

***Conversion, Respectful Witness and Freedom of Religion<sup>1</sup>***  
***By Dr. Rick Love***

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“Are There Limits to Our Dialogue? Interfaith Marriage and Conversion”  
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I am grateful for the conveners of this conference. The theme “Are There Limits to Our Dialogue? Interfaith Marriage and Conversion” challenges us to talk about some important areas of tension between our faiths. Because of our deeply held convictions, few topics are as controversial and potentially contentious as “conversion.” Nothing stirs up the emotions more than when we talk about members of one faith community converting or attempting to convert members of another faith community. (I specialize in Christian-Muslim relations, so my paper will focus on these two faith communities.)

The tensions and emotions that arise when considering “conversion” surfaced in the news recently when the Moroccan government expelled a number of alleged “missionaries.”<sup>2</sup>

I have had robust discussions about this topic in five dialogues: at Yale University with Egyptian Sheikhs; at the Doha Inter-Faith Dialogue in Qatar; at a dialogue with Moroccans sponsored by the National Association of Evangelicals at the World Bank in Washington DC; at the Common Word dialogue at Yale University; and at the Common Word Dialogue at Fuller Theological Seminary. The topic of conversion has already been an important part of public, inter-faith discourse.

For example, at the Doha Inter-Faith Conference in 2008, Prof. Dr. Ahmed Al-Tayyeb (at that time the President of Al-Azhar University, but newly appointed as the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar) brought up this topic in his opening keynote address. In response to Pope Benedict’s baptism of Magdi Allam – a prominent convert from Islam – on Easter, Dr. Tayyeb said, “1000 Christians a month convert to Islam and attend Al Azhar University but we don’t celebrate them!”<sup>3</sup>

Dr. Tayyeb set forth his concerns very frankly, pointing out the ways in which he feels Christians act unethically in their evangelistic methods. In the very next session Prof Joseph Cumming, Director of the

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was edited after the original presentation.

<sup>2</sup> (see *Morocco clamps down on alleged missionaries* by John Thorne, Foreign Correspondent April 07, 2010 <http://www.thenational.ae/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20100407/FOREIGN/704069904/1002/foreign>)

<sup>3</sup> I find it hard to believe that 1000 Christians a month convert and attend Al Azhar. But even if this is hyperbole, his point is well taken.

Yale Reconciliation program, thanked Dr. Tayyeb for his frankness about this important topic and pointed out that genuine love must be expressed through respect for what is sacred to others and also through commitment to religious freedom. According to Cumming, when we conduct da'wah or evangelism in ways that are disrespectful of others or their beliefs, or when we deny religious freedom to others, then we fall short of that love. He suggested that if we could uphold these two principles – of respect and freedom – than we might find a sound basis for a common ethics of da'wah and of evangelism.

Later at the same conference I was having a meal with Dr. Tayyeb, Joseph Cumming and Dr. Aisha Al-Manna'ie, Dean of Shariah and Islamic Studies College in Qatar (Dr. Manna'ie was a former student of Dr. Tayyeb at Al Azhar). During our conversation Dr. Tayyeb said that Muslims are not engaged in da'wah like Christians. I said, "Come on, Dr. Tayyeb, you know they are!" Dr. Manna'ie turned to Dr. Tayyeb and exclaimed, "He is right!" Dr. Tayyeb smiled and concluded, "At Al Azhar Dr. Manna'ie was a disciple of mine. Now she has become a disciple of yours!"

I helped facilitate a three-hour closed-door session on the topic of da'wah and evangelism during the Common Word Dialogue at Yale University in July 2008. Almost thirty Christian and Muslim leaders participated. You can imagine how lively that discussion was! During this session Dr. Joseph Lumbard (an American Christian convert to Islam) exclaimed, "I didn't realize that evangelism was one of the pillars of the Christian faith!" A few other Muslim leaders made the same comment to me during the Common Word Dialogue.

I was surprised that Dr. Lumbard and these other Muslim leaders didn't know that evangelism is a pillar of my faith as a Christian. Perhaps some of you here also do not know this. So here is a brief summary.

