

Quaker Attitudes towards Signs and Wonders

I

IT is quite clear that not all early Quakers expressed their belief through signs, although a surprisingly large number of Friends (many of whom remain unknown) did do so. One reason why so many were involved in the various types of signs and wonders may, perhaps, lie in the general support for this type of expression given by Fox, Nayler, Burrough, Farnworth, Howgill, Hubberthorne, Parnell, and other outstanding leaders of early Quakerism. If the practice of appearing as signs had not met with the approval of these powerful moulders of the new movement, it would never have become so widespread, lasted so long, or won such broad acceptance among early Friends.¹

George Fox was himself drawn towards this type of behaviour, although he never went naked, dressed in sackcloth and ashes, blacked his face, or broke bottles or pitchers. A reading of Fox's *Journal* shows that he recorded a number of such cases (Robert Huntington, Thomas Ibbott, Richard Sale, William Simpson, and others), without making any condemnation of their various forms of signs. A close examination of his language shows, moreover, that Fox apparently approved these acts—sometimes saying that these people were “moved of the Lord” to perform their signs,² while at other times saying simply that they “were moved”.³ A very interesting passage, following his description of Ibbott's sign of the Great Fire, shows that Fox believed that “the Lord has exercised his prophets and people and servants by his power, and showed them signs of his judgements”.⁴

Elizabeth Harris (who was wont to appear in sackcloth

¹ Cf. Kenneth L. Carroll, “Sackcloth and Ashes and Other Signs and Wonders,” *Jnl. F.H.S.* 53 (1975), 314–325, and “Going Naked as a Sign”. *Quaker History*, scheduled for Autumn 1978 publication.

² George Fox, *Journal*, ed. John Nickalls (Cambridge, 1952), pp. 407–408. All quotations are from this edition.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 355–356.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 503.

and ashes), when attacked by some Quakers for this type of activity, sought Fox's view on this subject. Unfortunately his reply, if ever made, does not appear to be extant. There is, however, enough additional material outside his *Journal* to show that Fox approved Quakers resorting to signs and wonders. In 1654 Fox wrote "many hath the Lord moved to goe starke naked Amongst them...[as] A figer [figure] to show them their nakedness".⁵ The same judgement was made by Fox again in 1659.⁶ Once more, in 1679, Fox defended those who went naked, saying that they were moved by "the Lord in his power" and that "they were True Prophets and Prophetesses to the Nation, as many Sober Men have confessed since".⁷ One of the most interesting (and more relevant) passages in his *Journal* seems to suggest that there were *three* equally legitimate ways in which the gospel was to be proclaimed: "Many ways were these professors warned, *by word, by writing, and by signs*".⁸

James Nayler, who before his "fall" rivalled George Fox in his leadership of the Quaker movement, also was favourably disposed towards Quaker usage of signs and wonders as a proper means of expressing their prophetic message. As early as 1652 or 1653 Nayler looked upon himself to be "sett here as a signe to a people who lie given over to fulfill the lusts of the flesh", therefore taking only bread and water to the amazement of "them".⁹ By 1654 Nayler was defending those Quakers who had gone naked in Kendal and Kirkby Stephen.¹⁰ He says "God hath made as many signes among you, as to go naked in your Steeple-houses, in your markets, in your streets, as many in the Northern parts, which is a figure to you of all your

⁵ Friends House Library, London, Swarthmore MSS, II, 12 (Transcripts IV, 595). Transcripts hereafter Tr.

⁶ George Fox, *The Great Mistery of the Great Whore* (London, 1659), p. 217, cf. p. 233.

⁷ George Fox and John Burnyeat, *A New-England Fire-Brand Quenched* (London, 1679), p. 9.

⁸ Fox, *Journal*, p. 407. Italics added.

⁹ Swarthmore MSS, III, 66 (Tr. II, 847). Francis (Howgill?) has also been on a fast of eight or ten days. This letter carries a 1652 date (added later, on the back), but G. F. Nuttall, *Early Quaker letters*, 1952, No. 21, assigns the date February 1653.

