

The Testimony of Quaker Simplicity

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Dr. Richard Sartwell and Dr. Carole Spencer

Timothy James Burdick

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Introduction - In his book, *The Quakers in America*, Thomas Hamm contends that the Quaker testimony of simplicity is one of only five unifying themes found common to the various persuasions of Friends today.¹ In addition to worship based on the spirit's leading, ministry of all believers, consensus decision making process, and a commitment to education, he also includes simplicity as a basic philosophy of life. He goes on to stipulate, however, that:

Dramatic change has happened in virtually all persuasions of Friends over the past century, and one of the most visible manifestations of that change has been the near disappearance of what was once one of the most distinctive characteristics of Quakers: a commitment to the plain life.²

While this may seem to present two statements in opposition to one another, Hamm is asserting something here many Friends today would concur with; that although the visible manifestations of the “plain life” are no longer practiced with such rigidity as previous, the spirit capturing the original theological underpinnings is still very much present and alive. This paper will examine what those original theological premises were that led early Friends (particularly George Fox, Robert Barclay and William Penn) to adopt a testimony of simple living.

Early Influences and Ideas - Although Friends became known to the outside world as a *plain* people, they were not by any means novel in adopting this practice. Just prior to the Quakers, the Waldenses, Lollards, Cathartists, Mennonites and Anabaptists all practiced extreme forms of simplicity.³ Much earlier than this, desert fathers and mothers of the 3rd-6th century were escaping the world to live in the desert,⁴ and in similar fashion, monks during the medieval age

¹ Thomas D. Hamm, *The Quakers in America*, in Columbia Contemporary American Religion Series (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 64-119.

² Hamm, 101.

³ John Sykes, *The Quakers: A new look at their place in society* (London: Allan Wingate, 1958), 57.

⁴ Bradley P. Holt, *Thirsty for God: A Brief Overview of Christian Spirituality* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 54-69.

formed simple monastic orders.⁵ Like so many other identifying characteristics amongst Friends, it was the early leaders who coalesced several disparate groups of ideas into well established practice that was lived out in front of the world for all to see.

Ironically then, some of the very earliest of convinced Friends in the 17th century were people of wealth and status (Margaret Fell, Thomas Ellwood, William Penn, Robert Barclay).⁶ Even, George Fox, as evident by his trade of choice and his refusal to be a financial burden to others when traveling likely indicates that he, “was a prudent businessman and knew how to take care of his affairs.”⁷ It is interesting then, that leading Friends of the next century, some of whom had similar wealth, would bring such forced legalism to the practice of plain-ness. Up until the end of the 17th century there was no strong majority advocating for the same style of exclusionary and plain life, per se, that much of outside world eventually would know Quakers for. This is not to say that such matters were not of concern to early Friends; they may in fact have been arguably of greater concern than later generations attested to. What one finds instead amongst these early Friends, is the underlying deep concern for the inward condition of humanity before Christ, rather than any outward discipline.

Theological Underpinnings - Robert Barclay ends his *Apology* (published in 1676 in Latin and 1678 in English) with an important discussion of religion and lifestyle. In *Proposition 15 – Vain and Empty Customs* he opens with the following statement:

The chief purpose of all religion is to redeem men from the spirit and vain pursuits of this world, and to lead them into inward communion with God. All vain and empty customs and habits, whether of word or deed, should be rejected by those who have come to fear the Lord.⁸

⁵ Ibid., 84-96.

⁶ John Punshon, *Portrait in Grey: A short history of the Quakers* (London: Quaker Books, 1984), 127.

⁷ Ibid., 49.