### **Five Pillars of Evangelical Faith<sup>4</sup>**

The word "evangelical" comes from the word used to translate "gospel" in the New Testament, *euaggelion*, which literally means "good news." One of the clearest summaries of the five pillars of evangelical faith can be found in Jesus words in Luke 24:44-47.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The following two definitions provide fairly typical summaries of evangelical belief. The British historian David Bebbington argues that Evangelicalism centers around four truths: "conversionism (an emphasis on the 'new birth' as a life-changing experience of God), biblicism (a reliance on the Bible as ultimate religious authority), activism (a concern for sharing the faith) and crucicentrism (a focus on Christ's redeeming work on the cross, usually pictured as the only way of salvation)" (Noll 1999:13). According to Alister McGrath, Evangelicalism is grounded in a cluster of six controlling convictions: 1. The supreme authority of Scripture as a source of knowledge of God and a guide to Christian living. 2. The majesty of Jesus Christ, both as incarnate God and Lord and as the Savior of sinful humanity. 3. The lordship of the Holy Spirit. 4. The need for personal conversion. 5. The priority of evangelism for both individual Christians and the church as a whole. The importance of the Christian community for spiritual nourishment, fellowship and growth (1994:55-56).

<sup>5</sup> In my original presentation I used 1 Corinthians 15:1-4 and Matthew 28:18-20 as the basis for the five pillars.

He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.

The five pillars of evangelical faith emerge from this text. First, Jesus teaches that the good news is about him. The gospel is about "Christ," which means messiah (Isa Al Masih in the Quran). By the way, as an aside, Joseph Cumming, Director of the Yale Reconciliation Program, has written a brilliant article on this topic. He demonstrates that the terms "Messiah" and "Son of God" are often used synonymously in the Bible. That is, to call Jesus the Son of God in many cases means the same thing as calling him the Messiah. This is the best paper available on this issue -- theologically substantive yet understandable to Muslims.<sup>6</sup> Second, the gospel centers on Christ's death, described as suffering in this passage.<sup>7</sup> Third, the gospel is about Jesus' resurrection. Fourth, the gospel is in accordance with the Scriptures. The message of salvation through Christ's death and resurrection is rooted in God's Word. Fifth, the message of repentance and forgiveness of sin through Jesus must be proclaimed to all the nations. This is known as the great commission.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, evangelicals are good news people who live according to the Scriptures ("people of the book" as the Quran says). It is both our delight and our responsibility to share this good news with everyone. As Timothy George, President of Beeson Divinity School, says, "Evangelicals are a worldwide family of Bible-believing Christians committed to sharing with everyone everywhere the transforming good news of new life in Jesus Christ... to put it simply, evangelicals are gospel people and Bible people" (quoted in Noll 1999:57).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> (See "What is the Meaning of the Expression 'Son of God'?" <http://www.yale.edu/faith/downloads/rp/Son%20of%20God-Arabic-English.pdf> ).

<sup>7</sup> See Joseph Cumming's detailed analysis of this important topic in ancient Qur'anic commentaries: *Did Jesus Die on the Cross? The History of Reflection on the End of His Earthly Life in Sunni Tafsir Literature*. <http://www.yale.edu/faith/downloads/rp/Did%20Jesus%20Die%20on%20the%20Cross-English.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> There are a number of other passages that describe what Christians call the "great commission" (Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16: 15-20; John 20:21; Acts 1:8).

<sup>9</sup> See the Lausanne Covenant (1974) and the Manila Manifesto (1989) for two important international evangelical affirmations <http://www.lausanne.org/covenant> <http://www.lausanne.org/manila-1989/the-manila-manifesto.html>

## Evangelical Perspectives on Christianity and Other Religions: Exclusivism, Inclusivism, and Pluralism<sup>10</sup>

The following typology is most commonly used to summarize differing views on the relationship between Christianity and other religions: exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism (see Newbigin 1992:171-183). **Exclusivism** has probably been the most widely held evangelical viewpoint. Two statements capture the passion and focus of this viewpoint: “no other name,” and “how will they hear without a preacher.” These two statements are based on Acts 4:12<sup>11</sup> and Romans 10:14.

Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved. (Acts 4:12)

How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher? (Rom 10:14)

John Piper’s *Let the Nations be Glad* (1993) provides a good example of this position. Exclusivists believe that there is salvation in Christ alone, and that an explicit faith commitment to Christ is necessary to be saved. These beliefs have been the foundational convictions behind the evangelistic outreach of the church in both word and deed.

**Inclusivism** is a more recent position that echoes only the maxim: “no other name.” Evangelical Theologian Clark Pinnock’s *A Wideness in God’s Mercy* (1992) presents a good example of this viewpoint.<sup>12</sup> While inclusivists believe that salvation is in Christ alone, they do not believe there has to be an explicit faith commitment to Christ to be saved. If a proponent of another faith sincerely seeks to please God and trusts in His mercy he can be saved because of Christ, even though s/he has no explicit faith in Him.

