and among Friends, a diversity of leadings and callings, ranging from people quietly sitting in waiting worship to walking naked in the street as a sign of God’s displeasure with the corruption of society as a whole. Lots of people were doing lots of different things and they all said it was “of the Lord.”

Because of such behaviors, Friends were accused of being Ranters - people who recognized no spiritual authority but their own. It was an all-purpose slander - kind of like being called a liberal, today- and for the most part, we could easily refute it. Then in 1656, James Nayler rode a donkey into Bristol while other Quakers tore branches off of trees, waved them in the air, and chanted “Hosanna in the highest.” Nayler was reenacting Jesus entrance into Jerusalem in the week before he was crucified and he seemed to be equating himself with Jesus. To many, this proved that Quakers were willing to do anything and say, “God told me to do it.”

The event caused a national sensation. It was so big that Nayler wasn’t tried by an ordinary court, but by the Parliament itself. He was found guilty of blasphemy and sentenced to be pilloried,

whipped, have a hole bored through his tongue with a hot iron, the letter ‘B’ branded on his forehead, then taken to Bristol to be whipped again, and finally, imprisoned at hard labor.

There was fear among Friends that their credibility was completely lost. Some thought the emerging Quaker movement would be crushed. In response, the leadership of the young society called for a tightening of discipline. Henceforth, those who felt a leading were required to carefully test it within the Quaker community before acting on it. The results were two-fold. First, more radical behaviors were suppressed. Second, over time, a number of practices emerged that were broadly characteristic of Friends as a whole.

William Penn gives a good summary of these in his book, *Primitive Christianity Revived*. Penn listed twelve characteristic marks or signs of Friends. Let me read the headings to you. In most cases, they are self-explanatory:

- I. “Against Tithes
- II. Against All Swearing
- III. Against All War among Christians
- IV. Against the Greetings of the Times

We dare not offer worldly honor or use the frequent and fashionable greetings of these times. We see plainly that these are signs of vanity, pride, and pretentiousness.

- V. For Plainness in Speech [thee and thou]
- VI. Against Mixed Marriages
- VII. For Plainness in Apparel and Simplicity in Our Lives

We use few words when we speak, but stand by each one. Likewise, we are temperate in our food and abstain from the recreations and pastimes of the world.

- VIII. On Observing Days

We cannot in conscience observe the so-called holy days, public fasts, or feasts. These were invented and instituted by humanity, not by God; they are the product of a human will, not of a divine command.

- IX. With respect to our behavior toward both those within and those outside our society, we are called to act blamelessly.

- X. We require that collections be made to meet the needs of the poor, so that widows, orphans, and the helpless are cared for.
- XI. All within our religious society who intend to marry are required first to declare their intentions to, and seek the approval of, their parents, or guardians - even before one proposes to the other.
- XII. With the aim of maintaining good order, comforting and instructing all within the society, and keeping us in the ways of truth, meetings of our members are called to provide care and conduct business. These are held monthly in each district, quarterly within each region, and yearly for the whole nation. These are held to ensure accurate communications with each other on those things that sustain us in piety and charity.”

In many ways, this looks like the first listing of what are today called THE QUAKER TESTIMONIES. These were the outward behaviors that Friends felt called to by God and which had been accepted by the community. To early Quakers, they were simply the things one did as a result of entering into a new relationship with God. You didn't choose to do these things - they just naturally happened as a result of that relationship with the divine.

Friends under persecution and toleration

Let's return to our story. Only a few years after Nayler's ride, the monarchy was restored in England. Religious sects other than the Church of England were outlawed and subjected to persecution. Frequently, religious groups respond to persecution by going underground and in the 17th century, many dissenting sects did just that. They held their worship services in secret and outwardly tried to blend in with the majority culture. Friends did not. We held our meetings for worship in our (illegal) meetinghouses and, when those structures were pulled down by the authorities, we met *at our usual times* in the ruins or in the street. More than that, we continued to engage in other outward behaviors that made us clearly identifiable targets. We wore plain clothes and addressed all with thee and thou. We refused to pay tithes or to swear oaths.

We had no choice - these weren't self-selected behaviors, they were *peculiar* and I use the term *peculiar* in its 17th century sense: that is, chosen by God. We were God's chosen people and we needed to act as directed by God. The results were predictable. Thousands were arrested and hundreds died.

