The Missing Peace and Our Muslim Neighbor: Reconciling with Theological Parochialism

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Introduction: Why and How Will We Engage?

One of the deep questions floating around conversations within many churches today drives the inquiry behind this article—how should we view, and engage, Muslims?[1] Our encounters with people of other faiths has become commonplace since the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, when the concept of interfaith dialogue was mostly the domain of academics or high-level church leaders. It was not normal for parishioners in a local church to think much about people of other religions, except perhaps to send missionaries to remote parts of the world to evangelize them.

I was one of those missionaries in the first part of my career, but being a missionary to predominantly Catholic Mexico was not a theological bridge that stretched very far. This changed for me in a big way in the second phase of my ministry as a pastor in the Seattle area when 9-11 occurred, and terror brought down the fragile, and particularly limited, understanding we had of Muslims.[2] I was a pastor in a suburban church and began to visit local mosques, seeking to understand our Muslim

1 My work is focused on Christian-Muslim relations and as I will argue in this paper is probably the most significant inter-religious challenge and conversation today. It is also the strategic reason for the focus of this article.

2 See movie produced by John Yeager and the author of this article, *Blessed Are the Peacemakers: One Man's Journey to Find the Heart of Palestine*, https://worldlyholiness.com/movies-study-guide-from-peacetalkers-to-peacemakers.

neighbors but also to help people in my congregation make distinctions between what we witnessed that day and the religion of Islam, the second largest religion with nearly 2 billion adherents spread across the globe and perhaps as diverse in expression as Christianity. I found we too easily projected onto the entire Muslim world the images of what we witnessed on September 11. We became easily persuaded that they all hated us.

It wasn't a stretch to understand how my church and much of Western Christianity became weaponized by political and cultural powers against Muslims. Since Christianity still remains the largest religion globally, and since our particular history with Islam has been fraught with much conflict, fear, and misunderstanding, the work of peacemaking seemed both the correct path forward for me personally and also urgent for the church.

It would have been heartening in the aftermath of 9-11 to find many within my congregation automatically leaning into the ethic of love taught by Jesus Christ. But that wasn't my experience. It honestly felt like we were mimicking our larger culture, wanting to engage in a holy war against Islam. This approach was easily veiled as a fight for our lives, our communities, and our country against Islamic terrorism. Nuance and clarity were lost along with the biblical teaching on love of enemies. We were unable to see, in point of fact, that Muslims were not our enemies.

This created a bit of a midlife, ministerial crisis for me. Something was missing. And my leadership in the church did not seem to be helping to correct our syncretism, the corruption of our faith, our capacity to explore the theological and religious world of Islam, or show hospitality to our Muslim neighbors and refugees, many of whom themselves were escaping some of the horrors we ourselves were witnessing. We seemed to be allowing the world to squeeze us into its mold.[3]

One of my early mentors in peacemaking, Glen Stassen, helped me see one of our principle stumbling blocks in our own Christian discipleship that presents as an Achilles heel in the work of peace. I grew up with a truncated idea of peace. In his foreword to Willard Swartley's important book, *The Covenant of Peace: The Missing Peace in New Testament Theology and Ethics*, Stassen mentions the following:

3 Romans 12:2 reads, "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold, but let God re-mold your minds from within, so that you may prove in practice that the plan of God for you is good, meets all his demands and moves you towards the goal of true maturity" (Phillips).

> Swartley points out that the word peace appears one hundred times in the New Testament, and reconciliation four times. But New Testament theologians write more about *reconciliation* than peace, and often limit it to individual reconciliation with God—without significant attention to God's work to reconcile us with others or with enemies—and sometimes move it off the stage of history into a purely future eschatology waiting in the wings invisible in our actions and invisible to observers' eyes. They often reduce it to inner peace with God, without attention to God's will for peace among God's creatures.[4]

In a curious twist of biblical proportions, in the last few years there has been a perceptible movement away from broad support and enthusiasm in the work of peacemaking beyond a committed core of people. Some in the pew and church mission committee meetings are scratching their heads. A few phone calls and emails even questioned what our objective is in praying "with Muslims" instead of "for" them from our Christian enclaves and prayer closets. We encountered significant pushback from a leading evangelical pastor in the Seattle area in our early efforts.[5] Suspicion of our objectives and dissatisfaction with our modus operandi seemed to echo in conversations with some churches. Not all, thank goodness. But enough to give us pause. In my own denomination I received a detailed letter from one church, full of questions regarding my premise for engaging Muslims. Why did I have such deep relationships with Muslims and Palestinians, and why was I challenging the idea that the modern state of Israel was anything but a miracle in the desert that seemed to portend the second coming of Christ?

