



# **Thoughts on the Quaker Way (1)**

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*These Thoughts may be used by anybody for any purpose without acknowledgement.*

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# 1 Thoughts on Why I Am A Quaker

Thirty years ago (1975) I was a well-established worshipper in another Christian denomination, deeply involved in the local work of that church and most certainly aware of being on a spiritual journey. That awareness was seemingly negative. I had come to the point that I was frequently rejecting what I was hearing from the pulpit and constantly reinterpreting what I was reading in the bible. Then local Christians received an invitation from local Quakers to participate in a mid-week evening meeting for worship. I went along and found the silent worship sublime. This was clearly to be the next step on my spiritual journey and very quickly I realized that I had 'come home'. I needed space to consolidate the re-thinking of my Christianity; the Quaker Way gives you that space. I needed support as I left creeds firmly behind and explored the new ranges of my spirituality; the Quaker Way gives you that support. I needed to pin my new colours to the mast and make public witness to the centrality in all aspects of life of my new understanding; the peace testimony held by Quakers gave me the way forward.

I hadn't realised there was such a thing as unprogrammed worship, even though it was programmed worship that I was inwardly rebelling against. I hadn't understood that God, the Holy Spirit, was speaking to me through my soul and causing my brain to rebel. The Quaker Way has taught me to stop using my brain in the first instance and instead to sense what the Holy Spirit is communicating to me through my whole being. Before making that discovery the Holy Spirit had been somewhat disconnected to my life; Quakers do a marvellous job of taking 'the light' in John's gospel (the Word, the 'voice' of God, the Holy Spirit) and finding it inside every human being as the Inner Light. This then reflects a whole new way of looking at creation.

Quakers are very clear that only by going to this Inner Light (God the Holy Spirit speaking through the soul) will one ever hear the divine voice not contaminated by human influence. But it has to be one's continuous quest, continuing through all the decisions of the day and continuing through all the days of the week. The Quaker Way requires one to acknowledge as a reality that the whole of life is a gift from our Creator and that the traditional distinction between sacred and secular has no validity.

So Quakers only go to the bible as a secondary or supporting witness to the good news that each human being is capable of hearing God's message directly. We also have corporate worship, so that individual leadings can be tested and individual excesses can be transformed into constructive channels. Quakers do not tell you what to believe. THEY TELL YOU HOW TO FIND BELIEF. That is why the Quaker Way is inclusive and of universal application. It is an experiential process. When you personally experience seeking and finding the guidance of God within you, you will never need another Way. You will have 'come home'.

## 2 Thoughts on Standing in The Truth

In earlier centuries Quakers were also known as 'Friends of the Truth'. And 'the Truth' was a correct understanding of God's message. Even in the seventeenth century that message was both corrupted by human beings and not understood because it was expressed in thought forms appropriate to the first century eastern Mediterranean. Just like today!

In dealing with the affairs of an elderly colleague I have come across one way of understanding what is meant by 'the Truth'. It is to be found in *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*. The writer says that humankind has a great need to be truthful to itself, a great need to understand our true vocation as human beings. To do this we need to project our lives forward to the time immediately preceding our inevitable human death. We then need to explore our feelings as to what we would have wished to have done in our lives; we need to come back to the present with that vision of how we would have wished to have lived and only then do we know how we are to start living tomorrow. Most of us, I fear, will not be living 'in the Truth' tomorrow.

The lives of early Quakers reflected the enormous empowerment they received from believing that they were standing in the Truth. They lived as if the kingdom of God were dwelling among them. Although these Quakers were historical and political nobodies, the Quaker Way swept through England like a bush fire and because it was rightly seen as a threat to the established political and religious institutions, Quakers were viciously persecuted by Church and State. The immediate effect of persecution was to attract more adherents but eventually the number of leaders who died in prison or as a result of their persecution meant that the movement was weakened and this Lamb's War (the Lamb in the Revelation of John) had to go on the defensive. Perhaps it is the one period in history when an entire national society has come the closest to living in the Truth.

Most institutional Christians express their religious beliefs in a religious language which embraces the thought forms of earlier centuries, even other cultures, and which often gets rejected out of hand by the secular world. Quakers express themselves largely in the language of the day and in terms of how we should be living our lives. We endeavour to live by the principles (testimonies) of Simplicity, Truth telling & integrity, Equality & community, Environment & the earth, and Peace and nonviolence. If we live truly by these testimonies (and the Quaker Way is a very STEEP Way) then we are living true to our vocation as human beings, true to God's message. We are standing in the Truth, even though we may be derided or persecuted for so doing.

### **3 Thoughts on Understanding The Spiritual Quaker**

Using broad distinctions one can say that the worship of Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches is Eucharistic-centred (Holy Communion); for Protestants it is sermon-centred (preaching the Bible) and for Quakers it is Spirit-centred (silent waiting to allow the Holy Spirit to come through). It is not that other churches do not experience the leadings of the Holy Spirit; rather that Quakers seek first the leadings of the Spirit, which they experience as the Inner Light, and then they may well find confirmation of their leadings in religious writings or in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. But what is at work? It is the presence of the Creator (the Godhead) in his creation and that presence is permanent and universal.