**Pluralism** teaches that “all roads lead to God” and is thus not a Christian position. However, it is mentioned here to complete the overall typology. Pluralists believe that salvation is available in and through all religions. John Hick is the most well-known modern proponent of pluralism.

There are evangelical exclusivists and evangelical inclusivists, and there are there evangelicals who fall somewhere between these two positions.<sup>13</sup> I would describe this mediating position as follows. When

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<sup>10</sup>According to Alister McGrath, Oxford Scholar and evangelical theologian, “it is the issue of Christian theological response to religious pluralism which is of chief importance in the twentieth century, which is without question *the* most significant period of theological reflection on this theme” (McGrath 2001:573).

<sup>11</sup> See also John 14:6, “Jesus answered, I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father [i.e., God] except through me.

<sup>12</sup> John Sanders’ book *No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized* is another major work by an evangelical inclusivist (1992). Catholic Theologian Karl Rahner is another well-known proponent of this perspective (See Plantinga 1999:288-303).

<sup>13</sup> Harold Netland of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School notes that many evangelicals reject both of these views (exclusivism and inclusivism) “for going beyond what the biblical data allow. Some in this group adopt a modest

someone asks, “Could God save people without them hearing the gospel?” I respond, “Absolutely! God is sovereign, almighty and omnipotent and thus can do as He wills. God is love and thus longs for all people to know him. There are, in fact, pre-Jesus examples of this in the Hebrew Scriptures. I would rejoice if I found this to be true when my life is over and I stand before my Maker. However, we can’t live our lives in light of ‘possible’ theological deductions (as comforting as they may be) but rather in light of the clear teaching of Scripture. Moses taught: “The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but light of the clear teaching of Scripture.” Moses taught: “The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law” (Deut 29:29). We do not know the secret ways of God. But we do know what he has revealed about his global purposes. He has clearly and comprehensively taught that we must be witnesses to all the nations.” Is there any practical difference than between the exclusivist and the mediating viewpoint just noted? I would argue that this mediating viewpoint *demonstrates humility and rejects the triumphalism* often communicated by many exclusivists.<sup>14</sup>

### **An Evangelical View of Conversion, Respectful Witness and Freedom of Religion**

While conversion is a major focus of this conference and this paper, we cannot adequately address conversion without reference to the process of converting people, usually described with the pejorative term: proselytism.<sup>15</sup> Webster’s dictionary makes some important distinctions between the terms “convert” and “proselyte”:

Convert commonly implies a sincere and voluntary change of belief; it is, therefore, the designation preferred by the church, the party, or the school of thought of which such a person becomes a new member. ... Proselyte... may suggest less a... voluntary embracing than a yielding to the persuasions and urgings of another, be it an earnest missionary or zealot or someone with less praiseworthy motives. ... Proselyte is often the designation chosen by the members of a church for one formerly of their number who has been converted to another faith.<sup>16</sup>

The distinction between convert and proselyte was addressed early on in Christianity. In fact, the first great crisis of the early church centered on the relationship between conversion and culture or, if you

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agnosticism regarding the unevangelized, refusing to speculate about how God might deal with them and leaving the matter in the hands of God. J.I. Packer, John Stott, Chris Wright and Millard Erickson fit this category according to Netland (2001: 321). See also R. Todd Mangum’s, IS THERE A REFORMED WAY TO GET THE BENEFITS OF THE ATONEMENT TO ‘THOSE WHO HAVE NEVER HEARD?’ (JETS 47/1 March 2004) pp 121-136.

<sup>14</sup> As a theological position exclusivism is not inherently arrogant or triumphalistic. I just know that I was very prone to communicating in these ways in my past and I have seen many others do the same.

<sup>15</sup>J. Dudley Woodberry notes the term proselytism “has come to be used negatively of unworthy witness because of coercion or inducements external to the gospel or scriptural message” (2009:171).

<sup>16</sup> Webster’s New Dictionary of Synonyms (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, 1984), p. 189.

will, between conversion and proselytism (Acts 15). Jewish believers in Jesus the Messiah sought to impose their own religious culture upon new Gentile believers. They wanted the Gentiles to be circumcised and to follow the Torah. But the apostles and elders in the church of Jerusalem rejected these external religious cultural requirements for conversion.<sup>17</sup> The decision of the Jerusalem gathering of leaders made it clear that Gentile believers were not to be like Jewish proselytes. Instead they were Gentile converts to Christ. Andrew Walls draws astute missiological deductions from Acts 15.

