

A PERSPECTIVE ON THE

Peace Testimony

by John Andrew Gallery

When I applied for membership in the Religious Society of Friends ten years ago, it was easy to tell my clearness committee that I could support the Quaker Peace Testimony. I was, after all, a left-leaning liberal Democrat, and a commitment to peace was a part of my political and ethical philosophy. I had read the excerpt of the Peace Testimony in *Faith and Practice* and found it easy to identify with the phrase, "We utterly deny all outward wars and strife. . . ." I thought of myself as comfortably part of that collective we. The nuances of that paragraph, or of the document as a whole, weren't apparent to me at that time, nor were they raised by my committee. If they had asked if my commitment to peace was spiritually based, and if so how, I might have hesitated. Many years earlier, when I was called to the draft just prior to the build-up for the Vietnam War, I did not think my opposition to that war was based sufficiently on religious reasons to allow me to apply for conscientious objector status. Truth be told, not much had changed; but no one asked, and I passed on into membership.

Having joined the Religious Society of Friends, I've spent the last ten years trying to figure out what it means to be a Quaker, and then trying to be one. I haven't quite succeeded, but I've made some progress. Part of this process has included trying to

John Andrew Gallery is a member of Chestnut Hill Meeting in Philadelphia, Pa., and clerk of Philadelphia Quarterly Meeting. He is the author of a Pendle Hill Pamphlet, Reflections from a Prayer Vigil for Peace.

© 2002 John Andrew Gallery

understand the meaning of a commitment to peace from a spiritual perspective. I haven't quite succeeded at that either, but here, too, I'm making progress. This process has led me along a path many others have traveled before—first back to the historical context of the Peace Testimony itself, then along some scriptural trails, then off onto diversions into Buddhism, Islam, and *A Course in Miracles*. All these rather random threads have become somewhat clearer in the past few years through the simple process of witnessing for peace by standing for an hour each Sunday on Independence Mall in Philadelphia. The following is a short recap of that journey, which was inspired by an invitation from Germantown (Pa.) Meeting to speak at its 2002 annual retreat.

What I know of the history of Christianity is fragmentary, picked up along the way in art history courses or learned in recent years as I studied the early history of Quakers, generally on my own. Dale Hess's excellent pamphlet, *A Brief Background to the Quaker Peace Testimony*, gave me the overview I needed and directed me toward more complete histories. Learning about that history was important to me and so, at the risk of telling you something you already know, I'll summarize a few things I have learned.

Opposition to war and military service was an explicit and central part of Christian belief and practice during the first 300 years after the death of Jesus. During this time no Christian would be, or was allowed to be, a member of the Roman army. But the records of the early church

indicate that a commitment to peace was not solely focused on the issues of war and military service; it was the basis of the way Christians were expected to live with one another in their daily lives and the basis of their relationships with others, including those who persecuted them. There seems to have been an almost literal connection between daily behavior and gospel teachings: love thy neighbor was demonstrated by a somewhat communal lifestyle; love your enemies was evidenced in the way that early Christians accepted and endured persecution.

The conversion of Constantine in C.E. 313 and the subsequent adoption of Christianity as the exclusive faith of the empire in C.E. 380 resulted in significant changes. With Christianity as the state religion, it was necessary to reconcile the teachings about peace and the practices of the early church with the requirements of running an empire. Although the concept of a "just war" did not arise until the sixth century, it appears that a significant reconciliation of the contradictions between Christianity and government had been achieved by the early C.E. 400s, for after that date not only did Christians serve in the Roman army, but it was necessary to be a Christian to do so.

In spite of the official abandonment of the commitment to peace and pacifism by the church, many Christian groups maintained such a commitment, especially during the Middle Ages. This was true in England as well as in Europe. In the late 1300s, the Lollards, a dissident religious sect founded by John Wycliffe in a section of England where Quakers would later flourish, presented the first pacifist petition to Parliament stating, "The law of mercy, the New Testament, forbade all manslaughter." In Europe, Anabaptists, Mennonites, and Hutterites were among a number of Protestant sects that shared a commitment to peace as a central part of their religious beliefs and practices. This commitment was almost always accompanied by opposition to the death penalty and a refusal to take oaths.