Quakers understand this Inner Light to be in every human being (and wider than that) and waiting and ready to work through the human being should the individual come to recognize it. Christian Orthodoxy refers to the soul as being the human channel for this divine power. By cultivating this inner power, we subtly transform our imperfect selves and then the imperfect world around us. We are seeking ultimately to merge with that Divine Mystery, the Godhead, recognizing that that can only happen in God's time, which is timeless, and not our historic time.

This Light or Spirit can shine through every person's personality, though the extent to which any person at any one time recognizes it, will vary enormously. It does mean that potentially every person is a seeker and that we are all on a spiritual journey. This presence of the Spirit gives rise to spiritual values of beauty, truth-telling, goodwill, love etc, which are embodied in the human being, though because the human being is necessarily endowed with freewill, these feelings may be distorted, even into their opposites.

There must be a greater mind (the Godhead) in which these qualities rest and because of their spiritual nature they can only grow within the physical human body if they are freely accepted. But for free acceptance to be recognized and chosen, free refusal must also exist and this could give rise to lying, ugliness, hatefulness etc. Thus the Inner Light or Holy Spirit is a creative force striving to reproduce itself in the human being.

John Woolman (American Quaker, 1720 – 1772) has expressed this concept of the spiritual Light beautifully: There is a principle which is pure, placed in the human mind, which in different places and ages has had different names; it is, however, pure and proceeds from God. It is deep and inward, confined to no forms of religion, nor excluded from any, when the heart stands in perfect sincerity. In whomsoever this takes root and grows, they become brethren.

## 4 Thoughts on Being Truly Human

The World Council of Churches invites young people from all over the world to be helpers when its central committees meet in Geneva. Recently, there were 27 of them from 20 countries. The range of Christian theology, or understanding, that they represent would be mind-boggling. If there had been 27 theologians from 27 historically separate denominations talking about that aspect of the Truth (the message of God) which they hold most dear, I fear their community, if ever they managed to form one, would be a bit frayed at the edges. But what did these 27 young people discover by working together? That they were drawn into that wonderful experience of community which the bible calls 'the kingdom of heaven'. They had a life-developing experience.

You don't have to go to Geneva, and you don't have to be a young person, to have this experience of touching the edges of divinity. We touched it in Nida at the gathering of Baltic Quakers and Seekers. Whenever we are fully and naturally human we are on the verge of entering the kingdom. And the way into the fullness of that humanity is for all people to work together for the ultimate benefit of the world community.

But being human, we find we need to express our feelings in words. These words sometimes get set in stone and lose their vitality, and in our blindness we allow them to become more important than our common humanity, our potential divinity.

Quakers are well known for getting on with healing the world's wounds and at the same time refusing to allow their motivation to be permanently described in words. So, Quakers refuse to be identified by credal statements ..... with the consequence that Britain Yearly Meeting of Quakers cannot join that international community known as the World Council of Churches which is working, in its way, to heal the wounds of the world.

Words are just tools, but they can be damaging. It would seem that there are some who would claim 'you must agree these words before you can enter into that community called the kingdom of heaven'. British Quakers stand aside from words set in stone and get on with the job of healing the wounds of the world. Let's just love each other as the human beings we are meant to be, born into the likeness and image of God, and let's give those who have never experienced this love, the experience of this human divinity ..... help the lame to walk, the blind to see, bring freedom to those imprisoned within their humanity, for it was never meant to be that way. It is in this way that we worship God.

## 5 Thoughts on Meeting for Worship

At first glance the Quaker method of silent worship looks unique, but it is not. It is the method that was used by Jesus of Nazareth. When he needed guidance, Jesus would find a quiet spot (in the wilderness, further along the lake shore, in the garden of Gethsemane) and listen to what God the Holy Spirit, God the Inner Light, was saying to him.

As individuals we are unlikely to have the same clarity of purpose and vision that Jesus had and so our worship is corporate, we worship together. Together we are seeking the will of God and the corporate process means that new revelation, when finally understood, is accepted by all. A requirement of this process is that we meet together regularly. And we believe that this search for understanding can only lead us into unity, into being a community of believers. So the corporate process of worship is far removed from the secular debates of the world and far removed from being a group of individuals meditating separately.

Quaker worship does not work, initially, through the brain. It works through the soul where God is always speaking to us, if only we adopt the discipline of listening. We are created as human beings with this potential ability to receive divine guidance directly, God speaking to us, the ability to distinguish between right and wrong. We can call this potential ability the Inner Light, or the Christ within, or the Holy Spirit, or the seed which will grow if we nourish it. The problem is that as we grow and are exposed to the world we are conditioned by the world and we begin to think and behave solely in terms of self-interest. What we do in the world may seem perfectly normal but what has happened is that we have become totally self-centred. We are no longer what God the Holy Spirit has intended us to be. The Inner Light has seemingly gone out; the seed has been nourished with the impure water of the world; we are self-centred people.

Yet if we listen to our brain it assures us we are good people doing good works; and yet we are not, because first and foremost we are looking after ourselves. But the Inner Light and the life of Jesus of Nazareth tell us that we should be living for the benefit of the other person, for the rest of creation. How seemingly illogical Christianity is! It tells us we can best look after our own interests by looking after other people first (and second, and third). But the conditioning we are receiving from living in the world is that we look after ourselves first.

