

MEET THE Friends

by Paul Anderson

You are my friends
if your do
what I command.
Jesus (John 15:14)

QUAKER TESTIMONIES & DISTINCTIVES

Early Friends sought to recover the spiritual vitality of the first Christians, and this led them to raise several *testimonies* to what it means to follow Jesus. While testimonies are timeless convictions, they were applied in timely and distinctive ways. This is why Friends' testimonies and distinctives should *not* be confused.

Friends' testimonies include the convictions that *worship* should be in Spirit and in truth; that *ministry* should be universal and Spirit-filled; that *sacramental reality* is inward and unmediated; that *peaceable means* to *peaceable ends* should be prioritized; that *plain speech* and *simple living* are normative for Christians; and that Christ can be trusted to *lead His followers directly* if they will attend His present leadership.

But testimonies are not mere "options" for Christians to embrace if they care to or discard if they don't. They are upheld as direct implications of Christ-centered living. Timely expressions of these convictions, however, have led to interesting and sometimes quaint developments, and these are recognized as Quaker *distinctives*.

Seekers of Truth. A common mark of early Friends was a great concern for truth. We see this in their honesty in business, plain speech, and simple way of life. For example:

- Quaker merchants were among the first in their region to fix prices on goods based on their fair value assessment. In contrast to the barter system, fixed prices meant that even a child could be sent to the store without worry of being overcharged.
- Friends used "plain speech" to address one another because it was more personal. Using the plural "you" exalted another, but "thee" and "thou" were more intimate. They elevated the warmth of relationship over positional status.
- Friends refused to swear or take oaths because this implied they were being more truthful than at other times. Friends "affirmed" they told the truth, and let "yes" mean yes, and "no" mean no. The simplicity of truthful living has been admired by many and even plagiarized by some. The rosy-cheeked Quaker on the oatmeal carton reminds us all of that desirable (and marketable!) state: "nothing added."

MEET THE FRIENDS SERIES

① Quaker Beginnings, ② Quaker Testimonies & Distinctives, ③ Friends and Worship, ④ Friends and Ministry, ⑤ Friends and Sacraments, ⑥ Friends as Peacemakers, ⑦ Friends and the Kingdom of God

Alternatives to the Norm. As seekers of truth responded to their Lord, they found that life was rarely doomed to remain the way it was. Under the Spirit's leadership there is always a creative alternative to the norm.

- As an alternative to more addictive substances, such Quaker families as the Frys, Rowntrees, and Cadburys became leading innovators in the chocolate industry in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Quakers led the way in developing nutritious biscuits and crackers, and they also were leaders in the development of soaps and antiseptics.
- In 1801, out of a concern to see children educated, Joseph Lancaster offered to educate all who would come, regardless of their ability to pay. Since many were poor, he used older students as monitors to teach the younger ones. The innovative plan worked so well that soon he had over a thousand students, yet because the tutors *also* learned by teaching, his greatest contribution may have been to the educational theory that *involvement is the best means of learning*.

• In reaction to alcohol abuse among laborers, a Quaker pharmacist in Philadelphia perfected and began to market a nonalcoholic beverage made from roots. Doubting that either "root beverage" or "herb tea" would catch on, a friend suggested something like, "Why don't you call it 'root beer,' Mr. Hires?"

Advocates of the Oppressed. In obeying the commands of Christ and caring for the down-and-out, Friends took seriously the words of Jesus, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (Matthew 25:40).

- The persecutions of early Friends aroused their concern for the condition of the imprisoned. For a while Lancaster meeting met in Lancaster prison because there were more members in jail than outside. Friends still carry a deep concern for prison ministries and the plight of inmates.
- Out of concern about the poor treatment of the retarded and the insane, William and Esther Tuke began *The Retreat* in 1796, which was the first institutional effort to care for the mentally ill. They saw that love and nurture were more helpful than chains and confinement, and Quakers in Ireland and America were likewise pioneers in mental health care.
- Friends were among the first to speak clearly against slavery. Although it took four decades to come to unity, it is said that by 1800 not a single slave was owned by a Quaker. Levi Coffin of Fountain City, Indiana, was called "the president of the Underground Railroad," and he assisted as many as 2,000 slaves safely into Canada.

QUAKER TESTIMONIES often cut against the grain of society, and Spirit-led stands are rarely appreciated fully until the current crisis is past. Obedience to Christ may involve sacrifice, yet honesty and upright living may also bring unexpected blessing. It is said that Friends went to Philadelphia to *do good*, and they *did well*.

Whatever the outcome, those who would be "friends" of Jesus are called to be faithful to His leadership and example. As we follow Him, we testify to the truth, and even our distinctives as Quakers become signposts to the difference Christ's leading makes in our lives and in the world.