

George Fox - The unshakable Shaker

Leonard Ravenhill:

"The most remarkable incident in modern history perhaps is not the Diet of Worms, still less the battle of Austerlitz or Peterloo, or any other battle.

"The most remarkable incident is passed over carelessly by most historians and treated with some degree of ridicule by others - namely, George Fox's making for himself a suit of leather.

"No grander thing was ever done than when George Fox, stitching himself into a suit of leather, went forth determined to find truth for himself - and to do battle for it against all superstition and intolerance."

This was Thomas Carlyle's considered opinion about the poor, uneducated English shoemaker, George Fox. So hard was his itinerant preaching life that he made for himself that famous pair of leather breeches, which have since become historical. Those breeches were known all over the country, says Macauley the historian. In the middle of the 17th century men feared the man dressed in that famous suit as much as the Jordan spectators, centuries before, feared the man who had the leathern girdle about his loins and who ate locusts and wild honey. And rightly so, for George Fox and John the Baptist were kindred spirits.

George Fox first saw the light of day in 1624 at Drayton-in-the-Clay, Leicestershire, England. His godly parents belonged to the Church of England and endeavored to bring up their children in the fear of the Lord. George's first step in his long quest for spirituality was at the age of eleven when he surrendered his heart to the Lord. Ever after, he sought to live an honest and upright life.

The Reformation fires of one hundred years before had burned themselves out. Among the clergy there abounded much education, loose-living, and ease. The Protestant church had a name to live but was dead.

George Fox did not enjoy any personal direct communion with God until he was nineteen. Then for some time his soul was full of strange longings and continual reachings out after God. The Christians he met did not possess what they professed. So deeply was he grieved and distressed over examples of their hypocrisy that he could not sleep all night but walked up and down in his room praying to God. He sought help from man but found none.

His relatives did not know what to make of George. One kind soul said that marriage was the remedy for his melancholic state of mind. Another preferred the view that he should enlist in the army. A third believed the use of tobacco and singing psalms would bring relief. No wonder the seeking soul thought that his advisers were all "miserable comforters." One man, supposedly experienced in the things of God, was "like an empty hollow cask" to George Fox. Seeking the advice of a clergyman, Fox accidentally stepped on the minister's flower bed, whereupon the angry cleric flew into a rage.

Finding no help from men, Fox gave up seeking from that source. With the Bible as his guide, he began looking to the Lord alone for help. Slowly the light began to dawn upon him. He was led to see that only those who had passed from death to life were real believers in Christ. Once and for all Fox settled it that "being bred at Oxford and Cambridge did not qualify or fit a man to be a minister of Christ."

When George Fox was about 23, he began preaching to others the truths revealed to him. He was mightily used of God. Thus he came in the nick of time "to save the church from deadness and formalism, and the world from infidelity." He was sent of God to call the church to real spiritual worship.

Fox began his preaching with a limited education, without any special training, and without special advantages of any kind. He so preached that men got the shakes. The name Quaker was attached to Fox and his followers because of the quaking of the men who came to scoff but stayed to pray. Though he made others shake, no man could make him shake.

Walking bare-footed through the crowded market at Litchfield, England, this man in the leather suit upraised his hands and voice, shouting, "Woe unto Litchfield, thou bloody city! Woe unto Litchfield!" He feared neither man nor the consequences of his tirade. At first the crowd was amused, then serious, then terrified.

Here was a man with unquenchable zeal. He had "heard a voice." Beat him they might, cast him into prison they would, mock him as a madman they laughingly did. But still he proclaimed the message of Christ. Shut out of churches, George Fox made a stone his pulpit and preached to the crowds in the streets. Taken from the street

meeting to the jail, he made the jail a cathedral to declare the wonderful works of God. Often he was found praising the Lord in a stinking prison cell.

From judge to criminal, from Lord Protector to kitchen maid, Fox bore a burning witness. "He iterated the British Isles," says one of his biographers, "preaching and protesting as no man before him had ever done. In his preaching he wore out clothes, horses, critics, persecutors, and eventually himself."

