

The Quaker Marriage Declaration

THE simple marriage promise made by Friends has been thought often to be so typically Quaker, that it is interesting to recall how it followed a declaration framed before the days of the Society, which was used for a time by all in the land.

In 1645 the Long Parliament forbade the use of the Prayer Book, providing instead the "Directory for Publick Worship,"¹ which was prepared by an Assembly of Divines summoned to meet in Westminster Abbey to give advice on affairs concerning religion. Four-fifths of the members were Doctors or Bachelors of Divinity, and the rest were lay, chosen by the Lords and Commons from their own number.² Four influential Kirk leaders came from Scotland, in response to an invitation from Parliament "for the Speedying away of so many Godly divines as you shall make choice of to Assist our Assembly."

The new marriage service in the Directory was short and devout. The minister "must earnestly entreat the Lord whose presence sweetens every Relation . . . to be the portion of those now to be joyned." A homily followed, bidding them "to be content in the midst of all Marriage cares and troubles, sanctifying God's name in a thankful, sober and holy use of all Conjugal comforts, and provoking each other to love and good works." Then the pair clasped right hands, and the man made this declaration:

I . . . do take thee . . . to be my Married Wife, and do, in the presence of God and before this Congregation, promise and covenant to be a loving and faithfull Husband unto thee untill God shall separate us by death.

The woman declared similarly, adding the word "obedient," and the minister pronounced them husband and wife according to God's Ordinance.

The drafting of this marriage service, containing the declaration later followed by Friends, had been handed over with other forms of church worship to a sub-committee of five

¹ The earliest printed edition is dated 1644. The text is also printed in *Acts and Ordinances of the Interregnum, 1642-1660*, ed. Firth and Rait, for the Statute Law Committee, 1911. Quotations are from the 1911 ed.

² Members' names were given in the Ordinance which summoned them, June, 1643 (Firth and Rait, I, 180-184).

English divines, together with the four delegates from Scotland.¹ Their chairman was Stephen Marshall, reputed the finest preacher in the land—a talent not appreciated by the captive Charles I, to whom he was sent as chaplain not long after; for it was noted that the king said his own grace and began his dinner, while Mr. Marshall was still making a long prayer.²

The clash of theological opinion often held up the drafting, and Robert Baillie, professor of Divinity in Glasgow, wrote home “we have stuck longer than we expected over marriage.” But at length he could report of his Independent colleagues, “God in his mercie so guided it that we gott them satisfied.” Once completed the new services passed both Houses of Parliament with hardly an altered word, and the Directory became law on January 5th, 1645. Constables had to carry a copy to the minister of every parish, and its use on the first Sunday after arrival was enjoined throughout England and Wales, a Welsh translation being prepared.³

The new worship book was laid before the Kirk Assembly in Edinburgh, where it was received with great joy and contentment; and in the Scottish Parliament it was accepted without a contrary vote. A letter to the English Parliament stated that the Directory was to be used in all the kirks of Scotland, and added the desire that it should become the service book also of the Church and Kingdom of Ireland.⁴

Thus came into being the simple marriage declaration still used by the Church of Scotland, and by the Presbyterian Churches in Ireland and in Wales, which our Quaker marriage promise so closely resembles.⁵ In Scotland they have kept the exact wording of the Directory, except that both parties now promise to be loving, faithful, and dutiful. In Ireland the declaration is put as a question . . . “do you solemnly promise to be unto her a loving and faithful husband until God shall separate you by death?” In Wales the two covenant

¹ From the *Letters and Journals of Robert Baillie* (one of the Scottish delegates), ed. from his mss. by Laing, 1841.

² *The Godly Man's Legacy to the Saints upon Earth, exhibited in the life of . . . S. Marshal*, 1680.

³ Minutes of the Westminster Assembly for 1644.

⁴ A Paper presented to the two Houses of Parliament as well as to the Assembly. (*Journals of the House of Lords*, VII, pp. 317-8).

⁵ See the modern Service Books of the three Churches.

to be faithful and true. Alone of their brethren in the British Isles, the English Presbyterians do not continue to follow the 17th-century form.

Further search has been made as to whether the Directory declaration owed anything to the marriage service of John Knox,¹ based on Calvin's, which was in use in Scotland till 1645. This contained a far longer marriage vow, read by the minister to the parties, who responded: "Even so doe I take her/hym before God and in the presence of this Congregation." The last phrase appears again in the Directory: but it would seem that the brevity of the promise on which our own is based was a notable change from previous custom, when it originated among the divines of the Westminster Assembly in the Jerusalem Chamber.

The few Quaker marriage certificates existing from the first days of Friends are very brief in content compared with later times. A copy of one of these papers records thus simply the marriage of a Cotswold hand-loom weaver in Painswick, Gloucestershire.²

10.4 Mo.1658. We whose names are underwritten doe beare witness in the presents of the Lord; these two parties Walter Humphris and Mary Osborne, who are joyned in Marriag together by consent of their Parents: and our names as followeth are Witnesses . . .

