Quakers [1]

The Quakers -- more properly known as the Society of Friends -- were an important group in the politics and society of early North Carolina. Founded in the 1600s by George Fox, the Friends fled persecution in England and took advantage of the religious freedom offered in North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Maryland.

Religious life in England

Since 1534, the Church of England, sometimes called the Anglican Church, had been the*established* church -- the official state church -- of Great Britain. In order to hold a public office -- whether king, member of Parliament, or a local magistrate [2] -- a man had to be a member of the Church of England. All other religions were declared to be illegal and dissenters were persecuted: They were whipped, fined, driven out of the country, or put in jail.

Puritans

Many people were critical of the Anglican Church and formed their own religious organizations. One of the most important groups of religious *dissenters* -- people who disagreed with the established church -- was the Puritans. The Puritans believed that the Anglican Church was corrupt. They argued that Anglican ministers had too much power and that they prevented people from coming to understand the will of God for themselves. The Puritans wanted to focus on the individual believer; they tried to rid church services of symbols and rituals and to strip churches of their decorations. All these things, they believed, also distracted people from learning the will of God.

Puritans looked to the teachings of John Calvin, who taught that only a few people had been chosen by God to be saved. This was known as the Doctrine of the Elect. Since God knew everything, Calvin argued, He must have known when He created the world who would be saved and who would not. There was nothing you could do to change your fate: God had either "elected" you for heaven or for hell. Believers needed to search their souls to find out whether they were one of the "elect," or saved.

The Puritans and the Anglicans were the two dominant religious groups in England in the mid-1600s, when George Fox was a young man. While Fox shared the Puritan's criticisms of the Anglican Church, he was skeptical of many aspects of Puritan theology, particularly their belief in the Doctrine of the Elect.

The Society of Friends

Fox began a spiritual journey that would last him four years. He read religious books and spoke to religious leaders in the Anglican Church and in Puritan congregations. After several years, he came to the conclusion that none of the existing churches reflected the true teachings of Jesus. He believed that the answers to his spiritual questions could not be found in books, nor could educated men tell him the will of God. The truth was already inside of him, because the Spirit of God was in each person.

For the remainder of his life, Fox would preach his interpretation of Christianity and work to build a new church. His followers would become the Society of Friends, called the "Quakers" by their critics who claimed that Friends "quaked" or shook with religious excitement when they spoke.

Like many religious groups in England, Quakers were subject to much persecution. The lack of religious tolerance in England was one of the reasons many Quakers chose to move to North America, particularly to Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, and North Carolina. All three of these colonies permitted religious freedom for Christians.

Interestingly, Puritan Massachusetts was a difficult place for Quakers to live. The Puritans did not believe in religious tolerance. They believed that there was only one true way to be Christian, and that was by being a Puritan. They passed several laws that made Quakerism illegal in Massachusetts. They imprisoned Quakers who would not leave the colony. In one case, four Quakers were executed for refusing to stop preaching Quaker beliefs or to leave the colony.

Beliefs

Inner Light

One of the teachings that separated Friends from other Christian groups was their belief that the "Inner Light" was attached to all human souls. As such, all people could come to know the will of Christ.

Because the Inner Light was in each person, there was no need for clergy. Clergy were highly educated men who studied the Bible and taught their interpretation to congregations. Friends believed that the true path to Jesus was not through learning, studying the Bible, or listening to sermons, but through individual prayer and meditation. Once he or she had learned to identify the promptings of the Inner Light, he or she would know the truth. The believer could in turn speak truths and help others find the Inner Light inside themselves.

The Inner Light had two main purposes. The first was to help individual people come to know the will of God and to distinguish good from evil. Second, since the Inner Light was a part of the Spirit of God, every person was already part of God. There was no need to be saved by Jesus, as most Christian denominations taught. When a person died, his or her soul and the Inner Light would connect back to God. The Quakers did not believe in hell or damnation for Quakers.

Because each person had part of God in his or her soul, all people were connected to each other. A Friend would not want to harm another person because he or she was hurting him or herself, as well as hurting God. As such, Friends were pacifists, believing that no one should ever kill another person for any reason.

Plainness in dress

Friends believed that it was important to dress plainly. They believed that it was a sign of pride if a person wore flashy clothes with bright colors or a lot of jewelry. They believed that a person should not be concerned about outward appearances or put a lot of value on material objects. Having fancy clothes was a sign that a person valued worldly things over spiritual matters. While not all Friends followed the practice of dressing plainly, most felt that it was an important symbol of their commitment to live godly lives. Plain clothes were a symbol of a Quaker's spiritual goals and beliefs.

Plainness in speech

Friends also believed that, because the Inner Light was in everyone, all people were equal. They did not believe in ranks or titles. In the seventeenth century, people addressed someone of equal rank or someone they knew well as "thee" or "thou," and someone they did not know well or someone in authority as "you." Friends refused to use "you" and instead addressed all people as "thee" or "thou" to show that all people were equal. Their critics found this disrespectful.

