GEORGE FOX AND THE SOCIETY OF FRIENDS (QUAKERS)

Prayer
Scripture: John 1:9-13
Hymn: 366 "Dear Lord and Father of Mankind"

The Society of Friends, often called Quakers, grew out of the most radical and extreme mystical tendencies found among Puritans. The Society of Friends made one of the clearest and strongest protests against the bitter religious division, the bloody wars of religion and persecution, and the cold, empty formalism that characterized the end of the Reformation and the beginning of the Modern Period. The tumult in England in the 1640s, 1650s and 1660s furnished the suitable atmosphere for the rise of a host of wild sects.

PROTESTANT RADICALS (1640-1660)

Among the chief extremists that appeared in troubled England were the Levellers, the Diggers, the Fifth Monarchy Men, and the Quakers.

The Levellers were a religio-political party that appeared in the seventh century. The name, Levellers, to which they objected, appeared about 1647. The leader of the movement was a Baptist, John Lilburne. He found his chief support in the parliamentary army. In 1647 he published his The Case of the Army Truly Stated. Lilburne was an ardent student of the Bible and of law and political theory. He held that there is a natural law to which all laws of men and the structure of the state and society should conform. This natural law is written in the hearts and consciences of men. Sovereignty resides in the nation at large. He urged the dissolution of Parliament and its reestablishment on democratic lines. Parliament should be elected by universal manhood suffrage. Parliament should have limited administrative and police powers. No one should sit in two successive Parliaments. Lilburne was vain, quarrelsome and stubborn but he attracted fanatical followers. Cromwell looked on Lilburne and his followers with suspicion and Lilburne was imprisoned in 1648. After the execution of Charles I (1649) the Levellers renewed their agitation and Lilburne and other leaders were again arrested. They sought to make contact with Charles II while he was in exile. They dwindled in importance and by the time of the Restoration (1660) they had almost disappeared.

The Diggers were another religio-political sect that protested the private ownership of land. The sect was founded in 1649 by Gerrard Winstanley who taught that Christian principles required a communistic mode of life with crown lands and common land cultivated with the spade. About fifty men began digging up waste land at St. George's Hill, Oatlands, Surrey, in April 1649. Winstanley expounded his principles in several pamphlets and nobles were horrified at the thought of their gardens being dug up by these wild sectarian's. The movement soon collapsed.
More dangerous and fanatical were the Fifth Monarchy Men, a radical sect with a millennial emphasis. Their goal was to bring the "Fifth Monarchy" (Daniel 2:44) which in God's plan was to follow the four great empires of Assyria, Persia, Greece, and Rome. During the Fifth Monarchy Christ would reign with His saints for a thousand years (Rev. 20:4). For a time they supported Cromwell in the belief that the Commonwealth was a preparation for the Fifth Monarchy. They turned against Cromwell when they became convinced that he was not going to bring the fulfillment of their hopes. The movement became divided in mind. One part urged the use of force to establish the Fifth Monarchy. Others wanted to wait quietly for the coming of Christ. When the more militant attempted an uprising aimed at assassinating the king, the leaders were beheaded and the sect died out.

The most important of these radical movements was the Quakers. They were the only group to survive in spite of bitter persecutions. For three hundred years they have exercised an influence on the world far beyond what their numbers would have led people to anticipate.

The Quakers were a small sect founded by George Fox (1624-1691) in the last days of the Reformation in England and that was considered a great threat to both church and kingdom in the early days of the Modern Period. The plea of Fox and his Quakers was for a vital, inner, mystical, spiritual religion that would express itself in a practical spiritual Christianity. It was a plea for the restoration of apostolic Christianity to its primitive freshness, vitality, and power. They openly denounced existing churches and their ministers as hypocritical, shallow and empty, cold and formal. Fox wanted to recover and recreate the universal Church of Christ.

FORERUNNERS OF THE QUAKERS

Many spiritual and reforming movements of church history were preparatory for and confluent with the Quakers. Most of Fox's ideas had appeared earlier. Fox's idea that it was possible for man to live a victorious life marked by reason and free will reminds many of Pelagius in the fifth century. Fox was strongly critical of the emptiness of infant baptism denounced by Anabaptists in the Reformation, but earlier in 1126 by Peter of Bruys. Peter of Bruys, founder of the Petrobrusians, was burned at St. Gilles in Southern France in 1126. Both Fox and Peter Bruys denied that worship was confined to church buildings. Worship did not have to be controlled by the church. Church buildings are unnecessary. The church is not a building of wood, stone and mortar. The church consists of the congregation of those who have faith in Christ. Both opposed the Mass and all forms of superstition and both denied that the priest could turn bread and wine into the body of Christ to be given to the people for the salvation of their souls.

