



**Christian Conference of Asia**

## **BIBLE STUDIES**

# **Reconciliation, Renewal, and Restoration: Divine Indicative and Human Imperative**

**Congress of Asian Theologians (CATS)-IX**

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## INTRODUCTION

The Bible is not a single book written by a single author at one particular time or context on a specific theme. The Bible has been written over a period of time by several authors, and reflects upon many different events with rich resources of divine guidance. The Bible provides us with guidelines, principles, motivations, goals, and directions in life and our day-to-day situations. The most important aspect must be our own willingness to understand and learn the essence of Biblical messages. The proper way of studying, understanding, and interpreting Biblical messages will help us to discover and discern divine guidance. Bible studies are often helpful in understanding the contexts of a specific theme and situation. Bible studies become essential when a specific theme and its contexts are analysed, searched, and studied. A constant need to contextually explore the Bible and its theological relevance in a new way with fresh view of any subject is important.

The Bible studies included in this volume are based on the theme of the Congress of Asian Theologians (CATS) – IX, 'Reconciliation, Renewal and Restoration: Divine Indicative and Human Imperative'. The twenty-three Bible studies presented in the accompanying pages are focused on three specific sub-themes of the CATS-IX; 'Reconciliation -Towards the Harmony of Creation', 'Renewal - Towards the Fullness of Life', and 'Restoration-Towards Affirming the Will of God'. Different perspectives and interpretations on these common themes have been articulated by different authors, and will help us to understand and study the themes from diverse points of view.

It is our prayer and hope that the Bible studies in this volume will help in stimulating thought about the various dimensions of the main theme and sub-themes of CATS – IX. May God Almighty challenge us to comprehend the divine initiative and human imperative in all walks of our lives' situations.

**Mathews George Chunakara**  
*General Secretary, CCA*



**Subtheme I:**

**Reconciliation**

*Towards the Harmony of Creation*

# Reconciliation: A Change of Relationship

Rev. Dr. Pradit Takerngrangsarit\*

## Scripture

*“He (Jesus Christ) is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.” (Colossians 1:17 NIV)*

*“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come. All this is from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.” (2 Corinthians 5:17-16 NIV)*

## What is reconciliation?

In Romans 5:6-11, Paul says that before reconciliation we were powerless, ungodly, sinners, and enemies; we were under God’s wrath (v.9). Because of change or reconciliation, we become new creatures. As Paul says in 2 Cor. 5:17, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!”

Therefore, reconciliation involves a change in the relationship between God and human beings; and between human and human. God reconciles the world to himself (2 Cor.5:18). Reconciliation assumes that there has been a breakdown in the relationship, but now there has been a change from a state of enmity and fragmentation to one of harmony and fellowship.

Reconciliation takes place through the death of Christ. Paul says that “God reconciled us to himself through Christ” (2 Cor.5:18). God reconciles us to himself through the death of his Son, Jesus Christ (Rom.5:1). Thus, we are no longer enemies, ungodly, sinners, or powerless. Instead, the love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit whom he has given to us (Rom.5:5). It is a total

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change in the state of our lives. This act of reconciliation initiated by God through Christ gives us the new identity to be the new creation of God.

## **How do we reconcile?**

Reconciliation is the objective work of God through Christ (2 Cor.5:19). But it is also a subjective relationship. It is by the love and grace of God that we are reconciled to God (2 Cor.5:20). Thus, it is Christ through the cross who has made reconciliation possible, for “God made him to be sin for us” (2 Cor.5:21). As a result, we are born anew and are no longer controlled by the power of sin. Thus, we are able to reconcile with our neighbours as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Reconciliation is also related to justification in Romans 5. God has reconciled the world without counting people’s sins against them. We have been justified through faith (v.1), by his blood (v.9), and not through work. Therefore, we cannot claim reconciliation to be the work of humankind; but solely by the grace of God through the death of Christ. Christ sacrificed himself on the cross in order that we may be redeemed from all sin and maintain mutual relations with God and man.

## **Who do we reconcile with?**

Those who believe in Christ are reconciled to God, and that is when the partition that separates us from God is broken down. We are brought near by the blood of Christ who died for our sins. This is made possible by the cross of Christ, but only appropriated when we make the cross and the death of Christ applicable to our life or our relationships. This message of reconciliation that has come from God through Christ has been passed on to us. The ultimate aim is not only that we be justified, but that we might become the righteousness of God (v.21).

