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**George Fox:
A Man of Fiery Passion on a Mission for Jesus**

Tom Crawford

Impassioned by his personal experience of the “light of Christ” Fox became a dynamic, fanatically sincere speaker. He would speak the “truth” anywhere that God provided an opportunity for him to “convince” people that it was possible for them to “experience” the indwelling light of Christ to change their lives. He was not particular about where he spoke, for he would preach in barns, houses, fields, and in churches after the pries was finished. His ministry began in the northern part of England where he would preach, pray, and protest without reservation. Because he often denounced creeds, forms, rites, external sacraments, and man-made ministry, he was not popular and was often persecuted and imprisoned for his beliefs. Nevertheless Fox and his movement “the Society of Friends” (Quakers) would grow and flourish in England and beyond. Being both a Spirit anointed preacher and a prolific writer by the time of his death, his followers would number approximately 50,000 and the impact of his teaching and call to repentance would be felt as far away as the United States as well as several other countries. Beginning with his childhood this article will attempt to examine how Fox came to have the kind of impact that would infuriate the orthodox ruling class, the religious leaders of his day, and at the same time appeal to the common masses.

Born the summer of 1624 in central England to Christian parents of modest income and position, George Fox had a passion from a young age to help men find a genuine religious experience. This began early in his life when at the age of eleven he had a religious crisis. He wrote in his journal concerning this:

I knew pureness and righteousness, for while I was a

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child I was taught how to walk to be kept pure. The Lord taught me to be faithful in all things, and to act faithfully two ways, viz., inwardly to God, and outwardly to man ... and that my words should be few and savory, seasoned with grace, and that I might not eat and drink to make myself wanton, but for health . . .¹

Fox continued to develop spiritually while apprenticing as a shoemaker, also keeping sheep and dealing in wool. This was a particularly good occupation for him as it allowed him much times of solitude to contemplate what the Spirit was saying to him about his condition and the state of the world in which he lived.

While developing into a young man this early sense of seriousness and God being with him would radically impact the way he viewed himself and the culture around him. At the age of nineteen another religious crisis developed in his life as he observed the apparent contradiction between what religious people said on the one hand, and how they lived on the other. Walter Williams describes his perplexed state as being:

. . . distressed and confused by the seeming inconsistency of professing Christians. The Puritan neighbors whom he knew, professed Christianity, but seemed to live as worldlings. Did Christian faith result in no transformation of life? He knew that the Holy Scriptures called upon the penitent sinner to break with sin, and live a righteous and holy life; yet the preachers were ever 'pleading for sin and imperfection' so long as men live in the world.²

Holding the conviction that religion ought to make bad people good he was further dismayed by a Puritan cousin who asked him to go to an inn to have a jug of beer with him and his friend. When they started to drink "healths" (excessively) George protested, but to no avail.

They said the first to quit drinking would pay the bill and Fox promptly stood, put some money down and left the inn. This experience prompted him to leave not only the inn, but his job and his home "in search of a faith which would really show itself in the lives of those who professed it."³ He did this in the belief that God had commanded him to do so.

For the next three or four years Fox traveled the country side trying to resolve the conflict he felt in his soul between what he saw as a sinning religion and a religion that should be holy or pure. In his mind, reform of the church alone had not been suffi-

cient because people were still living a dualistic lifestyle. In his travels he would experience loneliness, the temptation to despair and other temptations. He sought out professors, priests, magistrates, Christians, and ordinary people to get counsel in order to resolve the inner spiritual conflict he was experiencing. The counsel he received was greatly varied and did not seem to have a great deal to do with resolving his inner spiritual turmoil. Relatives told him he should get married, others said he should become a soldier, and a priest told him to use tobacco and sing psalms for relief. Often those Fox confided in would betray his confidences. Another priest was friendly with Fox and seemed to enjoy his conversations with him until George stepped on one of his flowers which set him into a rage. This last experience was just another compounding of his inner turmoil. He was searching far and wide for spiritual truth and unable to find it.