Jacob Boehme, the Silesian mystic, had anticipated Fox in his contention that salvation is a vital, inner, moral and spiritual process that is wrought in the human soul by the immediate presence and activity of the living Christ. Both men were critical of the forensic conception of salvation as an external transaction.
Both were counted heretics for teaching that salvation was a spiritual and inner process. Boehme was persecuted by the Lutheran authorities but his writings spread to many lands and had great influence. It is doubtful that Fox with his very limited education knew anything about the German mystic, at least when he launched his movement. Educated friends and followers of Fox like Robert Barclay (1648-1690) and William Penn (1644-1718) were well acquainted with the works of Boehme. Boehme would be treasured and would have great influence on the Quaker movement as it matured.

One English movement that helped prepare the way for Fox and from which he drew many early followers was a movement known as "The Seekers." This movement had emerged from earlier spiritual reformers of England and the continent. Among those who greatly influenced the Seekers was the Dutch spiritual reformer, Dirck Coornhert (born 1522), who profoundly influenced Arminius who in turn had great influence in England. Coornhert's followers in Holland were known as "Collegiants". In England their counterparts were called "Seekers" or "Waiters" or "Scattered Flock". They exalted the Light of Christ in the soul, omitted the sacraments, had no ordained ministers, met for worship in silence, and spoke or prayed only as they felt moved by the Spirit. The Seekers believed that no true church had existed since the Antichrist became uppermost in the church. God in his own good time would ordain new Apostles or Prophets to found a new church. They did not think it right to try to hasten the process. Anabaptists bitterly opposed them on this point. An early Seeker, Bartholomew Legate (c. 1575-1612) was burnt at Smithfield for heresy. The Seekers were quite influential in the Commonwealth period.

Another movement from which Fox drew followers was "The Ranters." This was a fanatical, antinomian and pantheistic sect suspected of gross immoral practices and hated for revolutionary teachings. The Quakers suffered from misrepresentations arising from being confused with the wild Ranters. The Ranters were quite vocal in their attacks on contemporary churches.

The English Reformation has often been criticised for failing to produce great religious geniuses. Fox has been praised as one of the few and one of the greatest religious leaders that England has produced. Many of his contemporaries found his ideas most congenial. He proved an able missionary and organizer. Fox was considered most dangerous by the existing churches and was bitterly persecuted and often misrepresented.

GEORGE FOX, FOUNDER OF THE QUAKERS

George Fox was born in Fenny Drayton, a small hamlet in Leicestershire in the heart of the Midlands of England, in 1624. His father was a poor and humble weaver whom the neighbors called "Righteous Christer" (Christopher). His mother was Mary Laago that Fox claimed came from the stock of the martyrs. William Penn described her as "accomplished above most of her degree in the place where she lived." Fox described his parents as "honest and sufficient." Puritan preaching had left its mark on the home. It was characterized by pure and undefiled religion, sobriety,
simplicity, honesty, honor, sincerity, truth, reverence and respect. Fox declared that when he came to eleven years of age "I knew pureness and righteousness; for while a child I was taught how to walk to be kept pure." The English Bible was a powerful influence in the home. All of his life Fox would show great familiarity with the Bible.

As a lad Fox was apprenticed to a shoemaker.

When Fox was fourteen Nathaniel Stephens came to the parish church as curate. From later developments it has been guessed that the local church had a somewhat negative influence on the boy.

At the age of nineteen Fox experienced a great crisis. With a cousin named Bradford and another professed Christian, he attended a fair on business. His companions offered him a drink of beer. Being thirsty he drank a glass with them. They continued to drink healths and called for more drink. The two agreed that he who would not drink should have to pay for all. Fox was shocked and grieved that professors of religion should so conduct themselves. He paid and left them.

That night he could not sleep. He walked up and down and cried to the Lord. He was greatly troubled at the contrast between profession and practice of both young and old Christians. He felt he had become a stranger to all. He felt commanded by God to break off all fellowship. On the ninth of the seventh month of 1643 he left home to search for religious reality. For three years he travelled over England visiting churches and clergymen—the Church of England and all the dissenting groups. This pilgrimage led to greater spiritual depression. He found the clergy unworthy hirelings and hypocrites whose souls were hollow and empty. He described them as "empty, hollow casks" who could not speak to his condition. The Calvinistic preaching of the doctrine of predestination became most offensive—it seems that Nathaniel Stephens' preaching at Drayton had been of this type. His doubts and agony threatened his health and sanity.

In 1646 light broke into his darkness. He experienced an "opening"—a flash of insight that brought to clear consciousness a truth that had lain latent within him. He wrote:

When all my hopes in them (that is, in priests) and in all men were gone, so that I had nothing outwardly to help me, nor could I tell what to do, then, O, 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. Thus when God doth work, who shall hinder it? and this I knew experimentally. My desire after the Lord grew stronger, and zeal in the pure knowledge of God, and of Christ alone, without the help of any man, book, or writing. For though I read the Scriptures that spoke of Christ and of God, yet I knew Him not, but by revelation, as He who hath the key did open, and as the Father of Life drew me to His Son by His Spirit. Then the Lord gently led me along, and let me see His love, which was endless and eternal, surpassing all the knowledge that men have in the natural
state, or can obtain from history or books; and that love let me see myself, as I was without Him.

