Coercive questions represent the category of the most persuasive of all types of questions found in the Gospel of John. In legal contexts, some types of coercive questions are called leading questions in that they attempt to lead a hearer to a pre-determined answer. Coercive questions are asked by speakers in such a way as to push listeners to agree with the speaker—far more than just to answer a question. In contrast to most other types of questions, coercive questions are especially common in arguments, discussions and disputations because of their great rhetorical and persuasive power. Open questions may start a debate, but coercive questions win debates.\(^1\) As a result, coercive questions must use very specific combinations of syntactic, semantic and pragmatic factors to achieve their persuasive results. For example:

\begin{align*}
(1) \quad & \text{Will you trust in Jesus?} \quad \text{(Decisive question)} \\
(2) \quad & \text{Won’t you trust in Jesus?} \quad \text{(Coercive question)}
\end{align*}

Notice the only difference between (1) and (2) is a minor syntactical switch from positive polarity in the first example to negative polarity in the second example. Yet the small syntactic change belies the change in semantic and pragmatic persuasive power.\(^2\) The question in (1) encourages the audience to decide, but the question in (2) subtly pushes any hearer to say ‘yes’ (or resent the question if the push is detected). It is this push—sometimes subtle, sometimes not—that makes these types of questions coercive.

---

\(^1\) A prominent example of this occurs in legal venues, where lawyers who are sympathetic to a witness ask primarily open questions (to establish facts), and lawyers who are opposed to a witness ask primarily coercive questions (especially biased questions, to push the witness); see for example, Malcolm Coulthard and Alison Johnson, \textit{An Introduction to Forensic Linguistics: Language in Evidence} (London: Routledge, 2007), 102–107.

\(^2\) Floricic, “Negation and ‘Focus Clash,’” 130.
Due to the unique nature of language, a speaker can quickly ratchet up the interrogative pressure placed on listeners with stronger and stronger coercive qualities embedded in the questions. For example:

(3) Won’t you trust in Jesus? (Coercive question)
(4) Won’t you just trust in Jesus? (More coercive question)
(5) Isn’t there any way for you to just trust in Jesus? (Very coercive question)
(6) How can you not trust in Jesus? (Very coercive question)
(7) You will trust in Jesus, won’t you? (Super coercive question)

In these examples, the speaker uses several seemingly minor but really very effective rhetorical techniques to persuade and coerce hearers to agree with the speaker. In (3), the negative pushes listeners to respond in an affirmative manner, but not as much as the negative plus a bias word does in (4). By (5), any listener listening begins to feel a certain amount of interrogative pressure. (6) ups the ante further, introducing yet another, even stronger bias word. The question in (7) is arguably the most coercive of all question types, exerting a great deal of interrogative pressure on anyone in the audience. In many situations, (7) would come close to being heard as a threat, and would more than likely have the effect of strongly persuading some and strongly dissuading others in the audience. As a result, coercive questions can have the force of assertions, usually proposing the opposite of the literal meaning of the question.

Coercive questions also have a darker side: They are a regular staple of all sorts of unscrupulous and ruthless language. They may display a high degree of interrogative bias, and they often do not fight fair. They exemplify power imbalance in natural discourse, and an asker can use them to assert control or bring an accusation against listeners. Care must be taken when using coercive questions types—if they are not formed properly, they can easily backfire on the asker.

---

3 The fourth question is a negative tag question (sometimes called a rhetorical agreement question); for a sample study of its coercive power, see Michael E. Enzle and Michael D. Harvey, “Rhetorical Requests for Help,” SPQ 45:3 (1982): 174–75.
4 See for example, Blankenship and Craig, “Rhetorical Question Use and Resistance to Persuasion,” 123.
6 Fahnestock and Secor, Rhetoric of Argument, 344.