

Quaker Basics (Quakerism 101) **An Introductory Course in** **Quaker Faith & Practice**

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WEEK 1 – The Beginnings of Quakerism

Quakerism was born in the mid-17th century in England. This was a period of enormous political and religious turmoil. (This period has been compared to the late 1960s in the United States.) It was the only period in which England was a republic, rather than a monarchy. A civil war was going on during much of this time.

Many different small religious sects sprang up at this time. A few of these survived (as Friends did) and grew larger like the Separatists, who later became our Congregationalists, and the Puritans, who later became our Presbyterians. Most, however, of these groups disappeared.

There was an informal movement in the late 1640s and early 1650s in Northern England known as The Seekers. They rejected many of the structures of the church at the time and were looking for a rebirth of a more vital spirituality. George Fox had been preaching for several years but had attracted few followers. In 1652, Fox had a vision on a hill called Pendle Hill of “a great people to be gathered” and traveled to the area where the Seekers held their gatherings. He gave a sermon to about a thousand members of this group in an open field called Firbank Fell and many leaders of the Seekers responded to Fox’s message and the Quaker movement was born.

Quakers sent out preachers (many of whom were women) throughout the British Isles known as “The Valiant Sixty” as well as to the Continent and the American colonies. The movement experienced severe persecution, and a number of its most outstanding leaders died because of the terrible conditions in prison. Three were executed in Massachusetts Colony.

Characteristics of the early Quaker movement:

- Based on a radically direct living relationship with God
- Considered themselves to be returning to a form of primitive Christianity as practiced in the time of the apostles
- Rejected programmed worship, outward sacraments, and paid clergy
- Active role of women in church leadership from the outset (revolutionary at the time)
- Rapid growth in spite of potential suffering from involvement

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- Fox also set up a system of monthly, quarterly and yearly meetings (to provide coherence and corporate discipline to the new community of believers)

Reflection questions:

1. How would you respond if a charismatic spiritual leader such as George Fox spoke to you today?
2. Do you find the writings of early Friends exciting? Strange? Moving? Disturbing?
3. In what ways do you sense that Friends today are or are not practicing the same kind of religion as the first generation of Quakers?
4. Why do you think Friends grew so quickly and won so many adherents, even in spite of terrible persecution?
5. Why do you think established church leaders were so enraged by the Quaker message?

Readings for Week 1 – The Beginnings of Quakerism

PYM F & P, pp. 1-4 (can read to p. 15 if you like)

Extracts # 2, 4, 6-14, 16, 39 (on p. 86ff.)

NEYM F & P, pp. 27-31. (You can read the rest of history to p. 49 if you like, though we'll focus on 17th century.)

Further reading:

- *Glossary* in *F & P of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting* (pp. 215-221 – especially for those fairly new to Friends)
[<http://www.pym.org/faith-and-practice/glossary/>]
- John Punshon, *Portrait in Grey*, Chaps. 2-4 or just Chap. 3.

WEEK 2 – “The Inward Light”

This week we'll look at Quaker theology, that is, how Quakers think about God. Central to all Quaker practice is the idea that every human being has direct access to God in a living, intimate way. This direct ongoing connection does not require priests, ceremonies, or outward structures. Church hierarchy and programmed worship were both seen as interfering with this radical way of listening to God's voice in the present. Friends believed that this was the same kind of direct relationship with God experienced by Hebrew prophets and by the early Christian communities described in Acts.

Here are some terms or expressions that are used by Friends to talk about this experience of God:

- The Inward Christ
- The Inner Light
- “The Light of Christ that enlightens every one who comes into this world” [[John 1:9](#)]
- The Seed
- “Leadings”
- “Being led” by God

This is similar to certain ideas from Christianity in general:

- The Holy Spirit
- Continuing revelation
- “I shall always be with you, even to the end of time.” [[Mat. 28:20](#)]
- Immanuel (means “God is with us”) [[Isaiah 7:14](#), [Mat. 1:23](#)]

Friends sometimes today draw a distinction between:

- Spiritual vs. political (perhaps placing an emphasis on the “testimonies”)
- Inner life vs. outward action
- Christ-centered vs. universalist
- Historical Jesus vs. Inward Christ

Some Friends have suggested that a living present-day relationship with God or Christ breaks down these distinctions. Do you experience this as being true?

