

Learning Resources 1.1

The Early Quaker Vision

The Biblical Basis

The Holy Spirit has been made available to everyone:

In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.

Joel 2:28/Acts 2:17 (NRSV)

It is now possible to know God in an intimate relationship which is direct, inward and spiritual:

This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall not teach one another or say to each other, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more.

Jeremiah 31:33-34/Hebrews 8:10-12 (NRSV)

Key Characteristics in Summary

In the early Quaker understanding of the true faith:

- All authentic knowledge of God comes directly by revelation rather than via human authorities or secondary sources.
- The Holy Spirit is universally available, enabling everyone to enjoy an intimate and inward relationship with God, where the divine law is written upon the heart, and Christ teaches his people himself.
- Communal worship and personal spiritual practice are rooted in a discipline of listening for and hearing God's voice and then obeying the divine command.
- God's people must experience a spiritual death and resurrection, dying to the fallen way of Adam and being born again into the perfect way of Christ.
- The lives of God's people reveal the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).
- God's people are gathered into a community of love and unity, which offers a glimpse of the kingdom of heaven on earth.
- This faith is regarded as foolish by the world and so God's people tend to be vilified, misrepresented and persecuted for their witness.

More Information about Early Quakers

Videos:

Quakers (NCB News Learn) - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gSPp7z1cN_4

Thomas Hamm on George Fox - <https://quakerspeak.com/video/the-history-of-george-fox/>

Books:

George Fox and John L. Nickalls. ed. *The Journal of George Fox* (London: Quaker Books, 1997).

Douglas Gwyn. *Apocalypse of the Word: The Life and Message of George Fox, 1624-1691* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1986).

Rosemary Moore. *The Light in their Consciences: Early Quakers in Britain, 1646-1666* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000).

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. In what ways does this understanding of faith differ from others you have encountered or experienced? What do you think are the main strengths and potential weaknesses of this vision?
2. How do you feel about the early Quaker conviction that physical imagery and liturgies, and human authorities inevitably distract people from an inward experience of God?
3. Why do you think that this vision has, over time, produced both explicitly Christian Evangelical Friends' Churches, and increasingly post-Christian Liberal Pluralist Quaker communities?
4. Early Friends were convinced that their religious vision closely reflected the truth faith of Christ and the apostles. However, Quakers have remained quite small in number. Why do you think that this vision has not been more attractive?



Image of an early Quaker woman preaching.

Stuart K Masters (2025)

Learning Resources 1.2

The Early Quaker Movement in Quotations

Quiet and Inward

In the spirituality of early Friends, the first step on the pathway to the true faith was to set aside all human ideas, feelings and emotions in order to listen to God's voice and receive divine power. This quietist practice of surrender is outlined here by George Fox:

Be still and cool in thy own mind and spirit from thy own thoughts, and then thou wilt feel the principle of God to turn thy mind to the Lord God, whereby thou wilt receive his strength and power from whence life comes...¹

George Fox (1658)

Embodied and Empowered

For the first Friends, the practice of being attentive to God's voice and power led to an experience of inward spiritual cleansing, making them a fit temple for God to dwell in. This strongly embodied sense of divine indwelling is described by Dorothy White:

Thus, is the living God purifying his Temples, and he is making a Glorious situation, a Heavenly Habitation, and an Everlasting dwelling place in the sons and daughters of men; for God is now come to dwell in his people.²

Dorothy White (1660)

Following the Way of Christ

Once people experience this divine indwelling, they come to know the Spirit of Christ ruling within them and living through them. The way of Christ involves self-emptying (kenosis), nonviolence, humility, patient suffering, mercy and forgiveness. Just before his death, James Nayler gave a passionate account of what this had meant to him in his life:

There is a Spirit which I feel that delights to do no evil, nor to revenge any wrong, but delights to endure all things, in hope to enjoy its own in the end. Its hope is to outlive all wrath and contention and to weary out all exaltation and cruelty, or whatsoever is of nature contrary to itself; it sees to the end of all temptations. As it bears no evil in itself so it conceives none in thoughts to any other. If it be betrayed it bears it, for its ground and spring is the mercies and forgiveness of God. Its crown is meekness, its life is everlasting love unfeigned, and takes its kingdom with entreaty and not with contention, and keeps it by lowliness of mind.³

James Nayler (1660)

¹ George Fox and John L. Nickalls ed. *Journal* (London: Quaker Home Service, 1997), 346

² Dorothy White. *A Visitation of Heavenly Love* (1660).

³ James Nayler and Licia Kuenning, ed. *The Works of James Nayler*, Volume 4 (Glenside, PA: Quaker Heritage Press, 2009), 382.

A Peaceable People

After the Restoration of the English Monarchy in 1660, Margaret Fell tried to reassure the new regime that Friends posed no physical threat, arguing that, as a people, they followed the peaceable way of Christ and hoped that everyone else might take this path too:

We are a People that follow after those things that make for Peace, Love, and Unity, it is our desire that others feet may walk in the same, and do deny and bear our Testimony against all Strife, and Wars, and Contentions that come from the Lusts that war in the Members, that war against the Soul, which we wait for, and watch for in all People, and love and desire the good of all...⁴

Margaret Fell (1660)

More Information about Early Quaker Leaders

Books:

Larry H. Ingle. *First Among Friends: George Fox and the Creation of Quakerism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

Bonnelyn Kunze. *Margaret Fell and the Rise of Quakerism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994).

