

"A Common Word": How Should We Respond?

Responding to "A Common Word": WWJD?

by Rebecca Lewis

Never before in history have so many top Muslim leaders—138 religious authorities, scholars, intellectuals, media experts and other professionals from all the major branches of Islam—signed a document together, much less one addressed to the top Christian leaders worldwide. Their open letter, "A Common Word Between Us and You," comes in the context of Pope Benedict XVI's remarks in a speech, exactly one year earlier at the University of Regensburg in Germany, in which he mentioned the essentially violent nature of Islam. In their letter, they clearly seek to distance themselves from the violent terrorist sects within Islam who claim God's approval for their activities. Surprisingly, these 138 leaders chose to affirm the words of Jesus in Mark 10 (the most important commands are to love God and neighbor), and sought to demonstrate that the Qur'an fundamentally supports Jesus' statements. To give honor to Jesus and authority to his words in this way is unusual and, I believe, should be commended.

On their website, acommonword.com, you can read the original document as well as responses from many Christian leaders, from the Vatican to evangelicals. How should we respond to "A Common Word"? Controversy rages at this moment. WWJD: What would Jesus do?

How Jesus Presented Himself

Jesus is the center of our faith; he is the gospel. As believers, we must remember that his words are living and powerful, able to pierce the hearts of those who hear them—they are "a fragrance of life" to those whom the Holy Spirit is calling back to God. Whenever Jesus is lifted up, he draws all men to himself, whether or not they can immediately grasp the fullness of who he is, or understand what God is really like, or fathom what it may mean that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and the Lamb of God.

When Jesus revealed himself among men, he "did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but humbled himself, taking on the form of a servant" (Phil. 2:7). Though he appeared in a humble, fully-human state, those drawn to him slowly came to understand him to be "the exact representation of the reality of God" (Heb. 1:3), the one in whom all the fullness of God dwells

Editor's note: Readers not familiar with "A Common Word between Us and You" can find the full text of that document in *IJFM* 24:4.

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(Col. 1:19). Even Jesus' disciples, who walked with him daily, did not perceive this immediately—nor did he try to explain it to them right away. Instead, Jesus allowed them to come to know him and (once steeped in his teachings) discover the reality of his divinity, and the significance of his death and resurrection (something even Peter rejected up to the last minute).

Do we believe that we can introduce Jesus to others in the same way he introduced himself? Do we trust that those who are drawn to him will, like the disciples, ultimately see who he really is? He is as living and powerful today as he ever has been. Therefore, it is no compromise to point people to Jesus and encourage them to study him, allowing him to unveil slowly the mystery of his glory and redemption. We can confidently introduce them to Jesus the person and his words, instead of introducing them to doctrines about him. Ultimately people come to understand doctrines by knowing Jesus, not the other way around.¹

How Jesus Related to the "Muslims" of His Day

The closest biblical example we have of how Jesus might interact with Muslims is in Jesus' attitude toward the Samaritans.² The Samaritans then, like Muslims today, worshipped the God of Abraham, but in a way that was unacceptable to the Jews. Speaking Aramaic, the Samaritans even used a close variation of the word "Allah" for God ("Allah" has been used by Arabic-speaking Christians and in Arabic Bibles since the first century until today).³ The Jews considered the Samaritans heretics, corrupted in faith, and as such defiled and excluded from the temple and true worship of God.

The Gospels provide two startling instructive examples of Jesus' attitude toward the Samaritans: the parable of the Good Samaritan, and his interaction with the woman at the well and her village.

The "Good" Samaritan?

The parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10 is told, ironically, within

the context of Jesus' statement that the two most important commands are to love God and neighbor—the very commands emphasized in "A Common Word" document. One of the Jews listening asks Jesus point blank: "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus replies with a parable, the story of a Jew who is beaten, robbed and left for dead. Eventually, three men see the man along the road. Shockingly, the one who obeys God's command to love the man "as a neighbor" is not a fellow Jew, but a heretical Samaritan! In telling this story, Jesus clearly commends as pleasing to God the extension of love by a "heretic" and enemy to a "chosen" member of the Jewish faith. Today, if Muslims (our "Samaritans") are trying to affirm the commands to love God and neighbor as central to our faith and theirs (even if the latter seems disingenuous to some), would not Jesus commend Muslims for urging us all to obey God's commands?

The Woman at the Well

In John 4, Jesus interacts with a Samaritan woman and her village who have a corrupted version of the Abrahamic faith. He asks the woman at a well for a cup of water but she reminds him that he is a Jew (and, as such, will be defiled by drinking water received from her hand). Still he persists in making the relational connection and offers her "living water" so she'll never thirst again.

As Jesus continues, offering her eternal life, the Samaritan woman perceives that Jesus is making a spiritual or religious statement. Once Jesus tells her details about her personal life, she decides he must be a prophet. So she points out again that she is a Samaritan (which, by extension, means she has been rejected by the Jews because of her religion, barred from the temple and is unable to receive things from a Jewish prophet).

At this point Jesus makes an amazing declaration:

Believe me, woman, the time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship

what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet, a time is coming and has now come when true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth. (John 4: 21-24)

What is Jesus saying here? Is he saying that faith is not about the temple, or the mountain, or outward forms of worship? That those who worship (heretically) what they "do not know" (i.e., incorrectly perceive) can now become "true worshipers" if they worship in spirit and truth, without becoming Jews? How would we feel if Jesus said this today to our Samaritans, the Muslim people? Then Jesus goes on to tell her that he is the Messiah. (The Muslims already believe that Jesus is the Messiah, as it says in the Qur'an, though they do not know what this means.)