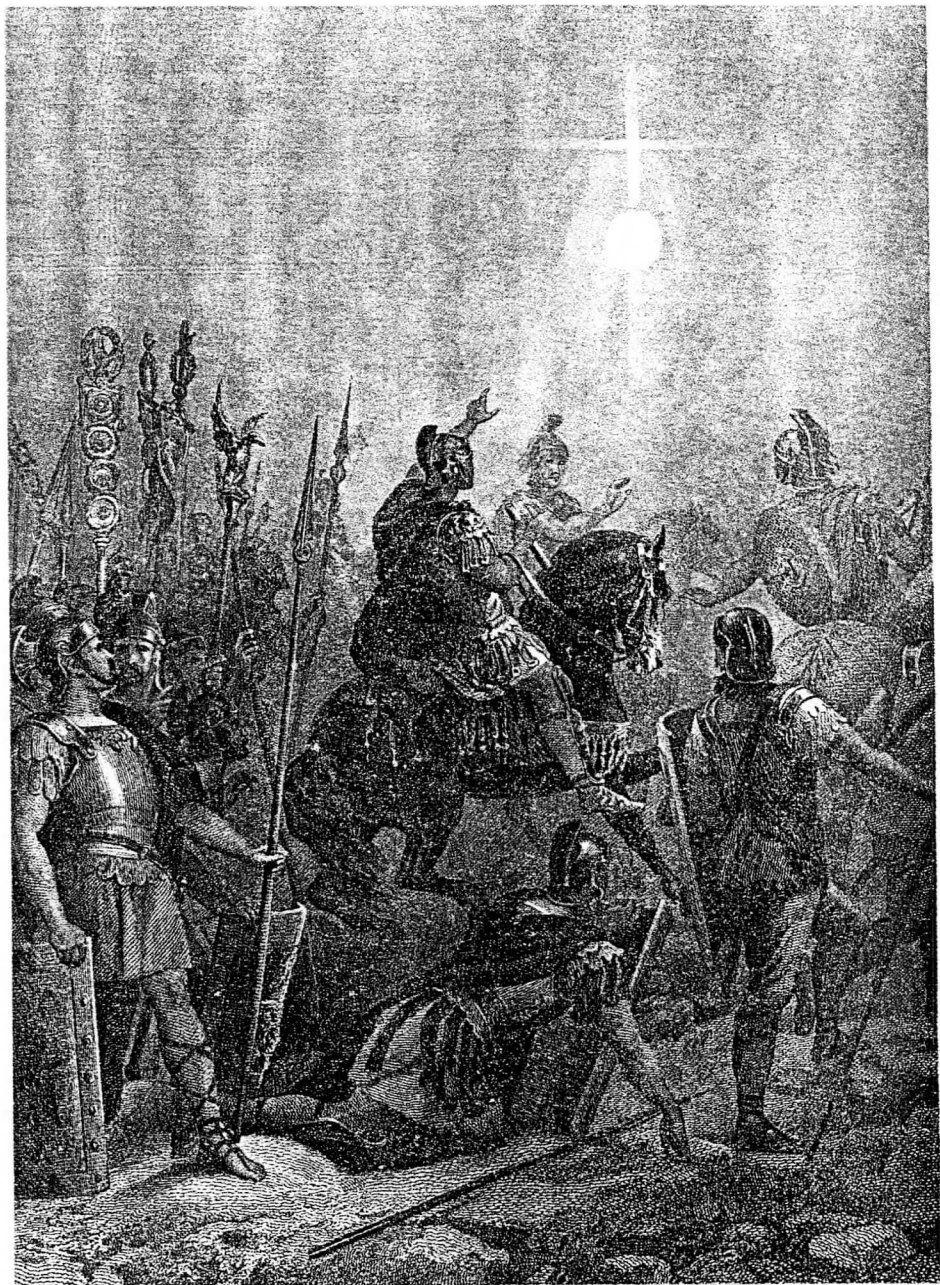
The existence of groups with a commitment to peace does not represent a continuous thread within the Christian movement, as historian Howard Brinton has pointed out. Most of these groups seem to have sprung up independently, reached their own conclusions about peace and pacifism, and had limited direct influence on one another. This is true of Quakers as well; the

commitment to peace was not something picked up from other groups, but one that evolved independently, within the context of the evolution of Quakerism itself.