Fox's mind had found rest. The whole world was new. It had a new smell. God had given him the key to life. He now knew God and Christ. He knew the love of God. The soul has no limits when wrapt in the love of God. The goal is a perfect, completely redeemed and transformed life. Instead of imputed righteousness the goal of life is real righteousness and actual holiness of life, a state of character in which Christ is formed in a man so that he becomes a triumphant soul. Salvation is a victorious life. It is spiritual health and moral power. It produces a full-grown, holy, sinless life.

Fox declared that the Lord continued to open great things to him. He wrote in his Journal:

About the beginning of the year 1646, as I was going to Coventry, and approaching towards the gate, a consideration arose in me, how it was said, that 'all Christians are believers, both Protestants and Papists;' and the Lord opened to me that, if all were believers, then they were all born of God, and passed from death to life; and that none were true believers but such; and though others said they were believers, yet they were not. At another time, as I was walking in a field on a first-day morning, the Lord opened unto me, 'that being bred at Oxford or Cambridge was not enough to fit and qualify men to be ministers of Christ....But my relations were much troubled, that I would not go with them to hear the priest; for I would get into the orchard, or the fields, with my Bible, by myself. I asked them, did not the apostle say to believers, that 'they needed no man to teach them, but as the anointing teacheth them?' And though they knew this was Scripture, and that it was true, yet they were grieved because I could not be subject in this matter, to go to hear the priest with them. I saw that to be a true believer was another thing than they looked upon it to be....So neither them, nor any of the Dissenting people could I join with, but was a stranger to all, relying wholly upon the Lord Jesus Christ.

At another time it was opened in me, 'That God, who made the world, did not dwell in temples made with hands.' This at first seemed a strange word, because both priests and people used to call their temples or churches, dreadful places, holy ground, and the temples of God. But the Lord showed me clearly, that he did not dwell in these temples which men had commanded and set up, but in people's hearts: for both Stephen and the apostle Paul bore testimony, that he did not dwell in temples made with hands, not even in that which he had once commanded to be built, since he put an end to it; but that his people were his temple, and he dwelt in them. This opened in me as I walked in the fields to my relations' house. When I came there, they told me that Nathaniel Stevens, the priest, had been there, and told them 'he was afraid of me, for going after new lights.' I smiled in myself, knowing what the Lord had opened in me
concerning him and his brethren; but I told not my relations, who thought they saw beyond the priests, yet they went to hear them, and were grieved because I would not go also. But I brought them Scriptures, and told them, there was an anointing within man to teach him, and that the Lord would teach his people himself. I had also great openings concerning the things written in the Revelations; and when I spoke of them, the priests and professors would say, that was a sealed book, and would have kept me out of it; but I told them, Christ could open the seals, and that they were the nearest things to us; for the Epistles were written to the saints that lived in former ages, but the Revelations were written of things to come."

Fox considered most beautiful an opening in 1647, the year he opened his mission of preaching: "I saw that there was an ocean of light and love, which flowed over the ocean of darkness. In that I saw the infinite love of God."

THE BEGINNING OF FOX'S MINISTRY

Just when Fox began to preach in the usual sense of the term is not clear but seems to have been late in the year 1647. Earlier he had been quite busy engaging individuals in discussions of the things of God. He found many like himself who believed the fundamental doctrines of Christianity but who were dissatisfied with the teachings and practices of the day and who were longing for a higher and more spiritual life. It was a time when there were frequent meetings in homes to discuss points of doctrine. Fox eagerly joined in such discussions. The church meetings of the Independents (Congregationalists) and Baptists of those days afforded him a good opportunity to spread his views. It was common for the "priest" (we would call him "preacher"), after he had finished his sermon, to call for questions or to open the meeting for discussion. Any one in the audience was free to speak on any point or question that the sermon had aroused in his mind. On such occasions Fox urged freedom of opinion in things pertaining to God and called for tolerance and Christian charity. He denounced war. He spoke against the tendency to separate religion and morality. He spoke out against the cold and empty formality of the churches and against the hireling ministry and the hypocrisy in the churches. He denied that church buildings were holy ground and that they were necessary. The true church was the congregation of people—not the building of wood and stone. He called for Christians to be completely honest and truthful and condemned oaths. One of Fox's favorite texts was John 1:9. The "true light" that can enlighten every man has come into the world. God has put his "Inner Light" in every man. This inner light can guide every man to the Light of Life which is Christ and can lead him to spiritual truth. The Scriptures are a true Word of God but revelation is not confined to the Scriptures. The Spirit of God continues to speak and quicken men for service. Fox denounced the doctrine of predestination—that some are predestined to salvation and others to damnation. God wants all men to be saved and victorious living is possible for all men.
Fox worked at his trade of shoe-maker while taking every opportunity to spread his message. Fox felt a call of God to preach His Truth. He wrote, "I saw the harvest white and the seed of God lying thick in the ground, as ever did wheat that was sown outwardly... The Lord's power broke forth and I had great openings and prophecies." His early preaching was in Nottinghamshire, especially in Nottingham and Mansfield. He found an open door in the meetings of the Seekers and the Ranters. In a meeting in Mansfield he was moved to offer prayer and he wrote, "The Lord's power was so great that the house seemed to be shaken."