He felt as though he was in the school of affliction with his questions still unanswered. However, God was using this time to mold him and prepare him for the ministry that was to follow. During this time Walter Williams says that Fox developed his conviction that:

. . . it is not the outward label of church membership or profession, but the inner belief of the heart, that makes one a Christian: that it is the passing from a state of spiritual death to one of spiritual life which enrolls one's name in the Lamb's Book of Life: not man's performance of rites and ceremonies, but a God-wrought miracle in his soul.⁴

Through all of his searching he was coming to the realization that there would be no help found in the world or in the council of men. His heart was divided and he could not find the help he needed to resolve this conflict. Fox states it like this:

. . . I found that there were two thirsts in me, the one after the creatures, to have gotten help and strength there, and the other after the Lord the creator and his Son Jesus Christ. And I saw all the world could do me no good. If I had had a king's diet, palace, and attendance, all would have been as nothing, for nothing gave me comfort but the Lord by his power.⁵

Fox was moving ever closer to experiencing the risen Christ who would bring life to him in a personal way. In the Gospel of John we are told that "he that hath the son hath life." This experience of a life set free for powerful abundant living is about to become a reality for one whom diligently sought after the truth

from childhood. After experiencing loneliness, ridicule, frustration, many miles traveled, shelter less nights and after much prayer and Bible reading Fox describes discovering the joy of a life set free in Christ like this:

I saw that there was none among them all that could speak to my condition. And when all my hopes in the m and in all men were gone, so that I had nothing outwardly to help me, nor could tell what to do, then, Oh then, I heard a voice which said, 'There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition,' and when I heard it my heart did leap for joy. Then the Lord let me see why there was none upon the earth that could speak to my condition, namely, that I might give him all the glory; for all are concluded under sin, and shut up in unbelief as I had been, that Jesus Christ might have the pre-eminence, who enlightens, and gives grace, and faith, and power. Thus, when God doth work who shall let it? And this I knew experientially . . . My desires after the Lord grew stronger, and zeal in the pure knowledge of God and of Christ alone, without the help of any man, book, or writing.⁶

Thus, after a long and arduous journey George Fox discovered a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. This would prove to be the central or core experience from which the Quaker message would spring. At the age of twenty-two Fox is now ready to begin proclaiming his message of a personal, transforming, and experiential faith in Jesus Christ with England and the world. His journey for truth had been difficult and would remain difficult because in "1646 the doctrine of the great Puritan Churches—the Presbyterians, Independents, and Particular Baptists—left little room for a first-hand experiential faith of this kind.⁷ In spite of the religious insincerity around him, and driven by passion to experience the reality of truth in a personal way he found what he was looking for and the religious insincerity of his day would be unable to silence his message. Someone has said that a man with an experience is never at the mercy of a man with an argument and I believe this definitely proved to be true for Fox.

To this point in his life Fox had experienced personal salvation and a revival of his own soul. By spending much time seeking God's truth, reading the Bible, and praying, he came to a knowledge of who Christ is and experienced in a personal way the Holy Spirit setting him free from his old nature to be able to live in obedience to Christ. One might even describe this as a

power encounter, removing the curse of the past and bringing him in to a deeper life in Christ. Many of the expressions of revival were evident in his life.

His personal revival led to Holy Spirit empowered preaching which brought conviction and repentance among his hearers. One afternoon Fox waited for a church meeting to break up and as the people were leaving he began to declare his message. The crowd grew to one thousand and he preached in power holding their attention for three hours. Braithwaite reports it like this:

. . . the Lord's power surprised him. It was an intensely expectant and receptive company... after some time he stood up, with his rapt face and piercing gaze . . . he was there to tell them that Christ Himself was now come . . . all were to hearken to Him.⁸

Many were convinced (repented) that they could experience a changed life by confessing their sin and allowing Christ to empower them to live in obedience to his word.

The separation between religion and life was over. Fox called his followers to walk in purity free from sin by the power of the Holy Spirit. Fox believed that if he could be kept pure so could others. God would do nothing special for him that he would not do for anyone who sincerely sought the Lord and trusted him. He believed that God would enable anyone to live in purity but to do so would require "persistent watchfulness, in utter dependence on the power of God." On this subject he wrote Oliver Cromwell's daughter, Lady Claypole, encouraging her to seek God's help to be pure. He expressed it like this:

Be still and cool in thy own mind and spirit from thy own thoughts and then thou wilt feel the principle of God to turn thy mind to the Lord God, whereby thou wilt receive his strength and power from whence life comes to allay all tempests, blusterings and stormsWhat the light doth make manifest and discover, temptations, confusions, distractions, distempers; do not look at the temptations, confusions, corruptions, but at the light which discovers them, that makes them manifest; and with the same light you will feel over them, to receive power to stand against them . . . For looking down at sin, and corruption, and distraction, you are swallowed up in it; but looking at the light which discovers them, you will see over them. That will give victory; and you will find grace and strength: and there is the first step of peace.⁹

Fox believed that the Lord was able to deliver from everything including willful sin. If God is all powerful, he certainly has power over all sin. He taught his followers how to find deliverance from the sin principle and live a deeper life of purity in Christ. It worked for many because the "Quakers" became known for their honesty and simple, pure lifestyle. They were highly respected for this even among people who often did not hold to their same convictions.