What Barclay is addressing here is the deeper theological basis for why a believer would abrogate apparent worldly superfluous practices. In the linear flow of the above statement, true religion redeems people, these people are then led to inward intimacy with God, and finally then, empty customs are let go of by them as they come to know this truth. Attending to the flow of this process is important, as it is clear for Barclay that all behaviors come out of personal redemption and out of knowing God first and foremost. While his *Apology* does address some of the forbidden practical elements of Christian behavior (the use of flattering titles, extravagant apparel, useless conversation, jest, recreation, and war), Barclay is much more so trying to get to the heart-motivation behind such behavior. In a sub-section of *Proposition 15* titled, *The Character of a Quaker*, Barclay reminds the reader:

Indeed, truth has prevailed to such an extent concerning the purity of one of its followers, that if one is called a Quaker he is not expected to do the things which others commonly do. If he laughs derisively or is unruly, exaggerates in his speech, or is not punctilious in keeping his word, or becomes impatient or angry, they will say that he is acting contrary to his profession.⁹

Again, it is that “truth has prevailed” first, which in turn causes individuals to live out this expression. Barclay is arguing for one’s outward actions to be a window to what has already happened through Christ on the inside.

Rather than “simplicity” or “plain-ness” then, the precursory idea that had much more significance to Barclay and early Friends was the concept of integrity. Barclay uses this word as a header to *Proposition 15*, and its concept is found throughout early Quaker thought and practice. If nothing else, becoming a Child of the Light in the 17th century was a call towards inner integrity of the self before Christ and before others. Wilmer Cooper states that, “the call for

⁸ Robert Barclay, *Barclay’s Apology*, ed. Dean Friday (Newberg OR: The Barclay Press, 1991), 389.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 390.

honesty lies at the heart of Quakerism,” and that, “respect for this kind of integrity calls for a correspondence between what one professes and how one translates that into action.”¹⁰ In a different publication, Cooper states, “‘What is Quakerism?’ I claim that ‘integrity’ is the essential Quaker testimony.”¹¹ Likewise, Richard Foster says that early Friends were a witness to a kind of simplicity, “in which honesty and integrity were the distinguishing characteristics.”¹² For someone like George Fox, the idea of Christian character and integrity undergirded much of his actions and writings. In a letter to Quaker merchants regarding how to practice righteousness within their businesses, Fox paraphrases Proverbs 20:7 to them, “He that walks in the integrity, is just and blessed by children after him.”¹³ Whether Fox was addressing business people or a local meeting house, the issue of integrity before Christ is a recurring theme for him. In epistle 250 Fox focuses in on vain fashions of the world:

Keep out of the vain fashions of the world; let not your eyes, and minds, and spirits run after every fashion in apparel of the nations; for that will lead you from the solid life. ... But mind that which is sober and modest, and keep to your plain fashions.¹⁴

Fox’s thinking on this issue was not merely for show, but had more to do with the fundamental character of a Christian. While he does not use the word integrity here, it can clearly be understood as such. He goes on in the same epistle to contend that:

¹⁰ Wilmer A. Cooper, *A Living Faith: An Historical Study of Quaker Beliefs* (Richmond: Friends United Press, 1990), 104.

¹¹ Wilmer A. Cooper, *The Testimony of Integrity in the Religious Society of Friends*, Pendle Hill Pamphlets (Wallingford PA: Pendle Hill, 1991), 6.

¹² Richard Foster, *Freedom of Simplicity* (New York, HarperSanFrancisco, 1981), 65.

¹³ George Fox, *Epistle 200 – The Line of Righteousness...*, in *The Power of the Lord is Over All: The Pastoral Letters of George Fox*, ed. T. Canby Jones (Richmond: Friends United Press, 1667/1989), 155-156

¹⁴ Fox, *Epistle 250 – A warning to all to keep out of the vain fashions of the world and c.*, in *The Power of the Lord is Over All...*, 223.

Therefore take heed of the world's fashions, and trust not in the uncertain riches, neither covet the riches of this world, but seek the kingdom of God, and the righteousness thereof, and all other things will follow; and let your minds be above the costly and vain fashions of attire, but mind the hidden man of the heart, which is a meek and a quiet spirit, which is of great price with the Lord.¹⁵

For Fox, and other early leaders, “the hidden man of the heart,” was the more pressing concern as they strived to, “seek the kingdom of God,” first, “and all other things will follow.” In doing this, one could claim integrity before Christ.

