

A Christian Theology of Multi-Faith Partnership

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Multi-faith is a challenge for many evangelicals. Evangelical Christians are not historically known to involve themselves in multi-faith, primarily out of a fear of sacrificing their evangelical distinctives and the exclusive truth claims of the gospel and as a result, evangelicals have unfortunately often created a subculture that isolates them from substantive relationships with people of other faiths. This is disconcerting as we believe both in multi-faith and the exclusive truth claims of Jesus as demonstrated in the Bible. We firmly believe that, not only are these concepts not in tension with one another, but they are in harmony with each other.

Multi-faith partnerships also serve to provide clarity between the Christian faith and other faiths, as well as strengthening our own faith. When we represent other beliefs outside of our own, too often we fail to do so in a way that those who embrace those other beliefs would affirm. This is often an act of dishonesty. As Christians we must tell the truth. It is difficult to know the truth apart from interaction with those we are trying to understand. It is also difficult for those who disagree with us to know what we believe, unless we have a relationship with them as well. There is also a tremendous benefit to our own faith when we examine it, and have it examined, by those who do not hold to the same set of beliefs that we do.

In the following paragraphs, we will endeavor to delineate a theology of multi-faith that demonstrates that our multi-faith commitment is both a profoundly Christian commitment and is rooted in historic evangelical theology.

The Image of God

This pursuit begins with a belief that all men and women are created in the image of God. As followers of God, we believe that his creation of humanity in his image means that every human being has inherent worth and value that is not connected to what they do or believe. Worth and value are fundamental building blocks of a Christian theology of mankind. As such it demands that we treat all people with respect and dignity. A theology of God's image, then, demands that Christians treat all people as those with dignity, that we speak well of one another, that we love one another and that we treat one another with kindness, regardless of belief or practice.

Furthermore, it signals that every person is worthy of friendship and respect.

[Genesis 1:26-27, Genesis 5:1-2, Genesis 9:6]

Love for One Another

Not only are we to treat one another with inherent dignity because of our foundation as people created in God's image, but God extrapolates out from that and commands Christians to love all people, but particularly those we disagree with, as a sign and expression of our Christian faith. The bible is explicit, when it comes to love. If we do not love our neighbor, we do not love God.

[Mark 12:29-31] If we do not love each other, there is no evidence that we are in relationship with God. [John 13:35] We are commanded to love our enemies. [Matthew 5:44] If we do not

have love, we have nothing. [1 Cor. 13:1] This love is not merely theoretical love, either. Instead, this love must be love in action; a love that works. So, if we are to love those we

disagree with, that love must be demonstrated in tangible ways in the context of relationship with one another. [James 2:15-18] Beyond that, Jesus teaches us that our love for our neighbor is not limited to those who are in close proximity to us, or those who share our beliefs, but rather it is to be demonstrated to those we come upon who are in need of help. [Luke 10:25-37] Finally, our love for one another, and our love for our neighbor, is to be specifically directed toward those who have need and a failure to engage in this behavior is a denial of Jesus himself. [Matthew 25:31-46]

The Kingdom of God

At the formation of Jesus' earthly ministry he declared that he came preaching the good news of the kingdom of God. [Luke 4:43] This declaration reveals that the kingdom of God is formative in the way we consider and apply Christian behavior. Put simply, the kingdom of God is the rule and reign of Christ over all things. Christian theologians have often referred to the kingdom of God as "already and not yet." [Hebrews 2:8-9] In other words, it is already here, but it is not yet fully consummated. As Christians, though, we are current residents of God's kingdom, waiting for its ultimate fulfillment. Our responsibility, then, is to live in light of that kingdom - as if that kingdom has fully arrived. We are to live now as we will live then. We do not believe that this means that we are to advance the kingdom (God's kingdom is already omnipresent), but we do believe that we have an obligation to both live in light of that kingdom, and to declare the gospel of the kingdom. Even in the Lord's Prayer (or the Model Prayer), Jesus teaches us to pray for the coming of the kingdom, and the implication is that the kingdom can be made visible in the lives of believers in Jesus who live faithfully in light of his kingdom. [Luke 11:2] This kingdom theology then, teaches us that there is not one aspect of life that is not under the authority of God, and cannot be engaged redemptively. This necessarily eliminates the concept of a sacred and secular divide. As the theologian Abraham Kuyper so well said, ***There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: 'Mine!'*** So Christian work is all work that reflects the kingdom, including otherwise seemingly mundane or secular work such as common life events, and the pursuit of enhancing the community that you call home. [Jeremiah 29:4-7]

