



WORLD EVANGELICAL ALLIANCE

Office of Intrafaith and Interfaith Relations

Making Peace: Reconciling Forgiveness with Justice by means of Personal Initiative

This speech was given by H. E. Prof. Thomas K. Johnson, Ph.D., Ambassador from the World Evangelical Alliance to the Vatican, on February 2, 2017, at a conference entitled “Ethics in Action for Sustainable and Integral Development: Peace” held at the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, Casina Pio IV, Vatican City.¹

Mr. President, Your Eminences, Your Excellencies, esteemed colleagues,

I bring you greetings and wishes for God’s blessing from the World Evangelical Alliance and the some 600 million Christians in our churches. Many of us have mixed tears with our prayers in light of the violence of our time. May God give us wisdom to find new initiatives for peace.

The WEA’s current president, Efraim Tendero, formerly headed the council of evangelical churches in the Philippines. In 2008, he took the daring step of leading a delegation of Christian pastors and Muslim imams on a peace mission to the Central Command Headquarters of an armed Filipino rebel group, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front.

When he arrived, one of the Moro leaders, Datu Mastura, asked, “Why are you here? Are you sent by the government?” Efraim replied, “No, we are Christian and Muslim religious leaders who come in support of the peace process. As an Evangelical bishop, I am leading this delegation, because as a Christian, I believe that all people are created in God’s image, and therefore we should treat each other with dignity and should live in harmony and peaceful coexistence irrespective of our religious affiliation. I am also a follower of Jesus the Prince of Peace, who said, ‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the sons of God.’” Datu said, “If that is so, come in and let us dialogue.”

Bishop Efraim’s personal initiative of forgiveness and mercy was a crucial step toward the peaceful resolution of a civil war. He fearlessly—or perhaps more accurately, in spite of his fears—put Jesus’ challenging teachings into practice. With help from many others, Efraim and Datu’s face-to-face discussion helped to end conflict. An attempt to practice justice without forgiveness would have led to more war. A personal initiative of mercy and forgiveness was needed.

In the Gospel of Matthew (18:15), Jesus says, “If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over.” The immediate context of this saying refers to conflicts among believers, but the recommended behavior is the same as what Efraim did with the Muslim rebels: go directly to the person involved, have an open conversation, and pursue reconciliation along with justice.

As mentioned a few minutes ago by Rabbi Sir David Rosen, when peace between individuals, people groups, or nations is broken, merely pursuing justice will never restore peace. It will only further the cycle of hostility and vengefulness. To restore peace, we must bring justice

¹ I need to thank Ruth Baldwin, Pavel Raus, Ph.D. and Bruce Barron, Ph.D. for their kind input regarding these comments.

and mercy together as teammates. And showing mercy or forgiveness always requires personal initiative. Someone has to break the cycle by taking the initiative to practice mercy and forgive. This is what, we Christians believe, God is doing through Jesus Christ. He offers us mercy, leading to peace with God, without waiting for us to earn it. The same principle must be applied to our human relations. Conflict seems to happen by accident; peace requires initiative.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Nelson Mandela, and other key figures in post-apartheid South Africa understood the need to link justice and mercy. Ignoring past injustice would have been unthinkable, but simply pursuing justice would have perpetuated the cycle of bitterness and bloodshed. In 1995, they launched South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), the very name of which acknowledged their nation's dual need. The TRC could not solve every problem or heal every wounded heart, but it could and did blaze a trail, the only possible path toward a brighter future for South Africa. And this led to several future efforts in other countries, where people attempted to upgrade and implement their initial ideas.

As we consider the conflicts destroying people, communities, and nations, the outcomes will be far better, I believe, if we constantly remember and apply Christian wisdom regarding the relationship between justice, forgiveness, and personal initiative. Today we are dialoguing as friends. But in the future, God may call some of us to face-to-face interaction with armed rebels, reactionary nationalists, or the surviving remnants of ISIS. Will we take personal initiative to bring justice and forgiveness together in such a manner that peace is restored?

As a very small personal initiative toward peace, I observe sitting next to me the Ayatollah Mostafa Mohaghegh Damad from Iran. I know about the conflict between the US and Iran, as well as conflicts between Christians and Muslims. But that is not the entire story. I would like to ask the photographers to come up and take a picture of us publicly shaking hands with all of you present.

Comments from after the conference:

As I was sitting next to Ayatollah Damad during the first sessions of the conference, it occurred to me that in a couple ways he might be my enemy. He is Iranian and I am an American, and our countries are at enmity, though not at war. And he is part of the religious establishment in Iran, which does not think Muslims should be allowed to convert to Christianity and which has persecuted some new converts to Christianity from Islam, though it is hardly possible for me to know what opinions he has expressed to fellow Iranian Muslim leaders.

My mind soon jumped to Jesus' command, "Love your enemies." So I began to do what little one can do in that situation to love a possible enemy during a conference. I helped him get his computer online (even though it was a Mac!). I helped him edit the English for a line in his speech. At his request, I autographed one of my books for him. And we compared notes about why we each walk with a cane. (He has an ALC injury in his right knee.) I then asked if we could shake hands publicly for a photo.

Reconciliation always includes a mix of justice, forgiveness, and personal initiative. I would be delighted if my small steps of initiative would lead to reconciliation between western Christians and Muslims in Iran, but a part of that would have to include freedom of religion for Christians in Iran, including those who have recently converted or are now converting to Christ. Freedom of religion is a core component of justice. And it is my impression that justice has been the lacking component that has led to the failure or misfire of multiple major attempts at reconciliation.