Equality

(from pp. 33-35 and 46. Three almost entirely new intro paragraphs, the rest substantially reordered/rewritten. Some points reworked to become Advices. Added scripture quotations and excerpts from New York YM and Southeast YM. Queries rephrased to become more open-ended.)

(See also Community, Integrity, Living in the World, Sexuality, Simplicity, Wealth)

Equality is a cornerstone of Quaker faith and practice. Friends recognize that there is that of God in everyone, that all are of equal value in the eyes of God, and that this equality transcends the unique characteristics, circumstances, talents, strengths, and gifts given to each by God. Equality is not a mathematical statement in the faith and practice of Friends; it is a description of spiritual condition. Men and women, children and adults, seasoned Friends and new attenders, all have the Divine Spark within them—the capacity to receive, reflect, and be changed by the Light.

The testimony of equality has shaped the long history of Quaker work in the world: efforts for prison reform, abolition of slavery, humane treatment of people with mental illness, human rights, economic justice, and peace-making. However, Friends’ discernment has been influenced by the surrounding cultures. Despite good intentions, some efforts now appear late, insufficient misguided, or actively harmful.

For example, Friends today generally believe that from the generation of Elizabeth Hooton and Margaret Fell onward, Quakers recognized the gifts and rights of women. Women have been leaders of Meetings—listened to and respected equally with men. However, the truth is more complicated than that. Women’s acceptance as “equals” often did not transcend the cultural limits of the age. This has been true throughout our history; sexism continues today within the Religious Society of Friends, as it does in the surrounding cultures.

Likewise Friends often speak proudly of the Society’s role in ending slavery in the United States and in working to improve the lot of African Americans. However, many meetings discouraged African American membership up through the 19th century. The testimony of equality challenges us to work toward a religious society that differs from what is today: overwhelmingly white, well educated, middle class, and politically liberal.

Much fear, hatred, and misunderstanding arise from thinking, talking, and acting in terms of unequal groups based on race, ethnic heritage, age, social class, sexual orientation, and a myriad of other categories—rather than in terms of equal individuals who are unique and precious in the eyes of God. We are called by the Spirit to welcome and be taught by everything that members and attenders bring to the Meeting: group identities, as well as personal background and characteristics. Diversity among us should be fostered and appreciated.

We cannot be easy in our own lives when others suffer indignity, injustice, or want that does not touch us. Exploitation harms not only the victims but the perpetrators, as well. The Spirit of God working within our lives shapes our understanding of equality and teaches us to approach each person with tenderness, humility, and a true desire to build right relationships.

Certainly a great deal remains to be done to foster true equality in the Religious Society of Friends, our nations, communities, families, and individual relationships. As we follow the Light,
past habits and attitudes will give way to new understanding of the value of all human beings.

Quotations

Then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God. Indeed, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.


...for in Christ Jesus, you are all children of God through faith. ... There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

Galatians 3:26, 28

And thus the Lord Jesus hath manifested himself and his Power, without respect of Persons; and so let all mouths be [stopped] that would limit him, whose Power and Spirit is infinite, that is pouring it upon all flesh.

Margaret Fell, 1666

Taking off one’s hat to another person, bowing..., and other similar foolish ... formalities which accompany them, should be forsaken. All of these were invented to feed men’s pride through the vain pomp and glory of this world.


...[T]hat pride is an excess of self love, joined with an undervaluing of others, and a desire of dominion over them: the most troublesome thing in the world. There are four things by which it hath made itself best known to mankind, the consequence of which have brought a misery equal to its evil. The first is, an inordinate pursuit of knowledge; the second, an ambitious craving and seeking after power; the third, an extreme desire of person respect and deference; the last excess is that of worldly furniture and ornaments.

William Penn, No Cross, No Crown, 1682

Quakers have long believed that “honorific,” submissive language opens opportunities for evil. Both those who use such language of elevation, and those who are its object, are endangered. The Quaker doctrine of equality does not mean equality of ability, economic resources or social status. It means equality of respect and the resulting absence of all words and behavior based on class, racial or social distinctions...Friends refused the use of titles of honor and salutations which implied that one person was superior to another. There were three reasons for this. First, the Quakers wished to remove all recognition of social distinctions based on class or race. Secondly, they were opposed to any form of flattery which tended to puff up self esteem. And, thirdly, most titles were out of harmony with the truth....

Howard Brinton, Friends for 300 Years, 1952

Friends are able to respect the fundamental equality of all persons because they have undergone the inner transformation that constantly reminds them that no person has reason to be prideful or feel superior to others.

Lloyd Lee Wilson, Essays on the Quaker Vision of Gospel Order, 1993

Much misunderstanding, fear, and hatred throughout the world stem from a common tendency to stereotype people and speak of groups as solid blocs and to lose sight of the
varied and precious individuals who compose them.

Friends are committed to accept individuals as God’s creatures and to look for the working of the divine Spirit in their lives.

The Holy Spirit, which we all share, makes us equal. We differ in our class backgrounds, intelligence, manners, experiences, talents, skin color, language, gender, sexuality, and customs; these differences can serve to remind us of the infinite number of ways the Spirit presents itself. But our differences can also create barriers because of our inability to interpret accurately the actions, motives, and goals of others. This failure to understand lies at the heart of racial and ethnic prejudice, for when we fear the unfamiliar or unknown, we tend to reject and thrust it from us.

Faith and Practice of New York Yearly Meeting, 1998

Our experience … has been that spiritual gifts are distributed by how Friends are called and their faithfulness to that call, not by marital status, sexual orientation, or gender identity.

Southeastern Yearly Meeting, Annual Gathering minute 06YM14

Advices

Friends strive to see and to witness to their culture the value and the worth of each person.

Those who live privileged lives should cultivate rather than suppress the discomfort they feel when others suffer indignity, injustice, or want. This discomfort is the Spirit moving in our lives.

Friends do well to follow the example of earlier lives lived in the Spirit. We do not do well to rest on the reputations of prior generations, or to remake their history into pious legend. Friends are advised to look at Quaker history honestly, acknowledging the Society’s mistakes and shortcomings and keeping its achievements in proper perspective.

Resisting the cultural pressures to define others, for good or ill, solely by group identities, Friends can engage with and learn from those of various backgrounds, experiences, and characteristics. Each brings something to the community, without which that community is incomplete. A daily discerning practice of equality is necessary to create change within us as well in the situations through which we move.

The Spirit shows us that in many circumstances, treating all people the same way does not create equality in the sense Friends use that term. Equality involves such matters as independence and control of one’s own life.

We can find ways to work for true equality alongside those who are privileged and those who are oppressed by the current structures of institutions. Friends must be willing to change our own long-held attitudes and practices as the Inner Guide requires of us.

Queries

In the Spirit of Christ, how are we ready to put ourselves at one another’s side and share each other’s burdens?

As we are true to the Divine within ourselves, do we respond to the Divine in others?
How do we speak to and answer that of God in everyone?

In all our relations with others, how are we sensitive to issues of equality, autonomy, and power? How do we challenge destructive patterns in these relationships when they arise?
How do we encourage ourselves and others to consider people as individuals, rather than as stereotypes?

What are we doing about the injustices, which are part of our social and economic life? How do we help those who suffer from discrimination?

How do we avoid being drawn into violent reactions against those who are destructive of human dignity?

How do we reach out to the violator as well as the violated with courage and love?

How are we faithful to the Spirit guiding us toward creation of a world in which every individual is loved, cared for, and educated, has useful employment and lives in dignity?