

“Then why the Negroes?”: Abolitionist Consciousness Among the Late Seventeenth Century Quakers

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The struggle to abolish the trans-Atlantic slave trade and slavery in general is often viewed as one of the greatest triumphs of humanity and the Quakers, or the Society of Friends, have a special place in that story. As the first group to condemn slavery as a whole and to discipline or expel members for participating in the slave trade, either as traders or as slave owners, they are often romanticized as forward-thinking and progressive.¹ Yet the development of an abolitionist consciousness in the Quakers was by no means assured or easy.² It required more than a century for the initial stirrings of abolitionist sentiment to eventually blossom into a full-grown abolition movement. Quaker abolition was founded first and foremost on the religious convictions and beliefs of the group during the second half of the seventeenth century, and this continued to be its driving force throughout the duration of the movement. These beliefs are in evidence in the earliest works produced during the mid- to late-seventeenth century by several Quaker leaders. By examining the works of men like George Fox, William Edmunson, George Keith, and the leaders of the Germantown

Meeting, the progression of Quaker abolition can be charted and the fundamental centrality of religious doctrine to the belief can be clearly seen. While these cries often went unheeded even amongst their own people, it is impossible to deny that they formed the foundation of later abolitionist movements, whether inside or outside the confines of the group. The doctrines of the Quakers during this period contributed more to their development of an abolitionist consciousness than any other single factor.

The Quakers were formed around 1650 in England by religious dissenter George Fox, and shared common religious and theological bonds with both Oliver Cromwell's Puritans and the Church of England.³ There existed several significant differences that set the Quakers apart from these other groups, however, and placed them on the road towards abolition. Firstly, they believed in an "inner Light" that allowed anyone to experience God directly, regardless of social standing, gender, or ethnicity.⁴ This doctrine emphasized the importance of individual contact with God and affirmed the knowability of God by all people.⁵

¹ Marcus W. Jernegan, "Slavery and Conversion in the American Colonies," *The American Historical Review* 21 (1916): 512.

² Herbert Aptheker, "The Quakers and Negro Slavery," *The Journal of Negro History* 25 (1940): 331; Brycchan Carey, "'The Power that Giveth Liberty and Freedom': The Barbadian Origins of Quaker Antislavery Rhetoric, 1657-76," *Ariel* 38 (2008): 27.

³ Jean R. Soderlund, *Quakers & Slavery: A Divided Spirit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 5.

⁴ Hugh Barbour and J. William Frost, *The Quakers* (Westport, CN.: Greenwood Press, Inc., 1988), 43; Aptheker, "The Quakers and Negro Slavery," 332; Soderlund, *Quakers and Slavery*, 5.

⁵ Aptheker, "The Quakers and Negro Slavery," 331.

It also resulted in persecution, especially in post-civil war England. The Calvinist doctrine espoused by the Puritans stated that salvation was for the Elect; that is, those chosen by God. That salvation could come from an “inner Light” separate from any knowledge of Christ or the Scriptures was at odds with this and was the primary point of dissention between the Puritans and the Quakers.⁶ The second, which came out of the first, was a belief in the universal brotherhood of all people.⁷ Since the Quakers believed everyone had an equal ability to know God, it followed that they were all equal in His eyes. This doctrine also led them to reject traditional structures of authority. Initially they adhered to no strict church hierarchy and rejected the practice of tithing.⁸ This put them at odds not only with the Protestant Puritans, but also with Catholics. The strict hierarchical nature of the Catholic Church was a contentious point between Catholics and Protestants to begin with, but the extremity of the Quaker position was beyond what either group generally held to as a doctrine. It was not uncommon for Quakers to find themselves arrested and imprisoned on charges of blasphemy, contempt of court, or disturbance of peace for interrupting what they considered to be an improper worship service because of the institutional nature of the