¹⁰ Cf. Nayler's statement in Francis Howgill, *A Woe Against the Magistrates, Priests, and People of Kendall* (London, 1654), p. 2.

nakedness".¹¹ Still another 1655 Nayler document contains two very significant paragraphs:

What we doe, is not from the command that was to others, nor herein doe we walke by Tradition, but from command of the same power, by which we are sent forth; and if we were commanded to forbear wearing shooes, as well as we are commanded to deny your Heathenish customes and covetous practices, in not taking care for food and rayment, we should be made willing to obey, as some have done who have been commanded to go bare-foot, and some who have been commanded to goe naked (which you who know no particular commands from God, but walke by tradition in your owne wills, doing what you like, and leaving what you will undone) do scorne and reproach as evill.

And for any going naked, or being otherwise made signes and wonders to yee, which ye charge as a great thing against us, yee being ignorant of the power of God; by which these men are acted, any wise man may know these doe it not according to their owne wills, but in obedience unto God, which commands some have denied to obey, for which, the heavy judgements of God have been layd upon them, from which they could not be freed, till they were made obedient, as is well knowne in Kendall.¹²

One of the earliest Quaker leaders to speak out in defence of signs and wonders was Francis Howgill. He noted, in 1654, that God had sent signs and also "commanded my Servants to go bare and naked in your sight, to be a sign to you that your covering is now rent, and your garment is to bee torn, and you shall be left naked and bare, and you shall be made a mock and a proverb to all, as my Servants have bin made a mock and a proverb to you".¹³

Richard Farnworth (d. 1666), who may himself have gone naked, in 1655 attempted to show that those Quakers who went naked did so because of the Lord's command or spirit.¹⁴ As he calls people to repentance, he says,

Dwell in the Light, which is the condemnation of the ungodly, for all they that are contrary to the Light, are without the cloathing of God: among such doth the Lord send some of his children, to

¹¹ James Nayler, *A Discovery of The Man of Sin* (London, 1654), p. 48.

¹² James Nayler, *An Answer to the Booke called The perfect Pharisee under Monkish Holinesse* (London, 1655), pp. 21, 28. Cf. James Nayler, *A True Discoverie of Faith* (London, 1655), p. 12, and *Spiritual Wickedness, in Heavenly places, proclayming Freedom to the Forme, but persecuting the Power* (n.p., n. d.), pp. 4-5.

¹³ Howgill, *A Woe* (1654), p. 1.

¹⁴ Richard Farnworth, *Antichrists Man of War* (London, 1655), pp. 41-43.

go naked, and put off their Cloathes, a figure and a sign of their nakedness, who are naked from God, and cloathed with the filthy garments.¹⁵

Edward Burrough (1634–1662), one of the truly outstanding leaders of the early Quaker movement,¹⁶ seems to give some support to this practice when he (and fifteen others) called the English nation to repentance so that it might be healed. He wrote, “thou must be stripped of thy filthy garments, and set as in the day that thou wast born, before thou canst be cloathed with divine righteousness”.¹⁷

James Parnell (1636–1656), one of the most famous of the early Quaker martyrs, reported in a letter to Burrough that a man from Littleport had come to Soham (near Cambridge) where Parnell was having a meeting and that this man had stood naked, without Parnell knowing it, until the meeting was over. This development had caused many of the “world’s people” to stumble, but Parnell himself was “made to Cleare it much to the people”.¹⁸ Parnell is also reported to have written a paper in which he defended going naked as a sign.¹⁹ Martha Simmonds, who was given to appearing in sackcloth and ashes, is said to have justified the practice of going naked also.²⁰ Richard Hubberthorne, in a 1660 joint publication with James Nayler, also championed this position, saying “Nakedness is a fit sign for you who are covered with Lies and Unrighteousness.”²¹ John Story, also in 1660,

¹⁵ Richard Farnworth, *The pure language of the spirit of truth* (London, 1656), p. 7.