The distinction between proselyte and convert is vital to Christian mission. It springs out of the very origins of that mission, demonstrated in the first great crisis of the early church. The later church has seen many heresies come and go, but the earliest of them has been by far the most persistent. The essence of the “Judaizing” tendency is the insistence on imposing our own religious culture, our own Torah and circumcision. Christian conversion as demonstrated in the New Testament is not about substituting something new for something old<sup>18</sup>—that is to move back to the proselyte model, which the apostolic church could have adopted but decided to abandon.<sup>19</sup>

In a joint statement entitled “*Why Do We Share the Good News about Jesus with All Peoples, Including Muslims?*”<sup>20</sup> leaders of fifty-five Christian organizations from nineteen countries address the topic of conversion in Affirmation 6: “We believe that only God can convert people. Christianity and Islam agree

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<sup>17</sup> Paul’s letters to the Ephesians and Galatians, along with the conclusions of the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15), affirm that conversion to Christ does not require abandoning one culture for another. Gentile believers did not have to adopt Jewish culture to be saved. The decision made by the Jerusalem Council remains foundational for our understanding of the relationship between conversion and culture. We can better understand the radical nature of the decision reached by the Jerusalem Council when we interpret Acts 15 in light of Jesus’ warning recorded in Matthew 23:15 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel around on sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.” Some Jews were actively bearing witness to their faith prior to the coming of Christ. They used two terms to describe the fruit of their missionary labors. *God-fearers* were those Gentiles who worshipped Yahweh and followed his ethical teachings but did not receive circumcision. *Proselytes* by contrast were those Gentiles who not only believed in Yahweh, but also embraced the culture of the Jews, including the painful rite of circumcision. See Karl Georg Kuhn, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. VI, trans. and ed. by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), pp. 727-44, and Ulrich Becker, *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Vol. 1, ed. by Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), pp. 359-62.

<sup>18</sup> Eph 4:17-32 indicates that true conversion involves profound character change. Thus, I interpret Walls to be saying that foreign cultural expressions should not be imposed upon new believers.

<sup>19</sup> Walls, “Converts or Proselytes?” (2004:6)

<sup>20</sup> You can find this statement at <http://ricklove.net/links/Why%20we%20share%20the%20good%20news%20with%20Muslims.pdf>

on this point.<sup>21</sup> For many, the titles ‘Muslim’ and ‘Christian’ define an external, cultural identity. Instead of focusing on external labels, we invite all people, including Muslims, to an inward change through Jesus.”<sup>22</sup>

Most evangelicals would acknowledge four components of conversion: there is a turning from sin, a trust in Christ as Savior, an inward work of the Holy Spirit in the human heart, and an active following of Jesus: obeying all that he commanded.<sup>23</sup> While there is a consensus about the general nature of conversion, there is a spectrum of thought regarding how far followers of Jesus may accommodate to culture in practice (but that is beyond the scope of this paper).<sup>24</sup>

Because evangelism is a pillar of evangelical faith, we will and we must bear witness to our faith. That is non-negotiable. So *how* we witness is vital.<sup>25</sup> I am painfully aware that evangelical practice sometimes fails in this respect. There are evangelicals who use relief and development as a *cover* and do “aid evangelism” (i.e., aid as a means to evangelism). As Abdul Rashied Omar notes, quoting Charles March of the New York Times, “an astonishing 87% of all white evangelical Christians in the United States” provide overt religious legitimation for the American invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq... prominent leaders, like Franklin Graham and Marvin Olasky drummed up support for the wars through Sunday congregational sermons touting such conflicts as creating “exciting new prospects for proselytizing Muslims” (2009:184-185). All I can say is may God forgive us. May my Muslim neighbors forgive us for this lack of integrity and denial of the character of the Christ we seek to emulate.

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<sup>21</sup> Jesus pointed out, “No one can come to me, unless the Father who sent me makes them want to come” (John 6:44 Contemporary English Version). The Qur’an agrees, saying, “God converts whom he will” (al-Nur 24:46; Fatir 35:8). In fact, both are missionary religions with a message for all people (Qur’an 25:1; 38:87; 3:20; Jn 3:16). Both faiths claim the final messenger (Qur’an 33:45; Heb. 1:1-2). Both groups are called to be witnesses (Qur’an 2:143; Mt 28:19-20). Both scriptures make exclusive claims for their message (Qur’an 3:85; Jn 14:6; Acts 4:12). Yet both are called to witness in a gracious manner (Qur’an 16:125; 29:46; 1 Pet 3:15).

<sup>22</sup> 2 Cor 5:17-20, Jn 3:3-7, Eze 36:26-27.

