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many.

**Sermon Brief**  
**Text: John 4:1-15**  
**Title: Overcoming Barriers**  
Lorin L. Cranford

Seeking to faith-  
fully proclaim  
the whole coun-  
cil of God in  
scripture!



**INTRODUCTION**

I deeply appreciate the opportunity this morning to return to my “Muttergemeinde in Deutschland,” as I have called this church many times over the years since the 1981-82 Sabbatical leave that I spent here working in the university. In this new chapter of my life as a retired professor of New Testament and also as pastor of the International Baptist Church in Cologne, I rejoice in the opportunity to work with you in the development of a new ministry of Bible study to the English speaking community of Bonn / Bad Godesberg. Our church in Cologne deeply appreciates the help that you are giving to this ministry.

The leadership of your congregation asked me to speak today on this special occasion of celebrating a partnership with the city of Oxford England and the Christian churches there. The theme of the events during this weekend have focused on Baptist dialog with other Christian groups and with non-Christian religious traditions, and in particular Christian - Muslim dialogue. The text requested for me to use today is the experience of Jesus with the Samaritan woman as described in the Gospel of John chapter four. I want to read the first fifteen verses as an introduction to this experience that is described in verses one through forty-two of John’s Gospel:

1 Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, “Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John” 2 — although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized — 3 he left Judea and started back to Galilee.

4 But he had to go through Samaria. 5 So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. 6 Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. 7 A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.” 8 (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) 9 The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) 10 Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, “Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.” 11 The woman said to him, “Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? 12 Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?” 13 Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, 14 but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” 15 The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.” (NRSV)<sup>1</sup>



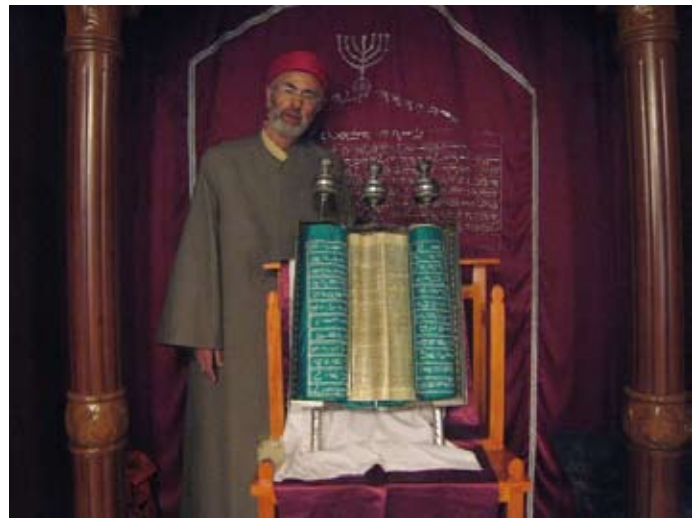
<sup>1</sup>4.1 Ὡς οὖν ἔγνω ὁ Ἰησοῦς ὅτι ἤκουσαν οἱ φαρισαῖοι ὅτι Ἰησοῦς πλείονας μαθητὰς ποιεῖ καὶ βαπτίζει ἢ Ἰωάννης 4.2 - καίτοιγε Ἰησοῦς αὐτὸς οὐκ ἐβάπτισεν ἀλλ’ οἱ μαθηταὶ αὐτοῦ - 4.3 ἀφῆκεν τὴν Ἰουδαίαν καὶ ἀπῆλθεν πάλιν εἰς τὴν Γαλιλαίαν. 4.4 ἔδει δὲ αὐτὸν διέρχεσθαι διὰ τῆς Σαμαρείας. 4.5 ἔρχεται οὖν εἰς πόλιν τῆς Σαμαρείας λεγομένην Συχάρ πλησίον τοῦ χωρίου ὃ ἔδωκεν Ἰακώβ [τῷ] Ἰωσήφ τῷ υἱῷ αὐτοῦ· 4.6 ἦν δὲ ἐκεῖ πηγή τοῦ Ἰακώβ. ὁ οὖν Ἰησοῦς κεκοπιακῶς ἐκ τῆς ὁδοπορίας ἐκαθέζετο οὕτως ἐπὶ τῇ πηγῇ· ὥρα ἦν ὡς ἕκτη.

