

Friends' Struggles Through the Years

Ron Mock
(Northwest Yearly Meeting)

Presented at the FWCC conference
“Friends’ Peace Witness in a Time of Crisis”
Guilford College
Greensboro, North Carolina, USA
January 18, 2003

FOREWORD

This essay is the text of a presentation given at the peace conference convened in January 2003 by Friends World Committee for Consultation Section of the Americas. “Friends’ Peace Witness in a Time of Crisis” was only the 5th conference in FWCC’s history that was specially called to consider a major topic of concern to all Friends. It brought together Friends from all over North America and from all the branches of Quakerism that North American Friends represent.

Even though the Peace Conference took place before the U.S.-led war in Iraq, the messages presented are still timely. Presentations focused on the topics of the history of the Quaker peace testimony, its spiritual and biblical basis, individuals’ struggles with the testimony, and information about various peacemaking efforts going on throughout the world. The participants reported feeling renewed and supported for continuing the work.

ORDERING INFORMATION

Both the book of the entire proceedings from the Peace Conference and a 5-CD set of recordings of all the presentations are available for purchase. Contact:

FWCC Section of the Americas

1506 Race Street

Philadelphia, PA 19102 USA

Tel: 215-241-7250

Fax: 215-241-7285

E-mail: Americas@fwccamericas.org

Web site: www.fwccamericas.org

PPPPPP

Quakers have been consistently pacifist, but it's been a fuzzy sort of pacifism, in two ways.

First is the nature of Friends' understandings. Quakers give exceptional weight to this light within. For a group keen on following the leading within as the fundamental rule of ethics, arriving at a firm a priori rule about the content of such leadings seems a little out of character. Yet pacifism is a firm conviction that one will never be called to kill, nor to participate in killing.

Wouldn't Quakers have been more likely to be a modern revival of holy warriors? After all, Old Testament holy wars are marked above all by the willingness of God's people to radically obey God.

The apparent cases of approved war in the Old Testament all share a common denominator with the Old Testament cases of NOT going to war: radical obedience to God. War is condemned when it is the result of merely human planning, such as God predicted would be the standard approach of Israel's monarchy, and as the prophets decried when this turned out to be the case. On the other hand, war is commended. No, that is not enough, it is commanded—when it is at God's direction, with the proviso that the warriors have to be scrupulously obedient to God's rules of engagement. God might command the warriors one time to fight with pitchers and torches, and to do no direct harm to the enemy. On another occasion, God might command the slaughter of the entire noncombatant population. Whatever God commanded, that was Israel's duty. Human planning was pretty much useless, in God's eyes.

So the key in the Old Testament is not foresight, or a commitment to make war or not make war. The key is a commitment to be radically obedient to God. This implies a sort of operational flexibility, a readiness to go anywhere and do anything, but only as God commands. Doesn't this sound good? All the inner light and nothing but the inner light. What could be more Quakerly than that?

So maybe Friends should be a little uneasy foreclosing God's options when evil abounds. We may be pretty well convinced that love is inconsistent with killing, but we do not control the Spirit. It is in charge.

I am glad we haven't gone this route; holy war has earned a horrible reputation, used as it has been by everyone from the Crusaders to the abortion clinic bombers to Al Qaida. And one benefit of being an evangelical Quaker is all the weight I have to give to the Gospels, which help clarify some of the paradoxes left us by the Old Testament. Jesus seems to be making a firm point: we had been imperfectly understanding God all along, thinking that the Divine character was expressed in an eye for an eye, etc. Instead, God wants us to pray for our enemies, go the extra mile for them, forgive them, love them. There is no room for lethal violence in Jesus' example, nor in his character, nor in his message. His disciples do not kill, because they love.

Quaker pacifism may seem fuzzy to a lawyer (like me) because it is more experiential than propositional. As a community, Quakers in relationship with the Creator get to know some things about God's character. God is loving, even toward our enemies, and is omnipotent, so will never run out of options for meeting our needs. To kill is to despair either of God's love or of God's omnipotence, and is never consistent with faith in the God we attend to in times of worship, prayer, and action.

My second reason for saying Quakers practice a fuzzy pacifism is historical. Quakers have generally been comfortable with participating in government, even police work. This is a marked contrast to our cousin pacifist denominations, Mennonites and Brethren, who have traditionally seen any participation in the wielding of the sword as inconsistent with pacifism. Quakers are more restless than that. If they see things broken, they want them fixed. Whether the agency for fixing things is private or governmental, they want to use whatever tools work. This even applies to regulatory enforcement, otherwise known as policing. Perhaps some Quakers may consider lethality to not be necessary to policing, but this is not a widely held view.