¹⁶ Cf. Elisabeth Brockbank, *Edward Burrough: A Wrestler for Truth, 1634–1662* (London, 1949).

¹⁷ Edward Burrough, *A Declaration from the People Called Quakers, to the Present Distracted Nation of England* (London, 1659), p. 6. This document is signed by Burrough and fifteen other Friends.

¹⁸ A. R. Barclay MSS, XXIX. These manuscripts are to be found at Friends House Library, London.

¹⁹ Richard Blome, *Questions Propounded to George Whitehead and George Fox, who disputed by turnes against one University-Man in Cambr., Aug. 29, 1659* (London, 1659), p. 6.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 6. Blome reports that he has “heard” that Martha Simmonds “saith the same”. Cf. Kenneth L. Carroll, “Martha Simmonds, A Quaker Enigma,” *Journal F.H.S.*, 53 (1972), 31–52.

²¹ Richard Hubberthorne and James Nayler, *A Short Answer to a Book called the Fanatick History, etc.* (London, 1660), p. 5.

defended this practice which seemed to be enjoying a new vogue in 1660–1661.²²

Early Quakerism not only found signs to be an acceptable way of expressing the Quaker message but also placed much more emphasis than has ever been noted on the related practice of fasting. That early Friends engaged in fasting should come as no surprise—given the prominence of that practice in the biblical materials which so greatly influenced Quakerism (as well as the earlier and larger Puritan movement).²³ These early Friends seem to have known especially that David and Daniel fasted: “These holy men, and many more have wee for our Example.”²⁴ It is interesting to note that Daniel, an apocalypse like the revelation of John, was popular among early Quakers and that Daniel’s example had much significance for these Friends. The place and importance of fasting in the early church (Acts 13:2, 3) must have influenced the thought of these early Quakers also.

As early as 1647, when his wandering ministry began, George Fox “fasted much”.²⁵ Although his Journal notes the fasts of others in the 1650s, Fox mentions only one other fast on his part after this 1647 date, even though he does note that he later wrote papers concerning the difference between true and false fasts.²⁶ In 1652, the year generally credited with seeing the rise of Quakerism, there were many Friends who embraced the practice of fasting. Not only did Fox himself fast (in connection with the trouble centering around James Milner), but he also reported that James Nayler underwent a fourteen-day fast in that year.²⁷ Richard Hubberthorne (1628–1662) also engaged in a “great fast”, becoming so weak that many people

²² John Story, *Babilons Defence Broken Down, and one of Antichrists Warriours Defeated* (London, 1660), p. 16.

²³ Cf. Judges 20:26; I Samuel 7:6; 31:13; II Samuel 1:12; 12:21, 22, 23; I Kings 21:27; Ezra 8:23; Nehemiah 1:4; Esther 4:16; Psalms 109:24; Daniel 10:3; Matthew 4:2; 6:17; Acts 13:2, 3.

²⁴ Story, *Babilons Defence Broken Down*, p. 15. This passage cites Psalms 109:24 (claimed to be by David) and Daniel 10:3. Cf. p. 25 in Story’s work.

²⁵ Fox, *Journal*, p. 9.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 293, 348–349. These papers were produced between 1655 and 1658.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 119, 147.

thought he was dead.²⁸ In a 1652 or 1653 letter, James Nayler wrote to Fox that he had taken only bread and water since the "sessions" and that "Francis" [Howgill?] had been in a fast eight or ten days.²⁹ This practice must have become fairly widespread during 1653 and 1654, for some of the anti-Quaker writers were soon attacking Quaker fasting—comparing it to the practice of the Papists.³⁰ Miles Halhead (1614?-ante 1690) fasted for fourteen days in 1654, drinking only some water during that period.³¹ In June of 1655 Margaret Fell produced a paper on fasting, having been inspired by the English government's call to keep "a day of solemn fasting and Humiliation" as a result of the persecution of Protestants in France.³² George Fox had produced such a paper in 1654, when Oliver Cromwell had called for a fast for rain to relieve a terrible drought.³³

