Understanding the written work of Margaret Fell is essential in any accurate evaluation of early Friends’ theology. Her work gives insight into the earliest tenets of Quaker theology, as well as their development over time. She was one of George Fox’s early disciples, and probably the most significant in his own story, given that she would eventually become his wife. Following her conviction under Fox, she was quickly elevated to spokesperson and apologist for Friends’ ideals. Margaret filled a central role in the early development of the movement, particularly in the north of England. This was the site of Friends’ earliest evangelistic successes, and Fell became the stabilizing force for the region. This is due in part to the force of her personality and her convictions, but it also reflects the fact that she possessed more wealth and social status than most Friends; her manor home at Swarthmoor Hall rapidly became the spiritual, organizational, and psychological hub for the nascent Quaker movement. From there she wrote voluminously on a variety of topics as she articulated and defended Friends’ theological and social beliefs, most notably by authoring the first published Friends’ Peace Testimony.¹

**Background and Context**

Margaret Askew Fell Fox (1614–1702) was born in the north of England into relative privilege. Her gentleman father was progressive in his thinking, providing his daughters with a high level of education for the times. He also left Margaret a personal inheritance of £6000 – a considerable sum at the time – and property. This left her well positioned for her marriage to Judge Thomas Fell, Lord of the Manor at Ulverston. They forged a deep and lasting union, raising eight children to adulthood. Both Thomas and Margaret gained in social currency by their union, enjoying high status, respect, and personal power. As Thomas rose through the legal and political ranks, he held some of the highest and most financially advantageous
positions in the kingdom and served as a member of parliament under
Cromwell. Because of Margaret, Thomas also became an active defender of
the legal rights of early Friends, though he himself was not a follower.
Margaret personally ran their large estate and managed business affairs in
the north, which was the practice before the Victorian era. At the centre of
everything was Swarthmoor Hall, where she raised the children, supervised
servants, and entertained the many visitors who came to conduct business
with her or her husband.

Among these visitors were an ongoing line of itinerant religious teachers
and preachers who had heard of Margaret’s keen interest in the spiritual
life and matters theological. For twenty years Fell had been developing her
own views in long hours of conversation with the visiting religious
teachers. At the same time she attended local worship at the Independent
Church in Ulverston, part of the resurgent Separatist Movement of the
sixteenth century.\(^\text{3}\) In this she fulfilled her role as wife of the lord of
the manor and she continued with the Independent church through the
early days of her conviction under the preaching of George Fox. Like
others, he had heard of the Fells’ openness and hospitality and presented
himself on their doorstep. Thomas Fell was often away on the judicial
circuit, and when he returned this time he found his wife and household
transformed. The meeting between George Fox and Margaret Fell changed
the lives of the Fells and the future of Quakerism.

For her part, Margaret saw George as a disciple of Christ, and as the first
fruit of a newly opened revelation. He was “the fountaine of life.”\(^\text{3}\) She
wrote: “Our dear Father in the Lord, though we have ten thousand
Instructors in Christ, yet we have not many fathers, for in Christ Jesus
thou hast begotten us thorrow (through) the Gospell.”\(^\text{4}\) His proclamation
opened up the possibility of a direct and unmediated connection with
heaven that also addressed key theological and political anxieties of the
time. Fox returned several times to Swarthmoor Hall in those early days,
bringing others convinced with him. Margaret quickly found her way into
their deepest trust. Early in their relationship Margaret Fell was given the
task of articulating the beliefs of the Children of the Light for outsiders,
primarily those associated with the religious establishment. Like other early
Friends, she objected to the idea of theology as a subject of objective study,
but her work on their behalf was of necessity theological.\(^\text{5}\)

