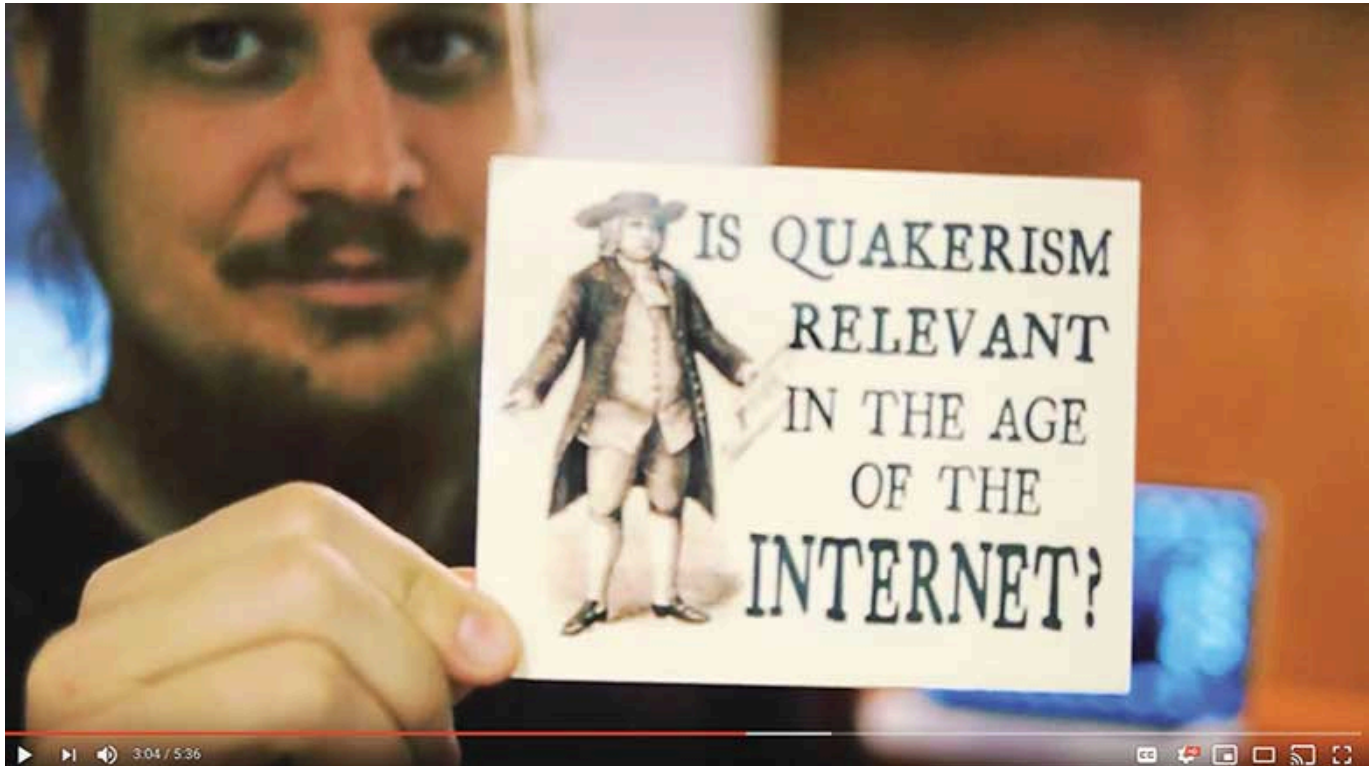


Stripping Down Quakerism for the Internet

August 1, 2019 By [Max L. Carter](#)



Jon Watts, "The Birth of QuakerSpeak: A Quaker YouTube Channel," December 2013 video.

During my time on the faculty at Guilford College, students in the Quaker Leadership Scholars Program had a requirement of doing a senior project. Not to blow the whistle on some students but not everyone took the task seriously. Jon Watts did. He set up a recording studio in the basement of a local meetinghouse and spent the year researching and recording an album of original music about early Quaker spirituality, titled *A Few Songs Occasioned*.

And not to embarrass Jon, but the exceptional quality of the collection of music inspired by George Fox, James Nayler, and Solomon Eccles took me by surprise. It wasn't that I hadn't been aware of Jon's reputation as a Quaker rap music artist, but I wasn't used to students taking the requirement so seriously—and I recalled Jon's work in my Quaker Testimonies class his first semester at the college. Let's just say it didn't display the sophistication of his senior work!



Quakerism 101 with Max Carter

This and the next image from Jon Watt's 2011 music video "Quakers Get Naked in Meeting for Worship," featuring Max Carter.

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Something had happened in the intervening years, and I came to realize it was a deepening of Jon's own spiritual exploration. That exploration continued after his graduation. Continuing his Quaker rapping career, he made the video "Dance Party Erupts During Quaker Meeting for Worship," which included the musical statement, "I'm not a Christian, but I'm a Quaker. I've got Christ's Inner Light, but he's not my savior." That phrase got me in some trouble with Evangelical Friends who knew me and knew that Jon had been my student. I told them, "Before he took courses at Guilford, I don't think Jon could have managed to let the word 'Christ' pass his lips!"