Reflection questions:

1. In your experience of other faiths, how do you feel this idea of the Inner Light is similar to or different from the ideas at the heart of those other faiths?
2. Do you feel you have ever experienced God touching you or speaking to you directly? If so, when?
3. Was this a comforting experience or a disturbing one?
4. Some have suggested that the Inner Light undergirds all Quaker practice (e.g. Meeting for Worship, Meeting for Business, Testimonies). Do you see this as being true in your experience of Quaker practice in Local Meeting? Yearly Meeting (YM)?

Readings for Week 2 – “The Inward Light”

PYM F & P, pp. 16-17.

Extracts # 3, 17-27 (on p. 87ff.) Can also dip into *#94-125* if you have time.

NEYM F & P pp. 65-71.

Further reading:

- Thomas Kelly, *[A Testament of Devotion](#)* (section on “Inward Light”).

WEEK 3 - Meeting for Worship

Meeting for worship in unprogrammed Friends Meetings offers a unique way for a group of people to be present with God. Such gatherings have the potential to be infused and guided by the Holy Spirit. A number of factors contribute to the power and depth of such worship.

1. The Meeting Culture. Do Meeting members have a living experiential sense of what a gathered meeting is? Of spirit-led vocal ministry? Does the Ministry & Counsel committee feel empowered to take active responsibility for the quality of worship in the Meeting? What activities does the Meeting engage in (meeting retreats, Quakerism classes, guidance to new members, etc.) that may have an impact on the quality of worship.

2. Individual / family preparation during the week (Tabor’s First Door, the “Door Before”, in his Four Doors to Meeting for Worship.) Do meeting families/members engage in any spiritual practices (bible study, personal meditation or prayer, etc.) during the week?

3. How Friends move into worship (Tabor’s “Door Inward”). How does what you do on Sunday morning and as you enter worship impact on your ability to enter into a deep sense of communion with God

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quickly in meeting? What does Concord Friends Meeting do that helps or hinders this process? (e.g., “greeters”, handling of latecomers, timing of children being in meeting, physical layout, etc.)

4. “Gathered worship”. This is an expression Friends use to describe a meeting for worship in which many or all of those present people feel deeply and powerfully knit together in closeness to God. The term “covered” meeting is also used. It is a wonderful and sometimes an upsetting experience. I have heard a number of Friends say that they feel they have never experienced this in their meeting.

5. Vocal ministry. Being “led” to speak in meeting used to be an awesome even watershed event in the lives of many Friends in the past. Friends wrote about becoming seriously ill because of failing to respond to a call to speak or speaking when they were not led.

Many Friends are attracted to the idea that in some sense the “Spirit” guides the ministry but are often uncomfortable with the idea of “judging” whether specific speaking in meeting is or isn’t so “led”. Different Friends often respond very differently to specific offerings – a given ministry may “speak to the condition” of some present but not others. Is there a way the Ministry and Counsel committee can prayerfully reflect on the extent to which ministry in the meeting is directed by the spirit without becoming involved in judgmentalism towards individual offerings? How does the meeting address a persistent personal pattern of ministry that deviates from this goal?

6. The Door Beyond. How does meeting draw to a close? What is the impact of introductions, announcements, or forms of sharing such as reading and addressing queries, “twilight meeting” or “joys & sorrows” at the end of meeting? How does Meeting for Worship spill over into the life of the meeting and the lives of its members throughout the week?

Reflection questions:

1. What practice of “centering” or moving from regular thoughts/concerns into deeper worship do you use?
2. Do you feel that you have experienced “gathered worship”?
3. Have you experienced a similar sense of the almost tangible presence of God in other settings, such as during personal prayer, in nature, a cathedral, a concert, a wedding or funeral?
4. To what extent do you experience vocal ministry in the meetings you have attended as being spirit-led?
5. Have you ever felt “called” to speak? How did you respond?

