

The Quaker Testimony

by Wilmer A. Cooper

The word *testimony* is dear to Friends because it is supposed to grow out of our experiences of the leading of the Spirit of God or the voice of conscience informed by the Light of Christ within. Quaker testimonies might be considered the equivalent of the creeds of the churches. The testimonies of peace, simplicity, equality, etc., are familiar to most Friends, with the peace testimony given priority. The testimony of integrity is often subsumed under one of the other testimonies, but perhaps is most central of all to the message of George Fox.

This thought came to me recently as I listened to a tape recording of an address given several years ago to my Quakerism class by Elfrida Vipont Foulds. She is now an elderly Friend, a distinguished member of London Yearly Meeting, who lives in northwest England in the Lake Country, where Friends had their beginnings in the 1650s. Her home is at Yealand-Conyers, not far from Pendle Hill, Firbank Fell, and Swarthmoor Hall. She is the author of a number of books, particularly children's books, and she is also a Quaker historian of some note.

The subject of her talk to my class was, "The Message of George Fox." Years earlier, she had struggled to bring Fox's experiences alive to her by visiting his birthplace at Fenny Drayton, a small, sparsely populated village in the English Midlands. As she walked around there she realized that probably only one building was still standing that had been there when Fox was a boy, and that was the village church. So she went over to the church, pushed open the large door, went in, took a seat on one of the front pews, and just sat there in meditation. She lapsed into absolute silence, no sound from within or without. Finally she looked up and saw along the wall one of those family tombs one sees in English churches. The faces and family

names were carved across the top. The faces all looked alike, except for one half-face that was looking right at her.

At that moment she seemed to hear a voice which said, "Everything begins with a question about life." At the same time she saw in her mind's eye the boy George Fox sitting there with his family in the village church, Sunday after Sunday, worshiping. But the boy George looked puzzled; he seemed to be pondering why he and his family, and their neighbors, came week after week to the village church where they prayed; where they made solemn affirmations; and where they witnessed to Christ. But then these self-same people would go from the church the following week cheating their neighbors, cheating in the marketplace; they would get drunk in the ale houses; husbands would beat their wives, and children would get cuffed by their parents. Next Sunday they would faithfully go back to the village church and go through the same religious exercises as the week before, only to repeat the same kind of behavior in the village the week following.

All of this inconsistency troubled the boy George Fox so that he continued to ask deep questions about the meaning of life, given this kind of behavior. At this point Elfrida Foulds says that the message of George Fox suddenly came to her, namely that Fox felt the need for integrity in daily life. He saw that there must be a correspondence between one's faith, between what one practiced on the Sabbath, and what one does during the daily work week. For Fox it called for the kind of integrity the Psalmist was talking about: "Judge me, O Lord, for I have walked in mine integrity." (Ps.26:1)

So "integrity" became Elfrida Foulds' subject for the message on George Fox which she was to deliver. She pointed out that Fox continually tested this in his own life. There is the example in his *Journal* when he was invited by some friends to a drinking bout, and he re-

fused because he saw an inconsistency between such behavior and the faith he proclaimed. Fox also saw many inconsistencies when he observed the churches of his day. He believed that a minister of the gospel could not be prepared at Oxford or Cambridge, if such persons were not moved by the promptings of the Holy Spirit, the voice of God within. Moreover, Fox refused to call places of worship "churches" because a church is not a building; it is the people of God, a fellowship of believers. The church is the men and women who come together in worship; therefore, Friends called their places of worship "meetinghouses"

Integrity means speaking the truth.



Ricardo P. Thomas



Terry Foss/AFSC

Integrity calls for faithfulness to conscience illumined by the Light within.

Wilmer Cooper was one of the founders of the Earlham School of Religion in 1960. He is professor emeritus now but still teaches part-time at ESR and writes on Quaker subjects. His article is adapted from his speech last year to Intermountain Yearly Meeting. It appeared in the October 1987 Friends Bulletin.

of Integrity

rather than "churches."

Elfrida Foulds calls Fox's view of the relationship of faith and life the "sacramental view of life," in which there must be a correspondence between the inner life of the spirit and the outer life of involvement in the world. I will refer to this again in my closing remarks, but this will give you the background for my choice of "integrity" as the focus of my address to you, and how it came about that Elfrida Foulds concludes that integrity is the centerpiece of George Fox's message.

