

Speaking Peace, Living Peace

Baltimore Yearly Meeting
 In the American Civil War
 (Compiled 2003 by Chuck Fager,
 for the Baltimore Yearly Meeting
 Religious Education Committee)

Introduction: How have Quakers lived out their peace testimony in time of war? And in particular, what about wars in which they were directly caught up in the hostilities?

The Hicksite Baltimore Yearly Meeting was one such body. Its territory included many places which were to become some of the most bitterly contested battlefields of the U.S. Civil War. The following excerpts from the Baltimore minute books of 1861 to 1865 record their testimony and their trials in these years of trouble. They are presented here for purposes of remembrance and reflection in our time.

Through out this period, the yearly meeting's *Discipline* called upon monthly meetings to prepare answers annually to a specified set of Queries, and submit them to their superior Quarterly Meetings, which passed them on to the Yearly Meeting.

At the yearly meeting sessions these responses were brought together and summarized, The state of the Society indicated by the responses was then carefully considered. This discussion was reviewed in a Minute of Exercise. Among these Queries was the following:

“Sixth Query. Do you maintain a faithful testimony against oaths; an hireling ministry; bearing arms, training, or other military services; being concerned in any fraudulent or clandestine trade; buying or vending goods so imported, or prize goods; and against encouraging lotteries of any kinds?”

As late as 1858, the responses by Baltimore's monthly Meetings on this topic were summed up thus:

“Our testimony against a hireling ministry, oaths, military services, clandestine trade, prize goods and lotteries, appear to be generally maintained.”

But a cautionary note can be found in a letter to *The Friend* of London, in 11th Month, 1859, signed “Pacificus,” and which said of Friends on the eve of this contest:

“We live in a well-ordered state, where persons and property are, with rare exceptions, amply secure from the hand of violence, and in a country where the presence of a foreign enemy has not been felt for centuries. It is no trial of faith for us to abstain from the use of arms for our protection, and to refuse to engage in military service. We can scarcely, by any effort of the imagination, place ourselves in the position of those, who, in the midst of anarchy and lawlessness, feel the necessity of being always on their guard against violence, or who experience the misery of seeing their homes desolated by the invasion of a hostile army. It therefore becomes us, at the present day, while steadfastly supporting the Christian doctrines which we believe to be right, to speak with diffidence, as never having really had our principles put to the test.”

Such a test was soon to come for Baltimore Yearly Meeting Friends. The minutes below describe, in their own words, how they grappled with the shock and the impact of this “desolating evil.”

1861

From *SUMMARY ANSWERS TO THE QUERIES**Sixth*

Friends appear to be mostly careful to maintain our testimony against a hireling ministry, oaths, military service, clandestine trade, prize goods, and lotteries. Yet some deficiency is acknowledged by several of the reports to exist, in the support of our important Christian testimony against war and military services, some cases of which are under care.

Baltimore – 10th Mo 30th

The Committee appointed at a former sitting to endeavor to embody some of the exercises of this Meeting, produced the following Minute, which was read and united with, viz:

During the consideration of the state of our Religious Society, as reported from the Quarterly Meetings, this Meeting has been solemnly impressed with the great responsibility that rests upon us as professors of the Christian name, that we should manifest in our life and conversation, the fruits of a Christian spirit, devoting our hearts without reserve, to the service of God.

In view of the present unhappy condition of our country, we have been reminded of the circumstances by which George Fox, and his companions in spiritual labor, were surrounded when in a time of civil war, they went forth as ambassadors for Christ, to proclaim and exemplify his peaceable kingdom. The false rest of the people had been broken – their confidence in their spiritual guide had been shaken – and finding in ceremonial observances no spiritual sustenance, they were induced to seek in the inner sanctuary of the heart, for that communion with the Father of spirits, which alone can satisfy the longings of the immortal soul.

And so we trust, when the tempest, and the earthquake, and the fire shall have passed by, that the still small voice – the word of the Lord – will be heard, and that many will be found who have not bowed the knee to Baal, nor kissed his image.

Even if suffering should be the portion of those who are called to labor in the cause of righteousness, to uphold, by example, the Testimonies of Truth, let us remember for our encouragement the language of our Lord, “Blessed are ye when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you, *falsely*, for my sake: rejoice and be exceeding glad, for great is your reward in heaven.” . . . We have at this time felt the necessity of digging deep, in order to secure a foundation on the rock of everlasting Truth, and may we ever bear in mind, that he only who heareth the sayings of Christ and doeth them, hath built his house on this rock, against which the winds and waves of human passion will beat in vain. . . .

The consideration of our important testimony against war, brought a deep exercise over the meeting, accompanied by a desire, that this righteous testimony may be faithfully maintained by our members. The times we live in call loudly on us to abstain from everything calculated to encourage this desolating evil now sweeping over our land, mingled with the wail of the widow and the orphan, and the groans of our countrymen.

We were reminded that we have fallen on troublous times in regard to the welfare of our Religious Society; for the deep interest manifested by many of our members in the contest now unhappily raging in our beloved country, may gradually alienate their minds from the peaceable principles inculcated in the precepts of Jesus, and exemplified in his life. While we cannot be indifferent spectators of things passing around us, and in which we have so deep an interest, we earnestly desire that Friends everywhere may give evidence that they are followers of the Prince of Peace – that they have an abiding faith in the protecting power of our Heavenly Father, and that he will not suffer his dependent children to be tried farther than he gives ability to sustain.

The right education of our children, and their preservation from the corrupting influences to which they are too often exposed, have again claimed our attention
From the Epistle of New York Yearly Meeting, included with the Baltimore Minutes:

Dear Friends,

The condescending goodness of the Great Head of the Church has again permitted us to meet together, at a time of great outward commotion and strife, when the war cry is heard in the land – when brother is arrayed against brother in deadly strife – where the children of one common Father, (the workmanship of his holy hand), whose watchful eye never slumbers, whose ear is ever open to the cries of the poor and needy, and whose arm of power is continually stretched forth to save all who put their trust in Him, are contending together.

