

NOTES to accompany the study of THE VISION of George Fox.

These notes are derived from two sources:

1. **Truth of the Heart**, *an anthology of George Fox*, by Rex Ambler, and
2. **Quakerism**, *A study guide on the Religious Society of Friends*, by Leonard S. Kenworthy.

Rummaging around in **Truth of the Heart** for background information on THE VISION, it became apparent that the greatest aid to understanding the letter would be an understanding of the religious – political circumstances in which Friends were living at the time. It was not at all a time of sweetness and light.

The extracts are given page numbers from which they were taken. Ambler's book carries a straight through page number, also page numbers indicating the section, i. e. pp. 3:27 indicates the extract to be in section 3, item 27. Each extract is identified in Ambler's book with its source, epistle, journal, etc. The following up on this aspect is left to the reader.

Not satisfied that these extracts from **Truth of the Heart** were sufficient, the second reference, Kenworthy's **Quakerism** was explored (again). Kenworthy paints a picture of antagonism between followers of Fox and the current culture unlike most others but sticks to specifics. The two tables listing the differences with Church authorities and the Political authorities are exemplary. (Note that there are number of parallels today amongst religious and political leaders with these “ancient” positions of Friends!).

These notes are not meant to be complete or orderly. They are listed as found in the scouring of relevant items. They are meant to help understand the passion and the grace in THE VISION still in George Fox after thirty years. 1679 preceded the travels of George Fox in the Americas and his subsequent setting up of meetings in that place and in England to provide the corporate gathering of Quakers.

Your comments are welcome, especially if this material has been helpful to you.

Ted Church

churchted25@comcast.net

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References concatenated for a single document to be exported as PDF.

Reference: **Truth of the Heart**, *an anthology of George Fox*, by Rex Ambler, Quaker Books, September 2001, Friends House, London.

p. 200 The Vision. From Making Sense of Fox, The final essay in the text.

“The remarkable letter that concludes the Anthology is from 1679, when Fox was 55, and it summarizes perfectly, perhaps better than he had ever done before, what his vision had been all these thirty-odd years. It celebrates truth as the source of all the good things he and others had experienced, for truth exposes all the falsehoods their lives had been based on, freeing them from the narrowness of “self” which cut them off from life, and fills them with love for the 'universal creation' to which they truly belong, and for the 'infinite and incomprehensible God' who is the source of all truth and life and peace. It is Fox's hymn to truth.”

p. 108 Witness of Words, pp. 3:27

“Be bold in the power of truth, and valiant for it upon the earth, triumphing over and trampling all deceit under foot, inward and outward; having done it in yourselves in particular, ye have power over the world in general And being written all in one another's hearts, have all one voice and the pure language of truth, where in all plainness of speech things may be spoken in nakedness of heart one unto another in the eternal unity in one spirit.”

p. 109 Modernization of pp. 3.27

“Be bold in the power that truth gives you, and be valiant for truth on the earth, treading down and triumphing over and trampling all deceit under foot, in yourselves and in others. And having done that yourselves in particular you will have power over the world in general And since you are all written in one another's hearts, see that you all speak with one voice and in the pure language of truth. For there, in the plainness of speech, things can be said in complete openness of heart to one another, with the eternal unity of the one spirit.”

p. 197 The Essay last para.

“. . . the movement that Fox helped to initiate tended to form around a distinctive way of life, which was intended, and understood, as a 'testimony' to the truth they could not adequately express in words. To be more specific, it formed around a set of testimonies, each of which responded to a different form of evil or deceit. The refusal of Friends to use violence, for example, is described as 'a certain testimony unto all the world of the truth in our hearts in this particular' (3:42), the particular in this case being the violence readily used in the society of that time for religious and political ends. It was only twelve years since the end of the civil war, and only eleven since the king himself had been beheaded. In this very year when the 'peace declaration' was made, 1660, the king's son returned to restore the monarchy and to crush any movement that sought to undermine it again. The Quakers were prime suspects. Their response to accusations made against them was 'to speak the plain truth of our hearts (2.75, also from the declaration) which persuaded them they could not and should not do violence to anyone. In any case they had been liberated from the ego-based desires which made people want to resort to violence (3:42, 43). And they hoped that that their active refusal of violence, more than any arguments they might offer, would persuade people to 'receive' their testimony as true. This too could take place without words, although words, like the declaration, might also sometimes be useful.”