There is yet another reason why I

came to this topic of integrity. Perhaps you have been asked, as I have, to explain Quakerism to someone unfamiliar with it. In the winter of 1980 when I was on sabbatical leave at Woodbrooke, the Quaker study center at Birmingham, England, we had there a young Indian woman who was studying at Birmingham University. Because she had never met any Quakers before coming to Woodbrooke, understandably she wanted to find out more about them. Someone suggested that since I was a visiting Friend giving some lectures, that she ask me. So we sat together at the table one

day and she began asking "What is a Quaker?" Because I didn't have a quick and ready answer, she became impatient with my hesitant response. Unfortunately, I began by suggesting two or three things she could read about Friends. At this point she showed a bit of anger. All she wanted was a straightforward two-sentence answer to, "What is a Quaker?" or "What is Quakerism?"

As I struggled with this question then and on many other occasions, as probably most of you have, it occurred to me that perhaps the word "integrity" comes as close as any single-word answer to "What is Quakerism?" Now let me explain what I mean by this.

From the beginning Quakers have been known as "Friends of Truth" or "Publishers of Truth." The word "truth" and the word "integrity" have a close affinity and correspondence. In some respects the words are synonymous. Early Friends' use of "truth" had a biblical origin. Friends were fond of the Gospel of John, such as John 4:23 which says, "The true worshiper will worship the Father in spirit and in truth." And again in John 8:32, "You will know the truth and the truth will make you free." For some other thoughts about truth I am indebted to Kenneth Boulding's 1970 Swarthmoor lecture at London Yearly Meeting entitled, "The Prospering of Truth." Interestingly, he makes reference there to a practice that some Wilburite Conservative Friends used to have, namely, greeting one another by asking, "How is truth prospering in thy parts?" That is to say, "where thee lives." Obviously that is a searching way to greet another Friend.

"Truth" is a frequently used word in early Quaker literature. In some Quaker journals it appears on almost every page. It is usually Truth with a capital T. It is more than just common, ordinary truth that is understood here. For early Friends this Truth referred to the Gospel they found in the New Testament. It was Truth which had objective content, and it was truth in which one could participate. It was much more than propositional truth, which is probably our most common understanding of truth.

Let me now describe four ways in which integrity has been described and practiced by Friends.

• **The first is truth-telling, or simply not telling lies.**

For Friends this was grounded in the injunction of Jesus not to take an oath or swear that you would tell the truth.

Integrity leads to a deep sense of spiritual community.

Juditha Lopez/Friends General Conference

Integrity calls us to be truly who we are.



Terry Foss/AFSC

Friends were very conscientious about this, not only because it was refuted by the Bible, but it implied a double standard of truth. One should be known for telling the truth all the time, and not just when you are called before a judge and are sworn to tell the truth. *Webster's Dictionary* definition of an oath is "a ritual declaration, based on appeal to God . . . that one will speak the truth, keep a promise, remain faithful, etc." And swearing means to make a solemn declaration or affirmation (by invoking the presence of God) to tell the truth.

But Quakers believe that you should be known for telling the truth all the time. As a matter of fact, early Friends were thrown into jail more often for refusing to take the oath than for any other reason. Anybody who didn't like Quakers could bring them before a judge, charge them, and have them jailed because they would refuse to take the oath before the judge.

Apart from Friends' writings, one of the best places to find this kind of integrity described is in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's, *The Cost of Discipleship*. Bonhoeffer, you may remember, was the German pastor/professor who was jailed and hanged by the Nazis just before the end of World War II. Bonhoeffer has a chapter entitled "Truthfulness." He gives an interpretation of Matt. 5:33-37 which forbids taking oaths and swearing. It sounds like it might have been written by a Quaker. Bonhoeffer held that "the very existence of oaths is proof that there are such things as lies. Oaths are intended as a barrier against untruthfulness." And, parenthetically, he says that "perjury is a word for telling lies under oath." But Jesus destroys the lie by forbidding oaths altogether. "Let your 'yea' be 'yea' and your 'nay' 'nay.'" There is no need for oaths if you speak the truth all the time. Of course you can find the same thing said in Fox's *Journal*, and in other early Quaker writings. So the first point is, integrity means truth-telling.

• Integrity calls for authenticity, for genuineness, and for veracity in our personhood.

It calls us to be truly who we are and not be two-faced by trying to be something or somebody we are not. Thus integrity is the opposite of hypocrisy, which means phoniness, sham, and deception. Jesus has some scathing words for hypocrites in Matt. 23. He has seven woes against the religious authorities of his time, the Scribes and Pharisees, who

were pretenders of virtue and piety.

