

Margaret Fell Fox



Mrs. Margaret Fox, about 1866
(From an oil portrait)

Margaret Fell (1614-1702), one of George Fox's first converts, was the "mother of Quakerism". Her home at Swarthmoor Hall was a haven for Quaker ministers and a hub for organizing, relief efforts, and communication. After her first husband, Judge Thomas Fell, died, she married George Fox. Like many early Quaker leaders, she was imprisoned for her faith. Her combination of deep spirituality and practicality were of immeasurable help to the first generation of Friends.

On first hearing George Fox

In the following passage Margaret Fell is describing George Fox's "sermon" at the Ulverston steeplehouse. It was the first time she had heard him speak.

And when he came among us, [he] opened us a book that we had never read in ... to wit the Light of Christ in our consciences, and ... declare[d] of it that it was our teacher, that we should believe in it, and turn our minds to it, and that the Letter killed, as the Apostle said, and that Christ and the Apostles' words was not ours but theirs that spoke them.

And so he went on, and said, "That Christ was the Light of the world, and lighteth every man that cometh into the world; and that by this light they might be gathered to God," &c. I stood up in my pew, and wondered at his doctrine, for I had never heard such before.

And then he went on, and opened the scriptures, and said, "The scriptures were the prophets' words, and Christ's and the apostles' words, and what, as they spoke, they enjoyed and possessed, and had it from the Lord": and said, "Then what had any to do with the scriptures, but as they came to the Spirit that gave them forth? You will say, 'Christ saith this, and the apostles say this;' but what canst thou say? Art thou a child of the Light, and hast thou walked in the Light, and what thou speakest, is it inwardly from God?" &c.

This opened me so, that it cut me to the heart; and then I saw clearly we were all wrong. So I sat down in my pew again, and cried bitterly: and I cried in my spirit to the Lord, "**We are all thieves; we are all thieves; we have taken the scriptures in words, and know nothing of them in ourselves.**"

Appeals to the King

Margaret Fell was born into an aristocratic family (the Askews) and had no hesitation in personally appealing to the King.

And in the Year 1660, King Charles the Second came into England, and within two weeks after, I was moved of the Lord to go to London, to speak to the King concerning the Truth, and the sufferers for it. For there was then many hundreds of our Friends in prison in the three nations of England, Scotland, and Ireland, which were put in by the former powers.

And I spake often with the King, and writ many letters and papers unto him, and many books were given by our Friends to the Parliament, and great service was done at that time. And they were fully informed of our peaceable principles and practices... . And I writ and gave papers and letters to every one of the [Royal] Family several times, viz. To the King, to the Duke of York, to the Duke of Gloucester, and to the Queen Mother, to the Princess of Orange, and to the Queen of Bohemia.

Facing the Oath of Allegiance

About a month after, the same justices sent for me to Ulverston, where they were sitting, at a private sessions; and when I came there, they asked me several questions, and seemed to be offended at me, for keeping a Meeting at my house, and said, they would tender me the Oath of Allegiance.

I answered, They knew I could not swear, and why should they send for me from my own house, where I was about my lawful occasions, to ensnare me? What had I done? They said, if I would not keep a Meeting at my house, they would not tender me the Oath. I told them, I should not deny my faith and principles, for anything they could do against me; and while it pleased the Lord to let me have a house I would endeavour to worship him in it.

So they caused the Oath to be read, and tendered it unto me. And when I refused it, telling them I could not take any Oath for conscience' sake, Christ Jesus having forbid it.

So they passed sentence of *Praemunire* upon me, which was, that I should be out of the King's Protection, and forfeit all my estate, real and personal, to the King, and imprisonment during my life. But the great God of heaven and earth supported my spirit under this severe sentence, that I was not terrified, but gave this answer to Judge Turner who gave the sentence, "Although I am out of the King's Protection, yet **I am not out of the Protection of the Almighty God.**"

Understanding of the Light

Friends, deal plainly with yourselves, and let the eternal light search you, and try you, for the good of your souls; for this will deal plainly with you; **it will rip you up, lay you open**, and make all manifest that lodgeth in you; the secret subtlety of the enemy of your souls, this searcher and tryer will make manifest...consider one another, and provoke one another to love and to good works; not forsaking the assembling of yourselves, but exhorting one another, and so much the more, as you see the day approaching.