The longer she challenged the opposition, the more careful and system-
atic her work became. Over time her theological articulation, particularly
in Christology and the doctrine of the Trinity, became more resonant with
traditional Protestantism. Fell addressed the work of those who accused
the Friends of heterodoxy and heresy, as well as explaining Quaker teachings to new or potential converts. Friends were also charged with treason and other violations for preaching and disseminating religious information. Margaret carried on correspondence with judges and jailers who were violating laws by ignoring legal requirements for warrants, habeas corpus, and what passed for due process. Because of her long relationship with Judge Fell, who frequently defended early Friends in court, she was knowledgeable about the legal system and its terminology, and this too appears in her work.6

She carried on all this correspondence, theological work, and more from Swarthmoor Hall, which was the de facto headquarters for the Friends’ movement between 1652 and 1654. From here many of the first Friends held meetings for worship and discernment, and organized relief for followers who were being persecuted for their affiliation as Friends. Because of her centrality to the early movement, Margaret Fell would have been in conversation and frequent correspondence with nearly every prominent early Friend. Among her extant correspondence we have letters to notable Friends such as William and Gulielma Penn, Samuel Fisher, Isaac and Mary Penington, Richard Farnworth, James Nayler, Edward Burrough, Francis Howgill, George Whitehead, and Robert Barclay, all of whom are represented in this volume. However, like all of these notable Friends, Fell’s work and witness was not about the good and the great, but about humility and equality before the Light.

The fact that a woman of Fell’s social rank gave over her life and her worldly goods to the service of the Light meant a great deal to the early Friends, most of whom were of low estate. Arguably Fox’s most illustrious early convert, her humility and deference to Friends of lower social and political status was a source of discussion that generated dismay or affirmation, depending upon what one thought of Quakers. Though she enjoyed a certain amount of protection during the life of Judge Thomas Fell, met directly with James I, Charles I, Charles II, and Oliver Cromwell, and corresponded with nobility, her convincement would eventually lead to several imprisonments and the forfeiture of her property. Through it all she managed to hold onto her beloved Swarthmoor Hall, which has been reclaimed today as a place of Quaker study and inspiration.

The centrality of Swarthmoor Hall and the organizational importance of Margaret Fell’s work, has been well documented in books about Fell, but in the general narrative it has overshadowed her significance as a theological thinker.7 This reflects a number of factors, primary among them the intentional reconstruction of the early Friends’ narrative to favor
George Fox. This included the centralization of authority in the south of England away from the north and Margaret, and the move toward social disengagement following the suffering of the “First Publishers of the Truth” and near decimation of the movement.9 Soon after their marriage in 1669, Fell and Fox began a functional separation of their leadership, with Margaret remaining in the north while George focused upon the south. Gradually authority centralized around London and Fox, with younger Friends assuming guidance of the Society. Fell grew more distant from the organizational structures there, and more critical of changes in Society polity.

In later years, Fell expressed alarm at Friends’ shifts toward legalism around behaviors such as plain dress and the swearing of oaths she saw becoming the norm toward the end of her life. She believed the emphasis upon separation and outward forms ran contrary to the spirit of the earliest Friends’ witness, and she denounced them as “silly imaginary outside practices.” Increasingly in later years, as her influence waned, she wrote of the trials and teachings of early Friends which she believed had been forgotten.10 Despite this, Fell found no reason to give up her lobbying on behalf of Quakers and their beliefs. This put her on a collision course with younger generations of leadership, who favored disengagement from society at large and male leadership as the norm. By the time of her death, Margaret Fell had become an anachronism in Quakerism, while her husband George Fox had become iconic.

However, when we reread Margaret Fell and others closely we find coworkers and leaders who were peers with Fox in the construction of the early movement and its theology. Fell was intellectually close with Fox, and directly deputized by the First Publishers of the Truth to articulate and defend their beliefs. As such, her work is a valuable resource in reconstructing early Friends’ theology, as well as in understanding the rhetorical strategies they adopted in spreading the news of the Inward Light now come into the world. As we have already noted, Margaret was not a trained theologian – a title she would have reviled – but as we shall see she was deeply knowledgeable of Scripture and of Friends’ beliefs, and always focused upon obedience to the Inward Light.11 Her life and death were played out on a grand scale, and her work captured the essential theological tenets of early Quaker belief. We now consider some of her major theological concerns and the context within which they emerged, in particular Fell’s understanding of Scripture, eschatology, hamartiology, the conscience, and the nature of the Trinity.
Scripture, Seekers, and the Second Coming

