

MEET THE Friends

by Paul Anderson

Christ is come
and coming.

George Fox

FRIENDS AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD

As we consider the roots and fruits of Quakerism our goal is not to become "just like" past Quakers. This would be the most *un-Quaker* thing to do. Their genius was not one of conformity to an outward standard; rather, it involved the transformation of one's total life by the creative power of the Holy Spirit. As opposed to copying the past, our question as contemporary Friends is: "How can we be touched by the same spiritual power that changed their lives and their worlds?" The answer to this question may lie within an understanding of the Friends concept of the *kingdom of God*.

Friends seek *simplicity* because of the priority of the kingdom in their lives. Friends throw all their energies into *worship* and *ministry* because these compose the work of the kingdom. Friends embrace the infinite number of ways Christ is revealed in everyday life because they are alert to the immanent presence of the kingdom. Friends seek to make all they do a living witness to the Prince of Peace and the Lord of Love, because it is under His kingship that we seek to live.

Although kingdom language does not dominate Quaker journals and epistles, it does offer an overall view of how Friends perceived themselves and their callings. They experienced what Jesus proclaimed, that "the kingdom of God is at hand." They had tasted of its advent, and the only appropriate response was to include others within that kingdom. The "day of the Lord's visitation" is *now*, and each must respond to his or her encounter with Christ.

BELIEVING that Christ is present is to say the kingdom is *already* come. But realizing that all have not turned to worship and serve Him is to confess that the kingdom is *not fully realized*. This tension between the "already" and the "not yet" is what added the urgency to Friends' evangelistic thrust. Their passion was to work for the day when God's will would be done on earth as perfectly as it is in heaven. Then the kingdoms of this world would indeed become the kingdom of our Lord and Christ. We too become a part of that process as we live under the lordship of the King.

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

Quakerism is essentially an *adventure in Christ-centered living*. We diminish all else that we might heighten Christ's place within us and among us. Living into the kingdom of God begins with unreserved allegiance to Christ, its King. Christ is to be the center of all we do. The rewards of such a commitment are eternal, but the price to be paid may also be high.

Jesus calls for His would-be followers to *count the cost*. Membership in one kingdom excludes us from membership in the other. No one can serve two masters. To encounter the reigning power and love of Christ forces a judgment. As Bonhoeffer says, "There are two ways possible of encountering Jesus: man must die or he must put Jesus to death."* Both self and Christ cannot occupy the same throne at once. Jesus says, "If anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me."

OBEDIENCE TO CHRIST may also involve *suffering*. If we are called to continue the ministry of our Lord, who was crucified, we also must be willing to carry a cross. Yet the burden of the cross never comes without our Lord providing the means with which to bear it. Jesus invites us saying, "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest for your souls." (Matthew 11:28) Life is never without its burdens, and following Christ may bring more hardship than ease. However, as we trade our yokes for His, which fits properly, the more we are able to bear.

The way of the kingdom turns the values of a society *upside down*. The first become last, and the last become first. The way of the world says, "Fortunate are the aggressive and shrewd, for they shall prosper financially." But the way of the kingdom says, "Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth," and so on. The way of the kingdom involves being the advocates of the defenseless, supporters of the oppressed, lovers of the unlovely. The way of the kingdom involves lifting the burdens of human need around us because of the reign of Christ in our lives.

As Neave Brayshaw says, the Society of Friends "has rediscovered, neither easily nor quickly, the truth that it exists not for itself, but for the world's healing."**

FRIENDS' belief that the kingdom is among us had a powerful impact in the past, and yet it may also have a more powerful impact today. As we consider today as our "day of visitation," it cannot but change the way we interpret our purpose for living. Our mission, again, is to point the scattered sheep to their one, true Shepherd. And our message is that Christ is come to teach His people himself. *Christ is come and coming!* Let us prepare the way for His coming because of our response to His already having come within our lives and in the world.

*Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, Harper & Row, 1978, p. 35.

** A. Neave Brayshaw, *The Quakers: Their Story and Message*, 1969, p. 348.