

George Fox and the Quakers January 13th



George Fox 1624-1690

In the middle of the seventeenth century, a new Christian movement began. Today it is known as the Society of Friends or the Quakers. It began with a man called George Fox who looked everywhere in the church of his time for a religion that he felt was “real”. He wanted to experience the love of God directly, not just through reading or going to church services. He felt that all the groups of Christians he met were “formal”, just playing at being Christians.

His own Christian life began, he claimed, when he heard a voice speak to him. He felt this experience brought him into direct contact with Jesus Christ. What he had been told now became real to him. He felt he had to share with others that direct contact with God was possible and personal. This conviction led George to begin preaching but he often was forced to preach after the minister had finished the usual sermon. This led him to start preaching in the churchyard outside and many people became aware of a special power and authority in his words.

One day, on Pendle Hill, in the North of England, George Fox had a vision of a great crowd of people being brought together by Jesus Christ. He felt God was calling him to do the job of bringing this crowd together. He began to preach regularly in the open air and this resulted in the growth of a Christian movement that numbered some 50,000 within a few years and about 100,000 by the end of the century. Their numbers included people from all sections of society and class barriers broke down within the group. This growth went along with opposition. In 1650, George Fox was sentenced to 6 months in prison. It was then that the judge mockingly referred to George’s followers as “Quakers” because they sometimes

shook with emotion. The name stuck! As Fox and his followers came to question more the established church of England, the opposition grew.

The Quakers often did not conform to the social norms of the time. One example of this was that the Quakers took Jesus literally when he said “Do not swear an oath but let your yes be yes and your no be no” and so they refused to take an oath even in a court of law. They refused to pay church tithes and did not go to the official (Church of England” services but met in their own meetings which were illegal at the time. They were imprisoned and ill treated but they still spoke out against the state church, referring to its buildings as “steeple houses”.

One of the Quakers’ main beliefs was in “the light of Christ within you”. You needed to hear God’s voice in a direct way to keep your faith fresh and real. This meant they were often more ready than other Christians to think in a new way. They were among the first to speak and act, against slavery. They treated all people as equals and were friends to all. This led them to speak up for religious freedom at a time when everyone was supposed to fit in with the religious forms of society. They believed that what you did was as important as what you said you believed and they refused to fight in any war.