It seems to me that Quakers have been trying to have everything, and this is a good thing. That is, we want to be able to be unfettered followers of the Spirit. But at the same time, we want to be able to live by our faith that God will never lead us to kill. And, to compound matters, we still want to be engaged in public life, to lend our hands and voices to the making and execution of public policy. This kind of thinking brings us face to face with several dilemmas.

Pacifist Dilemmas

I would say there are five basic types of dilemmas for pacifists. The first is a simple one, the one that students ask me about every year: what do we do if someone is attacking our loved ones? I want to call this **Peter's Dilemma**, since it is the very choice Peter faced when Judas and the Sanhedrin security men came to arrest Jesus. Peter decided to defend Jesus violently, until Jesus stopped him.

This dilemma is difficult both for visceral and for more reflective reasons. First, we have an instinctive urge to protect our loved ones. In a situation where there is some choice in who will die, we automatically want to spare the lives of those we know and love.

How many pacifists would hold their children back to allow someone else's children into the last lifeboat? So, looking at this as a sort of lifeboat situation—either Jesus dies or the guard does—Peter's reaction seems familiar and hard to criticize. He acts to save his friend's life.

But this is not just a straight-up choice between two lives selected at random. Peter is also choosing to protect the innocent against the guilty. Now, a temple guard is not a major villain. He is just a man doing his job. But in this case, that means he is taking part in a grave injustice: the illegal, surreptitious arrest of an innocent man, preparatory to a rigged trial and a heinous execution. Compared to the moral perfection of Jesus, this poor temple guard is a nasty criminal.

So, which should die? Which more deserves death? Well, probably neither, but if a choice is going to be made between an unjust aggressor and an innocent target, isn't it clear that the aggressor should take the risk of injury and death, rather than the target? So not only is Peter's reaction understandable as a visceral reaction to an attack on his friend, it is also defensible, perhaps, as a discerning moral choice as to which person should bear the risk of suffering.

Jesus rebukes Peter. In one sense, this represents Jesus' waiver of any desire to be so defended, and thus undermines Peter's rationales. But Jesus also warns Peter that his moral calculation is off. Peter has calculated only the most immediate consequences of his sword-waving. But down the road there are other consequences. Our actions help create the future. By wielding the sword, Peter is helping to condition the behavior of others. He is helping to define another arena in life as a game involving violence. In the future, temple guards will have to

increase their armament, and their suspicion of bystanders, etc. They will escalate the game, and so will people who might oppose them.

Every use of the sword multiplies future uses of the sword. He that builds his life behind a sword-based defensive wall will stimulate in his neighbors and enemies symmetrical responses, as they equip themselves to deal with the new levels of threat in their lives. Peter hasn't taken into account in his moral calculus this effect: doing violence increases violence, and not only the doer but also a lot of innocent bystanders will suffer.

In Jesus' specific case, this escalation will happen so fast that Peter's exertions will not save Jesus. Other temple guards in the party accompanying Judas will pull their swords, and even if Peter's defense is effective against this sortie, the Temple authorities will only send out a larger party, perhaps with Roman reinforcements, until Jesus, and Peter, and probably all eleven remaining disciples are captured and executed as rebels. Nothing will have been gained. Peter is going to die by the sword, maybe that very night, along with a lot of other people, if he doesn't put the sword away and begin to behave nonviolently.

The second dilemma is Peter's dilemma writ large, which I want to call **Bonhoeffer's Dilemma**. In this situation, more than just a few people are at risk of death or extreme suffering if one does not act. Pacifist Dietrich Bonhoeffer concluded that killing Hitler was the right thing to do because it would save so many other lives.

Perhaps someone who would be nonviolent in a Peter's Dilemma situation, possibly because there are few victims at risk, might decide that killing is acceptable when the good to be done is large enough. There is some logic in this. Peter's dilemma gets resolved in favor of nonviolence because, if everything goes very well, violent defense will cause about as many deaths as it saves. Jesus waives any desire for such a defense; and in this fairly close moral balance, the costs of future violence stimulated by this act will quickly outweigh any gains.

