

The Quaker Peace Testimony

Diana Lee Hirschi

We utterly deny all outward wars and strife and fighting with outward weapons for any end or under any pretense whatsoever; this is our testimony to the whole world . . .

. . . The Spirit of Christ by which we are guided is not changeable, so as once to command us from a thing of evil and again to move us into it; and we certainly know and testify to the world that the Spirit of Christ, which leads us into all truth, will never move us to fight and war against any man with outward weapons, neither for the Kingdom of Christ nor for the kingdoms of this world. . . . therefore we cannot learn war anymore.

—The Quaker Peace Testimony¹

QUAKERS, OFTEN CALLED FRIENDS, have several core “testimonies” that can be remembered by the mnemonic “SPICE”—Simplicity, Peace, Integrity,

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1. From “A Declaration from the Harmless and Innocent People of God, Called Quakers, Against All Sedition, Plotters, and Fighters in the World: For Removing the Ground of Jealousy and Suspicion from Magistrates and People Concerning Wars and Fightings,” *North Pacific Yearly Meeting Faith and Practice* 35 (1993). This declaration is found in virtually every Quaker edition of *Faith and Practice*.

Community, and Equality. Each of these interrelated testimonies is essential to our identity as Friends, but we are clearly best known for one of them. As H. Larry Ingle has pointed out, “[T]he Quaker peace testimony [is] the most remarked-on feature of the Religious Society of Friends. When the world’s people think of Friends, they think of our [fundamental disapproval] of war, and when Quakers want to distinguish themselves from other Christian groups, they identify themselves as one of the ‘historic peace churches.’”² Today, in the aftermath of September 11 and with the continuing American war against Iraq, our peace testimony has attracted renewed attention. Many look to the Quaker peace testimony for a possible alternative to the destructive violence of waging war, and no doubt it could act to deter war if enough people subscribed to it. In today’s world, however, the peace testimony cannot prevent governments from running amok. As a Quaker, “convinced” in 1978 and a member of the Salt Lake Monthly Meeting of Friends, I believe that the Quaker peace testimony is a true expression of the spirit of Christ.

Quakers established early in our history that we would neither fight wars nor violently resist governments. In 1661, after twelve years of Cromwell and the Protectorate, Charles II returned to England from France and was crowned king. The Fifth Monarchists, who had believed that the next king of England would be Jesus himself, saw Charles’s ascension as a kind of blasphemy and took up arms. They were handily defeated and beheaded, but their uprising made the king and parliament even more ill-disposed toward the radical groups that had flourished during the revolution. Quakers were of particular concern to the government because, unlike most of the other radical groups, secular and religious, the Quakers did not go underground.³ To convince the king that Quakers, despite some rather radical beliefs, were not dangerous, George Fox and a number of other Quakers sent a long epistle to Charles II entitled “A Declaration from the Harmless and Innocent People of God, Called Quakers,

2. H. Larry Ingle, “The Politics of Despair: The Quaker Peace Testimony, 1661,” retrieved on November 16, 2003, from www.kimopress.com/Ingle-01.htm.

3. These historical details are summarized from H. Larry Ingle, *First Among Friends* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), chap. 13.

against All Sedition, Plotters, and Fighters in the World.”⁴ It is this document that contains the first expression of the Quaker peace testimony, quoted at the beginning of this essay.

It is not clear how much influence this letter had on the king and parliament. They certainly did not let the Quakers be, but they did not behead them either. Instead Quakers were sent to jail en masse pursuant to the Quaker Act of 1662, which forbade attendance at Quaker meetings, and the Conventicle Act of 1664 directed against all nonconformist religious services. (I know a lot of teens who would love to belong to a church whose meetings they were forbidden to attend.) Thousands of Quakers were imprisoned and their meeting houses were destroyed because they held their meetings openly, refusing to gather secretly. Those not in jail continued to meet on the rubble. Finally, in 1689 the Toleration Act put an end to imprisonment for attending church. Quakers’ nonviolent resistance to these unjust acts had borne fruit. They had put the peace testimony into practice through their nonviolent response to intolerable government action.⁵

After this period, Quakers were never again the kind of social radicals that preached a world turned upside down. (Many of us long for those olden days!) But the Quakers were preserved, and they never practiced and always preached against war thereafter. Ingle correctly characterizes the importance of Quaker opposition to war when he writes,

