

Revolutionary Roots of Quakerism: A Workshop on 17th Century Friends

Session #1 - The World Turned Upside Down (background & beginnings)

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 1960's in the U.S. The country was wracked by 3 civil wars between 1642 and 1651. After King Charles I was tried and executed in 1649, England entered its only period as a republic, rather than a monarchy.

There were many different small religious sects that sprang up at this time. A few of these survived (as Friends did) but most disappeared. Son of a weaver, George Fox was born in 1624 in a strongly Puritan village about a hundred miles north of London. He was apprenticed to a sheep owner and carpenter. He went through a period of seeking and spiritual turmoil at age 18. He began public preaching at age 23 and gathered a handful of followers. An older woman, Elizabeth Hooten, is often considered Fox's first collaborator in building a new religious movement.

There was an informal movement in the late 1640's and early 1650's in Northern England known as the [Westmorland Seekers](#). They rejected many of the structures of the church at the time and were looking for a rebirth of a more vital spirituality. In 1652, Fox had a vision looking northward from the top of a steep hill called Pendle Hill of a "great people to be gathered." He continued traveling northward to the area where the Seekers held their gatherings. On June 13, 1652, he preached extemporaneously for three hours to an outdoor gathering of a thousand members of this group in a windy open field called Firbank Fell. Many leaders of the Seekers became "convinced" by the spiritual power of Fox's message, and the Quaker movement was born.

Quakers sent out preachers (many of whom were women), known as "The Valiant Sixty," throughout the British Isles, as well as to the Continent and the American colonies. About 3000 Friends suffered imprisonment, with hundreds dying due to very unsanitary conditions, including several of the movement's most outstanding leaders. Four were executed in Massachusetts Colony. The movement grew rapidly from 1652 through the Act of Toleration in 1689, when Friends in England numbered roughly 1% of the population (50,000 people).

Characteristics of the early Quaker movement: They...

- Were "evangelical" - i.e., they actively recruited others into their movement, interrupting church services, preaching in market places, etc. (and were very critical of most other Christian groups at the time)
- Considered themselves to be returning to a form of primitive form of Christianity as practiced in the age of the apostles (the time of James, Paul, Phoebe, etc. during the 1st century after Jesus' birth)
- Rejected programmed worship, outward sacraments, and paid clergy
- Insisted on the rightness of women playing an active leadership role in the new movement, rejecting arguments that it was wrong for women to preach or participate in church decision-making. Roughly 12 of the key first leaders known as the "Valiant Sixty" were women. Many of these women wrote extensive tracts.

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. Why do you think Friends grew so quickly and won so many adherents, in spite of terrible persecution?
4. Why do you think established church leaders (both Puritans and Anglicans) were so enraged and threatened by the Quaker message?
5. How do you think Friends today are or are not practicing the same kind of religion as 1st generation Quakers?

Further reading:

Journal of George Fox: [Testimony of Margaret \(Fell\) Fox concerning her late husband George Fox...](#)

Journal of George Fox, [Chap 6: A New Era Begins 1651-52](#) (on Pendle Hill vision & Firbank Fell)

[NEYM Interim Faith & Practice](#) pp.49-51

John Punshon, *Portrait in Grey: A Short History of the Quakers*

Session #2 - **This I Knew Experimentally** (ideas about God & the Bible)

Early Friends wrote thousands of tracts and their ideas were not systematic. It is possible to read a number of different interpretations into their writings so Friends today are able find writings that agree with their own very different faith stances! It seems clear to me, however, that early Friends held the following beliefs:

Direct revelation. Each person has access to direct guidance from God in the present time.

“The Seed, or Grace of God, is small in its first Appearance, even as the Morning Light; but as it is given Heed to, and obeyed, it will increase in Brightness, till it shine in the Soul, like the Sun in the Firmament at its Noon-day Height.” - Elizabeth Bathurst, 1655-1685

“Art thou in darkness? mind it not, for if thou do it will fill thee more, but stand still and act not, and wait in patience till light arise out of darkness to lead thee.” - James Nayler, 1616-1660

“Sweet is this state, though low: for in it I receive my daily bread, which is given of the Lord; for I cannot live to him, but as he breathe the breath of life upon me every moment.” - Mary Penington, 1623-1682

“I declared Truth amongst them, and directed them to the light of Christ in them; testifying unto them that God was come to teach His people Himself, whether they would hear or forbear.