church, be it Protestant or Catholic.⁹ The practice of Quakerism was in fact banned entirely in England in 1664 by the Conventicle Act, and the simple act of partaking in it could result in arrest or deportation.¹⁰ A third doctrine that had a major influence on the eventual rejection of slavery was that of non-violence.¹¹ Quaker pacifism was based on a specific interpretation of Scripture that external wars and conflicts were rooted in internal desires and lusts.¹² Staying out of conflict was a victory over the sinful nature of the flesh. Finally, the Quakers believed in simplicity; that is, they rejected opulence and the sins of lust and pride that went along with them.¹³ Rooted in both the Bible and Puritanism, this was another example of the internal war common to all between the sinful flesh and the forgiven spirit.¹⁴ Taken together, these doctrines formed the religious basis for the majority of Quaker attacks against slavery in the late seventeenth century as well as the basis as the persecution against them that would inform these attacks.

The first Quaker author to address the issue of slavery was George Fox, the founder of the movement. In 1657, only two years after the first Quaker missionaries had reached the New World, Fox published his short letter *To Friends Beyond Sea, that Have Black and Indian Slaves*.¹⁵ The letter itself has little in it that would be

⁶ Barbour and Frost, *The Quakers*, 62.

⁷ Aptheker, “The Quakers and Negro Slavery,” 332.

⁸ Soderlund, *Quakers & Slavery*, 6.

⁹ Barbour and Frost, *The Quakers*, 66.

¹⁰ Barbour and Frost, *The Quakers*, 66.

¹¹ Soderlund, *Quakers & Slavery*, 18.

¹² Barbour and Frost, *The Quakers*, 45.

¹³ Soderlund, *Quakers & Slavery*, 18.

¹⁴ Barbour and Frost, *The Quakers*, 44.

¹⁵ Thomas E. Drake, *Quakers and Slavery in America* (Gloucester: Yale University Press, 1965), 5; Carey, “The Power that Giveth Liberty and Freedom,” 31.

considered anti-slavery or abolitionist in nature outside the title and the first line. In fact, Fox never in any of his writings directly called for the emancipation of slaves.¹⁶ Rather, he is primarily concerned that the Friends see to the spiritual wellbeing of their slaves. His assertion that “he [God] made all Nations of one Blood”¹⁷ recalls the foundational Quaker belief in the equality of all men.¹⁸ This, together with the statement that “he doth Enlighten every Man, that cometh into the World, that they might believe in the Son”¹⁹ caused Fox to ultimately observe that Christ is given for a Covenant to the People, and a Light to the Gentiles, and to enlighten them; who is the Glory of Israel, and God's Salvation to the Ends of the Earth. And so, ye are to have the Mind of Christ, and to be Merciful, as your Heavenly Father is merciful.²⁰

In 1671, Fox visited the colony of Barbados, where he observed first-hand the realities of New World slavery. While he was there he preached to slaveholders as well as slaves.²¹ He implored the slaveholders to see to their slaves’ spiritual well-being and to treat

them as fellow citizens in the Kingdom of God.²² To the slaves he brought a similar message, encouraging them to accept the salvation of Christ.²³ In doing so, he raised the ire of the non-Quaker slaveholders on the island.²⁴ They feared that if the slaves took to heart the teaching of equality they would rebel, and accused Fox and his companion William Edmunson of trying to incite revolt.²⁵ Fox and Edmunson denied this strenuously, citing the Quaker doctrine of non-violence as evidence.²⁶ The authorities were unconvinced, however, and in 1675 a law was passed that forbade Quakers from bringing their slaves to Meetings or allowing them to attend the Quaker schools.²⁷ This controversy in Barbados illuminated quite clearly the inherent disagreement between Quaker doctrine and slavery.²⁸

Fox's experiences in Barbados led him to publish *Gospel family-order, being a short discourse concerning the Ordering of Families, both of Whites, Blacks and Indians* in London in 1676.²⁹ His second work to deal with slavery, *Gospel Family-Order* delved more deeply into the topics he had presented nineteen years earlier in *Friends Beyond*

¹⁶ Carey, “The Power that Giveth Liberty and Freedom,” 29.

¹⁷ Carey, “The Power that Giveth Liberty and Freedom,” 31.

