



Listening points

The history and purpose of *Quaker faith and practice*

The purpose of *Quaker faith and practice*

Two basic functions:

- to guide Friends in procedural matters and provide for the regulation of internal affairs
- to reflect the spiritual experience of the Yearly Meeting – guide the Moral conduct of Quakers and bearing witness to testimonies

It is more than just a list of rules, as shown by the postscript from an Epistle to the brethren in the north from a meeting of elders at Balby in 1656.

Dearly beloved Friends, these things we do not lay upon you as a rule or form to walk by; but that all, with a measure of the light, which is pure and holy, may be guided: and so in the light walking and abiding, these things may be fulfilled in the Spirit, not in the letter, for the letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life.

This shows that the Book of Discipline (which is the subtitle of Quaker faith & practice and the generic name, rather than of one particular revision) is really about having a way to follow and to be guided rather than just a rule book. It is also a source of authority. Given that Quakers don't have ordained clergy it is a way of placing authority and power somewhere that can be recognised by the group. The power is in the book because it reflects our tradition, and describes developments and importantly is agreed by the whole group.

The Book of Discipline is revised, roughly every twenty-five or thirty years. This allows changes in practice and theological outlook to be incorporated. It can be changed by the group when it desires. Although Quakers don't have creed it marks and expresses where we currently stand as individuals and as a group.

The history and development of the Book of Discipline through six theological ages of Quakerism

Early Enthusiasms: from the birth of the Quaker movement to the end of the 1650s.

Key ideas: The central idea for Quakers during this period was the concept of the Inward Light.

Discipline:

- **1656** Epistle to the brethren in the north' from a meeting of elders at Balby.
- Twenty advices as to how Friends should conduct themselves.

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Restoration Quakerism: 1660 to about 1680

Key ideas: This was a period of hostility and persecution for Quakers. Structure and organisation was introduced and the peace testimony was adopted (1661). Group authority took precedence over individual experience.

Discipline:

- **1682** Three queries (questions) intended to produce factual information so that the progress of the Society could be seen and help given where it was most needed.
 - What Friends in the ministry departed this life since the last yearly meeting?
 - What Friends imprisoned for their testimony have died in prison since the last yearly meeting?
 - How the Truth has prospered amongst them since the last yearly meeting, and how Friends are in peace and unity?

The Yearly Meeting also issued epistles and minutes designed to offer guidance to Friends in relation to various matters.

Quietism: 1690s to 1820s

Key ideas: Quakers were very cautious about determining if action was truly led by God. They increasingly upheld the value of the silence in meeting for worship. There was an emphasis on strong self-discipline.

Discipline:

- **1738** the first published book of discipline by the Yearly Meeting sent to meetings rather than to all Quakers:
 - Discipline was designed to hold the society together and prevent “Disorderly walking”.
- **1782** the first published version was made available to Friends. Reasons for publishing this were:
 - So that the advices “more uniformly observed and put in practice; that order, unity, peace and harmony may be preserved”.
 - So “the youth of present and future generations may be early and full instructed in our religious principles and in the nature and design of our Christian discipline”.
 - That outsiders would be left with an impression of the constant and earnest endeavours of the Yearly Meeting for the promotion of virtue and religion.
- **1802** second edition
 - Revisions designed to present the discipline more concisely and clearly and to establish organisation on a more definite basis.
 - New entries focused on “temptations to Friends to seek worldly gain” and on ‘gaming’.
 - Trade was a key issue. Quakers were excluded from many professions and naturally gravitated towards trade but this involvement was matched with strictures on how wealth should be accumulated (or not) and Quakers “numbered amongst those whose delight and trust are not in riches” (JJ Gurney).

Evangelicalism: 1830s to about 1900

Key ideas: Emphasis on the paramount authority of scripture and belief that salvation was proven through good works.