Our first steps in peacemaking with our Muslim neighbors were clearly an adventure with very few maps or mentors. Thankfully, I found a few, but many times I felt like an imposter, clearly not an expert in peacemaking. As I grew in my understanding of Islam and began to consult with others who were already on this path, I became more convinced that

4 Glen Stassen, foreword to Willard Swartley, *The Covenant of Peace: The Missing Peace in New Testament Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2006), x.

5 Our initial ventures engaging Muslims in the Seattle area were passionately criticized by Mars Hill founding pastor Mark Driscoll after this article was published: Janet I. Tu, "Evangelicals Extend a Hand to Muslims," *The Seattle Times*, September 7, 2010, https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/evangelicals-extend-a-hand-to-muslims/.

a posture that Jesus articulated in the Gospels should be our primary approach: Blessed are the peacemakers. Build bridges, engage our "other" as a human being before we categorize them by tribe, geography, or place in life. Everyone has a story. Listen. While responses in the mosque were overwhelmingly positive and constructive, even though some were trying to convert me to Islam, something interesting began to happen back in my church community.

The deeper we went into peacemaking the less we became featured heroes of the church, "reaching Muslims for Christ," as I was when serving as a foreign missionary. The first time I was commissioned by my denomination to work among Muslims in fact, financial and emotional support were flush. But several years into this work, and after returning from the foreign field, I lost financial support from some churches because I was local and appeared more intent on peacemaking than evangelism.[6] One pastor even told me that the kinds of things we were doing, such as helping local churches engage Muslim neighbors in their own community, was not "strategically aligned" with the mission of his church!

Some people did follow our lead and join us in the mosque. But others wanted to know first whether we worshiped the same God. Others still asked if my goal in making friendships with Muslims was for evangelism. Were any Muslims converting to Christianity?

I began to ask myself, was I on the wrong path? Was I outside of God's will somehow?

I dove deep into Scripture and began to seek out mentors like Rick Love, the founder of Peace Catalyst International, and others. The more I prayed and studied, the more I became convinced we were on the cusp of something important and being led by the Holy Spirit. I was not always confident I was moving in the right direction but with growing conviction kept taking the next step forward and deeper into personal relationships and bridge building. I began to see God act in ways that surprised me and pulled me deeper into places I never imagined.

Within a few years I was invited to speak in a mosque for a community event addressing how we were building bridges as Christians with our Muslim neighbors. The Imam of that mosque was trying to do the same thing with his community, including churches in the area. After I spoke to a crowded mosque one evening along with a Catholic priest and several lay leaders of other Christian organizations, the Imam handed

6 Curiously, I've shared more about my relationship with Jesus Christ, doing some kind of evangelism in other words, explaining important ideas in Scripture, correcting misunderstandings, as a peacemaker than as a missionary.

me a check as a speaker fee. That surprised me! As it did the treasurer at our denominational headquarters in Chicago when they received a check from my now very good Muslim friend for our work in peacemaking.

I began taking church groups and their pastors to Friday prayers across the country, in rural communities as well as key urban centers like Detroit and Chicago where majority Muslim communities are found. I also began to travel to Muslim majority countries as a friend of Muslims to learn more and go into the trenches on deeper theological questions with the Quran and Bible both open before us.

I also served as an advocate for human rights in Palestine for several months, seeking to address issues of human rights and injustice toward marginalized communities. We made two movies telling the stories of peacemakers—Jewish, Palestinian, Christian, Muslim, and secular people, all working for peace. A few years ago, I was a guest at the United Nations for an event hosted by Muslims to discuss ways to build inclusive societies. In all of these new spaces, I never was anything but a self-declared follower of Jesus Christ, seeking to bear witness to his love for all people.

This journey has thrust me into reading my Bible with fresh eyes. One of my important discoveries is featured in this article. I found amazing parallels between the Samaritans of Jesus's day and Muslims today.