James Nayler was engaged in very serious fasting in 1656.³⁴ Thomas Rawlinson (d. 1689) at this same period was able to report to Margaret Fell that he had taken only bread and water for two weeks.³⁵ In 1659 a number of the members of the Fell family engaged in fasting, for William Caton in a letter to George Fox reports that Bridget Fell has fasted twelve days, Isabell has fasted seven (and is to do nine), and "Little Marg" [Margaret or Mary?] has fasted five days. He also reported that several others in the family were "exercised" in the same thing, that a servant girl had fasted twenty-one days, and that Mary Atkinson of Cartmel had fasted twenty days.³⁶

The fact that fasting was practised by Quakers in the

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

²⁹ Swarthmore MSS, III, 66 (Tr. II, 847).

³⁰ Thomas Welde, *A Further Discovery of that Generation of men called Quakers* (Gateside, 1654), p. 11. Cf. *The Querers and Quakers Cause, At the Second Hearing* (London, 1653), p. 35, which speaks of Quakers denying meat "for some days" (1653). A number of examples of early Friends refusing to eat meat can be found.

³¹ M. Halhead, *A Book of some of the Sufferings and Passages of Myles Halhead* (London, 1690), p. 6.

³² Margaret Fell, *False Prophets* (London, 1655), pp. 17-22. Cf. Fox, *Journal*, p. 348, especially n. 2.

³³ Fox, *Journal*, p. 293, n. 1 and n. 2.

³⁴ Swarthmore MSS, I, 12 (Tr. I, 95); III, 12 (Tr. III, 163).

³⁵ *Ibid.*, III, 12 (Tr. III, 163).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, IV, 267 (Tr. I, 392). This was probably Mary Fell.

1650s encouraged the enemies of Quakerism to lay the deaths of at least two Quaker martyrs to this practice. James Parnell, greatly weakened by the terrible conditions of his imprisonment—in the “Hole in the Wall” and “the Oven” at Colchester—died in 1656 after eight months of suffering there.³⁷ His persecutors, seeking to mask their own guilt, produced at the inquest a verdict which said, “We do find that James Parnell through his wilful rejecting of his natural food for ten days together, and his wilful exposing of his limbs to the cold, to be the cause of the hastening of his own end; and by no other means that we can learn or know of.”³⁸ John Luffe (d. 1658), who accompanied John Perrot to Rome, was said by the church officials there to have died from fasting for nineteen days, although Quakers claimed that he had been murdered by the Roman Catholics.³⁹ It was in response to this false claim that Charles Bayly (1632?–1680), who later became the first governor of the Hudson’s Bay Company, fasted for twenty days in 1660/1—in order to show that a fast of nineteen days was not enough to kill a man.⁴⁰

Early Quaker use of signs (or “enacted parables”) and widespread use of fasting show a number of important facts about these first Friends and their movement. They were convinced that they lived in the “last days” and that the spirit of God (or the spirit of prophecy) had been poured out upon them. Their study of the prophetic and apocalyptic works was constant, as they sought both a deepening understanding of their own religious experiences and a fuller knowledge of what they were “called” to do. In the same way they sometimes resorted to fasting (and prayer) as a help in discovering more clearly what the significance of all of this was for them.

³⁷ Braithwaite, *Beginnings of Quakerism*, pp. 190–192.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 192, quotes this statement.

³⁹ Charles Bailey (Bayly), *A Seasonable Warning and Word of Advice to all Papists, But Most especially to those of the Kingdom of France* (London, 1663), p. 6; John Perrot, *John Perrot’s Answer to the Pope’s feigned nameless Helper: or a Reply to the Tract Entitled, Perrot against the Pope* (London, 1662), p. 1.

⁴⁰ Kenneth L. Carroll, “From Bond Slave to Governor: Charles Bayly (1632?–1680),” *Journal F.H.S.*, 52 (1968), p. 28. Bayly viewed his own fasting as a “sign” of the church officials’ guilt in bringing about Luffe’s death.