I directed the people to their inward Teacher, Christ Jesus, who would turn them from darkness to the light.

Therefore I exhorted the people to come off all these things, and directed them to the spirit and grace of God in themselves, and to the light of Jesus in their own hearts, that they might come to know Christ, their free Teacher, to bring them salvation, and to open the Scriptures to them. - George Fox's *Journal*

“The testimony of the Spirit is that alone by which the true knowledge of God hath been, is, and can be only revealed.” - Robert Barclay *Apology for the True Christian Divinity*

Role of the Bible. Although early Friends considered the Bible is a critical source of religious truth, they did not consider it higher than the kind of inward knowledge described above. In fact they believed it was impossible to understand the meaning of biblical passages unless one was living in the “life and power” in which the scriptures were originally given forth. They believed, as a result, that their religious opponents misunderstood important parts of the Bible because they were **not** living in this same direct, living relationship with God in their own day.

See: Jack Smith (Ohio YM Conservative) “The Scripture as Understood & Used by Conservative Friends”, talk at QuakerSpring 2007 <http://quakerspring.org/about/resources/other-documents/>

“I told them the gospel was the power of God, which was preached before Matthew, Mark, Luke and John or any of them were printed or written; and it was preached to every creature (of which a great part might never see or hear of those four books), so that every creature was to obey the power of God; for Christ, the spiritual Man, would judge the world according to the gospel, that is, according to His invisible power. When they heard this, they could not gainsay, for the truth came over them. I directed them to their teacher, the Grace of God, and shewed them the sufficiency of it, which would teach them how to live, and what to deny; and being obeyed, would bring them salvation. So to that grace I recommended them, and left them.” - George Fox's *Journal*

Universal priesthood. Everyone has access to this experience. It is not restricted to an ordained priesthood or to those who receive formal religious training. They felt that the “Seed” (inward presence of God) acted even in the lives of those like Muslims or Native Americans who had no formal knowledge about Christ or the Bible.

“Oh you Rulers & Judges, do you think to overcome us by keeping [our teachers and ring leaders] in prison? Nay, Christ is our teacher, and he cannot be removed into a corner... The Lord does not speak to us in an unknown tongue, but in our own language do we hear him perfectly, whose voice is better than life... We cannot own the teaching that is of this world, but that which cometh immediately from God, and that is pure and refresheth the soul...and it causeth us to meet together, to worship the Lord as we ought to do.”

- Esther Biddle *The Trumpet of the Lord Sounded Forth unto These Three Nations*, 1662

See account of Mary Fisher's trip to Sultan <http://www.quakersintheworld.org/quakers-in-action/187>

Language. Early Friends referred to this direct experiential relationship with God using a variety of different terms: Inward Christ, Inward Light (though not “Inner Light”), The Seed, and “leadings”.

The word Christ is Greek for "messiah" or savior. Early Quakers believed that the living Christ was one with God from the beginning of time and still present in their midst in the present - teaching, healing, transforming, liberating, and leading the Quaker community. They made no distinction between their present-time inward relationship with Christ and the historical Jesus. Many Friends today use the word Christ to refer to God's spirit at work in their lives, but do **not** see this as identical with Jesus.

Friends found these concepts in the Bible, espec. the Gospel of John (often called the “Quaker Gospel”):
“In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it...The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.”
(John 1)

The Comforter or Holy Spirit that God promised to send after Jesus' death.

"I shall always be with you, even to the end of time."

“Emmanuel” (“God-with-us”)

“living water” (John 4:10)

“the Light of the World”

“true vine” (John 15).