Likewise for another such early leader within Friends, William Penn, he too sees the call to Christ as reflective of the inner person. In his foundational work, *No Cross, No Crown* (1682), Penn dedicates chapter seven to the discipline of self denial; an important concept in regards to the integrity of the Christian character. In this chapter he addresses the antithesis of integrity (false pride), and describes four proofs of the evil caused by the individualistic self-pride he saw rampant in the world of his day:

The first is an undue pursuit of knowledge. The second is an ambitious craving after power. The third is an extreme desire of personal respect and deference. *The last excess is in worldly furniture and ornaments* [italics added].¹⁶

Penn understood that, *evil begins from within, and not from without*, and that a life of excess was evidence of a life *not* transformed by Christ. He concludes chapter 7 with the following solution to such evils, “The way of recovery is to come to a saving knowledge of religion; that is, an experience of the divine work of God in the soul.”¹⁷ Notice that he does not call for the rejection of possessions, adorning plain apparel, or constructing simple meeting house, as these are outward manifestations of what was happening on the inside. When Christ worked in one’s life

¹⁵ Ibid., 224.

¹⁶ William Penn, *No Cross, No Crown*, ed. Ronald Selleck (Richmond: Friends United Press, 1682/1981), 53.

¹⁷ Ibid., 58.

the fruit of the spirit was evident in Christian integrity. This in turn, would result in the outward expression of the Friends' testimonies. The outward display of unabashed consumption then was indicative of a deep troubling lack of integrity before Christ. Cooper says that, "Early Friends believed that commitment to the Christ Within would bear fruit in their outward lives and 'testify' to the truth of their inward experience."¹⁸ It is entirely and completely within this framework that Friends naturally came to adopt their practices of plain dress, plain speech, simple meeting houses and generally doing away with worldly vanities or excess. After Christ transformed their hearts, they saw no other way to live with integrity then to live out that simple truth.

A Hedge and a Light - Even still though, it must be fairly acknowledged that this plain life was created from as much of a positive motivation to live out the truth of Christ in the world, as it was also just simply a counter-cultural protectionism against the establishment. Friends were by no means initiating a theology of simple living out of a vacuum, but had the real world excesses of the 17th century as a place to direct their tirades. In one such example Fox and some followers were brought before a judge and they did not remove their hats (as was the expected custom of the time). Friends had decided in opposition to such a vain and worldly practice they would not remove their hats for anyone. When questioned by the judge about this behavior, Fox is at first staunchly silent. Then he eventually begins an intense argument with judge about the legality of being forced to remove his hat. In the end, the infuriated judge has the group of Friends physically removed from the chambers. While the idea of plain-ness and equality were always present amongst early Friends, there is also a strong sense of just pushing against the

¹⁸ Cooper, *A Living Faith: An Historical Study of Quaker Beliefs*, 99.

system here. Of this example, John Sykes points out, “One senses a mixed motivation here, and love of scoring every point, always present in George Fox.”¹⁹

Likewise, the clear and frequent ranting by Fox, Barclay, Penn and other leaders against the luxuries of the state/church system and those who would be consumed by worldly vanities, speaks volumes about their internal motivations. Harold Loukes acknowledges that, “Early Friends were tireless in their challenge to the church; and as long as they continued to argue, they were, perforce, taking the Christian tradition seriously.”²⁰ As evidence of such, in the year 1649 Fox’s Journal includes a strong indictment against the priests:

But the black, earthly spirit of the priests wounded my life; and when I heard the bell toll, to call people together to the steeplehouse, it struck at my life: for it was just like the market-bell, to gather people together, that the priest might set forth his ware to sale.²¹

If this were a one-time occurrence in Fox’s writings it might easily be considered a specific attack on a specific person or a specific institution. But, Fox’s Journal is simply just littered with similarly sounding statements of him raging against the world around him. In the same chapter, Fox adds admonishments against May-games, sports, plays, shows, fairs, markets, deceitful merchandising, music, acting, etc. – “forewarning them of the great and terrible day of the lord, which would come upon them all.”²² For Fox, plain-ness was as much a reflection of the Christ within, as it was a war against the evil without.