II

George Fox never appears to have been troubled by the numerous manifestations of signs and wonders in early Quaker history. His *Journal* (dictated at various times⁴¹) records a number of such cases, written in a language which clearly seems to approve of such behaviour. Moreover, several of those Friends who in 1671 travelled to America with him (Briggs, Eccles, and Widders, for example) had earlier performed signs—with Eccles still appearing naked, both in London and Ireland, at the end of the 1660s. In this same year (1671) Fox's testimony concerning William Simpson spoke favourably of Simpson's three years of going naked and in sackcloth some years earlier.

Many Friends other than Fox, however, were troubled in later years by the fact that primitive Quakerism had produced such behaviour. Where Friends were willing to forget this chapter in their past history their enemies were unwilling to let the matter drop.⁴² William Penn, attacking some nameless opponent, wrote in 1695:

For his saying, That some of our Women have gone naked; 'tis affirmed with Lightness and Untruth; tho' some few of our Friends have gone naked, for a Sign to this Generation, as the poor Man in it that prophesied of the Fire of London, and another, of God's stripping some Persecutors of their Power, and in perticular, that Generation of the Clergy that preceded the Restoration, which having Rise[n] through Persecution, forgot their Pleas, when they had Power, towards those that dissented from them, and testified against the same evils in them, that they had justly inveighed against in the former Bishop's Days. And now he may see we are not against all Signs.⁴³

George Whitehead, writing a short time later, attempted to minimize the number of those who went naked as a

⁴¹ Cf. John L. Nickalls' Preface to his edition of Fox's *Journal*, vii, where he discusses the various dates (1664, 1675, etc.) at which portions and editions of the *Journal* were dictated by Fox.

⁴² William Burnet, *The Capital Principles of the People called Quakers Discovered and Stated out of their own Writings* (London, 1668), p. 23; Caleb Dove, *Birds of a Feather, Flock Together, Being Two Speckled Ones, A Mag-pye and a Jay* (London, 1728), p. 14; *Saul's Errand to Damascus* (London, 1728), pp. 34–35; *A Parallel Between the Faith and Doctrine of the Present Quakers, and That of the Chief Hereticks in all Ages of the Church* (London, 1700), p. 14.

⁴³ William Penn, *A Reply To a Pretended Answer, By a Nameless Author to W. P's. Key* (London, 1695), pp. 143–144.

sign. He also expressed his belief that some of these had experienced a divine call to perform signs, although he did not think that this was true of all who had engaged in such behaviour:

As to going Naked: it has been no general Practice among the People called Quakers; 'twas but very few, who many Years since were concerned therein, as Signs to those Hypocrites, who covered themselves under an empty Profession of Religion, *and not of the Spirit of the Lord, that they might add Sin unto Sin*, Isa. xxx I. The Shame of whose Nakedness, the Lord's Truth made more and more appear, even in those Days; and therefore I believe he set some as Signs and Wonders against them; altho' I cannot excuse every one in that Case, to have a Divine Call, to make themselves such Spectacles to the World: Yet I believe some were called to be such Signs and Wonders to the World, both of old, and since Apostacy prevailed. I Sam. xix. 24. Isa. xx, 2, 3, 4. Micah i. 8.⁴⁴

The most amazing reaction, however, is that of Thomas Story, whose *Journal* was published in 1747 and contains his views as expressed in a 1725 debate. He was convinced that no Quakers had ever gone naked, but only some Ranters who had mixed with Quakers at the first appearance of Quakerism. He did believe, though, that going naked was not inconsistent with God's will in some cases—"since he commanded one of the greatest of all his Prophets to go so for the Space of three Years, as a Sign to Egypt and Ethiopia; and what hath been, may be, since God is still the same".⁴⁵

Joseph Besse makes no attempt to list all the people who suffered for going forth as signs. Yet he does include enough examples to show that he was not embarrassed by this type of religious expression. His account of William Simpson's going naked through the streets of Evesham (1659), Margaret Brewster's appearing "black face" with ashes on her head (1677), and Thomas Newhouse's breaking of two glass bottles (1663) are all viewed as acting in a "prophetick Manner". He also included a long transcript of Margaret Brewster's trial. When discussing Deborah Wilson's going naked, Besse was content to describe it simply "as a Sign against the Cruelty and oppression of

⁴⁴ George Whitehead, *The Christian Progress* (London, 1725), p. 226. This was written long after the 1659 debate Whitehead participated in.