Six men Friends sign, following Margaret Fell's advice in 1656: "And after the meeting freinds may draw a little note concerning that action of that day . . . and as many freinds who are men as are free may set their hands to it."³

It will be noted that at this early period the promise made by the pair is not recorded, and there is indication that Fox and Margaret Fell may have been reluctant to bind Friends to any set form of words. Among the oldest of our dated documents are two papers on marriage, one by Fox in 1653,⁴ the other by Margaret Fell three years later.⁵ Fox counsels

¹ John Knox's Genevan Service Book, 1556 (Ed. Maxwell).

² From "A Register Booke of the People of God called Quakers, in and about Painswick, of Births, Marriages, Deaths and Buryalls." (Being an exact Duplicate . . . carefully compared and examined with the Original in 1790.) Glos. and Nailsworth M.M. Safe, Gloucester.

³ Epistle on Marriage, 1656, endorsed personally by Fox. MS. belonging to Isabel Ross.

⁴ MS. Portfolio 36.19 (Friends House Library).

⁵ Note 2 above.

that the parties "may speak as they are moved how that they are in marriage joyned together"; and Margaret Fell, more exuberantly, "as they are moved of the Lord by his power and in his fear they may take each other in the meeting and speak what the unlimited power and spirit give utterance."

Both leaders acted thus in their own marriage in Bristol in 1669, when their declarations were reported in these terms:

. . . G.F. . . . did solemnly, in the presence of God and us his people, declare, that he tooke the saide Margaret Fell, in the everlasting power and covenant of God, which is from everlasting to everlasting, and in the honourable marriage to be his bride and his wife. And likewise the said Margaret did solemnly declare, that, in the everlasting power of the Mighty God, and in the unalterable word, and in the presence of God, his angels, and us, his holy assembly, she tooke the saide George Fox to be her husband.¹ . . .

It must have become obvious very early that some clear mutual promise was essential if Quaker marriages were to be recognised universally as valid. From the purely practical point of view also it was necessary, for our local Quaker records show that comparatively early marriage was as common among Friends as it was elsewhere in the 17th century, and youths and maidens in their late 'teens were sometimes married in our meetings. On such occasions not all would find it easy to follow the exalted advice to speak what the spirit gave utterance. It was natural that these young Quaker folk should tend to make use of the marriage promise so familiar to them already in the weddings of their Puritan friends.

There is evidence that soon after the Monthly and Quarterly Meetings had been set up, some of them adopted forms of marriage certificates for their own locality, in order to make their procedure uniform and their declaration clear. An early example is found in the Minutes of the Bristol Men's Meeting, 13th 10 Mo. 1669.² The wording of another, from the Edinburgh Monthly Meeting Book of 1671, is given in full by Robert Barclay, a descendant of the author of the *Apology*, in his work on the religious societies of the Commonwealth.

In 1672 a Minute of Gloucestershire Quarterly Meeting

¹ Thirnbeck MSS. Printed in *Irish Friend*, 1841, 148; and Webb's *Fells of Swarthmore Hall*, Appendix C.

² At the Friars Meeting House, Bristol.

(held at Stinchcombe at the house of Thomas Daniell, 27th of Sixth Month), was headed "Arrangements for Quaker Marriages," and states that "All marriages must be recorded by a Forme of Certificate as followeth . . ." The form then suggested for Gloucestershire Friends followed closely the one given in the Bristol Minutes of 1669. The marriage declaration was still in reported speech in the certificate, but the words spoken by the parties must have been in effect those of the Directory.

. . . We therefore are witnesses that on the day of the date of these presents, ye said A. did in the presence of the Lord and us his people take ye said B. to be his wife, and ye said B. did take ye said A. to be her husband, and did mutually promise each to the other to live together in love and faithfulness according to God's Ordainence untill by death they should be separated. . . .¹

In 1677 a form of certificate was discussed in London, and Minutes were recorded as follows:

Meeting for Sufferings, 18th, Eighth Month (October), 1677.

The business about the forme of a Certificate for Marriage is referred to be perused by friends in the Ministry next 2d day and Tho. Rudyard to bring an Account of their answer Next Meeting.

Morning Meeting, 22nd Eighth Month (October), 1677.

A Certificate of Marriages by T. Rudyard² read and referred to the friends of the next six weekes meeting to consider of.

Six Weeks Meeting, 20th Ninth Month (November), 1677.

That the forme of a Certificate about Marriages this day read is agreed to be made use of For the time to come and that the words to be Spoken by the friends that take each other to be given to the persons by E.H.³ and they desired to speake them as neare as they can.

