

# STAND AND LIVE IN THAT WHICH TAKES AWAY THE OCCASION FOR WARS

## A Critical Examination of the Quaker Peace Testimony: Present and Past

by

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Martin Luther King, Jr., a half century ago, observed the tendency of many of those who espouse peace toward a shallow self-righteousness, facile thinking and subtle belligerence toward those who were thoughtful, sensitive, conscientious *combatants*:

Many pacifists, I felt, failed to see this [man's potential for evil, the complexity of man's social involvement, and the glaring reality of collective evil]. All too many had an unwarranted optimism concerning man and leaned unconsciously toward self-righteousness.... I came to see the pacifist position not as sinless but as the lesser evil in the circumstances. I felt then, and I feel now, that the pacifist would have a greater appeal if he did not claim to be free from the moral dilemmas that the Christian non-pacifist confronts (*King, Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story - Birth of Successful Non-Violent Resistance, 81*).

While we may take issue with some aspects of King's analysis, his charges concerning "unwarranted optimism" and "self-righteousness" are well worth examining today. The attacks on America on 9/11/2001 have been termed a "wake-up" call for America, and also might well be seen as the same for the Religious Society of Friends, a wake-up call in the case of Friends to re-examine the foundation of its peace witness. Though the U.S. government warned us over 10 years ago that we were entering an even more dangerous world than the one we had just finished facing during the Cold War, in the absence of worldwide superpower conflict, we found that very difficult to believe. We ignored enemies who declared openly that they intended to bring us massive suffering and death. We dreamed such an event was no longer possible.

Even after 9/11, some Friends had great difficulty grasping the reality of an enemy with no interest in negotiation and compromise, an enemy whose inveterate hatred was dedicated to terror and destruction. And some had even greater difficulty grasping that the 9/11 attack had initiated a new war. One such Friend expressed to me after 9/11 his total puzzlement over why the media and people in general were talking about a "new war." Apparently he believed a nation's government could ignore the destruction of 3000 citizens' lives and 100 billion plus dollars in national wealth - and still survive. Quaker officialdom soon developed a slogan for the first decade of the new millennium - "War is not the answer." I thought it rather problematic: it only raises the question, ♦ Then what is the answer?! ♦ And murmuring, "peace" is not enough. How do we get there?

Other Friends and non-Friends - more partisan and ideological - claimed the essential problem was America itself. This led them to denounce the government, to blame the victims, to make the unhappy self-righteous accusation of "you had it coming to you." They marginalized themselves in their fellow citizens' minds as insensitive, hateful, even disloyal.

However, most Friends reacted like so many other thoughtful and fair-minded Americans: with fear and anger, pain and confusion. One Friend I know spoke in Meeting for Worship of his horror as he stood on a roof across from New York City on 9/11 and witnessed the atrocity. The ensuing days added to the trauma as his professional associates, well educated and generally gentle, declared their passionate desire to see the enemy "nuked." This Friend confessed confusion and helplessness, and he was certainly not alone. A Religious Society, whose membership over the last twenty years often declared that its one consistent characteristic was devotion to the Peace Testimony, found itself suddenly far less certain of, and unified in, its witness.

Given this uncertainty, my purpose in what follows is to do a critical examination of our testimony, in hopes that our witness might be re-established on a firm foundation -one that can weather and withstand all that this world may send against it. This review will be divided into two parts: Part 1 analyzes some key weaknesses in current thinking on our testimony and Part 2 reviews the original foundation of Friends peace testimony, an essential foundation for a firm witness.

## **Part 1 - An Ungrounded Testimony**

I hazard the statement that what we have today is a peace testimony largely unexamined and untested, rooted in fallacious thinking, and practiced too often in the service of partisan politics. What passes for the Peace Testimony today is a largely a secular, partisan movement, a subset of values and behaviors that favor one party over another, that supports very worldly agendas, and that is based on the belief (faith?) that we can control our own destiny. ♦ The following four points represent four major erroneous claims often made concerning that witness:

### **1. ♦♦ "The Peace Testimony is 'the one key Testimony all Friends can and should agree upon.'"**

A quick survey of Friends - past and present - will immediately reveal that many Friends did not, and still do not, embrace this witness. Even many Yearly Meeting *Faith and Practice* books reflect this by blessing both the conscientious combatant and conscientious objector positions.

However, the essential reason the "one key testimony" claim is fallacious lies in the fact that *the peace testimony is but one part of a larger witness to the active presence and power of Christ Jesus in our lives*. That larger witness is a seamless life of "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" ♦ [Gal.5:22-23]; of keeping the commandments. Murder, stealing, adultery, covetousness, strife, factions, even drunkenness: all these sow the seeds of violence and war. Our first Quakers recognized this key truth and resisted the tendency to make a list of "testimonies," from which one could choose the ones one felt comfortable in supporting. ♦ They recognized only one witness: that one's entire life had to witness in its actions and words to the presence and power of Christ Jesus.