⁴⁵ Thomas Story, *Journal* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 1747), p. 655.

their Rulers". Concerning Solomon Eccles' going naked with a pan of fire and brimstone on his head, however, Besse writes, "This well meant Zeal of his met with ill Reception, the common Lot of *prophetick Monitors* from the Despisers of Instruction".⁴⁶

Quaker historians usually have been aware of the prevalence of signs and wonders among early Quakers. Most of them have acknowledged the existence of these phenomena, although they have not been consistent in their methods of handling them. The following pages of this article contain a brief analysis of the attitudes towards signs and wonders held by the authors of some of these works. It will be recognized, however, that no attempt has been made to examine the works of all such writers.

William Sewel completed his great history early in the eighteenth century, and the first English edition appeared in 1722.⁴⁷ In this work Sewel noted a small number of signs (although he did not call them by that name). These included the cases of the woman who broke the pitcher at Parliament's door (1658), Thomas Aldam's tearing of his cap before Cromwell (1658), Robert Huntington's wearing a sheet and halter (1660), Thomas Ibbott's warning to London (1666), and Solomon Eccles' appearing naked at Galway (1669).⁴⁸ On the whole, Sewel's practice is simply that of listing the signs without any personal comment on them. In two cases, however, he departs from this pattern. As he discussed Huntington's appearing in a sheet and halter, he added: "Now how mad soever this was said to be, yet time shewed it a presage of the impending disaster of the cruel persecutors."⁴⁹ When speaking of Eccles' appearing naked at Galway, Sewel (who appears unaware of Eccles' similar performances in London as well as the many other cases of Quakers going naked) twice refers to this development as a "strange

⁴⁶ Joseph Besse, *A Collection of the Sufferings* (London, 1753), I, 393; II, 61, 230-233, 236, 260, 261-265. Italics added.

⁴⁷ Joseph Smith, *A descriptive Catalogue of Friends' Books* (London, 1867), II, 561.

⁴⁸ William Sewel, *The History of the Rise, Increase, and Progress of the Christian People Called Quakers* (London, 1795), I, 340, 341, 475; II, 216, 262. All references are to the Third Edition. The Dutch edition appeared in 1717.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, I, 475.

action" and says "What the benefit of this strange action might be, I leave".⁵⁰ His use of the word "strange" implies, it would seem, some slight condemnation of this type of behaviour.

Another eighteenth-century history of Quakerism was that produced by the Irish Friend John Gough in 1790. This work does not appear to contain any discussion of going naked, wearing sackcloth and ashes, or of any other signs. In a rather lengthy note Gough does mention the recent repetition of some early charges against the primitive Quakers—including that of going naked and preaching naked at the market crosses—but he seems to imply that all of these charges flow from Higginson's highly partisan purposes in attacking Quakerism.⁵¹

Samuel M. Janney, nineteenth-century American Quaker historian, mentions that two Friends—Thomas Murford and Sarah Goldsmith—appeared in sackcloth in 1654.⁵² Although he does not list any other cases of signs, it is quite clear that Janney knew of their widespread early usage. Janney not only knew of these phenomena but also had some real understanding of their place in the religious life of the seventeenth-century world out of which they sprang:

These cases, and some others of a similar character among the early Friends, in which individuals thought it their religious duty to appear as "signs" before the people in order to bear a testimony against evil, should not be condemned as the result of delusion or fanaticism. They were perhaps more appropriate and effective in that age than they would be in this, because it was a season of great religious excitement; and moreover, it was customary among the Puritans to refer continually to the Old Testament for examples. Many cases are recorded there in which sackcloth was worn by the prophets and kings of Israel; sometimes as a token of approaching calamity, and often in seasons of great and general affliction.⁵³

As one moves to twentieth-century treatments of early Quakerism, one finds a number of different reactions to

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, II, 262.