But in Bonhoeffer's case, all these factors change. Killing one person—Hitler—seems to promise the rescue of thousands or even millions from death. The cost in future violence of Bonhoeffer's plot is much more likely to be offset by the lives saved in the short run. In fact, by removing Hitler, it may be possible to prevent more world-warping violence than Bonhoeffer's act would have generated.

Furthermore, Hitler is even more deserving of death than the temple guard. And Hitler's future victims have not asked us to refrain from defending them.

Both Peter's and Bonhoeffer's dilemmas are, in a sense, math problems. Do I kill an unjust attacker to save the lives of those she is attacking? To a nonpacifist they are not conceptually difficult math problems, although the calculations can be lengthy and uncertain. You kill to save more lives, or you kill to save more innocent lives. You weigh the losses and take the path that cuts costs as far as possible. To a pacifist, the problems are tougher. Not only ends, but means count. Some means are so costly you just can't use them. Using death to prevent death doesn't add up, to the pacifist.

Furthermore, the pacifist realizes that his actions create the context for other actions. The costs of every act of killing include making the next act of killing more likely. Our society is stuck in the myth of effective violence, the notion that when you really mean business you do violence. Every act of violence adds weight to the myth. So when Peter considers whether to

slice off the ear of a Sanhedrin guard, or Bonhoeffer helps plant a bomb in a suitcase, they should have taken into account the nearly infinite ramifications of their actions down through history, as sincere, believing people cite their cases to reinforce their own decisions to embrace violence.

We saw in 2001 an extreme version of this kind of math problem in the dilemma facing those on United Flight 93 over Pennsylvania. As far as we can tell, at some point the passengers on that plane learned that they, and their hijackers, were all going to die. They did not have a choice to spare the hijackers' lives, unless they somehow managed to overcome them and save the plane. The most likely result was that all would die if they attacked their hijackers. But if they didn't attack, then everyone on the plane and maybe hundreds on the ground would die.

I am with Jesus and, I think, against Bonhoeffer on the first two dilemmas. But on the Flight 93 dilemma, I think I am with the passengers who decided to attack their hijackers. They did not choose death for anyone, as death was already chosen. In fact, they probably had a chance to save the plane and its occupants, including all or most of the hijackers, if they attacked. In the actual case, many on the ground were certainly saved by their deaths. And yet I hesitate. Do I know how many future deaths I am buying by embracing death as a tool, even in this most extreme of all cases?

These first three dilemmas are gut-wrenching. But they are not the hardest ones we face, nor are they really at the heart of our response to terrorism and tyranny.

Perhaps the centerpiece dilemma Quakers have faced historically was their own version of what was originally **Constantine's dilemma**. Constantine claimed to have seen a vision convicting him of the truth of Christianity. This vision came on the eve of the crucial battle in which he had an opportunity to rid the empire of a particularly vicious pretender to the throne, Maxentius. Constantine faced a choice, whether he knew it or not: should he go through with his attack on Maxentius as an attempt to secure order and justice for his countrymen; or should he abandon his own claims to the throne and let Maxentius rule, thus avoiding a deadly battle; or should he take some third path, which probably would not have been clear to him at the time?

Quakers in Pennsylvania, after running the colony for some decades, came to a point in the French and Indian wars where their choices seemed to boil down to loving their neighbors (and protecting them from an enemy) on one hand, and loving their enemy (by not fighting) on the other. Some Friends left their positions in colonial government rather than fight, while others left their pacifism rather than refuse to help defend their neighbors.

We are in a similar position today. We do not as a Society dominate political structures anymore, but we as citizens still contribute to our nation's political debate and, through voting, to its decision-making. We share Constantine's Dilemma. Do we endorse violence to stop terrorism and tyranny? Or do we oppose violence even if it allows terror and tyranny to continue with impunity?

Some Friends have abandoned pacifism because of the overwhelming importance of seeing terror punished and its mechanisms destroyed. Others have urged our country to eschew violence, even if it means terrorists get away with it and tyrants continue to devour their people.

I cannot stand comfortably with either side in this debate. In particular, I have a question for those stridently anti-war, whether it be in Iraq or against terrorism generally. What does it mean to you to love your enemies?

The Good Samaritan v. Saddam Hussein

Let's take Iraq as the "enemy" for a moment, and compare it to the familiar parable of the Good Samaritan, which Jesus used to try to explain to the disciples what it meant to love one's neighbor. Iraq is the man in the ditch. Saddam and his thugs are the people who have just beat him up. In fact, in our parable, they are still holding their victim down in the ditch and punching him now and then.