At a time like this, of outward agitation, we thankfully have to acknowledge a belief that all who wholly trust in this Power, will experience the truth of the declaration of the Prophet when addressing the Most High: – “Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is staid on thee, because he trusteth in thee.”

While we do not assume to interfere with other men’s matters, or sit in judgment upon those not of us, to mark out their path of duty – remembering the answer of the Divine Master to the question, “what shall this man do?” “if I *will* that he tarry until I come, what is that to thee?” follow *thou me*” – it is with earnest and affectionate solicitude that we fervently desire that all who bear our name may rally to the standard of truth, and enlist under the banner of the Prince of Peace, who will assuredly lead us unto victory; not by the battles of the warrior, which is of confused noise and garments rolled in blood, but by that warfare which is spiritual, designed to overcome all evil, to eradicate every germ of bitterness from the mind, and to introduce into that kingdom wherein dwelleth righteousness.

Might not the inquiry be made of us, individually, whether the perusal of the war news of the day, unless guarded against, is not calculated to excite and foster those passions in our breasts which are in direct opposition to the blessed precepts of our Saviour, as expressed in his most excellent Sermon on the Mount.

It was the declaration of the Prophet formerly, that when the judgments of the Lord are in the earth, the inhabitants thereof learn righteousness. Are not his judgments now in the earth? And will he not turn and overturn until his purpose is accomplished? “I will shake not only the earth, but the heavens also,” was his declaration by the mouth of his Prophet, clearly showing that all false rests will be removed, and our tent will be only place of safety. “God is our tent.”

1862

From ANSWERS TO THE QUERIES

Sixth

Our testimony against a hireling ministry, oaths, military services, clandestine trade, prize goods and lotteries, appears to be generally maintained. Though three reports mention deviations, respecting military services, to some cases of which care has been extended.

Baltimore – Thirtieth of the [Tenth] Month, and 5th of the week.

The Committee appointed upon the subject at a former sitting, produced the following minute of the exercises of this Meeting, to be inserted in our Extracts for the benefits of our absent members, which was approved, viz:

The reading of the Epistles, from the several yearly Meetings with which we correspond, has brought us into near unity with our distant brethren, and has afforded to our minds confirming evidence of the unity of the Christian Church; for all who are taught of the Lord, are actuated by one spirit, even that which ascribes, Glory to God in the highest, and breathes peace on earth, and good will to men.

The sorrowful condition of our beloved country, so feelingly alluded to in those Epistles, has tended much to solemnize the Meeting, and to humble us under the considerations of our many delinquencies, as a nation and as individuals. Lively testimonies have been borne in this Meeting, not only against the horrors of war, but to the all-sufficiency of that grace which emanates from the Father of Spirits, and which will save to the uttermost all who place their trust in him.

It was clearly shown, that however ardently we may feel attached to our excellent government its preservation, or that of any civil institution, it is of small importance when compared with the sublime principles of the Gospel of Christ, and the salvation of immortal souls. The disciples of the Prince of Peace can only promote the advancement of his kingdom, by obedience to his Spirit, and keeping his commandments. “Without me,” he says, “ye can do nothing.” “If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me.” These are still the unchangeable terms of discipleship; for we cannot serve two masters; – we are either conformed to this world, or transformed by the renewings of our minds.

They who have experienced the mercy and forgiveness of God, will be enabled by his grace to forgive others; and continuing under this holy influence, they will be endued with patience and confidence in him who, “ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will.” He sees from the beginning to the end of time, for one day with the Lord is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.

Information has been received at this Meeting, that many of our members who reside in Virginia, have, during the past year, been subjected to great trials by reason of the civil war which is now desolating that portion of our country. Some of them have been arrested by the military

authorities of the Southern States, and held as prisoners for a time. Among these, our beloved friend, Job Throckmorton, was one whose sufferings excited general sympathy. While on his way to attend the Monthly Meeting at Hopewell, he was arrested by the military, and with many other prisoners, who had not been bearing arms, he was subjected to fatiguing marches and great privations, which resulted in his death. His pure and blameless life was such, that we have no doubt he laid down his head in peace, and has entered in to eternal rest.

Our religious meetings in that section of the country have generally been maintained, though most of our meeting-houses have, at times, been occupied for military purposes. At Hopewell and Winchester, our members have been subjected to peculiar privations and trials, by reason of the large contending armies that have alternately occupied and despoiled that region; but the Meetings of Friends have seldom been omitted, though often held in private houses.

At Woodlawn, a branch of Alexandria Monthly Meeting, the meeting-house was, during the whole of last winter, occupied by the federal troops. The Midweek Meetings of Friends were then held in a private house; but on First days, they assembled in the meeting-house with the soldiers, who carefully prepared the house, expressed a desire that the Meetings should be kept up, and were evidently much interested in them.

At Waterford [Virginia], a part of the meeting-house was for many months, occupied by the Southern soldiers, while another part was reserved for the Meetings of Friends. The officers and some of the soldiers usually attended, behaved with decorum, and at times expressed their cordial appreciation of those seasons of deep solemnity and religious exercises. We have reason to believe Gospel of Peace and Love, at some favored seasons, was felt to flow, like a refreshing stream in a desert land.

The evidences thus afforded of the power of Divine truth, and the consolations of the Gospel of Christ, should incite us to increased diligence, that we may, through watchfulness and prayer, and unreserved obedience, fill up the measure of our duties, and obtain the rich reward of divine approbation.