You might think that religious lobbying is new, but within the first decade of persecution, the Puritans, the Baptists, and many other dissenters had successfully petitioned Parliament to regain their rights. Eventually, the government restored the rights of nearly all Christians with three major exceptions: the Catholics, the Unitarians, and the Quakers. The leadership of our society, most prominently William Penn, undertook a campaign for toleration. One essential part of that campaign was to redefine the distinctive practices of the society.

Make no mistake; Friends in the 1650s believed that they had re-discovered Christianity as Jesus intended it be. They believed they were the only true Christians. They called themselves a peculiar people and they meant they were God's chosen people. They believed they would convert the whole world to Quakerism. It was inevitable.

But to gain toleration, they needed to change their message. If you want others to tolerate you, you have to tolerate them. We began to describe the Society of Friends as part of the church. Our peculiar practices were re-defined as "just our way of doing things" - not God's way; not what everyone else should be doing, too.

This, in itself, may not have been a bad thing. It may have provided a needed bit of humility. Moreover, it worked. In 1689, Parliament enacted the Act of Toleration, ending nearly 30 years of persecution. There were still limitations, but for the most part, Quakers could practice their religion without interference - and this created an unexpected problem.

When you're facing prison, it's easy to know who is with you and who is not. Anyone who had willingly joined in the suffering was recognized as a member of the society. Voluntarily doing things that exposed you to prison was a clear statement of commitment. But

anyone who hid their identity was clearly not a Friend. But after 1689, that was no longer the case.

Absent the pressures and penalties of persecution, it was easy to say you were a Friend and some did who just liked the sound of it. In short order, the problem of nominal Quakers arose. Some way of distinguishing the true Quaker from the nominal one was needed. In response to this problem, observing the unique outward behaviors, such things as using plain speech - not just to other Quakers, but to everyone - and wearing plain clothes all the time, was more rigorously defined and enforced.

Let me give you an example. Originally, plain clothes were just plain clothes. New Friends took their everyday garments and removed such things as ribbons, lace, extra buttons, and unnecessary lapels. Bright colors were avoided, but there were no specific criteria - plain simply meant unadorned. But, as time went by, rigid standards were developed. Uniforms were specified for men and women. Even such details as the width of the brim on a man's hat or the number of folds in a woman's bonnet were prescribed. People who failed to strictly follow this code were "labored with" and if that was unsuccessful, disowned.

In essence, many of the "marks of a Quaker" were transformed from the things that you do *because* you are close to God to the things that you do in order to show others that *you are* a Quaker. As such, they were cut off from their spiritual roots and became things-in-themselves. The justification for doing them became, "This is what we do."

That's strike one. Here are strikes two and three: One definition of a ritual is "patterns of behavior having significance within a particular social group." As prescribed religious behaviors, plain clothes, plain speech, and the other requirements took on the characteristics of rituals.

Moreover, these behaviors functioned as a creed. In other Christian churches, membership is predicated on adherence to a written creed. In the same way, membership in the Society of Friends was predicated on adherence to a behavioral creed. If you don't look

like us and talk like us, you are not one of us.

You can see the inherent contradiction in this situation. From its founding, the Society of Friends was non-creedal and had stripped away all outward ritual. This redefinition of the Quaker practices introduced an existential tension that was finally resolved for most Friends in the mid-19th century. The solution was simply to eliminate the rituals. A whole host of external obligations were abandoned in the course of a few years. Requirements for plain clothes, plain speech, and the use of numbers for the days of the week and months of the year, and regulations on the height of tombstones were removed from nearly all books of discipline. Today, only a handful of Friends continue to practice these as testimonies.

So, we have a discontinuity. To use a biological metaphor: As a corporate testimony, ‘plain’ doesn’t evolve into ‘simplicity’ - ‘plain’ goes extinct. This would mean the peculiarities of early Friends have no relationship to the social testimonies that Howard Brinton identified in the middle of the 20th century or to the testimonies that we recognize today.

Theological Answer

Well, that’s a bummer. We seem to be back to our traditional testimonies being relatively new. But, remember when I asked if our present testimonies have roots in the practices of the earliest Friends? I said the answer was, “yes and no”? That’s the “no” part. The “yes” side of it comes from the theological underpinnings of the testimonies. To understand this we need to clearly define what a Quaker testimony is.

