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### Quakerism And The Family: In The Past And Present

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# **Quakerism And the Family In the Past And Present**

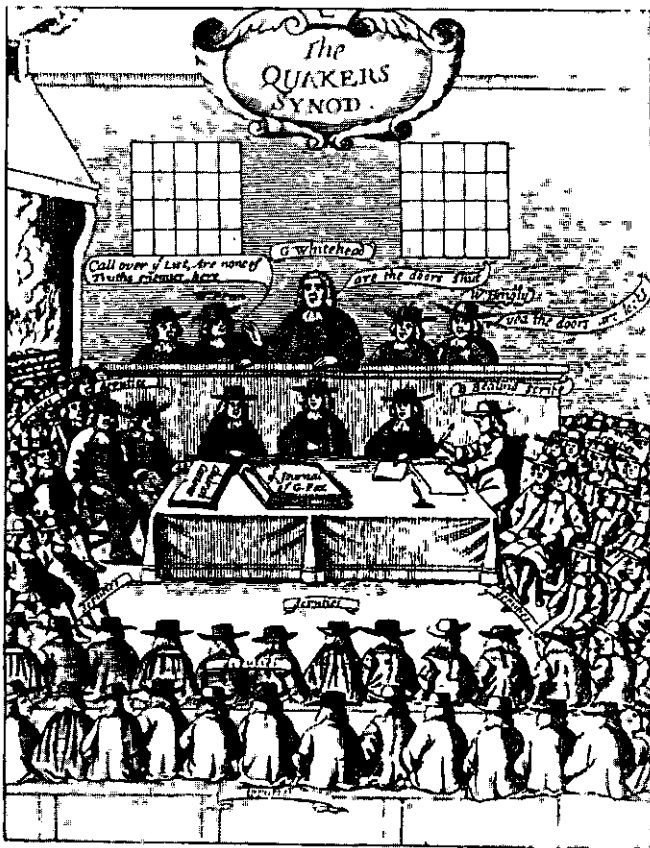
*by J. William Frost*

**T**he Society of Friends which existed from 1700 until 1900 had characteristics which would be repellent to most modern Quakers. First of all, there was a copious dose of authoritarianism, not only in the practices within the meeting, but in the definition of the faith. Quakers endorsed toleration for all religions in civil society, but within the meeting there was only one standard of proof. Quakers did not just seek for the Truth—they found it and made infallible pronouncements concerning it. The authority of the Quaker minister was certainly equal to that of the priest in the Roman Catholic Church; the minister preached God's will directly. The height given to the ministers' and elders' gallery was a symbol of their importance and power within the meeting. James Jenkins, an English Friend who lived in the early 19th century, complained that when any subject occasioned disagreement in a meeting for business, ministering Friends might, in a meeting for worship, preach down opposition. Since the ministering Friends claimed direct inspiration from the Holy Spirit for what they said, the intimidation of lay people was frequent.

Ministers, elders, and overseers—the most devout and generally the most conservative members—ran the meeting. Non-ministers were not encouraged to preach in meeting for worship, and back benchers were not to speak loudly, if at all, in meetings for business. Friends did not regard the power of the meeting over their lives as dictatorial, since to a large extent power rested upon voluntary consent. Quakers had discovered Truth in the 1650's, and it was the responsibility of those who believed to preserve that Truth in undiluted form, primarily by the enforcement of the discipline in meetings for business, and by family visits by ministers and elders. In a family visit, a group of weighty Friends would come to a family,

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From "Quaker Reflections to Light the Future," published by Religious Education Committee, Friends General Conference.

sit silently for a while, and then communicate anything they had to say. The communication could be quite personal and upon any area in which the minister thought the family was deviating from the practice of the Truth. Speaking back to elders was not encouraged. Dissent on any tenet of the faith which led to action was greeted with discipline. If the miscreant did not recant, he or she would be disowned.

To the first generation of Quakers in England, the family was of little importance. When Margaret Fell wrote to a traveling minister complaining that he should not have married, the man justified his action as a response to the direct command of God, and insisted that he wed the woman "contrary to my will." On another occasion, when a traveling minister and a wife had a child, they surrendered the child to the care of others, so that their work for the propagation of the faith would not suffer. In spite of some famous exhortations by Fox on education, persecution in England and the unsettled conditions in England and Pennsylvania meant that formal education remained a subordinate interest. Exhortations to parents on the care of children did not become an integral part of epistles from London Yearly Meeting until after toleration was effectually granted, following

the Glorious Revolution of 1688. Professor Richard Vann has commented upon the rarity of pamphlets in the 17th century which specifically are addressed to children, or to issues concerning the family. The Society of Friends discovered the importance of the family when proselytization of outsiders no longer paid certain dividends. This occurred late in the 17th century, and from 1700 until the 20th century the main way to become a Friend was to be born a Friend. The family became the primary method of insuring the survival of the faith. And Quakers easily fell into the habit of assuming that all children of Friends, by some mysterious process, were destined to develop into religious adults. The result was birthright membership, which meant that a child should grow up in Grace, and never remember a time when she or he was not a Quaker. Birthright membership assumed that the child would be raised under a system of Quaker practices. From infancy the child was to use plain speech, wear plain garb, and associate almost exclusively with other Friends.