The intent and scope of this article can in no way answer every question surrounding interfaith engagement and dialogue, or the state of the church today vis-à-vis our Muslim neighbors; but it is an honest effort to engage theologically the question of engaging our "religious other." My experience is largely limited to the Abrahamic faiths and the encounter between Islam, Christianity, and to some degree Judaism as it relates to peacemaking work in Israel and Palestine. Since I am a Christian leader, I will look critically at my own community, thus following one of the important ideas planted by Krister Stendahl in these kinds of space, that we should not compare our best with the other's worst.[7] In other words, seeking to diminish another religion for the sake of winning the "divine beauty contest" will not be employed in this conversation. We will look at some of the disconcerting responses to Islam in the church and broader society, responding with an examination of some important New Testament teaching to help us reflect and respond to engaging our Muslim neighbors.

Perhaps a leading question should be asked at this point. What script

7 Barbara Brown Taylor, *Holy Envy: Finding God in the Faith of Others* (New York: HarperCollins, 2019), 65.

are we following when we think of Muslims? As Christians, do we lean toward loathing or loving Muslims? I have seen a lot of the former and not enough of the latter. I understand how fear shapes us and the amygdala is hardwired to respond in ways to preserve our lives. Some of us effectively work through biases and analyze culture, media, and systems that seek to predetermine our responses. Thankfully, there is a middle ground where some have dipped their toe in the water, but perhaps like the topic of Christian-Muslim relations itself, the vociferous margins are what we know and hear more about. Not everybody finds themselves in these extremes, however; many are somewhere in the middle.

Many people are just curious, do not want to offend a Muslim coworker, and wonder about Sharia law, jihad, or what is really meant when a Muslim says, "Allah akbar." Some pundits and leaders behave like arsonists seeking to pour the accelerant of misunderstanding, fear, and hate in order to divide and intimidate.[8] Consequently, we find in our current political climate a way of thinking and behaving toward Muslims that is shaped and impacted fundamentally by Islamophobia.

In my experience many of the questions people raise in church audiences reflect a deep suspicion if not outright fear of Islam which has been shaped by Islamophobia, but in most cases without ever meeting or knowing a Muslim. A growing number of religious leaders are working to improve Christian-Muslim relations,[9] but a recent study found that more than three in four U.S. evangelicals say they have never, or infrequently, interacted with Muslims.[10] Consequently, they are apprehensive of Muslim immigration and their presence in our communities but for reasons and motivations that arise out of false ideas about Islam and fear of the Muslim world. Whatever one thinks of Muslims, as followers of Christ we must respond, framed by the teaching of Jesus Christ. As a Christian leader I need to help answer people's questions but more important guide and disciple the church. Clearly we have a challenge.

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8 Thomas L. Friedman wrote an excellent opinion piece on "Arsonists and Firefighters" in *The New York Times*, June 28, 2014, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/29/opinion/sunday/thomas-l-friedman-who-is-setting-the-sectarian-fires-in-the-middle-east.html.

9 Peace Catalysts International, a group I collaborated with for over 10 years, is one good example, and Religion News Service writes about several others in Aysha Khan, "Evangelicals and Muslims See Similarities in Faiths and Favor Closer Ties, Survey Says," March 20, 2019, https://religionnews.com/2019/03/20/evangelicals-and-muslims-see-similarities-in-faiths-and-favor-closer-ties-survey-says/.

10 Khan, "Evangelicals and Muslims See Similarities in Faiths," https://religionnews.com/2019/03/20/evangelicals-and-muslims-see-similarities-in-faiths-and-favor-closer-ties-survey-says/.

As Rabbi Marc Schneier mentions,

> "Evangelical Christian-Muslim relations is today's largest interreligious challenge, and the poll shows that there are causes for concern and elements of hope and optimism on both sides to narrow the divide."[11]

Islamophobia and the Church

Many studies have been conducted over the years seeking to understand the rise in Islamophobia both in our country and within the church. A revealing study conducted by LifeWay Research several years ago charted a disturbing trend within evangelical circles. They conducted two iterations of their polling with the same questions in 2010 and in 2015,[12] therefore ascertaining a trend line. It was not just a snapshot in time, in other words, but helped chart movement in a direction of increasing Islamophobia, not decreasing. An important distinction between mainline pastors and evangelicals is that the former view Islam as a religion of peace, love, and compassion while the latter see Islam as violent and dangerous. Sadly, even within the overall research, a growing number of all pastors labeled Islam violent, combined with a decrease in numbers of those who viewed it as spiritually good.