So, in sitting together in silent worship we are seeking to transform the thoughts in the brain with the messages from the soul. The brain has been conditioned by the world into putting the self first; the soul is telling us to put the other person first. It is not possible to respond to both and to claim that we are fulfilling our potential as human beings, that we are the daughters and sons of God. To which are we listening? The voice of the world or the voice of God? What do our lives show?

## 6 Thoughts on Equality and Community

Quakers have a testimony to equality; that is to say, accepting equality is a vital factor or principle in our lives. All people, female and male, are made by God with the capacity to receive the Inner Light (also known as the Holy Spirit or the Christ). We are born with that potential ability and as we grow in years and sensitivity, all are enabled to turn to that Inner Light for guidance, for deciding between God's way and the world's way. This concept of equality was extremely radical in the seventeenth century because thousands of years of human conditioning had meant that women were second class citizens. This human conditioning was that 'women stayed at home and looked after the children' while 'men made the decisions and went to war'. It had become deeply ingrained in human nature that women were inferior. To say that they were equal in God's eyes from the beginning of creation was an insight that could only come from the guidance of the Inner Light.

But human conditioning is a very powerful thing and whilst George Fox may have been clear about feminine equality, there were many early Quakers who had to struggle with this novel idea. The radical result of acceptance of the principle of equality was that women equally could receive the inspiration of the Inner Light and be messengers of the good news. A further natural consequence of all people being able to accept God's guidance through the Inner Light is that this would lead all people into unity, into community. Nobody is suggesting that finding unity in understanding God's guidance is straightforward. It requires disciplined attention to the Inner Light and transformation of the human ego before community can be effectively achieved, and even then people will continue to be at different points on their spiritual journey.

Are we talking only about the inherent equality of all parts of the human race? No. We are talking about the inherent equality of all parts of God's creation. In theological terms everything was created 'ex nihilo', from nothing, or rather from beyond human comprehension. Everything is from God and whatever matter existed at the beginning of human time (the big bang), this formed a unity based on equality of purpose. The consequent process of development (evolution) is a process based on choice, and wrong or imperfect choices can be made, but fundamentally we bring the natural world into our God-given community.

Perhaps we are beginning to stretch the meaning of words beyond what we have been conditioned into thinking they mean, but full respect for all parts of creation is fundamental to the continued existence of community; all creation is interdependent; human beings cannot exist in isolation. At the end of a meeting for worship Quakers generally shake hands. If we are sitting in a circle we are able to join hands and more demonstrably form a community. Upholding both the human world, the animal world and the environment falls naturally within our Quaker testimonies.

## **7 Thoughts on Truth, The Timeless Journey to Divinity**

Our Creator relates naturally to every part of his creation and does so directly. For the human being this communication, this speaking, is effected spiritually by the Creator through aspects of his being known variously as the Holy Spirit, the Christ, the Inner Light (etc). These spiritual aspects speak through our soul rather than through our brain and might generally be given the feminine gender where language allows it (the Holy Spirit, she ...). The essence of what our Creator has to say to us is often referred to as 'the Truth'.

The Truth is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow but our capacity to hear and understand that Truth is limited by our very humanity, and no one person or one group can know the whole Truth. As our humanity develops, so we understand more of the Truth.

We always need to hear what the rest of humanity is saying to us through their soul, let alone the rest of creation, so that our understanding of the Truth, and our ability to live by it, may be enhanced.

Seeking to live by the Truth leads us naturally into community, and this community should be understood to be creation-centred and not human-centred. In Christian circles the ultimate community in this spiritual journey is described as 'the kingdom of heaven', the place where divine-human reconciliation is finally achieved. It could more completely be understood as divine-creation reconciliation.

On the journey any group can seek to create the kingdom of heaven in microcosm at any time and in any place. It is the underlying purpose of living in society. To create the kingdom we have to listen to the Truth and then make it the reality of our own lives, without compromise and remaining with souls open to the message of our Creator.

The Quaker Way offers us a doorway through which to start the journey and gives us some signposts on the way (testimonies).

## 8 Thoughts on Signposts on The Way

Quakers have testimonies or 'declarations of truth'. So do Christians generally. We have the Old Testament (the former declaration of truth) and the New Testament (the new declaration of truth).

The principle testimony of Quakers is that God speaks to each of us directly; we do not need to have somebody else (a preacher) or something else (a bible) to tell us what God is saying. His message comes to us spiritually and directly. This way of listening to God decreases enormously the possibility of human corruption of the divine message. The danger that we need to be aware of is the corruption that can come from our own human conditioning. This arises quite naturally from living in the world and absorbing the world's standards, and because it is natural it requires a very positive effort to recognize it and overcome it. Listening for God's message is our attempt to live by that divine conditioning for which we were created but which can only be made real by our voluntary cooperation. The testimonies express the message from our soul, whilst the very great danger is that the world gets to us first through our brain.

So Quakers offer signposts on the way, outworkings of their principle testimony, declarations of truth aimed at offsetting the world's conditioning. They are primarily a reflection of our understanding of God and secondly a response to our culture. They are not fixed definitions, but are understandings which are capable of being re-expressed as our understanding of God's Way develops or as our dominant culture changes. They bear no relation to the formal creeds of the institutional churches which are the product of our brain and which tend to express the terms of membership of that institution.