4.7 Ἔρχεται γυνὴ ἐκ τῆς Σαμαρείας ἀντλησάσα ὕδωρ. λέγει αὐτῇ ὁ Ἰησοῦς, Δός μοι πεῖν· 4.8 οἱ γὰρ μαθηταὶ αὐτοῦ ἀπεληλύθεισαν εἰς τὴν πόλιν ἵνα τροφὰς ἀγοράσωσιν. 4.9 λέγει οὖν αὐτῷ ἡ γυνὴ ἡ Σαμαρίτις, Πῶς σὺ Ἰουδαῖος ὢν παρ’ ἐμοῦ πεῖν αἰτεῖς γυναικὸς Σαμαρίτιδος οὔσης; οὐ γὰρ συγχρῶνται Ἰουδαῖοι Σαμαρίταις. 4.10 ἀπεκρίθη Ἰησοῦς καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῇ, Εἰ ἤδεις τὴν δωρεάν τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τίς ἐστὶν ὁ λέγων σοι, Δός μοι πεῖν, σὺ ἂν ἤτησας αὐτὸν καὶ ἔδωκεν ἄν σοι ὕδωρ ζῶν. 4.11 λέγει αὐτῷ [ἡ γυνὴ], Κύριε, οὔτε ἀντλημα ἔχεις καὶ τὸ φρέαρ ἐστὶν βαθύ· πόθεν οὖν ἔχεις τὸ ὕδωρ τὸ ζῶν; 4.12 μὴ σὺ μείζων εἶ τοῦ πατρὸς ἡμῶν Ἰακώβ, ὃς ἔδωκεν ἡμῖν τὸ φρέαρ καὶ αὐτὸς ἐξ αὐτοῦ ἔπιεν καὶ οἱ υἱοὶ αὐτοῦ καὶ τὰ θρέμματα αὐτοῦ; 4.13 ἀπεκρίθη Ἰησοῦς καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῇ, Πᾶς ὁ πίνων ἐκ τοῦ ὕδατος τούτου διψήσει πάλιν· 4.14 ὃς δ’ ἂν πίη ἐκ τοῦ ὕδατος οὗ ἐγὼ δώσω αὐτῷ, οὐ μὴ διψήσει εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα, ἀλλὰ τὸ ὕδωρ ὃ δώσω αὐτῷ γενήσεται ἐν αὐτῷ πηγὴ ὕδατος ἀλλομένου εἰς ζωὴν αἰώνιον. 4.15 λέγει πρὸς αὐτὸν ἡ γυνὴ, Κύριε, δός μοι τοῦτο τὸ ὕδωρ, ἵνα μὴ διψῶ μηδὲ διέρχωμαι ἐνθάδε ἀντλεῖν.

Luther Bibel (1984):

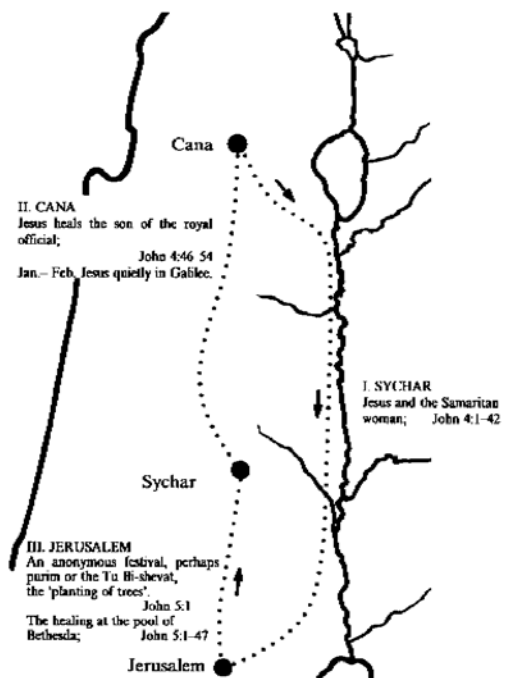
4 1 Als nun Jesus erfuhr, dass den Pharisäern zu Ohren gekommen war, dass er mehr zu Jüngern machte und

In order to understand this experience of Jesus, one has to know something of the cultural background of ancient Jews and Samaritans. The Samaritans of the first Christian century were the product of several centuries of blending Jewish and non-Jewish ethnic groups that began with the destruction of the Northern Kingdom of ancient Israel in 722 BCE when the Assyrians conquered that part of Palestine. The Assyrians brought into the territory of the old Northern Kingdom conquered peoples from across the Fertile Crescent and they inter-married with the surviving Jewish people. Out of this came the Samaritan culture with its own traditions -- religious and otherwise. Out of their earlier heritage from the ten northern tribes of Israel, they developed their own worship center at Mt. Gerizim, rather than at the temple in Jerusalem. They had their own version of the Bible that only included the first five books of the Old Testament. The prophets and writings sections of the Hebrew Bible were rejected. The Jewish people despised the Samaritans as much as they did non-Jews in general. Racial tensions between the two groups -- Samaritans and Jews -- usually remained at a high level. For a Jew to reach out to a Samaritan represented a radical departure from well established tradition.