When I worked for Friends Committee on National Legislation in Washington, D.C., in the 1950s, we had a friend and neighbor who was going back to her college for a class reunion. In preparation she went out and bought a new wardrobe of clothes to wear. In an attempt to justify buying these clothes, she said to us, "You know, when we get back to college and have that class reunion, it's going to be one big lying session!" In other words, they were going to put on false fronts and try to be people they weren't.

• Integrity calls for obedience, or if you prefer, faithfulness, to conscience illumined by the Light within.

For Friends this is the seat of religious authority and the touchstone of our faith. Here Quaker truth and integrity have an existential quality. It is truth which lays hold of one in a moment of

The world is
hungry for—if
not dying for—
integrity in
daily life.

time. It is truth which may very well have objective validity, as I believe it does, but if it is not truth which is internalized in each of us, and for which we take ownership, then it is not truth which is valid and binding for us. But once it lays hold of us, it is truth which will not let us go until we have acted upon it. This kind of truth is new and fresh and therefore vital. It is not grounded in dogma, creeds, abstract philosophical ideas, or theological affirmations. It is not to be found in religious textbooks or Quaker books of discipline, but it is grounded in a living faith and experience of the present moment. It is the basis for the Quaker testimonies—testimonies which are a living witness to the inward leading of the Spirit of God in our lives.

• We need to look at integrity in terms of its root meaning.

We need to see it in its larger context. The word comes from the Latin *integritas* which refers to a state or quality of being complete, that is, a condition of wholeness. The word "integrity," as well as the mathematical term "integer," all have a common meaning. When we look at these common mean-

ings of *integritas*, or "integrity," they all point to a unity when applied to persons, or what we call community. Integrity creates a sense of togetherness and belonging when applied to persons in community. It is in community that persons are able to have a sense of responsibility and accountability toward one another. This is the opposite of individualism, which is preoccupied with doing one's own thing, often with little concern for how it affects other people. This attitude dominates so much of our behavior in society and in our U.S. culture, and it affects the Religious Society of Friends as well. Thus we need to recover the testimony of integrity as applied to wholeness in communities of persons in which we have a sense of responsibility and accountability toward one another.

But integrity in its root meaning leads to an even deeper sense of community. This level of wholeness goes beyond the community of persons to a spiritual community with "The ground of our being," to use Paul Tillich's words. Here we need to associate integrity with the religious concept and experience of salvation. Now that may seem strange to you because the word "salvation" is not fashionable anymore, except among radio and television evangelists, and a few fundamentalist church folk. But according to Paul Tillich the root meaning of "salvation" is derived from the Latin *salus* (or *salvus*), which can mean "health" or "wholeness." Now, who among us does not want to have health and wholeness, both physical and spiritual? If the wholeness aspect of integrity leads to a sense of community of persons, likewise I am suggesting that it may also lead us to an experience of spiritual wholeness in relationship to God. This comes very close to what St. Augustine meant when he prayed: "Oh God, Thou hast created us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee." In a similar vein Olive Wyon writes, "integration" is not an end to itself; it is a means to an end, and the end is God."

Turning now to some practical aspects of our subject, I believe that the world is hungry for, if not dying for, integrity in daily life. As we look around us, we are overwhelmed by a society and culture which has few compunctions about lying, cheating, and stealing. People's lives are fraught with hypocrisy, deception, and fraud. It seems to be the norm.

We shall enumerate here a few examples.

The widespread use of drugs and drug dealing falls into this category.

Another example is "white collar crime," such as the insider stock-trading scandals on Wall Street. Those who commit these crimes exhibit little sense of remorse in terms of their behavior in the marketplace. Or, turning to government and public policy-making, we find widespread use of lies, dirty tricks, cover-ups, in order to bypass legal and democratic processes in the interest of personal party gain. This is not to suggest that all government is corrupt and evil. Quakers have always believed that it is possible to work through government to help transform the world. But we are also aware of the frequent lack of integrity by many who represent us in government.