While engaged in examining the condition of our religious body, an earnest desire has been felt, that we may live up to our professed principles, and faithfully maintain our religious testimonies. . . .

1863

From *ANSWERS TO THE QUERIES**Sixth*

Friends appear to be generally careful to bear our testimonies against a hireling ministry, oaths, clandestine prize goods and lotteries; but all the reports admit a want of faithfulness in the support of our important testimony against military services and requisitions.

Baltimore – 10th Month 27, 1863

The Committee appointed at a former sitting to endeavor to embody the exercises of this Meeting whilst engaged in the consideration of the State of Society, produced the following Minute, which was approved by the Meeting, viz:

A precious solemnity has prevailed over the Meeting during its several sittings, and much unity and harmony of feeling were manifested throughout. Many lively testimonies were borne during the examination of the State of Society, to the efficacy of that pure love, which is a redeeming principle in the hearts of all who yield to its benign influence, and wholly resign themselves to the Divine disposal. Many hearts were tendered and contrited under the baptizing influence of that living Gospel ministry that reached the witness in their own breasts, and much affectionate advice and tender counsel were held forth, particularly to the younger members, to come forward to the help of the fathers, in maintaining the testimonies of this people, being assured that to willing and obedient hearts, the yoke of Christ becomes easy. These were encouraged to greater faithfulness in the attendance of all our Meetings, and to unreserved dedication of heart to every feeling of duty required of them. Faithful obedience in little things leads to increased strength and greater openings, for we rarely stand still in religious experience, but are either advancing or retrograding in our course, and lamentable, indeed, is a condition of degeneracy. Let us all be awakened to increased watchfulness over ourselves and one another, and renewed concern to seek first the kingdom of heaven, and to walk answerable to the high and holy calling wherewith we are called.

Our predecessors in this Religious Society, by faithfulness to the manifestations of the Divine Power, wrought a great work in the earth, and to us is bequeathed this rich inheritance, the fruits of their labors. Shall we then let fall these great testimonies that have enlightened mankind, and modified human governments? Shall we suffer the brightness of the light of these ancient worthies to be eclipsed by our unfaithfulness? Such, alas, is too much our condition. Many deficiencies appear amongst us, and we fall far short of their primitive faithfulness. Yet such is the condescending goodness and mercy of our great heavenly Parent, that with all our frailties, He suffers not our light to be put out, but still raises up faithful standard-bearers to exalt His name in the earth....

A considerable number of our members, who live within the lines of military operations, being now in attendance with us, represent, that although they have been subjected to great trials, they have generally been preserved from personal injury, and have cause of thankfulness to the

Shepherd of Israel. Two members of Fairfax Monthly Meeting [Virginia] have been arrested as hostages by the Southern troops, and so far as we know, are still held as prisoners, but measures have been taken to obtain their release, which, it is hoped, will prove successful.

On considering the condition of our beloved country, now subjected to the calamities attendant on a civil war, our hearts are affected with sorrow for the many victims who have fallen in the conflict, the many widows and orphans who mourn their bereavement, and the demoralizing effects of military service. We nevertheless hold fast our confidence in the wisdom, goodness and power of that Almighty Being, who rules in heaven and on earth, who permits the passions of men to work out their own chastisement, and brings forth, in the operations of His providence, results that cannot be foreseen by human wisdom, nor frustrated by human depravity.

The testimony to the peaceable nature of Christ's kingdom, maintained by our fathers, is still dear to our hearts, and notwithstanding the cloud of discouragement that now overshadows us, we trust the Son of Righteousness will yet arise, and the glory of the Lord be made manifest to the nations. As the Prophet saw, in the visions of light, a stone cut out without hands, which became a great mountain, and filled the whole earth, so, we believe, will the Redeemer's be established in the fullness of time, by the word of Divine Power.

In order that this precious testimony may be advanced, there have been raised up in every age of the Christian Church, witnesses for the truth, who have often prophesied in sackcloth, or been slain for the testimony of Jesus. Such were the members of this Religious Society at its rise. They were faithful to the civil governments under which they lived, and when they could not actively comply with laws that conflicted with their conscientious convictions, they patiently endured the penalties, until through suffering they obtained relief, and were thus made instrumental in promoting the cause of religious and civil liberty. May we be faithful in following their example, so far as they followed Christ. How instructive is the reply of the blessed Jesus to the disciple who inquired "what shall this man do?" "if I will that he tarry until I come, what is that to thee?" follow thou me." It is not our place to judge others, who may believe themselves called to pursue a different path from that in which we walk, but to follow the foot-steps of our Holy Exemplar, "who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth; who when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered he threatened not, but committed himself to Him, that judgeth righteously."

Much solicitude and religious concern have been felt in this Meeting, that in the education of our dear children we may seek for a qualification to lead them, both by precept and example, in the way of righteousness. In order to promote this end, provision should be made for a guarded religious training at school, and suitable books for use in the family. . . .

1864

From *ANSWERS TO THE QUERIES**Sixth*

Our testimony against a hireling ministry, oaths, clandestine trade, prize goods, and lotteries, appears to be generally maintained. But many of our members have deviated from our precious testimony in relation to military services. Some cases of infringement thereof, are under care.

Baltimore 11th month 2d

The Committee appointed at a former sitting to endeavor to embody the exercises of the Meeting while engaged in the consideration of the state of Society, produced the following Minute, which was approved, viz:

. . . The sanguinary conflict that now rages in our beloved country, laying waste some of its fairest scenes, bringing to an untimely grave many thousands of its inhabitants, and causing bereavement throughout the land, has called forth the expression of much sympathy for those who are suffering from this awful calamity. It has been our earnest prayer that we may not put our trust in the arm of flesh, but rather rely on the never-failing arm of Divine power, which sustained our worthy ancestors in seasons of severe suffering, made them instrumental in promoting the cause of Truth, and, in His own good time, delivered them from all their afflictions.