The “Offices of Christ”. Friends experienced God as touching and shaping their lives in a number of distinct ways. They had an odd-sounding (to us) way of referring to this: namely, the “offices of Christ”. These “offices” (or roles) included king, prophet, counselor, comforter, shepherd, redeemer, mediator, reconciler, teacher, etc. These are all ways of talking about how God works in our lives in our own day (i.e. not just through redemptive acts of God as these played out through Jesus’ birth, death and resurrection). The point was that they believed that God spoke to them, led them, upheld them, guided them, healed them, lifted them up when they were discouraged, reprov'd them when they got off track, etc.

See: Sandra Cronk (founder of the "School of the Spirit"), *Gospel Order: A Quaker Understanding of the Faithful Quaker Community*, Pendle Hill Pamphlet #297, 1991, pp.17-20 on the “offices of Christ”)

Reflection questions:

1. When (if ever) have you experienced God touching you or speaking to you directly? Was this a comforting experience or a disturbing one?
2. What verbs would you use to describe your experience of God/The Spirit touching or influencing your life?
3. In your experience of other faith communities besides Friends, do you feel this idea of the Inward Christ is similar to or different from the ideas about God at the heart of other faiths?
4. If this immediate relationship with God is at the heart of all Quaker practice (e.g. Mtg for Worship, Mtg for Business, Testimonies), do you see this as being true in your experience of Quaker practice in your local meeting? In your yearly meeting?

Further reading: Robert Barclay, *Apology for the True Christian Divinity* (1676): 2nd & 3rd propositions (on immediate revelation and on scripture)

Samuel Caldwell, *The Inward Light: “How Quakerism Unites Universalism & Christianity”*. (Phila.YM Relig. Ed. Comm., 1997) (http://www.angelfire.com/dc/universalism/Inward_Light.html)

Thomas Kelly: *A Testament of Devotion* (section on Inward Light).

Colin Saxton “[Christ Has Come to Teach Us Himself](#)” (QuakerSpeak interview)

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Session #3 - **The Silent Assemblies of God's People** (a whole new form of worship)

How did early Friends worship? How did this form of worship evolve? Several things are clear:

- Many of their worship gatherings involved lots of silent waiting.
- They believed strongly that any spoken message or vocal prayer must be spontaneous and guided by God's spirit rather than prepared in advance or part of a fixed liturgy.
- They rejected outward rituals like communion, water baptism, and the singing of psalms, seeing communion and baptism as inward spiritual experiences rather than ceremonies. (Some have suggested, however, that there was spontaneous singing by individuals during worship.)
- The ability to provide effective preaching and teaching in worship was based on inward gifts rather than formal religious training at a university or being formally ordained by ecclesiastical authority.

The early Quaker theologian Robert Barclay says that he was won over to the Friends movement primarily by the power of its worship. He writes:

"I myself... who not by strength of arguments, or by a particular disquisition of each doctrine, and convincement of my understanding thereby, came to receive and bear witness of the truth, but by being secretly reached by this life; for when I came into the silent assemblies of God's people, I felt a secret power among them, which touched my heart, and as I gave way unto it, I found the evil weakening in me and the good raised up, and so I became thus knit and united unto them, hungering more and more after the increase of this power and life, whereby I might feel myself perfectly redeemed."

"The first that enters into the place of your meeting...turn in thy mind to the light, and wait upon God singly, as if none were present but the Lord; and here thou art strong. Then the next that comes in, let them in simplicity of heart sit down and turn in to the same light, and wait in the spirit; and so all the rest coming in, in the fear of the Lord, sit down in pure stillness and silence of all flesh, and wait in the light.... Those who are brought to a pure still waiting upon God in the spirit, are come nearer to the Lord than words are; for God is a spirit, and in the spirit is he worshiped.... In such a meeting there will be an unwillingness to part asunder, being ready to say in yourselves, it is good to be here; and this is the end of all words and writings—to bring people to the eternal living Word." - Alexander Parker, 1660

"And this is the manner of their worship. They are to wait upon the Lord, to meet in the silence of the flesh, and to watch for the stirring of his life, and the breakings forth of his power amongst them. And in the breakings forth of that power they may pray, speak, exhort, rebuke, sing, or mourn, and so on, according as the spirit teaches, requires, and gives utterance."

