

*Quaker faith and practice: the book of Christian discipline of the Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain*

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## Introduction

This book of faith and practice constitutes the Christian discipline of the Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain. Discipline is not now a popular word. It has overtones of enforcement and correction but its roots lie in ideas of learning and discipleship. Discipline in our yearly meeting consists for the most part of advice and counsel, the encouragement of self-questioning, of hearing each other in humility and love.

Words must not become barriers between us, for no one of us can ever adequately understand or express the truth about God. Yet words are our tools and we must not be afraid to express the truth we know in the best words we can. It is this conviction which has prompted the selection of a wide variety of extracts for inclusion in this book, confirming our testimony that truth cannot be confined within a creed. We must trust that faith is robust, compassionate and 'not quick to take offence', and that the Spirit which gives the words is communicated through them.

Our book of discipline was first issued – in manuscript form – in 1738. There had been requests for a compilation to be made of the minutes of advice and counsel which had been sent out from time to time in earlier years to quarterly and monthly meetings. The first printed collection appeared in 1783 with many deletions and additions. Every generation has felt the need for revision; the present is the tenth edition. Pressure for revision has always come from the generality of Friends, but each revision has met with resistance from some who had lived with the old words and had found them entirely satisfying. Nevertheless, it has been the experience of Britain Yearly Meeting that necessary change has, despite occasions of great tension, been effected in love and unity.

From 1861, the book of discipline was divided into separate chapters – later, parts – *Christian doctrine*, *Christian practice*, and *Church government*. In 1921, *Christian doctrine* became *Christian life, faith and thought*, substantially a new work attempting, as was said in the preface, 'to state truth, not by formulating it, but by expressing it through the vital personal and corporate experience of Friends'. Thus began the use of extracts which has subsequently been developed as an acceptable method of expressing the breadth of our theology.

The 1959 revision brought together *Christian life, faith and thought* and *Christian practice* into one volume, *Christian faith and practice*, which, with the 1967 revision of *Church government* (including the 1964 revision of *Advices and queries*) comprised the book of discipline at the time of the present revision in 1994.

Again, in 1985, London Yearly Meeting responded to proposals for revision that had arisen 'not from the centre but from local meetings and individual Friends, as well as committees', and asked Meeting for Sufferings to appoint a revision committee. The previous thirty years had seen changes in language, in religious thought and social attitudes and in the nature of British society itself. Lives of ordinary people had been affected by advances in communication. Images of famine, war and disaster, wherever they occur in the world, are now brought into our own homes. The immediacy of our knowledge oppresses us with the feeling that the distress and violence of our time are greater than ever before. In Britain, however, it has been the good fortune of this generation to be free from war and conscription and, though poverty, homelessness and unemployment are widespread, many live with expectation of comfort, care and length of life.

There is no yardstick by which the experience of one generation can be judged against that of another, but we do know that, whatever the circumstances, we are called to rediscover the Quaker way and to find appropriate words to express it. We are not without consolation. Signals come to us from all over the world that there is in the human spirit a prompting towards a better way that is persistent and will not be put down. This enduring hope confirms the truth asserted in John's gospel that the light shines in darkness.

The arrangement of the text within this book is intended to show the interdependence of our faith and our practice. Therefore matters of church government no longer stand alone, but are integrated with other material in order to encourage deeper understanding of the nature of our organisation as an expression of community, of the right ordering of our affairs and of the religious foundations on which our structures are built. The revised advices and queries – which may prompt the ministry that enriches and deepens our meetings for worship – form the opening chapter of the book. They are an essential part of it but they are also printed separately.

