

What Friends Believe

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'In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, and in all things charity'.

These words appeared for many years on the cover of *The Friend*, a Quaker weekly. We Friends generally are reticent about making statements regarding our beliefs, in the knowledge that each member of our denomination of the Christian church is likely to use different words to express their particular interpretation of the essentials, let alone the non-essentials.

Of course belief in God, in Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit is the bedrock on which The Religious Society of Friends (to give us our proper title) is founded.

From the very start in 1652 the Bible has been of central importance to us, coupled with our belief in direct communion with God. George Fox, the 'founder' of Quakerism, as a young man spent some years to no avail seeking preachers or ministers who could help him develop his understanding and interpretation of the scriptures. Then he 'heard a voice' which said: 'There is one, even Jesus Christ, that can speak to thy condition'. Fox said afterwards, 'When I heard it my heart did leap for joy'. He shared his revelation, that Christ would speak directly without an intermediary to those who sought him, with like-minded seekers. They began to call themselves 'Children of Light' and then 'Friends of Truth', which in due course became 'Religious Society of Friends'. 'Quakers' is a nickname dating from the early days.

Our distinctive form of worship became (and still is) the central and most important part of the movement, namely a meeting in which all that are gathered worship and pray together in quiet dependence on God, seeking his will and guidance. We believe that all present are equally likely to be chosen by the spirit to give a message, and usually a number participate vocally in the meeting. Every Friend has responsibility for receiving insight, interpreting it, and passing it on to the meeting if led by the spirit to do so.

It will be readily appreciated that this simple (and at its best deeply spiritual) form of worship requires no priest or clergyman to act as mediator between the Almighty and those who are worshipping.

Belief in Jesus Christ and the relevance of his teachings to everyday life is of special importance to us, and is the subject of a large proportion of Quaker writing down the years. Quakerism has been described by some as 'primitive Christianity', having leap-frogged back over the centuries to Christ as he was when on earth; ideally Quakerism is Christianity at its purest and simplest. We believe it is important to study the gospels and use them as the guidance by which to live.

There are some of our beliefs and practices with which the great majority of Christians would not be comfortable. We fully understand that, and would not dream of suggesting ours is the only true path to God, simply that it is the right one for us.

For instance, because we believe God and man have direct relationship and mutual correspondence at all times, we do not feel the need for the sacrament of the Eucharist.

We believe in spiritual baptism, yielding to the power of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, and thus water baptism seems to us unnecessary:- 'John indeed baptised with water, but ye shall be baptised with the Holy Spirit'.

Because we believe that a written credal statement limits the interpretation of God, and because with the passage of time such statements may no longer be as helpful or as relevant as when originally written, we do not have a written creed. Besides, the existence of a written creed can lead to an attitude of mind which brands as unbelief that questioning of accepted ideas without which progress is impossible.

We believe that the will of God is best discerned through corporate worship and corporate decision making. For us his authority comes from the spiritual leading of God through our ordinary members, rather than through an individual who is 'head' of our church. We have a set of questions which we ask ourselves regularly (the 'Queries') which include 'Do you gather together at meetings for worship in expectant waiting on God, prepared to share experiences and insights? Are these meetings occasions when by the help of the Holy Spirit you are enabled unitedly to worship God? Are you open to the promptings of the Spirit, and sensitive to one another's needs, whether your response be in silent worship or though the spoken word?'

We believe that there is 'that of God' or 'the Light of Christ' in every person which can be reached, (though sometimes not without difficulty!). George Fox put it thus: '...be obedient to the Lord God and go through the word and be valiant for truth upon earth ... be patterns, examples ... that your

life may preach among all sorts of people, and to them; then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in every one.'

We believe in simplicity. Our meeting-houses are quite plain and are not consecrated; Christ said 'Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst'. In our own lives we are not as spartan as early Friends, but we shun ostentation of any kind.

We believe in honest and integrity. Our 'Query' reads: 'Are you honest in your daily work and in all your personal relationships? Do you maintain integrity in your dealings with government authorities and other outward concerns?'

We believe in equality of men and women. Women have taken a full (and very valuable) part in the affairs of our 'church' for over 340 years.

We believe that all war is inconsistent with the spirit and teaching of Christ. We seek to live at peace with all people and to work towards reconciliation between individuals, groups and nations. On a personal level we ask ourselves 'Do you cherish an understanding and forgiving spirit? Do you avoid unkind gossip and the spreading of rumour? Do you avoid damaging the reputation of others? Do you cultivate an appreciation of each individual's worth?'

At our recent annual gathering, or Yearly Meeting, the public lecture was entitled 'Quakerism – a lifestyle based on Christian faith'. Our 'Query' reads: 'Is your way of life in keeping with the teaching of Jesus? Do you fulfil your part as a religious society and as individuals in promoting the cause of truth and in spreading the message of Christ throughout the world?' Friends are painfully aware that we fall very far short of what God would wish, but we are comforted by the promise of forgiveness.

The end of our General Christian Counsel reads: 'Finally, dear Friends, let your whole life be worthy of a disciple of Christ, living in a right relationship with God and your neighbour.'

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