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Early Quakers and Fasting

By Kenneth L. Carroll*

Years ago, inspired by Henry J. Cadbury's Swarthmore Lecture *Early Quakerism and Early Christianity*, I began my research into some of the early Quaker manifestations of that same "spirit of prophecy" which had marked the primitive or early church. Out of this grew my articles on wearing sackcloth and ashes, signs and wonders, and singing in the spirit.¹ While searching early Quaker sources, both letters and tracts, I often came across references to Quaker fasting. Only recently, however, have I carried out my earlier hopes of doing a study of early Quakers and fasting.

Fasting was not new with early Quakerism, for it was already widespread in seventeenth century England. Roman Catholics were "fasting" from the flesh of animals on Friday, although not from the flesh of fish. There were also national "fast days," called because of droughts or other calamities which threatened the nation. There were smaller groups of people who fasted together – as in the case of "a seeking people, who kept one day in the week in fasting and praying" with whom John Camm and John Audland met when they arrived in Bristol.² There were also those individuals who made a regular practice of fasting, usually in connection with holy days.³ Given the number of references to fasting in the Bible, it is not surprising to find so much emphasis on this practice in seventeenth century England.

Many of the converts to early Quakerism came from such groups as Seekers, Baptists, and Independents, all of whom put great emphasis on the Bible. George Fox himself knew the Bible well, and his thought and expressions were often influenced by that powerful source of inspiration. Fasting and fasts appear frequently in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. In the former we find references in Judges 20:26; I Samuel 7:6, 31:13; II Samuel 1:12, 12:21, 22, 23; I Kings 21:27; Ezra 8:23; Nehemiah 1:4; Esther 4:16. In the New Testament there is the well-known story of Jesus fasting in the period following his baptism.

In his *Journal* George Fox, when speaking of the period early in his 1647 wanderings, recorded that "I fasted much, and walked abroad in solitary places many days, and often took my Bible and went and sat in the hollow trees and Lonesome places. . . , for I was a man of sorrows in the times of the first workings of the Lord in me."⁴

There were other times when Fox fasted, such as when he was greatly troubled by the wild predictions of James Milner. Thus, late in 1652, we see

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Fox embarking on a ten-day fast,⁵ as he began to wrestle with how to address that predicament or crisis which Milner had thrust upon Friends.

Other examples of Quaker fasting, some as early as 1652, are recorded. In December 1652 Myles Halhead heard “the word of the Lord,”

Thou shalt not eat nor drink for the space of 14 dayes anything but Water: But fear not for I will feed thee with the Dew of Heaven, and with the sweet Incomes [?] of my Love; and my Word shall be unto thee sweeter than the Honey or the Honey-Comb, and I will make thee to know, that I am able to keep and preserve thee fresh and strong, and able to do my work without the Creatures, as well as with it.⁶

Halhead then fasted fourteen days, without any meat or drink (except water) and later reported that in that two-week period he “was kept very fresh and able of Body.”

It was also in November 1652 that James Milner engaged in fasting, having already completed fourteen days and continuing for another two days in order to “save the souls” of Dorothy Barwick and the wife of Brian Fell. Carried away by his apocalyptic expectations he also proclaimed that Wednesday, December 1, would be the Day of Judgment, and the next day (Thursday, December 2) would be the start of the new “creation.”⁷ It seems likely that both James Milner and his wife Elizabeth fasted before issuing their acknowledgments of wrong, after having been condemned by George Fox, James Nayler, and Margaret Fell. Both of the Milners, claiming to have been “young in the Truth,” apologized for having brought dishonor on the Quaker movement.⁸

Fox’s *Journal* records that Richard Hubberthorne (also in 1652) was “in a great fast, and after was very weak,” so that many people thought Hubberthorne was dead.⁹ In that same year James Nayler (who had been convinced in 1651) was “reported as being ‘under a fast fourteen days’” when he visited Fox at Swarthmore Hall.¹⁰ This was the first recorded of many fasts for Nayler, perhaps occasioned by the Milner episode.