Our ancient testimony to the peaceable nature of Christ's kingdom, has been made more dear to our hearts, by contemplating the scenes of carnage and destruction that abound in our land. It was doubtless the intention of the Most High in sending his beloved Son into the world, to redeem mankind from the dominion of evil, to influence them by his meek example and sublime precepts, and through the guidance of his pure Spirit, to bring them into harmony and fraternal love. This happy condition was shadowed forth in the figurative language of prophecy: "The wolf shall dwell with the lamb; the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the young lion, and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them."

The primitive Christian church was the depository of this pure doctrine, which subsequently became obscured through the false teaching of a corrupt priesthood, and an alliance with the world; but being revived by the early Friends, the precious legacy has been transmitted to us. May we ever remember that the Truth of God can only be promoted by obedience to His Spiritual law; and placing the light upon the candlestick by a consistent example, may we keep alive the sacred flame which must spread far and wide, before the prophecy shall be fulfilled, "The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ."

We have rejoiced in the announcement that, throughout the State of Maryland, liberty has been proclaimed to the long-oppressed descendants of Africa, and an earnest desire has been expressed in this Meeting, that we may not be unmindful of the great work yet to be accomplished, in extending to the freed people who dwell among us, the benefits of education and Christian care.

In contemplating the progress of our testimony against slavery, from its small beginning near the close of the 17th century, to the present day, our hearts are filled with gratitude and love to that Almighty Being who called our predecessors to labor in this cause, and led them safely along through the guidance of his grace. the prophetic language of John Woolman, written nearly one hundred years ago, has been feelingly revived among us, as being now in the process of fulfilment: “I have seen in the light of the Lord, that the day is approaching, when the man that is most wise in human policy, shall be the greatest fool; and the arm that is mighty to support injustice, shall be broken to pieces: The enemies of righteousness shall make a terrible rattle, and shall mightily torment one another; for He that is omnipotent is rising up to judgment, and will plead the cause of the oppressed; and he commanded me to open the vision.”

The Christian duty of dealing with offenders in the spirit of meekness and love, has been to our minds, a subject of religious exercise, and an earnest desire is felt that at this trying season, we maybe governed by Divine wisdom, remembering that the first object to be sought is the restoration of the diseased member to health, rather than its separation from the body.

Our Meeting this year has been unusually large, and favored with remarkable solemnity. A considerable number have attended from that section of our country where the scourge of war has exerted its desolating effects. Although great pecuniary losses have been sustained, and personal danger sometimes encountered, we have rejoiced in learning that the Meetings of Friends have been generally kept up, their lives have been preserved from the hand of violence, and amidst all their trials, they have often had cause to rejoice in the Lord.

1865

From *ANSWERS TO THE QUERIES*

Sixth

Friends generally appear to be careful to bear our testimony against a hireling Ministry, oaths, clandestine trade, prize goods and lotteries. But a deficiency in the faithful maintenance of our precious testimony against war and Military services, is acknowledged in all our reports.

Baltimore – 11th month

The Committee appointed to prepare a minute, embodying the exercises of this Meeting, produced the following Report, which was satisfactory, viz:

On entering upon the consideration of the state of Society as portrayed in the answers to the Queries, the Meeting was brought under a solemn covering on account of the many deficiencies amongst us

We have felt it to be a cause of gratitude to the Father of all our sure mercies, that the desolations of war have been stayed in our land, while at the same time we have to lament, that so many of our precious young members, and some of more mature age, have been led to join the

ranks of the warrior, disregarding the emphatic declaration of our blessed Master to His disciples, “my kingdom is not of this world, else would my servants fight.” We were exhorted that while remembering the scripture injunction to “deal gently with the young man,” we should not desert the glorious banner of the Prince of Peace. It was feelingly testified that the many departures from this distinguishing characteristic of the followers of our blessed Lord, as reported in the answers which have come up from our subordinate meetings, should teach us humility, inasmuch as we are thus shown we are not all living up to our principles in this particular; hence the necessity of a return to our first love, in humble prostration before Him “who dwelleth in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and the heart of the contrite ones.”

The duty of remembering the poor, and comforting the afflicted, has claimed our serious attention. we are persuaded that the spirit of Christ will, in all ages, bring forth similar fruits; and as in the Apostles’ days, no man counted aught that he had his own, but gave all to be used as any had need; so in our day, those who have abundance, should remember the afflicted and destitute, and minister liberally to their wants, thus gladdening their hearts, and causing them to glorify Him who is the Author of every blessing.

The condition of the colored people residing within our limits, has been brought feelingly before us; and while we rejoice at their liberation from the shackles that have so long impeded their moral and intellectual advancement, we are conscious that there is yet much to do on their behalf, and a wide field open for religious labor among them. An earnest desire is felt, that we may be no less faithful in this interesting concern, than were our forefathers, who, through obedience to the Divine Monitor, became the pioneers in the great work of emancipation. . . .

The attendance of our members at this Meeting has been large, and among them are many from that section of our country which has so lately been the scene of sanguinary conflict. Since our last yearly Meeting, they have been subjected to heavy losses of property, and much anxiety of mind, by the ravages of War. Notwithstanding the perilous situation in which they have sometimes been placed, their religious meetings have been very generally kept up, their lives have been, through Divine mercy, preserved from the hand of violence, and their necessities supplied. The sympathy and aid extended to them by members of this and other Yearly Meetings, are gratefully appreciated, and have tended to strengthen the ties of brotherly love by which all the branches of our religious body are united.

From the Epistle of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, included with the Baltimore minutes:

Dear Friends,

We are now permitted to address our distant brethren, under circumstances calculated to clothe the heart with rejoicing, although this has been overshadowed by the great grief of the Nation, for the death of our much lamented President.