¹⁸ Drake, *Quakers and Slavery in America*, 5.

¹⁹ Carey, “The Power that Giveth Liberty and Freedom,” 31.

²⁰ Carey, “The Power that Giveth Liberty and Freedom,” 32.

²¹ Drake, *Quakers and Slavery in America*, 6.

²² Drake, *Quakers and Slavery in America*, 6.

²³ Drake, *Quakers and Slavery in America*, 6.

²⁴ Philippe Rosenberg, “Thomas Tryon and the Seventeenth Century Dimensions of Antislavery,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 61, No. 4 (2004): 621.

²⁵ Drake, *Quakers and Slavery in America*, 7; Aptheker, “The Quakers and Negro Slavery,” 333.

²⁶ Lester B. Scherer, *Slavery and the Churches in Early America, 1619-1819* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975), 40; Drake, *Quakers and Slavery in America*, 7-8.

²⁷ Drake, *Quakers and Slavery in America*, 8.

²⁸ John Witt, “Development of an Abolitionist Consciousness,” *Germantown Crier* 46 (1995): 29; Drake, *Quakers and Slavery in America*, 5.

²⁹ Rosenberg, “Thomas Tryon and the Seventeenth Century Dimensions of Antislavery,” 621; Scherer, *Slavery and the Churches in Early America*, 40.

Sea. The twenty-two page tract was a collection of some of the sermons Fox had earlier delivered while in Barbados, and a growing understanding of the evils he saw inherent in the slave system is increasingly evident.³⁰ As was *Friends Beyond Sea, Gospel Family- Order* was concerned primarily with ensuring that slaves were treated humanely and fairly, as befitted a brother or sister in Christ.³¹ Fox once again states that all people are equal before God, writing,

And so now consider, do not slight them, to wit, the *Ethyopians* [sic], the *Blacks* now, neither any Man or Woman upon the Face of the Earth, in that *Christ* dyed [sic] for all, both *Turks*, *Barbarians*, *Tartarians* and *Ethyopians* [sic]; he dyed [sic] for the *Tannes* and for the *Blacks*, as well as for you that are called *Whites*...for he [Christ] is the propitiation for the sins of the whole world.³²

To Fox, it was the responsibility of the planters and slaveholders to ensure their slaves knew the Good News of the Gospel, since it was a right common to all people. Failure to do so was a direct and deliberate act of sin.³³ Fox also advocated for limited terms of slavery to

be followed by manumission "after a term of years."³⁴ While he does not state here what he feels an appropriate term would be, in another work published in 1671 he suggested thirty years to be suitable.³⁵ Finally, he attacked the cruelty of slavery through the Golden Rule, exhorting his readers thus:

if this [slavery] should be the Condition of you or yours, you would think it hard Measure; yea, and very great Bondage and Cruelty. And therefore consider seriously of this, and do you for and to them, as you would willingly have them or any other to do unto you, were you in the like slavish Condition, & bring them to know the Lord Christ.³⁶

The Golden Rule served to further associate the kind and gentle treatment of one's slaves with Christian duty as well as reinforced the idea of ethnic equality.³⁷

For all this, Fox does not at any point in his writings condemn the practice of owning slaves outright.³⁸ Rather, he accepted it as an unfortunate but ultimately unavoidable part of human existence, "no more capable of being abolished than 'Blastings, Mildew, or Caterpillars.'"³⁹ His concern was with the

³⁰ Rosenberg, "Thomas Tryon and the Seventeenth Century Dimensions of Antislavery," 621; Drake, *Quakers and Slavery in America*, 6.

³¹ Drake, *Quakers and Slavery in America*, 6.

³² Carey, "The Power that Giveth Liberty and Freedom," 42.

³³ Rosenberg, "Thomas Tryon and the Seventeenth Century Dimensions of Antislavery," 622.

³⁴ Carey, "The Power that Giveth Liberty and Freedom," 43; Drake, *Quakers and Slavery in America*, 6.

³⁵ Drake, *Quakers and Slavery in America*, 6.