An early convert was Elizabeth Hooton whom he described as "spiritually-minded and solidly religious." She proved a great helper in spreading the message. Another prominent early convert was Amor Stoddard, a captain in Cromwell's army.

During the years 1647-49 Fox travelled over Nottinghamshire with Mansfield as his headquarters, making shoes and preaching. Occasionally he made journeys farther afield. The number of his followers grew rapidly. They called themselves "Children of the Light." The name, "Friends in the Truth," began to supplant the "Children of the Light." Often it was shortened to "Friends."

In 1649, the first year of the Commonwealth, he made what has been called his first public challenge to the old system. On Sunday morning he was on his way to a meeting of the Children of Light when he caught sight of the "steeplehouse" of the town. Instantly he heard a voice within say, "Thou must go cry against yonder great idol and against the worshippers therein." He went to the church where he said "the power of the Lord was mighty amongst us." The preacher took his text from II Peter 1:19 that we have the sure word of prophecy which is the Scriptures by which we should try all doctrines. Fox later wrote, "Now the Lord's power was so mighty upon me, and so strong in me, that I could not hold, but was made to cry out and say, 'Oh, no; it is not the Scriptures!' and I told them what it was, namely the Holy Spirit, by which the holy men of God gave forth the Scriptures, whereby opinions, religions, and judgments were to be tried; for it led into all truth, and so gave knowledge of all truth. The Jews had the Scriptures and yet resisted the Holy Ghost, and rejected Christ, and His apostles and took upon them to try their doctrines by the Scriptures; but they erred in judgment, and did not try them aright, because they tried without the Holy Ghost."

Fox had interrupted the sermon and this was illegal. His emotion and sense of divine impulsion had overcome him. Some Quakers declare this is the only time he ever interrupted a formal service. Fox was arrested and thrown in "a nasty, stinking prison." It was the first of many prison experiences. It was a short imprisonment but he converted his jailer. Fox described the effect of his interruption on the congregation: "The Lord's power so sounded in their ears that day, that they could not get it out of their ears for some time after, they were so reached by the Lord's power in the steeplehouse."
The next two years, 1650-52, Fox was very busy with his preaching until he was thrown into prison in Derby and kept for a whole year. He had gone to the "steeplehouse" in Derby. After the minister had finished his sermon and had called for discussion, Fox seized the opportunity to expound his ideas of spiritual religion. The preacher charged him with blasphemy. While in prison he converted the jailor and many who visited him in the jail.

This was the occasion when Fox and his followers were given the nickname "Quakers." Justice Bennett gave them the name "Quakers" when Fox at his trial exhorted the judge to "quake before the Lord." The judge had heard that it was common for the Children of Light to tremble with emotion during their meetings. The name caught on. Fox and his followers did not strongly resent it.

The magistrates wanted to get rid of Fox and came up with the idea that if they gave him permission to walk for a mile for exercise he would run away. Fox refused to take the walk unless the authorities would first measure off an exact mile. While in prison when Fox was not preaching to visitors, the other prisoners or the jailer, he spent his time writing.

When he was released from prison late in 1651 Fox made a preaching journey into Yorkshire in northern England. Among his converts was James Nayler, a former quartermaster in the Parliamentary army, who became a great preacher. Also he won Justice Durant Hotham, one of the foremost English disciples of Jacob Boehme. He also won a number of honorable women. At Preston Patrick he found a congregation of Seekers who had a chapel. They had discarded ordination and the sacraments as lacking authority and efficacy. They exalted silence over words. They were "waiters" and "seekers". Fox won them in 1652. They are considered the first Quaker community.

FOX'S GOAL

Fox did not intend to found a new sect. He believed he was an instrument in the hands of God for the restoration of apostolic Christianity to its primitive freshness, vitality and power. He believed he and his followers were the seed of the new and universal Church of Christ brought back at last from its wanderings in the wilderness and revived by the real presence of its divine Head, the Lord Jesus Christ. His goal was the recovery and recreation of the universal Church of Christ.