

In Context: Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct^[1]

It was recently my privilege to accompany the team from the World Evangelical Alliance in Geneva (July 28, 2011) when they issued the new text “Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct,” along with the World Council of Churches and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. I sincerely hope there will be a serious process of appropriation, as we individually and corporately study and apply this text and its principles. I think almost every point can be directly derived from the Bible, so it can become the property of the entire Christian community. From my partial knowledge of the development of the text it is clear to me that it is designed to address a very complex set of problems and needs from around the globe. Our discussion and consideration will be much richer if we all consider the complex context for which it was written. This context includes several related but distinct elements:

Our Historical Context:

Our Christian missions history has occasionally included crusades, religious wars, forced conversions, inquisitions, and inappropriate connections between missions and colonization. Of course we have long rejected such practices, but not everyone knows that. In my private correspondence with Muslim journalists, I have been accused of being an advocate of such sins, simply because I am a Christian missionary. Now the rejection of such practices by almost all branches of the Christian tradition is public, official, and irrevocable. A complete confession of all past sins is neither necessary nor possible. We stand forgiven, rejecting our known sins, but codifying what we have learned from the past.

Our Political Context:

Persecution and laws against religious conversion, very serious problems in many parts of the world, are often connected with claims that Christians have done something terrible as a result of their faith. In the ancient world we heard the false accusation of cannibalism. Today the accusations are different, whether desecrating our neighbors’ symbols, or making the healthcare, education, and relief services provided by Christians dependent on pseudo conversions to the Christian faith. We think most of these accusations are false, but on a few occasions the accusations have been true. We have now clarified our ethics of mission at a very high level, so that both Christians and the watching world know the standards to which we wish to be held accountable. We hope this will reduce religious persecution based on false accusations.

Our Social Context:

In every society there is a slow, fluid interaction between the internal moral self restraint of the people and the external legal restraint applied by the government. Increasing levels of moral self restraint by the people contribute to a situation in which governments protect higher levels of freedom, including freedom of religion and freedom of speech. As supporters of freedom of religion for all, we should take leadership in teaching our people to practice very high levels of moral integrity, especially in how we present the gospel which is needed by all people. This lends moral suasion to our appeals for freedom of religion.

Our Existential Context:

All people have a God-given awareness of right and wrong, historically called the “natural moral law,” in light of which people will evaluate the authenticity of our Christian witness. When Jesus said “by this will all men know you are my disciples” (John 13:35), he mentioned only our love for fellow Christians, but we can safely assume that many of our neighbors will apply the principle to our love for all people. Our Christian witness to the gospel is commonly evaluated on the basis of whether or not people can observe real love and respect for our neighbors. We have now clarified for ourselves and others the standards by which all people are invited to evaluate the authenticity of our total witness to the gospel.

Our Theological Context:

As we have previously articulated^[2] Christians must follow the balanced, whole counsel of God, which includes recognizing simultaneously the created dignity of all our neighbors and also their deep need for the gospel. These complementary biblical truths should inform the way in which we carry out the entire mission God has given to the church. And these complementary truths require both that we speak to defend the God-given human rights of all people, including freedom of religion for other religions, while we also clearly proclaim that all people need Jesus. Practicing belief in the whole counsel of God requires both theological balance and also spiritual depth, as we seek the power of the Holy Spirit to overcome our natural tendency to accept only parts of the truth.

Our Ecumenical Context:

We should follow Martin Luther in recognizing a distinction between the gospel of Christ and God’s moral law, between salvation by faith and the rules or principles which people should follow. Because of this distinction we know that people who might or might not believe the gospel which we proclaim may largely agree with us about some moral rules. This low level moral agreement is what makes civilization possible. These newly codified recommendations for conduct are predominantly in the realm of God’s moral law, not primarily an explanation of the gospel. The fact that the WCC and the PCID agree with us about some basic moral principles does not imply any assessment, positive or negative, about the gospel preached by any of the other organizations.

Our Global Cultural Context:

Throughout history we Christians have repeatedly developed ways of thinking, talking, and acting among ourselves that have then passed beyond our Christian fellowship into many broader cultures. Christians have often contributed extensively to cultural value systems around the world. It is our hope that this code of ethics in mission will contribute to global standards for how any worldview, religion, or ideology is presented by its adherents to the wider public. We want our neighbors to know the love of Christ because they need Jesus; we also want to contribute to a humane and peaceful social order in which people can both consider the claims of the gospel and live their lives before God. Therefore we invite our neighbors to consider the standards to which we think all people should be held accountable while they talk about their deepest convictions. We do not think that a global conflict of civilizations is necessary, though this has been predicted by some. Such a conflict of civilizations can be avoided if all people

follow such high standards for how we attempt to convince others of the truths we find fundamental for life.

As we enter the process of appropriating these newly articulated principles of conduct, I hope all will give serious consideration to the multi-faceted context being addressed, as well as to look seriously at the biblical texts from which the principles were derived. This can lend balance, depth, and quality to our presentation of the gospel.

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[2] Thomas Schirmmacher and Thomas K. Johnson, "Why Evangelicals Need a Code of Ethics for Mission," *International Journal of Religious Freedom*, 3:1, 2010, pp. 23-37. Available as a free download at www.iirf.eu.