

QUAKER TESTIMONIES

Newcomers to the Society are often attracted by our values and practices, like peace work, simplicity of life and the pursuit of integrity. They are soon told that these are testimonies. They then find that there is no authoritative statement of what the testimonies are, only hallowed examples of their implications in particular circumstances. . . They are religious, ethical, collective, demanding, developing – and vague.

John Punshon, *Testimony and Tradition*, 1990

These testimonies reflect the corporate beliefs of the society, however much individual Quakers may interpret them differently according to their own light. They are not optional extras, but fruits that grow from the very tree of faith.

Harvey Gillman, *A Light that is Shining*, 1988



• The word 'testimony' comes from the Latin for 'witness' and is the story a witness tells in court. The distinctive testimonies of early Friends were not just verbal accounts but were lived-out parables which demonstrated the Christian message through human lives. For some Quakers, the testimonies may be seen as taking the role of the creeds in other areas of the Church.

• Because each Friend responds to the Inner Light in a way that relates to his/her own life experience, the response to the testimonies is an individual response. There is no standard expression of the testimonies; their form changes over time. This is illustrated by the indices of *Christian Faith and Practice* (1960) and *Quaker Faith and Practice* (1995):

1960 *Against*: betting & gambling; capital punishment, conscription; hat honour (removing the hat in the presence of a social 'superior'); oaths; slavery; times & seasons (church calendar); tithes
For: integrity in business; peace; penal reform; plain language; relief of suffering; social order (social justice); Sunday observance (18th & 19th centuries); temperance & moderation

1995 equality; marriage; oaths; peace; plainness of dress & speech; simplicity; times & seasons; tithes, truth

• Early Friends had a particular understanding of the Light which led them to their distinctive principles of church order, that involved a totally free ministry and the rejection of ordination and the sacraments. Local congregations developed a radically new method of community life by waiting on the guidance of the Light. 'Gospel order' was the phrase most often used to describe the many dimensions of this new ordering.

• Friends affirmed the **equality** of all persons regardless of gender, wealth, race or age. In 1674 George Fox stated:

And some men say, "Men must have the Power and superiority over the woman, because God says, 'The man must rule over his wife, and that man is not of woman, but the woman is of the man'" (Gen 3:16). Indeed, after man fell, that command was. But before man fell, there was no such command. For they were both meet-helpers. They were both to have dominion over all that God made. . . And as man and

woman are restored again, by Christ, up into the image of God, they both have dominion again in Righteousness and Holiness, and are helps-meet, as before they fell.

- The recognition of 'that of God' in each person leads to Friends' testimony against slavery and capital punishment.

- The complex social rules of the time supported a strict hierarchical system. Friends' refusal to remove their hats for their 'betters' and their insistence on the use of the lowly 'thee' and 'thou' resulted in many fines and jail sentences.

- The wearing of plain dress demonstrated their sense of equality with the poor in addition to Friends' desire for **simplicity**. Today, simplicity does not necessarily mean a life of voluntary poverty, but that we become good stewards of all that we have and that we become sensitive to the needs of others and ourselves. Living in a frenetic frenzy of busyness damages the soul, one's health and one's family life.

☛ In 1660, George Fox and other Friends wrote a declaration to Charles II that was the first Quaker public testimony **against war**:

We do utterly deny all outward wars and strife and fightings with outward weapons, for any end or under any pretence whatsoever. And this is our testimony to the whole world. . . The Spirit of Christ, by which we are guided, is not changeable, so as once to command us from a thing as evil and again to move unto it; and we do certainly know, and so testify to the world, that the Spirit of Christ, which leads us into Truth, will never move us to fight and war against any man with outward weapons, neither for the kingdom of Christ, not for the kingdoms of this world . . .

- Within the Society, early Friends used the expression 'the Lamb's War' to express the approach they took to peace. James Nayler described the only weapons of war as love, gentleness, faith, patience, purity, grace, virtue, temperance, self-denial, meekness and innocency.

☛ Underlying each of these testimonies are the values of **truth and integrity**. Because of their strong belief in always speaking the truth, many common terms were changed:

- Quakers recognized that the church is a community not a building, so they named their places of worship 'meetinghouses,' and called other places of worship 'steeplehouses.'

- Because the days of the week and months of the year are named for pagan gods, Quakers numbered them using, for example, 'first month' and 'fifth day' for January and Thursday. Friends substituted the following rhyme for the better known *Thirty days hath September*:

The fourth, eleventh, ninth and sixth,
Have thirty days to each affixed;
And every other thirty-one,
Except the second month alone,
Which has but twenty-eight in fine,
Till leap year gives it twenty-nine.

- Terms such as 'clerk' indicate that the Holy Spirit guides the Meeting for Business, not a human leader.

- When all one says is based on the truth, swearing on the Bible in court sets up a double standard, so Friends still affirm that they will tell the truth and do not place their hand on the Bible.

- Friends raised the everyday to the holy, and so all days were seen as equal with the consequent ignoring of Christmas and other Church 'holy' days.

☛ Today, many Friends feel that **sustainability** should be included among the testimonies, while others see it as a modern expression of simplicity, equality and peace.

☛ The testimonies are not intended to make us feel inadequate or guilt-driven. We are called to respond to the Light as we experience it, finding support in the local community of faith.

Anne Thomas, June 2000
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