

A Christian Approach to Interfaith Relations

Colleagues,

Today's offering comes from Steven Kuhl, Executive Director of the Crossings Community. Steve has spent much of his working career as a pastor and professor in Greater Milwaukee, where he also serves as a member of the Unity and Relations Commission of the Wisconsin Council of Churches. In that capacity, he worked with four others to craft a document entitled "[Loving our Neighbors: A Statement of the Wisconsin Council of Churches on Interfaith Relations](#)" (November, 2014). What you'll see below is the part that Steve wrote.

No one crafts documents, of course, without reasons for doing so. Steve was kind enough to send along some background for this one, as follows:

"The question of how Christians should relate to their interfaith neighbors is not an abstract matter for the Christian churches of Wisconsin. The question came to a head in a very shocking and practical way for many Christians in 2012 with the [Oak Creek Sikh Temple shooting](#). Convinced that the Christian Churches of Wisconsin could no longer ignore the fact of religious diversity, suspicion, and prejudice in their local communities or the state at large, the [Wisconsin Council of Churches](#) set its sights on developing guidelines for helping Christians to enter into dialogue and better relate to their interfaith neighbors in a way that encompassed both Christian confessional integrity and civic/community unity. Since the Council consists of 19 member and observer denominations from assorted Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant traditions, no one knew what level of theological specificity or what kind of

interpretive framework might be acceptable in this undertaking. As it turned out, the writers opted to rely squarely on the Nicene Creed, with a particular focus on its distinction between what God does in general as Creator and what God does in Christ as Redeemer. With that as interpretive framework, the document that emerged was able to win a unanimous and enthusiastic reception from the Council's member and observer churches. It also got a very favorable response from various representatives of the Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim communities."

This is hardly Steve's first foray into the ever-challenging topic of interreligious relationships. Those of us who attended the 2014 Crossings Conference heard him address it there with his invariable thoroughness, care, and astute Lutheran sensibility, in a paper entitled "[Proclaiming Christ Among the Religions: Interpreting Today's Pluralistic Impulse in Light of Christ's Singular Promise.](#)" For further sustenance over the next two weeks, I urge you strongly to check it out, along with [the other essays we feasted on](#) at that event, under the general topic of "Pluralism." It was rich fare indeed.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce

Biblical and Theological Foundations: Love of God and Love of Neighbor

From the outset it must be understood that, for Christians, the goal of interfaith relationships is different from ecumenical relationships. Ecumenical relationships are established in the hope of fostering Christian unity; interfaith relationships are entered into primarily for the purpose of living in community. Christians enter into dialogue with one another so that we can

cherish our common bond in Christ; Christians enter into interfaith dialogue so that we might be good neighbors with everyone. Ecumenical relationships, therefore, are rooted in the second article of the Nicene Creed, in a common confession of Christ as God and Savior and the Trinitarian faith that binds Christians together:

*[We believe] ...in one Lord Jesus Christ,
the Only Begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all
ages.*

*God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God,
begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father; through him
all things were made...*

For Christians, interfaith relationships are rooted in the first article of the Nicene Creed, a common experience of our humanity and the struggles of daily life that binds humanity together:

*We believe in one God, the Father Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and
invisible.*

Although both interfaith and ecumenical relationships have dialogue as their basic activity, respect as their basic approach, and mutual understanding as their basic hope, nevertheless, as noted above, the expectations of these relationships are quite different.

The biblical and theological foundation for this distinction in relationships is expressed in the two love commandments that Jesus presented as a summary of "all the law and the prophets." Loosely quoted, the commandments are: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind... and love your neighbor as yourself" (cf. Mt 22:34-40, NRSV). It is helpful to focus on this text because of the favorable image it already has in interfaith dialogue. For example, in Christian-Muslim

relationships, it is the primary text Islamic scholars used in their historic invitation to Christians to dialogue (["A Common Word between Us and You,"](#) 2009). For our purposes, the text is important for the way it holds in tension two distinct but foundational principles central to interfaith relationships: freedom of conscience before God and unreserved respect of other persons.