Although “testimony” does not have the same connotation as “dogma” or “creed,” it still points to the most fundamental practice that corporate bodies of Quakers have always adhered to; while some individual Friends have participated in or approved of every war that has torn their human communities since 1661, when the peace testimony was published, no yearly nor monthly meeting . . . has ever repudiated it. . . . To do so would be to cut that body off from other Quakers even more surely than, for example, employing those whom early Friends dismissed as “hireling priests.”⁶

Still, as Ingle suggests, individual Quakers have participated in virtually every war since the peace testimony was first declared. In the 1670s,

4. John L. Nickalls, ed., *The Journal of George Fox* (Philadelphia: Religious Society of Friends, 1997), 398.

5. Howard H. Brinton, *Friends for 300 Years* (Wallingford, Pa.: Pendle Hill Publications, 1994), 157–59.

6. “The Politics of Despair: The Quaker Peace Testimony, 1661,” available in October 2003 at www.kimpress.com/Ingle-01.htm.

Quakers controlled the colonial government of Rhode Island, but individually, as colonial administrators and as settler colonists, they prepared for and prosecuted Rhode Island's part in King Phillip's war, a war against the confederated northeastern Indian tribes. In their preparations, however, they did enact a statute exempting anyone with conscientious scruples from service in the war. This statute was promptly rescinded when the traditional Protestants regained control some time later.⁷

Quakers, being in the forefront of the antislavery movement, were of course very sympathetic to the Union cause in the American Civil War, and it is hard to believe a large number didn't support the fight and actually participate in it, although I am not aware of any study on this question. Quakers signed up in large numbers to fight in World War II.

My own observation is that the response of individual Quakers to the peace testimony ranges over a wide spectrum. Most refuse to serve in the military; a small but significant number resist war taxes; many maintain a vigilant and active participation in peace and antiwar activities; and some adhere generally to the testimony as long as there is no war on (much like being a strict vegetarian between meals). Of course, the differing responses to any particular war cause conflicts in yearly and monthly meetings. Members discuss what the testimony means in relationship to the war in front of them and how the peace testimony should be expressed to the wider community. At the end of these discussions, unity is reached on the action the meeting wants to take. These discussions can get quite intense, but the meeting survives them. The process itself is an important part of Quaker belief, and we could almost add another testimony—the testimony of right Quaker process. All of this springs from fundamental Quaker beliefs, held variously within each individual Friend, of what our right relation with each other is.

One might wonder, given the relatively small number of Quakers throughout history, what kind of effect, if any, the peace testimony has had upon the world. Let me describe three examples of the impact of the peace testimony on recent world events.

Most of us, when asked to name someone whose life was devoted to nonviolence, would think of Mahatma Gandhi, yet few know that Gandhi's beliefs and practices were influenced by American Quakers. In

7. Meredith Baldwin Weddle, *Walking in the Way of Peace: Quaker Pacifism in the Seventeenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 169–82.

1894, while a young barrister in Natal, South Africa, Gandhi received a copy of an English translation of Leo Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*. Gandhi said in his autobiography that the book overwhelmed him. He reread it while in jail in 1906 and carried it with him from jail to jail throughout this period early in his great campaigns of civil disobedience, or *satyagraha*. During this time, Gandhi and Tolstoy had struck up a correspondence. The last long letter Tolstoy wrote was to Gandhi.⁸

On the very first page of *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*, Tolstoy acknowledges his correspondence with American Quakers and the pamphlets, journals, and books they had sent him. He concludes his remarks about his indebtedness to Friends:

Further acquaintance with the labors of the Quakers and their works . . . showed me not only that the impossibility of reconciling Christianity with force and war had been recognized long, long ago, but that this irreconcilability had been long ago proved so clearly so indubitably that one could only wonder how this impossible reconciliation of Christian teaching with the use of force, which has been and is still, preached in the churches, could have been maintained in spite of it.⁹

The path of influence may be indirect, but if Quaker belief had so strong an influence on Tolstoy, and Tolstoy had a similar effect on Gandhi, then Gandhi's nonviolent achievements in twentieth-century India were partly inspired by the Quaker peace testimony.

Another tangible expression of the Quaker peace testimony is the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), formed during World War I to assist people affected by that war. It continued its efforts after the war and still continues them today. In 1947, the AFSC shared the Nobel Peace Prize with its British counterpart. In the conclusion of his speech at the presentation of the prize, the chairman of the Nobel committee summarized the contribution of the two organizations with these words:

The Quakers have shown us that it is possible to translate into action what lies deep in the hearts of many: compassion for others and the desire to help them—that rich expression of the sympathy between all men, regardless of nationality or race, which, transformed into deeds, must form

8. Martin Green, "Foreword," in Leo Tolstoy, *The Kingdom of God Is Within You* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), v-xi.