The clouds of war, so fearfully dark upon our country’s horizon, and which have cast their shadows upon all private and public concerns, are apparently soon to pass away.

We are again assembled to examine into the affairs of the Church, with thankful hearts to the author of all our sure mercies, that he has, in great measure, removed this awful scourge.

That we may be individually and collectively, so chastened and prepared in heart, as to do always, to all men, whatsoever we would have them do to us, and feel of a truth, that Christ’s kingdom is not of this world, is the moral we should draw from the terrible calamities through

which the nation has passed.

It is no new thing to hear of wars and rumors of wars, but to stand unmoved amid all commotions, is the prerogative of the redeemed and ransomed of the Lord. . . .

A lively exercise has sprung up in regard to the divided condition of those bearing the name of Friends. We have travailed in it with much feeling and unity. The exhibition of schisms, and divisions, among a people so nearly alike in themselves, and so widely differing from those who lay great stress on ceremonies and outward ordinances, is a stumbling block to inquirers Zionward, and a great impediment to their own usefulness among men.

We hope that the day is approaching, when there can be a coming together of a people, all professing to be led and guided by the spirit of Christ, and thus enabled so to labor, as to renew that “unity of the spirit, which is the bond of peace,” that was the distinguishing characteristic of the early gathering of this people.” . . .

From the Epistle of Genesee Yearly Meeting [in western New York and southern Ontario], included with the Baltimore Yearly Meeting Minutes.

Dear Friends,

As we are again assembled in a Yearly Meeting capacity, we have been made to rejoice, in that we have been thus permitted to partake of the rich bounties with which the Lord’s table is spread . . .

While we have mourned that the spirit of war should have made its inroads among us, a peace-professing people, while we have sorrowed that some of our young men should have, under the influence of the excitement around them, been induced to enter the arena of military strife, and there become the instruments of shedding the blood of their fellow men; yet we earnestly hope now, as the conflict has ceased, and as they return to their peaceful homes, they may become so convinced of the superiority of the principle of love to that of force, and that it is better to suffer wrong for a season, than to do wrong, that they may so live in the future as not only to give satisfaction to their friends, and thus be continued in the bosom of Society, but by being thus convinced by experience, of the sweeter and more hallowed influence which surrounds those who dwell under the canopy of this Divine principle, become its devoted advocates in the future.

The Friends Peace Testimony Reconsidered

I

If Quakers are asked, Where can I find the ‘Quaker Peace Testimony’? where would we turn to find it?

Most of us in North America and England would pick up a recent book of Discipline or Faith & Practice. There the answer seems straightforward. Almost all the many such contemporary books I have examined, from across the various branches, include the same statement, with only minor variations.

Philadelphia Yearly Meeting’s 1997 version of what it calls the “historic peace testimony” is typical:

“The Society of Friends has consistently held that war is contrary to the Spirit of Christ. It stated its position clearly in the Declaration to Charles II in 1660:

‘We utterly deny all outward wars and strife, and fightings with outward weapons, for any end, or under any pretense whatsoever, this is our testimony to the whole world The Spirit of Christ, by which we guided, is not changeable, so as once to command us from a thing as evil, and again to move us unto it; and we certainly know, and testify to the world, that the Spirit of Christ, which leads us into all truth, will never move us to fight and war against any man with outward weapons, neither for the Kingdom of Christ nor for the Kingdoms of this world.... Therefore, we cannot learn war any more.’” (F&P pp. 76f)

When I speak of reconsidering the Peace Testimony, these few sentences from 350-plus years ago are the starting point. They are treated in our Disciplines as a definitive expression of this witness, one drafted by our founders, bearing the seal of history, and ratified today by Friends of all branches.

Indeed, such is the stature of these few phrases that I call them the “canonical” Peace Testimony, because they have become a kind of Quaker scripture. And this status makes them all the more ripe, indeed overripe for reconsideration.

II

Before this reconsideration begins, four preliminary points need to be made:

First, these sentences are only a brief excerpt from the 1660 Letter (about 110 words out of a total of 2500).

Secondly, they are not really representative of the full letter, which as we shall see is indeed much more complex and even ambiguous. (The full 1660 text is in the **Appendix**.)

Third, to put it gently, even these excerpts are more qualified than they appear in our Disciplines. More plainly, they are presented in a way that significantly alters their actual import.

Take, for instance, the opening statement: “We utterly deny all outward wars and strife”

“We” however is not the beginning of the 1660 statement; in the text it actually starts like this:

“All bloody principles and practices, **as to our own particulars, we utterly deny**; with all outward wars and strife”

It can be argued that the phrase “as to our own particulars,” is very important here, especially as a qualifier; we shall see why in a few moments. Further, what is presented as the sentence “Therefore we cannot learn war any more.” is actually the beginning of a longer sentence, and occurs close to the end of the statement, three pages away.

These standard excerpts, in short, have been significantly altered and misquoted.

Fourth, while the 1660 Letter is obviously ancient, it turns out that its elevation to “canonical” or scriptural status is not a given of Quaker history, but actually quite a recent development. Examining old books of Discipline, I have not found it cited anywhere before the 1920s. In fact, prior to that, it’s hard to find in them any statement of a “Peace Testimony” as such. None of the old Disciplines I have seen includes it.

No Peace Testimony? Nope.

Instead, there was a testimony *against* war. Here’s how most Yearly Meetings’ Disciplines put it through eight decades of the 19th century, under the heading of “War” (There was no heading of “Peace”):

“Friends are exhorted faithfully to adhere to our ancient testimony against wars, and fightings, and in no way to unite with any in warlike measures, either offensive or defensive, that by the inoffensiveness of our conduct we may convincingly demonstrate ourselves to be real subjects of the Messiah’s peaceful reign, and be instrumental in the promotion thereof, towards its desired completion; when, according to ancient prophecy, ‘the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea; and its inhabitants shall learn war no more.’”