I believe there are five essential characteristics that distinguish a testimony:

First and foremost - as early Friends, Howard Brinton, and Wilmer Cooper all agree - a testimony is something we are called or led to - not something we choose to do on our own. It arises from a relationship with God. You could say it comes from “that of God” within us, not “that of us.” Contemporary Friends use a variety of terms to name this: Spirit, the Inward Light, Christ, the One, Goddess,

the unfolding of creation, and others. The particular words don't matter. What is essential is that the source - the origin - is not our reason or our tradition or our personal preferences. So, for example, if I engage in peace work because it makes me look good to people I admire, it isn't a testimony. It may well be good work, valuable work, important work, but it isn't a testimony.

Second, you must *testify to* a testimony. In other words, it has to be *public* behavior. Something I do within my family or among close friends is not a testimony. It may be a tradition or a habit, but it isn't a testimony. For example, if I refer to Sunday as First Day when I'm among Quakers, but call it Sunday I'm when talking to others, isn't a testimony. It's just a quaint custom.

Third, if we are to refer to something as a *Quaker* testimony, it should be representative of our entire community. I have a personal calling - to write about Quaker history and theology. I believe it is divinely inspired and it is certainly public behavior. It is a testimony, but it is my personal testimony, not a *Quaker* testimony. I believe it's good and valuable work, but I need to distinguish it from the work we are called to do as a community.

Fourth, a testimony is what early Friends called "a cross to the conscience." This comes in two flavors; it's a challenge to my own conscience - you might say it calls on me to act outside my comfort zone - and, equally important, it's a challenge to the consciences of others.

Consider, for example, the effect in the 1660s of testifying by wearing plain clothes and using plain speech. When you met someone you knew on the street, you would be wearing apparel that, for the times, was comically plain. No lace at the collar, no ornamental buttons on your sleeve, not even lapels on your shirt or coat. Men would not bow, which was a simple courtesy nor would they remove or even tip their hats - another common courtesy. Nor would you use one of the ordinary greetings - such as, "Your Humble Servant." If the person was of a higher social class, you would also grossly violate good manners by using "thee" and "thou" instead of the expected and polite "you" - let alone honorifics such as "your

grace” or “your Excellency.” In brief, you would act like an ill-mannered, ignorant, discourteous, insolent, rude lout. Unless you were a rebellious teenager, acting this way was a serious challenge to your own pride.

At the same time, it was a challenge to the pride of the people you met. The ways they expected you to act were normal, but they were things that puffed up their pride [give an example of a proper greeting]. When you didn’t follow convention, you wounded their pride. You implicitly called attention to the unnecessary finery they were wearing and to their expectation of casual flattery. That was risky. More than one Friend received a beating in return. If you did it in a courtroom, it could lead to jail time.

In short, it was, and should be, a cross to the conscience both to testify and to be testified to.

Finally, a testimony flows from, and is an expression of, love - God’s love and our love.

No one has expressed this better than John Woolman. In his journal, he describes making a dangerous journey to meet with Native Americans who were at war with the white settlers in central Pennsylvania. He wrote, “I was led to think on the Nature of the Exercise which hath attended me: Love was the first Motion, and thence a Concern arose to spend some Time with the Indians, that I might feel and understand their Life, and the Spirit they live in.” Love came first, then the calling. First, God’s love for Woolman; then, God’s love for the natives; and finally, Woolman acts out of love for the Native Americans.

The twelve marks of a Quaker that William Penn listed all shared these attributes. So do Howard Brinton’s four social concerns and Wilmer Cooper’s testimony of integrity. They all came from the same source - the Inward Light. One didn’t evolve into another; they are all simply children of the same mother.

So here are your two answers: from an historical perspective, the origin of the SPICES is Howard Brinton with an assist from Wilmer Cooper. From a theological one, the origin is God.

Implications

So what? What are the implications of this? How does any of this relate to you?

Before we go on, I think Wil Cooper was fundamentally right about the testimonies having a common denominator - but ‘integrity’ isn’t it. Our lives are fragmented and Wil’s sense of integrity as wholeness - the integration of all our parts - is essential for psychological health, but it misses something important here.

The testimonies are all the products of one thing. Just as they all originate in the divine, our decision to practice them is rooted in a particular response to the leadings and drawings of the Inward Light. Each time we testify, it is the product of faithfulness to our own unique calling whether we are called to work for racial equality or to help build a sense of community in our own meetings or just to tell the truth when a little white lie would be so much easier. I would say, in fact, there is only one testimony, faithfully following the word of God spoken within our hearts. This results in many products. When we listen carefully and respond faithfully, it results in simplicity and integrity in our lives, in work for peace and social justice, and in a sense of community with each other and with all creation. It is SPICES and more.