⁵¹ John Gough, *A History of the People Called Quakers* (Dublin, 1789), I, 126–128 note. Francis Higginson (1617–70), vicar of Kirkby Stephen; author of *A brief relation of the irreligion of the northern Quakers* (DNB; Nuttall, *Early Quaker letters*, 1952).

⁵² Samuel M. Janney, *History of the Religious Society of Friends* (Philadelphia, 1867), I, 211–212.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, I, 212.

and explanations of these signs and wonders. It has been suggested by at least one writer, in 1905, that the sufferings experienced by early Quakers produced some of these signs.⁵⁴ While it may be true that some Friends under the pressure of suffering may have responded with signs, and that some other signs were meant to warn against the continued persecution of Quakers, it must be recognized that the widespread appearance of signs preceded the outbreak of any large-scale suffering. In his "Early Friends and the Historical Imagination" (1926), John W. Graham devoted several pages to signs (which he believed Friends learned from the Bible).⁵⁵ Graham expresses his own "Quaker disapproval" of going naked (and of other signs?) in the words "We would have had it otherwise".⁵⁶

The fullest treatment of signs and wonders appears as an appendix to *First Publishers of Truth* (1907), under the title "Going Naked a Sign".⁵⁷ Norman Penney shows an awareness of the widespread nature of going naked as well as some other types of early Quaker signs. He contents himself with echoing the judgment of Samuel M. Janney:

It would be extremely unjust to apply to all the actions of former generations the standard of propriety now adopted in enlightened nations; for, although the cardinal principles of morality have been nearly the same among good people in all ages, there has been a vast difference in their manners and their ideas of decorum. The few instances of indecorum among the Early Friends may well be pardoned, when we reflect that they lived in an age when, by order of the public authorities, and for no other offence than religious dissent, worthy men and virtuous women were stripped to the waist and cruelly scourged in the public streets, both in England and America.⁵⁸

Many other twentieth-century writers touch upon the subject of signs and wonders. Three of them treat the subject in a way which should be noted here. William Charles Braithwaite, in his *Beginnings of Quakerism* (1912) and

⁵⁴ John W. Graham in *Jnl. F.H.S.*, 2 (1905), 85-86.

⁵⁵ John W. Graham, "Early Friends and the Historical Imagination," *Journal F.H.S.*, 15 (1926), 9.

⁵⁶ *Journal F.H.S.*, 15 (1926), 12.

⁵⁷ Norman Penney (ed.), *The First Publishers of Truth* (London, 1907), pp. 364-369.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 368, quoting Samuel M. Janney, *History*, I, 476.

his *The Second Period of Quakerism* (1919) exhibits not only a rather thorough knowledge of the many manifestations of this aspect of the prophetic side of early Quakerism but also a recognition of the fact these expressions of the primitive Quaker message should not be ignored or too easily shunted aside:

They felt themselves to be the prophets of a new religious era. The word of the Lord burned within them and demanded expression in speech and action. Saturated with Bible knowledge, they there found examples for their own conduct. In this matter of testifying truth by signs, Old Testament prophecy and apocalyptic imagery were rich in fitting phrase and authoritative precedent . . . While, then, we may deplore the crude literalism of Quaker practice on this question as on some others, we should recognize the devoted spirit of obedience which lay behind it, and its naturalness under the circumstances and the conditions of thought of the first Friends.⁵⁹

