

# 5 minute guide

to

# QUAKERS

– The Religious Society of Friends

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## Brief Overview – Numbers Worldwide, Belief and History

Quakers are members of the Religious Society of Friends. This faith began as a Christian denomination during the mid1600's in England. It is practiced today by about 360,000 people in a variety of forms throughout the world. At the present time, the highest concentration of Quakers is found in Africa.

Their religion includes traditional testimonies of pacifism, social equality, integrity and simplicity. Many also include the testimony of stewardship of our planet.

Their core doctrine is the priesthood of believers which comes from the Biblical passage: *But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light* 1Peter 2:9.

They believe in a personal experience with God and developing themselves into purity and the light of God. This is done through reading the Bible and a focused private life spent concentrating on their actions to best match emotional purity and the light of God.

Quakers lead outward lives committed to their inward experiences. They strive to reflect lives of Jesus Christ.

## History and Founder

The first Quakers were known as the Valiant Sixty in England. Their movement came about from the dissenting Protestant groups who broke away from the Church of England. Some of the earliest Quaker missionaries were women. These missionaries traveled to convert others to their branch of religion based on the message: *Christ has come to teach his people himself*. Their religion stressed both the direct relationship with Jesus and a belief in the universal priesthood of all believers.

In England in the 1640s, after the English Civil War, many new Christian groups were forming. A man named George Fox became convinced that you could have a personal and direct experience with Christ without the help of trained clergy. This was acquired through a spiritual experience and the reading of the Bible. His followers thought of themselves as "the restored true Christians" after centuries of apostasy in the English churches.

When George Fox was charged with religious blasphemy in 1650 and called a "Quaker", the name became widely accepted for this new branch of religion. Other names to describe this religious group include true Christians, Saints, Children of the Light, and Friends of the Truth.

With Margaret Fell, the wife of an English judge, Fox helped develop a new idea of family and community. They stressed the importance of conversation for an opportunity to speak of piety, faith and love. New roles for women surfaced with the responsibility for the spirituality of the larger community. The larger community would now gather in meetings.

In search of both an accepting environment for these meetings and economic opportunities, some Quakers came to the United States in the early 1680s. They settled predominantly in Rhode Island and Pennsylvania. William Penn is noted for establishing Pennsylvania in 1682 as an American state run under Quaker principles.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Quakers became more inward and looked toward spirituality rather than concentrating on converting others. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, several large splits within the Quaker movement occurred to include the Hicksite-Orthodox split, the Beaconite controversy, and the Gurneyite-Conservative split.

## Traditions, Beliefs and Practices

Most Quakers believe in continuing revelation in that truth is revealed directly to each individual from God. Therefore, Friends focus on trying to hear God. Quakers do not believe in the role of priests. Instead they feel that as Quakers, they are the priesthood of all believers. God is expressed in such terms as inner light, inward light of Christ and the Holy Spirit.

Quakers bear witness to testify to their beliefs in their lives. They believe like James in the Bible that *faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead*.

Some theologians classify Friend's witness into categories or testimonies. Quakers believe in the testimony of community in that individuals who are faithful to God are gathered into a community of similar believers who seek to know and live out God's will. They share commitments involving social testimonies. The Peace Testimony reflects their opposition to war in all forms. The Testimony of Simplicity revolves around God as the Center and Orderer of their lives. God provides for the materialistic needs in their lives. They believe that material luxury results in spirit deprivation and environmental destruction. They also believe that all people are loved by God, and thereby they have a Testament of Equality which stresses fundamental brotherhood and sisterhood of all people. Everyone in society is treated with love and respect. The Testament of Integrity is recognition that the Spirit calls them to lead lives of honesty and consistency.

The foundational belief of Quakerism is that God is knowable by every human and that His spirit leads him/her into truth if humans are faithful in hearing and obeying the voice heard in their hearts. This helps direct the will of God for individuals in their lives. They also believe that through God's grace, they are empowered to do God's will.

Quakers believe that all of life has the potential to be sacramental rather than just at specific dates and times, rituals or ceremonies. God's presence is everywhere in every aspect of life at every moment.

Conservative Friends place their trust in the guidance of God and reject all forms of religious symbolism including the Eucharist and water baptism. They believe that holiness exists in all daily activities and that all life is sacred. They believe that a meal with others is a form of communion with God. They do not have any written creed.

Evangelical Friends make up about 40% of the total number of Quakers throughout the world. They have similar beliefs as other evangelical Christians believing that Jesus is their Lord and Savior. They believe that Christ died on Calvary, biblical infallibility and the need for a personal relationship with Christ for every believer. They believe the purpose of the Friends' Church is to help spread Christ to the unsaved world, to show God's love, and to undertake social service to others. The Bible is held as the Word of God.

Gurneyite Friends known as Friends United Meeting Friends are the modern-day followers of the Evangelical Quakers. This theology was first proclaimed by Joseph Gurney, a 19<sup>th</sup> century British Quaker. They make up about 49% of the total number of Quakers throughout the world.

They believe Jesus Christ is their Teacher and their Lord. They strive to work closely with other Protestant churches. They believe that the Bible is the direct Word of God. Children and adults attend religious education which centers on orthodox Christian teaching from the Bible and upholds Quaker history and Quaker testimonies. Gurneyism was the main form of Quakerism in England in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but today you find Gurneyite Friends throughout the world. They routinely combine “waiting worship” with religious practices found in other Protestant Christian churches like reading of the Bible and singing of hymns.

Holiness Friends are influenced by John Wesley’s doctrine of Christian perfection. This doctrine explains that loving God and humanity as shown by Christ allows believers to rid themselves of voluntary sin. Holiness Friends believe that Fox’s message of perfection was the same as holiness. Some Friends may incorporate holiness beliefs in their yearly meetings, but in other Quaker gatherings like in the Central Yearly Meeting of Friends founded in 1926 and the Bolivian Holiness Mission Evangelical Friends Church founded by missionaries in 1919, this is a predominant theme.

