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Inbox

Confessing the One True God in the Context of Public Interreligious Events

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In the polytheistic arena of an increasingly “small world,” for a Christian invited to participate with representatives of non-Christian religions in public religious events, the issues are primarily scriptural and secondarily practical. The hazards, far outweighing any expectations of effective Christian confession or proclamation of the Gospel, justify—even demand—an explained absence.

Scriptural “lenses”

Scriptural “lenses” through which to observe and evaluate civic religious events are at least threefold: (1) the First (foremost) Commandment (Ex 20:3 and Mt 22:37–40); (2) paradigmatic events (1 Kgs 18 and Acts 17); and (3) clear apostolic directives for the Christian life (1 Cor 10:14ff. and 2 Cor 6:14ff.).

The First Commandment

In Exodus 20, God speaks clearly: His people are to have no other gods before Him. In Matthew 22:37–40, Jesus explicates the First Commandment for the Pharisees. Love God with all your heart, soul, and mind. This is the “first and greatest commandment.” Note that the First Commandment takes precedence over the Second. Love for neighbor follows and is based upon love for God. In a multireligious event, the stakes are high—overwhelmingly high. A Christian who risks participating obligates himself to give clear, unambiguous witness to the triune God as the one true God, of whom all other “gods” are but false, demonic imitations. Absent that, he has violated the First Commandment, for we are to have no other gods before Him, i.e., in addition to or in His presence. And what of the Second Commandment in such circumstances? Love your neighbor as yourself. To that we respond: What greater love for a neighbor can be shown than to witness to him of the one true God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and of the one and only hope of his salvation? It is the very antithesis of love to imply the religious validity of a collection of clerics on a public platform, regardless of their professed beliefs. Christians are to let charity prevail in their dealings with others, but it is God who defines love.

Elijah and the prophets of Baal

In 1 Kings, Elijah is acting in the midst of national crisis and suffering—in this case, drought and famine. The analog in our civic culture is a disaster or crisis, when

high emotions tempt people to blur religious distinctions on a public platform to emphasize unity. To be sure, Elijah shares a platform (Mt. Carmel) with the priests of Baal. Observe, however, how Elijah relates to his Baalite peers. Does he respectfully listen to their prayers and then offer his own as one of several equally valid petitions? Hardly. Read Elijah's plea to the people (v. 21). Read his prayer (vv. 36–37). Read the whole account. We may be uncomfortable with Elijah's (God's) method, but we dare not ignore the clear message that God does not tolerate other gods in His presence. Only He is the God of Israel. If, under the New Testament, we do not slaughter the priests of false gods, we surely avoid even the implication or appearance that they are representatives of equal and valid religions.

Paul and the Areopagus

For a positive example of Christian presence in a public polytheistic context, we refer to Paul's Athenian experience (Acts 17). In Athens, where idols were common, Paul is preaching the "good news about Jesus and the resurrection." When asked to meet at the Areopagus, he doesn't flinch. Risking sneers (there were some) and ridicule, he again preaches the resurrection, upon the hearing of which some say, "We want to hear you again on this subject." As a result, "a few men became followers of Paul and believed." No mocking or slaughter of false prophets this time, just clear proclamation of the Truth. Paul meets the followers of other "gods" on their own turf and leads them to the Gospel. Note, however, that the context is neither a prayer service nor a formal religious event of any kind. Can one even imagine Paul's engaging in serial prayer or a rite of worship with or among unbelievers? Why not? He explains clearly in quite another context.

Paul again—God's Word for the "Corinthians" of the twenty-first century

In his Epistles to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul provides clear, practical "thou shalt not" applications of both commandments, even (especially) for today. In 1 Corinthians 10:20 he warns: "the sacrifices [and surely the prayers] of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons." What Christian would choose or dare to participate with demons? In 2 Corinthians 6:14ff., Paul charges believers not to be yoked—especially, and obviously, in a religious context—with idolaters or unbelievers. That is, they should not put their spiritual welfare and the spiritual welfare of others, fellow believers as well as unbelievers, at such risk. "What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? . . . between the temple of God and idols?" Rhetorical questions, to be sure. To put it bluntly: Avoid illicit religious relations. Could any scriptural warnings be more relevant to contemporary multireligious events? There is no ambiguity here. The ambiguity resides in our culturally conditioned minds, which, by the way, may also tempt us to regard references to "demons" and "Belial" as archaic. Yet we know that God's Word applies to us and our time, that our world is spiritually no different from the world of Paul. God's faithful people have always had to live and interact

with unbelievers and anti-believers. Our twenty-first century world offers nothing new under the sun in that respect. These clear words of Scripture are no rigid or out-of-context proof-texting. They are at the heart of the matter, for the Corinthians and for us.

Note that Paul does not limit prohibition against such yoking to prayers or worship with vested clergy. The proscription is general: “Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. . . . What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols?” Lest we misunderstand his meaning, Paul defines and clarifies: “For we are the temple of the living God.” It is not only in a temple (“built with hands”) or a church or a mosque that a Christian avoids participating in prayer or worship with unbelievers. Rather, we Christians, who are the very “temple of God” (cf. 1 Cor 6:19), avoid any yoking—in actions or contacts—that would cause us or our neighbor to offend God or to confuse false gods with the one true God. Could Paul have put it any more directly? Call such events what one will—“civic event with religious content,” “prayer service,” etc.—it matters not. Do not be yoked!

What of the claim that a Muslim cleric or Jewish rabbi in some sense believes in “the one true God”? While the claim may provide a basis for theological discussion and, in an appropriate context, even an opportunity for evangelism, it has no relevance to a public interreligious worship context, where important distinctions can’t be made.