- Isaac Penington 1681

"The Lord of Heaven and earth we found to be near at hand, and, as we waited upon him in pure silence, our minds out of all things, his heavenly presence appeared in our assemblies, when there was no language, tongue nor speech from any creature. The Kingdom of Heaven did gather us and catch us all, as in a net, and his heavenly power at one time drew many hundreds to land. We came to know a place to stand in and what to wait in; and the Lord appeared daily to us, to our astonishment, amazement and great admiration, insomuch that we often said one unto another with great joy of heart: 'What, is the Kingdom of God come to be with men? And will he take up his tabernacle among the sons of men, as he did of old? Shall we...have this honour of glory communicated amongst us, which were but men of small parts and of little abilities?' And from that day forward, our hearts were knit unto the Lord and one unto another in true and fervent love, in the covenant of Life with God; and that was a strong obligation or bond upon all our spirits, which united us one unto another. We met together in the unity of the Spirit, and of the bond of peace, treading down under our feet all reasoning about religion. And holy resolutions were kindled in our hearts as a fire which the Life kindled in us to serve the Lord...and mightily did the Word of God grow amongst us."

— Francis Howgill (one of the Westmoreland Seekers), 1663

Early Friends made a distinction between two forms of worship:

1. **Threshing Meetings.** These consisted in public preaching, often at great length, by Friends who were recognized as having a special gift of prophetic vocal ministry. These sermons (which could last an hour or more) were often delivered in public places such as fairs or markets. They delivered entirely spontaneously without pre-planning, believing that God (or the inward motion of Christ) would provide the words needed. Although the person delivering such a spoken message would usually be accompanied by other Friends, the purpose of this kind of worship was largely to carry the truth that Friends had discovered to those not yet part of the Quaker movement.
2. **Retired Meetings.** These gatherings were primarily (although not exclusively) for those who had already become “convinced” of the truth of the Quaker message. They might be held in homes or barns in public buildings such as pubs. It seems likely from quotes such as Parker above that Friends gathered in silence and took some period of time to allow the meeting to become “gathered” before anyone felt moved to speak. Messages still may have been considerably longer than what we are accustomed to today. There is abundant evidence, however, that Friends felt it was important that messages be limited in simplicity to what the leading of the Spirit, and that there was a danger of “running beyond one’s Guide” – i.e. speaking one’s own thoughts or ideas rather than what the Inward Teacher required to be spoken.

Reflection questions:

1. Do Alexander Parker’s words (“sit down in pure stillness...”) resonate with your own experience of turning into a deeper place during the beginning of worship and helping it to become “gathered”?
2. How often do you feel you have experienced deeply "gathered worship" in your meeting? In meetings elsewhere?
3. Have you experienced a similar sense of the tangible presence of God in settings other than Meeting for Worship 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 your meeting as being led or directed by the Living Spirit?
5. Do you ever feel powerfully "called by the Spirit" to speak? How did you respond?

Further Reading: “Excerpts from various YM disciplines on the subject of Spirit-led Vocal Ministry”

(http://www.inwardlight.org/excerpts_on_vocal_ministry.html)

Peter Blood “[Biblical Roots of Quaker Worship](#)” (about Robert Barclay’s 11th Proposition concerning Worship)

(http://www.inwardlight.org/biblical_roots_of_quaker_worship.html)

“[Nurturing Gospel Ministry](#)” a minute summarizing an evening of reflection at QuakerSpring 2008

Early Friends did not divide up “the testimonies” as is often done today. Nonetheless, all early Friends lived a way of life that was radically separated from non-Friends around them, leading initially to severe persecution.

Integrity. The most radical differences between Friends’ lifestyle and non-Friends – and what led them to being persecuted – primarily fall under what we refer to today as the Testimony on Integrity. [John 12:35-6](#)

“Be patterns, be examples in all countries, places, islands, nations wherever you come; that your carriage and 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 everyone; whereby in them you may be a blessing, and make the witness of God in them to bless you.” - Statement of 1656, from *The Works of George Fox* (1831)

Friends strongly emphasized the necessity of living in a manner that was radically in keeping with their beliefs.