### **2. "The Peace Testimony recognizes the basic good of human nature and calls it forth."**

While some might try and quote Scripture out of context, claiming this position rests upon "people seeing our good works and glorifying their Father who is in heaven," such a position is far less a religious than a philosophical one, a philosophical belief that goodness will flower forth if societies with their unjust mores and governments, their violent misguided policies, see our goodness and humanity and quiet their repression. Missed by this position is the logical corollary that the goodness of human nature should beget both good societies and good government. Those who believe in the essential goodness of human nature live lives of denial. They refuse to face the genocidal tendencies in the human heart, the evidence of which has been so appallingly evident over the last century.

### **3. "The Peace Testimony is pacifist."**

Still common among 21st Century Quakers is the tendency to confuse the original Quaker Peace Testimony with the pacifist position espoused by members of other "Peace Churches" and certain early 20th Century political movements. ♦ However, a "pacifist" position - "*a quiet, passive non-resistance to evil*" - was never espoused by original Friends. Their position reflected a strong prophetic tradition: a spiritual tradition that required an active, truthful confrontation of evil, not only with love, but with God's uncompromising demands for righteousness and justice. This position was not based on a naive belief in

the power of love, but rather in an unshakeable faith in God's power.

4. **"The 'Modern Quaker Peace Testimony' does not require any foundation in religious tradition or faith, let alone a Christian foundation."**

Of all the modern claims for the peace testimony, this one betrays the sandiest foundation. Such a claim turns the peace testimony into a plant without root, a plant which will quickly wilt in the heat of injustice, violence, and evil, - or be eaten away by subtle arguments for violent defense and armed resistance. The lack of a firm foundation betrayed modern Quakers during the Vietnam era when frustration with the seeming slowness of integration and anger over the continued conflict in South East Asia led some to suggest that it was time for violent, rather than non-violent, resistance. Their optimism concerning non-violence and the ultimate outcome of the struggle had evaporated.

Moreover, as activist social agendas replaced faith as the foundation for the peace testimony, Friends embraced more and more highly partisan positions, positions that are often part of the problems facing us, rather than their solutions. Friends' politics too often drove their practice and such politics often fostered a blind and brutal self-righteousness little different from ancient militant "God was on our side" arguments.

## **Part 2 - Our Original Witness**

No document so ably explains the original Quaker Peace Testimony as the 1661 *Declaration from the harmless innocent people of God, called Quakers, against all sedition, plotters, and fighters in this world...* Unlike our present witness, the Peace Testimony of the 17th Century was not based on an unrealistic vision of the world. By studying the document, one realizes that it addresses a whole series of questions that might be directed by the world at those who embrace the witness, questions that are not explicitly stated in the declaration, but that are none the less answered by it. (I've identified these questions below in bold italics and followed them with the *Declaration's* answers in plain italics):

***Why will you not fight? We can neither kill men, nor swear for nor against them..., because it is contrary to the spirit of Christ, his doctrine, and the practice of his apostles; even contrary to him for whom we suffer all things and endure all things.*** Friends' response was simple and direct: Christ Jesus has commanded us not to fight and kill. Of all the reasons for supporting the Peace Testimony, **this is its single firm foundation**. Even many who support military action and violence under some circumstances - including career military personnel - recognize and honor this as the one true foundation for non-violent behavior. And they generally respect it and **those who truly and sincerely hold to it**.

***That may be so under the present circumstances, but won't you change your mind when the spirit moves you, when the circumstances change? We, whom the Lord hath called into the obedience of his truth, have denied wars and fightings, and cannot any more learn them. This is a certain testimony unto all the world of the truth in our hearts in this particular, that as God persuadeth every man's heart to believe, so they may receive it.***

***But God's commandment not to kill is not absolute, is it? ... The spirit of Christ, by which we are guided, is not changeable, so as once to command us from a thing, as evil, and again to move unto it. We certainly know and testify to the world, that the spirit of Christ, which leads us into all truth, will never move us to fight and war against any man with outward weapons, neither for the kingdom of Christ nor for the kingdoms of this world.*** There is a key point here that must not be missed - **that God is not changeable**. One often hears "continuing revelation" espoused among Friends for supporting a number of social agendas which run counter to scripture and our tradition. "That was then," they say, "but now a new truth has been revealed to us." Such thinking is both erroneous and dangerous to the very peace testimony

modern Friends want to embrace. The correct understanding of continuing revelation is: **"yes, more may be revealed, but it will not conflict with prior revelation, because God is not inconsistent, so as to** ♦♦♦ **command us from a thing, as evil, and again move on to it.** ♦♦♦ If Friends deny this logic, then there is no foundation for the peace testimony, for God would be changeable, sometimes commanding against conflict and, at other moments, moving us to war.