Still other examples of possible lack of integrity confront us whenever we walk into a supermarket, or any store, and wonder whether we're being cheated with respect to the quality of the goods, and whether the price is fair. Sometimes we are not only victims of cheating and deception, but we become perpetrators of it ourselves. We, too, are tempted to lie and cheat, partly because everyone else seems to be doing it. How many of us are truthful about our IRS returns? That's a toughy for us. This year I reported an income item which I am quite sure IRS would never have known had I not reported it. But in the interest of integrity I reported it, and of course I was haunted by the fact that I was going to be coming here to talk to you about integrity! This is an area where we are tempted to justify cheating because we so often disapprove of the way our tax dollars are spent by the government, particularly for military purposes.

We also need to ask ourselves about our sense of integrity and fidelity in family relationships, in our dealings with our spouses and children. How many of you know about the research that our Quaker friend, Judy Brutz, has done with respect to violence in the Quaker family? Her research shows supporting evidence that there's little, if any, difference between Quaker and non-Quaker families in the amount of violence used in the home. This is very upsetting to us as Friends, but Judy Brutz has considerable evidence for her conclusion. She is now in the process of forming, with the help of some other Friends, what is called Friends Family Service, P.O. Box 16010, Des Moines,

Iowa, if you are interested in finding out more.

We do not need to give any more examples to illustrate our point about the cry for integrity in daily life. Because of such widespread lack of integrity we are forced to ask the question: Is it not true that we are in about as much danger of being destroyed by our own moral sickness and culpability, as a society, as we are in danger of annihilation by nuclear bombs? I know we are all concerned about the possibility of an accidental nuclear holocaust, as we should be, so I don't want to detract from that concern. But I'm trying to suggest that there is something else eating away at our society which should claim our attention just as surely as the nuclear threat.

Friends in the past have had a very high standard for themselves. Early Friends were committed to what they called "Christian perfection," which is

We must begin to take the Quaker testimony of integrity as seriously as we do the peace testimony.

a term not very well understood today. Those of you who knew Cecil Hinshaw from Boulder (Colo.) Meeting may have read some of his early writings on the Quaker claim to Christian perfection in early Quakerism, and what relevance it has today. The Christian perfection of early Friends called them to live up to the measure of the Light of Truth given to them. It is a call to holy obedience to the Light of Christ within, as Thomas Kelly would say. Thus we have a lot to live up to in our Quaker heritage and in our testimony of integrity and truth-telling.

We might remind ourselves here of the well-known statement of the Harvard psychologist and philosopher, William James, who in his book, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, describes Quakerism as "a religion of veracity, rooted in spiritual inwardness." He went on to say that early Quakerism was "a return to something more like the original gospel truth . . . than had ever been known in England." That is a pretty bold statement. How well do we emulate this in our Quaker lives today?

I agree with Hugh Doncaster, the British Quaker who in 1967 at Friends

World Conference at Guilford College challenged Friends by saying, "The world is dying for lack of Quakerism in action." I agree with that, but I do not believe we are worthy of such a claim unless we begin to take the Quaker testimony of integrity as seriously as we do the peace testimony. We need to learn how to teach our children these testimonies and to model them for others. We need to begin to live the way we want the world to become, rather than the way the world is now.

In conclusion, let me return for a moment to Elfrida Vipont Foulds. After she settled on "integrity" as the focus of George Fox's message, she went on to spell it out in terms of the Quaker sacramental view of life. She defined a sacrament in the classical way as "an outward sign of an inward grace," or as we might prefer, an outward sign of an inward spiritual experience and commitment. She observed that what Fox wanted to convey was that our outward, visible lives should give expression to our inward spiritual lives, and that there should be a correspondence between the two.

To give expression to this idea, Elfrida has popularized the Quaker phrase, "Let your lives speak." Presumably this is a quotation from George Fox, although she is not sure Fox ever uttered these exact words. But she is convinced that they reflect a basic religious principle for him. If you go to northwest England today you will find this message inscribed on a plaque on what is called "Fox's Pulpit," high on a rock overlooking Firbank Fell. It was here that Fox preached to over a thousand seekers gathered in June 1652 shortly after his vision on Pendle Hill of "a great people to be gathered." It was here that Fox not only called people to "let your lives speak," but he admonished them to live as if the kingdom of God could come in their lives then and there, rather than wait for the Kingdom to come at some future time.

Finally, I would like to end with a prayer, the source of which I do not know, but it is a prayer that speaks about Truth and has always meant a great deal to me.

Oh, God, who art the Truth, make us one with Thee in everlasting love, for in Thee alone art the sum of our desires. Let the whole creation be silent before Thee, and do Thou speak only unto our souls. □