David Neelon. *James Nayler: Revolutionary to Prophet* (Becket, MA: Leadings Press, 2009).

Websites:

Friends Library - <https://www.friendslibrary.com/>

Quaker Heritage Press - <http://www.qhpress.org/index.html>

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Quakers found that transformation and a sense of divine empowerment were experienced when they stopped striving and surrendered themselves to God. Quaker theologian Rachel Muers has suggested that “in Quaker practice, ‘doing nothing’ changes things.”⁵ How do you feel about this kind of quietist spirituality?
2. The earliest Friends experienced a strong sense of divine indwelling. They believed that Christ was appearing within them and living through them. Why do you think this got them into so much trouble?
3. Spend some quiet time reflecting on the words of James Nayler, which were written after he had been brutally tortured, rejected by his community, and beaten to the point of death. What feelings and responses are arising within you?
4. Early Friends felt that, when people live in the way of Christ, they inevitably reject war and have the motivations that lead to violent conflict taken away from them. How do you feel about this early testimony to peace?

Stuart K Masters (2025)

⁴ Margaret Fell. *A Declaration and an Information from Us, The People of God Called Quakers* (1660)

⁵ Rachel Muers. *Testimony: Quakerism and Theological Ethics* (London: SCM Press, 2015), 74.

Learning Resources 1.3

Early Quakers and Puritanism

The early Quaker movement emerged out of the radical wing of English Puritanism.

The Mainstream Puritans

After Henry VIII cut ties with the Roman Catholic Church during the 1530s, the mainstream Puritans worked to 'purify' the English Church of all remnants of Roman Catholicism, and reform it based on Calvinist principles. This meant simplifying liturgy, asserting the absolute authority of the Bible and affirming the Calvinist doctrine of double predestination, which is the belief that God has elected some people for eternal salvation, and others for eternal punishment. This meant that the spiritual destiny of individuals was entirely dependent on decisions that God had already made. It was this kind of Puritanism that was dominant in the first half of the seventeenth century. This included groups such as the Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and the Particular Baptists.

The Radical Puritans

During the 1620s, a radical form of Puritanism emerged, influenced by ideas and writings from the radical wing of the European Reformation. In opposition to the Calvinists, these radicals shared a number of common tendencies:⁶

- The belief that the old outward religious law had been abolished and replaced by the inward guidance of the Holy Spirit.
- The rejection of external sacraments and ceremonies, viewed as the idolatrous worship of physical things rather than God.
- A practice of total passivity and surrender before God, rather than the more active disciplines of mainstream Puritan piety.
- The assertion that liberation from sin was possible in this life through the freely given grace of God.
- A conviction that salvation was universally available through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

So, in place of the deep spiritual anxiety associated with predestination, these radicals offered a real sense of assurance and joy in the present, and they found that a life of holiness flowed naturally from their inward experiences. Crucial to all of this seems to have been a real conviction that Christ was now returning in Spirit to dwell within his people.

⁶ Nigel Smith. *Perfection Proclaimed: Language and Literature in English Radical Religion, 1640-1669* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), 2.

Radical Puritan Quotations ⁷

Jesus Christ must be experienced as a living presence within people:

To see Christ to be all in all in us, that is to know him experimentally; and if you know him thus, then you know him as you ought to know him, else he is but a fable to you; for so to know him is to have all the Scriptures fulfilled in you.

John Everarde (1584-1641)

People need to participate in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ as an inward and spiritual experience:

In regard to his death and crucifying: whatever he suffered externally in the flesh, it shows how he is internally crucified daily, even to the end of the world.

John Everarde (1584-1641)

Human understanding is worthless without the spiritual power and guidance of Christ:

The knowledge of the Gospel without the power of Christ and his death, hardens above all; none such enemies to the simplicity thereof.

Roger Brearley (1586-1637)

People need to be born again, and this means Christ being born within them:

So, when thou art past hope, and see no reason, then shall Christ be born to thee, for that is the fulness of time, and till then, the fulness of time is not come. And we see that Christ is nothing to man, till he be born in man.

Roger Brearley (1586-1637)

More information about John Everarde - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Everard_\(preacher\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Everard_(preacher))

More information about Roger Brearley - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roger_Breareley

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

5. Why do you think that the Radical Puritans, including Quakers, were so opposed to the Calvinist beliefs of the Mainstream Puritans?
6. Looking at the key features of the early Quaker vision (see Learning Resources 1.1), in terms of mainstream and radical Puritanism, what similarities and differences can you see?
7. Given the clear connections between the first Friends and earlier Radical Puritans, why do you think George Fox claimed that his religious vision had come by divine revelation alone?
8. Why do you think that this religious vision has not become more popular and widespread within Christianity?

Stuart K Masters (2025)

⁷ These quotations are taken from David Como. *Blown by the Spirit: Puritanism and the Emergence of an Antinomian Underground in Pre-Civil War England* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 236-237.