

## Quaker Terminology: Quaint, Quintessential, Off-putting, or Confusing?

### 2<sup>nd</sup>-Hour Program for Raleigh Friends Meeting, First-day, 8<sup>th</sup>-month, the 14<sup>th</sup>

“Thee can join us in a discussion of this subject during second-hour, next first day.” Why is it that members of the Religious Society of Friends tend to use so many terms that are not immediately understandable to the general public? Are the historical reasons for some of these verbal practices still valid today?

Take, for instance, the word “**thee**.” The historical reason that early Friends disliked using the word “you” was that it tended to imply greater (and they thought undeserved) respect for members of the upper classes. All are equal before God. The Bible plainly showed Jesus using words equivalent to “papa” and “thou” when addressing God. It would be reasonable for early Friends to have thought for themselves that it made no sense to use a higher term when addressing mere mortals, even those in earthly positions of authority.

Here are some other examples:

- **Meeting** is where one comes together to worship. Most people would use the word “church,” except for the fact that we don’t have a steeple and we don’t have a hired minister.
- We use the word **clerk** when referring to leadership of our group, and even then, it is a kind of “leadership among equals.” Most people in society would use some other term, such as “coordinator,” “leader,” or “spokesperson” for such a position, certainly not such a humble-sounding word as “clerk.”
- A **concern** usually means something very important that probably has been weighing on the conscience of the speaker for a long time, and the utterance of the concern might have the potential to transform society, as well as the lives of those who are present. Others in society might use the term “obsession,” “passion,” “calling,” “insight,” or some other such term, depending on the context.
- **First-day** and other numbered days of the week were used by early Friends because of they didn’t want to honor the heathen sun god, among others. But does **anybody** associate Sunday with sun?? Though the practice of using just numbers is said to be part of “plane speech,” most people who hear that speech will attempt to translate the numbers into terms with which they are familiar.
- Our use of the term **Friends** as a self-identification often requires that we use the supplementary term “Quakers” when describing who we are. It’s almost equivalent to the way members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints may have to use the term “Mormon” when explaining to

their coworkers what church they belong to. But Friends often have a more difficult challenge, since there are fewer of us, and our terminology is probably less well known than that of the Mormons.

- The words **Meeting for Business** describe an event which can be quite distinct from people's common understanding of the word "business meeting." For instance, Friends would be horrified and disappointed to hear the words "Let's take a vote" spoken with seriousness. If we wanted to make our practices plain to people who don't know us, maybe we should call our meetings for business "consensus meetings." Though perhaps the word "consensus" doesn't capture the whole essence of what we do, but neither does "meeting for business."
- Our use of the word **ministry** does not imply that one is hired to be a pastor. Rather, the word emphasizes an activity, such as speaking in meeting or caring for the sick.
- A **monthly meeting** refers to a group of people who usually meet together for worship once a week. Only the Meeting for Business (see above) happens once a month. The words "local group of Quakers" might be a more effective term to use with strangers, depending on what one envisions as the "effect."
- **Quaker** would seem like a useful term for us to use, except for two problems. First, the term was originally used derisively by people who wanted to emphasize the odd behavior of members of the Religious Society of Friends. Second, who among us has ever seen a Quaker quake? It seems inconsistent with our practices of numbering days and avoiding honorific terms for us to cave in and adopt an inaccurate and sarcastic term when describing ourselves (or maybe that can help keep us humble?).
- We tend to use the word **testimony** in a way that is markedly different, compared to when the same word is used in a Christian fundamentalist church. It seems that our use of the term emphasizes a principled stand that Friends have adopted after long soul-searching and many meetings together. In many other churches the same word implies that an individual member stands up, possibly at the front of the church, and declares their belief. The words "peace principle" and "commitment to peace" don't have quite the same ring to it as "peace testimony," but that's probably just a result of hearing the latter term repeated many times among Friends.
- We continue to use phrases such as "**way will open**," and such words are part of our tradition. But has anyone spend any time thinking about those word recently? Is it a matter of our superstition that solutions to problems will become apparent if we wait together for it? Is it a matter of statistical probability that a solution will become apparent, as long as there are enough of us searching for it for a sufficiently long time? Do we continue to use these words just to comfort each other or to put off making decisions?

In summary, we unprogrammed Quakers have inherited a wealth of terms that we continually use in our mutual discussions. Some of the arguments **for** continuing this practice are as follows:

1. The practice may remind us of our **historical roots**, including the insights from George Fox and others. Our roots can help hold us securely in place as a group as we continually face new and potentially bewildering ideas and situations.
2. It is possible that the use of a common set of terms helps to make our discussions **more precise**, much in the way that scientists within a certain branch of science use terms that may be unfamiliar to others.
3. Jesus advised his followers to “be ye not of the world, but be ye transformed from the word,” or something like that. Plane speech practices might have the potential to remind us **not to just follow the crowd**.
4. Quaint speech practices and odd terms might sometimes serve as a subtle **advertisement**, causing hearers to want to find out more about our group, our beliefs, and our practices.
5. Plane speech can avoid **inadvertent honoring** of ancient gods, aristocrats, and even the leaders among us.

Some arguments **against** continuing the use of traditional Friends terms include the following:

1. The terms may be **confusing** to people with whom we want to communicate.
2. The terms may be **off-putting** to people we might want to draw into our group.
3. The terms may sometimes stand in the way of Friends’ **continuing evolution and growth in the spirit**.

Personally, I don’t find any of the second group of arguments to be persuasive. There are plenty of groups who lack the deep historical roots of Friends. Friends’ practices and terminology have a demonstrated ability to evolve over time. What does thee think?