As we have noted, Margaret Fell had a deep affinity for Christian Scripture. The King James Bible or Authorized Version (1611) was published three years before her birth, and Fell took to the study of Scripture at an early age. Her comfort with the text is obvious, and she quoted the Bible liberally in her work. Her approach to the text is representative of general biblical scholarship for the time, which has its limitations. Thus, for example, she assumed that the author of the Gospel of John was the same as the author of the Revelation of John; current scholarship demonstrates that this is unlikely. In supporting her arguments, Old and New Testament verses are allowed to flow together and intertwine as if they are a merged text. The admixture of Old and New that Fell employed would not have been at all confusing to her audience and it gives the impression that the Bible is ingrained in the very process of her thought. This reflects a distinctly Quaker hermeneutic that is also deeply Christian in the New Testament sense.

Margaret Fell rejected the traditions of the church which arose after the first apostles. It was with the emergence of creedal councils by “them that were got into the Words” that “the Apostacy entred . . . and the holy, pure and true Church went into the Wilderness.” At the same time she clearly enumerates the essential tenets of the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed in her own theological articulation. Her rejection of the authority of the papacy, insistence upon the Priesthood of the Believer, and the primacy of Scripture over religious tradition were in line with Protestantism generally. Fell’s assumption was that Scripture held universal authority regardless of the social or cultural context. She read the Old and New Testaments as a single document which carried the Word of God, with Christ at the centre of both. Individual writers of the books were divinely inspired. Scripture was “given forth from the light, and the spirit of God was in them who spoke in the Scriptures.” She viewed all biblical writing as prophetic and instructive to the present moment, regardless of a book’s genre and content. It was the ground of all true belief and the litmus for any claim about who God is and what God desires of us. Through it, humankind is taught the true nature of all human existence.

This was her understanding of the text prior to meeting George Fox, and through it she was able to embrace the heavily scriptural Quaker hermeneutic. To fully understand this it is helpful to consider the larger religious context for her conviction. This is particularly true in the case of eschatology. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were filled with
politico-religious upheaval that centred around the emergence of the Protestant movement and a distinctive preoccupation with the Second Coming of Christ. The face of religion in England changed with Henry VIII's Act of Supremacy in 1534, and the expulsion of the Catholic church from England. Queen Elizabeth I used anti-Catholic sentiment as a means of political cohesion and control. One example of this is her support for the publication of John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* (commonly known as Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*).18 This book is a polemical history of Protestant martyrs focused largely upon the sufferings of English and Scottish Protestants under Catholicism. The political and religious atmosphere was intentionally charged with anti-Papist rhetoric, with the Catholic church portrayed as the biblical Whore of Babylon sitting on Satan's throne. Margaret Fell embraced this view, with the exception that the Whore of Babylon was any part of the Christian church that elevated tradition and ecclesiastical practice above the pressings of individual conscience.19

Speculation as to the date of the Second Coming of Christ was a ubiquitous activity in England from Elizabethan times onward. It was more than popular speculation; it was serious pursuit joined by the likes of Isaac Newton.20 Friends, like those in the culture around them, believed they were on the edge of the last great movement of God on earth. Anticipation was so great that the question was not “if” but “when” Christ would return in the flesh and set up the new Jerusalem on English soil. But when the promised return of Christ did not occur, many Christians were thrown into deep despair. Why had the promised return—so confidently talked about and hoped for—never materialized? Who was at fault? The failure of Christ to return in the flesh and establish a new Jerusalem generated a variety of responses. Some, such as the Fifth Monarchy Men, became more militant in a last great effort to remove political and social circumstances they believed had hindered the return of Jesus. Others, such as the Seekers, discussed more fully elsewhere in this book, responded by turning inward and pulling away from established religion to varying degrees.