³⁶ Carey, "The Power that Giveth Liberty and Freedom," 44.

³⁷ Rosenberg, "Thomas Tryon and the Seventeenth Century Dimensions of Antislavery," 626; Carey, "The Power that Giveth Liberty and Freedom," 44.

³⁸ Witt, "Development of an Abolitionist Consciousness," 29.

³⁹ Carey, "The Power that Giveth Liberty and Freedom," 45.

maintaining of a holy society where masters provided for the physical and spiritual wellbeing of their slaves and slaves would learn from their masters the tenets and doctrines of Christianity, allowing them to become an able and active part of the larger society once they were manumitted.⁴⁰ It was by no means a perfect scenario, a fact that Fox acknowledged, but in a society where slavery was an accepted part of daily life, it was perhaps the first real attempt to ameliorate the conditions of the slaves and treat them as ethnic or racial equals if not necessarily equals in societal standing.⁴¹ As such, he cannot properly be called an abolitionist. His writings and the ideas he espoused, however, formed the basis for many of the arguments used by later Quaker abolitionists. His position as founder of the sect lent his writings additional weight to the later attempts at abolition by men such as Benjamin Lay and John Woolman, who based many of their arguments on his positions.⁴² None less than the great British abolitionist Thomas Clarkson observed in 1808 that Fox had "left his testimony against this wicked trade," proving that some of the earliest abolitionists outside the Quaker community saw him as one of them.⁴³ Whether the works of George Fox are truly abolitionist in nature or not is of ultimately secondary importance. That his writings did influence later abolitionists, Quaker and otherwise, is beyond debate and he marks the beginning of the

development of an early abolitionist consciousness among the Quakers in the latter stages of the seventeenth century.

If Fox cannot be called a true abolitionist, his friend and companion to Barbados, William Edmunson, certainly can be. Edmunson had returned to Barbados in 1675 and had continued to teach slaves in defiance of Governor Atkins. This resulted in his being brought up on charges of attempting to incite revolt among the black population, a charge Edmunson again denied on the basis of the doctrine of non-violence.⁴⁴ He in fact argued that his teaching would make the Africans better slaves than those who were kept in "ignorance and under oppression."⁴⁵ This did not move the authorities, however, and as previously mentioned, laws were enacted against the Quakers. At first blush, these do not seem the protestations of an abolitionist; far from them, in fact. Merely a year after his Barbados debacle, however, he wrote a strongly worded letter to slave owners in Virginia and Maryland, urging them to free their slaves outright, that they might be more willing to accept Christian teaching.⁴⁶ This was a significant step beyond the teachings of George Fox. Where Fox had never advocated an outright emancipation, favouring instead a slow manumission, Edmunson called slavery

an aggravation, and an oppression upon the mind, and hath a ground; and Truth

⁴⁰ Carey, "'The Power that Giveth Liberty and Freedom,'" 29.

⁴¹ Carey, "'The Power that Giveth Liberty and Freedom,'" 28, 45; Rosenberg, "Thomas Tryon and the Seventeenth Century Dimensions of Antislavery," 634.

⁴² Carey, "'The Power that Giveth Liberty and Freedom,'" 30; Rosenberg, "Thomas Tryon and the Seventeenth Century Dimensions of Antislavery," 621.

⁴³ Carey, "'The Power that Giveth Liberty and Freedom,'" 29.

⁴⁴ Aptheker, "The Quakers and Negro Slavery," 333; Drake, *Quakers and Slavery in America*, 8.

⁴⁵ Drake, *Quakers and Slavery in America*, 8.