There are additional current trends on Islamophobia, with strong, though not exclusive links to "evangelicals" and more generally, "conservative white Protestants."[13] In an important article in *Foreign Policy* magazine, author Chrissy Stroop cites the first time hearing Islam equated with terrorism: It was from the pulpit in her church. This happened in 1998, before Islamophobia was mainstream. The pastor had just completed a serious reading of the Quran in his own studies and concluded that "a good Muslim should want to kill Christians and Jews." I bump into this issue often in churches where "experts" make facile conclusions about

11 Khan, "Evangelicals and Muslims See Similarities in Faiths," https://religionnews.com/2019/03/20/evangelicals-and-muslims-see-similarities-in-faiths-and-favor-closer-ties-survey-says/.

12 Florence Taylor, "Islam Is 'Dangerous,' Say Over Half of US Protestant Pastors, *Christianity Today,* October 23, 2015, https://www.christiantoday.com/article/islam.is.dangerous.say.over.half.of.us.protestant.pastors/68518.htm.

13 Chrissy Stroop, "America's Islamophobia Is Forged at the Pulpit: White Evangelicals' Apocalyptic Fantasies Are Driving U.S. Policy," *Foreign Policy*, March 26, 2019, https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/03/26/americas-islamophobia-is-forged-in-the-pulpit/.

Islam from a superficial reading, cherry-picking texts from the Quran to support a slanted perspective. And this often occurs without their personally knowing a Muslim layperson or Imam. It could be compared to a non-Christian making stereotypical statements about Christians by reading the conquest texts in Joshua or Deuteronomy or listening to Franklin Graham online. The author of this article further points out that "the presidency of Donald Trump has been shaped by the fear of decline in power and influence among conservative white Protestants." This only exacerbates the current growth of Islamophobia in the church.

However, as author Khaled Beydoun mentions, it is not just a conservative Christian issue. Even Bill Maher, a liberal talk show personality, often makes ghastly caricatures of Islam on his shows, mentioning on *Real Time with Bill Maher* that the Quran is "Islam's hate-filled holy book."[14] Beydoun further notes, "though Islamophobia coming from the left is often more latent and harder to detect than that which emanates from the right, and particularly the far right, it is still there."[15]

For a variety of reasons this trend increased and was leveraged under Donald Trump's presidency with the support of evangelicals helping to create a robust aversion and antagonism toward Muslims, viewing the entire world of Islam under the banner of Islamophobia.[16] It must not escape us that immediately after becoming president in 2016, Trump leveraged Islamophobia as a key pillar of his presidency, making it mainstream and part of his policies. Unleashed a day after Trump's inauguration, Islamophobia became "an ideology that drove the president's political worldview and motivated the laws, policies, and programs. The Trump moment marked a new phase of transparency in which explicit rhetorical Islamophobia aligned, in language and spirit, with the programs the new president was poised to implement."[17] And sadly, white evangelicals caught this virus. The Institute for Social Policy and Understanding finds evangelicals to be the religious or ethnic group in America most likely to hold Islamophobic views, with 44 percent having a negative

14 Khaled A. Beydoun, *American Islamophobia: Understanding the Roots and Rise of Fear* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018), 30.

15 Beydoun, *American Islamophobia*, 31.

16 Kristen Kobes Du Mez, a professor of history at Calvin University in Grand Rapids, argues this point repeatedly in *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2020).

