

**A FUTURE FOR ECUMENICAL CHRISTIANITY
LEHIGH COUNTY CONFERENCE OF CHURCHES
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JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, . . . and your neighbor as yourself.
Mark 12:30-31

I was sitting in the sanctuary of Congregation Sinai, the synagogue in the downtown neighborhood, just west of the church I serve in Chicago, participating in a Sabbath Eve service. We have a good relationship with Congregation Sinai. They use our sanctuary to celebrate the High Holy Days of Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah every year. It's been going /on for about a decade, long enough that members of their congregation have staked out territory in our sanctuary and have their own favorite Presbyterian pews in which they expect to sit—just like many of our members do. Congregation Sinai gives us a nice gift every year, sends flowers for our Sunday worship around the Fourth of July, extends hospitality for a Seder during Holy Week, and the use of their facilities for meetings and retreats. My friend, Rabbi Michael Sternfield says that, after all, our founder and leader, Jesus of Nazareth, was one of theirs. We are neighbors—good neighbors.

Rabbi Sternfield and his people had invited members of Christian churches in the area who cooperate in a number of ventures to be their guests at a special social action Sabbath service. So I was sitting there, following along in the prayer book, listening to the wonderful lyric sound of Hebrew read by someone who knows how to read Hebrew, praying the beautiful prayers—which felt like Presbyterian prayers frankly. We repeated the Shema, Deuteronomy 6:4–5, which devout Jews have been doing morning and night, daily for thousands of years: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” We prayed our gratitude to God for the sweet gift of life, for the peace of the world, for our neighbors and the stranger in our midst. We stood to reverently thank God for all our dear ones who have gone before us and are now with God. We received the familiar blessing, “The Lord bless and keep you . . .” People shook hands; husbands and wives kissed. We stepped into the vestibule for a small glass of wine and taste of bread, and then we went out into the darkness of a cold Friday night in Chicago.

As I walked back to Fourth Presbyterian Church to get my car, I thought, “That was good; there is nothing about that service that excluded me, nothing I could not affirm, nothing about the faith that Sabbath service represents and the history it reflects that I cannot embrace.” Of course there are differences. We think very differently about who Jesus was. We call him Christ, Messiah, Savior. They call him Jesus of Nazareth, rabbi. But there is so very much about our traditions that is common and so much that addresses the human heart and the human community with a common moral vision. So I was feeling pretty good about it all and about faith and hope and love and the world in general on that Friday evening.

I stopped in the office to check my e-mails. You should never do that on a Friday night. I should

have known better.

What greeted me was the latest in a flurry of calls and emails from Jewish friends and leaders about a visit by a Task Force of the Presbytery of Chicago with representatives of Hezbollah while on a visit to partner churches in the Middle East. Coming on the heels of the Presbyterian Church's decision to begin a process of phased, selected divestment from corporations whose business in Israel is harmful to Palestinians and Israeli people — and a decision to continue funding a new church development in Philadelphia which seemed to be targeting Jews for proselytizing, it had disturbed our friends in the Jewish community, to say the least. What in the world is going on in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)? my Jewish friends wanted to know.

The next emails were about the continuing argument in my own church about ordination, that spills over into virulent arguments about the authority of scripture — Christology and basic theology, including one from a right wing organization suggesting that congregations like the one I serve should be kicked out of the denomination.

Finally, there was one about Pat Robertson's most recent outrageous announcement about assassinating the Venezuelan head of state.

What went wrong? What goes wrong with such predictable consistency? How do we get from the gentle, inclusive love of Jesus to people demonizing one another in the name of their religion? *Time* magazine essayist, Michael Kinsley, concluded that religion always, sooner or later, decides that it is superior to other religions and the rest is history. No wonder the world seems weary of traditional institutional religion: using the Bible as a club, appealing to the least attractive of our human characteristics, our incessant ego needs to be first, number one, the center of a universe walled in on all sides by our opinions and prejudice and convictions. How do we get from the common ground Jesus seemed to want to create, where people meet one another in their common humanity, where all barriers are down and people are together—men and women, rich and poor, righteous and sinner, black and white—from that to religion as a compound fortified by doctrine and a narrow ethical, social, and political vision?