⁴⁶ Scherer, *Slavery and the Churches in Early America*, 41.

is that which works the remedy, and breaks the yoke, and removes the ground. So it would do well to consider that they [the slaves] may feel, see, and partake of your liberty in the gospel of Christ,...[that] they may see and know the difference between you and other people, and your self-denial may be known by all.⁴⁷

According to Edmunson, slavery was actually making it more difficult for them to accept the Gospel message, a far cry from the earlier Quaker position that he himself had espoused. It created an "oppression upon the mind," which distracted the slaves with their earthly concerns instead of allowing them to focus on Christ.⁴⁸ This constituted a complete reversal of his earlier stated position in Barbados of 'the better the Christian, the better the slave.' He also showed great concern over the ability of slave-owning Quakers to be proper witnesses to their slaves and to the larger communities in which they lived. By being freed, the slaves would "know the difference between you and other people," reinforcing the teachings of the Quakers in opposition to those of other Christian groups.⁴⁹ Additionally, the denying of material wealth and possessions would be a witness to

the community around them, as well as following the Quaker doctrine of simplicity.⁵⁰

In closing his letter, Edmunson poses to its recipients a hard, vital question over the morality of slavery. He asks, "many of you count it unlawful to make slaves of the

Indians: and if so, then why the Negroes?"⁵¹ In one searing, terrible question, the entire issue of slavery was laid bare for the Quakers. If, as they professed, all men were equal, and if they found it unlawful to enslave the Native populations of the Americas, what right had they to enslave Africans? By answering that they did not, Edmunson became the first person in the British empire, let alone from among the Quakers, to articulate the sinfulness of slavery as an institution.⁵² He was the first true Quaker abolitionist.

If Edmunson was the first Quaker to declare slavery to be sin, the first full community of them to rally against the institution was a group from Germantown, Pennsylvania. In 1688, the members of the Germantown Monthly Meeting drew up and presented the Philadelphia Quarterly Meeting with the first official petition calling for the immediate and total abandonment of the institution of slavery.⁵³ The argument has even been made that such urgency in seeking abolition was not seen again until the

⁴⁷ Drake, *Quakers and Slavery in America*, 9 – 10.

⁴⁸ Scherer, *Slavery and the Churches in Early America*, 42.

⁴⁹ Scherer, *Slavery and the Churches in Early America*, 41.

⁵⁰ Barbour and Frost, *The Quakers*, 44.

⁵¹ Drake, *Quakers and Slavery in America*, 10.

⁵² Drake, *Quakers and Slavery in America*, 10.

⁵³ Aptheker, "The Quakers and Negro Slavery," 335; Drake, *Quakers and Slavery in America*, 11; Soderlund, *Quakers & Slavery*, 18.

abolitionist movements of the 1830s.⁵⁴ The Germantown Petition, as it came to be known, attacked slavery in four ways. First off, as George Fox had done, they appealed to the Golden Rule.⁵⁵ Slavery was, they claimed, in direct opposition to the concept of ‘Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.’⁵⁶ Second, they held that slavery caused a proliferation of vices amongst both the slaves and the slave owners.⁵⁷ Slavery being sin, the slaveholders sinned by participating in it, while disrupting African families by separating spouses forced them into committing adultery.⁵⁸ Thirdly, the use of slavery sullied the reputation of the community for potential immigrants from Europe.⁵⁹ Perhaps more practically based than the others, this argument was that Quakers from Europe who were often the target of persecution would have no desire to live in a place where they inflicted on others the same treatment they themselves had received.⁶⁰ In the words of the petitioners, “in Europe there are many oppressed for Conscience sake [sic]; and here there are those oppressed...of a black Colour.”⁶¹ To accept slavery was to accept the very thing from which

they had fled in the first place. Finally, the signatories of the petition felt that keeping slaves would ultimately result in having to break the Quaker code of non-violence.⁶² Should their slaves revolt, the Quakers would have to choose between death or sin, having already chosen sin by allowing themselves to keep slaves in the first place. In asking the question “have these Negroes not as much right to fight for their freedom as you have to keep slaves,” they exposed the untenable position that the institution of slavery had created in Quaker society in much the same way as Edmunson had done.⁶³

The Germantown Petition itself drew heavily on ideas that were not strictly Quaker in origin. Many of the members of the Germantown meeting were Mennonites or Anabaptists of German and Dutch origin.⁶⁴ While they were certainly official members of the Quaker community, their experiences of persecution and repression at the hands of Catholics and Protestants in Europe shaped their perceptions of African slavery as much as their adoption of the Quaker doctrine did.⁶⁵ The Germantown Petition was an attempt on

⁵⁴ Witt, “Development of an Abolitionist Consciousness,” 22.