p. 198 The Essay continued

“Similarly with the cause of justice, Friends' testimony to the truth 'in this particular' was a lived protest against the gross inequalities and abuses of their time, for these two were based on self-deception. The needs of the poor had been heard once again in the civil war, but despite many promises they were disregarded in the Commonwealth of the 1650's and wholly rejected with the return of the king: hierarchy and privilege were once again established. So Fox denounced the self-importance of the fashionable middle-classes which had blinded them to the reality of their world: your 'ambition and pride, loftiness and haughtiness stops the ear from the Lord . . . and stops up the eye with which you should see yourselves, and stops up your ear from hearing the poor' (3:52). It is the preoccupation with self that makes them insensitive and that leads to ill-treatment of others and social injustice. In response to all this Friends were called to do justly in all their interactions with people, for that is to treat people as they are (3:48). It is, again, a matter of living on the basis of truth, which had given them their freedom and peace of mind, but it is also a matter of bearing witness effectively to the truth that could also free others (3:54), and of helping to establish a social order based on trust instead of fear and violence (3.58, 59).

p. 198 The Essay

“. . . society in general (w)ould (not be expected to) adopt the moral principles of Friends, Without an experience and acceptance of the truth in their own lives people would be quite unable to live a life based on truth. So, until they do come to that realisation they have to reply on something else, and Fox seems to accept that people will need the law, government and even state violence to bring some justice and discipline in society (3:60f; cf: 1:95). and that in so far as Friends are in society they will need them too (3:60). (Fox) seems to say that the political leaders *ought* to base their actions on truth, which, as he says elsewhere (2:24), is the only sound basis of 'true order'.

. . . Fox saw the society of his time failing even minimal standards of justice. (Could he and his friends) ask, realistically, whether the state might be inherently incapable of delivering the justice they were looking for(?) . . . from 1662 to 1687 their minds were preoccupied with the violence that the state was visiting *on them*.

. . . their response to this persecution was to plead for justice by setting forth the facts (3:61, 68), so that 'truth may stand over the head of the liar' (3.68), but also to turn the injustice into a form of witness. “your imprisonments will reach to the prisoned that the persecutor prisons in himself (3:69), which is of course 'that of God' which he refuses to acknowledge. The way in which suffering is accepted, without retaliation or abuse, can tough the feelings of the persecutor who may have thought that the suffering was necessary. It exposes the illusion that violence is the only answer to conflict. Fox's offer of the 'other cheek' conveys 'the truth' to his opponent so powerfully that it changes his heart, and his hatred turns to love (3.71).

. . . Living with the truth may *win* others, but it may just as easily make them fearful and angry, because truth would threaten the world they had so carefully constructed to make themselves safe. Fox told Friends not to be surprised if they suffer, and go on suffering: 'They that will live godly shall suffer persecution' (3.72). 'Self-religion', i. e. religion devised by the self and devoted to the self, needs to defend itself with violence, whether it is illusory or not (3.66),

. . . the disappointment of Fox and his Friends must have been massive. Those in authority had largely rejected the new movement of the spirit, which had promised to lead the world into an era of justice and peace (3.77,78). Since the opportunity had been missed the Friends of Truth could only now wait until another such opportunity came, as it surely would (3:82), and in the meantime be faithful to the truth they had received (cf. 2:89f). In one of his last papers, from 1689, he urges Friends to 'hold

fast to this hope that is set before us' (3:83).

p. 128 Government

3:62 Keep out of the restless, discontented, disquieted spirit of the world about the government, for you know it has been always our way to seek the good of all and to live peaceably under the government, and to seek their eternal good, peace and happiness in the Lord Jesus Christ and to lay our innocent sufferings before them, who have suffered as lambs and sheep and made no resistance, but have 'prayed for them that persecuted us'. (*Epistle 369 (1681)*). The rough quotation is from *Matthew 5:44*.

P. 128 Persecution

3:63 Great persecutions are in most counties in England and many are imprisoned in many places, and their goods spoiled. (*Epistle 315, 'to Friends in Barbados'. 1675*).

3:64 For we are under great persecution, betwixt thirteen and fourteen hundred in prison, an account of which hath lately been delivered to the king. Besides the great spoil and havoc which has been made of Friends' goods by informers, and besides the great spoil upon the two-thirds of our estates and upon the twenty pound a month acts, and for not going to the steeple-house, and besides many are imprisoned and premunured for not swearing allegiance, both men, women, widows and maids, and many are fined and cast into prison, as rioters, for meeting to worship God. And we are kept out of our meetings in streets and highways in many places of the land, and beaten and abused. And therefore prize the liberty, bot natural and spiritual, that you enjoy. (*Epistle 386, 'to Friends in Charleston in Carolina'. 1683*).

3:65 And the cause of all this our sufferings is not for any evil, but for things relating to the worship of our God and in obedience to his requirings of us. *Journal (for 1661), ed. Nickalls, p.421*.

Notes from **Quakerism**, *A study guide on the Religious Society of Friends*, by Leonard S. Kenworthy, Print Press, 1981. Prepared for a study of THE VISION, by George Fox.

p. 9 Quote;- *Primitive Christianity Revived*. These ideas were not the sole discovery of George Fox. They were not even new. Fox was no religious revolutionary; he was a religious reviver, struggling to rediscover the authenticity, simplicity, power, and vitality of first century Christianity.