<sup>23</sup> See Love 2000:231-232 and McKnight 2007: 71-73

<sup>24</sup>To understand something of the breadth of perspective and the major points of tension, see the outstanding article by Joseph Cumming entitled, “Muslim Followers of Jesus?” <http://www.christianitytoday.com/globalconversation/december2009/index.html>

<sup>25</sup>In her important book, *Proselytization Revisited: Rights Talk, Free Markets and Culture Wars*, Rosalind I.J. Hackett rightly notes, “the possible religious conversion (an event of personal, spiritual transformation) was often less important for generating conflict than the *forms of expression, transmission, and behavior* deployed to this end” (2008:2 emphasis hers).

Having said that, I am happy to note that there is an increasing number of evangelicals who seek to share their faith in a manner worthy of Jesus the Messiah.<sup>26</sup> In a joint statement previously mentioned (“Why Do We Share the Good News About Jesus with All Peoples, Including Muslims?”), Affirmation 5 focuses on respectful witness and specifically rejects what has historically been referred to as “aid evangelism”: “We, who come from many cultures, countries and backgrounds, offer this message of peace to all people in love, with respect and cultural sensitivity, without coercion or material inducement.”<sup>27</sup>

Two important texts from the New Testament capture the point of affirmation 5:

But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:15).

Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone” (Col 4:45-6).

Evangelicals are non-negotiably committed to Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”

This viewpoint has been ably articulated in another important consensus document which is part of the “Grace and Truth Project” (affirmation 7 in the exposition).

We affirm the right of religious freedom for every person and community. We defend the right of Muslims to express their faith respectfully among Christians and of Christians to express their faith respectfully among Muslims. Moreover we affirm the right of Muslims and Christians alike to change religious beliefs, practices and/or affiliations according to their conscience. Thus we stand against all forms of religious persecution toward Muslims, Christians, or anyone else. God desires all people to make faith choices based on conscience and conviction rather than any form of coercion or violence (2 Cor 4:2).<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> I rejoice whenever the good news about Christ is shared (cf. Phil 1:15-18). However, I believe that Christ receives more glory when our motives and manner are more in line with his, and I believe his witnesses are more effective when they imitate his motives and manner.

<sup>27</sup> J. Dudley Woodberry and Joseph Cumming have each written profoundly biblical articles about respectful witness that every evangelical should read (Woodberry 2009:171-177; Cumming 2008:311-324).

<sup>28</sup> <http://ricklove.net/gracetruth/grace%20and%20truth%20exposition%20for%20website.pdf>

Note that this statement *affirms both the “right” to conversion along with the “responsibility” of ethical witness.*

### **Evangelicals and Dialogue ... an Oxymoron?**

Evangelicals are famous for evangelistic zeal, but we are not known for being advocates of dialogue! In fact for many, Evangelical dialogue is an oxymoron. This tension is evidenced by a new evangelical journal sponsored by Fuller Theological Seminary. The first editorial in the first issue is entitled: “Mission and Dialogue? *Is it possible to be an Evangelical & engage in interfaith dialogue?*”<sup>29</sup> Here we read that this journal “seeks to create space for Evangelical scholars and practitioners to dialogue about the dynamics, challenges, practices and theology surrounding interfaith work, while remaining faithful to the gospel of Jesus and His mission for His Church.”

Another article in the same journal, by Martin Accad, describes the Common Word Dialogue.<sup>30</sup> He affirms the massive significance of the dialogue but points out that it has managed to split the Evangelical community into two camps.<sup>31</sup> The first camp is made of those who, in their evangelistic methods, have traditionally adopted a more exclusivist and polemical approach to other religions, including in their approach to Islam. Many in that group have expressed their dismay and disbelief that Evangelicals should actually be willing to engage in dialogue with Muslims. The other is the more “inclusivist” camp, the several hundred represented by the signatories of the Yale Response. These represent the position that the Gospel proclamation needs to be primarily a positive proclamation, and therefore that it is not in conflict with the principles of dialogue. [Please note: Accad is not using the terms “exclusivist” and “inclusivist” in the same sense as described in the typology above.] Perhaps one of the most striking elements is that on both sides of this deepening divide, there are some top caliber theologians and highly seasoned missionaries. Moreover, neither side is willing to give up evangelism and mission, and all recognize and have pointed out that Islam’s persecution of Muslim converts to Christianity under the rubric of the infamous “apostasy law” is unacceptable and needs to be addressed.

Accad rightly notes that there are presently two camps among Evangelicals on the issue of relating to Muslims. I have personally felt the sting of criticism from my more conservative evangelical friends because of signing the Common Word and engaging in dialogue.