I can give each testimony a simple description reflecting response to spiritual guidance and reaction to the world:

Testimony	Spiritual	the World
<i>Simplicity</i>	Be as a little child	Shun what this world calls wealth
<i>Truthfulness</i>	There are no half-truths in God	Always be transparent to the world
<i>Equality</i>	All human beings are of equal worth in God's eyes	Equal rights and equal responsibilities for everyone
<i>Peace</i>	Reflect the nature of God	Nonviolence is a way of life

These simple descriptions only begin to open up the wealth of meaning and guidance in each testimony. For instance, equality leads one into community and concern for the animal world and the environment (the integrity of creation).

## 9 Thoughts on The Truth and Truthfulness

Why is the universe made the way it is? Why does the human being exist? The answer to these mind-boggling questions is 'The Truth'. But the answer is beyond the ability of the human brain to comprehend; we are merely children of the solar system. The sensory system of our physical being has been shaped totally by our position in the physical universe. So, our attempts to objectively understand The Truth are subjective, inadequate and belong only to the present day.

For George Fox The Truth could be understood by realising that our Creator is communicating with us all the time and we must stop and listen (or stand in the Light). James Nayler felt keenly the impact of Paul's spiritual journey by stating that we should become the Christ who is within us. They were both saying the same thing but because they are trying to express a spiritual understanding, they have to use picture language to do it. The language we have derives from our physical existence and not from our underlying spiritual nature.

But to whatever extent the metaphorical language may draw on the concepts of religion, the outcome is action. 'Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven'. Quakers have named these actions as Testimonies and they are appropriate to the context in which they were formulated. These Testimonies, or principles, are spiritually derived because they are what we see as expressed in the nature of the universe; they are innate in creation. In our methodical cum scientific way we have classified them as simplicity and plainness, truthfulness and integrity, peace and nonviolence, equality and community, with equality now giving rise strongly to a testimony to the earth and environment.

The Truth thus embraces all these Testimonies and perhaps Martin Luther King offered a more tangible term when he said that Love is the most powerful force in the universe. Traditionally, of course, the word is God.

God/Love/Truth is present everywhere, from the tiniest electron to the most enormous galaxy, expressing itself in ways in which we get fleeting glimpses of understanding which stretch, or snap, our faith; such that by following our Testimonies we have no individual expectation of personal success (Christian crucifixion), but have the faith that the larger community will ultimately benefit. A way of understanding this would be that we are sub-consciously maturing our spiritual sensory system and preparing it for the continuing journey that it must undertake (Christian resurrection) when our physical sensory system has died. It will undertake this journey here and now but not within the narrow parameters in which our physical system operates and probably not within the physical concepts of time and space at all.

What a great relief that in the physical life of Jesus of Nazareth and in the spiritual concept of The Christ that this 'Truth' has a human face.

## 10 Thoughts on Simplicity

Quaker testimonies, of which simplicity is one, need to be understood primarily as spiritual insights. They sound as if they are very practical insights into how to live in this world, and they are. But the act of living in this world is a journey, or part of a journey, to the kingdom of heaven, to the evolutionary climax of creation. So, how one lives is a very spiritual question. How do we build the Kingdom here and now? Our life is our worship. The secular and the spiritual are one. There is only one existence and it is called into being and maintained by God the creator. This is the Quaker approach. What are these testimonies, these signposts showing us the way to the Kingdom?: *Simplicity* and plainness, *Truthfulness* and integrity, *Equality* and community, leading to the integrity of creation, *Peace* and nonviolence.

God's Way for humankind is not complicated, it is simple. So simple that an equivalent comparison is that of young children placing their unquestioning trust in their parents. But God's Way is tough. It requires transformation of the self-will, that seemingly natural instinct for self-preservation that would look after our own interests first. God wants us to identify our self-interest with the wellbeing of creation and not to look to our own security and comfort. We are created 'in the image and likeness of God' to recognize the integrity of creation, not the selfishness of the individual. If we are acquiring material things, wealth, status, then we are on the wrong road. We need to find the simple and plain road of acquiring respect for the other and living for the benefit of the other.

James Nayler, the most effective seventeenth century Quaker speaker, remained to all appearances a rustic north countryman. Sophisticated Londoners flocked to hear him because he brought them the word of God. His simple and practical clothing reflected the integrity of his life and his beliefs. In a subsequent century, 'Quaker grey' became something of a uniform which meant that for a period the meaning of the testimony was in danger of becoming unclear – it could become a desired end in itself rather than the means of plainness in living which helps to bring us to the Kingdom. If the concept of plainness in living were to become a dominant concept in our rich western culture, it would be a sign that the economic imbalance in the world was being seriously tackled.

Quaker Meeting Houses are also plain and simple. The true 'ekklesia', a place to meet our Creator. Just benches or chairs. No adornments, no icons, no memorials, no pulpit, and probably a small central table with a copy of Quaker Faith & Practice and the New English Bible. My Meeting House in Hertford, England, is the oldest, purpose-built Meeting House in the world (1670), and when visitors enter it they just stand and stare and feel. Simplicity becomes beauty becomes peacefulness; a very tiny part of the Kingdom. Quaker testimonies are first and foremost spiritual insights; insights into our Creator's Way for humankind.

