

Some thoughts on cooperating with those of other faiths

A discussion paper by Ida Glaser

Recent correspondence about 'co-belligerence' in "Idea" reminded me of the couple who went to their rabbi to solve a dispute. The husband presented his case. 'You're right,' said the rabbi. The wife presented her case, 'You're right,' said the rabbi. 'But they can't both be right!' protested the rabbi's wife, who was listening. 'Hmm,' said the rabbi. 'You're right too.'

Both David Pawson's concerns and Evangelical Alliance's response have much that is 'right' about them, and yet, in any given situation, we have to decide whether to co-operate or not, and we cannot do both at once. I'd like to offer some helpful pointers from my current Old Testament studies. The New Testament challenges links between faith and national, ethnic, territorial and political interests, and may therefore not be the best place to turn for guidance in these sorts of human relationships. The Old Testament deals with a nation and nations, and therefore gives much insight into the dynamics of relationships between groups of people of different faiths. We need, of course, always to read it through New Testament eyes, remembering

Paul's summary of the Gospel in the Old Testament which reminds us that the purpose of God's people is and always has been the blessing of all nations (Gal 3v8)

Jesus' use of examples of inter-faith relationships that challenge ethnic separation in the contexts of religious and political confrontation (Luke 4v24-7)

Jesus' radical challenge to all who would use religion as a tool of political, economic or nationalist intentions (Matt 22v21).

Israel's purpose as a nation, as explained in God's pivotal words to Moses on Sinai is two fold: among the nations, she is to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Ex 19v6). The holiness makes her different from the other nations, and requires complete loyalty to Yahweh alone. The priesthood makes her a servant of the nations, to teach God's laws (cf Lev 10v11), show them the way to forgiveness of sin and fellowship with God (cf Lev 1-7) and bless them (cf Num 6v22-7). 1 Peter 2v 9 takes up these images, and indeed they are the context for the exhortation to 'Live such good lives among the pagans (Gk ethne = peoples or nations) that, though they accuse you of wrong, they may see your good works and glorify God on the day he visits us' (1 Pet 2v11).

It is, I suggest, the tension between keeping holy and being called to bless the nations that can underlie our ambivalence about co-operating with people of other faiths. How can we keep clear about our faith in the unique Christ and at the same time have close interactions with those who have other ways of worship? (There is also the question of whether serving and blessing the nations can be seen as including co-operation on human concerns. This is the 'old chestnut' on the relationship between evangelism and other aspects of mission, which has been dealt with elsewhere.)

If we are to be faithful to our Lord, we, like Israel, need to take both the callings together. However, there are times when we need to focus more on being holy, and others when we need to focus more on blessing the nations. I offer two contrasting situations as examples.

#### 1. The Canaanites and the ger.

On entry to the promised land, the Israelites were told to destroy the Canaanites and their gods. This was partly because God was using the Israelites to judge the Canaanites, and partly so that Israel would be able to maintain her exclusive worship of Yahweh. (This was, of course, a unique event both in the land being given to Israel and in the Canaanites being judged, and the rest of the Old Testament and New makes this totally inappropriate as a paradigm for inter-faith relations today. I mention it because it demonstrates the need for us to live according to God's holiness.)

In contrast, it is clear that there were many foreigners living among the Israelites (Ex 12v38), and that at least some of the Canaanites made peace with them (Joshua 2, 9). Some of these resident aliens (*ger* in Hebrew) turned to Yahweh, but some did not. Right from the beginning of the exodus, the Israelites had to decide how to treat them (Ex 12v42-4). There were some religious restrictions on those who were not circumcised, but they were otherwise to be treated with justice and respect, and are often included with widows and orphans in the lists of those for whose welfare the Israelites were particularly liable (see the detailed study by JP Burnside, *The Status and Welfare of Immigrants: the place of the foreigner in Biblical law and its relevance to contemporary society*, Jubilee Centre, 2001). The commandment to ‘love your neighbour as yourself’ is given explicitly both with respect to fellow Israelites and with respect to *ger* (Lev 19v18, 34).

## 2. Solomon and Nehemiah

Solomon and Nehemiah both built the Lord’s temple. Nehemiah refused the help of his Samaritan neighbours. Solomon requested the help of the King of Tyre, and made good use of foreign expertise.

There surely cannot be a greater test case for co-operation than that of building the temple. We have two opposite pictures in Scripture. For Nehemiah, the key concerns were the purity and security of God’s people. For Solomon, the focus was using all the resources available for the building of the temple; and the early part of Solomon’s reign is, I think, the most glorious picture of Israel blessing the nations in the Old Testament. We see the nations involved in building the temple, and then included in Solomon’s dedication (1 Kings 8v41-3, 2 Chron 6v32-3), which envisages the nations coming to worship in Jerusalem. Solomon’s wisdom also shows both the gathering of wealth from the nations and their blessing through Israel. He gathered and, with God-given discernment, tested the proverbs (1 Kings 29v32-3 cf Ecc 12v9-10), and comparison with the literature of the nations indicates that he drew many from outside Israel. We then see people from the nations coming and receiving wisdom (1 Kings 4v34). The Queen of Sheba is the apex of this.

Solomon did all this when Israel was at the height of national strength and security, and we can see it as a foretaste of the ingathering of the nations in Christ and in heaven (Rev 21v24). On the other hand, Solomon’s closer interactions with foreigners through his many marriages later led to idolatry and thence to war with the nations and loss of part of the kingdom (1 Kings 11). We can understand why, after all the lessons of the exile, Nehemiah repudiated foreign marriages.

What about Nehemiah’s refusal of help from the Samaritans? This might have been partly an attempt to keep the Israelites holy, but it was at least as much because of the insecurity of his situation. The returned exiles were a small group, a long way from possible military support. Further, while the King of Tyre was friendly towards both David and Solomon, Nehemiah’s neighbours seem only to have wanted to cause trouble for the Israelites.

What can we conclude?

Both Joshua and Nehemiah were right to try to keep God’s people holy. On the other hand, neither of these attempts at holiness were very effective. As soon as Joshua’s generation died, the Israelites went astray (Judges 2v7-10); and, by the time of Jesus, the post-exilic attempts at holiness through separation were clearly undermining the spirit of the law.

Both the good treatment of the *ger* among the Israelites and Solomon’s welcome of foreigners are clearly part of God’s plan to bless all nations. On the other hand, the marriages with women who worshipped other gods brought disaster.

We can conclude that decisions about co-operation with people of other faiths require much discernment if we are both to be entirely faithful to our Lord and work towards blessing non-Christians in every way. These two things we are bound to aim for. However, we need to consider whether, as in Solomon’s case, the co-operation is out of friendship or whether, as in Nehemiah’s case, it would undermine us. We also need to make sure that it does not lead us into wrong worship.

Most importantly, we need to remember that the ultimate blessing for the nations is the salvation that is in Christ. We therefore need to ask whether this particular co-operation will help people to see Him, and make them more able to hear the Gospel. If the answers to these questions are positive, I do not think that we need to fear for our security or for our holiness: real holiness is what we have in Christ, and real security is also what we have in Him. That should enable us to focus on the peoples for whom He died, and not on our own concerns.