9. Tolstoy, *Kingdom of God Is Within You*, 2-3.

the basis for lasting peace. For this reason alone the Quakers deserve to receive the Nobel Peace Prize today.

But they have given us something more: they have shown us the strength to be derived from faith in the victory of the spirit over force. And this brings to mind two verses from one of Arnulf Överland's poems which helped so many of us during the war. I know of no better salute:

The unarmed only
Can draw on sources eternal.
The spirit alone gives victory.¹⁰

A third expression of the peace testimony is seen in the work of the Friends Committee on National Legislation (FCNL), an organization which lobbies the U.S. Congress on legislative matters of concern to Quakers. FCNL describes the broad areas of its policies and projects by the following phrases, which may be found at the head of its publications and websites: "We seek a world free of war and the threat of war; we seek a society with equity and justice for all; we seek a community where every person's potential may be fulfilled; we seek an earth restored." For example, FCNL is working, and encouraging citizens to work, to defeat the development of nuclear "bunker busters," a pet project of the present regime in Washington.

When the Trade Towers and the Pentagon were attacked, FCNL, being a Quaker organization, knew immediately what its response would be. It advocated action governed by international law and cooperation to bring the attackers to justice. FCNL's headquarters are across the street from the Senate Office Building. The morning after the attack and to this day, everyone leaving the Senate Offices is greeted by a huge banner on the FCNL building which says "War Is Not the Answer."

To conclude, let me describe the Quaker decision-making process and the wellsprings of Quaker belief as I understand them. With respect to process, my understanding is essentially the same as any other Quaker's: We take no action until everyone is in unity with it. We have lots of guidelines for getting to unity. Unity does not mean that everyone is delighted with the decision finally taken. On questions of war and peace when the dogs of war have been unleashed, we usually even lose a member or two. We don't seem to come to unity on extreme or provoca-

10. Gunnar Jahn, Chairman of the Nobel Committee, "Presentation Speech," Nobel Peace Prize 1947, Nobel e-Museum, retrieved on November 16, 2003, from <http://www.nobel.se/peace/laureates/1947/press.html>.

tive action. For example, no Quaker meeting—and in fact, no Quaker, to my knowledge—has endorsed or participated in a Plowshares action where weapons are beaten and damaged, much as many of us admire the courage and commitment of those involved. But we oppose war and the preparation for war.

Where does this commitment come from? Here each Quaker must give his or her own answer. We have no creed or dogma. You can be a comfortable Quaker and an agnostic, in the usual sense of that word, but probably not a *militant* agnostic. (I learned what a militant agnostic is from a bumper sticker: “I don’t know, and neither do you!”) That is, you would have to make your peace with common Quaker concepts such as “the inner light” and sayings such as “Christ has come to teach his children himself” or there is “that of God in everyone.” We have no authorities to tell us what these things mean, so you would have to figure them out for yourself.

For me, with no dogmatic ideas about God and Christ, these fundamental Quaker truths can be summed up with a statement by the great nineteenth-century Quaker Elias Hicks, as quoted by Walt Whitman: “The fountain of all truth is in *yourself* and your inherent relations.”¹¹ And this is true of all persons. We must as Quakers look to the Spirit within, as tested against our traditions and confirmed by our community. For this reason, we cannot look for truth from a prophet, from a pope or archbishop, or from a book or a boss. So we have no hierarchy; no one gives commands or bosses others around—not with the sanction of Quaker faith and practice, at least. This spirit, however any individual Quaker experiences it, leads those who stay with us to agree with William Penn, who said, “A good end cannot sanctify evil means; nor must we ever do evil that good may come of it. Let us then try what love can do.”¹²

11. Walt Whitman, “November Boughs: Notes (Such as They Are) Founded on Elias Hicks,” *Prose Works* (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1892) retrieved November 4, 2003, from Great Books Online, Bartleby.com, 2000, www.bartleby.com/229/5021.html.

12. A common Quaker conflation of two sayings, numbers 537 and 545, by William Penn. See William Penn, *The Peace of Europe, The Fruits of Solitude and Other Writings*, edited by Edwin B. Bronner, Everyman Library (London: J. M. Dent, 1933), 61, 62.