Speaking truth was extremely important. The admonitions to avoid oaths ([Matthew 5:33-37](#)) got them in trouble when they were asked to either swear that they did not support the king or (later) to support the king. Friends like Fox were often administered such loyalty oaths at their release, landing them right back in prison again. The Letter of James also talks about limiting what we say to what is really essential.

Other applications:

- They believed it was wrong to use “plural address” to refer to persons of higher social status (i.e. addressing people with “ye” or “you” rather than “thou” and “thee”. They considered this a form of lying.
- They insisted on holding their worship services in public rather than in secret (as some dissenting groups did), which often led to imprisonment.
- They felt it was wrong to pay tithes to support hired clergy they rejected. Their property was often seized.
- They charged fixed prices for goods rather than reaching a price via bargaining (or “haggling”).
- Friends (and also often Puritans) felt it was wrong to use the names of pagan gods that they didn’t believe in to refer to days of the week and of the month.
- They also shared with Puritans a rejection of church holidays such as Christmas and Easter which were not specifically mentioned in scripture. They did, however, honor the Sabbath as a day set aside for rest.

Reflection Questions

- **Do you at times push the limits at times of what is really honest on your income taxes?**
- **Does your meeting discuss issues of personal ethics together?**
- **Would you ever tell a friend you disagree with something s/he has done that is dishonest or unethical?**
- **Is being scrupulously honest as important today as it was in the 17th century?**
- **Where might you not be strictly committed to truth-telling (e.g. hiding runaway slaves, Anne Frank)?**
- **Do you think Friends still have a public reputation for honesty?**

Thousands of Friends were sent to prison for keeping to their beliefs on issues like loyalty oaths and holding non-Church of England services in public. Many, perhaps hundreds, died in prison. Others including George Fox had their lives shortened by repeated imprisonment in very unhealthy jails.

Four Friends were hung on Boston Common for returning to Boston and preaching what they believed to be truth in public in spite of being banished by the Puritan government. Many lost their property for refusal to pay tithes.

- **Do you think that Friends today are being called to radical faithfulness around issues like climate and race?**
- **Why do you think few Friends have faced imprisonment or even death for their beliefs since the 17th century?**
- **Are there any issues that are so important to you that you would risk imprisonment or even death?**

Simplicity. Friends believed it was important to discern if recreation, other activities, clothing, other possessions, etc. get in the way of being able to be connected to God and hear God's voice in our hearts. Margaret Fell Fox wrote that she felt the objection to brightly colored clothing was a "silly gospel". cf. [Matthew 6:19-34](#).

Friends shared Puritans' rejection of the use of musical instruments, plays, and dancing as well as participating in holidays like Christmas and Easter. (They did not, however, object to honoring the sabbath.)

- Why do you think early Friends were so concerned about being separated from the world around issues like holidays like Christmas, instrumental music, dress, plays, dancing?
- Can you think of modern day relevant ways we might learn from 17th century Friends' concerns about these kinds of activities? (e.g. violent films, excessive time on the internet, social media, having "sabbath time")

Peace. Many early Friends had fought for Oliver Cromwell in the English Civil War. Friends made several public declarations in 1660 rejecting outward fighting as a way of distinguishing themselves from the Fifth Monarchist religious insurrection (the attempt to fight against the restoration of King Charles II). However it was not uncommon for Friends to enlist in the army or navy even after these declarations. [1660 Declaration to King Charles II](#) Note: Margaret penned an earlier declaration on this subject six months before Fox did so. See also: [Barclay on Jesus' teachings re violence](#).

Early Friends writings about war referred more often to the passages in the Letter of James about how outward fighting springs from greed ("lust for things") than the passages in the Sermon on the Mount about turning the other cheek. (cf. John Woolman's later teaching that the "seeds of war" being in our possessions.)

