

The Quaker Basics (The Universal Light)

By

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I've been talking with a wide variety of Quakers these past few months, discussing with them what it means to be a Quaker. **It's been an interesting experience.** When I tell evangelical Quakers what progressive Quakers believe, they often say, "That's not Quakerly!" When I tell progressive Quakers what evangelical Quakers believe, they say the same thing. **It seems the only things Quakers agree upon is that other Quakers aren't real Quakers.**

What does it mean to be Quaker? **If we could visit the early 1700's and ask Quakers that question, they would likely talk about not having creeds or pastors, about worshiping in silence under the guidance of the Spirit.** They would no doubt mention pacifism. While they were telling us these things, we would notice they were speaking in the plain language of *thee* and *thou*, that they didn't take off their hats and bow to us, and were dressed in plain clothing lacking any ornamentation. **Indeed, were it possible to invent a time machine and transport those Quakers from that era to this one, they would be delighted to see that Quakerism had endured, but would be mystified, if not downright appalled, by the religious metamorphosis and mutations of modern Quakerism.**

Any Quaker who claims to follow a pure, unadulterated version of Quakerism is either uninformed, arrogant, or odd. **Quakerism has undergone vast changes over the past 350 years.** This isn't bad. In fact, our survival as a religion likely depended on it. Religions adjust to changes in cultures and advancements in knowledge or they wither and die. **Mormons no longer practice polygamy, Christians in Massachusetts no longer kill witches, and a few months ago I was at the Indianapolis Hebrew Temple and saw no evidence of blood sacrifices.**

Religions change or die.

Even though religions change to accommodate cultural sensitivities and intellectual progress, this is seldom done easily and is often resisted by those who consider such changes a departure from God's Truth.

While we don't always look and act like the Quakers of old, some of our beliefs have endured. **I'd like to spend our next several Sundays together talking about those Quaker values which have enjoyed a long life and deservedly so.** This way, when you tell your Friends you

attend a Quaker meeting and they ask, “What do Quakers believe?”, you will be in a better position to tell them.

We’ll refer to these values as The Quaker Basics. The first Quaker basic is the one on which all the others rest, and that’s our belief in the *equality of God’s presence*. **We believe God is directly accessible to all people, that no person, book, church, or religion enjoys exclusive access to God.** When George Fox, the founder of Quakerism, was imprisoned in 1656, he sent a letter to Friends urging them to “walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in every one.” **The phrase “...that of God in every one.” caught on and is still widely used among the various branches of Quakerism.** This morning, I would like to talk about what that means and why it is important. Let me begin by contrasting it with other Christian perspectives.

I have a friend who believes God is only present in those people who’ve been baptized in the name of Jesus. **While he believes God is present in those who’ve accepted Jesus as their Savior, he believes God only speaks through men, though he doesn’t bring that up when his wife is in the vicinity.**

I have another friend who believes God is only present through the sacraments when administered by a priest. That sounds like magic to me—that if you say the right words and perform the right rituals, God will suddenly be present. But many people believe that and find it helpful.

When you think about it, the distinctive point for most religions are their beliefs about God is known to us. **The theological term for this is *revelation*, and when we use that word in religious circles we’re simply talking about how God reveals God’s self to us.**

We Friends believe the Light of God is in every person of every faith, and even present in those people who profess no faith. **God’s presence in us has nothing to do with anything we’ve done.** It isn’t something we’ve earned. God’s presence in us isn’t something we’ve achieved because we’ve followed a certain ritual or believed a particular doctrine.

Now we might think that some people, because of their behavior, don’t have God’s Presence in them. I would be the first to say that some people seem more aware of God’s Presence in them, that they tend the Light of God in them more tenderly and conscientiously than someone else might. **But even those people who ignore God’s Presence in them are just as loved, just as cherished, just as prized as the most devout saint.** Because the Light of God within us is never extinguished, and there is always hope that even the most immoral people can grow in their awareness of God’s Presence and live in the reality of God’s Presence more fully.

This is salvation, if I may use that term, to the Quaker. **We don't believe God becomes present in our lives when we go to an altar and invite Jesus into our hearts.** We don't believe our kneeling at altar changed God's mind about us. That belief is 19th Century Revivalism, not Quakerism. Nor do we believe God becomes present in our lives when we're baptized in water by someone the Church has authorized to do that. Water can do wondrous things, but it is not a magic potion. **We believe God has always been present in us. We believe authentic spirituality is about becoming more aware of God's presence in us and others.**

We believe in the equality of God's Presence. We believe God can speak through whomever God wishes to speak. **We believe it is dangerously arrogant when any one person, any one church, or any one religion claims to be the only channel through which God can communicate.** And while it seems true that some persons are more sensitive to God's leadings than others, it also seems to be the case that even a blind pig finds an acorn now and then—that persons not known for their spiritual prowess have occasionally hit the nail smack on the head. **Consequently, we believe every person should be accorded the respect of being listened to.**

Our belief in the equality of God's Presence was a radical notion when Quakers first talked about it 350 years. The people who'd put themselves in charge of God's revelation didn't care for it, which is why George Fox found himself in prison in 1656.

You know, friends, if you were to ask me to define God, I would have a very difficult time doing that. If you had asked me at the age of fourteen, I could have told you in a moment who God was. Fourteen year-olds say with certainty things which have confounded theologians for centuries. But now I'm not so sure how to define God, and am increasingly suspicious of persons who can. **But I do believe this—I do believe this God who defies easy description is connected to every person.** I believe God is our common thread, the love which connects all people everywhere. **We sometimes live as if that is not true, as if we have little in common with our enemies, little in common with those the world has taught us to fear, but we do have something in common—God's Presence in us.** I believe when we pay attention to that Spirit of God, when we are acutely aware of God's Presence in us and others, we can live fully, love wastefully, and enjoy lives of deep meaning and great delight.

May God's Spirit in you see the Spirit of God in others!