Who in our version of the parable is the Pharisee? Remember, the Pharisee sees the man in the ditch, but doesn't come to his aid. Rather, he passes by on the other side. I can imagine him saying to himself, "See how I am loving my neighbor? You won't find me down in that ditch beating that man up." Or maybe, if he's really virtuous, he says "I do not believe in violence. I love those robbers, so I won't beat them up."

We in the peace community all too often act as if we believed Jesus' command was "do not harm your enemies." Or maybe it was "try not to bother your enemies." Instead, the command is to LOVE our enemies.

We play the part of the Pharisee when we let Iraqis suffer tyranny while we pass by on the other side. We play the part of the Pharisee when we let whole communities suffer, until their despair boils over into terrorist violence.

I am not urging that we become a new character in the story. There is no Rambo in the Gospels, who comes with guns blazing and shoots up the thugs (and maybe the man in the ditch a little, too). But when it comes to loving the man in the ditch, wouldn't Rambo be a better candidate than the Pharisee? Instead, in our version of the parable, we run up the road to try to stop Rambo from coming in. "Stop!" we cry. "You're going to hurt someone." Or we might go stand with the robbers, and tell Rambo "if you shoot at them, you are going to have to shoot at us, too."

Jesus praises the Samaritan. The Samaritan recognizes what the issue is: the man in the ditch is suffering and needs help. He is more interested in the plight of the man in the ditch than he is in the purity of his clothes. He takes personal risks, to his plans for his own life, and to his finances, in the form of increasing his own exposure to the robbers still lurking who did in the man in the ditch. He loves. If the robbers are still around, I bet he still goes into the ditch to rescue the man. He wards off robbers' blows, or takes some of them himself, for the sake of the man in the ditch. He comes to know firsthand the evils that robbers can do, and as a result he stops thinking of robbers as someone else's problem. He works to end the evils of robbery without creating new ones.

Here is the modern Quaker dilemma. Can we keep our focus on victims, rather than on our doctrines? Can we learn from those with whom we disagree about methods? George Bush has eloquently argued that we can no longer tolerate either terrorism or tyranny, and that the two are intimately connected. He is right in his analysis, although his methods will create their own evils.

Can we recognize tyranny and terror for the evils they are, and find a way to oppose them nonviolently as vigorously as our country is preparing to fight them violently?

Or will we pass by into Phariseeism, keeping our skirts clean but leaving people in ditches all over the world?

This is the crucial dilemma facing Quakers now. We can't abdicate, as some of our Anabaptists friends used to do; we can't pass by on the other side as if our neighbors' problems were not our problems. If Constantine abdicates, Maxentius rapes the empire. If the Quakers abdicate, the French and the Indians get slaughtered. If we abdicate, people will suffer and die under dictatorships and kleptocracies all over the world, and communities will sink into the corrosive despair that spawns terrorists.

Nor can we abdicate in the other direction, as unfortunately Constantine did, and acquiesce in another round of killing. That way lies many of the same evils.

And we won't resolve it by doing what I am doing at this moment, by standing safe in North Carolina and venting. We can only resolve it by acting, by making the same sacrifices soldiers may soon make on our behalf. Our time, our treasure, and our lives themselves must be thrown into the fray. There needs to be massive, nonpermissive incursion into the Iraqs of the world, not only to prevent our government from bombing, but to prevent their governments from oppressing. One half the message is not enough.

Jesus' Dilemma

There is one dilemma left, and it is Jesus' own dilemma. The Gospels recount how Jesus was tempted in the wilderness by Satan himself. Jesus was encouraged to turn stones into bread, to accept dominion over all the earth, and to cast himself from the top of the Temple.

Think about this scenario. Satan has just three chances at Jesus, so you can bet he's pulled out his three best shots. What about these make them the best choices to ensnare the Messiah and ruin all of God's plans?

The temptation to turn stones into bread is, I believe, a temptation to meet all the world's needs by fiat. Hunger would be abolished if stones were edible. Wouldn't this be a wonderful thing? Isn't ending human suffering what Jesus' ministry is all about? But Jesus responds that bread is not enough for human life. So, I wonder, what else do we need?