Nayler was involved in very serious fasting in February 1653, when he wrote to George Fox from Appleby,

I was maid after y^e sessions to refuse there diet, & since [then] to live upon bread & water, which cannot be believed by them, not that it is any bondage to me, within or without, for it is my libertie, & fre[e]dome whereby y^e lord hath sett me above all other Created things. Oh deare friends rejoice with me, for I se[e] that to be taken out of all Created things is p[er]fect freedom.¹¹

A 1656 letter to Margaret Fell reported that Nayler had “been in a faste this 10 or 11 dayes onely once he tooke a little wine, & for the most parte hee doth night & day take watter in his mouth, & put it out again after hee have

had it some space.”¹² Thomas Rawlinson wrote to Margaret Fell from Exeter on the 23rd of 6th Month, 1656, that Nayler

hath beene in a fast, hee ate noe bread but one little bitt, for a whole moneth, & there was about a fortnight when I came to him, hee tooke noe manner of foode, but some days a pinte of white wine & but now hee eates meate for he and I are both at a dyett, for hee is not free to eate with friends in prison.¹³

Nayler himself had reported to Fox in February 1653 that “My dear brother Francis [Howgill] is well, hath been in a fast about 8 or 10 days, God is doeing him good & raising up his own to praise & serve him.”¹⁴

There are several 1659 fasting episodes that are worthy of notice. In mid-November of that year Henry Fell, well-known early “Publisher of Truth” (who was active in Europe, the West Indies, and Surinam in South America), wrote to George Fox that at the moment he was in a fourteen day fast. From the letter it appears that Fell was seeking to work through some inward problem or decision about whether or not to go with John Stubbs on some religious journey.¹⁵

One of the more striking examples of early Quaker fasting is met with in the group efforts of some members of the Fell family and several others in the neighborhood. William Caton, writing from Swarthmore Hall on the twenty-third of the eighth month, 1659, reported to George Fox that several in the Fell family and household

have been exercised and yet are in fasting; Bridgett Fell fasted twelve dayes, Issabell hath fasted about seven and is to fast nine; little Marg[aret] hath fasted five, and A little maide that is a servant in y^e house called Mabby hath fasted twenty. And one Mary Cartmell hath fasted above twenty. And two more in this family are exercised in the same thing. And blessed bee the Lord they are and have bene generally wonderfully preserved and some of them are come very well thorow it, and others are kept in y^e faith & Patience, and all is pretty well, blessed be the lord.¹⁶

Of great significance in this report concerning the Fell household is the absence of the name of George Fell, Margaret Fell’s only son. Originally, in 1652, George Fell seems to have been drawn to Quakerism, through the magnetism of George Fox and the whole-hearted embracing of the new movement by his mother. In George Fell’s own enthusiastic embracing of the Quaker message there was, perhaps, an example of what Henry Cadbury once described as “over-conversion.” He was soon swept up in James Milner’s apocalyptic dreams of the Judgment, the New Creation, and the establishing of the New Jerusalem in “Beakeley” [Baycliff or Beckclift], the town where Milner lived. George Fell (1638-1670), still only a youth of fourteen, became one of Milner’s “disciples” and was given the name

Zebedee by Milner who now claimed that he himself was Jesus Christ and George Fox was John the Baptist.

George Fell was greatly disillusioned, it would seem, by the failure of Milner's promises and predictions and the resulting condemnation of Milner's "false prophecy" by George Fox, James Nayler, and Margaret Fell (soon thereafter followed by James and Elizabeth Milner's denial of their earlier "outgoings"). John Gilpin, early anti-Quaker writer in his 1655 edition of *The Quakers Shaken*, reported that George Fell "before that time [had been] bewitched with the delusions of the Quakers," but "afterwards never followed them more, blessing God, that he had open'd [his] eyes to see the delusions of Sathan and those manifold Snares wherein [he] had been entangled."¹⁷ Probably the great differences which developed between Margaret Fell and her son began with this traumatic experience and continued to grow.