Readings for Week 3 – Meeting for Worship

PYM F & P, pp. 17-21.

Extracts # 45-93, 138-50 (on p. 100ff.), Query #1 (p. 206)

http://www.inwardlight.org/quakerism_101.html

NEYM F & P pp. 95-104. NEYM Advices, "Meeting for Worship", p. 206; *NEYM Queries*, "Meeting for Worship", p. 211

Further reading:

- Bill Taber, *Four Doors to Meeting for Worship* (PHP #306)
- Handout: Excerpts from [various Yearly Meeting disciplines](#)

WEEK 4 - Meeting for Business

Quaker decision-making is a form of corporate discernment of God's will for the faith community. Most decision-making for religious groups has been done in one of two ways characteristic of human societies in general, namely:

1. Top down hierarchical decision-making (e.g., Pope over archbishop over bishop over priest over laity in the Catholic Church, military, most businesses) or

2. Some form of "majority rule" (e.g., in many Protestant denominations, the congregation votes on important questions, including selection of a new pastor.)

Quakers developed over the past 350 years a unique form of decision-making that is radically egalitarian not only in that each participant has an equal voice, but also in that small minorities are honored and listened to and even given the power to stand in the way of decisions in many instances. It is not, however, the same as consensual decision-making, which involves a horizontal attempt to find agreement among those who make up the group. Instead, a group can discover or hear what God is saying to them by an egalitarian & participatory method.

This is a fragile enterprise. It can deteriorate into gridlock, inefficiency, "tyranny of the articulate", and even schism. Some of the components necessary for success include:

1. A culture in the meeting in which members understand the purpose of the process

2. Careful preparation of items in advance of business meeting is crucial including sorting out which items really need to come to the meeting for decisions. This makes it possible to move more slowly and prayerfully through the important issues before the meeting.

3. An atmosphere of expectant waiting upon God during the meeting for business. (It may be referred to as a "meeting for worship for the purpose of decision-making.")

4. A willingness of those present to share their own sense of what God is asking the group to do in a manner that allows and respects differing discernments of this from other members of the group.

5. A skilled and assertive clerk (facilitator of the meeting for

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business) able to discern the “sense of the meeting” (or what God appears to be asking the group to do) through the different expressions from the membership. This is a challenging and powerful form of spiritual leadership.

6. Patience and a sense of confidence that the process can work well as intended.

It is interesting that in some spiritual communities the “highest office” is that of priest (one who is permitted to carry out special religious rites or ceremonies). In others, it is a person skilled at preaching. In non-pastoral Quaker meetings today, our highest “office” is a person charged with helping us to discover God’s voice for the group in meeting for business.

Reflection questions:

1. To what extent have you experienced Quaker business or committee meetings as a form of worshipful waiting upon Divine Guidance in your Local Meeting? In Yearly Meeting?
2. What do you see as some of the major roadblocks to this form of decision-making working as it is intended?
3. What do see as possible barriers in yourself to your own fruitful and prayerful participation in this process?
4. Are good clerks born or made? If they are made, what do or could our meetings do to help nurture the skill of clerking as a key form of spiritual leadership?

Readings for Week 4 – Meeting for Business

PYM F & P pp. 21-26 & 26-28, Extracts # 1, 5, 126-37. Query #2 (p. 206)

NEYM F & P pp. 114-119. NEYM Advice, “Meeting Business”, p. 206; *NEYM Queries*, “Meeting Business”, p. 211

Further reading:

- Barry Morley, *[Beyond Consensus: Salvaging Sense of the Meeting](#)* (PHP #307)
- Michael Sheeran, *[Beyond Majority Rule: Voteless Decisions in the Religious Society of Friends](#)* (Part II, chaps 1, 2, 3, and 5) Written by a Jesuit priest who studied extensively Philadelphia Yearly Meeting’s decision-making process.