This failed eschatological aspiration and the great disappointment it generated is essential to understanding the appeal of the early Friends' message. Fell taught that the historic in-breaking of the Kingdom of God had in fact begun as anticipated, but that the form of Christ's return had been misunderstood, largely due to error within the teachings of the established church. The key to understanding this is the unique interpretation of the term “in the flesh.” The church taught that the return of Christ would be the bodily return of Jesus. But for Friends, the Second
Coming of Christ had begun.²¹ It was not manifest in a single physical
form, but in the flesh of all those who conform to the Inward Light
interpretation of Scripture caused Margaret Fell to reread every part of the Bible.
This new interpretation of Scripture brought new clarity to her
in a new exegetical light. This perspective, built
thinking and changed her theological framework. This theology, built
upon the years of study before Fox, was now grounded in his teaching
on the Inward Light.

It is important to note that Fell did not see the teaching on the Light as
an addition to doctrine, but a rediscovery of it, claiming: “This is not a
new Doctrine, though it may seem so to many; because this Mystery hath
been hid, and the Spirit of God, which opens this Mystery, erred from,
and turned from, by those that have been Teachers of People.”²² Fell
believed that the Inward Light made manifest in the conscience was the
highest form of divine revelation, insofar as Scripture was a dead word
without the illumination of the Holy Spirit. This is not to say that the
Bible was a secondary revelation, but that it was only vibrant and efficacious
for instruction through the active work of the Light. The Spirit does
not contradict the Scriptures, but the Bible does not close the word and
work of revelation. This mirrors the teachings of radical Protestants active
across Europe at the time, which would have reached Margaret long before
she encountered Fox.

The tenet that the Second Coming of Christ was dawning in her own
day underpinned all of Margaret Fell’s theology. The process was not a
single instance of return, but that of Christ “come and coming.”²³ The
final Coming was predicated upon fulfilling the eschatological necessities
of the End Times, such as the ingathering of the Jews. However, the
central focus for Fell was the special work God was undertaking in order
that the full coming of Christ in the flesh might be fulfilled. The coming
of Christ in the flesh would occur as humans brought themselves into right
relationship with the divine. In so doing, God lives in us, not just with us.
This indwelling is a theotic process resonant of the Eastern Orthodox
tradition of theosis (or deification), but it is more than that. Fell believed
that as the Inward Light indwells humans their natures are transformed,
and the promise of Christ’s return in the flesh is fulfilled. Human flesh
becomes Christ’s flesh, and in this way Christ’s return is literally in the
flesh. Scripture and its truths could only be fully understood and made
efficacious when one accepted this eschatological precept.

Another aspect of this eschatological focus was Margaret Fell’s deep
interest in the Jewish question. She wrote letters and open publications
to the Jewish leaders of the day, most notably to Manasseh ben Israel (1604–57). He was a celebrated Portuguese Rabbi, writer, diplomat, and founder of the first Jewish printing press in Amsterdam. Ben Israel was invited to England for a conference at Whitehall to negotiate the possible legal re-emigration of Jews into the British Isles. The conference – which was destined for failure and Ben Israel’s personal demise soon afterwards – was the subject of tremendous attention given the intense interest in the Second Coming that was a hallmark of the time.24 Friends were among the many who sought his attention. What is useful for our purposes here is the insight the conference adds into Margaret Fell’s rhetorical strategy and use of Scripture generally. As her target audience and purpose changed, so did her documentation of biblical citations. Thus, when she addressed the Jewish people in publication she used only Old Testament/Hebrew scripture references and stories, accompanied by notations of chapter and verse. By contrast, letters to Friends often left verses undocumented, suggesting that they would have recognized them without assistance. However, in her religious writings to professional clergy or Christians outside the Quakers she exercised more care in her use of biblical citations and included the text references.

