

# Ambassadors for Christ

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2 Corinthians 5:16-  
21

**Sermons Series:**  
**In Christ Together**  
**for the World**

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I had never heard of Pastor Terry Jones before this week. But this pastor of a 50-member church in Gainesville, Florida burst onto the international scene recently. His Twitter and YouTube rants to burn the Koran gave way to media frenzy. His picture appeared on the cover of every media outlet. Satellite trucks camped out in front of his church. When I googled his name yesterday, I had a choice of 35 million entries. I watched his rather bizarre news conference Thursday. He relented to burning the Koran in exchange for a deal with Muslim clerics to relocate the Islamic cultural center away from Ground Zero. Several Imams have since refuted his extraordinary claims.

Our national leaders took time out of their busy schedules to comment on Terry Jones. It all started with General Petraeus warning that the Koran burning could endanger American soldiers. President Obama, in a news conference, urged Pastor Jones essentially to back off. Even Secretary of Defense Robert Gates got into the act and called Terry Jones this week.

The mere threat of this Koran burning sparked riots in India and Afghanistan as well as threats from terrorists. Our president warned that Al Qaeda would seize on it as a recruiting bonanza.

Sure, Islam has its share of extremists. But I was reminded this week that Christianity does, also.

Why do extremists grab all the headlines? For starters, it sells papers and promotes email traffic. But, perhaps it's also the plight of the vast middle to sit on our hands and do nothing.

As I followed the news this week, my heart longed for some word of reconciliation. Scripture provides the remedy. God wants people to be reconciled.

I selected this passage from 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians in early summer, oblivious to this controversy. It seemed like the ideal passage to launch us into the fall program year. Little did I know how appropriate it would become for the issues at hand! God wants people to be reconciled.

In 2 Corinthians 5, the word reconciliation appears five times within a span of three

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verses. The Greek word for reconcile literally means “to exchange.” When we are reconciled, we exchange enmity and discord for peace and goodwill.

Reconciliation is entirely God’s doing in 2 Corinthians 5. Look at verse 18—“All this is from God who reconciled us to himself.” The same thought is expressed in verse 19—“God was reconciling the world to himself.” We don’t reconcile ourselves to God. God reconciles us to himself.

Many people regard Christianity as a moral improvement plan. They think it’s up to them to earn God’s favor. They must somehow be good enough to merit God’s salvation.

People often say to me, particularly as they contemplate the prospect of death, “I’ve made my peace with God.” When people say this to me, I want to scream. You can’t make peace with God; not when God makes peace with us.

I’m convinced people don’t really understand the radical nature of Christian grace. Grace is counter-intuitive for people. We have come to believe that everything in life has to be earned. People get pretty much what they deserve. Justice makes more sense to people than grace.

Mark Twain said this about grace: “Heaven goes by favor. If heaven went by merit, you would be out and your dog would be in.” His tongue-in-

cheek comment finds its mark. If entrance into heaven is attained by favor, man’s best friend may be the more deserving.

From first to last, reconciliation is God’s doing. God both initiates reconciliation and brings it to completion. God’s agent of reconciliation is Jesus Christ. He mediates reconciliation with God. Paul writes to Timothy, “There is one mediator between God and humanity, Jesus Christ” (1 Timothy 2:5). Go back to verse 18—“All this is from God who reconciled us to himself through Christ.” Verse 19—“In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself.” “In Christ” is one of Paul’s favorite prepositional phrases and appears first in verse 19 to add emphasis. “*In Christ* God was reconciling the world to himself.”

I said earlier, the Greek word for reconcile means to exchange. Verse 21 spells out this exchange for us: “For our sake God made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” God imputes to Christ something that was extrinsic to him (namely sin) so that we might have something imputed that is extrinsic to our nature (namely righteousness). John Calvin called this “the great exchange.” God exchanged Christ’s righteousness for our sins.

Okay, so what? So what difference does this sermon

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make in my life? If God initiates reconciliation and brings it to completion through Jesus Christ, what is there left for us to do?