The answer is that religion can be and often is hijacked by the basic and base human need to be number one. It happens in all religions, including our own. "Our religion is better than yours. Our God is better than yours. Come to think of it, our God is the real God; yours is a figment of your imagination."

Jesus, I believe, would not be happy. He tried to set the record straight. He said something one day that would, or could, if we simply listened to him, forever change the way people thought about religion and about people of other religions.

I grew up in the context of religious diversity and latent conflict. My chums with whom I played daily were the devoutly and strictly Baptist Esteps who went to church a lot, didn't smoke, drink, play cards, go to school dances or even read the comic papers on Sunday and the devoutly Roman Catholic Shaugnessys who went to confession on Friday and came home to eat fish and whose oldest sibling was a nun, Sister Hilda. We were Presbyterians and not very zealous about it: my parents pretty much did all the things the Esteps thought were sinful — but were

profoundly horrified when I went to confession with my friend John Shaugnessy and stood outside the little booth while he talked to the priest. My parents treated it like a major crisis and I was told never, never to do that again. The Esteps and Shaugnessys argued about religion and church a lot — and each was so very certain that theirs was the right and only way. About the only thing they ever agreed on was that the Presbyterian Buchanans were going straight to hell.

I never did buy it — that absolute certainty and the exclusivism that went with it. And I am saddened and appalled at the prominence and popularity of exclusivist religious thinking that specializes in wall building and excluding the stranger, the alien.

“Good teacher: which commandment is the first of all?” A scribe, a religious teacher himself, asked it. It’s a good question. What does God want us to do? What is the moral bedrock on which we can live a Godly life? What is the one commandment that sums up our religion? Jesus’ answer is the only answer. Everybody knew it. They all recited it from memory twice daily. It was on the doorpost. They wore it on their foreheads and wrapped it around their wrists: the Shema—“Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one: you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and strength.” Here Jesus articulates the bedrock of his, and our, faith: the oneness of God—the radical monotheism of Judaism—and the imperative to human beings to be as human as they can possibly be by loving God with absolute singleness of purpose.

The scribe, being a scribe, is about to ask a follow-up question, I think. The text doesn’t say it, but I’ve spent my life around religious scholarly types, so I know he’s going to say, “A follow-up please: Love God, a singular love for God? But how, Jesus, how exactly should one do that? How in the world do you express your love to God?” He knew and we know that there is no shortage of answers. In a sense that’s what religion is—an answer to the “how to love God” question: make sacrifices, kill goats and bulls, build altars, burn them so God can smell the smoke, or obey the rules, do this, don’t do that, go to church, sing hymns, say prayers, make a pledge to the Capital Campaign—God really likes that, by the way. But the scribe doesn’t get to ask his follow-up question because Jesus keeps right on going. “The second is this,” he says. The man wanted one, not two. He’s going to get more, whether he wants it or not—which he really doesn’t, because none of us really want to hear this part: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” That’s also in his Bible and ours, by the way, the book of Leviticus.

He’s not the first to put love of God and love of neighbor together. But he is first to say that together they become one command. That changes everything. You can’t do it by yourself, he says. The only way to love God is by loving your neighbor. You have to have neighbors if you’re going to have religion—my religion. Jesus, Walter Brueggemann says, makes one new word out of two: now it’s God neighbor. And that does change everything.

Love for God tends to be an abstraction, the solitary human pursuit for meaning, individual yearning for oneness with the creator. Love for God has inspired the great mystical traditions in Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and all the great religions of the world, and the important practices of contemplation, meditation, and prayer. But it is essentially a solitary activity.