⁵⁵ Aptheker, “The Quakers and Negro Slavery,” 336.

⁵⁶ Soderlund, *Quakers & Slavery*, 18.

⁵⁷ Aptheker, “The Quakers and Negro Slavery,” 336.

⁵⁸ Henry J. Cadbury, “An Early Quaker Anti-Slavery Statement,” *The Journal of Negro History* 22 (1937): 490; Scherer, *Slavery and the Churches in Early America*, 42; Soderlund, *Quakers & Slavery*, 18.

⁵⁹ Aptheker, “The Quakers and Negro Slavery,” 336.

⁶⁰ Drake, *Quakers and Slavery in America*, 12.

⁶¹ David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 126; Witt, “Development of an Abolitionist Consciousness,” 33.

⁶² Aptheker, “The Quakers and Negro Slavery,” 336.

⁶³ Scherer, *Slavery and the Churches in Early America*, 42; Drake, *Quakers and Slavery in America*, 12; Rosenberg, “Thomas Tryon and the Seventeenth Century Dimensions of Antislavery,” 637.

⁶⁴ Witt, “Development of an Abolitionist Consciousness,” 23.

⁶⁵ Witt, “Development of an Abolitionist Consciousness,” 33.

the part of those who drafted and signed it to restore the holy nature of the New World community that had been desecrated by the stain of slavery, an unwelcome reminder of the treatment they had suffered in Europe.⁶⁶

The final major instance of Quaker abolitionist thought in the seventeenth century was from George Keith, a Scottish Quaker, who, in 1693, printed *An Exhortation and Caution to Friends concerning buying or keeping of Negroes*.⁶⁷ In most of his arguments, Keith followed the lead of Fox, Edmunson, and the Petition, but he and his followers often took the ideas of the others to the next step.⁶⁸ The Keithians appealed to the Golden Rule, as did the others, but added that it was a Christian duty to help slaves escape from their masters.⁶⁹ With George Fox, they argued that all people were equal before God, and that the sacrifice of Christ was for all, regardless of skin colour.⁷⁰ To William Edmunson's argument that owning slaves was in and of itself sinful they added the argument that slaves were essentially war prizes acquired by violence, which Quakers were not allowed to buy or own because of their aversion to violence.⁷¹ Slaves were, to Keith, "captives of war violence,

cruelty, and oppression; and theft and robbery of the highest nature."⁷² By purchasing slaves, the Quakers were aiding and abetting an act of war, a complete anathema to their religious ideals. Perhaps the most original pieces of abolitionist thought to come from the Keithian diatribe was the black-and-white way in which he characterized the owning of slaves as sinful. Appealing directly to Scripture, Keith argued that, since it was biblically unlawful for a master to oppress his servants, and since no oppression was greater than slavery, slave owners were in direct violation of the laws of God.⁷³ He even linked the punishment of slaveholders to the book of Revelation and the Apocalypse, quoting "He that leadeth into captivity shall go into captivity" (Rev. 13:10).⁷⁴ Keith's attack on slavery was virulent and polemical, based entirely on biblical arguments.⁷⁵ Unfortunately for Keith, he had been disowned by the Philadelphia Meeting over theological differences in 1692 and was widely seen as a schismatic.⁷⁶ Because of this, the acceptance of his work was somewhat haphazard and it was largely ignored by the majority of the contemporary Quaker community.⁷⁷ It did, however, have a great

⁶⁶ Witt, "Development of an Abolitionist Consciousness," 38; Drake, *Quakers and Slavery in America*, 11.

⁶⁷ Henry J. Cadbury, "Another Early Quaker Anti-Slavery Document," *The Journal of Negro History* 27 (1942): 210; Soderlund, *Quakers & Slavery* 18.

⁶⁸ Aptheker, "The Quakers and Negro Slavery," 337; Drake, *Quakers and Slavery in America*, 15.