Peaceable Living

In Romans 12, we find a priority for the Christian that guides their existence among those with whom they may disagree. Paul says, ***If possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.*** The broader context of the passage is an indication of how to deal with those who might even be considered enemies. Our responsibility as Christians is to live peaceable lives, but even beyond that, we are to initiate, or pursue, these peace-filled lives. While the passage reminds us that we will not always be able to live at peace with all people, the clear teaching of the text is that this should only happen, not because of our behavior, but as we have pursued it and the other party has rejected our offers of peace. Peace and peaceful lives are to be defining characteristics of the life of a follower of Jesus. [1 Timothy 2:2, James 3:17] In recent years evangelical Christians have functionally cordoned themselves off from the rest of society and culture. They have done this for a variety of reasons, but the result has been a church that does not understand the world and a church that does not understand the world is a church that cannot faithfully serve and engage the world with the love of Jesus. Multi-faith gives

us the opportunity to not only serve the world, but to understand the world as well. It introduces us to faiths, cultures, and people who are unique and different from what we would normally otherwise come into contact with. Believing in the primacy of truth, and believing that truth is best served when it comes from the original source, a Christian approach to learning should include knowledge passed down from first-person sources, which would serve to affirm the importance of multi-faith engagement.

Displaying Jesus

At the pinnacle of the Christian faith stands Jesus Christ. He is not only the savior, but the model for all of his followers. What's more, he is the standard that God is shaping us into. The destiny of every Christ follower is to be formed into the image of Jesus. (Romans 8:28-29) In the New Testament we get to see a broad range of Jesus and his follower's experiences with those who did not believe in him, or even, at times, follow God. While it is true that he did get angry on occasion, as seen in his engagement with the pharisees [Luke 11:37-54] or the money-changers in the temple [John 2:13-16], it should be noted that those occasions demonstrated his anger at people who were believed to share his religious tradition, but who had perverted it for their own gain. When he was faced with those who did not share his faith, he responded with grace and compassion. Jesus faced a Samaritan woman, who lived a morally questionable life, and treated her with dignity, grace and kindness. [John 4:1-42] The Apostle Paul engaged the Greeks at Mars Hill as his intellectual equals, not speaking with condescension, but even using their own idols and philosophy as the starting point for his conversation about the gospel. [Acts 17:22-34] On the island of Malta, Paul shared hospitality with the people there, and demonstrated love and grace to them in response to their hospitality. [Acts 28:1-10] Jesus displayed great affection and respect for Zacchaeus, even though he was not respected in the broader culture, and Jesus' engagement with him caused him to lose respect among the religious leaders of the day. [Luke 19:1-10] Each of these engagements, and so many more, are instructive of the Christian expectation that we treat those who do not share our beliefs with grace, compassion, love and dignity. When we do so, we embody the character of Jesus. Treating others this way, then, is the way of discipleship; the way of gospel formation. In the Sermon on the Mount we have the greatest moral and ethical teaching known to man. Stanley Hauerwas said it this way, ***The basis for the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount is not what works but rather the way God is.*** If we are to be as God is, which is both the desire of the Christian life [1 Corinthians 15:49] and the promised destiny of every Christian [Romans 8:29-30], then our lives must be shaped by the Sermon on the Mount. Multi-faith, then, gives us the unique opportunity to live out the Sermon on the Mount in a way that demonstrates contrast which cannot be found in our experiences when we are simply surrounded by those who are like us. Much like the parable of the Good Samaritan, multi-faith places us in an environment where we are surrounded by those who believe differently than we do, who are sometimes considered enemies by many and who would naturally be those who we might otherwise oppose. The Sermon on the Mount, then provides the ethical and moral framework for how we engage in this context, and how we do so in a way that brings glory to God. [1 Corinthians 10:31]