(There followed specific directives about loss of goods for refusal of war taxes, and avoidance of military ceremonies and the like.)

The other reference to the testimony in these books came in the Queries. Here’s the one from Baltimore Yearly Meeting (Hicksite) in 1861, which was typical:

“Sixth Query. Do you maintain a faithful testimony against oaths; an hireling ministry; bearing arms, training, or other military services; being concerned in any fraudulent or clandestine trade; buying or vending goods so imported, or prize goods; and against encouraging lotteries of any kinds?”

Again, there is no mention of “peace” or “peacemaking” in this laundry list of miscellaneous mandates; and “not bearing arms” comes after the prohibitions on oaths and hireling ministry, suggesting that these were held to be greater evils.

Indeed, it is not until after World War One, that the 1660 (mis)quote begins appearing in books of Discipline. My own hypothesis about this sudden emergence is that it stems from a report on peace made to the first Friends World Conference in 1920, where delegates from all the branches were present, a report in which the quotes appeared.

In sum, what is presented as a definitive, unambiguous, and foundational statement in our

current books of Faith and Practice, is on closer examination shown to be something quite different, and, I would contend, considerably more ambiguous and challenging.

III

To begin to explain why, two major features of the 1660 Letter's context need to be underlined, one textual and one historical.

The first is that the 1660 Letter is biblical through and through. This of course is typical of early Friends; but three biblical themes are particularly salient in it. They are:

1. The Peaceable Kingdom (e.g., in Micah 4: 1;3-4: But in the last days it shall come to pass, that the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established in the top of the mountains . . . and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift up a sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.)

2. The State as God's Enforcer (Romans 13:1-5: 1 Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. 2 Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. 3 For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same. 4 For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil. 5 Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake.)

3. Spiritual Warfare against Principalities and Powers (2 Corinthians 10:3 - 5 & Ephesians 6:10-18).

2 Corinthians 10:3-5: 3 For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh: 4 (For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds;) 5 Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ. . . .

Ephesians 6:10-18: 10 Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might. 11 Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. 12 For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.

The second important contextual feature is the Letter's historical situation: Friends in England in 1660 were a people without worldly power, branded as essentially outside "civil society," and facing massive persecution by the authorities. The letter to Charles II hoped to ward off or mitigate this official persecution (and didn't succeed very well at that). Nevertheless it assumed and expressed attitudes about power and social order which were soon to become important to the evolution of the testimony it tried to articulate.

Turning to the 1660 Letter itself, one passage in particular seems to me to best express the basis of what could be called 1660 Quaker pacifism. Here it is:

Therefore consider these things, ye men of understanding: for plotters, raisers of insurrections, tumultuous ones, and fighters, running with swords, clubs, staves, and pistols, one against another; these, we say, **are of the world**, and have their foundation

from this unrighteous world, from the foundation of which the Lamb hath been slain; **which Lamb hath redeemed us from this unrighteous world, and we are not of it, but are heirs of a world of which there is no end, and of a kingdom where no corruptible thing enters.** (Emphasis added)

That is, while in a physical, temporal sense these Friends were still residents of England in 1660; by the work of Christ's Spirit within them, in their essential being they were living somewhere else, namely: in the peaceable kingdom (of Micah iv), an entirely different spiritual reality.

In this new community/state of being, they add, warfare is undertaken in a characteristic, qualitatively different manner:

“Our weapons are **spiritual**, and not **carnal**, yet mighty through God, to the plucking/pulling down of the strongholds of sin and Satan (a paraphrase of 2 Corinthians 10:4), who is the author of wars, fighting, murder, and plots. Our swords are broken into ploughshares, and spears into pruning-hooks, as prophesied of in Micah iv. Therefore we cannot learn war any more, neither rise up against nation or kingdom with outward weapons, though you have numbered us amongst the transgressors and plotters.” (Emphasis added.)

Here we see two of the Letter's key biblical themes: the peaceable kingdom and spiritual warfare. These themes pervade another passage, which could be called the 1660 Quaker Peace Plan:

“. . . [A]s for the kingdoms of this world, we cannot covet them, much less can we fight for them, but **we do earnestly desire and wait**, that, by the **Word of God's power**, and its effectual operation **in the hearts of men**, the kingdoms of this world may become the kingdoms of the Lord, and of his Christ; that he may rule and reign in men by his Spirit and truth; that thereby all people, out of all different judgements and professions, may be brought into love and unity with God, and one with another; and that they may all come to witness the prophet's words, who said, ‘Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more,’ Isa. ii. 4., Mic. iv. 3.” (Emphasis added.)

Let's parse this out a bit: For these Friends, war will end when the Word of God's power changes enough of the hearts of men, that they will abandon physical (or carnal) warfare, and immigrate into the peaceable kingdom. The Friends' role in this process is principally to desire and wait for this transformation.

If the earlier spirit and emphasis are foreign to the ethos of modern Quakers, they are not therefore absent from our world today. The 1660 Letter and the later Queries remind me very much of the attitude of the stricter Amish sects. Some of these had colonies in a Pennsylvania valley near where I lived in the late 1990s. These Anabaptists carry on their lives as if they are already residents of the peaceable kingdom: they grow their crops, raise large families, trade with the “English” (i.e., non-Amish like me), attend their house church worship services, and otherwise do their best to ignore the corrupt and violent outside world.

And one more thing: they don't do war.