Light, Darkness, and the Inward Turn

In exploring Margaret Fell’s theology we find much more than the drumbeat of biblical references and an underlying preoccupation with the coming of the Light. Her metaphysics was grounded in the understanding of conscience that is in many ways foreign to the contemporary reader. The idea of a conscience lies deep in Western culture, and by the time Margaret Fell began writing the notion was commonplace in English religious literature.25 Though her view has resonance with the likes of Thomas Aquinas or Martin Luther, she understood it more in the context of the Enlightenment.26 Her view of the conscience is expansive compared to the great traditions – it is one’s deepest connection to God, and provides the grounding for the mind, the soul, and the moral impulse. This makes conscience the fundamental point of contact for the self and God. In this context, her understanding of the Light – that inward leading and guiding force of love and guidance – is one of organic and interactive intimacy between the human and the divine.

The present use of the term “conscience” is far different from the mystical, chain-breaking, revolutionary power the word had acquired in Fell’s day. In the concept of “conscience,” Fell found the grounds for true
community and equality within humanity. For human beings, the locus for salvific work is the human conscience, where the seed of God has been planted equally within each person. This is an egalitarian implanting in a universal call to each conscience where God the Light awaits, desiring human renewal into life and salvation. This is resurrection out of death and darkness into perfection. Here, “[a]ll things are in God, who hath reconciled us unto himself; by Jesus Christ; and hath given us to the Ministry of Reconciliation; to wit, That God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not imputing their Trespasses unto them.” This reconciliation is not merely for human beings but all of creation. Yet the telos of the Light is not redemptive justification alone, but sanctification unto the state of perfection. Like all Friends, Fell held that perfection was possible in the present life. Their view was largely misunderstood and proved another source of persecution for those who claimed it publically.

Margaret Fell began defending Friends’ teachings on perfection soon after her conversion. She was not asserting that all persons attain absolute perfection from sin, or making claims of the type that brought James Nayler or the Ranters low. Her focus was upon those Christians “pleading for Sinn And against perfection” – Protestants who believed that the bonds of sin were so strong they could never be entirely severed in this life. Fell rejected this based upon biblical texts such as Matthew 5:48 which admonishes believers: “Be Thee perfect, even as Thy Father in Heaven is perfect.” She believed that the seed of Christ is implanted into each human conscience. Since Christ the Light is perfect, the seed is also perfect. Those who walk in the Light, when they have been searched and cleansed, dwell in the perfection of the Light which is “pure and leads in the pure path.” Here is the Body of Christ and the temple of God, and as such must also be perfect. Salvation was therefore not an end in itself, but an ongoing work of perfection which takes place in persons who dwell in the Light.

This path leads to perfection, and it can do so in this life. Those who dwell in the Light are increasingly conformed to the Spirit of Christ. The path to perfection begins with justification, which is ongoing in the sanctification that takes place in the Light. But what of those who turn away from the Light? Everyone has an eternal soul with a divine call and standard placed within them, and each makes a choice whether to serve the Light or the Darkness. If one can move from darkness into light, one can also return to darkness and become a “backslider.” If humans choose to turn from the implanted light in their conscience, they serve the darkness and increasingly come to dwell in it. Likewise, if believers who dwell in
the Light conform their spirit and works to the standard of God they are conformed to the Spirit of Christ.\textsuperscript{34}

The first step in this process is to look inwardly to “see what thou can witness of him made manifest in thee, for there thou must find him.”\textsuperscript{35} The choices persons make will then be reflected in the actions they take and the life they live. The moral starting place for all persons is goodness rather than evil, because of the pure seed of God implanted within each soul at birth. Evil and Satan are real things, with real power, and they exert influence for their own ends throughout all creation. However, people come personally to dwell in darkness as individuals through an accrual of personal choices. Theologically, Margaret Fell did not view the physical body itself as inherently good or evil. It was a potential dwelling place for Light or Darkness, and would come to reflect the nature within it. Without faithful attention to the Light and its purifying guidance humans are given to sinful action rooted in selfish desire, and this sin brings us into alignment with the god of this world, which is condemnation.