WEEK 5 - The Testimonies

The word “testimonies” is a special term used by Friends to refer both to standards to guide individual Friends behavior in specific areas and to our witness to the wider society in that particular area. These

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are not simply individual lifestyle decisions or witnesses but principles around which Quakers have developed a broad degree of agreement as a religious society. Because of the grassroots form of decision-making in the Religious Society of Friends, there is no definitive list of the testimonies, nor is there agreement on exactly what these testimonies require or mean in the detail. The list I like to use includes five testimonies:

Integrity – Although this testimony is on everyone’s “list”, the name for it varies. Friends have always had strong opposition to use of oaths as a form of double standard in truth speaking. Early Friends benefited economically from their reputation for scrupulous honesty. As a result, many major economic institutions in Pennsylvania trace Quaker roots. Consistent honesty in one’s life and economic affairs is an endangered species today when most people accept it as being acceptable to cheat on taxes or with large corporations.

Simplicity – Until the end of the 19th century, most Friends wore “plain” clothes (somewhat similar to the Amish today) as a testimony against the “world’s” fashions. Margaret Fell loved to wear colorful clothes and was outspoken in her opposition to this interpretation of simplicity. Only a handful of Friends, mainly in the “Conservative” yearly meetings, follow this testimony today.

Nonetheless, the testimony remains an important one for Friends today. Some try to live simply as a way of avoiding distraction from a life attuned to God. Others do so out of concern for economic justice and the violence that arises from affluent lifestyles. John Woolman wrote and lived a life that addressed both reasons for simplicity with great eloquence. Environmental concerns offer new reasons for practicing this testimony.

Equality – This has been a key issue for Friends from the beginning. Friends have played a leading role in allowing women to take leadership roles along with men. Support for women’s suffrage and opposition to slavery were more controversial among Friends than is often remembered today. Concerns about discrimination based on age, economic class, disabilities, and sexual orientation are also strong among many Friends today. Some include another testimony on “community” (or care for others’ needs).

Peace – Early Christians generally refused to participate in military service. Quakers made their first public statements in opposition to participation in outward warfare in 1660. They are considered one of the “Historic Peace Churches” along with Amish, Mennonites, Brethren, and several smaller denominations. Although participation in the military may have led to disownment in some meetings in previous centuries, many Friends participated in the two

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world wars with at least the passive acquiescence of their meetings. Meetings vary greatly how actively they wrestle with individual Friends on this issue.

Unity with Nature. Many Yearly Meetings have adopted sections of their discipline and queries in this area in recent years. The general thrust is that God wishes for human communities to live in harmony with the natural world and to stop living in a manner that does violence to the non-human parts of creation. Friends can live out this concern by spiritual changes in their human-centered way of looking at things, living more simply, and being involved in a wide range of environmentally oriented actions both as individual families and as a faith community. There is a widespread sense that this is an important area of concern to Friends although little consensus among Friends on specifics.

Newer testimonies. The testimonies are always evolving. As a result, individual Friends, Quaker committees, conferences, monthly meetings, etc. have suggested new testimonies from time to time. Examples include new testimonies on everything from sexual ethics to music.

Reflection questions:

1. Which of the testimonies listed “speak to you” deeply?
2. Which ones make you uncomfortable?
3. Are there others you feel should be added to the list?

Readings for Week 5 – The Testimonies

PYM F&P Extracts [#15, 35, 44, 195-297](#). Queries # [6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12](#) (on p. 210-214).

NEYM F & P pp. 141-144 ([Simplicity and Integrity](#)), pp. 179-182 ([Equality](#)), pp. 182-189 ([Peace and Nonviolence](#)), pp. 189-192 ([Stewardship](#)). **NEYM Advices**, “Personal Conduct”, “Stewardship”, “Peace and Reconciliation”, pp. 207-210; **NEYM Queries**, “Personal Conduct”, “Stewardship”, “Peace and Reconciliation”, pp. 212-213

Further reading:

- [“A Perspective on the Peace Testimony”](#), by John Andrew Gallery, in the Nov. 2002 issue of [Friends Journal](#).
- David Morse, [Testimony: John Woolman on Today's Global Economy](#) (PHP #356).
- John Woolman, [“A Plea for the Poor”](#) [<http://www.umilta.net/woolmanplea.html>] (appended to most editions of his [Journal](#))
- Elaine Prevallet, [Reflections on Simplicity](#) (PHP #244)