Equality. Friends were centuries ahead of their time in encouraging women to take active leadership in the faith community. They not only allowed women to preach but wrote many tracts justifying this. First Friends also took a strong stand against class oppression, insisting that God could speak as readily through unschooled working people as through those from the upper classes who received formal theological training in a university.

On the other hand, many Friends in the American colonies apparently owned slaves, including William Penn. The [1688 Germantown Statement](#) is considered perhaps the first official statement from a religious group stating principled objection to slavery as being inconsistent with Christianity.

Although some Quakers were deeply involved in antislavery work in the 19th century, this kind of political activity was very controversial among Friends. Only a very small percentage of US Friends were involved in the Underground Railroad or political work against slavery. Friends of African descent were required to sit in a separate seating area in the back or in the balcony in many meetinghouses.

- How do you think Friends were able to be so enlightened on the God working through women and those of lower classes but so blind to the contradiction between slaveholding and Quaker beliefs?
- How does the early Quaker belief in the universal access of all people to the inward light of Christ inform our own reflections and work today around gender, race, class, sexual orientation?

Unity with Nature. Both George Fox and John Woolman were very aware of the close connection between life in the spirit and the natural world. Both also had very friendly respectful interactions with Native Americans.

"Now I was come up in spirit through the flaming sword into the paradise of God. All things were new, and all the creation gave another smell unto me than before, beyond what words can utter." - George Fox, 1648

"To know the secrets of nature is to know the works of God; and to know the works of God within the creation is to know God himself, for God dwells in every visible work or body." Gerrard Winstanley, leader of the Digger community, later a Quaker, 1652

Session #6: Constructing “Gospel Order” as a Way of Living with Each Other

“Gospel Order” is an old-fashioned Quaker term for the radical transformation and re-ordering of lives and relationships that results from the relationship between the Quaker community and the Living God. Consistent with Matthew 18, gospel order attempts to preserve loving relationships within the faith community while moving towards a shared understanding of God’s will.

- “Order” refers to the many concrete changes that are made in lives and relationships - not just an inward feeling but a way of life expressed in virtually every area of living.
- “Gospel” refers not to a creed or dogma, but to a real living relationship with God. The central focus is not right beliefs or right actions but life and power in God.

As Fox says: “Many have had the letter but lost the life, the notion but lost the possession, the profession but lost the substance, Christ Jesus.” This is the “true sap” which Jesus describes so vividly in [John 15](#) (which, significantly, is also the chapter from which “Friends” took their name for themselves.) Fox: “Therefore take heed of the world’s fashions, lest ye be moulded up into their spirit, and that will bring you to slight truth, and lift up the wrong eye, and wrong mind, and wrong spirit, and hurt and blind the pure eye, and pure mind, and quench the holy spirit.”

Further reading:

Sondra Cronk “Gospel Order: A Quaker Understanding of Faithful Church Community” [Pendle Hill Pamphlet #297](#). (provides wonderful examples of how issues are addressed & resolved in a traditional Quaker meeting community)

Lloyd Lee Wilson, *Essays on the Quaker Vision of Gospel Order*. [order from FGC Books](#)

In the late 1660’s George Fox began devoting more and more time to setting up monthly, quarterly and yearly meetings across Britain, on the Continent, and in the American colonies. There were a number of reasons he felt called to do this:

Sufferings. Friends experienced imprisonment for following their faith up until the late 1680’s when King James II began to end religious persecution (presumably to protect his fellow Catholics). In some cases an entire meeting might be in prison. Others lost property because of refusal to pay tithes to support the “hireling priesthood”.

There was no formal membership in the 17th century. Meetings drew up lists of those needing support and this evolved much later into formal membership. The representative meeting of London Yearly Meeting is still known as “Meeting for Sufferings”.

Support for Ministers. Friends felt the need to provide spiritual oversight and support for those carrying out public ministry, including providing elders to accompany those called to journey to spread the Friends message and provision for spouses or families who stayed behind.