Accad also points out that the “law of apostasy” remains a huge point of tension between Evangelicals and Muslims (this tension -- I might add -- is felt by all Christians, not just Evangelicals; secularists and adherents to other religions also find the law of apostasy unacceptable). But happily there are a number of Muslim scholars who are re-examining and refuting the traditional interpretation of the law of apostasy (which states that if someone converts to another religion from Islam they must be killed).

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<sup>29</sup> “Evangelical Interfaith Dialogue” Issue no. 1, Winter 2010 <http://www.evangelicalinterfaith.com/>.

<sup>30</sup> See Reflections on “A Common Word” Issue no. 1, Winter 2010 p. 10 <http://www.evangelicalinterfaith.com/>

<sup>31</sup> It is worth noting that there are some evangelicals who do not fit neatly into the two camps. They have been able to both applaud the intent of the Yale response and to graciously express concern and disagreement with some of the points and ways things were stated in it.

I was deeply encouraged by Mohammad Hashim Kamali during the Common Word Dialogue when he refuted the traditional interpretation of the law of apostasy (see his *Freedom of Expression in Islam* [1998]). Asma Afsaruddin (a member of the Advisory Board of *Peace Catalyst International*) and Jamal Badawi also refute this traditional viewpoint.<sup>32</sup>

### **What are the practical implications?**

Do I want Muslims to follow Jesus? Of course I do! Some of the Muslims whom I am privileged to know through my work may experience life-transforming encounters with Jesus. I welcome this and recognize that some of these may choose to live out the implications of that as Muslims within the Muslim community, while others may choose to change their religious affiliation. I am committed to defending their fundamental human right to make that decision for themselves, and I will give them as much or as little help as they want in thinking through how to live out their discipleship. In the same way there may be Evangelicals who, in the course of my work, feel led to become Muslims. While I would naturally try to persuade them against this, ultimately I must in the same way support their following their own convictions.<sup>33</sup>

I deeply appreciate Sheikh Habib Ali Al-Jifri's<sup>34</sup> perspective on this issue. During the Common Word Dialogue, we discussed the issue of Da'wah and evangelism. He concluded: "I do not have any problem

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<sup>32</sup> See Afsaruddin 2009: 200-202. Jamal Badawi gave me his paper on the subject which I hope to put on my website in the near future. See also *Apostasy and Religious Freedom* by Louay Safi Apr 08, 2006. <http://louaysafi.com/content/view/54/18/> and article about Dr. Abdul Hamid Al-Ansari in "Academic cautions against 'irrational way of thinking'" by Anwar ElKhatib in the Gulf Times [http://www.gulf-times.com/site/topics/article.asp?cu\\_no=2&item\\_no=262587&version=1&template\\_id=36&parent\\_id=16](http://www.gulf-times.com/site/topics/article.asp?cu_no=2&item_no=262587&version=1&template_id=36&parent_id=16)

However, as Abdul Rashied Omar notes, "The right to be convinced and to convert from Islam to another religion is held by only a minority of Muslim scholars. This view of religious freedom is, however, not shared by the vast majority of Muslim scholars both past as well as present. Most classical and modern Muslim jurists regard apostasy (riddah), defined by them as an act of rejection of faith committed by a Muslim whose Islam had been affirmed without coercion, as a crime deserving the death penalty"(Omar 2009:186).

<sup>33</sup> Some may interpret this to mean that I think human rights trumps the authority of Scripture. Not at all! I think John Piper summarizes my viewpoint well: "Christians are tolerant of other faiths not because there is no absolute truth or that all faiths are equally valuable, but because the one who is Absolute Truth, Jesus Christ, forbids the spread of his truth by the sword. Christian tolerance is the commitment that keeps lovers of competing faiths from killing each other. Christian tolerance is the principle that puts freedom above forced conversion, because it's rooted in the conviction that forced conversion is no conversion at all. Freedom to preach, to teach, to publish, to assemble for worship—these convictions flow from the essence of the Christian faith. Therefore we protect it for all" (2005).

<sup>34</sup> Sheikh Habib Ali Al-Jifri is the founder and President of the Tabah Foundation in the UAE. He is celebrity in the Muslim world, frequently speaking on television in the Middle East.

with Evangelicals sharing their faith anywhere, because I am convinced about my faith.” I feel the same way about my faith! Christians confess that God is sovereign, almighty and omnipotent. Muslims confess: Allahu Akbar! We need to believe what we confess – even in this touchy area.