From about this time onwards the declaration seems to have been as we have known it up to our own day. In 1690⁴ Meeting for Sufferings agreed to "the printing of Friends' Marriage Certificate to deliver to some of the members of Parliament, that they may see the Method Friends takes in their Consumating their Marriages." The occasion was a Bill relating to Clandestine Marriages, and the Society's action

¹ From "Ye Booke belonging to the frends of the quarterly meeting within the County of Glocester," 1670. M.M. Safe, Gloucester.

² A London Friend skilled in law, "and zealous for the liberties of the people." (Besse: Sufferings.)

³ Ellis Hookes, first Recording Clerk of the Society, from c. 1657-1681.

⁴ Minute of Meeting for Sufferings, 7.ix.1690.

was "to manifest our Christian care and righteous proceedings in not admitting clandestine or unwarrantable marriages amongst us." In the certificate printed,¹ the marriage promise was thus given:

Friends, in the fear of the Lord and in the presence of you his people I take this my friend . . . to be my wife, promising by the assistance of God, to be to her a faithfull and loving husband till it please the Lord to separate us by death.

It will be seen that now the significant phrase "by the assistance of God" has been added. This was a Quaker addition to the Directory form, and is not used by the other churches which follow it. The wording "in the presence of this Assembly" is found also about this period.

It is noteworthy that in this certificate, printed as typical of those in current use, the Quaker bride promised obedience, but others of the time indicate that option on this point was possible. The mere word "obedient," inserted in the Directory declaration of 1645, was mild compared with the emphasis on the subservience of women shown in the marriage service books of the early Reformers. In those of Calvinist origin, the wife promised to her husband subjection and obedience, and before taking her marriage vow she was thus addressed: "It is the wife's dewtie to studie to please and obey her husbande, serving hym in all thynges that be godly and honeste, for she is in subjection, and under the Governace of her husbande so long as they continue both alive."²

In the first days of the Society of Friends, the view in Puritan England could still be expressed in Milton's line on Adam and Eve, "He for God only, she for God in him."³ It was the Quaker belief in the universality of the Inner Light which in itself challenged this conception, and made Fox so outstanding a champion of the spiritual rights of women.

The fact that our marriage promise "is that prescribed by the Directory with very slight variation," was pointed out by Robert Barclay in the *Inner Life of the Religious Societies of the Commonwealth* (1876). It has been mentioned again recently by Arnold Lloyd in *Quaker Social History* (1950).

¹ Copy in the Men's Minute Book, The Vale M.M., 1673-1706, at Friends House Library.

² From John Knox's Genevan Service Book, *op. cit.* First used by the congregation of Marian exiles in Geneva, of which he was minister, 1556. Brought by him to Scotland, 1560.

³ Paradise Lost, Book IV.

The knowledge may seem enriching to us, for the Westminster Assembly comprised some of the most stalwart Puritan personalities of the day. In few ways could Quakers have followed them in their State-religion, based upon the Catechism and the Westminster Confession of Faith which they produced soon after the Directory. But their marriage declaration proved so akin to the manner of Friends in its direct simplicity that we have never needed to seek further, and besides ourselves it has long satisfied many others. We are reminded of Henry Cadbury's suggestion in his "Revised Views of Quaker Origins,"¹ that when Quakerism can be viewed in the light of its first setting, the early Friends may be found to overlap their contemporaries more than we have guessed.

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George Keith to Henry More

THE original letter published herewith by permission is at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.² Not many letters of George Keith appear to be extant.³ Their absence from Quaker collections is easily explained by his later apostasy. This letter fits, however, into a large correspondence which is preserved, centering around the lifelong friendship of Henry More and Anne, Viscountess Conway.⁴

¹ Article in *The Friend* (Lond.), 1954, p. 5.

² Colonial Clergy, Case 8, Box 23. That this is an original is confirmed by comparing another letter of Keith owned by the same Society and printed in the *Pennsylvania Magazine*, 41, 1917, p. 381.

³ Ethyn W. Kirby, *George Keith, 1638-1716*, p. 165, refers to a few copies, but original letters are scarce.

⁴ Marjorie Hope Nicolson, *Conway Letters*, 1930, has edited much of this material in admirable fashion. Though largely repeated in this book, her earlier essays are worth reading: "George Keith and the Cambridge Platonists," *Philosophical Review*, 39, 1930, 36-55, and (on Van Helmont) "The Real Scholar Gipsy," *Yale Review*, N.S., 18, 1929, 347-363. This correspondence must have been known to Dr. Richard Ward who in his *Life of More* (1710) cited from it, including passages showing the more favourable opinion which More came to entertain concerning the Quakers. These were thus available to the anonymous writer of *A Vindication of the Quakers, or an Answer to the B[isho]p of L[ichfield]'s Charge against them*, 1732, where they are repeated, pp. 23-28. More's fullest discussion of Quakerism published by himself is in the *Scholia*, added in the Latin collection of his works, in 1679 and later, to his *Divine Dialogues* published in 1669. See on Dialogue V, Section XV.