Love for neighbor, without God in the picture, inclines toward an admirable humanism, an idealism that does many good things. But alone it doesn’t fare well with big questions, like evil

and how human beings get involved in it. And it bumps right into the reality that sometimes it's very difficult to love your neighbor, especially when your neighbor is not very loveable. After the terrible church bombing in Birmingham, Martin Luther King Jr. wisely said that it's a good thing Jesus didn't command us to like our neighbor. Love is bigger than like, and sometimes it takes some outside help to pull it off.

So they belong together as one great commandment. You shall love God with singleness of purpose and your neighbor as yourself. We are not listening to him!

As America has become more ethnically, culturally and religiously diverse in the past few decades, so American Christianity became radically individualistic — neighbors faded as part of the paradigm, as popular Christianity focused on the individual, individual needs, desires, and preferences.

In a fine essay in the August edition of *Harpers*, “The Christian Paradox: How a faithful nation gets Jesus wrong,” Bill McKibben observes that we are a culture saturated with Christianity — something like 85 percent of us claim to be Christian. That's a higher percentage than Jews in Israel, by the way.

But McKibben observes, our public life, our politics specifically don't reflect much of the actual teaching and values of Jesus. McKibben has assembled a set of disturbing data to document. The short form — the most influential kind of Christian religion today, talks a lot about topics Jesus didn't talk about: sexuality, and reproduction issues, and pretty much ignores what Jesus mainly talked about namely — love for neighbor, care for poor and vulnerable.

McKibben argues that classical Christianity has morphed into two competing creeds, both of which use Christian vocabulary, symbols and metaphors but operate pretty much counter to the Jesus of the New Testament.

The two competing creeds are: 1.) Apocalypticism — “Jesus is Coming.” A faded, peeling sign announced outside Holden Beach, North Carolina, “Get right with God, Jesus is coming.” I've been looking at that sign for 30 years. The cynic in me always notes that he better come soon — or we better get a new sign. There is a major industry in Apocalyptic operating under the guise of Christianity.

Tim LaHaye's *Left Behind* books, about the rapture when Jesus returns amidst war, bloodshed, death and destruction and claims his elect — are all-time best sellers.

Pat Robertson thinks the antichrist is probably a Jew living in Israel.

The fact is it's just not very important Biblically. It's based on a spurious reading of a few isolated texts and a total misreading of the last book in the Bible, The Revelation of John, which is an imaginative critique of the Roman Empire and an epistle of hopefulness written in code with very, creative imagery — wonderfully addressed to men and women who were being arrested, tortured and executed for their faith.

Apocalypticism is, in one sense, the most radical form of individualism in religion. I'm in. You're not. I'll be raptured. You'll be left behind. "In case of the rapture, this car will be driverless."

The second competing creed is expressed in the phenomenally successful mega church movement. Now, one wants to be careful here. Generalizations are always dangerous and misleading.

There are mega churches doing a faithful job of witness and service. But McKibben observes what drives the movement and results in its phenomenal success is an unrelenting refocus of religious attention, energy and imagination — from others, the neighbors Jesus commanded us to love, the stranger Jesus wants us to welcome, the hungry, naked, sick and oppressed who commanded his attention — to refocus on the individual self: my needs, my hopes, my success, my salvation.

McKibben sites a booming mega church: "drive-through Latte stand, Krispy Kreme doughnuts at every service, and 'How To' sermons — How to Discipline Your Children, How To Reach Your Professional Goals, How To Invest Your Money, Reduce Your Debt, Get Along With Your Spouse."

Now, this is not all bad. In fact, some of the common sense advice is good. It's just that it changes fundamentally the basic, clearest, simplest teaching of Jesus — to love your neighbor, to gain your life by giving it away, to become all you can be by voluntarily sacrificing. *To Live Your Best Life Now*, to employ a current best seller, by forgetting yourself, your needs and focusing on the needs of others, particularly the ones who are in need.

"At the moment, McKibben concludes, "the idea of Jesus has been hijacked by people with a series of causes that do not reflect his teaching."