Parental obligation was heavy; parents had to insure that the child remain susceptible to the experience of the Inner Light. This responsibility could not be fulfilled if parents were either too strict or too lenient. Most important, Friends believed that more was accomplished by example than exhortation. Parents were to be paragons of Christian life, keeping calm under provocation, maintaining self-discipline, and acting under the continuing guidance of the Divine and Holy Light. Surviving letters from the 18th and early 19th century contain many complaints about parents overindulging youths, but rarely did anyone discuss overseverity of parents. Quaker education was basically indoctrination. So was U.S. education. Before the Revolution, children in Quaker and non-Quaker schools were taught religious truths and social obedience. The main change occasioned by the American Revolution was to add democratic and republican dogmas to the value system implanted by the schools. Friends wanted their children to go to schools which would inculcate Quaker principles. If no Quaker schoolmaster were available, Friends were supposed to teach the child at home. The theme of education was to guard the child against evil. And schoolbooks contained copious doses of Quaker theology and sermons about obedience to parents and teachers, in addition to admonitions about proper behavior patterns which generally entailed due subordination. When Philadelphia became too licentious (sometime in the 18th century), Friends decided to create special institutions which would ensure seclusion from evil. At Westtown, Nine Partners and their sister schools located in bucolic retreats, only Friends were admitted, the teachers were all Friends, and all observed the peculiar testimonies of Friends. The school was designed to be a Quaker family in a different institutional setting. Creating special boarding schools seems to have had the de-

sired effect, for Philip Benjamin's study of 19th century Philadelphia Friends shows the disproportionate influence played by the graduates of Westtown and George School in the two Philadelphia Yearly Meetings. With great reluctance, Friends came to support college education by the middle of the 19th century. Some way had to be found to hold the offspring of prosperous New York, Baltimore, and Philadelphia Friends within the meetings. Since business and gentility demanded a college education, Friends created Haverford and Swarthmore as a method of keeping youth within the meeting. Ironically, the colleges established to preserve the youth in the faith were one of the chief factors in molding Quakerism, for the colleges brought their graduates into contact with literature, Charles Darwin, biblical criticism, and eventually psychology. The result was a basic transformation of Quakerism in the late 19th century and throughout the 20th century.

The importance of the family to the meeting can be seen in the strenuous efforts of Friends to maintain religious unity. From the 17th to the beginning of the 20th century, Friends disciplined every Quaker who married an outsider, and a great many were disowned. Only in a family where religious unity was guaranteed could the wife and husband be helpmeets and the correct religious training of the young be guaranteed. Spiritual affinity was the basis for choosing a mate, and the early

Friends were hostile to the notion that romantic love should be the primary basis for marriage. In Quaker families, as in families in general in the U.S. culture, the treatment of children and women within the home was prevalently authoritarian and patriarchal. Legal rights were bestowed exclusively upon the father. The New Testament proclaimed that husband and wife become one, and the law saw that one as male. The law supported the father in all his actions in the family, except for quarreling which would lead to violence, or non-support. Quakers may have guaranteed women spiritual equality, but only in exceptional cases did they extend that spiritual equality into other spheres. This is not to assert that Quaker marriages were not happy, or that there were not many affectionate unions. But the marriage relationship of Quakers was worked out in the U.S. social context, assuming the male's intellectual and social superiority. Marriage lasted until death. Divorce was rare and, when granted, brought automatic disownment from the meeting. Throughout the 19th century, divorce brought no alimony and, in the case of adultery in many states, the man was allowed to keep any property the woman brought in marriage. In marriage, in the role of women in education, in the relationship to the church, Quakers did not differ significantly from other Protestant denominations in the 18th and 19th centuries. The result was that when the value systems of the rest of the culture in regard to reli-

*Friends General Conference, 1896*



*Grace Youkey*

gion and family life changed, so did the Quaker value system.

Today, Quakerism has changed so drastically as to have almost no relationship with the historic faith of Fox, Penn, and Woolman. We profess a theologically vague mysticism, with or without a specifically Christian orientation. There is no disownment for any reason, partially because Truth seems a much more complex phenomenon. The Deity no longer operates so intimately within the meeting. Friends today rarely discern states or relate to prophesy or tell of visions. Ministers are not afraid to begin a discourse with "I think," or "I was reading recently in *The New York Times*." Prayer is less frequent, the Bible less frequently cited, and Quakers seem more doctrinaire when discussing social questions rather than theological issues.

"Head learning" is now encouraged. We listen to lectures by college professors, and there is a great emphasis upon all forms of education, even though the specifically Quaker content of that education offered in Quaker-affiliated schools is often difficult to find. Distinctive forms of dress, speech, and manners have virtually disappeared. We cooperate with secular groups like the American Civil Liberties Union or the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom on social issues. We have joined the World Council of Churches. Unlike the 19th century Friends, we are so tolerant of diversity that even Friends on the east and west coasts can meet in something like harmony.