The response to this message of experiential faith was phenomenal. Little groups of "the children of Light" were springing up rapidly in Northern England. From these followers Fox trained leaders, six of whom he worked with closely. Additionally sixty more fiery lay preachers were raised up to evangelize the land. This group became known as the "Valiant Sixty." Vipont says the "Valiant Sixty" entered into a missionary campaign. She describes it like this:

This widespread missionary campaign was pursued with such devotion and energy that in some places it proved almost irresistible. In Bristol especially, John Audland and John Camm found many Seekers who welcomed the Quaker message as an answer to their prayers, and wonderful meetings were held, calling forth the very best in those who had brought it. "As the work is great," wrote John Audland, "the power is greatest in us that ever we knew."¹⁰

Under the power of Fox's preaching and leadership, the "Valiant Sixty" became carriers of revival literally taking the essence of revival with them every place they went. This movement had the urgency of the Holy Spirit in it, compelling those who had come to enjoy the rest and victory to carry the good news to other towns and cities.

The "Valiant Sixty" shared the ministry in eastern, southern, and western England. Fifty-four of them were men; twelve were women. These itinerant "Publishers of Truth" were lay people, forty of whom were connected with farming in some way. Several were involved in trades, and some were professional people. Fox, following biblical precedent, sent them forth two by two. They preached in homes, market places, out in the open air, in jails, and sometimes in churches. Strategically, they sought to reach population centers such as London. According to Walter Williams,

. . . these God-sent messengers carried the gospel message over most of England to rich, and poor, high and low. By 1660—less than six years after the crusade be-

gan—there would be 30,000 to 40,000 Friends in England.

George Fox, then only thirty-six years of age, would be recognized as the most powerful spiritual leader in England. At the time of his death (1691), Friends would constitute the largest Non-conformist group in England.¹¹

Some estimate the number of this Non-conformist Friends group to be as many as 60,000, perhaps even more. It seems reasonable to believe that revival was taking place in a country that had been experiencing civil, political, and religious unrest. God was pouring out His Spirit on His people and society was being changed, morally, ethically, politically, and spiritually.

Other outstanding characteristics of George Fox which would prove to be expressions of revival include his extraordinary gift to preach the Scriptures in a way that opened them to clear understanding. His preaching was Christ-centered, stood against living a sinful life as a professing Christian, and relevant to the society of his time. He preached with much effort and power. I believe his preaching was powerful in part because of his Bible knowledge. He was recognized far and wide for his knowledge of God's word. Someone said that if all the Bibles were lost or destroyed Fox would be able to rewrite the Bible from memory.

In addition to his powerful preaching, he excelled in prayer. One would be hard pressed to know which he was better at, praying or preaching. William Penn gives us some insight as to how one affected the other. Penn says "the most awful, living, reverent frame I ever felt or beheld, I must say was his prayer. And truly it was a testimony that he knew and lived nearer to the Lord than other men; for they that know him most will see most reason to approach him with reverence and fear." The power of his preaching flowed from the intenseness of his prayer life. Fox was an incessant laborer among his followers both in prayer and preaching.

Another outstanding characteristic of his life which contributes to revival is the fact that he suffered much for his convictions, and was at times persecuted mercilessly, and yet he refused to repay evil for evil, and he would suffer in humility until the truth was revealed and God delivered him. At one time he even refused the offer of a pardon from Oliver Cromwell, instead waiting for the truth to be revealed, because he did not want even a hint of guilt to be connected with his name or ministry. This ability to live above reproach even in the face of persecution attracted those who were seeking the genuine article. In

Fox, people found someone whose walk matched his talk. His ability to turn his cheek and treat those who attacked him with respect was incredible. It is impressive that Fox moved constantly among rude, vengeful people who often wanted to persecute him, yet his objective was to overcome these attitudes by going among these people in the power of the Lord and treating them with love in order to change their mind and life (convince them). And he did convince many.