Jesus and his disciples had hurriedly left Judea in southern Palestine, and he headed to Galilee in northern Palestine. Samaria lay between these two provinces, and represented the shortest route from Jerusalem to Galilee. With the Pharisees in Judea mounting pressure on Jesus (cf. vv. 1-3), he made the decision to retreat north to Galilee in order to get away from them. By going through Samaria, Jesus was able to quickly distance himself from the danger of the Pharisees. Their hatred of the Samaritans meant they would not follow him into Samaria. In his haste to leave Judea, he did not secure supplies for the three day trip to Galilee. So when they arrived at Jacob's Well near Sychar, the disciples went into town to secure provisions. That left Jesus alone sitting near Jacob's Well. John makes the point that it was about mid-day when a woman made her way to the well in order to draw some water. This was highly unusual, since the women of the town would have come as a group to the well early in the morning. They needed the safety of a group for protection from harm. Fetching water early in the morning provided the needed supply for cooking etc. during the entire day. For this woman to be coming out to the well in the middle of the day clearly signaled some was wrong. Either through exclusion by the other women or through personal shame at her lifestyle -- or both

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taufte als Johannes 2 – obwohl Jesus nicht selber taufte, sondern seine Jünger –, 3 verließ er Judäa und ging wieder nach Galiläa. 4 Er musste aber durch Samarien reisen.

5 Da kam er in eine Stadt Samariens, die heißt Sychar, nahe bei dem Feld, das Jakob seinem Sohn Josef gab. 6 Es war aber dort Jakobs Brunnen. Weil nun Jesus müde war von der Reise, setzte er sich am Brunnen nieder; es war um die sechste Stunde. 7 Da kommt eine Frau aus Samarien, um Wasser zu schöpfen. Jesus spricht zu ihr: Gib mir zu trinken! 8 Denn seine Jünger waren in die Stadt gegangen, um Essen zu kaufen. 9 Da spricht die samaritanische Frau zu ihm: Wie, du bittest mich um etwas zu trinken, der du ein Jude bist und ich eine samaritanische Frau? Denn die Juden haben keine Gemeinschaft mit den Samaritern. – 10 Jesus antwortete und sprach zu ihr: Wenn du erkennst die Gabe Gottes und wer der ist, der zu dir sagt: Gib mir zu trinken!, du bätest ihn und er gäbe dir lebendiges Wasser.

11 Spricht zu ihm die Frau: Herr, hast du doch nichts, womit du schöpfen könntest, und der Brunnen ist tief; woher hast du dann lebendiges Wasser? 12 Bist du mehr als unser Vater Jakob, der uns diesen Brunnen gegeben hat? Und er hat daraus getrunken und seine Kinder und sein Vieh. 13 Jesus antwortete und sprach zu ihr: Wer von diesem Wasser trinkt, den wird wieder dürsten; 14 wer aber von dem Wasser trinken wird, das ich ihm gebe, den wird in Ewigkeit nicht dürsten, sondern das Wasser, das ich ihm geben werde, das wird in ihm eine Quelle des Wassers werden, das in das ewige Leben quillt.

15 Spricht die Frau zu ihm: Herr, gib mir solches Wasser, damit mich nicht dürstet und ich nicht herkommen muss, um zu schöpfen!

-- she made the trip every day alone and at a time when no one would be at the well. When this lone Jewish man was sitting near the well, I'm sure she was surprised. But even more so when he spoke to her. All through the middle eastern cultures of that time no man every spoke to a woman in public apart from his own wife. Notice her reaction in verse nine with John's comment explaining the background of her words, "The Samaritan woman said to him, 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?' (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.)"

What can we make of this episode in Jesus' ministry? Several insights about Christ emerge here that are important and relevant to Christians in today's world who seek to faithfully follow Christ. This morning I want to touch on just a few of these. And do so against the backdrop of the theme of this weekend's conference emphasizing Christian - Muslim dialogue. And also with the ecumenical nature of our worship service today.

