



The Middle East Initiative

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Living Beyond "Kata Sarx": A Paradigm for Healing and Reconciliation

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Text

2 Corinthians 5: 16 – 21

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once regarded Christ from a human point of view, we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.



The world is overwhelmed today with pain, divisions, and hatred. One wonders what would bring this world to healing and wholeness. Paul in 2 Corinthians presents a remedy where reconciliation is the cure. Paul shares his story of pain that he experienced in Corinth. He opens our eyes to how to solve divisions since many times we tend to deal with temporal solutions that relate to consequences and forget to tackle the main cause for divisions. Without reconciliation, healing is not achieved.

Reflection

Paul speaks in his passage about reconciliation; it seems after having a good experience in the city of Corinth, after the church was flourishing and growing, Paul left them to find out later that lots of problems appeared in Corinth—not merely problems among the Corinthians but there were even problems with Paul himself. Paul was questioned and suspected concerning his validity as an apostle, his motives were put into question and his gospel was considered as heresy.

So in the second letter to the Corinthians, Paul, with gritted teeth sometimes and through tears in other times, defends himself. In the fifth chapter, Paul's desire to clear his name combines with his effort to repeat the true gospel, resulting in a sublime passage of great power where the centerpiece is reconciliation.

The result of this cosmic reconciliation is that we now look at everything differently. We look at everything and everyone through the lens of reconciliation. We are ambassadors of reconciliation as we call others to believe in Jesus and be in a good relationship with God. But it's not just about the vertical dimension between God and us. Being caught up in God's love changes everything on the human, horizontal level as well.

Paul writes "Once upon a time we regarded Jesus only from a human point of view and when we did, we didn't understand Jesus well. But now we see Jesus and everyone in a divine perspective and it changes everything." Paul talks about regarding Jesus and each other "*kata sarx*," a Greek phrase which literally means "according to the Flesh," and the call of reconciliation is a step towards not looking to people according to the flesh, *kata sarx*.

Therefore, we know no one after the flesh (*kata sarx*—according to the flesh) **from now on**" (v. 16a). "Therefore" refers back to what Paul said in verses 14-15. Because Christ "died for all, that those who live should no longer live to themselves, but to him who for their sakes died and rose again" (v. 15), Paul no longer regards others "after the flesh" or "according to the flesh" (v. 16).

In the New Testament, *sarx* is most frequently used as a contrast with that which is spiritual (John 3:6; 6:63; Romans 7:18; 8:3-6; Galatians 5:17). That is how Paul uses *sarx* in this verse. To view someone *kata sarx* (according to the flesh) means to view them by worldly standards—by their nationality, wealth or physical beauty, or political influence or power. Those are the concerns of the natural person. Paul now regards people from a different perspective—a spiritual perspective.

"Even though we have known Christ after the flesh" (v. 16b). Paul's name was Saul. Saul's role as a persecutor of the church is well known. He was complicit in the execution of Stephen (Acts 7:58 - 8:1). He ravaged the church by entering Christian homes and committing Christians to prison (Acts 8:3). He breathed "threats and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord" (Acts 9:1). He saw Jesus as a blasphemer—and Jesus' crucifixion as just punishment—and Christians as promulgators of a false religion.

"Yet now we know him so no more" (v. 16c). Saul's spiritual eyes were opened as a consequence of his encounter with Christ on the Damascus road—an encounter that temporarily blinded him physically. A light from heaven drove Saul to his knees and a voice asked, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (Acts 9:4). When he asked, "Who are you, Lord?" the response was, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But rise up and enter into the city, and you will be told what you must do" (Acts 9:5-6). Saul's view of Jesus had changed. **Paul's eyes were opened to living beyond the flesh.**

Our Middle Eastern Challenge for Living up to Reconciliation

My two daughters woke up in the middle of the night frightened by the loud noises that interrupted our sleep. We were at home alone while my husband was traveling. "*Mom, who would play with fireworks at this time?*" asked our younger child. I stayed silent and tried to calm my fear so that the girls would not get afraid. This was the first time that my children experienced a loud noise aside from celebrations. We rushed into a safe room in our house and I tried to calm them. "It is O.K." I said,

