

“Love as Deed”

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There is an older man who lives in my part of Middle America who was not invited to this week’s Yale conference. He is in his 70s. A retired farmer. He is a Christian. He never liked Muslims. In fact, he openly spoke his opinions against Muslims even though he probably never met a Muslim. One day when he was speaking ill of Muslims in the Middle East another Christian asked him if he had ever met and talked with a Muslim from that part of the world. He had not. So, the other Christian suggested that the retired farmer travel with him to Jordan and spend two weeks meeting people. To my surprise, the retired farmer said yes. He left his ailing wife behind in a nursing home and traveled farther from home than he had ever before gone.

In Jordan he was introduced to Muslims who were friendly and hospitable. They talked about farming and they talked about faith. They shared meals and he was invited into several Jordanian homes.

When the retired farmer came back to America his attitude was dramatically changed. He carried with him a large album of photographs and told to anyone who would listen the stories about his new Muslim friends.

Did he change his faith? Absolutely not. His Christian beliefs are exactly the same. Would he very much like his new friends to believe as he believes? Yes, I think he would.

The difference was dialogue. The transformation was in a new found trust. The retired farmer with such strong opinions was open to change. He showed respect and was shown respect. He loved and was loved.

Those who call themselves Christians and those who call themselves Muslims today total half of the population of the world.

- Our numbers are great and our influence is far reaching.
- Our differences are deep and real. Sometimes those differences are cultural, racial and ethnic but our doctrines also differ. I have been impressed with the comfortable candor of presentations and conversations at this week’s conference as Muslims and Christians have clearly stated beliefs. We have heard many speak this week about the essential Christian beliefs in the Trinity, the deity of Jesus Christ, original sin and salvation through faith in Jesus as Savior. And we have heard clear statements about Islamic beliefs in the singularity of Allah, the authority of the Qur’an and the importance of the Prophet Mohammed.

Evangelical Christians

I speak to you as an evangelical follower of Jesus.

We are those in America and around the world who describe ourselves as Christians, who take the Bible seriously and who believe in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

Although we are most often described as “Christians” that is not a title by which followers of Jesus were always known. It was our critics that gave us the name. From the beginning we were simply called followers of the way of Jesus and disciples of Jesus

of Nazareth.

First century followers of Jesus spoke often of him being anointed by God, the Greek word is Christos. They said “Christos” so often that they were nicknamed Christians.

The description “Evangelical” comes from the Greek word *euangellion* which means “Good News” or Gospel. Evangelical Christians are people of the Good News.

- We share the historical Christian beliefs in the Trinity, the deity of Jesus and that Jesus gave his life to save us from sin.
- We are deeply committed to the authority of the Bible. We study the Bible faithfully and believe it fully.
- We admit that we are sinners. We are seekers after peace in our lives and in our world. We believe that Jesus forgives sin, gives peace and brings us into the kingdom of God.
- We experience a personal relationship with God through repentance of sin and faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord. We are followers of Jesus not by birth or citizenship or culture. We are follows of Jesus by choice and personal decision.
- Evangelicals are a movement across many traditions and every denomination.
- We are not about politics, power, money, country or culture. By far, most Evangelical Christians live in Latin America, Africa and Asia. Most are poor. Many are persecuted. The number of Evangelical Christians in America is growing primarily through immigration. Millions of immigrants have come to America in the past 25 years from countries where Evangelical Christianity is rapidly growing. They are evangelizing America.
- Because Evangelical Christians are centered in the Good News of Jesus, evangelism is one of our pillars—telling the Good News.

Why we love God and neighbor

All of this calls us to the theme of our meeting—love of God and neighbor.

Love of God begins with God not us. He is the infinite Initiator. “*We love [God] because God first loved us.*”¹ The love of God is unilateral and unconditional. The New Testament says that “*God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*”² God loved us when we were not beautiful or loving, when we were rebellious and disobedient. The love of God is magnificent beyond description.

As God loved us we are to love him and others. We are to love as God loves. Not that we can be fully like God but God can empower us with his love to love him and our neighbors. As we have often heard this week we are called to love God with all of our hearts, souls, strength and minds; and, love our neighbors as ourselves.³

When the “Common Word” letters were exchanged between representatives of Islam and Christianity the hope was to find common ground in the midst of differences. Convinced that love for God and love for neighbor was that common ground the dialogue was to be based on this theme.

Almost immediately there was discussion about the definition of love. What does it mean to love? Who is my neighbor? If we are unsure what others mean by love, how do

we continue the conversation and share the experience of the retired farmer?

One Christian leader suggested to me that Muslims don't mean the same as Christians when using the word love. This week one of our speakers said that there are at least 40 Arabic words for love while in English we have only one.

Love as Deed

The Greek language of the first century had different words for love. *Eros* referred to sensual, sexual love. *Phila* depicted fraternal affection. *Agape* was considered the highest form of love—sometimes defined as “action in the best interest of another person.”

Agape is the word used to describe God's love for our world and for all of us. His love is more than affection. It is action. While we celebrate the word of God's love in Holy Scripture, we experience God's love in his actions—mercy, compassion, forgiveness, generosity, revelation, salvation and more. The love of God in word is truth but the love of God in deed is experienced.

The words of love may be debated. The deeds of love may be demonstrated.

That is why love for our neighbor is so important, because it can be seen, documented and measured.

- The deeds of love on a personal level include respect, kindness, truth, justice, generosity and forgiveness.
- The deeds of love for the world may include everything from creation care to care of the poor, from stopping terrorism to stopping nuclear proliferation, from helping those with HIV/AIDS to reducing malaria.
- Love in deed is the proof of what we say.

Frankly, words are easier than deeds. It is easier to say “I love you” than to do it. It is not easy to love unilaterally or unconditionally. We often fail. It is not easy to do good to those who are evil, to forgive those who do not apologize and to bless those who are not grateful. It is never easy to love our enemies. But, it is in these deeds that love becomes more than just words.

It is powerful to look someone else in the eye and say, “I love you.” It is supernatural to show the love of God in what we actually do.

Last night I sat at my computer and did an Internet search for the English word “love.” There are 2,360,000,000 websites. There are a lot of words about love. May there be even more deeds of love.

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COMMON WORD CONFERENCE, Yale Center for Faith and Culture: Reconciliation Program. Yale University. New Haven, Connecticut.

Leith Anderson

President: National Association of Evangelicals

¹ 1 John 4:12

² Romans 5:8

³ Luke 10:27