

Module 406: George Fox

Journal by George Fox. Excerpted and introduced for Christian History Institute by Dan Graves.

“Then, at the command of God, the ninth of the Seventh month, 1643, I left my relations, and broke off all familiarity or fellowship with young or old.”

George Fox was founder of the Quakers, so called because they trembled before God. In opposition to the obvious coldness and corruption of the church of his day, Fox chose to be guided by the inward light of Christ (fed by continual immersion in the Bible) and rejected the trappings of formal religion and undue respect to men, whatever their elevation. For this he suffered many imprisonments.

Under tyrants, prisons are places of terrible retribution and injustice. Included in our excerpts are a description of possibly the nastiest prison conditions recorded in Christian history.

The Event that Drove Fox to Seek God

When I came towards nineteen years of age, being upon business at a fair, one of my cousins, whose name was Bradford, having another professor [i.e.: someone who professed to be a Christian] with him, came and asked me to drink part of a jug of beer with them. I, being thirsty, went in with them, for I loved any who had a sense of good, or that sought after the Lord.

When we had drunk a glass apiece, they began to drink healths, and called for more drink, agreeing together that he that would not drink should pay all. I was grieved that any who made profession of religion should offer to do so. They grieved me very much, having never had such a thing put to me before by any sort of people. Wherefore I rose up, and, putting my hand in my pocket, took out a groat, and laid it upon the table before them, saying, “If it be so, I will leave you.”

So I went away; and when I had done my business returned home; but did not go to bed that night, nor could I sleep, but sometimes walked up and down, and sometimes prayed and cried to the Lord, who said unto me: "Thou seest how young people go together into vanity, and old people into the earth; thou must forsake all, young and old, keep out of all, and be as a stranger unto all."

Then, at the command of God, the ninth of the Seventh month, 1643, I left my relations, and broke off all familiarity or fellowship with young or old.

In His Misery, Fox Keeps Apart

After this I went to another, one Macham, a priest in high account. He would needs give me some physic, and I was to have been let blood; but they could not get one drop of blood from me, either in arms or head (though they endeavoured to do so), my body being, as it were, dried up with sorrows, grief and troubles, which were so great upon me that I could have wished I had never been born, or that I had been born blind, that I might never have seen wickedness or vanity; and deaf, that I might never have heard vain and wicked words, or the Lord's name blasphemed.

When the time called Christmas came, while others were feasting and sporting themselves I looked out poor widows from house to house, and gave them some money. When I was invited to marriages (as I sometimes was), I went to none at all; but the next day, or soon after, I would go and visit them, and if they were poor I gave them some money; for I had wherewith both to keep myself from being chargeable to others and to administer something to the necessities of those who were in need.

About the beginning of the year 1646, as I was going to Coventry, and approaching towards the gate, a consideration arose in me, how it was said that "All

Christians are believers, both Protestants and Papists"; and the Lord opened to me that if all were believers, then they were all born of God, and passed from death to life; and that none were true believers but such; and, though others said they were believers, yet they were not. At another time, as I was walking in a field on a First-day morning, the Lord opened unto me that being bred at Oxford or Cambridge was not enough to fit and qualify men to be ministers of Christ; and I wondered at it, because it was the common belief of people. But I saw it clearly as the Lord opened it unto me, and was satisfied, and admired the goodness of the Lord, who had opened this thing unto me that morning.

The Answer to Fox's Spiritual Agony

But as I had forsaken the priests, so I left the separate preachers [those who wanted to separate from the Church of England] also, and those esteemed the most experienced people; for I saw there was none among them all that could speak to my condition. When all my hopes in them and in all men were gone, so that I had nothing outwardly to help me, nor could I 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.

Examples of Fox's Early Work

At a certain time, when I was at Mansfield, there was a sitting of the justices about hiring of servants; and it was upon me from the Lord to go and speak to the justices, that they should not oppress the servants in their wages. So I walked towards the inn where they sat; but finding a company of fiddlers there, I did not go in, but thought to come in the morning, when I might have a more serious opportunity to discourse with them.