The hearts of all human beings are subject to the righteous judgment of the Light. This spirit of judgment “comes from Jesus who is the light of the world, who for Judgment is Come into the world; who is the Judge of the world.”\textsuperscript{36} All human beings are responsible for the inward search that will determine their eternal fate. Concerning this Fell wrote:

To the light of Xr. Jesus in you Consciences which he hath enlightened you withall[,] who is the light of the world, and doth enlighten every one that cometh into the world, and if you love the light[,] you bring your deeds to the light to be prooved & tried. whether they be wrought in god[,] and this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, & men love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil, for every one that hateth the light, neither cometh to the light[,] least his deeds should be reprooved.\textsuperscript{37}

There is an ultimate judgment for everyone, and those who reject the Light face condemnation and hell. Margaret Fell believed in hell and mentioned it often in her work. She accepted the traditional understanding of hell as a place of fire and torment, though she was not generally given to recounting its terrors as a rhetorical device. Her focus was on the call of the Light and the salvation and purification found there.

The Trinity: Creator, Redeemer, and Bringer of Light

In her theological articulation, Margaret Fell focused primarily upon the work of God who is Light (the Father) and the Light (often the Son).
However, she did on occasion offer an articulation of the Trinity, most often in the context of criticism from opponents of Quakerism. Though Quakers rejected the use of the word “Trinity” as unbiblical, Fell affirmed the conceptual framework in her writings. For example, in her 1660 publication *A True Testimony from the People of God*, she wrote: "Christ saith, if any Man love me, and keep my Words, my Father will love him, and we shall come unto him and make our abode with him. Here the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, which proceeds from the Father and the Son, is manifested, which doth teach all things." The challenge of unpacking Fell’s theology merits a more lengthy example. She wrote:

God is Light and in him is no Darkness at all, the work that he works is in the Light, which is pure, and leads to purity; which Light testifies against all sin … And the Light which comes from Jesus Christ, which is the Messenger of the Living God, sent from God, may bring your Souls out of Egypt, and out of the Fall, from under the curse, which Disobedience hath brought upon all Men … This is the Day of your Visitation, and Salvation, if you be faithful and obedient, for the everlasting God, which is the Life, Light and Substance of Life, is risen, and arising, and raising up the Dead to hear the voice of the Son of God. "Light" serves a manifold purpose, expressing the Godhead as well as each person of the Trinity. The conflation here is obvious, but Fell wrote extensively and over a long period of time. Thankfully, the accrual gives us ample opportunity for nuanced reading to her intentions.

What is clear from reading the Fell corpus is that she operated within the general Western understanding of God as an infinitely powerful being and the source of infinite goodness. God is immortal spirit, fully just and perfect in every aspect. God the Father is the creator and the immutable, inscrutable, invisible ground of all being. All human conception of God is inadequate to the fullness of Divine Being. Unaided, humans are incapable of grasping the full nature of the eternal God. The connection between the human and the divine, between finite and infinite, is made only through the Light of Christ. God the Creator sends the Light that is Christ. This Light is the immutable spirit; the Light was Christ, not simply the spirit or ghost of Christ, it is “the Light which John bears witness to, which is come a Light into the World, and lighteth every Man that cometh into the
Throughout Fell’s work, Christ is the eternally existent source of human salvation who sends his spirit to us. It is God the Father who sends the Son. The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son jointly. It is the Light as the Spirit of Christ that actively convicts persons of sin, calls them to repentance, and transformation. Jesus Christ is also the Incarnate Word who took on human form, performed miracles, proclaimed God’s truth, was crucified and buried and rose again from death. This said, Fell was a practical theologian who did not dwell on the particulars of the incarnation, only upon its benefits. While it appears that she had little interest in Jesus Christ as man, she also never doubted his historical reality, nor his teachings as presented in Scripture. For Margaret Fell, the primary purpose of the incarnation is “the Redemption of Man.” She believed:

Christ Jesus, who is elected and chosen of God, and precious, who was glorified with the Father before the World began, him hath he made Heir of all things, and the Propitiation for the Sins of the Whole World; by him, and in him, and through him, is the Restoration, and Redemption and Building up again, out of the fallen State of lost Adam, and of all Mankind in the Fall.