The Religious Society of Friends had its origins during a time in English history that was marked by civil unrest. For at least 150 years after Henry VIII abandoned the Catholic church and created the Church of England, political unrest in England was the result of religious differences and the difficulties caused by the unity of state and church. Subsequent kings and queens had different affiliations to the Anglican and Catholic churches, and the unity of church and state made religious dissent a political act, subject to severe persecution. Anglican monarchs persecuted Catholics and vice versa, and the large number of dissident groups that arose after the Protestant Reformation were subject to persecution all the time. This was true of Quakers from the start of the movement.

Although a period of tolerance existed under Oliver Cromwell when Puritans, themselves a dissident group, controlled Parliament, the return of Charles II to the throne in 1660 raised concerns about a new round of persecution. Quakers tried to establish good relations with Charles II—it was he who would later give the charter for Pennsylvania to William Penn—but they were generally lumped together with all others whose practices deviated from the Anglican church and seemed to disrupt society. So when the Fifth Monarchy Men organized an uprising against the king, he responded, on January 10, 1661, by outlawing not only meetings of Fifth Monarchy Men, but also those of other major dissident sects, including Baptists and Quakers, and required members of all three to take an oath of allegiance. Quakers refused, and within a matter of days over 4,000 Friends went to prison.

In response to this dramatic situation, George Fox and ten other Quaker men met, composed, and issued, on January 21, 1661, what we now call the Declaration of 1660. (In the old calendar, the year ended in March, so January 1661 by our calendar was 1660 at the time.) In a certain sense this was a political and strategic document. It was intended to convince the king that Quakers did not pose a threat because they did not believe in the use of violence, and to thereby protect Quakers from further persecution. It was unsuccessful, and the



Free Library of Philadelphia

CONVERSION OF THE EMPEROR CONSTANTINE

With Christianity as the state religion, it was necessary to reconcile the teachings about peace and the practices of the early church with the requirements of running an empire.

king and Parliament continued to pass laws designed to limit dissenting religious groups, and Quakers in particular, from engaging in their own religious practices. The commitment of Quakers to live out

their beliefs in their daily lives—whether that be through the refusal to take oaths, to take off their hats, or their insistence on holding prohibited religious meetings in public—more than their commitment to peace, resulted in 6,000 Quakers being imprisoned between 1662 and 1670.

By 1661, Friends had established a structure of monthly, quarterly, and yearly meetings to conduct business affairs and

had adopted the practice of seeking the “sense of the meeting” in making decisions. No doubt George Fox and a number of weighty Friends still had great influence over the young Quaker movement. Nonetheless, it seems somewhat inconsistent with Quaker practice that 11 men within ten days could agree on a statement that they would make on behalf of all Quakers. Even more remarkable is that their statement appears to have been easily accepted and has remained an enduring and distinguishing characteristic of Friends for over 300 years.

Prior to 1660, the Christian Peace Testimony was not an explicit corporate witness among Friends. When it existed at all—and Howard Brinton notes that it wasn’t as important an issue among early Friends as many other testimonies—it was a matter of individual decision making. Many Quakers stayed in the army after conviction, and that practice seems not only to have been acceptable but was defended when Quakers were discharged as unreliable soldiers. If Fox’s statement to William Penn—“Wear thy sword as long as thou canst”—was really made, it reflects this emphasis on individual decision making. The earliest known statement of a Quaker regarding a commitment to peace is not that of Fox himself, but William Dewsbury in 1645. Dewsbury recorded hearing a voice that said: “Put up thy sword; if my kingdom were of this world then would my children fight.” He did, but this too was an individual decision.

The evolution of the commitment to peace among Quakers from an individual to corporate witness is reflected in Fox himself. From the start of his ministry in 1647, Fox was personally opposed to the use of violence. He was often beaten, but refused to defend himself and often, when the violence was over, had kind words or actions for his attackers. When Fox was in prison in 1650 he was invited to join the army by some soldiers who liked his leadership; he declined, noting in his *Journal* that he told them: “I lived in the virtue of that life and power that took away the occasion of all wars.” The critical word is “I.” He spoke for himself and for his personal beliefs.

