

**A BRIEF ACCOUNT  
OF THE RISE OF THE  
SOCIETY OF FRIENDS**

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A Brief Account of the Rise of the Society of Friends by Anonymous

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## A BRIEF ACCOUNT, &c.

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IN tracing the history of the Christian Church from its earliest establishment, through the period of its decline, until it reached that long and dark night of apostacy, which for ages preceded the Reformation, we find, that in proportion as the life and substance of religion decayed, a multitude of ceremonies were introduced in their place, little, if at all, less onerous than the typical institutions of the Mosaic law. This has ever been the result, when the ingenuity of man has attempted to improve or adorn the simplicity of spiritual religion. There is a natural activity in the human mind, which prompts it to be busy, and can with difficulty submit to that self-renunciation which the Gospel enjoins. It is much easier for a professor of religion to be engaged in the performance of rites and ceremonies, than to yield his heart an entire sacrifice to God. Objects presented to the mind through the medium of the natural senses, produce a powerful impression, and are more easily apprehended, than those truths which are addressed to the intellectual faculties only, and are designed to subdue and control the wayward passions of the human heart. It is not surprising, therefore, that instead of that worship of the Almighty Father, which is in Spirit and in Truth, and which requires the subjection of the will and activity of man, and the prostration of the whole soul in reverent humility before God, a routine of ceremonies and forms should have been substituted, calculated to strike the eye and the ear with admiration.

As the period of degeneracy was marked by the great amount and increase of these ceremonies, so, when it pleased the Most High to raise up individuals, and enlighten them to see the existing corruptions, and how far the professed Chris-

tian Church had departed from original purity, and to prepare them for instruments in working a reformation; one of their first duties was, to draw men off from those rites by which their minds had been unduly occupied, and on which they had too much depended, instead of pressing after experimental religion in the heart.

This, of necessity, was a progressive work. The brightness of meridian day bursts not at once upon the world. There is a gradual increase of light, from its earliest dawn until it reaches its fullest splendor; yet the feeblest ray which first darts through the thick darkness, is the same in its nature with the most luminous blaze. It makes manifest those things which the Divine controversy is against, and leads back to the state of gospel simplicity and purity, from which the visible Church has lapsed. And although the light may not be sufficiently clear to discover all the corruptions, nor the state of the world such as to bear their removal, yet those holy men, who act up faithfully to the degree of knowledge with which they are favored, are worthy of double honor, as instruments for correcting the growing evils of their day, and preparing the way for further advancement in the reformation.

It is interesting to observe, that the different religious Societies which have arisen since the reformation, all aimed at the attainment of greater degrees of spirituality and a more fervent piety, than was generally to be found among the sect from which they sprung. The idea, that forms were too much substituted for power, and a decent compliance with the externals of religion, for its heart-changing work, seems to have given rise to them all. Each successive advance lopped off some of the ceremonial excrescences, with a view of making the system more conformable to the Apostolic pattern. In the early part of the seventeenth century considerable progress was made in this work, tending to prepare the way for that more full and complete exemplification of the original simplicity of the Gospel, which was exhibited to the world by George Fox and his coadjutors. It is no arrogant assumption to assert, that to whatever point in the reformation we turn

our attention, we find the germ of those principles, which were subsequently developed and carried out by the founders of our Society, actuating the Reformers and leading them to results, approaching nearer to those attained by FRIENDS, in proportion to the faithfulness and measure of light bestowed on the individual.

Opinions very similar to those held by our Society, on the subjects of the indwelling and guidance of the Holy Spirit, baptism and other ceremonies, superstitious rites, war, oaths, and a ministry of human appointment and education, were promulgated by individuals at different periods, antecedent to the rise of Friends, though not advanced as distinguishing tenets by any considerable body of professors.

The reformation from Popery under Edward VI. was but partial. Many of the errors and superstitious of that pompous and ceremonial religion were retained; partly because the dawning light was not sufficient to reveal their true character, and partly in compliance with the popular prejudice in favor of ancient institutions, and of a showy and imposing form of worship. There were, however, men of eminent piety and religious discernment, who perceived the degeneracy from primitive Christianity, which gave birth to those corruptions, and had since fostered their growth and promoted their increase, until they threatened to supplant vital religion.

On the death of Edward, the hopes which these had cherished, of further advances toward the original simplicity and purity of Christianity, were extinguished by the accession of Mary, and the barbarous persecution which followed. Many sealed with their blood the testimony of a good conscience, and by faithfulness unto death, not only proved the sincerity of their profession, but prepared the way for those nearer approaches to Divine Truth, which have since been made. If the clearer spiritual light of the present day, unfolds to us some points in which the belief of those holy men was defective, it also places in stronger relief, as a noble example worthy of all imitation, the undaunted firmness and integrity of their characters, their love of Christ, and their devotion to his



cause. It cannot be viewed in any other light, than as a Divine interposition in behalf of his suffering people, that this bigoted and relentless Queen so soon closed her career, after a brief and inglorious reign.