## 11 Thoughts on Communication

We human beings are at the stage in our evolution whereby our primary senses through which we communicate are those which locate creation outside ourselves; our outward senses – sight, hearing, touch. But these outward senses can only communicate with the physical elements of God's creation, they can only create a physical relationship, and our need is to communicate with God. God is spirit and has to be worshipped or communicated with in spirit. Our secondary senses are the more inward ones of feeling, knowing, believing, and these work on the level of spiritual relationship; they communicate with or through the soul, the heart (in the spiritual sense), the conscience, the ground of our being. These are the senses we have to cultivate in order to communicate with our Creator. These are the senses which have to become our primary senses and will become our primary senses as we evolve.

But our western educational systems teach us through fact, logic, empirical knowledge, and so make a god of our outward senses. They make it more difficult, even impossible, to communicate with our Creator. Are we discovering rather late that we have much to re-learn from our native and aboriginal cousins?

The teaching of religion has inevitably followed the same path of using the outward senses and has become an academic exercise. No wonder seventeenth century Quakers rejected ministers of religion, all of whom had to have a degree from Cambridge or Oxford universities in order to be qualified to preach God's good news. No wonder that seventeenth century Quakers sought to cut out the human corruption of God's message by waiting in silence to hear it from our Creator himself. And not just then; even now our western culture continues to hinder our access to God by developing the primacy of the outward senses.

People have again lost sight of the fact that God is accessible by all people directly. We have been educated to believe otherwise, by being told that we need a preacher, a bible, a church building, all outward things. But the message of enormous empowerment that seventeenth century Quakers brought is that we are all daughters and sons of God and that God is speaking to us all, inwardly, individually, all the time. And as God is spirit, so we need to FEEL his presence in order to be transformed. Our human ego, feeding on the outward senses, has to be brought low and made subservient to the spirit of God. In pursuing that need to control the personal ego we become partners with God and only alongside that action can God begin to perfect his creation; only he can ensure that each of us then becomes a new creation. Reading the bible, listening to sermons, doing good works, these things do nothing in themselves unless we have first surrendered our human ego and FELT the empowerment of God's presence within us. Then, and only then, will mountains be moved.

## **12 Thoughts on Community**

### **The Spiritual Journey**

What is the purpose of our lives? At a certain point in our lives, different for every person, we begin to ask basic questions like this because we are beginning to recognize that our human life is also a spiritual journey. The spiritual journey means we are beginning consciously to take responsibility for our lives and changing the way we live. Human society seems to have taught us that in living we must look after ourselves (the self-centred ego); but there is another voice, deep within ourselves, which is wanting us to look after the whole of creation.

### **Forming a Community**

Society as a whole is answering our superficial questions, the self-centred ones, but not necessarily our deeper questions, and we seek the company of like-minded people to grapple with these deeper questions. Historically we have formed religious movements, but they have become institutionalized and subject to the corruption of the human mind. So, we form smaller communities, like Quakers, and we listen directly to the voice deep within us. We still call that voice 'God' because it is not a human construct in the sense that it is that of God which the human being is able to comprehend. In order to hear it we have to empty our minds of all things human. We have to restore our corrupted mind to the divine state it was at our conception.

### **Joining a Community**

A Quaker community opens itself to all who recognize that their lives are spiritual journeys and are prepared to follow the discipline of feeling the presence of God and living their lives in response to that voice. But do not think you can just walk into such a community and undertake the full responsibilities of membership. You have to be sure the community is right for you, and the community has to be sure that your interest will be a long-lasting one. The certainty that it is the right place isn't discovered by feeling content in some individualistic, spiritual meditation; it can only be discovered by worshipping with that community and working with that community for the benefit of God's creation.

### **Being a Community**

For Quakers, that certainty and that unity come through regular participation in the community's meetings for worship. The meeting for worship seeks to know the will of God and is the mainspring which empowers the community and its members to work in the world, for the world. And the most important aspect of this work is to make this new experience of empowerment available to other people, to spread knowledge of the Quaker Way, so that other lives may also be changed, so that ultimately the whole of God's creation can be brought to fulfilment.

### 13 Thoughts on Two Worlds or One?

Well, of course, there used to be three! Heaven, hell and earth sandwiched in between.

In a different time, in the fifth century, Augustine was faced with an enormous dilemma. Roman civilisation was crumbling away and being destroyed by a non-Christian military power. What should the Christian church do in the face of this apparent catastrophe? Augustine devised the theory of two worlds. In one world the State is supreme and Christians obey the head of State, the Emperor, and go to war. The second world is a spiritual world where God is obeyed through his agents on earth, the Pope and his Bishops.

Once this split is made then institutional Christianity is, in my opinion, doomed. The Christian was ordered to join the military and kill in the name of the State. For fifteen centuries and more the institutional majority churches have said that this is right and their teaching reflects this.

If you sit and listen to the Inner Light (the Holy Spirit, the Christ) does it ever say that you would be justified in murdering somebody (killing somebody) who is equally made after the image of God?