What is striking about the first commandment concerning the love of God is its unconditional nature. But, here, care in interpretation must be taken. As the word of Christ, the commandment is not a demand that is being imposed on us, but an invitation that is being offered to us. The commandment teaches us about who God is. God is the One who can be loved absolutely, relied upon without reserve, and trusted with our whole being, sinful though we are. This God is the God revealed in Jesus Christ, who comes to a sinful, broken world not with new demands and accusations but with grace and mercy, carrying human sin and brokenness in his own body on the cross and conquering human sin and brokenness in his resurrection extending new life to all the world. The commandment is an invitation to love this God, teaching us, paradoxically, that the same God, who, through the law, condemns the world of sin, is the same God who, through the promises expressed by the prophets, redeems the world through Christ.

But the commandment also teaches that the act of loving this magnanimous God is a free act of conscience, a fruit of faith, a gift of the Holy Spirit. Any use of coercion—whether of a physical, social or psychological nature—to promote the love of God contradicts the commandment, the Christian understanding of God, and the nature of faith. Therefore, respect for religious freedom and the conscience or faith of others in religious matters is a foundational principle of Jesus' teaching on the love of God. While it is certainly appropriate for Christians to

dialogue with others about the love of God in Christ and to invite them into that love as circumstances would have it, it is an offense to the love of God to present it as a demand or to inject a coercive element into it. This kind of admonition to respect religious freedom occurs in various denominational statements on interfaith relations, ranging from the Vatican II document, "[Nostra Aetate](#)" (1965) to the American Baptist document, "[American Baptist Resolution on Interreligious Prejudice](#)" (2003).

What is striking about the second commandment concerning the love of neighbor is the unreserved respect, indeed, the complete identification it calls forth between Christians and their neighbors. Again, care must be taken in the interpretation of the text. Who is the neighbor? A neighbor is someone who is related to us by virtue of our placement in the world, not by virtue of our relationship to Christ. The relationship called "neighbor" is defined by the first article of the

Nicene Creed, the doctrine of Creation, not the second article, the doctrine of Christ. How are we as Christians to regard our neighbors? Answer: as ourselves, as fellow human beings created in the image of God and as co-stewards of God's creation, called to work together for the common good. Therefore, when the commandment urges us to love our neighbor as ourselves, it is urging us, above all, to work together with all people for the common good: my good, my neighbor's good, and the good of the whole creation.

To be sure, neighbors can certainly disagree on how they understand the common good. The commandment does not forbid such disagreement. Rather, what the commandment does is urge love, even in disagreement: love understood as unreserved respect for the other, even in disagreement, love understood as an exercise in civility in all things, even in disagreement. In addition,

neither does the commandment forbid compromise in how we uphold the common good. It is certainly a basic part of civility and respect of others to make compromises with our neighbors. But compromise by its very nature must be a free choice, and made with a good conscience. Therefore, only those of equal standing in open dialogue are in a position to make compromise with integrity. For this reason, the commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves presupposes a community of equals engaged in open dialogue. The commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves informs all aspects of human life together. In today's religiously diverse society, where religious disagreement is a given, unreserved respect for those of different religious traditions also needs to be a given. Treating neighbors who have differing religious outlooks as equal partners in a common human calling to promote the common good is a basic principle for governing interfaith relationships that is not only consistent with, but also commensurate with Christian belief.

From this reading of the love commandments, two basic principles emerge for understanding the relationship of the Christian Churches in the WCC to other religious traditions: freedom of religion and unreserved respect for the other as neighbor and equal. Working out the practical details of these principles can happen only in the context of respectful dialogue. Such dialogue takes place on many levels, from formal theological and scholarly dialogues at the institutional level to informal dialogues between neighbors at the local level.

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