Second Day Morning Meeting: This group may have begun as an informal gathering of those who felt a special calling or gift to vocal ministry on Second Day (i.e. Monday) in London to share with each other their experiences of worship the previous day (or perhaps week) - presumably involving many of those identified as part of the Valiant Sixty. It later came to play a much more institutional role and actually had a role of approving or censoring proposed publications by Friends. It was roundly criticized by some Friends who felt this was a usurpation of power by some individuals over other Friends.

Eventually, those who had a recognized gift of vocal ministry began to meet regularly in each meeting with those who were recognized as having a gift for nurturing spiritual gifts (“elders”). Meetings of Ministers & Elders were held on the monthly, quarterly & YM level. These are the predecessor of today’s Ministry & Worship Committees.

“Eldership: Nurturing Others’ Spiritual Gifts” - a lot of different resources on this subject collected & posted by Peter on his website at <http://www.inwardlight.org/eldership.html>

Clarity of Message. Friends strongly emphasized inward leading (“experimental” knowledge). Many argued that no one else should judge others’ leadings. But some leadings endangered the safety of the entire Quaker community, or at the minimum risked confusing others’ about the Quaker message.

Several events led many Friends to see a strong need for corporate testing of individual Friends' leadings:

- In 1656 a leading Friend, James Nayler, entered Bristol re-enacting Christ's entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. He narrowly escaped the death sentence in his blasphemy trial before Parliament.
- A number of Friends took part in the abortive Fifth Monarchist uprising against King Charles II in 1661.
- Hat Controversy (John Perrot & others) 1661-early 1670s – Friends refused to take off their hats before others as a form of idolatry. But it became a practice of men to remove their hats when someone offered vocal prayer as a sign of respect for God. Others felt this was a form of programming of worship.

Further reading “Tradition vs. Innovation: The Hat, Wilkinson-Story, and Keithite Controversies” in *Quaker Studies*, 8:1. (<http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1004&context=quakerstudies>) (discusses the controversy between original emphasis on individual leading and desire of many to provide corporate limits on individual leading. [Matthew 18:15-22](#))

Corporate Discernment. Fox wanted a form of durable structure for the passionate movement that he helped launch to help it endure over the long run. Traditionally decision-making has been made in one of two ways:

- Hierarchical (e.g. Catholic Church: pope, archbishop, bishop, parish priest)
- democratic – votes taken within the local congregation, where autonomy largely rests (Congregational, Methodist, Baptist, etc.)

Our form of “church government” as embodied especially in the practice we call “meeting for business” represents a radical departure from the above two methods of reaching decisions. It represents the 2nd great innovation of 17th century Quakerism along with unprogrammed “waiting” worship. Meeting for worship provides a practical methodology facilitating God's direct immediate guidance over a gathering for worship. Discernment of God's will for the meeting body through a clerk who discerns the sense of the meeting arising from a gathered meeting for business is a practical way that God can provide similar direct guidance over church decisions via inward leading in the hearts of Friends.

Women's & Men's Meetings. Separate meetings for business were set up in each meeting for women and men. This was at least as revolutionary as allowing women to preach openly. Women were “recorded” (officially recognized) as having a gift of vocal ministry and also served as elders of the meeting.

There was controversy over the fact that women's meetings had a primary role in discerning the rightness of couples marrying. Women's meetings probably did not consider all the same items as the men's meetings, but they provided huge opportunities for women to develop and exercise leadership skills which led them women Quakers to play active roles in many social movements in the 19th century.

Further reading: “Quaker View of Women” (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quaker_views_on_women) describes significance of holding separate women's meetings for business for first 250 years of Quakerism.

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 monthly? In your yearly meeting?
2. What do you see as some of the major roadblocks to this form of decision-making working as it is intended? What do you see as possible barriers in yourself to your own fruitful and prayerful participation in this process?
3. 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?
4. What are the pros and cons of officially recognizing gifts by the meeting?
5. Friends in the 20th century emphasized an individualistic vision of faith as opposed to a communal or “corporate” vision. Was this a good thing or a bad thing? How much was it the result of Friends being influenced by “the world” (i.e., values permeating the surrounding culture)

These handouts were created by Peter Blood-Patterson in 2011. For more info go to www.inwardlight.org