

The Quaker Basics4 Non-Coercion

By

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Our sons returned to school this week, to the toil of compulsory education, and not with great enthusiasm. I can't imagine being a teacher and having to teach children who are in no mood to learn. **We have many educators here at Fairfield and you have my deepest admiration.** Personally, I support child labor, letting those who have the energy for work do it, while we adults, who are weary of labor and eager to learn something, go to school. **I would like to learn how to diagram sentences.** I wasn't paying attention the week Mrs. Conley taught it in the fourth grade. **They tried *making me learn it and I resisted, but now I would pay good money to know such things.*** That's the problem with *making* people do things, we find ways to rebel even when it's in our best interests to cooperate.

We've been talking about the Quaker basics. Quakers believe in the equality of God's presence, that God is in all people everywhere. **We believe the best way to make decisions is to listen carefully, educate ourselves thoroughly, and speak thoughtfully.** Last week, we talked about ongoing revelation, our belief that God's truth is not confined to any one book, church, or religion, that God still speaks.

Today, I want to talk about pacifism, but not in the way we typically think of it. **We usually define pacifism as *not fighting in war.*** Since most of us aren't eligible for military service, it's easy to be a pacifist. So instead of talking about pacifism as non-participation in war, I would like to talk about *non-coercion* and the weapons with which we fight.

The Prussian general and military strategist Karl von Clausewitz famously referred to war as "the continuation of policy by other means." **If that is true, and history seems to indicate then wars begin not when the first shot is fired, but when the first effort is made to compel someone to do what we want them to do.** Physical violence almost always has its origins in emotional violence. Emotional violence doesn't always end in physical violence. But physical violence almost always begins with emotional violence, with coercion.

Several years ago, we were vacationing in Michigan and befriended some other couples. One night, we went out to dinner. **The men sat at one end of the table talking about guy things—fishing and sports and cars, and the women sat at the other end talking about things their husbands did that drove them crazy.** I was smack in between the two groups, kind of a referee.

One of the women was mad at her husband, and had been for some time. He'd been promising for a number of years to renovate their kitchen. **So they'd been saving money for the kitchen, but he'd taken the money and bought a motorcycle instead.** She intimated that as a consequence their marital relations had become rather chilly, and that things weren't going to warm up until she got her new kitchen. **We all knew what she meant.**

Then her husband said he'd bought a motorcycle because their marital relations had grown cold, he didn't want to be in the house, and that money for the kitchen wasn't going to be forthcoming until certain areas of their relationship warmed up. **And I was stuck right in between them.** It was a long evening. So here was a couple—she was using intimacy as a weapon, and he was using money. **These were basically good people who would never have physically harmed one another, but they were using the weapons they had to inflict emotional pain and hurt on one another.**

There are many ways we do battle with people and there are weapons we brandish without thought—intimacy and money are two of them.

Let's look at a current issue from the perspective of non-coercion: I've been having differences of opinion with our yearly meeting superintendents. **I've been torn about how best to handle that.** I don't want to subsidize fundamentalism, so I thought of asking Fairfield not to pay my yearly meeting assessment. That'll teach 'em. **But I've been thinking more about that.** When their names were brought forward for consideration, I gave my approval to hire them. **Implicit in my approval was my promise to help pay their salary.** They have children to feed and bills to pay. Is it Christian for me to threaten their ability to do that so I can get my way? **It's one thing for me to engage them kindly and openly about our disagreements.** It seems another matter entirely to coerce or compel them into desired behavior, using my money as a weapon, and in the process breaking my promise and escalating the war of words, which would lead ultimately to pain and separation.

But ethics aside, there's another reason we should reject coercion, a very practical reason. It doesn't work. Because coercion inevitably breeds resentment and resistance. **It is counter-productive, making others doubly determined to continue the very behavior we find troubling.** If you have children, or remember when you were a child, you know this is true.

The more someone demands we do something, the more we resist it. The man who punished his wife by withholding money likely didn't find her more approachable. **People almost always resent and resist our efforts to change them.** This frustrates us, so we resort to coercion, withholding money, intimacy, or friendship to influence their behavior.

If religion teaches us anything, it ought to teach us that kind and candid dialogue is better than coercion. Unfortunately, coercion is built into a lot of religions. **Believe in Jesus, join this church, pray this way, give this amount, get baptized in this manner, marry this person, interpret the Bible, the Koran, or the Torah this way, believe this thing or that thing about God, or God will punish you.** The sword is always dangling just over our heads, the threat of punishment always near. Coercion. Compulsion. This is the start of violence. **First, we deny people the right to be themselves, then we deny them the right to be.**

When I was 20 years old, I began attending a discussion group at Plainfield Meeting. **We were meeting at the home of a woman named Mina Emily Seidler.** She was well into her seventies and was just a wonderful woman, full of life and good humor. Like many new converts, I was very passionate about the Christian faith and rather narrow.

One night in our group, Mina Emily said something that caused my heresy detector to beep. When I saw that others agreed with her, I said, “I’m not sure I can belong to a church where people believe such things.” I said it intentionally, in order to pressure them to change their way of thinking. **I remember Mina Emily reaching across, she was seated beside me, taking me by the hand and saying, “Oh, Philip, Quakers seldom agree on anything. And that is perfectly alright.”**

I learned three things that evening: First, I learned where two or three Quakers are gathered, there’ll be four opinions. Second, I learned that is perfectly alright. Third, I learned that honest and open discussion is superior to intimidation and coercion.

There was another man at our group that evening. **He left disenchanted, saying Quakers didn’t believe in anything.** He was mistaken. We believe there is that of God in every person. We believe in listening carefully and speaking thoughtfully. **We believe God still speaks.** And we believe that physical violence often begins with emotional violence, so we reject coercion, intimidation, and compulsion, preferring, as the early Quakers said, “to see what love can do”.