

I ran into an old friend this week, who was back in town visiting his parents, and we got to talking about some of the teachers we'd had growing up. Our class was small, so we mostly had the same teachers, and because I wasn't all that bright, I had some of the teachers twice. So we were talking about our favorite teachers, then reminisced for a moment about another teacher we'd had and my friend said, "I never really cared for him."

I said, "You know, now that I think about it, I didn't either."

We really couldn't say why we hadn't cared for him, just that we didn't. We didn't dwell on the matter, we just made that observation, then moved on to other topics.

But I couldn't stop thinking about that teacher and why I didn't care for him. I don't usually dwell on such things, but later in the day I remembered something about him. He wasn't a good teacher. He wasn't creative. He didn't strike a chord with the students. And that's fine, not everyone is charismatic and imaginative and personable. That's not a moral failure. But whenever he grew frustrated with us, which was often since he angered easily and was rather impatient, he would throw his weight around. He was one of these men, who, when he wanted you to do something, would say, "You'll do it, because I said you'll do it and I'm in charge!"

So his power and authority didn't rely upon mutuality or respect. We didn't want to please him because we admired, appreciated, or loved him, but because we feared not pleasing him. Now think for a moment of teachers you loved. Perhaps you loved them for their kindness or sense of humor. Or maybe they made learning enjoyable. Perhaps they were passionate about their subject, and made you excited about it too. They didn't compel or force you toward her desired goal, they wooed you toward it, they drew you in. Their teaching was almost a seduction, but in a good way, in a healthy way.

So when I was thinking about this, I thought, "That's what good and healthy religion should do." It should seduce our spirits, should tantalize us, should woo us, not bludgeon us. But think how often religion and religious people do just the opposite. Think how many Christians want to get their way by compelling us, often through the force of government, to do as they demand, who believe it is entirely appropriate to gain our cooperation and obedience by compulsion and law. They're like the teacher I used to have who said, "You'll do it, because I said you'll do it and I'm in charge."

The problem is that when religion acts that way, when it *demand*s *under force of law* that we follow its principles and rules, it might make us obey, but it can never make us enjoy. Because enthusiasm and delight can never be compelled. Obedience and compliance can be compelled. We can be made to do something, but we can't be made to like it.

We can't demand someone be passionate and enthusiastic about something. God knows we've tried, haven't we? Did you ever take a child somewhere and they were whining and you said, "You better straighten up and have a good time." How did that work for you? Did the child suddenly say, "Oh, okay. I'll start enjoying myself." No, of course not.

But there are people of faith who would, if they could, happily use the force and power of government to make the rest of us adhere to their beliefs. Which means they doubt their religion has the appeal and beauty to attract our freely-given devotion and commitment. For all their talk of faith in God, they believe the principles they hold can and must be forced upon others, rather than joyfully and freely embraced. But there is no religion so weak and unappealing as a religion that requires the muscle of government to succeed.

We are at a crossroads in our nation. The marriage of evangelical religion and political power we believed was waning has somehow mustered the strength to make one last stand, seeking to establish by force of law what they could not gain through attraction and appeal. We ignore this marriage of power at our own peril. It is a threat not only to our freedom, it is a threat to the Quaker faith we cherish. A faith we believe should only be chosen, not compelled.

If our ability to communicate and embody the gospel is so weak we require the strength of government to further it, that is our problem to solve, not the government's problem to correct. Of course, we want laws that enrich and expand human well-being. But those laws should stand on their own obvious merits, apart from any appeal to an other-worldly being whose values and priorities appear to differ widely depending on whom is speaking. Good religion entices, not coerces. We do not need, nor should we seek, the power of government to impose our religion. We simply need to embody the very best our faith has to offer.

And if we build such a faith, they will come. Make no mistake, they will come.

The lonely will come, drawn by community.

The poor will come, drawn by compassion.

The wealthy will come, drawn by a hunger for meaning money cannot satisfy.

The beaten down and powerless will come, drawn by dignity and hope.

The sick will come, drawn by healing.

The thoughtful will come, drawn by wisdom.

The broken will come, drawn by wholeness.

The frightened will come, drawn by courage.

If we, by lack of will and love, cannot entice others to the way of Jesus, we should not compel them through force of law. For good religion does not clench the fist. It extends the hand.