**Why will you not fight for your own government and own people?** ♦ To this question of allegiances, Friends answered: "We are Christ's people first and citizens of the Kingdom of God foremost." *We are not of it [this unrighteous world], but are heirs of a world of which there is no end, a kingdom where no corruptible thing enters.*

**But are not some wars just, or at least less evil than the alternative of not fighting?** *We know that wars and fightings proceed from the lusts of men, as James 4:1-3, out of which lusts the Lord hath redeemed us, and so out of the occasion of war. The occasion of war and war itself (wherein envious men, who are lovers of themselves more than lovers of God, lust, kill, and desire to have men's lives and estates) ariseth from lust. All bloody principles and practices we, as to our own particulars, do utterly deny, with all outward wars, strife, and fighting with outward weapons for any end, or under any pretence whatsoever: this is our testimony to the whole world.*

**Why embrace this way? What do you hope to gain?** ♦ ...Although we have always suffered, and do now more abundantly suffer, yet we know it is for righteousness' sake: "For our rejoicing is this, the testimony of our consciences, that in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom, but by the grace of God, we have had our conversation in the world ♦♦♦ (2 Cor. 1:2), which for us is a witness for the convincing of our enemies.

**But you will be overwhelmed with the rest of us?!** ♦ We earnestly desire and wait, that (by the word of God's power, and its effectual operation in the hearts of men,) the kingdoms of this world may become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ; and that he may rule and reign in men by his spirit and truth; that thereby all people, out of all different judgments and professions, may be brought into love and unity with God, and one with another....

**Will you resist nothing, even the greatest of evils?** ♦ To this question, Friends answered they were not "pacifist," not non-resistant to evil. They vigorously opposed evil and injustice, but declared: *Our weapons are spiritual, nor carnal, yet mighty through God to the pulling down of the strong holds of sin and Satan, who is the author of wars, fighting, murder, and plots.* In fact, the Declaration, itself, is in part a loving "warning" for your souls' good, not to wrong the innocent, nor the babes of Christ....

**But you have not suffered and hide behind the protection of others?** ♦ Unlike many North American and European Friends today, the first Quakers had suffered the fires of persecution, unjust imprisonment, and martyrdom. *We have been counted as sheep for the slaughter, persecuted and despised, beaten, stoned, wounded, stocked, whipped, imprisoned, haled out of the synagogues, cast into dungeons and noisome vaults, where many have died in bonds, shut up from our friends, denied needful sustenance for many days together, with other like cruelties.*

**What if the ultimate happens? You are "driven to earth, ♦♦♦ killed? Wiped from the face of the earth?!** ♦ The cause of all these our sufferings is not for any evil, but for things relating to the worship of

*our God, and in obedience to his requirings. For which cause we shall freely give up our bodies a sacrifice, rather than disobey the Lord; knowing, as the Lord hath kept us innocent, he will plead our cause when there is none in the earth to plead it. So we, in obedience to his truth, do not love our lives unto death, that we may do his will, and wrong no man in our generation, but seek the good and peace of all men.*

***It seems you are against everything, our government, our values, us!*** *Our principle is, and our practices have always been to seek peace and ensue it; to follow after righteousness and the knowledge of God; seeking the good and welfare, and doing that which tends to the peace of all.*

I have often heard Friends confess, after they've studied the *Declaration*, "I'm a poor Quaker! I could never embrace this when push came to violence!"

That confession is a good starting point for a deeper witness, for early Quakers posited no easy victory, recognizing that indeed they might be "driven to earth," in spite of their good will and non-violence. They recognized that they could not maintain this witness in their own strength, but needed God's power to do so. Their faith was rooted in an understanding of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection: that God's power can be, and is, manifest, even in the face of what seems complete and final death and defeat. If we are truthful, we must admit our own inability to experience the seeming destruction of all we hold dear. We must admit *that we do not have the strength within us to carry through to this end*. Jesus, Himself, confessed in the Garden of Gethsemane, how daunted He was by the crucifixion which awaited Him. He, Himself, had to seek His Father's power to be obedient and face such a death. A true embrace of the peace testimony must include the real possibility of crucifixion - and the ultimate power of God to turn death into resurrection and victory in ways we can not see. A true embrace must include our need for God's power to remain faithful to our witness.