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- Sandra Cronk, *[Gospel Order: A Quaker Understanding of the Faithful Church Community](#)* (PHP #297), pp. 9-13

Quaker Testimonies New & Old

- **Integrity** (or Speaking truth)
 - Early applications:
 - Refusal of oaths
 - Plain speech
 - Commercial honesty (e.g. refusal to haggle prices)
 - Other possibilities:
 - Cheating on income taxes
 - Software theft
- **Simplicity** (or “Purity”)
 - Early applications:
 - Plain dress
 - Rejection of “world’s” holidays / feast days
 - Rejection of musical instruments, choral singing, dancing, gambling
 - Traditional sexual values (no sex outside of traditional marriage)
 - Later applications:
 - Drugs and alcohol use / abuse
 - Other possibilities
 - TV, Internet abuse
 - Wearing suit & ties. Jeans
 - Personal spiritual disciplines
 - Fasting
- **Equality**
 - Early application:
 - Hat honor (still enforced in courtrooms!)
 - Honorifics in speech (e.g. plural address to superiors)
 - Gender roles
 - Later applications:
 - Slavery
 - Women’s suffrage
 - Prison reform
 - Recent extensions:
 - Rights of disabled people
 - Sexual orientation (discrimination against gays/LGBTQ)
 - Other possibilities:

- Socialism
- Use of titles, degrees, current honorifics (e.g., “Your Honor”, “The Honorable...”)
- **Peace**
 - Beginnings: Limited to personal non-participation
 - Early justification: “We do not fight with outward weapons.” (cf. rejection of outward sacraments)
 - Later: Extended to “political peacemaking” (organizing opposition to governmental policies)
 - The “seeds of war” in personal possessions & lifestyle (John Woolman)
 - Later justifications:
 - “That of God in everyone”
 - Turn the other cheek
 - Political rationale in terms of role in international relations, domestic priorities, etc.
 - Recent extension:
 - Refusing taxes that go to war (similar to earlier refusal of tithes)
 - Capital punishment
 - Other possibilities:
 - Vegetarianism
 - Violence towards women
 - Violence towards the environment
- **Unity with Nature**
 - Overlap with simplicity
 - Extensions of peace and equality) to all of creation (beyond just to other humans)

WEEK 6 - The Meeting Community

In previous centuries, Quakers were sharply “set apart” from the surrounding community by clothing, language, celebration of holidays, recreational pursuits, etc. The meeting community actively intervened to maintain the distinctiveness and cohesion of the meeting family.

Today, we are far less set apart from our neighbors, at least in outward things. Many of us would be unwilling for the meeting to intervene in matters that we consider our own private concerns. For better or for worse, Friends place a high value today on individualism. Nonetheless, the pendulum has swung back somewhat in recent years, with Friends more willing to engage with each other actively around critical issues of belief and lifestyle. Here are some examples.

Clearness committees. Many meetings take very seriously

their role in testing the rightness of decisions for marriage or membership. Friends also have begun to ask that clearness committees be set up to assist them in hearing God's voice regarding other personal decisions such as around education, jobs, or a leading to carry out a form of ministry.

Sexuality. Friends used to hold to traditional values that sex should be limited to traditional monogamous heterosexual marriage. There is significantly less consensus on this today, at least in liberal unprogrammed meetings. Many meetings have offered support to committed gay couples through holding weddings or "ceremonies of commitment". Others feel that Friends need to offer more active guidance towards our members regarding sexual ethics (premarital sex, fidelity to marriage, pornography, etc.)

Nurturance of gifts. In the past, meeting elders had a special ability for recognizing and supporting individual members who had a gift for vocal ministry. Some meetings have gone through a process for identifying and supporting a variety of gifts in their members.

Spiritual formation. A variety of approaches is available for deepening the spiritual life of members. These include meeting retreats, ongoing spiritual formation groups, spiritual direction, and developing one-to-one spiritual friendships with another Friend.