Practical matters—important, but secondary to the scriptural

Even aside from these clear scriptural prohibitions, given all the hazards of such events, we must conclude that opportunities for Christians to witness in a multireligious civic event that includes any aspect of worship, e.g., prayer, are essentially nonexistent. The most common public perceptions at such events—despite any good intentions of the Christian or his well-meant words—are that

- a. all participants have an equally valid “prayer path” to God.
- b. tolerance of each other’s religious beliefs is more important than the Truth.

In America, for example, it is only good civic manners when religious representatives gather on the same platform not to assert religious claims too seriously (certainly not exclusively) or to promote one religion at the expense of another. Ultimately, public prayer in a context of polytheistic civil religion is neither a proper means nor a setting for clear proclamation. Once one agrees to play by the rules of pluralistic public etiquette, it is all but impossible to proclaim that the Triune God is not one choice among others, but that He is the one true God and that Jesus is “*the Way*.” Such a claim is seen as fractious, a violation of a tacit gentleman’s agreement and rejection of the contemporary religion of diversity. Exclusivity is a most unwelcome interloper in the public religious context. A participant who makes exclusive claims at a multireligious civic event is far more likely to alienate (“Who does he think *he* is?”) or to confuse (“Why is he here?”) than to provide an opportunity for the Holy Spirit to open hearts to the Gospel.

The matter of perceptions

If we are to let love for the neighbor prevail, charity toward the weak in faith and those who lack faith in Christ means—at the very least—avoiding any act that confuses or alienates. Despite his best intentions, the Christian who participates in prayer or other religious activity on a platform with representatives of other religions must understand that he exercises little or no control over the perceptions that accompany his presence. Indeed, a presence that suggests to the spiritually weak or unenlightened that there are many paths to God is loveless in the extreme. For example, in regard to participation in an interreligious service some years ago following a national crisis, an editorial in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* opined: “Shouldn’t everyone recognize that there are many different ideas about spirituality, all of them to be respected? Shouldn’t the members of one faith [i.e., religion] feel comfortable worshipping [sic] their God, even in the company of people worshipping another? *Aren’t we spiritually more alike than different?*” [emphasis mine] (December 3, 2001:B6) That anyone refuses on scriptural grounds to participate in interreligious prayer or worship—period—is all but impossible to comprehend in a culture that venerates pluralism and diversity.

Why (not) participate?

Finally, however, we must ask: What is the point of participation? Is it to provide “visibility in the marketplace of religions”? That is not a scriptural concept. Is it to signify civic unity in a time of crisis, that we Christians are one with representatives of other religions in decrying the evil that surrounds us? That is, good intentions justify the act? The spiritual hazards are simply far too many and too great. We do well to remember that pressure to participate is usually social or cultural—anything but evangelistic: “The mayor, the governor, the President, et al. issued the invitation. The priest, the rabbi, the imam will be there. How can I refuse? What would people think?” And it is pride that prompts illusory self-assurance: “My contribution will be distinctive. My message will be clear. My prayer will stand out from the other three or five (serial, but equal) prayers addressed to a sequence of ‘deities.’” Another verse from 1 Corinthians 10 may well apply in the context: “Therefore, let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall” (v. 12).

Rather, at interreligious worship or prayer events, civic or otherwise, let our clearly explained absence *be* our public witness. There are far better and more appropriate—and less hazardous and less ambiguous—opportunities and occasions for proclaiming the Good News of salvation through Christ alone and for living that faith in public contexts. For interreligious events, a pastoral decision based on clear scriptural guidelines, including proscription, is always in order. Practical matters of *fellowship*, that is, activities involving other Christians, offer adequate opportunities for casuistry. The Scriptures, Old and New Testaments alike, are unambiguous regarding *interreligious* relationships. Sophisticated judgment is seldom required.

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The bottom line for Christians: KIS (Keep It Scriptural)

Exodus 20 and Matthew 22 (First Commandment); 1 Corinthians 10;
2 Corinthians 6.

David O. Berger

*Response***Witness in the Marketplace of Religions: An Opportunity to Be Seized**

David Berger's article, "Confessing the One True God in the Context of Public Interreligious Events" raises important issues about opportunities for witness to the One True God in the context of "public interreligious events." Since my own ideas are somewhat different and we are both members of the *Lutheran Mission Matters* editorial committee, I want to thank him for giving me the opportunity to share my views.

My concern takes seriously the last phrase of the article title, "public interreligious events," and that phrase sets the tone for this article. The time is very likely coming when Christian faith will have no privilege in American society, and all our public witnessing will be done in a context where all religions and spiritualities are regarded as equally valid. Christians will need to bear witness in a truly free-marketplace of religions.

To put this issue in perspective, I think we must recognize that this is not an issue about the answer to the famous Lutheran question: "What does this mean?" but about that second Lutheran question: "How is this done?" In my more than thirty years of service with LCMS World Mission, I met and worked with many people who were already working in the free-marketplace of ideas and also in areas where the marketplace was not very free because Christians were a small minority in a vast sea of people outside the Christian faith. In all those situations, I never heard a suggestion that the Christian faith was something that could be compromised or watered down to make it more compatible with the non-Christian religion. In my experience, people who have sufficient courage to share the Gospel in the marketplace are among those who are most seriously concerned about a pure Christian message and how it can be faithfully communicated in a non-Christian and perhaps even anti-Christian context.

This does not mean that they do not have continuing discussions in the family, in the Christian congregation, in the Christian community, about how this message is to be shared. What should be said? How should it be said? Where should it be said? Can we say more than we are already saying? Are we saying so much that we