Here is clear evidence that Margaret Fell, writing on behalf of early Friends, was Christocentric.

From Margaret Fell’s perspective, Jesus Christ was never mere instructive divine presence but active and salvific across time. The Light that is Christ Jesus is also the connective reality that inhabits the lives of believers within the Body of Christ, “for they that are joined unto the Lord are one spirit, one heart one soule.” As we have seen above, Fell’s thinking goes beyond the metaphorical to a more literal sense of the body, one in which humanity becomes connected to the resurrected flesh of Jesus. Though it is tempting to equate this with the sacramental idea of transubstantiation, it bears only a passing resemblance. In the time between the first appearance of the Light and the final judgment, the Body of Christ proclaims the truth and fulfills a key role in the unfolding reign of Christ. This body is comprised only of those who walk in obedience to the Light and they are the true temple of God. This “Temple of God is holy, whose Temple are ye; and what, know ye not that your Bodies are the Temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you.” This is the true church – rather than the worldly established church – which is constituted in God, the Father.

The established church was the target for a great deal of Margaret Fell’s writing, and it was often of a polemical nature. For Fell, as for all early Friends, the standard seventeenth-century Christian teachings with
their emphasis upon structure, hierarchy, and the authority of the church, were instruments of power and oppression. The “Church so-called” was an instrument of oppression and darkness wherein “we receive nothing contrary to Christ and the Apostle’s Doctrine, for Christ Jesus is the Everlasting Offering once for all.” The reasons for condemnation of the established church were many. From a theological perspective, Fell argued that the practices of the institutional church were unbiblical. Established religion, with its rites and rituals, had eclipsed the teachings and truths of the first followers of Christ. The true church should be simple in practice and apostolic in nature.

The impulse to return to a New Testament-style of church was shared by many Protestants and took on a variety of expressions. Like many Protestant reformers, early Friends had a distinctly ahistorical understanding of the Christian church. The 1600-plus years of the church, with its attendant creeds, covenants, and ecclesiastical practices, were viewed as apostasy. The true church needed nothing but the Light and the Scriptures, for “here is the Coming of Christ the Second time without Sin unto Salvation: This is the great Work that God is working in this his day in the Hearts of his People, as it was in the days of the Apostles.” In articulating Friends’ views, Margaret was critical of the entire Christian estate, eschewing both the polity and practices of the institutionalized church and the clergy. This applied to all of the developed traditions and practices, from basics such as altars, processions, robes and vestments to Eucharistic practices, required church attendance, education of the clergy, the catechism of laity and mandatory tithes. These went to pay the “hirelings” – the clergy who ministered for pay – and other “professors” who claimed to speak on behalf of God.

These criticisms of the established church, so much a part of the larger Protestant Reformation, are heavy in the work of Margaret Fell. This was a combination of her desire to return to apostolic Christianity and her outrage at the persecution that Friends endured in part at the instigation of the church. For Fell, the dictates of the conscience were a higher obligation than the dictates of church or state and she challenged both in her work. Her point of engagement with institutions was always Scripture, which in ideal circumstances would have been a source of dialogue and compromise. However, in the highly charged religious, social and political environment of England in the 1700s, there was little room for either. While there are many elements of early Friends’ beliefs that
would have fit well within the dominant theological structure of the day, their strongly egalitarian impulse and their condemnation of the practices of the established church placed them on a collision course with the surrounding culture.

The early Friends' movement was without doubt a radical religious movement. They were also deeply peaceable and fired by a sincere love of God with a desire to see the Kingdom of God come on earth. From the further vantage point of history we see that although aspects of Margaret Fell's theology were heterodox, it was also essentially Protestant in nature.