Near the end of the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, the disciples return from the town where they had all gone to buy food, and are shocked that Jesus is talking with her. As the woman hurries back to her village to tell everyone there about Jesus, the disciples try to get Jesus to eat, but instead he seeks to reveal to them what is happening. He says his food is "to finish the work" of God. He urges them to see that the fields, yes, even the Samaritans, are ripe for harvest, and he, the harvester, is already reaping a crop for eternal life among this hated heretical people group. I am not sure the disciples understand anything Jesus said to them at this point; they do not even really understand yet that he is the Messiah, or what that means in terms of Jesus being a Savior for the Jews, much less everyone else.

The end of the story is shocking: Jesus returns with the woman to her village and stays with them for two days, further defiling himself in the eyes of the Jews. The result? John records that many of the Samaritans believe that "this man really is the Savior of the

world.” Jesus has shown them that he is not merely the Savior of the Jews, but of the whole world!

How Should We Relate to Muslims?

Our “Samaritans,” our Muslim neighbors, think that Jesus is the Savior of the Christians and that to share in his salvation they must leave their communities and worship in our temples, becoming like us. However, Jesus is the Savior of all peoples. Jesus longs to reveal to them that, even though they worship what they do not know, they too can become “true worshipers who worship the Father in spirit and in truth.” Like the Samaritans, they need to understand that as the Messiah, Jesus is also their Savior and the Savior of the whole world.

In our generation, God has spoken to some Christian men of faith, and prepared them to go into Muslim circles and befriend Muslims so that those among them whom Jesus is calling to himself, may come to really know the God they fear, and understand for the first time who Jesus really is.⁴ Like the disciples, many men of God are initially shocked and do not understand what is happening, fearing that such initiatives compromise the gospel. But we have the example of Jesus to see that God does bring his gospel into the communities of those who seem impossibly far from him.

And we have the example of Peter. In Acts 10, God asks Peter to make an excursion similar to the one Jesus made in John 4. In this case, Peter is not going to a Samaritan community (who merely have a corrupted version of Abrahamic faith), but to visit a Roman family, whom he sees as pagan and unable to receive the salvation of Jesus unless they also become culturally and religiously Jews. Because Peter had never entered a Gentile home in his life for fear of defilement, God prepares Peter with dreams so that he will be willing to associate with a Cornelius, a Roman centurion. After seeing how God has been working in the heart of Cornelius, his Gentile family and neighbors, Peter exclaims: “I now realize how true it is that God does not

show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.” (vv. 34-35) Then he explains to them the full meaning of the death and resurrection of Jesus ending with “everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.” (v. 43) Yet even then, Peter is surprised that God accepts Cornelius and indwells him through the Holy Spirit without first requiring Cornelius to become a proselyte.

In our interactions with Muslims, and in our response to this historically unprecedented attempt on the part of Muslim leaders to reach out to Christian leaders, what is most important is that we not just *talk about* Jesus, but that we *be like* Jesus, following the examples he has given us. Can’t we commend those who would seek to follow God’s commands, to love him and their neighbors, as Jesus did in the parable of the Good Samaritan? Can’t we affirm their desire to worship the one true God, even though they “do not know” whom it is they worship, helping them move toward understanding that Jesus is also their Savior, not just ours, just as Jesus did in his interaction with the Samaritan woman and her village?

The Samaritan woman wanted to believe this prophet who was offering her living water and eternal life, but she did not think that she could, because she was a Samaritan. She was still waiting for the Messiah to come and tell her people the truth. Many God-fearing Muslims are just like that woman. They know that Jesus is a prophet and also the Messiah, because the Qur’an says so, but they “do not know” what this means or that his atoning salvation is available to them. They are not going to enter our “temples” to hear this, nor would they understand if they did; we must enter their communities, like Jesus did, and tell them that the Father is even now seeking from among them “true worshipers who will worship him in spirit and in truth.”

Likewise, the Roman Centurion Cornelius wanted to serve God but did not understand that he could be

acceptable to God through Christ until Peter came into his home and shared the full gospel with him. After seeing the work God had been doing in the heart of Cornelius and his Gentile family and neighbors, Peter understood for the first time what Jesus had tried to show earlier with the Samaritans, that he is the Savior of all peoples.

It does not matter if the attempts of some Muslims “to fear God and do what is right” is based on partial or inadequate understanding of who God is, because they do not have the full revelation of God in Christ yet. Neither do we have to be afraid of Muslims first honoring Jesus as “just” a prophet, or “only” as the Messiah they don’t yet know. Because Jesus is powerful and living, when we introduce them to him, being like him as his humble ambassadors, we can trust that he will unlock their hearts to understand who he fully is, just as he slowly did with the disciples. Those of us who work in the Muslim world have seen this happen over and over.⁵ Now is not the time to distance ourselves from our “Samaritans.” Rather, we should encourage every bit of interest they show in Jesus and his commands, and enter into their world, their homes, and their communities, to reveal to them that Jesus is not just the Savior of “the Christians,” but of the whole world. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ See Rick Brown, 2000, “What Must One Believe about Jesus for Salvation?” *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, 17(4):13-21.

² See Stuart Caldwell, 2000, “Jesus in Samaria” *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, 17(1):25-31.

³ See Rick Brown, 2006, “Who is ‘Allah’?” *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, 23(2):79-82 and Kenneth Thomas, 2006, “Allah in Translations of the Bible” *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, 23(4):171-174.

⁴ See, for example, Rebecca Lewis, 2007, “Promoting Movements to Christ within Natural Communities” *International Journal of Frontier Missiology*, 24(2):75-76.

⁵ For several examples, see Rick Brown, 2007, “Biblical Muslims” *International Journal of Frontier Missiology*, 24(2):65-74.