Another case of fasting, probably in 1659 also, is worthy of our attention. This one concerns John Luffe, an Irish Quaker from Limerick, who traveled with John Perrot in their labors in Greece, Turkey, and Italy. Sometimes they were part of a six-person group (along with Samuel Buckley, Mary Fisher, Beatrice Beckley, and Mary Prince). From the eastern Mediterranean area Luffe and Perrot returned to Italy, making their way to Rome where their purpose was to see the Pope. Soon the Inquisition seized them and imprisoned them in the Pazzarella (the prison or hospital for "mad-men"). In 1658 (or possibly 1659) Luffe died in prison. According to Perrot Luffe was murdered by hanging. Church officials later claimed that Luffe had fasted nineteen days and died on the twentieth – having starved himself to death. When Charles Bayly and Jane Stokes arrived in Rome to seek the release of John Perrot, they were also imprisoned in the Pazzarella. There Bayly learned, through Perrot, of Luffe's death by hanging at the hands of church officials, as well as the "official" Roman view that Luffe, through fasting, had starved himself to death. As a result, Charles Bayly felt called to fast twenty days, in order to show that a person might live through such a period of fasting.¹⁸

Even earlier this same charge of dying from too much fasting had been brought forth in connection with the 1656 death of the youthful James Parnell in Colchester. Within a year of Parnell's death Christopher Wade charged that Parnell had "murdered" himself by his "inordinate fasting . . . to show himself to be a Prophet of the Lord, for people to believe in him, which was not to believe his words."¹⁹ Parnell's death really stemmed more from his hard usage and the terrible conditions of his incarceration than from excessive fasting. His abode in the Colchester prison was the "Hole in the Wall" reached only by ladder and rope. While carrying his food in one hand

and reaching for the rope with the other, he missed the rope and fell to the stone floor far below. From here, greatly injured, he was placed “in a little low Hole called the Oven (which place was so little that some baker’s ovens have been seen bigger than it, though not so high) without the least air, hole or window for smoke.”²⁰

In 1664, after leaving John Perrot in Barbados, John Brown traveled to London to carry out a “duty” which he believed had been put upon him during the preceding October, when he had been at Patuxent in Maryland. He had felt led to “pass to London & there abstain from food for a season, & be obedient to what he should require of me.” Brown believed that he was called to perform a “sign” to Quakers in England, going to a “public place of speaking” at the Bull and Mouth Meeting. Upon “command” he abstained from food for several days until he was “commanded” to eat. On May 20, 1664, eighteen days after arriving in London, he went to the Bull and Mouth, took off his shoes and stockings, cut his hair, stripped off his clothes (wearing only a coarse loin cloth), mounted a platform “where men used to speak,” threw down his already sheared hair – saying God would thus scatter the enemies of his people (probably meaning those who “persecuted” John Perrot and his followers). The fasting for several days was perhaps to sharpen his powers of discernment or possibly to strengthen his determination to carry out his “task.” The outline of what he was to do seems to have been in his mind from his time at Patuxent in October 1663.²¹

Of particular interest is one fast that was proposed but never took place – a 1655 challenge by Richard Farnsworth to Thomas Moore, Jr., a leader of the Manifestarians. This challenge followed a “Dispute” at the home of Justice John Wray in Lincolnshire between James Nayler and Richard Farnsworth on one hand and the Manifestarians on the other. The Manifestarians broke off the debate for dinner, saying they were “not able to subsist without meat.”²² Farnsworth threw out a three-fold challenge to Thomas Moore, Jr.: 1) to travel with Farnsworth for two weeks to preach the word, wherever he might be led, 2) to agree “that you and I eat no food, as outward bread, and flesh, nor any outward victualling, provided by any man, or creature for that time, nor drink either Beer, Ale, or Wine, nor partake of any other outward thing, except a little spring water,” and 3) to have no access to books. This was to be a test, as the servant of the Lord [Elijah] “tried” the prophets of Baal.²³

Why did Fox and these other early Quakers fast? What was their purpose? In so far as we can tell there appear to have been several motives or reasons lying behind the various episodes which have been cited here, as well as others which might have been included. In some instances the fasting flowed from Friends’ desires to know God’s will more clearly. In others it may have

come from a great longing to deepen the spiritual life or to sharpen spiritual awareness. In still other cases fasting may have been seen as a way of strengthening the individual's ability to meet some special opportunity, occasion, or crisis. Charles Bayly's fasting in a Roman prison was clearly designed to show his view of the falseness of the charge that John Luffe had starved himself to death. Some of those in the Fell household may have fasted in imitation of their elders.