Two things come into view. First, we must receive God's gift of reconciliation. Paul urges us at the close of verse 20, "Be reconciled to God." We don't reconcile ourselves to God. God reconciles us to himself. Reconciliation may be entirely God's doing, but it must be embraced on the human side. Have you received God's gift of reconciliation?

I don't want to gloss over this essential point. We must start at the beginning. We begin by receiving Christ as Savior and by endeavoring to follow him as Lord.

First, we receive the gift. Second, we share this gift with others. Let's return to verse 18 one more time: "God reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation." Verse 20 offers a fitting conclusion, "So, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us."

Ambassadors are expected to know the position of their government on any issue. They cannot make up policies as they go along. It is their job to represent their country fairly on the issues.

Likewise, we are ambassadors for Christ. God makes his appeal through us. We are not free to make up this gospel as

we go along. We need to know what Christ teaches and how he expects us to live.

I've been thinking about this passage all week in terms of Christian-Muslim relations. In a former day, the Christian church often spoke in terms of our mission to Muslims. That's because Muslims lived, for the most part, in faraway places. Today, Muslims work with us, go to school with us and worship among us. They are counted among our family and friends. Muslims from every corner of the globe are moving into our neighborhoods.

How do we act as ambassadors for Christ among our Muslim neighbors? Surely we don't do it by burning their sacred book and provoking them to hate us more. We enter into relationship with them. We care about their joys and concerns. We treat them with dignity and respect.

Make no mistake about it; I want to introduce Muslims to Jesus Christ. But to do so, there must be congruence between what I say and what I do. Do I heed Jesus' second great command about loving my neighbor? The world is waiting to see if Christians obey this essential command.

This year, our staff and leadership will seek to order our church around the mission theme of "In Christ Together for the World." We intend to explore the full implications of what it means for us to live

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together “in Christ.” Paul adjures us in verse 16 not to regard one another any longer from strictly a human point of view. The human categories of where we work or go to school, how much money we have at our disposal or whom we know no longer carry any weight. We want to live together in Christ for the sake of the world. Anglican Archbishop William Temple said, “The church is the only cooperative society in the world that exists for the benefit of its non-members.” We don’t merely exist for each other, we exist for the sake of the world.

“In Christ Together for the World” makes a claim on all of us. Yet what this looks like in our individual lives will be different. God has created us to be unique people. To that end, we are inviting you to read with us this fall John Ortberg’s book, *The Me I Want to Be*. We will introduce this book next Sunday in worship beginning with the first section, Finding My Identity. You want to reach your full potential. God is even more concerned than you are about you reaching your potential. God wants you to flourish and is eager to help you achieve this goal. We have prepared daily scripture readings for you to pick up after worship or access on-line. Consider it your church homework. We are also inviting you to discuss what you are learning in small groups. We want you to immerse yourself in the

Scriptures, the Ortberg book and Sunday sermons so that together we might increasingly become the church God wants us to be.

The Sunday after Labor Day is the traditional start of the church program year. Labor Day marks the transition from summer to fall. School is back in session. We’ve returned to our jobs and routines in earnest again. Most of us have been in and out of church this summer. Now it’s time to refocus.

Chris and I visited our daughter Emily last week. Emily and her husband, Mike, have a new dog named Tucker. Tucker is a rescue dog who loves to fetch things. He’s absolutely passionate about retrieving Frisbees, sticks, balls, you name it. When Tucker is in his retriever mode, he is totally focused. He is locked on and can think of nothing else. I played fetch with Tucker last week. He wore me out. I had a hard time convincing him it was time to stop. I wondered how long he would persist if I kept going. As I was throwing the ball to Tucker last week, it hit me. I want a church full of Tuckers, who are ready to focus on Christ and lock on to his mission.

This fall, we want every person in this church to focus on being “In Christ together for the world.” We want to lock onto the people God calls us to be.

