

Who Are the Quakers?

(Revised 5/13/2001 and approved by the Visalia Friends Meeting for publication.)

By David Chandler

Who are the Quakers? What is Quakerism? You have undoubtedly read about Quakers in your US History classes, but we are commonly misidentified with the Amish, the Shakers, or the Mennonites. We are none of these.



In Visalia your main contact with Quakerism may come as you drive along Hwy 198 east of town near Farmersville. There you will see the Quaker Oaks Christmas tree farm owned by the Lovett family, long time members of our meeting. Our meeting house, designed by Bill Lovett, elegant in its simplicity, lies on a corner of the farm donated to the meeting, hidden under a huge Valley Oak. There is also the [billboard](#) facing the westbound lane

of the highway, used as a canvas for self-expression by the Visalia Friends Meeting.

The pun in the name of the farm conjures perhaps the hollowest point of contact between our culture and Quakerism: Quaker Oats, and the image of a colonial-era man in a big hat.

Quakerism arose in England as the most radical expression of the Protestant reformation. Quakerism must be understood as a product of reformation: a stripping away of the layers of institutional Christianity that were seen as non-essential or even hindrances to faith. When Luther broke away from the Catholic Church he stripped away the authority of the Pope. Luther asserted the "priesthood of all believers," but Lutherans retained the clergy and the sacraments. Other Protestant groups stripped away more. Most Protestants retained, or even promoted, the authority of the Scriptures to the extent that the Bible has been called, by some, the "paper Pope."

During the early 1600's George Fox began a personal quest for spiritual truth. He joined one Protestant group after another, but found none that could "speak to his condition." In stripping off the layers of institutional Christianity he arrived at the mystical center: God within. The opening of the Gospel of John speaks of a light which enlightens every man. This Inner Light, also spoken of as the Holy Spirit, the Divine Presence, or the Risen

Christ, became the cornerstone of Quaker theology. The exclusivity of Christianity, expressed through the initiation rite of baptism, was replaced with universalism: the belief that the same Inner Light is present in all people everywhere.

What George Fox retained of institutional Christianity was the community of believers, or more correctly "seekers." In our "Meeting for Worship" we meet in silence to listen for the "still small voice" of God within. If someone is moved to speak we listen, not only to the speaker, but also to the voice of God within ourselves. Truth is discerned as it resonates widely within the seeking community. Truths that are widely acknowledged through this process become known as Quaker Testimonies. The Bible is retained, but not as a "paper Pope." It is seen as the testimony of the seeking community extended over time.



What, then, do we make of the man in the hat? Surprisingly the hat played an interesting role in early Quakerism. One of the early Quaker Testimonies was to the equality of all people. If God dwells in every person, there can be no assignment of social worth that distinguishes royalty from commoners or elevates one person over another. Removing the hat in the presence of a superior was not just a courtesy but an obligation in 17th century society. As a protest against institutionalized inequality Quakers refused to remove their hats for anyone! Thus the man in the hat, who looks so quaint today, was in the context of his times an example of social radicalism born of spiritual mysticism.

Radicalism born of mysticism has marked Quakers throughout the centuries. Radical literally means going to the root. The practice of quietly seeking the indwelling presence of God is going to the root spiritually. Acting on the basis of revealed Truth rather than social convention leads to a radical style of life.

Respect for "that of God" within each person led William Penn, the Quaker founder of Pennsylvania, to respect native Americans as fully human and worthy of treatment as equals. The norm in that day was to consider them to be sub-human savages who could be killed with impunity like animals. Instead of driving them off by force Penn negotiated with the Indians, making payment for land and working for peaceful coexistence.

John Woolman led the Quakers in colonial America to renounce slavery even before the revolutionary war. Slavery is nowhere denounced in the Bible. Some churches even used

the Bible to defend the practice. But the Testimony that slavery was essentially evil resonated widely among the early Quakers. Quakers formed the core of the Civil War era abolitionist movement. They played a major role in the Underground Railroad, a conspiracy of civil disobedience to help runaway slaves escape to the north.

Along with the liberation of slaves came the struggle for equality of women, led by Susan B. Anthony and other Quaker abolitionists. The push for women's right to vote, their right to hold property, their right to seek custody of their own children in divorce was, in the social context of the day, as radical as the elimination of slavery, and nearly as hard to achieve.

The Testimony that we should not consider others, in whom God dwells, to be our enemies, has led to pacifism. Renunciation of war entails actively working for justice to "remove the occasion for all wars." Peace and justice are inseparable.

What was radicalism in the past is too easily taken for granted today. Radicalism is recognized as such only when it hits closer to home. In the 1980's Quakers were heavily involved, along with other churches in the Sanctuary Movement. Thousands of Salvadorans and Guatemalans fled their homelands because of war and government oppression. They were routinely denied asylum in the US because our government was supporting the governments that were oppressing them. The churches and Friends meetings involved in the Sanctuary Movement organized to smuggle, transport, shelter, and support Central American refugees in acts of civil disobedience, in what has been called the new underground railroad. Some refugees were taken to Canada where they were more readily granted asylum. Others were helped to disappear anonymously into the American landscape.

In other traditions George Fox, William Penn, John Woolman, and Susan B. Anthony might be considered Quaker "Saints." The Quaker tradition doesn't set apart special individuals as "Saints," but if we did Visalia would have its own: [Bard McAllister](#). Bard spent his life fighting for recognition of the fundamental human dignity of farm workers. Bard came to California working under the American Friends Service Committee. His goal was to assess the condition of migrant farm workers and see how their lives could be improved. To truly understand the people he actually became a migrant worker, for a season, along with his whole family, living in migrant housing and working alongside them. He attacked issues as fundamental as sanitation and safe drinking water. Bard comes to mind every time I see the porta-potties in the fields at harvest time. He found workers who could speak articulately about their conditions and organized them to give testimony to the legislature in Sacramento. He was instrumental in bringing safe drinking water to the tiny overlooked farm worker communities of Allensworth and Teviston. He founded [Self Help Enterprises](#), to enable workers to build decent housing for themselves. He was also instrumental in founding [SCICON](#) (Officially, the Clemmie

Gill School of Science and Conservation). SCICON was originally conceived as an educational enrichment program for the children of migrant farm workers. Today it is the crown jewel of the Tulare County educational program. Bard brought people together to turn dreams into realities.

Quakers don't recognize sainthood as a special category because each of us is equally called to let our daily lives express the light within. If you visit the Visalia Friends Meeting you will be invited to sit quietly with us, with no clergy, no sermon, no hymns, no collection plate. You will be invited to seek the light of God's presence within you, as we do within ourselves. As we sit quietly someone may feel called upon to speak briefly, or perhaps not. When we leave we are energized to let our light shine. That is the essence of Quakerism.