And Fox is not alone in this behavior. Sounding so similar, Penn’s straight-shooting, somewhat shrewd, subsequent statement shares this striking standpoint:

¹⁹ Sykes, 59.

²⁰ Harold Loukes, *The Quaker Contribution* (London: SCM Press, 1965), 53.

²¹ George Fox, *The Journal of George Fox*, ed. Nigel Smith (London: Penguin Books, 1998), 39.

²² *Ibid.*, 38.

Luxury brings weakness, laziness, poverty, and misery. But temperance preserves the land... By temperance, the rich would waste less of their wealth. The poor would not spend their hard-got wages on superfluous clothing, foolish May games, plays, dances, shows, taverns, ale houses, and similar follies. By these things the land is infected and rendered more ridiculous than any kingdom in the world.²³

Like Fox, Penn is fighting against the status quo of society. After spending several chapters dedicated to the inward evil of pride, Penn concludes *No Cross, No Crown* with five chapters on the ill effects of luxury. His words speak for himself:

Luxury is a contagious and killing disease. It creeps into all classes and types of people. The poorest people often exceed others in their ability to indulge their appetite. And the rich frequently wallow in those things that please the lusts of their eye and flesh and pride of life. They act as if luxury and not the cross was the ordained way to heaven.²⁴

For Penn, an extremely wealthy man up until the end of his life, luxury when used vainly became a barrier for all people on their road to the cross.

Like Fox and Penn, Barclay too adds to this mix a long list of “*Things that are Inconsistent with the Christian Religion,*” including flattering titles, kneeling before another man, and superfluous apparel.²⁵ More specifically, Barclay concludes that:

It is not lawful for Christians to use games, sports, plays, comedies, or other recreations inconsistent with Christian silence, gravity or sobriety. Laughter, sports, games, mockery, or jests, useless conversations, and similar matters are neither Christian liberty nor harmless mirth.²⁶

In the final analysis, the testimony of simplicity must be acknowledged as fermented from the perceived vain and empty practices of the world in which early Friends tried to avoid, as well as, it was seen as a reflection of the inner transformation of Christ. Its bias was clearly both

²³ Penn, 126.

²⁴ Ibid., 103

²⁵ Barclay, 391.

²⁶ Ibid.

positively and negatively motivated. One side of the testimony became a witness to the truth of the Inward Light, while the other side became a protection against the evils of the world. Cooper says the following of the practice of plain-ness and self-denial:

Early Friends were committed to acting truth in their daily lives... at the same time there were quite specific about what would keep them focused on the divine will and what would deflect their attention from it.²⁷

As many latter Friends came to appropriately call the testimony of simplicity, it operated as both *a hedge and a light*.²⁸

In some ways, however, the reality of “a hedge” also kept the practice safely in check and prevented it from denigrating into a legalistic forced practice, as became evident over the succeeding generations. As long as there was an “enemy” always outside to fight against, Friends had a clear place to locate their holy rage. When that enemy went away (or at least stopped killing them) that same focus and energy was directed inward. Friends then begin to use their plain and simple ways as methodology to protect themselves from themselves. Martin Davies says of this transition that, “Thus while early Quakers thought that the self had to become obedient to the light, the Quietists thought, that the activity of the self had to be suppressed that the light might have free reign.”²⁹ Friends had always understood their own human nature was an evil to be wary of, but now the outward techniques of plainness became the new tool of change, and for some the inner transformation was forgotten.

While today many see these legalistic displays as gimmicks, it is important to note that such practices were not entirely empty and superfluous for all, but held important personal

²⁷ Wilmer Cooper, *The Testimony of Integrity in the Religious Society of Friends*, 16-17.