17 Ibid., 13.

view of Muslims, double the number who viewed Muslims favorably.[18]

Islamophobia has historical roots in Christianity. As evangelicals, our theological ancestors the Reformers failed to improve much on the medieval Christian ideas about Islam that justified "violence and aggression against the Turks." Martin Luther, in ways similar to other Protestant reformers, employed negative images of Muslims to rally support for war against the Turks.[19]

It may be helpful at this point to define Islamophobia. A fresh, comprehensive definition is offered by Khaled Beydoun, a Muslim himself, in his very helpful book on the topic. He states that Islamophobia is:

> The presumption that Islam is inherently violent, alien, and unassimilable, a presumption driven by the belief that expressions of Muslim identity correlate with a propensity for terrorism. Islamophobia is the modern progeny of Orientalism, a worldview that casts Islam as the civilizational antithesis of the West and that it is built upon the core stereotypes and baseline distortions of Islam and Muslims embedded in American institutions and the popular imagination by Orientalist theory, narratives, and law.…Islamophobia is not an entirely new form of bigotry, but rather a system that is squarely rooted in, tied to, and informed by the body of misrepresentations and stereotypes of Islam and Muslims shaped by Orientalism.[20]

Implications in Our Current Reality

How is this translated into lived experience for Muslims in the US in their daily lives? A recent Pew Research study based on analysis of new hate crimes from the FBI found the number of assaults against Muslims in the United States rose significantly between 2015 and 2016, right in the middle of the presidential campaigns in 2015-2016. The most recent figures according to this study reported 127 assaults in 2016, exceeding by a significant number, the previous high reported in 2001.

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18 Callum Paton, "White Evangelicals Are the Most Islamophobic Americans, Poll Shows," *Newsweek*, May 23, 2019, https://www.newsweek.com/white-evangelicals-are-most-islamophobic-americans-poll-shows-1433592.

19 Todd Green, *The Fear of Islam: An Introduction to Islamophobia in the West* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 57.

20 Beydoun, *American Islamophobia*, 29.

But as always, it is important to put a face to these numbers. These are real people whose lives have been tragically shortened due to hate and aggression which has far too often found currency in the church.

I still have vivid memories of the murder of three Muslim American students, Yusor, Razan, and Deah in North Carolina. Khaled Beydoun writes about them in his book, but I remember well the impact, both within and outside of the Muslim community. This story, like many others, demonstrates how interconnected we are in the world. They were shot dead in their own apartment in North Carolina on February 10, 2015, but the outpouring of empathy and community support touched down in Seattle where I live. A few days after the incident, I was able to join a large gathering in downtown Seattle, filling the Westlake Park for a service of memorial, lament, and prayer. I was deeply impacted by the vigil the Friday evening after the murders, standing with many of my Muslim friends. Many of the signs held by young Muslims expressed the traumatic feeling of being Muslim in America saying things like, "It could have been me," and, "Am I next?"

More recently, after another hate crime killing 51 Muslims at Friday prayers in Christchurch, New Zealand, on March 15, 2019, we witnessed an outpouring at a local mosque on the east side of Seattle just four days later. Our friend Aneelah Afzali said, "It's all around us and we're all sort of inundated with Islamophobia."[21] Aneelah, who is the executive director of MAPS-AMEN (American Muslim Empowerment Network), put together an impromptu Islamophobia teach-in and invited many local religious and civic leaders, including our State political leaders Washington State Attorney General Bob Ferguson and U.S. Representative Pramila Jayapal. One of the speakers, Nayab Khan, was personal friends with one of the victims at Christchurch, telling a packed community room at the mosque of over 2,000 people that his friend "gave his life last Friday while trying to save others in the mosque. He saw his son getting shot and falling in front of his eyes."

These overt acts motivated by a culture of Islamophobia, while they ebb and flow, seem only to be increasing, moving upward on the curve, raising the question for Christians, what is our role in combating this trend? How should we engage and think about our Muslim neighbors? What is Christ's call to us in this crisis today? Should we jump on the bandwagon of fear? Do we loathe our Muslim neighbors, or is

21 Michael Spears, "Capacity Crowd and Interfaith Vigil and Anti-Islamophobia Teach-In," *Kiro7 News*, March 19, 2019, https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/interfaith-prayer-vigil-held-for-new-zealand-shooting-victims/931808037/.