In the years of the draft, their men trekked off to conscientious objector assignments in

quiet doves—indeed, in much higher percentages than did draft age male Friends of those decades. And while these Amish do contribute to war relief projects, they are hardly peace activists. They don't show up for demonstrations; and the constant, Mott-like busyness of my Quaker meeting a few valleys away would leave them cold. If they have a “peace plan” at all, it would rather closely resemble that of the ancient Friends just cited, focused on “the inoffensiveness of [their] conduct” as a model and a signpost, while waiting for the gospel Spirit to convert the warlike heathen.

The contrast between this quietist outlook and the activist preoccupations of contemporary Friends is rather stark, and worth pausing over briefly. The modern ethos of Quaker peace witness was stated in classically concise form by Lucretia Mott in 1876:

“If we believe that war is wrong, as everyone must, then we must also believe that by proper efforts on our part it can be done away with.”

This outlook adds two new features to the received witness: First, doing away with war in our time. Few if any of the earlier statements spoke of this; they implicitly presumed war's tragic persistence, and called for Friends not to take part in it. In the 1660 Letter, the end of war is put off to a distant, likely post-historical future when “the kingdoms of this world may become the kingdoms of the Lord, and of his Christ. . . .” (This is virtually a direct quote from Revelation 11:15, which is definitely talking about the “end of history.”)

The other new feature here is the stress given “proper efforts on our part.” War, for Lucretia, is a social problem like slavery or a disease such as smallpox. In a scientific, progressive society these plagues can be eradicated, and war is not essentially different. We are still working on developing the “proper efforts,” and mobilizing the necessary energy to apply them, but there is no doubt active resistance is the standard we hold ourselves to.

The spirit of virtually all Quaker peace action today, I contend, is essentially the same as that expressed by Lucretia Mott in 1876, and it is utterly different in tone and emphasis from what came before it.

IV

So far, this reexamined 1660 testimony may differ in mood and expression from the excerpts in today's Disciplines, but not much in substance.

But that is not the case when we consider two other excerpts, addressed specifically to the role of the rulers who were persecuting them. Let's hear them:

“Therefore in love we warn you [King Charles] for your soul's good, not to wrong the innocent, nor the babes of Christ, which he hath in his hand, which he cares for as the apple of his eye; neither seek to destroy the heritage of God, nor turn your swords backward upon such as the law was not made for, i.e., the righteous; but for sinners and transgressors, to keep them down.” (Emphasis added.)

This mention of the ruler's sword is a rephrasing of Romans 13:1-4. This passage is worth repeating here in full:

“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. **For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad.** Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; for it is God’s servant for your good. **But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer.**” (Emphasis added.)

It is no accident that this brief text is one of the most important biblical passages in Western political history. It has been repeated down the centuries as the scriptural sanction for civil power and official use of violent force. And in the 1660 Letter, this view of it is explicitly affirmed – not once, but twice. Here it is again:

“And whereas all manner of evil hath been falsely spoken of us, we hereby speak the plain truth of our hearts, to take away the occasion of that offense; that so being innocent, we may not suffer for other men’s offenses, nor be made a prey of by the wills of men for that of which we were never guilty; but in the uprightness of our hearts **we may, under the power ordained of God for the punishment of evil-doers, and for the praise of them that do well,** live a peaceable and godly life, in all godliness and honesty.” (Emphasis added.)

The “power ordained of God for the punishment of evil-doers . . .” Does this phraseology ring any bells for us today? It too comes out of Romans 13.

Well, so what? Do these two allusions make any difference to the Peace Testimony?

Yes, I believe they do. Certainly they did in practice. And the difference did not take long to become manifest. Only twelve years, to be more precise.

V

The 1660 Letter portrayed Friends as a meek and apolitical people: “. . .as for the kingdoms of this world,” it said, “we cannot covet them, much less can we fight for them . . .” That may have been true in Restoration England in 1660. But this sentiment evidently did not survive the passage across the Atlantic: in Rhode Island, Friends not only coveted worldly power, but soon achieved it.

Although not founded by Friends, the colony’s annual election in 1672 produced a Quaker Governor, Deputy-Governor, and a Quaker majority in the colonial assembly. And Friends held most or much of the local political power in the colony for many years afterward.

This novel development (almost a decade before William Penn began the “Holy Experiment” in Pennsylvania) soon had the public endorsement of no less a Quaker authority than the first signatory to the 1660 Letter, George Fox himself. He visited Rhode Island in 1672, attended New England Yearly Meeting there, and stayed on for several weeks afterward, the honored guest of the Quaker governor, Nicholas Easton.

In a sermon there, Fox expressed great satisfaction with the new regime: “What an honor is it that Christ should be both Priest, Prophet, Minister, Shepherd & Bishop, Councillor (sic) Leader, & Captain & Prince in your Colony,” he declared. He also – as was his habit – gave them

lots of concrete advice, about outlawing drunkenness, swearing, etc., and upholding their ancient liberties.

But with the power of the magistrate or governing authority for upholding righteousness, there also came the issue of bearing the sword against evil-doers. This role was, remember, explicitly affirmed in the 1660 Letter as a divine commission. Now this sword was in Quaker hands. What were they to do with it?

For Rhode Island's new leaders, this was not an abstract question: on the one side, from the sea, there were threats of invasion by French and Dutch naval forces. On the other side, they were surrounded by forests inhabited by increasingly restive native tribes.

No mention of war by Fox in Rhode Island has been found. But in other contemporary epistles, he made clear his support for the Romans 13 stance. For instance, in a 1676 letter to Friends on the Caribbean island of Nevis, Fox wrote,

“For if any should come to burn your house, or rob you, or come to ravish your wives or daughters, or a company should come to fire a city or town, or come to kill people; do not you watch against all such actions? And will you not watch against such evil things in the power of God in your own way? **You cannot but discover such things to the magistrates, who are to punish such things; and therefore the watch is kept and set to discover such to the magistrate, that they may be punished; and if he does it not, he bears his sword in vain.**” (Emphasis added.)

