

## **Spokane Friends Meeting**

October 27, 2024

“The Quaker Season”

Johan Maurer

Good morning!

(Or from our point of view, good afternoon. It's around 5:22 p.m. where we are, in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, about a ten-minute walk from the Tower of London.)

We've had several occasions to focus this year on our distinctive history, identity, and witness as Quakers. At Spokane Friends, that theme was our focus in the month of August as we observed George Fox's 400th birthday. Two and a half months ago, the most inclusive of the worldwide Quaker organizations, Friends World Committee for Consultation, held a week-long plenary gathering in South Africa, bringing together online and in person 500 Friends from 53 countries. And under Friends World Committee's sponsorship, many of our churches and meetings celebrated World Quaker Day on or around October 6.

When Judy and I are in London, we attend Bunhill Fields Friends Meeting, which is about 35 minutes on foot from our son Luke's apartment. Here's one of the ways Bunhill Fields Friends celebrated Fox's birthday, the World Plenary, and World Quaker Day:



Tim Gee, the general secretary of Friends World Committee, visited the meeting to talk about the world Quaker community to a gathering of Bunhill Fields Friends and others from the nearby community. The event had been given good publicity in the local Islington newspaper. The audience is sitting in the area behind the meetinghouse, actually in what was part of the Quaker burial grounds where 12,000 Quakers are buried from the earliest generations of our movement. We often meet there, outside, when the weather is good.

Here are a couple of views of the meetinghouse. On the street side, it looks like this:

[photo by John Goodwin]



This morning, the weather was cool but clear, and we met outside. When the weather isn't so good, we meet inside what used to be the caretaker's cottage, part of a larger campus of Friends facilities, but the rest of the buildings were destroyed by German bombs in World War II. A side view shows how small the building is...



[photo by John Goodwin]



See those steps on the left side? Roughly behind that bottom step is this tablet telling us that George Fox was buried in this burial ground.



[photo by John Goodwin]



I've been reading a fascinating book, *The Blazing World: A New History of Revolutionary England, 1603-1689*, by Jonathan Healey. In describing the political, social, and religious context of the mid-1600's in the British Isles, precisely the period when Quakers began, the author makes it clear how radical a challenge the Quakers and other so-called independent congregations were making to the social structures which, up to then, had seen themselves as permanent. We Quakers claimed that we were relying on God alone, with our guardrails being the Scriptures and the praying community, not the established customs and hierarchies over which the rest of the churches of that era were fighting to the death. And for their pains, Quakers faced not only

constant mocking, as I mentioned here back in February's message on the terms "Friends" and "Quakers," but they also faced seasons of arrests, imprisonments, and death.

Over the centuries, I think it is fair to say that we've developed our own share of established customs and, if not hierarchies exactly, at least elaborate organizational charts. The Quaker movement has divided several times. Sometimes we've divided over theological issues, and sometimes because of the strong personalities who became associated with those issues.

(When I talk about our lack of hierarchy, I'm reminded of a time when I was general secretary of Friends United Meeting. We had congregations in ten countries, with the largest share of them being in Kenya. So, it came to be that, when I was visiting one of the Friends meetings in western Kenya, the pastor introduced me as the Quaker pope. Of course that was news to me! Maybe that pastor meant it to be flattering, but, on the contrary, I found it to be a strangely helpful reminder of how far from true it was.)

It seems to me that it is possible for us to become so fond of our Quaker identity, our history, and our peculiarities, that we can end up forgetting our radical origins, our primordial skepticism about established customs and structures. But it's not my purpose today to shame or scold us. Not at all! We have nearly four centuries of experience in trying to live faithfully in challenging times, and whatever useful ways we've developed to hold on to that experience, to encourage each other, and to explain ourselves to an increasingly cynical world, I'm all for those things. I just think it is possible that you can go too far. I'd like to suggest some biblical reminders to help us keep that balance between centuries of hard-won accumulated experience and traditions on the one hand, and the radical simplicity and directness of our origins. After all, the early Friends did keep the Bible as one of their very few guardrails. Here are the three Scriptural passages I had in mind.

The first one is in the opening verses of Romans chapter 10.

### Romans 10:1-3 NIV

Brothers and sisters, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved. For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. Since they did not know the righteousness of God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness.

The original biblical context for Paul making this rather cranky complaint is his discussion about the Israelite leaders of his time relying on laws and customs as measures of faithfulness, rather than faith itself. Those leaders considered themselves as arbiters of God's salvation, rather than recognizing that God alone can call and define the people of God. That's how far they had drifted from the inspiration and experience of Moses and the patriarchs and matriarchs of ancient Israel.

