

Real interfaith dialogue demands honesty, understanding51704

May 14, 2004

Posted: 5/14/04

Real interfaith dialogue demands honesty, understanding

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ARLINGTON—Rather than retreating from the challenge of proliferating world religions in an increasingly pluralistic society, Christians should enter into honest dialogue with people who hold different beliefs, a Dallas pastor told a national conference examining “ultimate questions.”

“We seek to know those we are seeking to persuade,” said Jim Denison, pastor of Park Cities Baptist Church in Dallas.

**Newport
Foundation
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Denison spoke on world religions at a national leadership conference on the biblical worldview, sponsored by the John Newport Foundation. The foundation is committed to carrying on the legacy of Newport, who served more than 40 years as a philosophy of religion professor and administrator at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Newport taught a three-step approach to cross-cultural evangelism—seek to understand different worldviews, find common ground while maintaining distinctive beliefs and proclaim the gospel in both word and deed, said Denison, who was first a student and later a colleague of Newport's at Southwestern Seminary.

That approach matched the method Jesus modeled in his encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well, as recorded in John's Gospel, he noted.

"First, exegete the culture," Denison said.

Jesus understood the woman he met at the well was a social outcast, and he understood her Samaritan belief system better than she did.

Similarly, Christians need to understand before seeking to be understood, and they need to get to know people before they try to persuade them to consider Christ's claims, Denison said.

"So how do we confront our pluralistic and relativistic age in the context of world religions? First, we seek to understand the worldview we are attempting to change. We understand the question and the person asking it. We learn why they are asking their question. We exegete the culture before we seek to address it with the gospel," he said.

Next, Christians should engage in respectful dialogue with people who hold different worldviews, looking for points of commonality without surrendering distinctive beliefs.

Both Jesus and the Samaritan woman came to the well seeking water, and Jesus used that shared desire to point the woman to “living water.”

While Christians need to find common ground for dialogue, they have a responsibility to “explode the myth” that all religions teach essentially the same truth, Denison added. “Various world religions are not different roads up the same mountain. They are, indeed, different mountains,” he said.

Finally, Christians need to “witness with works and words,” Denison said. “We must be what we ask the other person to become.”

Milton Ferguson, former president of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, similarly emphasized the importance of authentic dialogue with people from other world religions.

Based particularly on his experiences ministering among international students, Ferguson said dialogue is “not only appropriate, but really is essential” if Christians genuinely believe the exclusive claims of Christianity.

Honest, open dialogue does not “ease the conflicts and blur the distinctions” between worldviews, he noted. Rather, it establishes a foundation of integrity on which Christians can present Jesus Christ as the way of salvation.

Looking to Newport's example, Ferguson offered four suggestions for dialogue:

- ◆ Acknowledge limitations. Finite human understanding is conditioned by personal experience.

“Our knowledge is finite; it is partial. We don't know the whole story. We don't see as God sees,” he said.

- ◆ Affirm personal beliefs. Christians need to clarify their own personal faith commitments, understanding why they believe as they do, Ferguson noted. And they need to hold fast to those faith commitments when engaged in dialogue with people who do not share them, he said.
- ◆ Seek to see people as God does. Christians should recognize every person as created in the image of God, with the potential for a spiritual relationship with him. “No one is hopeless. Every person is potentially a redeemed child of God,” he said.
- ◆ Proclaim and practice religious freedom. God does not coerce faith, and Christians must resist any attempts to force expressions of belief, he said.

“We are called to bear witness to the truth,” Ferguson said. “Let us celebrate the good news, tell the story and trust the truth.”

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