“Just wait and things will be fine.” But the sound continued and we had to carry our mattresses to the corridor and stay the night there. The next morning, things were calm and the children who kept insisting to know who interrupted our night went to school and came back with a new piece of information—“It is Israel.” “My friends at school said that Israel is the one who did this...” the older one said. And here, the story that we tried to keep from our two daughters was revealed to them. We were hoping that our children would not have to go through what we had to go through as children of war. We have tried for a few years to keep our children from the news, the violence, and the prejudices that war brings to the life of children, but failed. With one incident, the bombing of the electrical plant in Beirut, it all changed. And then my older daughter started to ask questions such as, “How far is Israel from Beirut?”, “Do you think that they will do this again?”, and “How can you be sure that this will not happen again?” At a time when we were hoping that peace will be achieved and our children would have the chance to enjoy peace and reconciliation, one incident spoiled the innocence of our children’s terminology, and invited our young ones to start formulating their prejudices. **One single incident was enough for building their walls of fears, suspicions, and judgments.....**

Unfortunately, encountering other religions in the Middle East is wrapped in the context of war that hinders a clear understanding of other religions. Despite that, we grew together with Muslims; yet pre-formulated ideas about other religions creep into our homes through the daily stories of war. I remember that before the Lebanese war started in 1974, falsely characterized as a “Muslim and Christian” war, we hardly cared to know who is a Muslim or a Christian. My classmates had no categories and we lived in harmony. It was just after the Lebanese war that things changed. And nowadays, things are even worse with the images of ISIS killing brutally and relating it to the true Islam. This might be a similar experience with September 11, or a Syrian refugee robbing another person, or a fanatic religious leader stating radical statements. **It takes one small incident to change it all.**

In the midst of the prejudices that are heaped upon the Middle East and the world, one stands and ponders on what possible way can we live reconciliation among religions. How can we move away from our judgments on other religions? Even pre-judgments hinder our vision to encounter the beauty of other religions and the beauty of another Muslim, Jew or Christian.

As Christians we are always challenged to live up to Jesus’s paradigm of reconciliation. We are ambassadors for the ministry of reconciliation between humanity and God and humans with each other. In 2 Corinthians Paul summarizes the meaning of reconciliation; Paul reminds the believers that if they have been reconciled to God then they must live reconciliation and reconcile others. Paul talks about regarding Jesus and each other *kata sarx*, which literally means “according to the Flesh,” and the call of reconciliation is a step away from looking to people according to the flesh, *kata sarx*, but to see beyond the *kata sarx*, beyond the prejudices that we build as we judge people not through the flesh, but rather through the eyes of God’s mercy and unconditional love for everyone. Today, the Middle East, and even the world, struggle with *kata sarx* attitudes that create divisions, prejudices, and separation, even building walls.

In a story told by Bishop Munib A. Younan, the Lutheran Bishop in Jerusalem narrates a story about a special encounter with a Jewish girl. He writes:

As my wife and I were walking from Jaffa Gate into the Christian Quarter in the Old City of Jerusalem, a Jewish girl around twelve years old spoke to us in Hebrew saying: - "Please help me to enter the Old City. I am afraid, because my teacher has told me that the Palestinians here will kill me." My wife who speaks perfect Hebrew told her to follow us, and spoke to her all the way about "the other" and that she should not believe what she had been told. When we came to a corner and were to depart from each other, my wife asked her: - "Did you feel safe with us?" - "Very much so,"

she said. My wife continued: - "Do you know that both of us are Palestinians? Did we harm you?" The stunned little girl opened her mouth and did not know what to say.¹

It was **an encounter beyond the *kata sarx***.

I remember when I was in the hospital delivering my first child. A time came when I experienced lots of pain. As the time passed, I closed my eyes and started to repeat the words, "Oh, Jesus, help me. Oh, Jesus, help me." Just then, I felt a hand touching my hand and heard a voice trying to calm me down and saying with caring words, "You'll be fine. You'll be fine." I opened my eyes to find a veiled Muslim nurse who was holding my hand as I was shouting, "Lord, Jesus," and her eyes were filled with tears. My comfort came from a Muslim woman whom I never knew, although I still remember her touch and tears and love. **It was a moment beyond the *kata sarx*, a moment of reconciliation.**

How to reconcile relates to the story of Jesus. "In Christ," God has reconciled the world with himself. This is a new "reality in which we are invited to participate through faith in Jesus Christ. In Christ, God was reconciling the world **and God emptied himself**, taking the form of slave..." (Philip.2:7) So, if reconciliation is to take place, we are to live self emptying in order to share the message of reconciliation. It sounds like a difficult way, but this is a main part of the Jesus story. This is how Jesus did it. Paul begs and beseeches them to live reconciliation. It is the emptying process that led God to the cross and we are challenged to do likewise; to live reconciliation in Jesus's way.

This leads us to an even more difficult reality about reconciliation. Reconciliation never happens without pain. But even our ***commitment is tested at the point of pain***. The story of Jesus is one of pain, because he did not escape from his vision of reconciliation when things became difficult.² To live reconciliation in the Middle East today is to be ready to expect pain on the road of reconciliation.