By 1657, Fox’s position was no longer an individual one; he expected all Quakers to reject violence and to live in peace. In 1659 he wrote, “Ye are called to live in

peace therefore follow it.” And in 1660, before the Declaration was issued, Margaret Fell would write to the king, “We are a people that follow after the things that make for peace, love, and unity. We do deny and bear our testimony against all strife and wars and contentions.” When Fox and his associates penned the declaration, the paragraph we quote today as the essence of their statement begins quite powerfully with a collective “we”: “We do utterly deny. . . .”

What caused this change? Early Quakers believed in a religion based on experience, not on ideas or the written word. Fox said his job was to bring a person to Christ and leave him there. That was the process he used himself, and his *Journal* reflects this by documenting the series of “openings” that occurred throughout his life, which led him into a deeper and deeper understanding of his religious philosophy. Central to this philosophy was his and others’ belief that all who fully opened themselves to Christ—to what we also call “the inner Light”—would come to understand that there was “that of God” in everyone, and a natural consequence of that understanding would be a respect for individual life, an aversion to war and violence, and a commitment to live in peace, “answering to that of God in others.” The place of first struggle was within the individual. It was here that one had to win victory over the worldly temptations, including pride, anger, and greed. This was the so-called Lamb’s War. (It is interesting to note the use of the word “war,” a military term, to designate this inner struggle and to note that in Islam the word *jihad* also means both inner and outer struggle.) But once that victory was achieved, this inner change would be reflected in outward forms. All the distinctive Quaker practices—the refusal to take oaths, the refusal to remove one’s hat, plain language, the Peace Testimony itself—all that we now call testimonies, are simply the natural outward expression of a completely changed inner life.

Testimonies have changed over the past 300 years. They come into being as a result of a careful process of reflection among large numbers of Quakers. They represent, in one way, a “sense” of the Religious Society of Friends as a whole. One could speculate that by 1661, there were a sufficient number of people who had been Quakers for a sufficiently long period of time, and that each had come to

an individual commitment to peace and nonviolence, such that when these 11 men articulated it for all of them it was easily accepted. Whatever the case, from that date forward, the Peace Testimony became a corporate and community witness among Friends.

When Fox and his fellow authors came to write the Declaration, they based their commitment to peace on the concept that “the spirit of Christ is unchanging.” The phrase “the spirit of Christ” makes it clear that they were not pointing to something explicit in the written Gospel as the source of their belief—not the Gospel word or the teachings of Jesus. They were pointing to something experienced, and experienced individually. What did “the spirit of Christ” mean to them?

For George Fox there was one significant and distinguishing characteristic of Jesus’ teachings that defined the unique spirit of Christ. This was the directive to love your enemies and pray for your persecutors. Fox called this the “royal law of love.” Loving your neighbor was not enough; it was essential to love enemies as well. For Fox and 17th-century Quakers, accepting persecution was a sign of having obeyed the law to love your enemies, just as it was for Christians in the early years of the church. The original purpose of sending a list of sufferings to London was not only to draw attention to unfair treatment, but to show that Quakers had accepted the royal law of love as evidenced by their having accepted persecution. If the essence of the spirit of Christ is to love enemies, then clearly war and the use of violence against enemies is completely in conflict with that idea, and thus unacceptable to any Quaker.

I am persuaded that the distinctive characteristic of Jesus’ definition of love is to love one’s enemies, to do good to those who hate you. It is a way of living that still eludes us today. Our response to September 11 is an easy measure of how far we are from living our lives by that standard. But there are two other phrases in the Gospels that have influenced me as I have tried to understand the meaning of “the spirit of Christ” as it relates to peace. These are: “The law says thou shalt not kill but I say thou shalt not even be angry,” and “Peace I bring you, not the peace of men but the peace of God.”

In the first, Jesus assumes that physical



Free Library of Philadelphia

WHIPPING QUAKERS THROUGH THE STREETS OF BOSTON, W.L. SHEPPARD

For George Fox there was one significant and distinguishing characteristic of Jesus' teachings that defined the unique spirit of Christ. This was the directive to love your enemies and pray for your persecutors.

acts of violence are so unacceptable that the prohibition against them needs no explanation. He extends the concept of violence and in doing so also extends the concept of peace to include personal and emotional peace, not just a physical peace.