Her theology, with its emphasis upon the Inward Light known in conscience and Scripture, proved an able construct within which to express her view of sin and redemption. In this, God, who is Light, sent his son, Jesus Christ the Light, to bring about human salvation. Christ the Pre-existent One sent his Spirit as the Light to guide us inwardly so that humankind might walk in the Light. This Light operates in Trinitarian unity, with economic distinctiveness and singleness of purpose. It lives out unity in diversity and calls humanity to look to the conscience – the moral self – to be searched and enlightened. How persons respond to that Light determines not only human eternal destiny but the nature of human communities and the world. For her part, Margaret Fell desired that everyone turn to this Light, and she worked tirelessly to express this. Her written work is a testimony to her desire that the Kingdom of God would come into the world. It is also a timeless witness to the earliest Friends' theological vision.

Endnotes
1 For further development of the arguments made in this chapter, see Broyd, *Margaret Fell and the end of time*. For more on Fell and her influence, see Young, *Young Kate, Margaret Fell and the rise of Quakerism*, and Ross, *Margaret Fell: Mother of Quakerism*. 
2 Societies of groups known as Independents sprang up across England in the sixteenth century, but were decimated by the Acts of Uniformity (1549 and 1551). The movement was resurrected in 1616 by Henry Jacob. The Ulverston Church was an early re-establishment (1640s) of the Separatist movement which gained political power when Oliver Cromwell (himself a Separatist) came to power. As an autonomous entity, each group of followers supported its own ministers, and they sometimes belonged to voluntary district associations. The Ulverston Church became Ulverston Southgate Independent Conunption Church in 1770 and closed in 1869. *CASCAT* 
3 Fell, *Undaunted zeal* [hereafter cited as Letters], p. 10.
“Children of the Light” is the term used by early Friends. Fell used it in her communication. Fell, *Letters*, p. 178.

In the older historical material about early Friends it is not uncommon to find Judge Thomas Fell mentioned in preeminence over Margaret. Thomas was very supportive of his wife’s activities and actively defended Friends against the many charges leveled against them. However, it is historically incorrect to place him before Margaret in any context within the history of the Society of Friends. Penney (ed.), *First publishers of the truth*, pp. xi–xvi.


The term “First Publishers of the Truth” is a self-referential term within the Society of Friends referring to the first generation of Quakers. The term was in firm circulation by the late 1680s, when efforts began to collect narratives of the first generation of Friends.


Her initial letter to George Fox contained at least six scriptural references in a one-page letter. *Letters*, pp. 10–11.


For Fell’s most complete single discussion, see “A Call to the Universal Seed of God” in *Works*, pp. 304–24.


*John Foxe, Actes and monuments*.


*Letters*, p. 170.

Manasseh ben Israel traveled to England for the Whitehall Conference in 1655, to discuss the readmission of the Jewish people to England. He was accompanied by his son Samuel. The conference was a disappointment on many fronts, with no real resolution to the issue of Jews in England. Samuel died of illness while they were in London. Manasseh died in 1657, while bearing the body of his dead son back to Amsterdam. He never saw home again. Neither he nor his family ever received the compensatory pension he had been promised by Oliver Cromwell.


For an overview of the concept of a moral conscience in the West, see Despland, “Conscience,” pp. 45–52. See also Baylor, *Act and person*, pp. 22–9. For the importance of conscience in the age of Fell, see Kelly, *Conscience; dictator or guide?*, and Andrew, *Conscience and its critics*.


For James Nayler, see Chapter 4, this volume.
30 Fell, Letters, p. 145.
31 Fell, Letters, p. 166.
32 Fell, Letters, p. 166.
33 Fell, Letters, p. 213.
34 Fell, Letters, p. 389.
35 Fell, Letters, p. 21.
36 Fell, Letters p. 137.
37 Fell, Letters, pp. 130–1.
39 Fell, Works, p. 270.
40 Fell, Works, p. 48.
41 Fell, Works, pp. 46–47.
42 Fell, Works, p. 254.
43 Fell, Works, p. 309.
44 Fell, Letters, p. 214.
45 Fell, Letters, p. 248.
46 Fell, Letters, p. 203.
47 Fell, Letters, p. 533.