Religious Freedom for All

At the heart of the American ideal, since its foundation, has been the principle of religious freedom. This commitment owes its foundation and strength, in large part, to Baptist pastor Roger Williams who demonstrated, theologically, that religious freedom is a biblical expectation. We believe that faith is a personal decision, and that each person must make a decision for themselves, without coercion, that determines what they believe. [Romans 14:5, 1 Corinthians 10:29] Because we believe that this decision must be made without coercion, and that each person is eternally responsible for their own decisions, faith must then be allowed to exist on a level playing field. We do not believe that any faith should be prioritized or privileged over another. To do so would be to lean into coercion, and it would also deny our fundamental faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ. This appeal is also rooted in the dignity of every person. Each person is created by God with inherent worth and value and that worth is demonstrated by each person's own volition.

Working for the Common Good

This is an often overlooked, and yet vital component of our collective Christian responsibility, and has been throughout Christian history. Through the years Christians have been involved in starting hospitals, universities, facilities for the aged, and orphanages. These are all activities that serve the common good, and which care for those who are in need. The commitment to serve the common good is evidenced in both the Old and New Testaments. God called the exiles in Babylon to live in such a way in their ungodly community so as to cause the blessings of God to be present. [Jeremiah 29:4-14] We are told that our responsibility as followers of God is to pursue good, and not evil. We are to seek justice. [Amos 5:14-15] Our pursuit of good government is an example of the biblical and necessary responsibility to pursue the common good of society. [Romans 13:4] We see multiple examples of benevolent behavior that benefits those who are in need across scripture, including forgiveness of outstanding debts [Deuteronomy 15:1-6], the returning of lands to ancestral owners [Leviticus 25:10], and farmers who were to leave some of their produce behind for the poor to gather [Deuteronomy 24:19-22]. This effort to seek the common good can only be accomplished if done in partnership with the general populace. This, by nature, demands partnership with people who do not believe like we do. This is something that we are already familiar with as we engage in political action with those who may vote like us, but who do not believe like us. We partner together for educational improvement with people in our children's schools who may live close to us but who do not believe like us, and the list can go on. Christians are called to work diligently for the common good, and this action necessitates partnership at some level with those who disagree with us. We do well to find areas of co-belligerence and work together with those in our city who may not believe like we do, for the good of our communities.

The Opportunity to Share our Faith

Our faith is best shared in the context of relationships. Like most any other piece of good news, while it is certainly possible for us to share it outside of a relationship, it is not as certain that it will be meaningful outside of a relationship. As evangelicals who believe in the importance of sharing our faith, multi-faith partnership provides a level playing ground where we can hear from and learn about the faith of others, but it also provides a unique opportunity to share our own

faith with those who are interested. We believe that sharing the gospel is a responsibility of the follower of Christ. [1 Corinthians 9:16] We believe that the gospel is a message for all people. [Romans 1:16] Our declaration of the gospel is rooted in our desire to share with others the encouragement and hope that we have received from the gospel. [1 Peter 3:15] Further, the gospel is rooted in God's love for the world and is intended to be expressed as a depiction of our love for the same world. [John 3:16] Multi-faith partnerships, then, provide an opportunity to build real, genuine friendships with people of other faiths, where they have the opportunity to share with us about why their faith is meaningful and significant in their lives, and we, in turn, can share with them about how the gospel has been transformative in our lives. This opportunity also exists to share the gospel in a way that the gospel is not artificially advantaged. Christians in America, in particular, seem afraid of placing the gospel on the same level with other beliefs, which seems to betray a lack of confidence in the gospel. We believe that the gospel is beautiful and should be able to be seen as such when placed on a level playing field beside other faith traditions. [Romans 1:16]

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