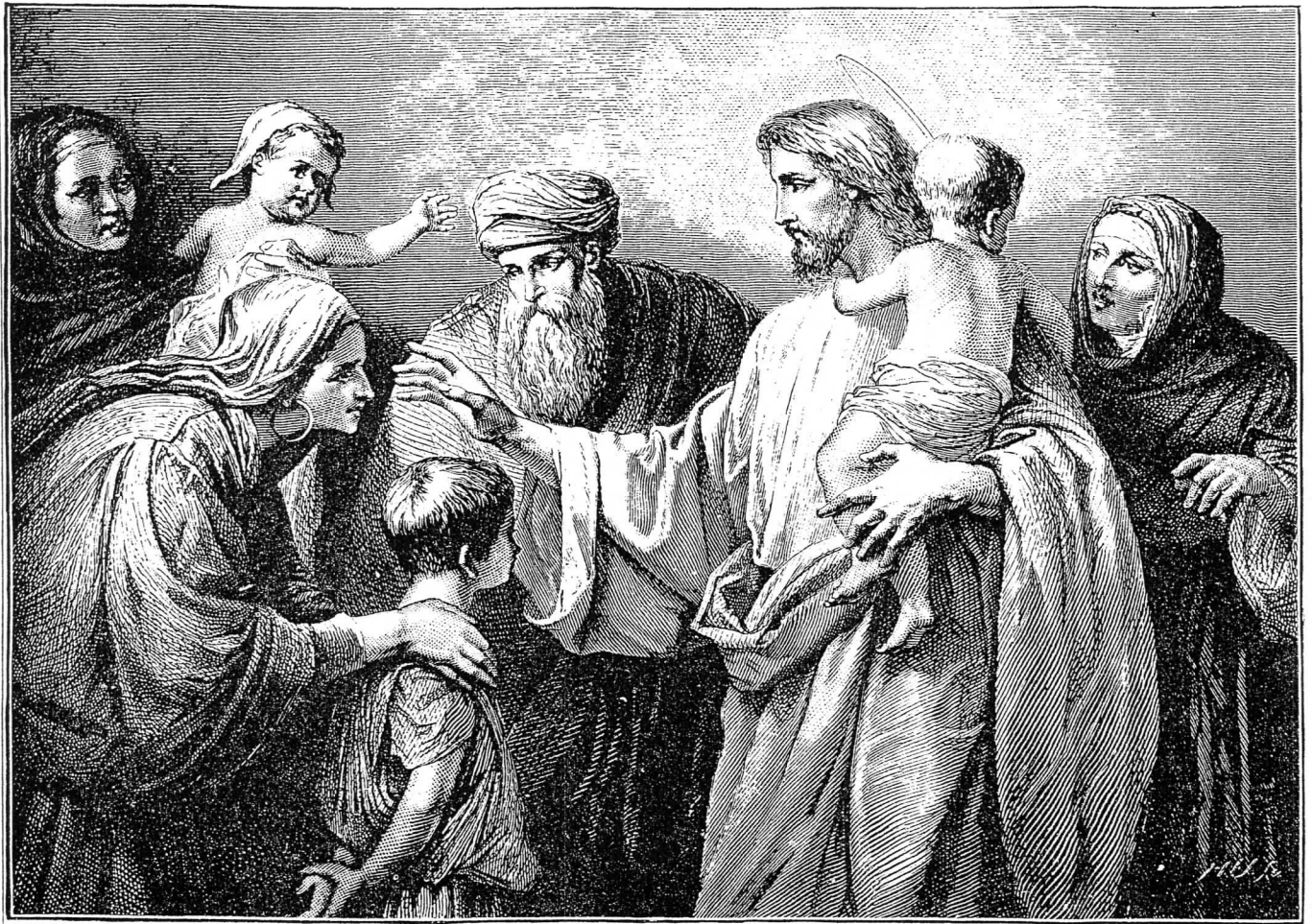
This statement about anger has been very challenging for me and a key to my understanding of peace from a spiritual perspective. For a large part of my life I carried around a great deal of undischarged anger. I was afraid of anger because I felt that if I expressed it I would lose control and would do physical harm to people around me. In fact, there were times in my life when I became so angry that I couldn't control myself and was physically abusive

to someone I loved. I knew that my anger was not related to that person or the circumstances in which I expressed it; it was displaced from something else, and I tried to address that through counseling and control. Yet the anger remained beneath the surface of my life, affecting most of my relationships in ways I could not always see. One day, at a Quaker meeting for business, I got into a disagreement with the person clerking the meeting, said some things I regretted, and later called him to apologize. I expected a similar apology back, for he had spoken out as well. Instead, he criticized me, stating that everything I did seemed to be fueled by anger. This took me aback. It made me see that

this was true and forced me to try to come to grips with it. Most of my friends tell me that anger is a natural human emotion and that it's best to release it, not to keep it bottled up. I don't believe that. I have come to realize that, at least for me, anger is a spiritual problem. If I want to have loving relationships with other people, anger is an obstacle and has no place in my life. That idea alone has shifted my relationship with my anger.