His next video got me in more hot water but continued to impress me with his evolving understanding of the depth and breadth of Quaker theology and spirituality. Having become intrigued by the seventeenth-century Quaker Solomon Eccles through his research for *A Few Songs Occasioned*, he and his friend Maggie Harrison worked on a project called "Clothe Yourselves in Righteousness." With Eccles's practice of "going naked as a spiritual sign" as inspiration, Jon developed another rap song and supporting video to emphasize the need to "strip off" the

worldly cumpers that impede our access to the Inward Light of Christ. The video, shot on the Guilford campus, had me looking disapprovingly as students left my boring Quaker lecture to join a group of students frolicking in their underwear!

After the video and supporting theological paper were released, a Friends pastor in North Carolina preached a First-day sermon about how I was developing a Quaker nudist colony at the college! I told him Jon's interest with "the end" would be consistent with early Friends' End Times emphasis, but I hated to disappoint him that it wasn't my idea of Quaker simplicity.

Jon moved on from his rap career, and I continued to teach rather than dabble in nudity. One day Jon contacted me to say that he wanted my help with an idea. He wanted to produce videos of no more than three or four minutes that would introduce Quaker concepts to a wider audience than is reached by Quaker academic writing. "I want to set up a video camera in the Hut [my office and classroom on campus]," he explained, "and have you respond off the top of your head to about ten questions about Quakers."



And thus far my family has not disowned me for bringing any lasting shame to the family name, nor has my Friends meeting read me out!

Having grown to trust Jon's work and admire his deepening desire to communicate an authentic Quaker understanding, I agreed. Jon told me a few of the topics he wanted to throw at me, but he encouraged me not to spend time doing the scholarly bit. He wanted spontaneous and from the heart. And when he and his friend Tom Clement set the video up and filmed me in front of the Hut's fireplace, I gave rapid-fire responses to Jon's rapid-fire questions: Where did the name Quaker come from? How did Quakerism begin? What is a Quaker view of alcohol? What are the differences between Quakers and the Amish? What are the different Quaker branches?

Neither Jon nor I had any idea that his little experiment with brief YouTube-style videos would evolve into something as successful and influential as the QuakerSpeak series. I have heard people far and wide (within the Quaker community and outside it) say that his videos have been very helpful—even some of mine, in spite of a few notable miscues I made.

For obvious reasons, I have not used any of my own QuakerSpeak appearances in programs I have done on Quaker history and spirituality. Even though Jon has made me look and sound better in videos than I actually do, and is able—with expert editing—to cut down on my penchant for rambling, I am hesitant to summon my virtual self when my real self is in front of people! (Besides, I'm terrible with technology.) But I have been heartened to hear that my brief presentations in the videos have been helpful to others in settings such as First-day school programs and classrooms. And thus far my family has not disowned me for bringing any lasting shame to the family name, nor has my Friends meeting read me out!

QuakerSpeak makes Quakerism accessible—and even interesting!

The genius—and limitations—of the QuakerSpeak videos is that they take complex topics and break them down to accessible descriptions. I have been greatly helped by hearing others dig into interesting, difficult, and sometimes controversial subjects with the clarity that brevity demands, and which that expert editing I mentioned enables. The limitation is that, especially in Quakerland, everyone has an opinion on what should—or should not—be included in any interpretation of what Quakers believe and practice. It's the old joke about four Quakers in town having five meetinghouses.

QuakerSpeak makes Quakerism accessible—and even interesting! That's no small accomplishment in a world where our numbers are diminished and many think we've gone the way of the Shakers—or think we are the Amish. If on occasion a video

oversimplifies a topic or presents a dominant Liberal Quaker view, it still has the virtue of piquing interest and often a rejoinder. If an interested viewer is drawn to visit a Friends meeting because of one subject, they will probably find that particular Quaker congregation doesn't quite view things the same, and the congregation will have the opportunity to expand on the visitor's knowledge.

Just as I saw Jon's spirituality and grasp of the breadth of Quaker experience develop wonderfully during his four undergraduate years and beyond, I have been delighted by how QuakerSpeak has developed from those initial off-the-cuff videos in front of a fireplace. In itself, that evolution is emblematic of how QuakerSpeak has enabled many to explore an ever-deepening understanding of Quakerism. I am grateful.

And I am most grateful that I didn't have to strip down to my skivvies for that "Clothe Yourself in Righteousness" video, which may well have spelled the end of the project at the very beginning!

Max L. Carter

Max L. Carter is a member of New Garden Meeting in Greensboro, N.C. In 2015, he retired from Guilford College as the William R. Rogers director of Friends Center and Quaker studies.