

# Foundations: The Early Quaker Vision

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## The Experience

### 1. Seeking: In the Wilderness

The men and women who established the Quaker movement in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century were part of a generation who for the first time in many centuries were faced with a genuine choice when it came to their religious affiliations. Many of those who were to become Quakers moved through a number of different groups but remained dissatisfied with all of the options available. This must have felt like a wilderness experience; a period of trial characterised by uncertainty, depression and anxiety. In particular, Calvinism fuelled existential angst with its emphasis on predestination, total depravity and the inescapability of sin in this life.

### 2. Finding: The Quaker Pentecost

A radical and life-changing experience of spiritual transformation acted as the catalyst for the emergence of the Quaker movement. For those involved this appeared to be a replaying of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was poured out on the apostles establishing a church guided by the presence of the risen Christ (Dobbs 1995, p.2). A dramatic experience of Christ appearing in their midst convinced early Friends that the true church was reappearing after centuries of apostasy (Wilcox 1995, p.3). Everything that is distinctive about the Quaker way developed out of a response to this experience and the efforts of early Friends to make sense of it.

## The Experience Interpreted

### 1. The Inward Pentecost

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In his *Journal*, George Fox describes many openings he claims to have received by direct revelation from God. Two in particular stand out as epiphanies, and both appear to relate to Chapter two of the Book of Joel in the Hebrew Scriptures. The

first took place around 1647, when Fox became aware of the real presence of Christ as a living spiritual power:

*“And when all my hopes in them and in all men were gone, so that I had nothing outwardly to help me, nor could tell what to do, then, oh then, I heard a voice which said, ‘There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition’, and when I heard it my heart did leap for joy.”* (Journal, p 11)

This was the beginning of Fox’s Pentecostal experience, which led him to proclaim that ‘Christ is come to teach his people himself’. For early Friends, the second coming had taken place inwardly and spiritually in the fulfillment of Joel’s prophesy at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-21):

*“And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions.”* (Joel 2:28, KJV)

This passage is often interpreted as the beginning of Quakerism as a distinct tradition. However, the references to the Book of Joel make it clear that Fox’s vision was of a people to be gathered in order to join God in the struggle to defeat darkness and evil within the creation. The ‘day of the Lord’ refers to God’s final and decisive victory over evil and the coming of the kingdom of heaven on earth. This was to be a time of judgment and purification leading to salvation. In the New Testament, it was associated with the second coming of Christ (e.g. 1 Corinthians 1:8). Joel writes:

*“Blow ye the trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm in my holy mountain: let all the inhabitants of the land tremble: for the day of the Lord cometh, for it is nigh at hand.”* (Joel 2:1, KJV)

So, Fox’s epiphanies point to an early Quaker movement that was both Pentecostal and apocalyptic in character. It was Pentecostal in the sense that it was founded on a transformational experience of the Spirit of Christ as inward teacher, priest, prophet and king. It was apocalyptic because this experience convinced early Friends that God was acting decisively in their time to overcome evil and establish the kingdom of heaven.

These Pentecostal and apocalyptic aspects are intimately connected, since it was through the transformative power of the Spirit that darkness and evil would be purged; firstly, inwardly in each person’s heart, and then outwardly in the whole creation. Early Friends witnessed to the universal potential of this Pentecostal experience and apocalyptic hope. They would not accept that the Spirit could be confined in any way because, as Joel had promised, it was poured out on ‘all flesh’, not just on the Christian church. The early Quaker vision was realistic in accepting the active presence of evil in the world. At the same time, however, it was fundamentally optimistic, since it witnessed to an eternal living Spirit with the

power to overcome this darkness. George Fox expressed this understanding quite succinctly when he wrote in his Journal *“I saw also that there was an ocean of darkness and death, but an infinite ocean of light and love, which flowed over the ocean of darkness.”* (Journal, p 19)

## 2. The New Covenant

A key aspect of early Quaker understanding is the belief that the coming of Christ has brought a new covenant (a new relationship between God and humanity) in which the immediate presence of Christ in Spirit has replaced the outwardly mediated ways in which God related to humanity in the old covenant.

In the old covenant God’s presence was to be found in a temple made of stone (The Temple in Jerusalem) and access to God was mediated through a human priesthood (the Aaronic priesthood). The people of God were led by human leaders (e.g. Moses) and God’s law (the Ten Commandments) was written on stone. In the new covenant Christ **fulfils all these outward and mediated forms inwardly and spiritually.** He is the spiritual substance of the old outward covenant. Christ is the eternal high priest who offers everyone access to God. As a result, God may now dwell in a temple made of living stone (the human body). Christ has become the inward and spiritual leader of God’s people and he writes God’s law on their hearts (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

The early Quakers believed that the primitive Christianity of the Apostles was the life of a gathered community taught directly by the risen Christ (Gwyn 1986, p.36). They therefore believed that the true function of preaching was to enable people to hear Christ’s voice within them. When this was achieved there was no longer any need for human teachers (Wilcox 1995, p.38). Such a view had far-reaching consequences for Quaker practice and for the Quaker relationship with other Christian groups.

Based on the fulfilment of Joel’s prophesy at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-21) early Friends believed that the Spirit of Christ might speak and act through anyone regardless of gender, age, education or social standing. This was particularly significant in terms of the freedom it conferred on Quaker women to fulfil the roles of prophet, preacher and minister by the direct call of the Spirit.

<b>The Old Covenant</b>	<b>The New Covenant</b>
For Jews	For Jews, Gentiles and all nations
From Sinai	The Law of life from heavenly Sion
A “thing decayed” having “many outward things	“Christ hath abolished all outward things.”

The Priest's lips to preserve people's knowledge	Christ's lips to preserve people's knowledge
Law written on stone	Law written in the heart
Sanctuary, tabernacle, temple	The bodies of believers are the temple of God
The High Priest lights candles and lamps in the temple	Christ lightens everyone's spirit with his heavenly light
Sacrifices and offerings	Christ offered himself once for all and ended outward sacrifice
Aaronic priesthood	Christ is the everlasting High Priest after the order of Melchizedec
The priests live in the chamber of the temple	Christ lives in the chambers of the heart
The Feast of Passover	Jews in spirit pass out of spiritual Egypt and feed on Christ the heavenly Passover
The priesthood of one tribe	All believers are priests, both male and female
Circumcision in the flesh by priests	Circumcision in the spirit by Christ
Outward death for those resisting the High Priest or Moses	Eternal death for those resisting Christ the heavenly High Priest and prophet
The spirit poured out on the House of Israel	The spirit poured out on all flesh
The observation of days, months, feasts etc.	Eternal heavenly feast day of Christ
Outward Sabbath	Eternal rest day of Christ
Swearing oaths	Christ, the oath of God, abolishes swearing
Moses is the leader of the outward Jews	Christ is the leader and commander of his people and calls all people
Of natural and outward things	Of inward and spiritual things

From:

Wilcox, C (1995) *Theology and Women's Ministry in Seventeenth Century English Quakerism* (Edwin Mellen Press), p.36-37

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