Clearly Evangelicals will continue to bear witness to their faith. Anything less denies our Lord. So I want to make three points in conclusion. **First, I am profoundly aware that the “great commission” (i.e., Jesus’ command to make disciples of all nations: Matt 28:18-20) is to be lived out in ways consistent with the great commandments** (i.e., Love of God and Love of Neighbor: Matt 22:35-40). In other words, love for God and love for neighbor shape the expression of our witness to the nations. Without love, evangelical witness is like a “noisy gong or a clanging cymbal” (1 Cor 13:1ff.).<sup>35</sup> I could easily say this 10 or 20 years ago but how I live this out in practice now is very different.<sup>36</sup>

This call to love God and neighbor provides significant common ground between Muslims and Christians<sup>37</sup> as articulated by hundreds of Muslim scholars summarized in the Common Word Between Us and You.<sup>38</sup> In fact, these commands give us a practical way to work towards peace. Peace Catalyst International, for example, has sponsored “Love your neighbor dinners” modeled after the Common

<sup>35</sup> See Graham Cole’s excellent summary of these issues (2009:218-219).

<sup>36</sup> The chart below presents a good overview of evangelical thought and practice in numbers 1-4. The point I am trying to make is best summarized in number 4, “Integral Mission,” or what I call “Biblical Holism.” (see Davies p .4)

|  |   |   |  |   |  |  |
|--|---|---|--|---|--|--|
| 1<br><b>Proclamation Only</b>  | 2<br><b>Traditional Evangelical</b>   | 3<br><b>Pragmatic Evangelical</b>   | 4<br><b>Integral Mission</b>   | 5<br><b>Pragmatic Ecumenical</b>  | 6<br><b>Traditional Ecumenical</b>                                       | 7<br><b>Liberation Theology</b>  |
| Doing good is a distraction (therefore, a sin) from our call to preach the gospel. | Social programmes are acceptable as long as they don't take evangelism resources. | Social programmes are a good strategy for evangelism (a means to an end). | We do good because we are Christians – no distinction made between compassion & proclamation | It is ok to preach the gospel but only if you have a chance (no intentionality) | Doing good is our preaching. Don't use ministry resources to "proclaim". | Preaching the gospel is via transforming the unjust structures of society. |

<sup>37</sup> There have been many criticisms of the Common Word and the Yale Response. See *A Common Word: Muslims and Christians on Loving God and Neighbor* (Volf, Muhammad and Yarrington 2010) for a summary of the presentations made during the dialogue along with detailed response to many criticisms.

<sup>38</sup> On October 13, 2007 one hundred thirty-eight influential Muslim clerics, representing every school and sect of Islam from around the world, wrote an open letter to Christians everywhere calling for dialogue based on the common ground of “love of God and neighbor.” This global initiative is referred to as “A Common Word” (see <http://www.acommonword.com/>). One of the most significant responses to this call for dialogue was issued by the Yale Center for Faith and Culture’s Reconciliation Program, which in turn resulted in a global conference at Yale University July 24-31, 2008 (see <http://www.yale.edu/faith/acw/acw.htm>). See also *A Common Word: Muslims and Christians on Loving God and Neighbor* by Volf, Muhammad and Yarrington 2010.

Word. Churches and Mosques gather together to discuss the themes of love of neighbor and related topics and then have a meal together (see <http://peacecatalyst.wordpress.com/2010/03/20/love-your-neighbor-dinner-vineyard-community-church-of-gilbert/>).<sup>39</sup> Stereotypes have been exposed and barriers have come down through these gatherings. Both Christians and Muslims are learning to love their neighbor.

**Second, I believe that many Evangelicals have ignored or minimized the clear teaching about peacemaking in the Bible.**<sup>40</sup> This is reflected in the preamble of World Evangelical Alliance Peace and Reconciliation Initiative:<sup>41</sup>

God has created the world to be recipients of His love. Because of sin, we live in a world rife with conflict. God's mission is the reconciliation of all things through Christ, and He invites us to participate with Him in the pursuit of right relationships. We honor the faithful examples of peacebuilding and reconciliation in our history. We confess and repent of our failure, whether through our action or inaction, to bear witness to the Gospel by faithfully living out the peaceable ways of Jesus Christ. In particular, we acknowledge that in our zeal for evangelism, we have often overlooked the biblical mandate to pursue peace. We commit ourselves anew to this mandate within our homes, churches, communities, and among the nations.<sup>42</sup>

Evangelicals would do well to go back to the Bible to draw out its profound and comprehensive teaching on peacemaking ... and live it out!