Worship is at the heart of Quaker experience. For God is met in the gathered meeting and through the Spirit leads us into ways of life and understandings of truth which we recognise as Quaker. As we follow these leadings in our community and in the wider world we are enabled to reflect on their meaning, testing our vision within our discipline and tradition. This book follows this sequence. It begins with worship and the gathering and ordering of our worshipping community; then it shows the ways of life, both individual and corporate, which have sprung from our faith, and the testimonies into which we have been guided. The book includes accounts of the lives of individual Friends whose commitment is an example to us. Towards the close of the book come statements and descriptions of our faith that spring from our experience. These in turn lead on to the final chapter, which indicates some of the ways in which the Holy Spirit is still known among us and challenges us to create anew a Society in which human lives are changed.

Special attention has been given to the inclusion of a wider range of contributions from women, from earlier days as well as more recent times.

Friends are enjoined in *Advices and queries* to 'avoid hurtful criticism and provocative language', but sensitivity to gender-exclusive language and the hurt it causes has only now become recognised amongst us. Effort has been made to avoid such modes of expression, accepting that quotations from earlier times must remain in the language of their age, but exercising discretion when there has been a choice of extracts. The aim has been to be truthful to the testimony of the past as well as the present. Similarly, we recognise the likelihood that in other areas the language used now may in the future seem insensitive.

Britain Yearly Meeting is becoming increasingly aware that it is part of a world-wide Quaker family. It is privileged to be geographically where George Fox was called to undertake his mission and where Margaret Fell nourished the publishers of truth, but there are now over sixty yearly meetings together with other groupings of Friends in six continents. Friends World Committee for Consultation performs an essential role in supporting this international community and Britain Yearly Meeting is committed to this work.

Many other yearly meetings publish their own books of discipline and we are finding, increasingly, that we are learning from and valuing a shared understanding. Writings by Friends in other countries which reflect our shared experience find a place in our book.

The extension of Quakerism world-wide has added diversity of theological outlook, varieties of worship and forms of organisation. When three hundred Young Friends from thirty-four countries met in North Carolina in 1985, they were 'challenged, shaken up, at times even enraged by these differences in each other'. After much travail, they came through this experience and were able to say, in a final epistle:

We have wondered whether there is anything Quakers today can say as one. After much struggle we have discovered that we can proclaim this: there is a living God at the centre of all, who is available to each of us as a present teacher at the very heart of our lives. We seek as people of God to be worthy vessels to deliver the Lord's transforming word, to be prophets of joy who know from experience and can testify to the world, as George Fox did, 'that the Lord is at work in this thick night'.

The final chapter to this book, *Leadings*, which looks for signs of how the Spirit is continuing to lead us, contains this epistle in full.

There is also diversity among us in Britain Yearly Meeting. It is reflected in part in the number of informal groups established in recent years. Some welcome this development as an indication of vigorous life, while others view it anxiously as a threat to the corporate commitment of Friends. However, we continue to know the experience of unity. Week by week, in Britain, more than four hundred meetings of Quakers assemble in expectant worship. They know the seventeenth-century experience of Robert Barclay: 'When I came into the silent assemblies of God's people, I felt a secret power among them, which touched my heart...'

Friends find unity in the depth of the silence, when the worshippers are truly gathered and deeply centred on the things of the spirit. We struggle with differences in our meetings for church affairs and here, too, as we consider what action we are called to take over issues that confront us, we know the experience of unity in conviction and purpose. It is a unity which is not to be found in optional attitudes but in discovering the place in which we can stand together.

It is hoped that readers of this book will pick up some responsive echoes from its pages, a resonance which touches their own lives, for, as London Yearly Meeting asserted in 1978:

We have great riches to share in; riches from the words used by Friends down the last three centuries who have put their experience of God down on paper and have searched out new ways to describe the infinite variety of God... There are great riches too in other branches of the Christian Church and in other faiths, for each one who seeks the truth may see a different part of it.

We are seekers but we are also the holders of a precious heritage of discoveries. We, like every generation, must find the Light and Life again for ourselves. Only what we have valued and truly made our own, not by assertion but by lives of faithful commitment, can we hand on to the future. Even then, we must humbly acknowledge that our vision of the truth will, again and again, be amended.

In the Religious Society of Friends we commit ourselves not to words but to a way.