Just as there may have been several differences or purposes lying behind Quaker fasting, so early Quaker fasting also varied in manner, degree, or expression. Some "fasting" Quakers drank only water, others wine, or even used sour vinegar to wash out the mouth. Some ate bread, while others did not. Most of them abstained from eating meat – either for a period or through the whole fast.

Quaker attitudes towards fasts and fasting inspired some of the strongly polemic writings of the 1650s. Anti-Quaker writers sometimes condemned Quaker fasting. William Brownsword, in listing "Quaker practices," said "they lay much stress upon Mean and plain Apparel" and then continues "They practice fasting much in their entrance upon this way, and afterwards as a special means of spiritual knowledge, &c." To underscore this last point, he cited the case of James Parnell in Colchester Gaol.²⁴ Giles Firmin (1656) also attacked Quaker fasting and was answered by Edward Burrough.²⁵

Where Quaker fasting on one hand was condemned by some writers, Quaker fasting was on the other hand played down or even questioned by some representatives of the Roman Catholic Church who said that Quakers denied fasting (that is, they did not refrain from eating meat on certain days). This provoked an outburst from a Quakeress (whose work is embedded in a tract by George Fox):

for many of the Quakers have fasted thirty dayes, twenty dayes, fifteen dayes, seven dayes together; I which am a Woman, (the Writer of this) fasted twenty two dayes, which never none of the Papists fasted forty dayes, or thirty dayes, or twenty two dayes together: I will challenge all the Papists upon the Earth, let them come out and go thirty dayes, let them come out and go thirty dayes together without either Bread or Water, or fourteen dayes, or twenty dayes, or let them come out and go thirty dayes together with nothing but Bread and Water, and try, and see if his belly be not his God, and the Quakers is known that they have never had more strength then when they have fasted two and twenty, and thirty dayes together.²⁶

Another 1658 Quaker tract by Fox contains a section by Francis Howgill who likewise strikes at the Roman Catholic approach to fasting. Howgill says "And as for your fasting, thou boasts of, we know what it is, denying one sort of meat, and taking another, and fasting one day, and riotous

another.”²⁷ On the very next page Fox writes,

This is the word of the Lord God to you that fast and afflict your selves, and observe days, & meats, which the Kingdom of God stands not in. You that fast, you want the Bridegroom, you want Christ, and the bond of iniquity is amongst you; and this fasting and afflicting of your selves for a day, & days, is not the Fast that the Lord requires, which breaks the bond of iniquity.²⁸

What is the true “fast” that the Lord requires? Although the answer to that question is found in these polemic exchanges with Roman Catholics, it was expressed earlier and more fully as Quakers responded to the State’s call to observe “public fast days.” As early as 1654, when Oliver Cromwell called for a nation-wide fast to end a great drought,²⁹ Fox responded that if Cromwell would “come down to own God’s truth he should have had rain and that drought was a sign to them of their barrenness of the water of life.”³⁰ Fox, in 1654, published a work which contained his position: *A Warning from the Lord to all such as hang down the head for a day*. He says,

This is the fast that the Lord requires, to deal the bread to the hungry; this Fast the Lord Requires of you all, then no Oppressor shall be in the Land, no Bond of Iniquity, and with the Fist of wickedness there shall be none to smite each other, but with the light Christ hath enlightened you withal, it shall be condemned, and it will lead to the true Fast, the everlasting day; then shall you see the Windows of heaven opened. . .