Membership. Membership does not seem to mean a great deal in many meetings. The Meeting may have a number of members on its rolls that have minimal involvement in the life of the meeting. On the other hand, there may be individuals who are extremely active in the life of the meeting who have never joined. What is the impact of parents enrolling their children as full members of the meeting – under a system where such members are never required to take an affirmative action of choosing to be members on their own when they reach maturity?

Accountability groups. This is a modern version of the old-fashioned Quaker meeting in which members took spiritual responsibility for each other's lives. This is often done in smaller groups than a whole meeting.

Reflection questions:

1. What are you looking for from the meeting?
2. Are there areas in which you would like the meeting to be more involved in your personal or family life? Less involved?
3. Do you feel that the meeting is doing everything it can to support and nurture the spiritual development of the membership? How could this go further?

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Readings for Week 6 - The Meeting Community

PYM F&P Extracts [#151-94](#) (on pp. 129-44). Queries # [3](#), [4](#), [9](#) (on pp. 207-209, 212-213).

NEYM F & P [pp. 119-124](#). On membership [pp. 235-240](#), clearness committees [pp. 255-256](#), minutes of travel [pp. 264-265](#), on marriage & sexuality [pp. 153-156](#)

Further reading:

- Tom Gates, [*Members One of Another: The Dynamics of Membership in Quaker Meeting*](#) (PHP #371)
- Patricia Loring, [*Spiritual Discernment: the context and goal of clearness committees*](#) (PHP #305)
- Sandra Cronk, [*Gospel Order: A Quaker Understanding of the Faithful Church Community*](#) (PHP #297), pp. 21-31.

Reflections On Membership

- What does membership in a meeting or in Friends actually mean?
- Being “members of one body” (arms & legs) [[Rom. 12:3-8](#)]
- Paul’s passage on gifts
- The church as “Christ’s body” [[1st Cor. 12:4-31](#)]
- The equivalent in terms of faith community of marriage vow?

Annual vs. lifetime vows

- “Paper membership” (where many active participants are not members and many members are not active)
- Membership is always in a local meeting
- New England YM discipline does not allow dual membership (in two faith traditions) though some local meetings ignore the rule, and others, such as Britain YM, have no such rule.

Joining

- “Convincement” vs. “conversion” (the term used by most faith communities)
- A large percentage of Quakers have come in by convincement in each generation
- Letter of application
- Meeting for clearness
- How high is the bar – theology, lifestyle, Testimonies

Role of children

- Birthright membership
- Membership by parental request
- Role of baptism in “Anabaptist” tradition (adult choice to join the church community)
- Confirmation

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- Chronic weakness in terms of “keeping” our children as Friends???

Discipline

- The meeting used to enforce lifestyle standards via process called “eldering”
- Today it is usually limited to very disruptive role in worship and/or community life or other severe violations of community role (e.g., sexual abuse or harassment)
- Other side: How do we support each other? (emotionally, financially, clearness, support for ministries, etc.)

Separation

- Disownment is a public distancing from a person separated from membership to avoid public confusion (e.g., Richard Nixon)
- The most common reason was for “marrying out”
- Other churches practice excommunication (refusal of sacraments), shunning (barring of social contact)
- Requests to terminate membership are often limited to total inactivity including refusal to respond to letters and longstanding financial non-participation – often linked to meeting’s financial obligation to YM!
- Today they are unlikely to be related to either theology or lifestyle
- Nostalgic membership – need for a new category of “affiliate” member?

Reading Sources for Quakerism 101 Class

Main texts:

- ***Faith & practice : a book of Christian discipline [PYM F & P]*** of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1997
[<http://www.pym.org/faith-and-practice/>]
- ***Faith and Practice [NEYM F & P]*** (the “book of discipline”) of New England Yearly Meeting, 1985 [<http://neym.org/faith-practice/>]

Pendle Hill Pamphlets (PHP) may be in [our library](#) and are available from the [Pendle Hill bookshop](#).