



GEORGE FOX: I did not suffer the penalty spoken of in England.

I came to the United States in freedom.

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That night that we came to Exeter, I spoke with James Nayler, for I saw he was out and wrong and so was his company.

Shortly after Fox's unhappy visit with Nayler in which Fox sensed that he "ran out into imaginations and a company with him," Nayler was released from Exeter prison and travelled to Bristol. The 1656 Nayler incident in Bristol, although ever so sketchily dealt with in Fox's Journal, was a major crisis both for the young and vulnerable Society of Friends and for Fox as its guide. Urged on by a number of adoring women followers, James Nayler had ridden into Bristol with his companions singing "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Israel" and flinging their cloaks in the mire for his horse to walk on, symbolizing the coming of Christ into Jerusalem. Nayler was arrested together with his companions and while the companions were later released, Nayler was kept in prison and charged with blasphemy. When tried, he staunchly denied "James Nayler to be Christ but said that Christ was in him." After a long trial in Parliament itself, Nayler was found to be guilty of blasphemy. His cruel punishment included two public whippings across the city of London with over 300 whip strokes each, and having his tongue bored through with a hot iron and his forehead branded with a B.

Source: Quaker Spirituality, The Epistles of George Fox. 1984

GEORGE FOX

Next to George Fox, James Nayler had been, perhaps, the most effective voice in sharing the Quaker message and this incident was a hard blow to the credibility of the Quaker witness. It confirmed the accusations of instability and illuminist fanaticism of which the enemies of the swiftly spreading Quaker movement had long accused it. In the course of Nayler's punishment, which he bore with the bravest of courage, he repented utterly and publicly of this incident and its effect in blunting the witness to his experience of Christ within, that he had given years of his life to proclaim.

George Fox had further distanced himself from James Nayler in the pain of this happening. The word of the London Yearly Meeting's Christian Faith and Practice on the outcome of this incident can scarcely be improved upon. "Having publicly abjured his follies in several statements, he sought to be reconciled with Fox who was lying ill and exhausted in Reading." Rebuffed, Nayler wrote to Margaret Fell: "My spirit was quieted in that simplicity in which I went, in that to return . . . and so His will is our peace." William Dewsbury was at least instrumental in bringing about a reconciliation between Nayler and Fox and Nayler resumed his Quaker service, "living in great self-denial and very jealous of himself."

Out of this brokenness came such a sense of God's forgiveness and of humility and tenderness that the closing years of his life have touched Friends to the core. Once again, the above source tells of the final scene of his life and quotes a saying of Nayler's that is especially precious to Friends and that follows this statement: "In 1660 he set out on foot for the North, intending to go home to his wife and children. He was seen by a friend of Hertford, sitting by the wayside in meditation; and passed on through Huntingdon, where another friend saw him in such an awful frame as if he had been redeemed from the earth and a stranger on it, seeking a better country and inheritance. Some miles beyond Huntingdon, he was robbed and bound, and found towards evening in a field. He was taken to a Friend's house near King's Ripton, and passed away in the peace of God towards the end of October, 1660."

James Nayler's last words, spoken about two hours before his departure out of this life were:

QUAKER SPIRITUALITY

There is a spirit which I feel that delights to do no evil, nor to revenge any wrong, but delights to endure all things, in hope to enjoy its own in the end. Its hope is to outlive all wrath and contention, and to weary out all exaltation and cruelty, or whatever is of a nature contrary to itself. It sees to the end of all temptations. As it bears no evil in itself, so it conceives none in thoughts to any other. If it be betrayed, it bears it, for its ground and spring is the mercies and forgiveness of God. Its crown is meekness, its life is everlasting love unfeigned; it takes its kingdom with entreaty and not with contention, and keeps it by lowliness of mind. In God alone it can rejoice, though none else regard it, or can own its life. It is conceived in sorrow, and brought forth without any to pity it, nor doth it murmur at grief and oppression. It never rejoiceth but through sufferings; for with the world's joy it is murdered. I found it alone, being forsaken. I have fellowship therein with them who lived in dens and desolate places in the earth, who through death obtained this resurrection and eternal holy life.²⁰

ALPHA: You can see the hard-won freedom of these early American patriots for you. You have a rich history of these very ones who came here to give you the elixir of spiritual freedom, and it behooves you to study and to show thyself approved onto God as he had.