Your Fasting and Mourning for a day, as a custome, is not accepted with God, God accepts it not, to fast one day, and feast another; but this is the Fast that the Lord doth require of you, to break off the Bonds [of] Iniquity, to shew mercy to the Fatherless and Widdows, and let the oppressed go free; cast off your Pride, cast off your Highness, ambition and honor, for these things the drought comes upon you, and the plague, and the Famine, which is your figure, that you have the out-side, but you want the Water of Life; and this is come upon you which have tasted of the mercies of God, and deliverances, and then there was a tenderness in many of you, but now many are got into ease, and pride, stretching your selves upon your beds of ease, and the parched ground is a figure of your parched hearts. . .³¹

Two years later, in 1656, Fox produced *A Declaration Concerning Fasting and Prayer*, in which he writes that the thing to be “fasted from” is what separates a person from God – such as injustice, iniquity, transgression, and vanity. He also calls for people to fast in secret rather than as a part of an orchestrated “day of fasting and humiliation,” for “the father that seeth in secret shall reward thee openly; this fast separates from the Pharisees fast, and them that bow the head for day like a bull-rush.”³² In that same year James Nayler, answering an attack upon Quaker fasting, wrote,

you seem to reproach the Quakers, saying you know some of them who fasted 30. & 40. daies. I say, if you had lived in the daies of Moses, Elias, David, Daniel, and other Saints of God, and the Apostles, who made proof of their ministrie in Fastings and Prayings, yea Christ himself should have had no better from you than scorn and reproach therein, fasting being a thing which your generation knows little of, nor are exercised little in whose care in the first place is for your bellies, and all must fast about you before you want your hire which you expect from them, which many times you do not work for, yet was it declared if they do not put it into your mouths, suits & prisons, yea manie times where the children want bread, and where-of you stand in no need: so that there is little thoughts of your fasting.³³

As we have seen, Quakers of various sorts (including Fox, Nayler, and other outstanding leaders) fasted in the opening generation of Quakerism. In most cases their fasting was in response to an individual need or leading. It was not in response to a summons for all Quakers to fast, nor was it to be on a set day but at the prompting of the Spirit. Those fasts on set days, whether called for by the State or by the Church, were viewed as an insult to God (and therefore a sin) where they were followed by iniquity.

It is not possible to tell how widespread fasting was among early Quakers or just how long the practice continued among Friends. Undoubtedly, isolated cases continued to occur through the years, but references to fasting (like those to wearing sackcloth and ashes and engaging in “signs and wonders” such as “going naked as a sign”) became less frequent as the 1650s turned into the 1660s and tended to disappear by the 1670s when the initial period of enthusiasm had departed from Friends.