⁶⁹ Drake, *Quakers and Slavery in America*, 15.

⁷⁰ Drake, *Quakers and Slavery in America*, 14.

⁷¹ Scherer, *Slavery and the Churches in Early America*, 43; Drake, *Quakers and Slavery in America*, 14.

⁷² Drake, *Quakers and Slavery in America*, 14-15; Scherer, *Slavery and the Churches in Early America*, 43; Rosenberg, "Thomas Tryon and the Seventeenth Century Dimensions of Antislavery," 630.

⁷³ Scherer, *Slavery and the Churches in Early America*, 43; Drake, *Quakers and Slavery in America*, 15.

⁷⁴ Scherer, *Slavery and the Churches in Early America*, 43.

⁷⁵ Drake, *Quakers and Slavery in America*, 15.

⁷⁶ Soderlund, *Quakers & Slavery*, 18; Drake, *Quakers and Slavery in America*, 14.

⁷⁷ Drake, *Quakers and Slavery in America*, 15.

bearing on later abolitionists, Quaker and otherwise, and the argument about slaves as war prizes was used extensively by Quakers who seldom realized its origins with the disowned Friend.⁷⁸

The evidence that an abolitionist consciousness was well into its development amongst the Quakers by the end of the seventeenth century is clear. What is not so clear is why, despite this sentiment, it took another seventy-five years for the full abolition of slavery amongst the Society of Friends to occur. The major problem was the reliance upon slavery and the slave trade by so many of the Quakers in the American colonies. The society they lived in saw no problem with slavery, and neither did they, and the amount of labour required in developing the New World meant that paid workers or indentured servants were often not available.⁷⁹ By rejecting slavery completely, the Quakers would find themselves at a disadvantage in the commercial atmosphere of the colonies, and as one scholar has stated, "economic interests can preserve remarkable contradictions in even seemingly strongly principled individuals."⁸⁰ Ultimately, it took a relaxing of economic and social pressure to allow the Quakers to fully embrace the role of abolitionists that their doctrines so clearly supported. This in no way detracts from the earlier development of abolitionist thought and ideals, however. Based primarily in religious doctrines and theology, the works of men like Fox, Edmunson, and Keith, as well as the authors of the Germantown Petition, created a

flickering flame that was preserved and fed throughout the following generations. Abolitionists such as William Southeby, Benjamin Lay, and Ralph Sandiford continued in the footsteps of these earlier men, using and honing their arguments. Ultimately it was left to still other men, such as John Woolman and Anthony Benezet, to carry these arguments to their conclusion, and by 1783 all the Quaker Meetings in what by that time was the United States had abolished slavery among their members.⁸¹ Yet at the very beginning we still find men of religious conviction and fervour, challenging traditions and practices that had been an accepted part of literally every human society throughout history. The following quotation, taken from a sermon delivered by William Edmunson on October 11, 1690 to Quakers in Maryland and Virginia, encapsulates the nature of the early abolitionist sentiment among the Friends:

Christ's command is to do to others as we would have them do to us; and which of you would have the blacks, or others, to make you their slaves without hope or expectation of freedom? Would not this be an aggravation upon your minds that would outbalance all other comforts? So make their condition your own; for a good conscience void of offence is worth more than all the world, and Truth must regulate all wrongs and wrong dealings.⁸²

⁷⁸ Drake, *Quakers and Slavery in America*, 14; Aptheker, "The Quakers and Negro Slavery," 337.

⁷⁹ Carey, "The Power that Giveth Liberty and Freedom," 27; Witt, "Development of an Abolitionist Consciousness," 38.

⁸⁰ Witt, "Development of an Abolitionist Consciousness," 36.

⁸¹ Aptheker, "The Quakers and Negro Slavery," 352.

⁸² Aptheker, "The Quakers and Negro Slavery," 337.

Edmunson, Keith, Fox, the Germantown Friends: these men were among the very first to affirm the equality of all people, regardless of ethnicity, gender, or social standing. They are, in many ways, the fathers of the entire abolition movement.