Fortunately for the Rhode island Quaker magistrates, the naval threats did not materialize. But in the late summer of 1675, an alliance of native groups launched a massive, region-wide terror war aimed at driving white settlers from New England. This deadly struggle was known to history as King Philip's war (after the Christian name given to its leading chieftain, whose Indian name was Metacomet.)

The horrifying impact of this war, and its toll on settlers in Rhode Island and elsewhere, was powerfully evoked by the historian Meredith Baldwin Weddle, in her pathbreaking recent book, *Walking In the Way of Peace* (Oxford, 2001):

. . . [T]o appreciate the moral task facing each Quaker during King Philip's War, it is essential to imagine the immensity of the danger threatening the people of New England; the fear of violence shredding all certainty and all expectations, just as sword and hatchet shredded the bodies fallen in their way. . . . The imminence of death alone would have been enough to shake each vulnerable settler or Indian; when death itself was dressed up in atrocity, whether real or rumored, it would be the rare person who could be sure that principle would not yield to terror or rage. For the Quaker, alone in his small house, miles perhaps from a neighbor, fear and horror faced down the ordained love for his enemies. . . . To the extent that the danger and fear can be approximated from the security and predictability of modern America, to this extent no hesitation can be seen as remarkable or shameful.

(From the security and predictability of modern America? This must have been written in the good old days, of late 2000.)

What was a governing authority to do in the face of such unbridled terror? More pointedly, what was the duty of a *Quaker* “governing authority”?

We don't know if those Friends in office engaged in much theorizing or soul-searching; no such records have turned up. We do know that they did two things:

First, in 1673, they adopted and upheld the first conscientious objector statute, exempting from militia duty those whose religious scruples forbade the bearing of arms. (We can be reasonably confident that this law was largely the product of their Quaker convictions, because as soon as non-Friends regained political control, they repealed it.)

And second, they went to war.

VI

As Meredith Baldwin Weddle summarizes their course:

“Rhode Island exiled Indians, supplied boats to the Plymouth and Massachusetts armies, blockaded Philip on Mount Hope, rescued English soldiers, provisioned and provided a safe haven for colonial troops, raised and dispatched soldiers, stored ammunition, transported troops across Narragansett Bay to battle, encouraged the mobilization and training of the local militias, deployed gunboats, manned an official garrison, contributed troops to the final search for Philip himself—and, at last, tried and executed prisoners of war. This is scarcely the record of either a neutral government or an inactive one.” (p. 170)

How did the Quaker officeholders reconcile this record with the pronouncements of the 1660 Letter? As far as Weddle's extensive research could determine, they didn't bother. But we can plausibly speculate that in their course they were attempting to make room for both their pacifist brethren who still thought they were living in Micah 4's Peaceable Kingdom, while also observing Romans 13's stern mandate for magistrates to “execute God's wrath upon wrongdoers”; after all, both of these texts were in the 1660 Letter.

At this point, the Letter's phrase “as to our own particulars,” which was edited out of the sentence as quoted in modern Disciplines, comes back into focus. How much different were the “particulars” of powerless, persecuted Friends in England in 1660 from the “particulars” of Friends elected to office in Rhode Island? And how much difference did such divergent “particulars” make?

Weddle did find one testimony by a group of Rhode Island Friends denouncing other unnamed Quakers for abandoning their conviction of “dwelling with [Christ] in his peaceable kingdom” and returning to “that faith which stands in carnal weapons, or the arm of flesh” (p. 244) But she did not turn up any response from the authorities to this criticism.

Another authority who had no comment or complaint was George Fox, who sent an epistle to Rhode Island Friends in 1677, ten months after the war's end. In it, among other things, he cautioned the Quaker colonists against hasty marriages, and chastised a member for killing a neighbor's horses which had strayed onto his property. But amid these advices, he made no mention of the Rhode Island Quaker officials' involvement in carnal warfare; not a word.

If we consider only the familiar excerpts from the 1660 Letter, it is quite possible to look back at these official Friends in Rhode Island and join the critics who challenged their faithfulness to the peace testimony. But it is equally possible to fit them right into the Letter's text if we consider it as a whole, because it takes such a role for granted.

That is, this canonical document, far from dictating the unambiguous prohibition of all Quaker involvement in any war suggested by the widely-known excerpts from it, includes the

very tensions and ambiguities, rooted in their turn in guiding texts from the Bible, which very likely gave rise to these Friends' course.

What can be learned from this fuller examination of both the 1660 Letter and this brief case study of its first application by Quakers in public power?

One lesson, I want to suggest, would be to take a more critical attitude to the texts presented to us in our books of Discipline.

Another would be to disabuse ourselves of the notion, often heard today, that once upon a time there was a golden age of uncomplicated faithfulness to a clear standard of Quaker witness, which was followed by a steep decline into the moral morass of today.

Early Friends may indeed have had moments and periods of exaltation, where they felt a strong sense of Christ's presence and divine favor. But the record shows that they also, from early on, had to wrestle with the application of their convictions in life situations which called such certainties starkly into question, and in which people of good will followed their light and testimony to very different places.

A third lesson, the last for this essay, is that the Friends Peace Testimony has been subject to reconsideration from early on in our history, and such reexaminations continue even now.

By such wrestling, we are not thereby abandoning our Quaker heritage, but very likely engaging it in one of the deepest and most faithful ways.

If this reconsideration of the "canonical" 1660 Letter, or rather the familiar but bowdlerized excerpts from it, deprives some Friends of easy answers to hard questions, and a comfortable, secure belief in the uncomplicated Quaker Good Old Days, this Friend is not sorry. They – and we – are actually better off to be shucked of such illusions, and to begin the sometimes hard but critical work of rethinking and reclaiming a peace testimony for us, and for our time.