Reconciliation can never be achieved by violence. One of the main facts that groups in the Middle East have recognized, is that violence can never lead to reconciliation, but only leads to more violence. The Abrahamic faiths have many times been misused to support violence, but deep down, they all share similar principles and values of justice and mercy. Religions in the Middle East are trapped by political agendas that hide behind religion and try to blur the beauty of it. It takes sincere people to rescue religions from elements of hatred, violence, and misinterpretation.

Also, reconciliation is achieved only by avoiding counting mistakes. Many individuals, nations, and religions are misled by counting each other's mistakes which hinder reconciliation. Reconciliation is moving forward for a future of healing and looking for what can be worked on together to educate generations to think in a language of peace that looks of the other as a fellow human. This is why real reconciliation cannot be commanded in an authoritarian fashion. **It must be brought to people and it must grow** in them so that they themselves can see the need for reconciliation and, therefore, manifest the costly commitment for reconciliation to take place. Then it is an encounter, not alienation.

I recall recently that in one of the Lebanese villages, the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon tried to open a school to teach the Syrian children from the refugee camp. The village and even some of church members were divided on receiving the kids, claiming that these children were stealing their crops and they did not want them to get into the village, or even help them. One incident

¹ A sermon delivered by Bp Munib A. Younan in the Chapel of the Resurrection in Valparaiso University "Peace building among Jews, Christians and Muslims in the Holy Land: The ideal and the real" 31 January, 2002.

² "Lorenzen, Thorwald." Reconciliation A theological meditation on 2 Corinthians 5: 17-21"

of Syrian children stealing apples led the village to refuse to receive the Syrian children. **One mistake and a wall of enmity was built.**

Once upon a time, two brothers who lived on adjoining farms fell in conflict. It was the first serious rift in 40 years of farming side by side, sharing machinery, and trading labor and goods as needed without a hitch. Then the long collaboration fell apart. It began with a small misunderstanding which grew into a major difference, and finally it exploded into an exchange of bitter words followed by weeks of silence.

One morning, there was a knock on John's door. He opened it to find a man with a carpenter's toolbox. "I'm looking for a few days' work," he said. "Perhaps you would have a few small jobs here and there. Could I help you?"

"Yes," said the older brother. "I do have a job for you. Look across the creek at that farm. That's my neighbor; in fact, it's my younger brother with whom I had a fight. See that pile of lumber over by the barn? I want you to build me a fence – an 8-foot fence- so I won't need to see his place anymore." The carpenter said, "I think I understand the situation. Show me the nails and the post-hole digger and I'll be able to do a job that pleases you."

The older brother had to go to town for supplies, so he helped the carpenter get the materials ready and then he was off for the day. The carpenter worked hard all that day measuring, sawing, and nailing. About sunset when the farmer returned, the carpenter had just finished his job. The farmer's eyes opened wide, his jaw dropped. **There was no fence at all. It was a bridge- a bridge stretching from one side of the creek to the other!** A fine piece of work, handrails and all – and the neighbor, his brother, was coming across, his hand outstretched. "You are quite a fellow to build this bridge after all I've said and done." The two brothers met at the middle of the bridge, taking each other's hand.

How can reconciliation be made real among religions in the Middles East? The only way that we can answer as Christians is to lift up through our lives the model of reconciliation that Jesus taught us; away from *kata sarx* prejudices, away from violence and counting mistakes, but rather to raise a generation for peace who is ready to build bridges, even when building bridges can be painful. **It is Christ's reconciliation that is the hope for the Middle East and the world today. We are called to build bridges, to reconciliation.**

Questions for Study and Discussion

- 1-What makes reconciliation difficult in the world today?
- 2-What *Kata Sarx* attitudes do you struggle with in your context?
- 3-How do you see healing in relation to reconciliation? Could there be justice and peace without reconciliation?
- 4-In what areas do you feel the need to build a bridge today?

Prayer

Almighty and gracious God, we confess to you that we have many times built walls that separated us from other humans and we failed to live up to your call to us to be ambassadors for reconciliation. Open our eyes to see our weaknesses and help us to have the courage to be renewed and be instruments for reconciliation in the world today, even when that does not look popular in the eyes of many.

Guide us to be freed from worldly perceptions that distort your image of love. We pray that you grant your church the power of the Holy Spirit to stand as light and salt in the Middle East and the world and to trust that healing is possible, even with small sincere steps.

In Jesus Name we pray,

Amen.

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