Think about times when someone has been angry with you; think about times when you have been angry with another person. It is very threatening; it feels and often looks violent. Anger feels like an attack, and our usual response is to get angry, to attack back. A person who is angry cannot be at peace. Nor can such a person be in a state of love toward another person, nor can such a person be in harmony with God. Anger prevents us from seeing that of God in others, and in fact prevents us from seeing that of God in ourselves.

If the meaning of "the spirit of Christ" as a key to peace is found in the qualities of love, the presence of anger is a sign of the



Free Library of Philadelphia

SUFFER THE LITTLE CHILDREN TO COME UNTO ME (MARK 10:14)

absence of love and the absence of peace. A commitment to maintain loving relationships with others, friends or enemies, makes a person much less likely to experience anger or to direct anger at another person, and more likely to focus attention on the situation that causes anger, not the person. The degree of anger in your life is a good measure of the degree to which you are at peace.

In the second phrase, Jesus makes a distinction between the peace of God and the peace of men. When I think about the meaning of the peace of men, I think about a worldly peace. That is, a way of life that does not include fighting or killing or violence or anger, but one that is based on love, mutual respect, and support. The communal life of early Christians seems to have had that quality, as does the sense of community that seems to have existed for early Quakers. Today, communities like the Amish and other intentional religious communities represent this to me. They represent the way I would hope the world would be if peace prevailed on Earth.

How then is this different from the

The peace of God is a quality of life one feels when one surrenders completely to God, when one is willing to give up control and personal desire, and to be confidently dependent on God (like a child).

peace of God? My understanding of this has been helped by ideas about peace from Buddhist and Muslim sources.

Nonviolence is a central principle of Buddhism. Right behavior is one part of the Eightfold Path. Right behavior means to not destroy life, to not steal, and to not commit adultery, three acts also linked together in biblical texts. The five Buddhist precepts include the same ideas, beginning with "do not kill." Right thought includes not being angry, greedy, or doing harmful deeds. Buddha's teachings about these issues are not dissimilar to Jesus' or, for that matter, to Fox's, and also emphasize peace as an individual commitment. Here are some words of the Buddha:

All beings tremble before violence. All fear death, all love life. See yourself in others. Then whom can you hurt? What harm can you do? He who seeks happiness by hurting those who seek happiness will never find happiness. For your brother is like you. He wants to be happy. Never harm him. Never speak harsh words for they will rebound on you. Angry words will hurt and the hurt rebounds.

But the achievement of true peace for a Buddhist does not lie in nonviolent action alone. It lies in the idea of a cessation of suffering. Suffering is caused by desire that results in an attachment to the things of the world, which in turn leads to hate, anger, greed, etc. So peace—true peace—

comes from a cessation of suffering, which comes from a cessation of desire, and a cessation of desire comes from living in the present. True peace is a state of being in which one is detached from desire, detached from the past, detached from the future, detached from expectations—detached, as the Vietnamese Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh says, even from hope, which is a desire for something different from what exists now.

I don't know much about Islam; I'm just learning. But I do know that the word Muslim means one who has surrendered to God and as a consequence has found peace. The concept of surrender as a condition of peace is found in other places as well. Sandra Cronk has written: "Early Friends recognized that this struggle (the Lamb's War) is taking place within each individual as each is called to surrender to God's will." Marianne Williamson, writing about *A Course in Miracles*, says, "When we surrender to God we let go of our attachment to how things happen on the outside and become more concerned with what happens on the inside." *A Course in Miracles* puts the concept of surrender in these words:

Let us be still an instant and forget all things we ever learned, all thoughts we had, and every preconception that we hold of what things mean and what their purpose is. Let us remember not our own ideas of what the world is for. We do not know. Let every image held of everyone be loosened from our minds and swept away. Be innocent of judgment, unaware of any thought of evil or of good that ever crossed your mind of anyone. Hold on to nothing. Do not bring one thought the past has taught, nor one belief you ever learned from anything. Forget this world and come with wholly open hands to God.