But when I came in the morning, they were gone, and I was struck even blind, that I could not see. I inquired of the innkeeper where the justices were to sit that day; and he

told me, at a town eight miles off. My sight began to come to me again; and I went and ran thitherward as fast as I could. When I was come to the house where they were, and many servants with them, I exhorted the justices not to oppress the servants in their wages, but to do that which was right and just to them; and I exhorted the servants to do their duties, and serve honestly. They all received my exhortation kindly; for I was moved of the Lord therein.

Moreover, I was moved to go to several courts and steeple-houses at Mansfield, and other places, to warn them to leave off oppression and oaths, and to turn from deceit to the Lord, and to do justly. Particularly at Mansfield, after I had been at a court there, I was moved to go and speak to one of the most wicked men in the country, one who was a common drunkard, a noted whore-master, and a rhyme-maker; and I reprov'd him in the dread of the mighty God, for his evil courses.

When I had done speaking, and left him, he came after me, and told me that he was so smitten when I spoke to him, that he had scarcely any strength left in him. So this man was convinced, and turned from his wickedness, and remained an honest, sober man, to the astonishment of the people who had known him before.

Thus the work of the Lord went forward, and many were turned from the darkness to the light, within the compass of these three years, 1646, 1647 and 1648. Diverse meetings of Friends, in several places, were then gathered to God's teaching, by his light, Spirit, and power; for the Lord's power broke forth more and more wonderfully.

Fox Abused for Rejecting Customs

Moreover, when the Lord sent me forth into the world, He forbade me to put off my hat to any, high or low; and I was required to Thee and Thou all men and women, without any respect to rich or poor, great or small. And as I travelled up

and down I was not to bid people Good morrow, or Good evening; neither might I bow or scrape with my leg to any one; and this made the sects and professions to rage. But the Lord's power carried me over all to His glory, and many came to be turned to God in a little time; for the heavenly day of the Lord sprung from on high, and broke forth apace, by the light of which many came to see where they were.

Oh, the blows, punchings, beatings, and imprisonments that we underwent for not putting off our hats to men! Some had their hats violently plucked off and thrown away, so that they quite lost them. The bad language and evil usage we received on this account are hard to be expressed, besides the danger we were sometimes in of losing our lives for this matter; and that by the great professors of Christianity, who thereby discovered [revealed] they were not true believers.

Examples of Miracles Worked Through Fox

Coming to Mansfield-Woodhouse, I found there a distracted [mentally ill] woman under a doctor's hand, with her hair loose about her ears. He was about to let her blood, she being first bound, and many people about her, holding her by violence; but he could get no blood from her.

I desired them to unbind her and let her alone, for they could not touch the spirit in her by which she was tormented. So they did unbind her; and I was moved to speak to her, and in the name of the Lord to bid her be quiet; and she was so. The Lord's power settled her mind, and she mended. Afterwards she received the truth, and continued in it to her death; and the Lord's name was honored.

There was in that town a great man that had long lain sick, and was given up by the physicians; and some Friends in the town desired me to go to see him. I went up to him in his chamber, and spoke the Word of life to him, and was moved to pray by him; and the Lord was entreated, and restored

him to health.

Fox Imprisoned in a Dreadful Place

The assizes being over, and we settled in prison upon such a commitment that we were not likely to be soon released, we broke off from giving the jailer seven shillings a week apiece for our horses, and seven shillings a week for ourselves, and sent our horses into the country. Upon which he grew very wicked and devilish, and put us down into Doomsdale, a nasty, stinking place, where they used to put murderers after they were condemned.

The place was so noisome [smelly] that it was observed few that went in did ever come out again in health. There was no house of office [restroom] in it; and the excrement of the prisoners that from time to time had been put there had not been carried out (as we were told) for many years. So that it was all like mire, and in some places to the tops of the shoes in water and urine; and he would not let us cleanse it, nor suffer us to have beds or straw to lie on.

At night some friendly people of the town brought us a candle and a little straw; and we burned a little of our straw to take away the stink. The thieves lay over our heads, and the head jailer in a room by them, over our heads also. It seems the smoke went up into the room where the jailer lay; which put him into such a rage that he took the pots of excrement from the thieves and poured them through a hole upon our heads in Doomsdale, till we were so bespattered that we could not touch ourselves nor one another. And the stink increased upon us; so that what with stink, and what with smoke, we were almost choked and smothered. We had the stink under our feet before, but now we had it on our heads and backs also; and he having quenched our straw with the filth he poured down, had made a great smother in the place. Moreover, he railed [spoke bitterly] at us most hideously, calling us hatchet-faced dogs, and such strange names as we had never heard of. In this manner we were

obliged to stand all night, for we could not sit down, the place was so full of filthy excrement.

