



IYM Quakers

Session One

The Heart of Quakerism



A Personal Relationship with God

- ***A Promise to Seeking Hearts***
- ***Professors and Possessors***
- ***New Birth***

Matthew 5:6

In The Sermon on the Mount Jesus taught that those with a hunger for “righteousness” would find their longing to be satisfied. This was certainly true over 1600 years later for a young man named George Fox.

Fox was born in 1624 in a small English town to parents who modeled righteousness and regularly participated in the parish church. George Fox attended worship also until at age 19, much to his parent’s chagrin, his spiritual unrest caused him to stop. Setting out on a spiritual pilgrimage of sorts, he earnestly sought something that he intuitively knew was missing from all the ritual and religious trappings of the Church of England at that time. In his Journal he describes an experience that seemed to be pivotal for him:



George Fox

But as I had forsaken the priests, so I left the separate preachers also, and those esteemed the most experienced people; for I saw there was none among them all that could speak to my condition. When all my hopes in them and in all men were gone, so that I had nothing outwardly to help me, nor could I 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.

Matthew 7:21-23

Later in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus indicated that simply professing a relationship with God was different than actually possessing one. His words are sobering, indicating that many who assume that they know God actually do not.

In 17th century England there was one officially recognized state church, the Church of England. It was characterized by all of the normal outward trappings of the church including rituals, creeds and elaborate buildings with priests serving as mediators of the grace bestowed by the church. Unfortunately, many of the priests did not serve out of a sense of calling from God or even out of the depths of a relationship with God. Sadly, the Church of England at that time did not possess a vibrant and active experience of God’s presence in its worship. Outwardly there was “church” – inwardly there was emptiness.

When George Fox and the early Friends discovered the reality of a first-hand, personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ they found their experience to be in stark contrast to the spiritual emptiness of “church” as they had known it. To understand Friends today, it is helpful to understand the context from which this movement arose. Many of the emphases of Friends today trace back to reactions against the spiritual emptiness of the 17th century Church of England.

John 3:1-8

The Gospel of John records a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, a Pharisee who was curious about Jesus. In this interchange we find Jesus insisting that what Nicodemus needed was a spiritual rebirth.

Some folks react negatively to terminology like being “born again,” yet the concept is one that is clearly taught by Jesus. Early Friends weren’t afraid of the terminology either, because it accurately described their experience. George Fox was not afraid to speak of the “new birth” or “receiving Christ.”

Today Friends in Indiana Yearly Meeting still insist that a personal relationship with God is at the heart of Quakerism. Friends neither emphasize nor embrace rituals and creeds because they are no substitute for a first-hand experience of God. We agree with early Friends who taught that “Jesus has come to teach His people Himself.”



A Personal Relationship with God

Quakers have similarities to many Christian denominations as well as some striking differences. Newcomers to a Friends Church frequently have basic questions about Quakers. Many are surprised to learn that modern-day Quakers exist, and then wonder why we no longer wear bonnets or broad-brimmed hats. This series, IYM Quakers, is designed to be an introduction to the Quakers in general, and Friends of Indiana Yearly Meeting in particular.

It’s somewhat awkward to refer to Quakers as a church, or even a denomination since the earliest Friends didn’t have the creation of a new organization in mind. They were simply hungry for a personal relationship with God. Early Friends discovered that what their seeking hearts longed for was available through Jesus Christ! Beginning with a young man named George Fox, and spreading like wildfire throughout 17th century England, those who made this discovery became a powerful, spontaneous spiritual movement.

One historian has referred to the period of time from 1650 – 1690 as “The Quaker Explosion.” During this time tens of thousands became a part of this experience which, for a time, was the fastest growing religious movement in the western world.

The similarity of the growth of the Quaker movement with that of the first century church as recorded in the Book of Acts is remarkable. In fact Quakerism has been aptly described as “Primitive Christianity Revived.”