

## George Fox – a Short Bio

I first read George Fox's Journal about 40 years ago. Wow, what an impression it made on my mind and heart. If you have the opportunity, it is a book you can't put down until the end. It's the kind of book that makes you wish there was a sequel! Though there is doubt Quakerism, or the Society of Friends, is alive today, it was a vast move of God beginning with the Spirit of God getting hold of George Fox and spreading like a fire in England, first through his ministry and then through many others. He talked about inward changes, inward fulfillment, inward knowledge of God, and inward conforming to the image of Jesus Christ (Romans 8:29)!

George Fox, 1624 - 1691, was born and grew up in Leicestershire in the turbulent times leading up to the Civil War. At 12, he was apprenticed to a local tradesman, but he left home in 1643 to seek 'the truth', through listening to preachers and others, and considering spiritual things. He knew the Bible intimately, and it was central to his life, but he looked for other sources of inspiration too.

He came to believe that everyone, men and women alike, could encounter God themselves, through Jesus, so that priests were not needed. This experience need not be in a church: these 'steeple houses', and the tithes that supported them, were therefore unnecessary. Those who believed this became known as 'Friends of Truth'.

He began talking to everyone he met about his ideas. He was soon in trouble with the authorities, and was imprisoned for the first time in Nottingham in 1649. According to Fox, the term 'Quaker' originated from a sarcastic remark by the judge in Fox's second trial, in Derby, in 1650. In 1651, he was offered a commission in the army, but refused saying that 'he lived in the virtue of that life and power that took away the occasion for all wars'.

In 1652, he climbed Pendle Hill in Lancashire, where he had a vision of a "great people to be gathered" waiting for him. The beginning of the Society of Friends (Quakers) is usually dated from the day, soon afterwards, when Fox preached to large crowds Cumbria. Some days later, he was at Swarthmoor Hall, near Ulverston, home of Judge Fell, Margaret Fell and their family. His ideas were warmly received, and Swarthmoor became a vital hub for the Society of Friends, in Margaret's capable hands.

Soon he and other Friends, the 'Valiant Sixty' or 'Publishers of Truth', were travelling all over the country, reporting back to Margaret Fell. Fox went to Cornwall, Wales and Scotland. There was a constant threat of persecution, but Judge Fell, though never a Friend himself, did a lot to protect them until he died in 1658. It was easy to find a Quaker guilty if you wanted to, as they wouldn't swear oaths (explaining they always told the truth) they refused to pay tithes, and didn't show proper respect to their 'betters' by bowing and doffing their hats (believing people are all equal).

In 1660 Quakers and other dissidents were suspected of plotting against the new king. Fox responded with the first formulation of the Peace Testimony, stressing the commitment to nonviolence. Nevertheless, in 1664, Fox was imprisoned for over two years. He wrote a journal, covering his life thus far, and kept it up until he died. He also made plans to organize the growing Society of Friends, devising a framework of local, monthly and yearly meetings that persists, more or less, to the present day.

In May 1669, Fox visited meetings in Ireland. On October 27, he and Margaret Fell were married after a round of “clearness” meetings to check whether they should. More than ninety Friends witnessed the marriage certificate. Their close partnership continued, but they could rarely spend much time together during their 20 years of marriage, due to Fox’s continued travels, much persecution, and periods of imprisonment for them both.

By now, there were many Friends in the Caribbean and in the colonies along the Atlantic coast of North America. In August 1671, after attending the first Yearly Meeting in London, Fox and 12 companions set sail for Barbados, arriving in October. The Barbadian economy was slave-based, and some Friends were slave-owners. Fox protested at the poor treatment of slaves, and said they should be released after thirty years of service.

In January 1672, they sailed to North America, via Jamaica. After seven weeks, they landed at Patuxent, in Chesapeake Bay, south of what is now Baltimore. Here there was a large Meeting – the forerunner of Baltimore Yearly Meeting. George and some others then went to a large Meeting on Long Island, before sailing to Rhode Island, where the Governor was a Friend. In June some of the party went north to Boston, while Fox and others went south, first to New Jersey, and then back to Chesapeake Bay before going on to Virginia and Carolina. In January 1673, they were back in Patuxent, where Fox spent the next four months meeting the local “Indian” tribes, an experience he found very productive. They returned home to Bristol in May.

By 1677, Fox was aging, but went with Robert Barclay, William Penn and others to Holland and Germany, where they saw the effects of the religious wars in other parts of Europe. In the 1680s he spent much time lobbying Parliament against persecution, and went again to Holland in 1684. He lived to see the fruit of his labors when the 1687 Declaration of Indulgence, confirmed by the 1689 Act of Toleration, finally enabled dissenters to worship freely.

After such a productive life in God’s Spirit, George Fox died in London in January 1691. He was buried at Bunhill Fields, a non-conformist burial ground on the edge of the City of London.