Liberal Quakerism refers to Friends who have taken the ideas from liberal Christianity which often includes a focus on the social gospel. Rufus Jones in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century popularized the idea that God is in everyone and that God is inner light. Liberal Friends practice good works and try to live a life that follows what Jesus preached. They reject religious symbolism and sacraments. They are not part of worship nor are they needed for spirituality. However, Liberals recognize their potential in bringing others to experience the Light. The Bible is central to their worship and to meetings. However, they feel if God leads them in a different way than Scripture points out, then the direction of God is more important. They accept a wide range of faith understandings and often believe that the Bible is an anthology of human authors’ beliefs and feelings about God, rather than God’s Word. They feel that multiple interpretations of Scripture are acceptable.

Universalists affirm religious pluralism in that there are many paths to God. It was founded by John Linton in the late 1970s after he had worshiped God with the Delhi Worship Group in India. When Linton moved to Great Britain, he founded the Quaker Universalist Fellowship. Universalists believe that the understandings of the divine can be reached through both Christian and non-Christian experiences and that both are equally valid in reaching Christian understanding.

The non-theists have viewpoints similar to other post-Christian non-theists in other churches such as the Sea of Faith in the Anglican Church. They are mostly atheists, agnostics and humanists who want to belong to a religious organization. The first of its kind was formed in the United States in California in 1939. The organization is quite small.

## Scripture, Texts or Holy Books

The Quakers have an absence of creed in that they are encouraged to lead lives of personal responsibility for the understanding and deliberation of their faith. They do not rely on priests or theologians to direct their spiritual growth. But rather, it is an individual matter of reflection, prayer, faithfulness and service.

Although the Quaker movement before the 20<sup>th</sup> century was considered a Christian movement, it did not actually fit within the traditional categories of Catholic, Protestant or Orthodox. Many

Quakers chose to remain a separate group, away from the other Christian groups. Worldwide, the vast majority of Quakers confess an orthodox Christian faith. They believe in the role and guidance of the Holy Spirit. The Christian tradition and Christian Scriptures are highly esteemed as a testimony to God's relationships to their spiritual ancestors. Most Quakers believe the Bible is inspired by God.

They do not feel it is their belief that makes them a Quaker, but rather the participation in the Friends' community, the continued search for divine guidance, and the attempt to live faithfully in harmony with God's guidance. They believe that outward statements of belief (creeds, prayers, etc.) are insufficient without application to their lifestyles. That is why they aim at an inward knowledge of the Spirit, both individually in their lives and collectively in meetings. The core of their faith is a living relationship with and obedience to God. It is not one of rote recitation to creed or performance of ritual.

## Worship, Prayer, Rituals

In programmed worship celebrated by 89% of Friends worldwide, there is a prepared message by an individual, often with some type of theological training. There may be a combination of hymns, a sermon, Bible readings, joint prayers and some time devoted to silent worship. The worship parallels that of other protestant denominations although in most cases there is no Eucharist service. This worship service may be called a "meeting" or a "Friend's church service". Pastoral care is the responsibility of a paid pastor.

Waiting worship is also known as unprogrammed worship or "holy communion in the manner of Friends". This worship is based on the practices of the early Christians. Friends gather and wait expectantly for God. They listen for His voice. There is no structured plan for the service. They believe that God plans what will happen in the service and He will lead people to speak. Sometimes an entire meeting may be silent, and at other times, many people will get up to speak. Meetings of today last about an hour, but in the early Quaker meetings, they might last several hours.

A "meeting for worship with a concern for business" is a special meeting of worship which all members can attend. This meeting is a time where Quakers gather to wait on the Lord to discover His will. Decisions are reached when the group as a whole feels the way to move forward has been shared and understood. There is no voting. Some people characterize these meetings as consensus decision-making. They feel that God's will is revealed and the way will become clear. The basic organizational unit for Friends is the annual meeting composed of congregations in a given area. At this meeting, a manual containing doctrinal statements and documents is published. Yearly meetings are also held at a national level.

## Festivals, Feast Days, Holy Days, Celebrations

Quakers use a traditional calendar to follow the terms in the Bible (i.e. the first day of the week, etc.). They do not observe religious festivals (e.g., Christmas, Lent or Easter) but they believe that Christ's birth, crucifixion and resurrection should be celebrated every day of the year. For example, instead of fasting during Lent, many Quakers feel that it is better to lead a simple lifestyle all year round.

Traditional Quaker memorial services are held as a form of worship. Friends gather together and offer remembrances about those that have deceased. These memorial services may be held many weeks after the person has died. This allows a wider attendance and also a time to stress spiritual reflection and celebration of life opposed to allowing grief to become the predominant focus.

## Timeline

1624	George Fox is born in England
1650	The name "Quaker" is first used
1655	The first Quaker missionaries reach North America
1681	William Penn receives the charter for Pennsylvania
1691	Death of George Fox
1700	Quietest Era begins
1795	Friends move in large numbers to parts of the eastern United States
1827	Hicksite Separation
1837	Joseph Gurney visits North America
1840	Congregational Friends separate from Hicksite meetings
1844	Wilburite and Gurney Friends separate from each other
1877	Conservative Friends separate from revivalists
1889	Pastoral system begins
1900	Friends hold first General Conference
1902	First Quaker missionaries arrive in Kenya
1910	Independent meetings become common
1937	Friends World Committee for Consultation founded
1963	Evangelical Friends Alliance formed
1989	Evangelical Friends Alliance becomes Evangelical Friends International

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