## BODY

### I. Christians should reach out in dialogue with others who are different.

If Jesus' example here says anything to us today, it challenges us to risk breaking social traditions by reaching out to other people who do not share the same values and heritage as we. In talking with the Samaritan woman Jesus crossed over very strict ethnic and gender boundaries of his time. Not many Jewish people of his day would have approved of his breaking either of these restrictions. The Jewish religious leaders of that time did not approve such activity at all. Had they have known of his action they would have severely criticized him for it. But by not having followed him into Samaria, they had no knowledge of this conversation, which became a part of the 'insider' Christian tradition about Jesus later on. John's inclusion of it in his gospel account served to highlight the example of the Lord in reaching out to non-Jews with the message of salvation for all people and not just the Jewish people. Late first century Christianity was already largely non-Jewish in nature and this event in Jesus' ministry helped legitimize this shift away from Jewish people as the only source of Christians.

At the end of July this year, Baptists will gather in Amsterdam to celebrate four hundred years of existence as a Christian religious group. Over these four centuries Baptists have consistently presented to the larger Christian world a voice advocating religious liberty and freedom of conscience in making religious decisions. In the midst of our extensive diversity as a religious group we have uniformly stood for the non-interference of government in church life. This is at the heart of our identification in Germany as a Freikirche. We believe deeply that each person must be free to choose his or her own path of religious devotion without outside coercion from government or any one else. For the most part over these centuries, this stance has led Baptists to defend that right for every individual, no matter what their choice may be -- atheism, Judaism, Islam, et als. Baptists in America were in the forefront of those who pushed for the Separation of Church and State legal tradition in the US Constitution. Roger Williams, one of the early Baptist pastors in Rhode Island during the 1700s, created the opportunity for non-Christians to live in peace and freedom in colonial America. This while all the other colonies in the new world were imposing mandated Christianity of some sort on all settlers.

A recent development highlights this historical stance of Baptists in our day. A few weeks ago the leaders of the Baptist World Alliance -- the umbrella organization of some hundred-five million Baptists representing some 214 Baptist groups globally -- released a formal letter in response to an earlier initiative taken by a large number of diverse Muslim leaders inviting different Christian groups to engage in a dialogue between Christians and Muslims in our world today. The extensive violence in our world increasingly has taken on religious tones, and sometimes is perceived largely as a fight between Christians and Muslims. The goal of the dialogue proposal is to reduce tensions by learning about one another through face to face discussions at various levels of discussion. For a year, various Baptist groups and leaders have been formulating an official response to the invitation, and it was released at the beginning of this May. The proposal is for the discussions to take place around two important religious principles set forth by Jesus as an affirmation of the Old Testament heritage in Deuteronomy and Leviticus:<sup>2</sup> 1) love for



<sup>2</sup>Mark 12:28-31 (// Mat. 22:34-40; Lk. 10:25-28): "28 One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" 29 Jesus answered, "The first is, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; 30 you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' 31 The second is this, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." (NRSV).

God, and 2) love for one's neighbor. These principles comprise a "common ground" for exploration of both similarities and differences between Christians, Jews, and Muslims in our world today. These concepts in general are shared by all three religious groups, and thus provide a helpful starting point for discussion. With dialogue over these concepts, it will also become clear just how differently each of these three traditions understand even these basic concepts of religious principle.

One of the responses by Baptist leaders is for dialogue to take place not just at the formal levels of theologians and among religious leaders of both groups. But, for the initiative to make positive contributions toward world peace, the dialogue must happen also at the local church level among representatives of the Christian and Muslim communities who live and work in the same city or region. What you have been doing this weekend here in Bonn reflects exactly what Baptist leaders internationally believe must be an essential part of this discussion. I want to commend you for your efforts. We must pray for world peace. But as followers of Jesus we are to be "peace makers" according to Matt. 5:9.<sup>3</sup> This strongly implies taking concrete steps beyond prayer to encourage peace and harmony in our world. This you are doing with the activities of this week-end.

Thus we as Christians of different background here today take a great deal of pride in our own heritage and tradition that advocates religious liberty and freedom of choice for all. In this we believe we are following the example of Jesus in treating other people with dignity and respect. Certainly this is what emerges from the conversation with the woman in our passage. Jesus did not attempt to coerce her into becoming a disciple. He treated this woman who had a bad reputation with dignity and respect as an individual made in the image of God. He engaged her in friendly conversation intended to help her discover a solution to her deep, deep problems both spiritually and morally. The conversation with this woman clarified her understanding of several key ideas, and, more importantly, it pointed her toward a new life that had new religious understanding and orientation. A life that could finally achieve dignity and purpose, which she had been missing up to that point.

Thus we as Christians should not be afraid of reaching out to others for dialogue and discussion of our religious heritage, and of theirs as well. The example of our Lord with the Samaritan woman encourages us to be willing to do just that.