The persecution he suffered came from the government, religious leaders, and the church hierarchy. In some way all were threatened by Fox. Government and political leaders often thought he was against the state and would seek to overthrow the legitimate government. Church leaders and pastors were often infuriated because Fox preached against "steeple house" religion that he saw as a sinning religion that was not consistent with the teaching of Scripture or what God revealed to him through experience. Hence, he was imprisoned no less than eight times during his ministry. Fox describes the outcome of an incident where a priest and congregation deeply resented his message:

And when I began to speak, they fell upon me and the clerk up with his Bible as I was speaking and hit me in the face that my face gushed out with blood and it run-off me in the steeple house . . . and they punched me and thrust me out and beat me sore with books, fists and sticks and threw me over a hedge into a close and there beat me over again. And they beat me into a house punching me through the entry, and there I lost my hat and never had it again, and after dragged me into the street, stoning and beating me along, sorely blooded and bruised. And the priest beheld a great part of this his people's doings.¹²

No wonder many were convinced that the experience Fox preached about was real. To survive this kind of physical abuse and in addition not strike back one would have to have supernatural Holy Spirit power and help.

In addition to everything I have mentioned there were supernatural manifestations of the Holy Spirit evident in Fox's ministry. When the people prayed, buildings shook, people would quake, and some were healed. There are reports that more than one hundred people received physical healing when Fox prayed for them. One of the meetings where Pentecostal manifestations took place was Malton.

There was, he says, at Malton, at the time called Christ-

mas, nigh two hundred Friends met to wait upon the Lord, and did continue three or four days together, and did scarce part night or day I was with them, and twice the mighty power of the Lord was made manifest; almost all the room was shaken.¹³

This is quite reminiscent of the book of acts with rooms shaking and jail doors flying open. Perhaps Christians today need to spend more time in prayer, praying for inner purity and revival as Fox and his followers did.

1. The desire that Christians might be moved to clearer and deeper understanding of Scripture through their devout study in small conventicles or house meetings.
2. The desire to have laity rediscover the universal priesthood of believers by giving lay persons positions of responsibility in these conventicles.
3. He urged all to see that the nature of Christianity is such that it cannot be contained in doctrinal formulations, but that it is rather a total experience of faith, and an attitude in the whole life. Doctrines are important . . . but much more important is the actual experience and practice of the Christian life.
4. The desire for all controversies to be carried out in a spirit of charity.
5. Spener wished that the training of pastors would go beyond cold logic and orthodox theology, and include a profound immersion in devotional literature and practice as well as some training and experience in the actual work of shepherding the flock.
6. As a result of this newly trained clergy, Spener wished to see the pulpit regain its original purpose of instructing, inspiring, and feeding the believers, rather than being used for learned disquisitions on obscure or irrelevant points of doctrine.¹⁴

Although Fox applied some of these points with variations, I believe they are a fair representation of how Fox envisioned ministry taking place.

In conclusion I want to summarize the dynamics of revival and growth in the "Society of Friends" as I see them. This was a lay movement. Fox spoke much about the priesthood of all believers. All believers have a message for the world, as well as the "Valiant Sixty" whom Fox sent out two by two. These itinerant preachers evangelized just as every lay person should. Next, two week, monthly, six week and quarterly meetings were an early application of the cell group idea for inner growth and vitality.

Many Seekers who were open to the Quakers came into Fox's movement through these groups. Simplicity is the third dynamic of revival. The religious experience Fox taught was simple. There were no barriers such as priests, liturgy, or buildings between God and man, thus one could experience the immediacy of God's presence in his religion. This was very appealing to the masses in seventeenth century England. Fourth, the ethical and moral fervor of the movement impacted, influenced, and often changed the values of society. As I mentioned earlier persecution caused growth and in this case would be a dynamic of revival. Moving on, Fox emphasized a restoration of apostolic Christianity that moved away from the letter of the law and tradition and empowered the laity. Seventh, there was an emphasis on universal redemption as opposed to the limiting Puritan and Calvinistic doctrine of election. The final factor of revival and growth as I see it is the fact that George Fox was a person of great religious fervor, charisma, and fidelity; powerful both in prayer and preaching.

William Penn said that "as to man, he was an original, being no man's copy."¹⁵ When writing Fox's epitaph Penn wrote "Many sons have done virtuously in this day; but, dear George, thou excellest them all."¹⁶ George Fox was a man of fiery passion who was on a mission for Jesus and he made a difference in his time and beyond.

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NOTES

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3. Elfrida Vipont, *The Story of Quakerism* (Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 1977), 17.
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8. *Ibid.*, 84.
9. Fox, *The Journal of George Fox*, 346-348.
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