Discipline:

- **1834**
 - Changes were a response to problems presented by interaction with the world and claims for greater freedom of belief and action within the society designed to allow for interaction but also to regulate it
 - Substantial alterations on how Friends related to authority/government.
 - New passage encouraging mission work
 - Emphasis on Temperance: Friends were encouraged “to advocate and promote the suppression of ... the improper and immoderate use of ardent spirits”.
- **1861** radical revision. Book of Discipline divided into three separate parts: *Christian Doctrine* - concerning the Christian theology and beliefs of Friends; *Christian Practice* – covering behaviour and including marriage regulations, appeals, and procedures for meetings; and *Church Government* - organisation, structure and governance of the Religious Society of Friends.
 - Broader marriage rules were approved and the rules on plain dress, plain speech and behaviour were abolished.
 - Emphasised the balance between idea of freedom and the need for rules and noted that the underlining principle of the discipline was “love to man as the reflection of love to God
 - Although a radical shift it still included a section on Self-denial (which covered simplicity, temperance, amusements, books) which exhorted Friends to “avoid the foolish and wicked pastimes... particularly balls, gaming places, horse-races and playhouses... those nurseries of debauchery and wickedness.”
- **1883** Christian Doctrine section substantially expanded. This was the last revision as one volume until 1994. The three chapters became three separate books and were revised separately.
 - This revision based the authority for statements of belief on Biblical texts and reflected the evangelical emphasis on authoritative teaching contained in the bible

Liberal Quakerism: 1890s to 1950s

Key ideas: Increased influence of science and Biblical criticism. There was renewed interest in the teachings of early Friends and emphasis on religious authority founded on personal experience.

Discipline:

- **1911** Christian Practice revised and issued as a separate volume.
- **1922** *Christian Life Faith and Thought*: replaced "Christian Doctrine" and broke almost completely from the idea of doctrine, replacing it with the idea of experience, reflecting the emphasis on the importance of direct, personal religious experience.
 - Included “illustrative spiritual experiences” of various Quakers to “illustrate the varied ways in which the heavenly vision has come with living power to the souls of men” and an anthology of short extracts from a variety of Quaker sources concerned with various aspects of Christian faith and thought. Attempted 'to state truth, not by formulating it, but by expressing it through the vital personal and corporate experience of Friends'.
 - Sections on: reality in religion; faith and belief; the nature of God; the Way of life (service abroad, peace, true social order) and “Some religious problems” which included: Science and religion and unity in diversity

- **1925** further revision of *Christian Practice* which again showed a move away from very prescriptive rules:
 - It included passages on 'The abundant life' (art, music, literature) and although it still mentioned exercising "due discrimination" in relation to this and that plays should be watched "under appropriate conditions" it acknowledged that "the creative artist is divinely inspired"
 - The passage of recreation marked a further shift from the plainness stating that "the life of the Christian is not a dull and cheerless existence".
 - It had sections opposing capital punishment and war and promoting education for peace.
- **1931** Church Government revised

Liberal-liberal Quakerism: 1950s onwards

Key ideas: theologically pluralistic and the with the influence of Christianity diminished

Discipline:

- **1960** Christian doctrine and Christian practice printed as one volume as *Christian Faith and Practice in the Experience of the Society of Friends*.
 - Doctrinal emphasis changed in favour of individual experience and personal faith
 - Still has explicit references to the Christian basis: "the mystery and truth of resurrection"
 - Scripture described as confirming the individual experience of God
- **1968** Church Government was revised (reprinted with subsequent amendments 1980).
- **1994** *Quaker Faith and Practice: the book of Christian discipline of the yearly meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain*.
 - More inclusive of diversity.
 - It marks a changing attitude to the Bible "we no longer believe in the Bible in the old way" but it still affirms the Christian basis of Quakerism, that Quaker decision making is about seeking the will of God and that Quaker worship is corporate not individual.
 - Little change in how God is referred to but the nature of God left open to individual interpretation.
 - Fewer passages relating to religious experience that mention Christ and more that mention God.
 - Covers topics not previously included: abortion, sexual relationships and divorce.
 - Descriptive not prescriptive and reflects personal experience demonstrating that the framework provided by Quakerism is in place to aid the individual journey.

Chapters on the structure and organisation have been revised several times.