## II. Christians must faithfully maintain their religious heritage from Jesus and the apostles.

The second point from our text that I want to stress this morning is just this: Christians must faithfully maintain their religious heritage in the midst of dialogue with others.

One of the main reasons Baptists have not been a significant part of the larger ecumenical movement through the World Council of Churches is that, as we have watched these dialogues over the past century or so among different Christian groups, the tendency has been all too often to move toward the "lowest common denominator" of belief and practice. Many groups have been all too willing to shed their own distinctive religious heritage for the sake of a 'unified Christianity.' The end result of such compromise has been a 'watered down' Christianity that honors neither the teachings of the Bible nor historic Christian belief and practice. Christianity quickly moves toward a 'social organization' with no spiritual power nor authentic religious message of hope and salvation. As a 'people of the Book,' Baptists in particular over the past four centuries have attempted to be faithful to the teachings of Jesus and the apostles, and thus have sought to present the gospel message of salvation and hope through Jesus Christ as the Savior of all mankind. Fear of losing this voice through compromising the gospel, as observed in many ecumenical discussions over the years, have made us hesitant to get involved.

The opportunity of authentic dialogue with leaders of the Muslim world presents us with the chance to engage in genuinely productive discussion. The proposal for dialogue from the Muslim leaders clearly acknowledges legitimate differences over many points of belief and practice. It does not demand, nor expect compromise of these differences from either side. Instead, the proposal is for sincere discussion of both similarities and differences between the two religious traditions. This proposal recognizes profound differences and calls for respect of them from both sides. The purpose of the dialogue is not to 'prove who is right' in their beliefs. Instead, it is to openly explore these differences in honest and frank discussion. And this, with the conviction that along the way there will be the discovery of many points held in common. Such honest dialogue can provide the basis for working together for the betterment of



<sup>3</sup>"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." (NRSV)

humankind. In this, the cause of world peace will be helped and the levels of violence reduced.

Do we find any scriptural basis for such an effort as Christian believers? I see in the conversation with the Samaritan woman signals pointing this direction. In the conversation with the woman in verses ten through twenty-six Jesus speaks very frankly with her about her Samaritan religious heritage in comparison to his Jewish heritage. Ultimately he reaches beyond both traditions to the new spiritual reality of his own identity as God's promised Messiah. Amazingly he affirms this identity to her and she is the only person in the four gospel accounts to receive such direct self affirmation by Jesus. Out of this comes the positive consequence of the woman finding spiritual awakening and renewal. She then becomes the messenger of this good news to the others in her town.

In this Jesus did not compromise his religious beliefs. Instead, he engaged the woman in serious appraisal of the two religious traditions of the Samaritans and the Jews at that time. His own unique insights provided opportunity for her to make a brand new discovery of God's love and of love for neighbor. And this discovery changed her life for the better.

The possibility of new life changing religious discoveries through honest discussions are present in the proposed Christian - Muslim Dialogue. We face no pressure to compromise our beliefs in such discussion. In fact, we have the opportunity to sharpen our understanding of our own beliefs as we hear them assessed from a very different religious tradition.

My own experiences of living and working in Germany periodically over the past thirty years have worked the exact same way. When I first prepared to come to Germany in 1980 as a professor of New Testament at the largest theological seminary in North America, some of my colleagues cautioned me not to become a liberal because of studying and working in German theological circles at Bonn and later on at Heidelberg. My desire, however, was to place myself in a very different theological climate from the one at the Texas seminary in order to better see my own belief system. The impact of this experience was to strengthen my belief system and deepen my commitment to the Christian scriptures as the Word of God. From 'stepping outside my own heritage' for a moment, I came to realize both strengths and weaknesses present in it. With God's help I found ways to reaffirm the strengths and to correct the weaknesses. But I never would have been able to see myself theologically to this extent had I not taken this step early on in my teaching career.

We Christians can never truly understand the richness of our individual heritage and beliefs by remaining isolated and cut off from interaction with other religious groups. If we sincerely reach out to others in frank and honest discussion, not only will they better understand us and what we stand for. But also we will better understand ourselves and our heritage. We will gain a deeper appreciation for who we are as Christians and as Baptists, and thus be able share that with others in greater confidence and courage. In the process we will come to a better understanding of who our Catholic, Lutheran, and Muslim neighbors are. Many of the misconceptions will vanish, thus allowing us to live together in greater peace, harmony and mutual respect.

### **CONCLUSION**

In the episode of Jesus with the Samaritan woman, he was about 'overcoming barriers.' And our Lord calls us to do just that today as Christian believers in Jesus. How ready are you to walk with Jesus through Samaria?