And dwell in love and unity, in the pure eternal light; there is your fellowship, there is your cleansing and washing...And the everlasting God, of light, life and power, keep you all faithful to your own measure; that so the resurrection and the life ye may witness, and the living bread ye may feed on, which, whosoever eateth of, shall never die. (*Epistle to convinced Friends*, 1656)

On Women's Rights

Later generations acclaimed Margaret Fell's tract of 1666 on *Women Speaking Justified* as a pioneer manifesto for women's liberation. At the time it was less noticed. Early English Ranters and Baptists as well as Quakers were widely noted for their women preachers. Margaret Fell's tract, though saying nothing about the general social and economic status of women, may nevertheless have been new in several respects: it was probably the first tract entirely on women's religious equality, and the first such by a woman.

Whereas it hath been an objection in the minds of many and several times hath been objected by the clergy, ... against women's speaking in the Church, ... that they are condemned for meddling in the things of God, the ground of ... objection is taken from the ... first Epistle to the Corinthians, chap. 14: vers. 34, 35; and also what he writ to Timothy in the first Epistle, chap. 2: vers. 11, 12. How far they wrong the Apostle's intentions in these Scriptures, we shall show clearly when we come to them in their course and order. But first let me lay down how God himself hath manifested his will and mind concerning women, and unto women.

Those that speak against the power of the Lord, and the Spirit of the Lord speaking in a woman, simply by reason of her sex, or because she is a woman, not regarding the Seed and Spirit and Power that speaks in her, such speak against Christ and his Church.

On Simplicity of Dress

Her maturity and freedom of spirit showed in her sober work for Friends, and continued right down to her last letters, when she challenged even the weighty Friends who tried to standardize Quaker dress and life. In her well known *Epistle against uniform Quaker Costume*; April, 1700²⁰ she pointed out that Jesus would have all to be saved, adding these words of warning:

But Christ Jesus saith, that we must take no thought what we shall eat, or what we shall drink, or what we shall put on; but bids us consider the lilies how they grow in more royalty than Solomon. But contrary to this, they say we must look at no colours, nor make anything that is changeable colours as the hills are, nor sell them nor wear them. But we must be all in one dress, and one colour. **This is a silly poor Gospel.** It is more fit for us to be covered with God's eternal Spirit, and clothed with his eternal Light, which leads us and guides us into righteousness and to live righteously and justly and holily in this present evil world.

Chronology for Margaret Fell & Early Friends

- 1614: Birth of Margaret Askew; Thomas Fell then 15 years old.
- 1624: Birth of George Fox: next year Charles I succeeded James I.
- 1632: Marriage of Margaret & Thomas Fell.
- 1642-51: Civil War of King vs. Parliament ending in Charles' execution and Cromwell's rule.
Thomas Fell in Puritan "Long Parliament," local skirmishes; became Assize judge.
- 1652-53: George Fox at and around Swarthmoor; Nayler & Howgill jailed at Appleby. Kendal Fund for Quaker traveling ministers.
- 1658: Deaths of Oliver Cromwell, Thomas Fell. MF wrote for Jews.
- 1660: Restoration of Charles II as king. Margaret Fell's first London trip.
- 1661: "Fifth Monarchist" radicals' revolt; many Quakers jailed.
- 1662: "Quaker Act" on oaths; MF's 2nd London visit.
- 1663: MF and daughters, later also Fox, traveled through southwest & north of England.

- 1664: MF & GF arrested at Swarthmoor, and imprisoned at Lancaster, *praemunired*. Wrote Women's Speaking, Touch-Stone, etc. Released 1668. To London again.
- 1669: Marriage of Margaret & George Fox in Bristol led to 2nd Lancaster imprisonment of MF 1670; released 1671: to London again.
- 1673: Fifth London trip to meet GF on return from America. Next two years: GF in Worcester jail, MF there & in London. Then GF convalescent at Swarthmoor: dictated Journal and edited Swarthmoor Letters.
- 1677: GF, Penn & Barclay to Holland & Germany; back to Swarthmoor.
- 1682: Penn sailed for America to settle Pennsylvania.
- 1685: MF in London: Charles II's death.
- 1680-91: GF mainly in London, MF at Swarthmoor. Fox died 1691, soon after William III granted Toleration Act, 1689.
- 1698: MF's 10th London visit.
- 1702: Death of Margaret Fox.

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