The world needs more people who will strive to hear what the Inner Light is saying to them: that there is one world, and it is God's world, and that in God's world EVERYTHING is worthy of respect because everything is interdependent. In living this message we may indeed come to our own Good Friday and we need to have a belief in God and an understanding of human life that will carry us through to Easter Monday.

We can only understand human life from within the very limitations imposed by our humanity. We do not know from where we have come, but in faith we believe that we are known to God before we are conceived. We do not know where we are going when our human frame finally expires, but in faith we believe that the nature of God is such that we continue our journey with him. In between coming and going, being born and dying, we are called to live in partnership with God by listening to the Inner Light and living our lives as she guides us.

One world, God's world ... and our human nature leads us to pray that we may be spared the test, Good Friday, ... but 'Your Will be done'. No compromise.

## 14 Thoughts on The Big Question

As mature human beings it is inevitable that we ask ourselves some very fundamental questions: Why do I, a human being, exist? What is the purpose of my existence? Whilst I have my human life what should I be doing?

These questions are all the same question really, the 'big' question, and the earlier in our lives that we recognize that the question has to be grappled with, then so much the better. Grappling with the question is our life's spiritual journey and no part of our life should be lived as if it is nothing to do with our spiritual journey. So, if we are looking after ourselves and nothing more, making money for ourselves, being self-centred, then we are wasting our lives.

From time immemorial humankind has recognized that there must be a power beyond human comprehension that is responsible for creation and he has given that power the name 'God'. But whilst the totality of God is beyond human understanding, God as Creator has retained the power of communication with us his creation. He communicates through the medium of the spirit, traditionally known as the Holy Spirit. But human interference has continually corrupted the message of the Holy Spirit and the institutional church was obsessed by its own wealth. The backlash to this secularisation was the Protestant Reformation with its insistence on the literal word of the bible. But human corruption of the divine message, or misinterpretation of the bible, still existed and the backlash to this came in England with the growth of the Quaker Way.

Quakers did everything humanly possible to eradicate human corruption of the divine message with their revolutionary proclamation that God speaks to every human being individually and directly. The Holy Spirit, which they renamed the Inner Light, is within you. Listen to it and live your life accordingly. And not just your religious life, but the whole of your life. There is no meaningful division between the sacred and the secular, and the power of the Inner Light releases you from the paralysing concept of sinfulness which the institutional churches preach.

Quakers were not setting up a new religion. They were simply telling people that each person is individually responsible for listening for God's guidance and answering the big question for themselves. The Quaker Way doesn't tell you what to believe; it offers a Way to find belief. And whilst the Quaker Way was, and still is, revolutionary, it's all there in the bible; and, of course, the bible, correctly understood, is revolutionary. But from the beginning the institutional churches have dominated the interpretation of the bible, and have argued endlessly about their differing interpretations, so Quakers in the first instance do not go to the bible for the answer to the big question; they listen to the voice of God within themselves. The authority of the Holy Spirit, the Inner Light, comes first. The experience reflected in the bible acts as confirmatory witness to what we have experienced directly from God.

## 15 Thoughts on The Big Scene: Christian Unity

The Quaker Way frequently seeks to hold together in unity matters which the world thinks are separate. We see them as two sides of the same coin. The world sees our physical self and our spiritual self as separate entities and gives pre-eminence to the physical self because it is able to see it and to understand it the better. The Quaker Way holds the two together as an integrated unity. The spiritual self is seamlessly interwoven with the physical self, but its roots are in a different plane of existence. The divine and the human cannot be separated. In Quaker terminology the Inner Light represents the spiritual, the divine. All who shape their human lives by the Inner Light find natural unity. Quaker membership is open to those who actively seek to 'stand in the Light'. Doctrine or theology or academic understanding is absolutely secondary, even of no importance. Most other Christian denominations have set their membership requirements within the context of acceptance of doctrine, of theological statements which need to be understood and affirmed.

So where do we meet? Early Quakers had no doubt that the Inner Light was Jesus the Christ guiding them and our understanding has always been that it is how we live our lives that is so vital. Quaker membership is like an open field; if you are prepared to risk having your life turned upside down by the Inner Light, come in and work with us; let us be one as our Creator intended.

The membership of other denominations seems to be as a field enclosed by a fence to maintain the purity of those within the field and to keep others out until they meet the necessary standards. Each institutional Christian denomination would claim that its doctrine reflects the teaching of Jesus the Christ as understood by their early Church and they are engaged in pursuing institutional unity through trying to assimilate their differing theological doctrines.

The two approaches are fundamentally different but it is a matter that needs to be wrestled with in the international Week of Prayer for Christian Unity which is generally witnessed to in January. Could it be that individual Christians are already in unity by being quite prepared to come and work in the open field? How else do we build the kingdom of heaven on earth except by living and working together in the spirit of the Christ for the benefit of the greater community? Could it be that institutional Christianity is irrelevant, except for the power that it holds?

The theme chosen for the 2006 international observance of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is Matthew 18(20) 'where two or three are met together in my name, I am there among them.' An exact description of the mainspring of Quaker worship and Quaker work in the world! Worship and work are two sides of the same coin. And such simple theology. Nothing more is needed. Unity will come from working together in the open field for the benefit of society.