Satan thinks he knows the answer to that question, and addresses it in the second temptation. Why stop at ending hunger? If Jesus is king of the world, he can institute justice, end systems of oppression, and reform economies. Turning stones into bread feeds people. Taking over the power structure makes it possible to meet other needs, too. But Jesus declines, saying that such a vast temporal power would interfere with each person's primary obligation, which is to worship and serve God only. A government designed to meet all needs would demand total obedience, and that is idolatry.

OK, says Satan, you have a good point. So let's make it easier for people to believe in God. He suggests that Jesus toss himself from the top of the temple. This would provoke an unmistakable display of the existence of God, as angels would appear to catch him and make sure he didn't even strike his foot against a stone. People would then see clearly that God exists, and would worship. But Jesus says "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."

This last is, to me, one of the most intriguing passages in all of Scripture. Why would Satan want everyone to see clearly that Jesus was the Son of God? What could evil possibly gain from God becoming that much more explicit?

I don't even know my own mind completely, so it won't surprise you to hear that I have no confidence in my ability to decipher Satan's thinking. There is something clearly wrong with putting God to the test. I think this means that we would be weaker if we could assay God like so much ore, or like judges at an ice skating championship, or even like we might size up our spouses. God has not been explicit to us since Adam and Eve fell, and apparently for good reason, for our own benefit.

It would ruin us, apparently, if we could move away from faith to objective certainty.

Satan not only aimed at the heart of all that is good in the world, he did so in a way that both responded to Jesus' points and upped the ante. Having bread handed to us would be bad. Having a government that demanded devotion that belongs to God would be worse. But having a God that left nothing to faith would be worst of all.

So how are these dilemmas for pacifists? Well, at one level they are dilemmas for all of us, who want to put our neighbors and the solutions to their problems on autopilot and not have to worry about them anymore. A world without interdependence would, it seems, be hellish.

But at another level, they are connected to a particularly pointed issue for pacifists. By rejecting Satan's offers, Jesus put the success of his world-saving mission into the hands of others. Satan offered shortcuts, each of which would bypass any need to involve feckless disciples. Instead, Jesus entrusted His mission to generations of slow, patient loving, delegated to vast numbers of pretty wretched creatures like ourselves. Satan's temptations must have been reinforced by Jesus' all-too-well-justified apprehensions about our capacity to stay on task, to pay attention, to get off our duffs, to even want to be good.

We have done a pretty spotty job, too. And yet, the task is still ours. No short cuts are planned this side of the end of the world. Jesus did not succumb to the temptation of the quick fix. He arranged things so they had to depend on the free-will decisions of millions of people, repeated every day of their lives. This doesn't sound like a good idea to me, but what do I know?

We face the same limitations. We cannot coerce our way to the Peaceable Kingdom. We can only convince our way there. People will come freely, or they won't come at all. Or worst, if we try to force-march them there, we will only be setting up a new evil empire to replace the old ones.

We fall to Satan's temptations every time we try to manipulate instead of inform, demonize instead of empathize, pull a fast one instead of act with integrity, cover our tracks instead of being transparent, or shade the truth rather than face all of it because in each case we are trying to enact our own decision regardless of the free will of others. We might as well be killing them just a little bit, taking away key bits of their humanity.

We are not called to succeed. We are called to try and to do so with the means that embody our ends: with love for enemies as well as friends; with nonviolence in word and deed; with respect for that of God in every person, leaving them room to work out their own salvation, the basic need of every human being.

PPPPP

About the Author

Ron Mock is Associate Professor of Political Science and Peace Studies at George Fox University. He was Director of the Center for Peace Learning there for 13 years. He is a member of the QWP (Quaker Middle East Working Party) and has finished a book on terrorism.

About the Wider Quaker Fellowship

Friends World Committee for Consultation, Section of the Americas, works to facilitate loving understanding of diversities among Friends while we discover together, with God's help, our common spiritual ground, and to facilitate full expression of our Friends' testimonies in the world. Friends World Committee's Wider Quaker Fellowship program is a ministry of literature. Through our mailings of readings, we seek to lift up voices of Friends of different countries, languages and Quaker traditions, and invite all to enter into spiritual community with Friends.

Printed 2004

by the

WIDER QUAKER FELLOWSHIP

a program of Friends World Committee for Consultation

Section of the Americas

1506 Race Street

Philadelphia, PA 19102-1498, USA

Tel: 215-241-7293 **G** Fax: 215-241-7285

E-mail: wqf@fwccamericas.org

Web: www.fwccamericas.org