**Third, I propose a "Da'wah and Evangelism Peace Project."**<sup>43</sup> How can we both be faithful to our respective faiths and yet live in peace?<sup>44</sup> Both Christianity and Islam are missionary faiths.<sup>45</sup> Large

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<sup>39</sup>You do not have to believe every statement in the Common Word or in the Yale Response to affirm its practical potential to build bridges between Christians and Muslims. Would your Mosque or Church be interested in hosting a dialogue like this? If so, please contact, Rick Love at [ricklove@peace-catalyst.net](mailto:ricklove@peace-catalyst.net).

<sup>40</sup>See my article *The Missing Peace of Evangelical Missiology: Peacemaking and Respectful Witness* <http://ricklove.net/peacemaking/Peacemaking%20and%20Evangelism.pdf>

<sup>41</sup>The World Evangelical Alliance represents 420 million Evangelicals around the world. <http://www.weapri.org/about-2/>

<sup>42</sup> The Peace Catalyst Manifesto is similar: In a world rife with conflict, we resolve to follow the peaceable ways of Jesus the Messiah. God's true children work for peace. We confess we have often overlooked the biblical mandate to pursue peace. Sometimes, we have shared the tenets of our faith without exhibiting the character of its founder. Thus, by the grace of God, we commit ourselves to peacemaking – to resolve conflict and restore harmony as God commands. We commit ourselves anew to this mandate within our homes, across our religious communities, throughout our spheres of influence, and among the nations of the world.

<sup>43</sup> Lord willing we will do this in partnership with the Yale Reconciliation Program

numbers of Christians convert to Islam on a regular basis and large numbers of Muslims become followers of Jesus on a regular basis.

We would begin by gathering leaders from both faith communities together to *develop an agreed upon “Ethics of Da’wah and Evangelism.”* Something similar to this has already been done in Britain by the Christian Muslim Forum.<sup>46</sup> There have been two significant meetings on similar topics in recent history<sup>47</sup> but both of them took place prior to the impact of globalization, terrorism and pluralism. Moreover, Evangelicals did not play a significant role in these meetings. Thus, there is a new urgency to address this topic.

Perhaps a second phase could include practical demonstrations of mercy where there have been human rights violations. My friend Dr. Sayyid Syeed (National Director of ISNA – the Islamic Society of North America) told me this story: A church building in Pakistan was burned down recently by Muslims. So some U.S. Muslims helped raise money in partnership with a church in the US. They went to Pakistan to give the leaders of the church there a large financial gift so they could rebuild their church!

I rejoice in this demonstration of mercy. However, these acts of mercy need to be multiplied around the world. This is why there is such an urgent need for the Da’wah-Evangelism Peace Project. There are far too many cases of persecution taking place around the world today.

I realize the massive complexity of working toward “freedom of religion” and implementing the “Da’wah-Evangelism Peace Project.” But my commitment to love of God and neighbor, along with the massive biblical teaching on peacemaking, compels me to push forward with this initiative. I believe there are wise, noble and forward-thinking Muslim leaders and wise, noble and forward-thinking Christian leaders who will join me.

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<sup>44</sup> For an important summary of these issues see *“The Ethics of Da’wa and Evangelism: Respecting the Other and Freedom of Religion”* (Love 2008b).

<sup>45</sup> Christianity and Islam both command their followers to spread the good news of the true path to God. Each claims a universal message for all people (Qur’an 25:1; 38:87; 3:20; Jn 3:16). Both faiths claim the final messenger (Qur’an 33:45; Heb. 1:1-2). Both Christians and Muslims are called to be witnesses (Qur’an 2:143; Mt 28:19-20). The scriptures of each make exclusive claims for their message (Qur’an 3:85; Jn 14:6; Acts 4:12). Yet both are called to witness in a gracious manner (Qur’an 16:125; 29:46; 1 Pet 3:15).

<sup>46</sup> ([http://www.christianmuslimforum.org/downloads/Ethical\\_Guidelines\\_for\\_Witness.pdf](http://www.christianmuslimforum.org/downloads/Ethical_Guidelines_for_Witness.pdf)).

<sup>47</sup> Dudley Woodberry mentions two previous gatherings on this topic in the past: The first was the conference on “Christian Mission and Islamic Da’wah” in Chambésy, Switzerland, June 26-30, 1976, organized by the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches, Geneva, in consultation with the Islamic Foundation, Leicester, and the Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, Selly Oak Colleges, Birmingham, England. The other was the “Christian-Muslim Consultation on Religious Freedom” sponsored by the World Council of Churches and held at Hartford Seminary, October 15, 1999 (Woodberry 2009: 175-176).

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