If we substitute "Quakers" for "Israelites," maybe you'll see where I'm going. "For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. Since those super-Quakers did not know the righteousness of God and sought to establish their own, namely their lists of testimonies and their constant promotion of Quaker exceptionalism, they did not submit to God's righteousness.

Paul says, "Their zeal is not based on knowledge." Notice that Paul, who is himself an Israelite as is most of his audience, is not rejecting the foundational knowledge of Abraham, Moses, and the prophets. But he doesn't want them turning that knowledge into a system of laws that becomes a substitute for living faith.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, chapter two, Paul talks more about that necessary knowledge:

What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words.

The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit. The person with the Spirit makes judgments about all things, but such a person is not subject to merely human judgments, for, [Quoting from Isaiah chapter 40,] “Who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?”

But we have the mind of Christ.

There are so many points of contact between Paul’s teachings here, and the testimony of Quakers. It is the Spirit who is from God, who helps us understand “what God has freely given us.” As the early Quaker theologian Robert Barclay, author of the *Apology for the True Christian Divinity*, said in his chapter on the Bible, “We confess indeed there wants not a majesty in the style, a coherence in the parts, a good scope in the whole; but seeing these things are not discerned by the natural, but only by the spiritual man, it is the Spirit of God that must give us that belief of the Scriptures which may satisfy our consciences.”

And without that inward confirmation, wouldn’t we too consider as pure foolishness the biblical teachings of simplicity, equality, nonviolence, and returning good for evil? Certainly, the



vast majority of humans for the vast majority of our history on this planet seem to regard these things as foolish, and even most Christians seem to prefer this view.

Paul ends this section with a flourish: “But we have the mind of Christ.” Notice that he doesn’t say, “But *I* have the mind of Christ,” but we, together, have the mind of Christ. It reminds me forcefully of George Fox’s revolutionary teaching, “Christ has come to teach his people himself.”

This links up very naturally with the final scriptural guiderail that I brought today: The Gospel of John, chapter five, verses 39 and 40.

You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.

The context for this passage is Jesus' indictment of the religious leaders for being upset that he healed someone on the Sabbath. Again, they are resting their case on the law, and Jesus claims direct authority from God. Jesus does not deny them their sources in Scripture, but (as in many other places, and through the other New Testament writers), he reminds them that the Bible testifies to him. Early Friends often cited these testimonies, particularly Genesis, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. In this Scripture, what we're hearing is no abstract argument: the man whom Jesus healed on the Sabbath had been suffering for thirty-eight years, according to John. And now, I don't want to cite this passage in order to win an argument, I want us to be free to come to Jesus, receive healing, and find our own ways to bring that healing into our fractured world.

I told you about the meeting we attend in London, Bunhill Fields Friends, a kind and hospitable meeting if there ever was one. Two Sundays ago, we had a capacity crowd in that little meeting house: there were sixteen chairs in the meeting room, and every single chair was taken. Keep in mind that the meetinghouse is in one of the most densely populated neighborhoods of London.

During the years we attended Moscow Meeting, we often had only half that number at meetings; it was a big day when there were ten of us. This situation isn't unique to Friends; many English parish churches, for example, now have only a handful of believers on a typical Sunday morning.

But it does cause me to wonder, and I'm grateful to have this time to wonder with you: what could we do as a movement to make ourselves more accessible, so that more of our neighbors could be healed and could experience Christ teaching his people himself? I know that Spokane Friends have been thinking about how to be better known and more accessible, and I'm here to tell you to please keep it up and let the other Friends in our region know what you're learning.

I think Quakers are very special in our invitation to worship in a community that gathers around God instead of theology or law or hierarchy or obscure folkways and codewords, but sometimes I'd like to ask whether we're just too special for our own good.

In the unprogrammed part of our meeting, my only priority right now is to invite you to be open to God's direct ministry among us rather than any ideas from me. But if they're useful to you, here are some closing queries:

- Do you know people who would likely be blessed or healed by coming to Spokane Friends Meeting, but haven't been here yet? What factors might keep them from coming, or on the contrary, what factors make it likely that they *would* come?
- What, if anything, inspires you about the origins and history of Quakers as a movement? What remains of that revolutionary history that still has the capacity to inspire and guide us in our very different time and place?
- Do we have rules, structures, or customs (written or unwritten) that might weaken our ability to offer healing? On the other hand, what aspects of our life together give us freedom and encouragement to offer healing?