## 16 Thoughts on The Big Vision

The universe is incredible; its scale is beyond our present knowledge; its origin and destination is beyond our human comprehension. What existed before the big bang? What will it look like in a million years from now? The sun is incredible; creating enormous power by burning itself away at a colossal rate, yet it will still be there in a million years' time. And it is only a small and relatively insignificant star. The earth is incredible; the home of life through the evolutionary process; and now with the human being as the present peak of this process.

Even in ancient thought the universe was recognized as a cosmos – an ordered universe. To explain the creation and the order, the concept of God was created as the source of creation, the spirit that moves through evolution and gives it its order and which has evolved humankind. This God exists beyond the limits of our human comprehension, but as our creator it remains in touch with its creation. The Holy Spirit, or the Quaker Inner Light, is that of God which is within the comprehension of the human being.

As we, curious humankind, examine this creation, we find to our amazement that everything is based on choice. Not just us human beings making choices as to what we do next, but every tiny atom in everything in this cosmos is making choices as to what it will do next. And the choices we need to make are those choices that will move us towards a future that God has destined for us. From within our human limitations we call that future perfection 'the kingdom of heaven'.

Intertwined with my physical existence, and extending into another plane of being, is a spiritual existence which is an integral part of me, but of which I am only vaguely aware. I need that vagueness to come into precision and the movement from vagueness to precision is my spiritual journey. I am born with my physical potential largely pre-determined and I proceed automatically from physical childhood to physical adulthood. My spiritual potential seems to be in childhood until I properly recognise it by starting to make right choices. Then I begin to see that my spiritual existence is in fact fully mature and that I, a human being, am an integral part of God's creative process. God depends on me and you.

We are called to progress our spiritual journey by growing from spiritual childhood to spiritual adulthood so that perhaps, ultimately, the human being will have evolved and be born with his or her understanding of their spirituality on a par with their pre-determined physical potential. Our calling is to inspire others with our big vision of working in partnership with God for the benefit of all creation by bringing our recognition of our spiritual selves into maturity.

## 17 Thoughts on The Big Journey

The human being is both physical and spiritual. The physical person is obvious, so obvious that we are apt to devalue any thoughts which do not prioritise the physical. We write and talk about what we see, about the relationships between physical things. This aspect, the physical, reflects a concentration on our human physical self and dominates our lives.

But we also have a spiritual existence which we cannot see with our physical senses and yet it is an integral part of our nature. The physical we see and the spiritual interweaves with it but in a different plane of existence. The physical is outward; the spiritual is inward. The physical has a largely pre-determined growth from childhood to adulthood. The influence of the spiritual seems to depend on whether we recognize it and the extent to which we make use of it or respond to it.

God (the Christ, the Holy Spirit, the Inner Light) is not to be found in the physical because 'he' cannot be seen directly, but he is to be communicated with through our spiritual selves. The degree of communication or searching reflects the maturity or immaturity of our spiritual journey, the big journey. What our searching needs to discover is that it is God our creator who communicates with us. We then choose to live by, or ignore, the understanding that is communicated.

So, communication with God has to be through our spiritual selves, through our soul, and not through the printed word (the bible) or the spoken word (the preacher). The spiritual side of our existence allows God's creative spirit to be potentially resident within us and that potential can come to fruition as we make right choices. Those choices must be the ones that come through our spiritual selves. If we feed through the soul we can overcome the false wisdom of the world, the domination of the selfish self. Formal theology, which comes from our physical side, the brain, is at best second-hand, because it is processed by the human being, and at worst is irrelevant.

Those who choose to accept God into their lives through their spiritual nature begin to participate in the holiness and perfection of God; they are then starting out on the big journey. Indeed, corporately, as a unitary body of any size, even two people, we can be blessed with God's perfection (living in heaven on earth), even though it may not be complete in any one of us; and even the corporate will always discover more potential to be realised.

This is liberation; this is holiness; this is freedom from the bondage of sinfulness and institutional religion; this is the way to Truth; this is the Quaker Way.

## 18 Thoughts on The Big Claim

The big claim that Quakers make is nowadays generally expressed as 'there is that of God in everyone'. What we are claiming is that our Creator (God) maintains communication with his creation (the human being). Traditionally this communication is said to be through the Holy Spirit and early Quakers were so convinced of the power of God within themselves they renamed this vehicle of communication the Inner Light. As God is spirit and has to be communicated with in spirit, so the Holy Spirit or Inner Light are not physical things but spiritual concepts which relate to the spiritual side of our identity.

What is the spiritual side of our identity? Because it cannot be seen it is sometimes a long time before people recognize that they have a spiritual self. Yet we have always known that we can feel through our emotions and this feeling is part of our spiritual being. We also know the difference between right and wrong without anybody telling us. In part this will be because we have absorbed certain standards from the society we live in, but in origin this ability to discern would have come to humankind from our Creator through our spiritual self. We have a spiritual self that is intertwined with our physical self and yet extends into another plane of existence.

Human beings are a very varied lot, so Quakers are clear that each person may have a different measure of ability with which to grasp the message of the Inner Light but God's message must inevitably be the same to every person. 'That of God in everyone' is recognizing that God is communicating with every person and that every person when given the opportunity is capable of hearing that message and responding to it. It is ensuring that such an opportunity exists in every person's day-to-day life that motivates Quakers to action.