A great while he kept us after this manner before he would let us cleanse it, or suffer us to have any victuals [food] brought in but what we got through the grate. One time a girl brought us a little meat; and he arrested her for breaking his house, and sued her in the town-court for breaking the prison. A great deal of trouble he put the young woman to; whereby others were so discouraged that we had much ado to get water, drink, or victuals. Near this time we sent for a young woman, Ann Downer, from London, who could write and take things well in short-hand, to buy and dress our meat for us; which she was very willing to do, it being also upon her spirit to come to us in the love of God; and she was very serviceable to us.

The head-jailer, we were informed, had been a thief, and was burnt [branded] both in the hand and in the shoulder; his wife, too, had been burnt in the hand. The under-jailer had been burnt both in the hand and in the shoulder: his wife had been burnt in the hand also. Colonel Bennet, a Baptist teacher, having purchased the jail and lands belonging to the castle, had placed this head-jailer there. The prisoners and some wild people would be talking of spirits that haunted Doomsdale, and how many had died in it, thinking perhaps to terrify us therewith. But I told them that if all the spirits and devils in hell were there, I was over them in the power of God, and feared no such thing; for Christ, our Priest, would sanctify the walls of the house to us, He who had bruised the head of the devil. The priest was to cleanse the plague out of the walls of the house under the law, which had been ended by Christ, our Priest, who sanctifies both inwardly and outwardly the walls of the house, the walls of the heart, and all things to his people.

By this time the general quarter-sessions drew nigh; and the jailer still carrying himself basely and wickedly towards us,

we drew up our suffering case, and sent it to the sessions at Bodmin. On the reading thereof, the justices gave order that Doodsdale door should be opened, and that we should have liberty to cleanse it, and to buy our meat in the town. We also sent a copy of our sufferings to the Protector [Cromwell], setting forth how we had been taken and committed by Major Ceely; and abused by Captain Keat as aforesaid, and the rest in order. The Protector sent down an order to Captain Fox, governor of Pendennis Castle, to examine the matter about the soldiers abusing us, and striking me.

There were at that time many of the gentry of the country at the Castle; and Captain Keat's kinsman, that struck me, was sent for before them, and much threatened. They told him that if I should change my principles, I might take the extremity of the law against him, and might recover sound damages of him. Captain Keat also was checked, for suffering the prisoners under his charge to be abused.

This was of great service in the country; for afterwards Friends might speak in any market or steeple-house thereabouts, and none would meddle with them. I understood that Hugh Peters, one of the Protector's chaplains, told him they could not do George Fox a greater service for the spreading of his principles in Cornwall, than to imprison him there.

And indeed my imprisonment there was of the Lord, and for His service in those parts; for after the assizes were over, and it was known that we were likely to continue prisoners, several Friends from most parts of the nation came in to the country to visit us. Those parts of the west were very dark countries at that time but the Lord's light and truth broke forth, shone over all, and many were turned from darkness to light, and from Satan's power unto God. Many were moved to go to the steeple-houses; and several were sent to prison to us; and a great convincement began in the

country. For now we had liberty to come out, and to walk in the Castle-Green; and many came to us on First-days [Sundays], to whom we declared the Word of life...

Discussion Starters

What event precipitated Fox's spiritual seclusion?

Fox relied much on what he called "inner light." When would reliance on inner light be trustworthy and when could it be dangerously misleading? How would a bystander know the difference? How closely have modern Quakers adhered to Biblical teaching?

What knowledge finally brought Fox spiritual relief and joy?

Describe some of the actions and statements Fox felt God led him to do or say. Do they conform to God's word?

What kinds of actions did God not allow Fox to partake of?

Have his principles changed our culture in any way?

How would you explain Fox's success with deranged and sick individuals?

How do you explain the rage of "Christians" against someone who refused to follow social customs such as tipping the hat?

What consolation did Fox have after suffering in a dreadful Doomsdale prison?