Many of those early Christians had know God directly. He was a power in their lives. They were filled with His love, willing to sacrifice and undergo horrendous persecutions to testify to his all-pervading, all-satisfying Presence. And their lives were often high testimony to their faith.

Fox burned with a desire to recapture and revive that kind of Christianity.

And his message was Christian. It was not a thin humanism or a vague mysticism; although it was both humane and mystical. In the words of William Penn, it was “primitive Christianity revived.” In the words of Fox: “Christ is come and doth dwell in the hearts of His people. . . .” Or, “I declared God’s everlasting truth . . . that they might all come to know Christ to be their teacher to instruct them, their counselor to direct them, their shepherd to feed them, their bishop to oversee them.”

Clashes with the Church Authorities. Even though Fox considered himself a religious reviver, most church leaders of his day in England considered him a revolutionist. He was a challenge to their authority, a disbeliever, a rebel, a renegade in their ranks. And that was true of all those who joined with Fox. The contrasts in belief between the church officials and early Friends were often stark, For example: -

Where they declared the doctrine of human depravity,	Early Friends proclaimed the possibility of human perfection.
Where they declared the doctrine of the elect,	Early Friends declared that all men, women, and children are elect.
Where they believed that revelations were limited to a few individuals and had stopped hundreds of years ago.	Early Friends believed that revelations were still occurring and that anyone could have such revelations from God.
Where they believed in the supremacy of the Bible,	Early Friends believed in the supremacy of the Inner Light.
Where they upheld the sacraments as essential aspects of Christianity,	Early Friends considered them as substitutes for the one and only sacrament, a Christian life.
Where they relied on the preaching of a single individual (a man), in their services,	Early Friends maintained that all worshippers are potential ministers, including women and children.
Where they utilized stained glass windows, an altar, and music to	Early Friends considered them deterrents to true worship.

promote worship,

Where they depended on a few church officials to make decisions for their congregations,

Early Friends stressed the inclusion of all members of their groups in making decisions, including women and children.

Was it any wonder, then, that so many of the church leaders and their adherents clashed with Fox and his co-workers?

Clashes with the Political Authorities. - Fox and his followers were also in disagreement with the political as well as with the religious authorities. Among the areas in which these two groups differed were the following:

Where the political leaders demanded that all witnesses take an oath on the bible to insure truthfulness,

Early Friends refused to take such an oath, believing it contrary to the injunction not to swear, letting their yeas be yeas and their nays, nays.

Where they required people to remove their hats in courts and before Royalty as a sign of respect,

Early Friends maintained that hats should be removed only in the presence of the Ultimate Authority – God.

Where they relied upon war as a major means of settling disputes, and required all able-bodied men to enlist,

Early Friends refuse to take part in fighting.

Where they limited severely the civil liberties of citizens,

Early Friends worked strenuously to defend and extend civil liberties.

In the light of such challenges by Quakers to the existing political order, it is understandable that so many government officials condemned Fox and his followers and sought in various ways to curb their activities.

Persecutions: In seventeenth century England the Quakers were obviously not only a nuisance, they were a threat to the status quo, religiously and politically. Consequently they were attacked verbally and physically, beaten and stoned. Laws were passed against them and they were often imprisoned.

For example, the Conventicle Act in 1664 made it a crime for more than five persons to meet for worship in any type of service other than that of the Church of England. Because of that act and other stern measures, over 2000 Friends were in prison within a year of its passage. In 1681 there were at least 1000 Quakers in prison and 1685, approximately 1400. And the prisons in which they were incarcerated were filthy, dank, windy, cold places, unfit for human habitation.

Yet most Friends were able to endure such persecutions and some even deepened their faith because of these tests of their convictions. Those in prison held services and peached to other inmates. And some of those outside the prisons petitioned the government to allow them to replace their fellow-sufferers in jails, although their requests were never granted.

There is even an account of the children of Bristol holding meetings for worship while their parents were imprisoned.

To assist the Quaker prisoners, a Meeting for Sufferings was established – a term which continues today as the name for the executive body of London Yearly Meeting (sic.)

As the leader of this new movement, George Fox did not escape incarceration. Eight times he was sent to prison, spending six years in jails and prisons, under almost unbearable conditions.

Some faults of Early Friends. Seventeenth century England was not marked by toleration or tact and early Friends did not always escape the spirit of that age. Despite their message of love and forgiveness, they could be uncompromising and unforgiving. What they considered certainty and conviction, others considered prejudice and fanaticism. In their fervor as new converts, they sometimes provoked opposition and encouraged persecution by their words and deeds.

Nor was Fox without fault in this respect. As Rufus Jones pointed out in his book on the Life and Message of George Fox:

Though usually humble and tender, he yet sometimes was over-conscious of his importance and he occasionally shared the tendency of his age to speak with an air of infallibility and finality. He felt undue satisfaction in the calamities which overtook his persecutors, though we should admit that it was a very human trait.