When the director of a young person's unit had difficulties building a one-to-one therapeutic relationship with a non-responsive problem teenager, he asked the parent to bring in photographs taken through the teenager's life. It was seeing the teenager as a six-month old baby that gave the teenager the opportunity to see himself differently. Of course, restoring relationships can also be made very difficult by genetic aberrations present from conception due to our not yet perfect evolution, but creating the opportunity in everybody's life to hear God's message is a responsibility for all of us.

Quakers are frequently to be found assisting people of low self-esteem to gain confidence in themselves and to see the world differently. The spiritual strength of the Quaker Way has very practical outcomes.

## 19 Thoughts on God The Inner Light

The character of the creator (God) is inherently present in that which is created (the universe). This statement is just as true of the artist or the sculptor and their creations (paintings, pottery) as it is of the divine. Creations are an extension of the mind of their creator.

Our Creator God is a good God having created something (from the Big Bang?) which after 13.7 billion years has now produced human beings who experience consciousness. This current state is temporary in the sense that evolution continues but the timescale of evolution is beyond the comprehension of our human minds. We can only say that our concept of God embraces the beginning and the end as set out in that penultimate chapter of the New Testament, 'I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end'. This presence of a benign God in our lives and in our universe is identified as 'God the Holy Spirit' and as this Spirit manifests itself in evolution, it is the source and sustainer of all change and all that exists. God the Holy Spirit is, after all, God itself in a particular form.

In 17<sup>th</sup> century England much doctrine of the Church of England was in dispute or not understood because of the poor quality of its presentation and its consequent association with magic. In this world the young George Fox wasn't the only person struggling to understand the message of religion. Then the lightning strike of revelation came to Fox: God was speaking to him and to every individual directly. There was no need for pulpit preaching or magical doctrine. God (Fox used the term Jesus Christ) was innate in his being and was wanting to guide his ways if only he would listen. Such a simple understanding but so empowering that he and those he spoke to were energized to take this clear message to the whole country. A spiritual revolution was underway. God the Holy Spirit (or Holy Ghost as it then was) was renamed by Quakers as 'God the Inner Light', the Light that enlightens all people (John 1,9).

This Quaker Inner Light is not like an apple to be picked off a tree; it is an understanding that has to be pondered and discerned because God's message can be radically different from those values dominating society which people have absorbed since birth.

The need for discernment to discover God's message led to the development of Quaker worship which is basically sitting in attentive stillness to enable the Inner Light (the Holy Spirit of God) to surface. Full discernment is a communal act. Initial inspiration can be individual and personal but if it affects the community it must be refined communally in that same state of attentive stillness as it was originally received. All gifts or talents of the worshipping community have to be brought to bear because within the community there is likely to be more maturity and wisdom than with any individual. And there is always the proviso that if the community has developed organisationally then any structural leadership must always be expressed solely as servanthood – serving the worshipping group rather than leading it. These considerations should help to ensure that a mature process of discernment will lead to finding ways in which our Creator's purpose can further evolve towards a future beyond our human comprehension.

## 20 Thoughts at the end of the year – The Big Amen

Mainstream media seems to concentrate on telling us that human society is corrupt, that government is corrupt, that business is corrupt ... and it is true, and it's all because the human being is imperfect. The Quaker Way represents the belief that human society can be wholly good; that government can be wholly beneficial; that business can be morally pure; that the human being is part divine and with the stimulus of the experience of community can strive for perfection and live now in God's power.

Quakers hold everything in unity because all is God's creation. All may seem to be imperfect, but the Quaker vision says that everything has the potential to reach perfection, to become divine. It is indisputable that the evolution of life has been, and therefore is, progressive. By living our lives in holiness, in union with our Creator, we make an affirmation first to ourselves that sinfulness, or self-centredness, does not control us, and secondly to the world, that living in God's power can change everything.

The Quaker Meeting for Worship acknowledges two things: that God is spirit and must be communicated with through the spiritual side of our personality; and that a community can be created which lives by God's power. Two separate concepts and yet our spiritual and physical existences are seamlessly interwoven. Worship is spiritual and is contemplative attention to our Creator who is spirit; living as a worshipping community is physical and practical.

From our relationship with our Creator, from our contemplative spirituality, we learn better how to live in this world and we have created testimonies to act as guidelines in our day-to-day living. There are now four principle ones: simplicity and plainness; truthfulness and integrity; equality and community (leading, inter alia, to environmental concern); peace and nonviolence. Living absolutely by an inspired understanding of these testimonies is living in God's power. It requires continuously making the right choices to enable creation to evolve as God's wishes it to evolve. To build 'the kingdom of heaven' on earth is our purpose.

We are spiritual beings and our human life is simply a stage in our spiritual life. At a certain level of thought the purpose of human life remains a mystery, but in some way it must feed back into our continuing spiritual life. Perhaps our spiritual unity cannot be finally consummated until our human unity is achieved, until we become humanly divine or fully mature. So our human lives in community must strain for human unity and all that that means economically, politically and socially. Our only tool is unconditional love, but it is the most powerful tool in creation.