There is an alternate model of religion, Christianity specifically, based on Jesus' clearest ethical instructions. It is alive and well in scripture, in church tradition and here and there in religious organizations, in churches who are progressive in worldview and ecumenical in spirit. If we have a future, it is here.

It is religion, as reconciler, peacemaker, community builder, listener, respecter. It is religion that is non-judgmental, open, inclusive, religion committed to dialogue instead of confrontation. And here I am going to risk being controversial, religion willing to lighten up a little on the tradition of proselytizing in the interest of understanding, religion willing to redefine mission as reconciliation rather conversion, or "playing conversion box score" as someone put it. In a recent address to the International Conference of Christians and Jews, Samuel Kobia, General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, called it "Healing the World — Working Together; Religion in a Global Society." Kobia told the assembly of Christians and Jews that "coming together for the mending of the world is not only wise and necessary, it is an essential part of our religious vocation."

“We need today,” Kobia said, “a commitment among people of faith that our religious traditions be not abused by their innermost holy principles. We need to make sure that our religious traditions do not breed contempt and death.” The world, Kobia said, longs for that kind of healing — reconciliation between nations, races and religions.

Two courageous and brilliant Jewish rabbis have written remarkable books that agree.

Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference*. Final chapter: *A Covenant of Hope*.

“The test of faith is whether I can make space for difference. Can I recognize God’s image in someone who is not in my image, whose language, faith, ideals are different from mine. If I cannot, then I have made God in my image instead of allowing mine to remake me in his. Can Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Confucians, Orthodox, Catholics and Protestants make space for one another in the Middle East, India, Sri Lanka, Chechnya, Kosovo and the dozens of other places in which ethnic and religious groups live in close proximity? Can we create a paradigm shift through which we come to recognize that we are enlarged, not diminished by differences.” (201)

Sacks argues that this notion — which he calls a “covenant of hope” — is the great challenge of our time and that it must come from the great religious traditions — including ours and his. . . . “That the one God, creator of diversity, commands us to honor his creation by respecting diversity.”

And Irving Greenberg, Orthodox Rabbi, Philosopher and Professor at City University of New York in, *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth*, writes about the relationship between Jews and Christians as a covenant partnership: that Christians and Jews are family, that each should support and be proud of and encourage and embrace, as brothers and sisters do, mostly.

The problem, historically, Greenberg says is that religion, particularly monotheistic religion is built around an idea or an experience of truth — ultimate truth — and then proceeds, almost inevitably, to conclude that our truth, is the only truth, and notes, as an example the 2,000 year hostility between Christians and Jews, from both sides.

There is another way, Greenberg argues. It is a conceptualization of truth called “covenantal pluralism” which posits absolute truth in a way that allows for other truth, or truths, other faiths besides mine. It is, these two rabbis — whose people perhaps more than any other in all of history have been the victims of religious absolutism and exclusivism, the best hope for a future characterized by peace.

That’s what the church is for: to be an embodiment of God/neighbor love. That’s what we do when we are most faithful to our Lord. Every church. That’s the heart of the church: love for God—love for neighbor, the one who sits beside you in the pew on Sunday morning, your next door neighbor who gets on your nerves, the ones at the local Synagogue and Mosque and those who need you — for when your love and compassion might be a matter of life and death.

That's what the church is for: to be an embodiment of that God/neighbor love. Jesus taught, lived and commanded.

And that is why this enterprise, this effort to live that neighbor love between individual Christians and individuals churches, to show the world that Christianity does not mean the narrow, exclusive, mean spiritedness that commands so much attention — and then to show the world something the world so desperately needs: diverse people, joining hands and hearts to reach out in love to neighbors.

That's the church I'm interested in — and I'm confident it's the church God wants and the world needs — a Church God is counting on to save the world.

What you are about in Lehigh Valley is nothing less than God's heart, God's work, our Lord's agenda and clearest instruction.

God give you strength and courage. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength—and your neighbor as yourself.