From these thoughts I derive the idea that the peace of God is a quality of life one feels when one surrenders completely to God, when one is willing to give up control and personal desire, and to be confidently dependent on God (like a child), believing that our lives are moving in concert and harmony with God.

Taken together these ideas suggest to me that "the spirit of Christ" that lies behind the Peace Testimony is not only a commitment to love friends and enemies alike, but also a commitment to see the maintenance of those bonds of love as taking primacy over all other feelings,

grounded in a sense of self-confidence and respect for others that comes from a true surrender to God.

Three years ago many of these ideas were floating around in my head as intellectual concepts, but they were not yet absorbed into my daily life and spiritual practice. I've come to understand these ideas better and to begin to make them part of my daily life, as a result of standing on Independence Mall each Sunday, witnessing for peace. I stand there with others, silently, for an hour, holding a sign that says some variant of pray for peace. I'm not there to convince anyone of anything; I'm there, I have discovered, simply to practice being peaceful, to practice personifying peace myself. In many ways this has given me a glimpse of the peace of God. By simply standing there I give up control over what happens during the hour; people may speak to me in a friendly or angry way, or they may just ignore me completely. I am not waiting expectantly as I do in meeting for worship, to see if I am called to speak or if what someone says is meant for me. I am just there being peaceful, or, as Thich Nhat Hanh would say, being peace.

This has led me to a personal understanding that peace does begin with each of us individually. It is consistent with what I have learned from Quakerism, Buddhism, and Islam. I share the view of the Dalai Lama when he says, "Although attempting to bring about world peace through the internal transformation of individuals is difficult, it is the only way to go. Peace must first be developed within the individual."

Most spiritual teachings have this concept in common. And so the place for each of us to start is simply with ourselves—not with speaking out against global warfare, not with peace marches in Washington, D.C., however tempting and important such activism is. The place to start is with the Lamb's War, with our own inward struggle with those parts of ourselves that are not peaceful, those situations in which we lose sight of that of God in others and in ourselves. The Peace Testimony asks us as individuals: do I live in that life and power that takes away the occasion of all wars? For me that is another way of asking: have I surrendered my life to God and do I derive the way I live from that act of surrender? When I stand on the mall I feel I have, though I

know the true answer is not quite. I give out a button that says "Peace Be With You" as an expression of my individual desire that each person I meet will, as an individual, live in peace, and as an indication of my commitment, as an individual, to live my own life in a manner that will make that possible. Peace begins with me.

The aim of nurturing peace in individuals is that one day enough people will have become so committed to peace that some group of men and women in our time will be able to articulate a peace testimony for the whole world and everyone will say, yes, of course. That sounds like an impossible dream. But it's useful to remember that it doesn't take 100 percent of all people on Earth or in the United States to create such a change; a much smaller number can do that. And in spite of what seems to be overwhelming support of the majority of people in the U.S. for a war on terrorism, many people who pass by the vigil on Independence Mall indicate their support for peace. I believe they are out there in large numbers, waiting to be called.

It's easy to think of peace as an individual struggle and an individual accomplishment. But it's hard for me to imagine how that moves from an individual level to the level of society as a whole. Yet the power of the Peace Testimony comes from its corporate witness. It is the power of "We utterly deny..." that has reverberated down through the centuries, inspired individuals, and given Quakerism its distinctive spiritual character. The fact that Quakers withdrew almost as a single body from the Pennsylvania legislature in the 1770s rather than vote taxes for war is an indication of how strong a corporate witness the Peace Testimony was for our predecessors in Philadelphia. It is the act of corporate witness that is still our challenge. Acting corporately often seems difficult for Quakers today. But it is what we are called to do. We are called to say no to violence, military solutions, collective anger, and revenge; we are called to say yes to actions guided by that distinctive law of love that includes both friends and enemies. That is our continuing responsibility to the world. As monthly, quarterly, and yearly meetings, not just as individuals, we must challenge ourselves to send a message to the world that peace is possible for all of us if we are each simply willing to live in peace with one another.

Peace be with you. □