And this leads me to what I see as the lessons of history for us today. The testimonies of the early Friends were expressions of faithfulness. People didn’t put on plain clothes because they thought it would bring them closer to God. They did it because they had no choice - faithfulness to the Inward Light required them to rip all ornamentation off their clothing.

Wearing plain clothes increased their chances of being arrested. And their chances of being imprisoned increased when they refused to swear an oath in court. And that increased their chances of dying in a dark, fetid, rat-infested cell. They knew the meaning of “faithfulness unto death.” They testified with their lives and, too many times, with their deaths for the sake of faithfulness. They set a high standard. I don’t know if I am able to meet it.

When persecution ended, they continued to wear plain clothes,

but for most, it was out of faithfulness to tradition, to custom, and to the requirements of the book of discipline. From that moment, it ceased to be a testimony. From that moment, it was doomed to extinction.

It is no accident that the focus of the Society changed from outreach to the world in the 1650s to internal policing in the 1700s. Furthermore, this left a void at the heart of the Religious Society of Friends and that laid the groundwork for the disastrous splits and separations of the 19th century.

The changes in the late-17th century were a response to the conditions in the society around them and the same dynamic is operating today. We are immersed in a culture that celebrates the individual and the individual's freedom to choose to do whatever he or she wants to do. This has infected the Religious Society of Friends and it has changed the way in which we think about ourselves as Quakers and, consequently, how we relate to God.

Over the past half century, the meaning of the word 'testimony' has changed profoundly among Friends. In the 1950s, a testimony was a statement about God and our relationship with the divine. "There is that of God in each person" was (and is) an essential Quaker testimony. But today, the word 'testimony' is used almost exclusively to name outward behaviors - testimony is not about God, it's about us. At the same time, these outward behaviors have become central to our definition of what it means to be a Friend. As such, we have moved the center of our religious community from the divine to ourselves. We don't testify to the work of God in creation, but to our own efforts.

This secularization of the testimonies elevates them as things to be pursued in and of themselves. We have done this before. The early Friends practices became things to do in order to show you were a Friend. Wearing the plain clothes and using thee and thou were fine things to do, but they did not feed the spiritual needs of 18th-century Quakers. To fill the void, some Friends looked to evangelical Christianity. Others found comfort in deism and enlightenment thought. The result was conflict, separation, and decline.

We can follow a similar path. We can elevate SPICES to be things-in-themselves - THE things that Quakers do. We can live simply so others can simply live. We can work for peace, social justice, and a reduction in atmospheric carbon. All good things. All important. But when we act out of our own wills or our own desires, we deny ourselves the opportunity to enter into relationship with God and we miss the simple joy of that communion. When we are in charge of our own lives, we lose connection to the Power that gives our actions spiritual meaning.

When “doing good things” becomes the definition of being a Friend, we make the SPICES into idols and we lose the ability to feed the souls of our members and attenders. We put ourselves on the pathway to extinction.

Addendum

That’s what I had written in preparation for this presentation, but in the last couple of days that I have spent with you folks, I have been feeling that something was missing. My wife tells me that I always give people the facts and leave them to make up their own minds. She says people want to know what I think, too. So here, it is (as best I can recall):

Throw away the SPICES.

There is a story, I think it is Buddhist, about a monk who points at the moon and says that you won’t see the moon if you look at the finger. I hope that isn’t too mangled.

SPICES is a finger. What they point to is faithfulness.

SPICES is fine for teaching kinds [*sic*] in First Day School or as a way to caricature Quaker social action when talking to non-Quakers.

Here is the Quaker testimony: God speaks to us all and if we each listen, we can hear what we are being called to do. Every one of us has leadings - some big and some small - we just need to listen carefully, discern as well as we can what that still, small voice is saying in our hearts, test what we think we are hearing with our faith community, and act faithfully.

We need to give up control of our lives. We need to trust God to guide us. We need to be faithful. If we do that, we won't need SPICES.

Queries

1. When have you known you had a leading? How and with whom did you test it?
2. Has it ever felt impossible to say yes to a leading? What did you do?
3. How does your life testify to your most deeply held beliefs?