When Elizabeth came to the throne, she found herself surrounded by Papists strongly attached to their religion, and zealous for its support. Her prudence dictated a cautious course in changing the existing order of things. Too great or sudden alterations, might have hazarded the peace of the realm, and even brought her crown into jeopardy. Elizabeth, moreover, was fond of magnificence in her devotions; and in this respect, the pomp of popery suited well with her inclinations. It is questionable, indeed, whether her preference for the Protestant religion was not as much owing to her affection for her brother, King Edward, and respect for the memory of her father, as to any decided conviction of its nearer approximation to the standard of Scripture Truth.

She restored the liturgy and order of worship as established by her brother, and strictly enjoined its observance, though many of her Protestant subjects conscientiously objected to some parts of it. The idol of uniformity, and the long cherished idea of a catholic Church, to which the Papists had made such lavish sacrifices of human life, had strong attractions even for Protestants; and Elizabeth, as well as her successors, persecuted even to death, not a few of her pious subjects, in the vain attempt to coerce the consciences of men, and reduce them to one common standard.

The doctrines and form of worship revived by Elizabeth after the death of Mary, left the minds of many much dissatisfied. They desired a more thorough separation from the errors of Popery; a simpler method of church government, and a purer and more spiritual religion and worship. These were called Puritans; a name which, though bestowed on them with no good design, yet agreed well with those things for which they contended.

The Protestants who fled to Frankfort, during the persecution under Queen Mary, unanimously concluded to dispense

with the litany, surplice and responses of the Church of England; that public service should begin with a general confession of sins, then the people to sing a psalm in metre in a plain tune, after which the minister should pray for the assistance of the Holy Spirit, and proceed to sermon. These innovations on the established order of the Service-Book, led to warm disputes, which soon spread into England; and though at times the breach would seem nearly closed, yet the controversy was again and again renewed, and efforts made to procure further reformatations from the errors of the Romish Church.

Soon after Elizabeth came to the throne, she appointed a Commission to review the liturgy as established by Edward. The alterations made in it, were rather in favor of the Papists than the Puritans, by many of whom it was viewed as more objectionable than the old Service-book. It was, however, presented to Parliament, and adopted as the national form of religion, by "The Act for the Uniformity of Common Prayer and Service in the Church," &c. The same Parliament passed an act vesting the entire ecclesiastical jurisdiction in the crown, and empowering the Queen "with the advice of her commissioners or metropolitan, to ordain and publish such further ceremonies and rites as may be for the advancement of God's glory and edifying his Church, and the reverence of Christ's holy mysteries and sacraments."

The act of uniformity was the source of great mischief to the Church. Many conscientious ministers and others could not conform to its requirements, believing them to be opposed to the doctrines and precepts of the Bible. The rigorous enforcement of the act, while it punished the bodies of men, and wasted their estates, did not convince their minds; but rather strengthened their opposition to and alienated their affections from the Church.

In the doctrinal views of the two parties, the Conformists and the Puritans, there was little avowed difference. The uncasiness arose chiefly from a conscientious objection to the assumptions of the bishops, the introduction of numerous unscriptural offices and titles in the church—the laxity of her disci-

pline—the prohibition of extemporaneous prayer—the numerous festivals—the use of organs and other instruments of music in time of worship—of the sign of the cross in the ceremony of baptism—kneeling at the ceremony of the supper—bowing at the name of Jesus and on entering or leaving their places of worship—to the ring in marriage, as well as parts of the words spoken during the rite; and to the use of the surplice and other vestments by the priests during Divine service. Such were the principal grounds of difference in the commencement of the dispute; and though the Conformists affected to consider them non-essential, yet they insisted on them with a pertinacity, which increased the opposition and widened the breach, until at length it produced an entire separation, from which have sprung the various classes of Dissenters.

That the Puritans were conscientious in their objections to the established religion, will not be questioned by such as are acquainted with the piety of their lives, and the patience and fortitude with which they endured persecution for their religious opinions. Connected with these, was a steadfast resistance to the assumed power of the crown, as visible head of the Church, to prescribe to, and control, the conscience of the subject, in things not essential. Against this they manfully contended while the reins of government were in the hands of their opponents. But when the revolution of civil affairs placed *them* in possession of the power, they too soon forgot the principles of rational and Christian liberty, for which they had formerly struggled, and exercised on others, the oppression and cruelty which they had so much condemned in their own case.

Contending for their religious liberty, naturally had the effect to make them more jealous of their civil rights; and hence, during the subsequent reign, we find them standing forth, as staunch opposers of the encroachments of the crown.

That they were instruments in the hand of Providence, for carrying forward the reformation from the errors and superstitions by which Christianity had been overlaid, cannot be doubted; yet as this was a gradual work, accomplished by