The economic status of the members is also changed. There are not many today who have made great fortunes, like Wharton, or Hopkins, or Strawbridge and Clothier. The percentage of farmers within our Society, as in the general population, has shrunk. The Society of Friends remains today what it became early in the 20th century: predominantly middle class and white, with a heavy concentration of members who are teachers and professional or managerial people. There are not many bosses and not many blue collar workers. My guess is that, on most issues facing us in the U.S. today, Quaker religion would prove a less significant variable to our members than age, wealth, and education. In summary: the Society of Friends today has embraced or succumbed to the nearly overwhelming impact of the nationalizing of life and culture that has taken place in the U.S. in the 20th century. Seventeenth century Quakers might find it difficult to recognize in us their religious descendants. But at least we go to many of the same meetinghouses, read their books, and have some of the same concerns in our devotional and our social lives. Yet even where our language is ostensibly the same, the social context is so different as to make identity problematic. The same hiatus is found in family customs. In the 18th and in the 20th century, the nuclear family—mother, father, and child living under

one roof—is the basic structure, but the emotional content of family life has been practically transformed. Economic and social ties in the marital union have lost a great deal of potency. The U.S. family has become an emotional unit and the best description of marriage is "companionate." We marry for love, and try to stay married for love, though there are some subtle and sometimes blatant ways the society controls marriage for love. Marriage as a patriarchal institution is being replaced by a relationship of equals.

Within the marriage state, we have learned that equality and freedom are not obtained without severe strain. What does it mean to be a male and a husband, or a female and a wife? What are the obligations of each to their careers outside the home? How is responsibility for rearing the children to be shared? The family today also has to confront new ethical issues: abortion and family planning, contraception, and euthanasia. Paradoxically, rising life expectancy means that in spite of a horrendous divorce rate, more children are being raised by both parents than ever before in history. But divorce has made marriage seem a far more fragile institution, and the experience of being raised by a single parent seems terribly common. Since 1900 the rising incidence of divorce has been universally decried by politicians and clerics and so-



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ciologists, but nothing has or seems likely to slow the increase. The extraordinary percentage of remarriages by divorced people, and the fact that two-thirds of all such marriages endure, show that among those who divorce, family life has remained an attractive ideal.

What can Quaker religion offer to modern families? First, it can be assumed that Quakers in isolation cannot solve their family problems, because we are simply too small a group, and too interconnected with the U.S. culture. I think it is also axiomatic that until Quakers decide what the meeting is to be, they will not be able to decide satisfactorily what the relations between the meeting and the family should be.

Working a way through the complexities of the present should not entail a repudiation of either the past heritage or present ambiguities. Just as it is a mistake to assume that in the future there will be greater wisdom than at present, so it is equally fallacious to assume that our present wisdom is better than that of the past.

There are some institutional forms which, by their nature, further the value system enshrined in them. For example, I cannot imagine the survival of the distinctive tenets of Quaker worship without some form of silent meeting. The value of an institution like the Society of Friends is greater today because membership conveys a sense of awareness of different life styles which can emancipate us from the tyranny of here and now.

What does the Society of Friends offer to us? It is a non-creedal, but distinctively Christian, religion which can depart from Western parochialism to enter into constructive dialogue with other forms of religion. There is a

commitment to an inwardly-experienced source of Truth and value which is known individually and corporately. There are ethical standards of universal validity: peace, love, honesty, equality, service, simplicity, and an awareness that each generation has to spell out the implications of such standards. And there is a fellowship of those trying to realize the goals of the preceding norms in personal and community life.

No institution perfectly embodies its highest aspirations, but the historic Society of Friends has remained a small beacon in wider society. That various yearly meetings have lost members almost continually since the 1820's may mean eventual extinction. This extinction would mean either that the ideals do not attract the wider general public, that Quaker parents do not make such ideals attractive to their children, that the meetings have repudiated these ideals, or that there is something wrong with these standards.

The difficulty in defining the relationship between the meeting and the family is complicated because we concentrate upon our disagreements rather than our shared values. We worry about whether First-day schools can survive, forgetting that for the first 175 years there were no First-day schools. What we want from the family is not far different from what Christians have always wanted. In canon law the first function of the family was the procreation and nurture of children. Since the child remains immature for many years, the relationship between parents should endure until the child can stand alone. The child's character will be formed by his or her observations of significant others: parents, grandparents and relatives, teachers and other adults, and her or his peer group. The Quaker meeting provides an institution where young, middle-aged, and old who are committed to the same religious and moral values join together for worship and fellowship. The ancient idea of a selective environment has attractiveness, and Quaker meetings and Quaker schools should be faithful to their heritage of distinctiveness.

A second traditional reason of equal importance for forming a family was for the wife and husband to be helpmeets. St. Paul said not to be unequally linked with unbelievers. Whatever that meant to early Friends, a modern exegesis might indicate that the best guide to success in a marriage relationship is for compatibility of intellect, emotions, interests, and morals. A shared membership within the Society of Friends is nice, but similar adherence to Quaker values is more important. Life demands growth, and being helpmeets assumes that change in both parties is requisite for the development of each.

We already know not only our controversies but also our basic harmony. The continuing task is to work within existing institutions while attempting to preserve our most cherished goals. □