



A Common Word

Colin Chapman on a recent initiative for Christian - Muslim dialogue

What is 'A Common Word'?

This is an 'Open Letter' signed by 138 Muslim leaders and scholars all over the world and addressed to 'Leaders of Christian Churches everywhere' (see www.acommonword.com). The title is taken from a Qur'anic verse in which Muhammad is told to make this appeal to Jews and Christians: 'O People of the Scripture! Come to a common word between us and you: that we shall worship none but God, and that we shall ascribe no partner unto Him ...' (3:64).

This is the main message of the

Letter: ' ... in obedience to the Holy Qur'an, we as Muslims invite Christians to come together with us on the basis of what is common to us, which is also what is most essential to our faith and practice: the Two Commandments of love' (i.e. the commands to love God and love our neighbour, Matt 22:34-40).

What is so significant about the letter?

I can think of at least seven reasons why the letter is so important:

The signatories represent many different kinds of Islam. Never before has such a wide cross-section of Muslim leaders come together to issue an appeal of this kind.

It recognises of the seriousness of the political issues dividing the world, suggesting that 'our common future is at stake. The very survival of the world itself is perhaps at stake.'

It emphasises 'the primacy of total love and devotion to God' and 'all-embracing constant and active love

A Common Word

of God', and uses Jewish and Christian scripture to sum up ideas which are seen as fundamental also in Islam.

It avoids polemical approaches by recognising the common ground as well as differences between the two faiths, and expressing the hope that 'this common ground be the basis of all future interfaith dialogue between us...'

It recognises the importance of human rights issues, saying that 'justice and freedom of religion are a crucial part of love of the neighbour'.

By suggesting that 'the Unity of God, the necessity of love for Him, and the necessity of love of the neighbour is ... the common ground between Christianity and Islam', it seems to recognise that Christians acknowledge the oneness of God and might be genuine monotheists.

It seems to recognise that Christian beliefs about Jesus may not amount to the cardinal sin of shirk (association, i.e. putting a created being on the level of the Creator). 'Taking other lords beside God' is interpreted to mean that 'Muslims, Christians and Jews should be free to each follow what God has commanded them, and not have "to prostrate before kings and the like" ...'

Why have some Christians responded so positively?

One of the most positive early responses from Christians came from the Center for Reconciliation at Yale Divinity School and was signed by 300 Christian leaders (most of them evangelicals) all over the world. Other positive responses have come from the Mennonites in the US and mission agencies like Frontiers. Those who responded warmly saw it as a

very genuine invitation to serious dialogue between Christians and Muslims.

Why have some Christians been so cautious, if not negative, in their response?

A significant number of Christian organisations and individuals have circulated papers through their own networks in which they criticise those who have responded positively and urge Christians to be much more critical of the content of the Open Letter. They suggest, for example, that the interpretation of several Qur'anic verses is different from traditional interpretations, and that far from being an invitation to genuine, open-ended dialogue, it amounts to a missionary call, inviting Christians to accept an Islamic understanding of the oneness of God as the basis for dialogue.

How then should we respond to 'A Common Word'?

While there are some very serious questions that need to be raised about the arguments used in the document, my own personal view (as one who signed the Yale Response) is that Christians can and should respond warmly to this invitation. Instead of raising all sorts of (very legitimate) questions about the wording of the invitation, we should see this as an opportunity to engage in serious discussion with Muslims wherever we are, and in the context of trusting relationships, ask all the hard questions we want – whether it's about human rights or about what they think of Jesus.

If you've had a difficult relationship with your neighbours in the past and they suddenly invite you to their home, the culturally appropriate

thing to do – at least in any Muslim context – is to accept the invitation and visit them. While you're drinking tea or coffee and if you're establishing some kind of relationship, you can raise your concerns at the appropriate time. A group of Christians in Cambridge, for example, have circulated a very positive and warm two-page response to their Muslim friends in the city and found it a good way of entering into discussion with them (Response No. 40 on www.acommonword.com).

So instead of thinking of ten reasons to decline this invitation from Muslim leaders, isn't it better to accept the invitation? The best way to test the genuineness of the invitation is to meet face to face and start - or continue - the dialogue. ■

Colin Chapman has worked in the Middle East for many years and is an expert on Islam and how Christians can best respond to Muslims. His book "Cross and Crescent" contains lots of useful information on Islam and offers advice on how Christians can reach out to Muslims around them.

The full text of "A Common Word" is available on the website www.acommonword.com.