Many times Fox prophesied of future events that were revealed to him. Visions often came to him. Once in Lancashire, England, as he was climbing Pendle Hill, he had a vision of a coming revival in that very area. He "saw the countryside alive with men, all moving to one place." I have worshipped in the old mullion-windowed meeting house erected after the great visitation of God in that area.

In personal appearance Fox was a large man with remarkable piercing eyes. His words were like a flash of lightning. His judgment was clear, and his logic convincing. His great spiritual gift was a remarkable discernment. He seemed to be able to read the characters of men by looking at them. He likened the temperaments of people to a wolf, a serpent, a lion, or a wasp. He could meet a person and say, "I see the spirit of a cunning fox in you." "You have the nature of a serpent." Or "Thou art as vicious as a tiger." Fox was far in advance of any other person in his day.

The great secret of Fox's power was his faith in God. He started with scarcely any advantages, but soon he influenced the whole world for God. His one desire was the extension of Christ's kingdom on earth. Through his influence England, Ireland, and Scotland were soon ablaze. In 1661 several of his followers were moved to go beyond the seas to publish truth in foreign countries. In 1664 he married Margaret Fell. In 1670-73 he sailed for the West Indies and North America. Though he was persecuted even there, the work spread.

No religious or political reformer was ever imprisoned as many times as George Fox, and oh, what prisons! But his times in prison were missionary labors. Not in solitary confinement, he always had a congregation. But he made converts. His fame spread and people came in crowds to hear him.

A distinguished American governor, Livingston, was justified in giving the following elevated opinion of "the unshakable shaker": George Fox alone has, without human learning, done more than any other reformer in Protestant Christendom towards the restoration of real, primitive, unadulterated Christianity and the destruction of priest craft, superstition, and ridiculous, unavailing rites and ceremonies.

He left us an example of fearless, devoted service that alas, but few have ever tried to follow. "He saw hell and heaven, God and judgment with such a clear vision that he was forced to go out in season and out of season to snatch poor sinners from their awful doom. Constantly he appeared just where nobody expected him, blocking the road to hell and pointing the road to heaven - and all because he was completely delivered from all regard for public opinion and utterly impatient of useless routine."

How cities throughout the world today could be made to quake by workers as full of God and faith, as reckless as to their life and interest and comfort, as determined to wreck the devil's kingdom as George Fox was!

Once Fox grasped the truth that he sought for, there was a steady calm in his spiritual life. There were no ups and downs; his life was pure and childlike and truly hid with Christ in God.

His preaching was plain but powerful. It may have lacked eloquence or clearness, it may have been given in involved sentences and been almost unintelligible, but the Holy Ghost was never lacking in all of Fox's discourses. He excelled in prayer.

The work by which Fox is principally known is Fox's Journal. This book, which was printed three years after his death, is one of the world's most famous books, "rich in spiritual insight, in noble simplicity and in moral fibre." It was Fox's presence and spoken words which made the deep impression vividly portrayed in his journal.

George Fox died in London, January 13, 1691. If you are ever in London, go to his grave right opposite John Wesley's church in City Road in the weary-looking Bunhill Field. Despite its moss and age, you will read on the leaning tombstone, "Here lies George Fox!" He is in good company, for beside him, waiting for the great day, sleep Wesley's mother, Sussannah, Isaac Watts, Daniel Defoe, and other famed folk. George Fox, who honored the Son will one day be honored by Him. Sleep on, faithful, fighting Fox!

"Above all, George Fox excelled in prayer. The inwardness and weight of his spirit, the reverence and solemnity

of his address and behaviour, and the fewness and fulness of his words have often struck even strangers with admiration as they used to reach others with consolation. The most awful, living, reverend frame I ever felt or beheld, I must say, was the prayer of George Fox. And truly it was a testimony. 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." By William Penn

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