Rufus M. Jones, in his *Quakers in the American Colonies* (1911), exhibits an embarrassment when he treats the American cases of signs performed by Thomas Newhouse, Catherine Chattam, Lydia Wardel, Deborah Wilson, and Margaret Brewster.⁶⁰ He was apparently unaware that these five were not alone in such behaviour but were part of the great stream which Penney and others had already clearly recognized. Jones appears unaware that Fox, Nayler, and others justified such behaviour. By lifting them out of their seventeenth-century outlook, practices, and world view, Jones has tried to judge them by his own early twentieth-century point of view. Thus, they become "mentally unsettled," "driven over the verge of sanity by the fury of the persecution", people who "yielded to the obsession", and who should have received "wise medical treatment". These were people subject to "hysterical tendencies" and who performed "misguided" acts.⁶¹ Jones' treatment reminds us very much of those early twentieth-century mistaken attempts to present psychiatric studies of Jesus which Albert Schweitzer demolished in his work

⁵⁹ William C. Braithwaite, *Beginnings of Quakerism*, Second Edition, revised by Henry J. Cadbury (Cambridge, 1955), pp. 150-151.

⁶⁰ Rufus M. Jones, *The Quakers in the American Colonies* (London, 1911), pp. 108-109.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 108-109. Cf. p. 266, n. 1, where Jones shows an awareness of Elizabeth Harris' appearing in sackcloth.

The Psychiatric Study of Jesus.⁶² A man must be viewed in the light of his own age and world view if he is to be understood fully. By trying to lift him out of his own historical, religious, and psychological background and setting him in the modern world he becomes, in a sense, an impossible fiction. One wonders how far in this direction Rufus Jones would have gone in a treatment of Jesus and of the Old Testament prophets.

The final author to be examined is Elbert Russell, whose *History of Quakerism* appeared in 1943. A rather thorough search of the index suggests that Russell either did not know about early Quaker signs or chose to forget them—for there are no entries for nakedness, nudity, sackcloth, or signs. Yet one would be mistaken in such a judgment, for Elbert Russell does mention going naked in one place. His one brief paragraph⁶³ shows an awareness of signs, their widespread acceptance in early Quakerism, and the influence of Old Testament prophecy upon them. His closing sentence is particularly worthy of thought: "An age that whipped men and women or exposed them in the pillory stripped to the waist could hardly have been shocked by these occasional 'signs' as much as people would be in later ages."⁶⁴

My own studies of signs and wonders are not meant to be a final and complete view of this phenomenon. Such a work would require the insights and knowledge of anthropology and psychology as well as of history and religion. These studies simply attempt to present a picture of the nature, scope, setting, and importance of this aspect of prophetic and primitive Quakerism. They also call for a deeper and more sympathetic understanding of this aspect of early Quaker history—so that people will no longer either ignore or tend to be ashamed by it. Our own

⁶² Albert Schweitzer, *The Psychiatric Study of Jesus: Exposition and Criticism* (Boston, 1948). Translated by Charles R. Joy from the German edition (1913).

⁶³ Elbert Russell, *The History of Quakerism* (New York, 1943), pp. 63–64.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

age produces so many similar actions⁶⁵ that we are being forced to look again at these earlier expressions and to evaluate them in a different way.

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⁶⁵ In the autumn of 1970, at the time I first became interested in the subject of "signs and wonders", a casual reading of the newspapers called to my attention several strikingly related actions. The Reverend William L. Mattheus chained himself to the pulpit of Christ Church Cathedral (St. Louis) "to protest racism". He and some of his followers also burned five one-dollar bills outside the cathedral—protesting "the Episcopal Diocese of Missouri's focus on monetary values rather than truly human values witnessed to by Jesus Christ" (from an article by Carl Rowan, entitled "Courage or Extremism? Conscience Must Decide": copyright by Field Enterprises, 1970). The November 9, 1970, issue of the *Dallas Morning News* (p. 2A), under the headline "Evictees Boo Pope in Square," carried the story of two young Fascists' chaining themselves to lamp posts near the obelisk in St. Peter's Square, as well as an account of "shanty dwellers" (recently removed from buildings where they were squatting) who came to St. Peter's Square, spread out blankets and mattresses and threatened to stay until they got housing. Still another article, only a short time before, spoke of two groups picketing President Nixon's political appearance in Dallas—one small group from Southern Methodist University appearing *bound and gagged* and the other (from a Christian Commune) appearing in *sackcloth*!