Jesus calling us to something different? I believe this is one of the most important issues of Christian discipleship today. As people of the Bible within the evangelical tradition,[22] I am curious whether in fact we [23] allow Scripture to shape our worldview or how we would answer the questions above about engaging our Muslim "others." Which of the 31,000 verses that comprise the entirety of the Bible do we consider essential guides to faithful Christian discipleship, and which ones are readily ignored?[24]

Jesus Challenges Samaraphobia Then and Now

I have stumbled upon a newfound interest and love for the Gospel of Luke recently. It has helped me come to grips with the challenge of Islamophobia. In particular, a series of texts leading up to a more familiar text for many—the parable of the Good Samaritan—has jumped off the page in a new way. Too often we read the high points of Scripture but fail to grasp how the author sets a favorite parable or verse in context, missing something profound. For me, Luke 9:51 and following, where Jesus begins to "set his face" to go to Jerusalem, has opened a new panorama that speaks to our modern-day relations with Muslims. In this section Jesus begins traveling from his native Nazareth in Galilee toward Jerusalem but does not take the typical route for first-century Jewish pilgrims. Many commentators cite this pericope as Jesus's transition to the last phase of his ministry on earth, his death, and resurrection, and all the things around his last chapter centered in and leading up to Jerusalem. It consumes pretty much the rest of the Gospel of Luke and is rich with important theological framework that I offer as part of the answer to the question of this article—how should we engage our "Muslim other"? Luke tells the story here of the problematic Samaritans, who are probably the best example for Christians to consider today when thinking about Muslims.

The lead into this section sets the stage in an important way. In Luke 9:49, John, one of the star pupils following Jesus, complains that they saw someone driving out demons in the name of Jesus, but they tried to stop them, because "he was not one of us." Justo González notes the idea behind this short encounter in the minds of the disciples: "Those

22 The National Association of Evangelicals has articulated four "evangelical distinctives" with the first and foremost as upholding the Bible as the ultimate authority for life and doctrine. Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*, 5.

23 Though I struggle with the term "evangelical" and find myself increasingly not aligned with the movement, this is my background, the church in which I was baptized, discipled, ordained, commissioned, and have served for over 30 years.

24 Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*, 5.

who did not belong to their group did not have the right to use the name of Jesus."[25] González, also an eminent church historian, further notes that at "the time Luke wrote his Gospel, the Christian movement was beginning to expand far and wide, and no one had control of that expansion."[26] Church hierarchies finally emerged, as is natural perhaps to any movement, in efforts to organize the chaos and determine who was part of the church and who was not. González observes that churches and denominations have acted in this way ever since, wielding authority to determine who is in and who is out. In this passage John is modeling what we know is all too common: "How can others who are not of our theological tribe use the name of Jesus as if he were theirs and insiders like us?" The disciples were drawing a circumference around who could appropriately even refer to Jesus or use his name in spiritual issues. As we shall see further in just a few verses, the idea of a particular border between "us" and "them," between orthodoxy and heresy, between those of our tribe and those who are enemies became huge. Alliances for the disciples seemed to conflict with Jesus's bigger idea of who was in and who was out. Jesus answers the disciples with, "Do not stop him, for whoever is not against you is for you."[27]

This sets the context for what follows and should not be detached in the reader's minds. Clearly Jesus is drawing lines of engagement, and as we see in the parable of the Good Samaritan, even making important statements about who can inherit eternal life, who better observes God's laws, and who really practices loving God and neighbor. Jesus was pushing the envelope with an inclusion and openness to the enemy Samaritans, making his early disciples very uncomfortable. This in itself is a critical factor that may help Christians today shape their own approach to our religious other. As N.T. Wright comments on this passage, "The disciples have to learn that God's kingdom may be going forward through people they don't know, who aren't part of their group. Things are not always straightforward."[28]

Indeed, the story of the journey Jesus started in Galilee, which would eventually take him to the cross on Golgotha in Jerusalem, took a troubling turn for the early disciples, especially for James and John, two of

25 Justo González, *Luke: Belief, A Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), Section #2451.
26 Ibid.
27 Luke 9:50.
28 N.T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 118.

Jesus's close disciples. The normal route for religious pilgrimages of Jews to Jerusalem from the north would seek to avoid Samaria, the location of the troubling "religious other" for the early disciples and later the emerging first-century church. But Jesus seems to be driving deeper on his mission, shaping a model for his disciples as he engages the troubling Samaritans. This of course is not the only encounter Jesus has with Samaritans, nor the only time the disciples were troubled by what Jesus was doing. The story of the Samaritan woman at the well does not appear in Luke but the point is similar to this one.[29]