Notes

- ¹ Kenneth L. Carroll, "Sackcloth and Ashes and Other Signs and Wonders," *Journal of Friends Historical Society*, 52 (1975) 314-325; "Quaker Attitudes Toward Signs and Wonders," *Journal of Friends Historical Society*, 54 (1977), 70-84; "Early Quakers and Going Naked as a Sign," *Quaker History*, 77 (1978) 69-97; "Singing in the Spirit in Early Quakerism," *Quaker History*, 73 (1984), 1-13.
- ² Hugh Barbour, *The Quakers in Puritan England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1964), 56.
- ³ Michael R. Watts, *The Dissenters* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 314, reports that Oliver Heywood, average, fasted thirty-five times a year.
- ⁴ George Fox, *The Journal of George Fox*, Revised Edition by John L. Nickalls (London: Religious Society of Friends, 1975), 9-10. Cf. H. Larry Ingle, *First Among Friends: George Fox and the Creation of Quakerism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 48.
- ⁵ Cf. Kenneth L. Carroll, "A Look at James Milner and His 'False Prophecy,'" *Quaker History*, 74 (1985), 18-26.
- ⁶ Miles Halhead, *A Book of Some of the Sufferings and Passages of Myles Halhead* (Shoreditch: A. Sowle, 1690), 6.
- ⁷ Cf. William C. Braithwaite, *The Beginnings of Quakerism*, second edition, revised by Henry J. Cadbury (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955), 147; Carroll, "James Milner and His False Prophecy," 18-26.
- ⁸ Margaret Fell, *False Prophets, Antichrists, Deceivers, Which are in the World, which John Prophetised of, which hath been long hid and Covered* (London: Giles Calvert, 1655), especially 12-13.
- ⁹ Fox, *Journal*, 142.
- ¹⁰ Fox, *Journal*, 119.
- ¹¹ Swarthmore MSS, 3:66 (Transcripts 2:847).
- ¹² Swarthmore MSS, 1:12 (Tr. 1:95).
- ¹³ Swarthmore MSS, 3:12 (Tr. 3:163).
- ¹⁴ Swarthmore MSS, 3:66 (Tr. 2:847).
- ¹⁵ Swarthmore MSS, 4:181 (Tr. 2:133). Geoffrey F. Nuttall, *Early Quaker Letters from the Swarthmore MSS to 1660* (London: The Library, Friends House, 1952), no. 497 (268), suggests that this may have been the proposed journey towards China and Prester John's country, which was not undertaken until 1661. Cf. Braithwaite, *Beginnings of Quakerism*, 429.
- ¹⁶ Swarthmore MSS, 4:267 (Tr. 1:392).
- ¹⁷ John Gilpin, *The Quakers Shaken, or a Warning Against Quaking* (London, 1655), 18-20. This 1655 edition contains additions to the 1653 edition.
- ¹⁸ John Perrot, *A Narrative of some of the Sufferings of J. in the City of Rome* (London: Thomas Simmons, 1661), 15-16. See also John Perrot, *Answer to the Pope's nameless Helper: or a Reply to the Tract Entitled, Perrot against the Pope* (London: Robert Wilson, 1662), 1; Charles Bailly (Bayly), *A Seasonal*

- Warning and Word of Advice to all Papists, But most especially to those of the Kingdom of France* (London: n.p., 1663), 6. Cf. Kenneth L. Carroll, "John Perrot, Early Quaker Schismatic, Supplement no. 33 to *Journal of Friends Historical Society* (London, 1971);" From Bond Slave to Governor: The Strange Career of Charles Bayly," *Journal of Friends Historical Society*, 52 (1968-1971), 27-28. See also Stefano Villani, *Tremolanti e Papista, Missioni Quacchere nell' Italia del Seicento* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1996), especially 59-61, 64.
- ¹⁹ Christopher Wade, *Quakery Slain Irrecoverably*, etc. (London: Christopher Wade, 1657), 37.
- ²⁰ Braithwaite, *Beginnings of Quakerism*, 191-192.
- ²¹ Crosse MSS, 54-55, found in Friends House Library, London.
- ²² Swarthmore MSS, 4:88 (Tr. 2:675) and 4:178 (Tr. 3:861). Cf. Nuttall, *Early Quaker Letters*, 293-297.
- ²³ Thomas Moore, Jr., *An Antidote Against the Spreading Infections of the spirit of Anti-christ* (London: R. Ibbitson, 1655), 8-9.
- ²⁴ Willisam Brownsword, *The Quaker Jesuite, or Popery in Quakerism* (London: J. N., 1660), 7-8.
- ²⁵ Giles Firmin attacked Quaker fasting and was answered by Edward Burrough, *Stablishing against Quakerism, thrown down and overturned*, etc. (London: Giles Calvert, 1656), 13.
- ²⁶ George Fox, *An Answer to A Paper which came from the Papists Lately out of Holland* (London: Thomas Simmon, 1658), 3. Either Fox put his name to someone else's writing or his scribe inserted her own testimony here.
- ²⁷ George Fox, *The Papists Strength, Principles, and Doctrines*, etc. (London: Thomas Simmons, 1658), 46.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 47.
- ²⁹ Fox, *Journal*, 293.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 293.
- ³¹ George Fox, *A Warning from the Lord, To all such as hang down the head for a Day, and pretend to keep a Fast* (London: Giles Calvert, 1654), 1, 3.
- ³² George Fox, *A Declaration Concerning Fasting and Prayer* (London: Thomas Simmons, 1656), 1-7, and especially 3.
- ³³ James Nayler, *Foot yet in the Snare* (London: Giles Calvert, 1656), 14.