Oaths and affirmations

Friends refused to swear oaths, citing Biblical commandments to "swear not" (James 5:12) and "swear not at all" (Matthew 5:34). In England, oaths were required of witnesses in court, members of juries, and public office holders, and anyone could be asked to swear an oath of allegiance to the king or queen. Because they refused to swear oaths, English Quakers were imprisoned, had property confiscated, and could not testify in court.

In North Carolina, and later in England, Quakers were allowed to*affirm* rather than swearing an oath -- essentially the same thing, but without the religious implications of an oath. (Disputes over oaths and affirmations would lead to Cary's Rebellion [3] in 1711.)

Church organization

Weekly worship services

Fox instructed his followers to set up meeting houses where members of the religious community would gather each week to worship. These worship services were unlike the organized church services of the Anglicans or Puritans. Rather than having a minister teach the congregation, the members sat in a circle in silent prayer and meditated. When a person felt moved by the Inner Light to speak, he or she would stand and relate an experience or an idea that they thought would help others on their own spiritual journey. A member might elaborate on a scripture he or she had read, or simply on an idea that they believed to be true. When finished, he or she would sit back down and the congregation would return to silence until another member felt prompted to rise and speak.

Men's and women's committees

Rather than having a minister or a group of clergymen govern the congregation, each community selected men and women to sit on committees. These committees oversaw church business, such as spending donations from church members, disciplining members who had misbehaved, and deciding on a common response to political or social events. The men's committee was in charge of the meeting house and raising money for repairs and upkeep of church buildings. The women's committee was in charge of distributing charity to widows, orphans, and families in need of financial assistance. The committes also disciplined members who had sinned; the men's committe disciplined men, while the women's committee disciplined women.

Allowing women to hold their own meetings separate from men and to give them authority to discipline members or to spend church funds was radical for the seventeenth century. Critics of the Society of Friends often pointed to the power of women in the church as a major problem and a danger to English society. English men and women of the time were taught to believe that women were inferior to men and that women were not capable of leadership. Women had to be looked after and disciplined by men. Women were seldom given this amount of authority in churches and they typically would not have been responsible for large amounts of money. Traditionally, men were in charge of providing charity on behalf of churches and other organizations and, because all clergy were men, they would have been in charge of disciplining church members.

Church discipline

If a member of the Society of Friends committed a sin that affected the community, such as swearing, being drunk, marrying a non-Quaker, having a child out of wedlock, being unfair in business, or being violent to a spouse or child, he or she could be disciplined. For major sins, such as marrying outside of the Friends community, a person would be disowned. This meant that the church had broken its relationship with that person. A sinner who admitted that he or she had behaved in a sinful manner could rejoin the church. But if the sinner denied that his or her behavior was a sin, that was considered prideful, which was yet another sin that set him or her apart from other Quakers.

Quakers in colonial North Carolina

Quakers were some of the first settlers to move to North Carolina, because the colony had established religious freedom as early as 1672. Although the Church of England was the official religion of North Carolina, there were few attempts to set up Anglican churches and congregations in North Carolina until the 1700s. This gave Quakers several years to build communities and establish their presence in the political life of the young colony. Most Quaker communities flourished in the northeast corner of the colony, near the Dismal Swamp and the Virginia boarder. Later, in the mid-1700s, Quakers would migrate from Pennsylvania to the Piedmont.

Until the 1760s, Quakers were active in North Carolina politics. One reason for their involvement was that Quakers, unlike many other colonists, lived close to one another and built towns and communities. Many people moved to North Carolina alone and lived isolated lives on farms miles away from neighbors. Quakers moved to North Carolina to be close to fellow believers and to escape the persecution they had faced in England and Massachusetts. They had common goals and concerns and often presented a common voice to the government of the colonies.

During the first fifty years of British settlement in North Carolina, Quakers held a number of public offices and made up a large portion of the elected representatives in the General Assembly. One Quaker, John Archdale, became Governor of North Carolina from 1695-6. As more and more Europeans came to North Carolina, though, Quakers became a smaller minority and had less political influence.

Their belief in non-violence would also become a political problem for Quakers. Throughout the eighteenth century, colonists fought different battles against the French, Indian enemies, and finally the British. Many colonists felt that Friends benefited from the sacrifices made by other colonists and yet refused to participate in the financial or human cost of warfare. As a result of their pacifist beliefs, Quakers lost their political influence in colonies such as Pennsylvania and North Carolina.

User Tags:
Anglican Church [4]
colonial [5]
gender roles [6]
George Fox [7]
immigration [8]

North Carolina [9]
North Carolina History [10]
Page [11]
Puritans [12]
Quakers [13]
religion [14]
religious freedom [15]
Students [16]
Teachers [17]

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[21]

George Fox is buried in London. In keeping with Quaker beliefs in plainness and modesty, his grave has only a simple marker.

Places:

[22]

Built by Quaker farmer Abraham Sanders in 1730, the Newbold White House in Hertford is the oldest brick home in North Carolina.

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