Fresh in the minds of a few of the disciples (Peter, James, and John) was the recent experience on the Mount of Transfiguration and the bizarre night vision with appearances from Moses and Elijah (Luke 9:28-36). These, you might remember, were the heroes in the story of God's chosen people on their pilgrimage to the promised land. The story of Elijah had to be one of the top five told among pilgrims at night around the campfire on their journey to Jerusalem. Elijah, if you remember, was the one who called down fire to kindle the wood on his altar in the big challenge against the 450 prophets of Baal in the contest on Mount Carmel, proving whose God was bigger (1 Kings 17-19; 2 Kings 1-2). Baal of course was in the royal city of Samaria and the center of the Canaanite religion. There is no way the disciples hanging out with Jesus would not have this story on their minds as they encountered the inhospitable reception from the Samaritans in Luke 9:53.

González suggests this passage "could serve as a basis for reflection on the way in which Christians have often dealt with those they consider heretics."[30] I couldn't agree more. To the degree Christians consider Muslims enemies, heretics, or "religious other" within the tent of Abraham, this section in Luke must form part of the foundation of our response. James and John, in the great tradition of Elijah modeling "my God is greater, my God is bigger," wanted to call down fire on the hated Samaritans who refused them hospitality. It may seem an extreme reaction for the simple fact of not serving Arabic coffee to some travelers on the road, but clearly this incident is the tip of the iceberg of deeply felt animosity that went both ways. And Jesus would have nothing of this religious animosity between the Samaritans and his disciples!

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29 John 4:27, "The disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a (Samaritan) woman."

30 González, *Luke*, location 2527.

Who Were the Samaritans and What Will We Do?

A little background on the Samaritans is in order. It is a piece I missed growing up in the evangelical church, at least in terms of how different and how hated they were by Jesus's first disciples. My sense of the Samaritans perhaps epitomizes how most modern readers skip over some of the underlying drama between the Samaritans and the early Jewish Christian community. I used to read about Samaria and the Samaritans as just a point on the map, merely a neighboring town in the adjacent county. Perhaps they had their own mascot and soccer team and shared some friendly rivalry at the end of the season each year, but I did not understand that they were bitter enemies.

One of the key points in Jesus's conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well was that the woman knew there was a disagreement between the Jews and the Samaritans regarding the proper place to worship. "Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem" (John 4:20). In the century preceding these stories in the Gospels, the Samaritans had established a "breakaway Temple" on Mount Gerizim, where Jesus had the conversation with the woman at the well. This was problematic, to such a degree that the Maccabees went into Samaria and burned that temple down. But the animosity between these two groups was even more current than the previous century. "In Jesus' lifetime, a lone pilgrim crossing from Galilee through Samaria to the Temple in Judea was killed by a band of Samaritans. A larger band of Judeans went into Samaria and executed those who had killed the pilgrim."[31]

This entire pretext in Luke sets up the conversation Jesus had with a young lawyer, an expert in the law, and the parable of the Good Samaritan. Much has been taught about the general moral fortitude of the Samaritan in this parable, but rarely do sermons feature the background of the extreme animosity between the Samaritans and early Christian community, which would have been principally Jewish. As N.T. Wright correctly assesses, much is at stake, then and now, as to whether we will use the God-given revelation of love and grace as a way to boost our own isolated security and purity as the young lawyer tried to do, or to extend that love and grace to the whole world,[32] as the Good Samaritan modeled.

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31 Terrence J. Rynne, *Jesus Christ, Peacemaker: A New Theology of Peace* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014), Location 1561.

32 Wright, *Luke for Everyone*, 129.

The young lawyer believed they should build a fence around the scope of love they were expected to exercise, but Jesus upset his theological parochialism. The message of Jesus and the gospel is "so wide-ranging, and so surprising, that many will find it shocking." Muslims are clearly our "religious other." The question remains, how will we engage them?

In a video we produced several years ago to describe our early approach to Muslims I tried to explain what we were discovering. In taking a stand against the spike in assaults toward Muslims we sought to counter the fear, anger, and occasional violence witnessed against our new friends in the Muslim community. Instead of fear or indifference, we came as fellow human beings with open arms. "My Muslim friends know I am a Christian pastor, but when I come to them and want to know them as a fellow human, and approach them with open arms, I get a reciprocal response. This is a human problem, a global problem. If we can't work and be as Jesus calls us to be, we have failed in our calling to Christ and are failing the world."