²⁸ Hamm, 102.

²⁹ Martin Davie, *British Quaker Theology Since 1895* (Lewiston NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1997), 35.

implications too and were adhered to in reverence, even if not agreed to by all. For many Friends, such obvious visual practices of plain dress and speech were extremely helpful for them to avoid temptation and/or association with any “worldly” behavior.

Conclusion – After Fox died and it became apparent that a transition to a rigid “plain way of living” was becoming dominant among Friends, not everyone received this development with equal agreement. As evidence, Margaret Fell wrote her *Epistle Against Uniform Quaker Costume* during this time. In this letter she states:

We must look at no colors, nor make anything that is changeable colors as the hills are, nor sell them nor wear them. But we must all be in one dress, and one color. This is a silly poor Gospel.³⁰

What Fell is protesting to here is not the practice of plain-ness, per se, but the apparent blindness with which it was deemed as a sufficient expression of faith. She goes on to contend:

This is not delightful to me, that I have this occasion to write to you... For I see, that our blessed precious holy Truth, that hath visited us from the beginning is kept under, and these silly outside imaginary practices is coming up, and practiced with great zeal.³¹

She clearly was not enamored with such legalism. Even Barclay understood how much system-wide forced conformity to an outward expression of faith was not at the intended heart of what he was trying to say. He stipulates in *Proposition 15* that:

Although by our principles the use of anything which is merely superfluous is unlawful, this does not deny the enjoyment of luxury for those who are accustomed to it. . . . Some things may be lawful for some and not for others.³²

Adding to this, Barclay also writes, “If a man dresses quietly and without unnecessary trimmings, we will not criticize him if he dresses better than his servants.”³³ While both Barclay

³⁰ Hugh Barbour, ed., *Margaret Fell Speaking*, Pendle Hill Pamphlets (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill, 1976), 32.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Barclay, 392.

and Fell represented extreme wealth and influence amongst Friends, their arguments did not win the day. Friends as a whole, instead, went into a long season of being known as a plain people evident mostly by their adherence to rigid outward disciplines. Despite such forced compliance over the next century, there were many exceptions along the way to this practice though. By the 1850's and 60's (150 years later) a strong enough consensus was developing amongst Friends that most Yearly Meetings acknowledged the growing trend and abrogated (or made optional) their Faith and Practice rules regarding plain dress and plain speech.³⁴

Today it is hard to find any clear visible manifestations amongst Friends of extreme plain-ness that sets them apart from society (except in a few Conservative yearly meetings³⁵), but many claim the *spirit* of the testimony is still very much alive and present amongst various persuasions of Friends. According to Hamm, Friends today across the spectrum are more likely to be sensitive to issues of time management, the relationship between simplicity and wealth, concerns over materialism, the role of technology, concerns for the environment, and integrity in word and deed.³⁶ Likewise, Punshon argues that the increasing trend toward vegetarianism amongst Friends is an important spiritual and moral lifestyle choice to consider.³⁷ And finally, Cooper suggest that, "Simplicity does not necessarily mean a life of voluntary poverty, but it does mean that we become good stewards of all that we have and that we become sensitive to the

³³ Ibid., 405.

³⁴ Punshon, 215.

³⁵ Hamm, 104.

³⁶ Hamm, 104-108.

³⁷ John Punshon, *Testimony and Tradition, Some aspects of Quaker spirituality*, Swarthmore Lecture 1990 (London: Quaker Home Service, 1990), 31.

needs of others.”³⁸ In the end, however, it must be fairly stated that for many Friends today, particular those of the American Evangelical persuasion, their actual lifestyle is not significantly different from the rest of society as a whole. Whether this reality is a reflection of a healthy understanding of the testimony, or simply indicative of a lost practice, is still for discussion.

³⁸ Cooper, *A Living Faith*, 106.

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