The whole message of reconciliation is centred on the love of God and the death of Christ. Paul reminds us that God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Rom. 5:8). This brings peace with God, access to God through Christ, rejoicing in the hope of the glory of God, making us rejoice in suffering, and having the love of God poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:1-5). We rejoice in God through Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation (Rom. 5:11).

## **Reconciliation: Towards the harmony of creation**

Christians find their security and hope in God as revealed in Jesus Christ, and say 'amen' to that unique relationship to God in the Holy Spirit. This is expressed as love and obedience in lives of discipleship and service. The commands of God demand a proper response. Individuals are to acknowledge his demands, regard him as trustworthy, and be obedient to him. The results of faith are seen in the radical changes that people experience when they place their trust in Christ.

Paul uses the term 'in Christ' to define what it means to be a Christian (Rom. 6:11, 23). It is a personal appropriation of the work of Christ. The result of this relationship is a movement from darkness to light (John 12:46), from death to life (John 11:25-26), and a love that reciprocates the love of the Father for the Son, and for the world (John 15:9-13; 3:16). Those who believe in Christ must be involved in active, self-giving service (John 13:1; 12-17). The power for this is to be found after Jesus' resurrection in the continuing relationship between the Son and the believer, facilitated through the Holy Spirit (John 14:15-27; 16:5-15; 7:37-39).

Being 'in Christ' is not only the basis of individual Christian and corporate identity, but also serves as the basis of transformed relationships (Gal 3:26-29). Being 'in Christ', believers identify with his death (Rom. 6:3; 5-11), his burial (Rom. 6:4), his resurrection (Col. 3:1), his ascension (Eph. 2:6), his lordship (2 Tim. 2:12), and his glory (Rom. 8:17). As a result, certain characteristics of Christ's person and work are attributed to those in communion with him. This picture is manifested at the Lord's table when we have communion with Christ and with our fellow believers, who in turn, reach out to the larger community.

## **New Creation**

The specific term 'new creation' occurs only twice in the New Testament (2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15). It is, however, the anthropological and individual side of the broad concept of the renewal of creation that is developed more widely in the New Testament.

The 'New Creation' is the renewal of creation. It brings hope to all humankind, whose sin threatened to destroy its hope in God. It is clear that a drastic change was necessary. God himself would carry out this new thing, and it would affect the lives of all those who believed in him.

The early church believed in the ultimate renovation or re-creation of the heavens and the earth at the close of history. This is evident and clear from 2 Peter 3:13 and Revelation 21:1-5. Both passages draw on Isaiah 65 and 66, but 2 Peter 3:13 is unique in its emphasis on the destruction of the heavens on the day of judgement. In this respect, Paul writes of creation's longing to be set free from the futility and bondage to decay, to which is linked the promise of the completion of redemption (Rom. 8:19-22). When creation is viewed in these general terms, the focus continues to be on God's intervention on the last day.

## **New Heavens and a New Earth**

The world God originally created suffered the catastrophe of sin and all of its consequences, but the future promises a perfect world in which the effects of sin are no longer present. The concept of new things is a major motif in redemptive history.

The renewal, also called 'renovation view' is more widely represented in the literature on this subject. 2 Peter 3:12b-13 is viewed as a purging of the old heaven and earth and forming it into the new. The catastrophe is comparable to Noah's flood, which can be considered as only a temporary fix. This provides a continuity and fulfillment of the purposes God began in the original creation and has now been brought to completion. Christ's incarnation and the believer's resurrection body provide analogies, although in different realms. The term 'renewal' in Matthew 19:28, argues for renovation rather than replacement. The term 'new' in contrast to 'old' may mean new in character rather than substance (cf. 2 Cor. 5:17; Heb. 8:13).

## **Conclusion**

The idea of reconciliation involves radical change in both personal and social aspects. This change is possible when we deny our-selves and begin to be in union with Christ. To live and work 'in Christ' is to commit oneself to the work of new creation. When a person's life is in concert with Christ, he or she is ready and willing to carry out Christ's mission of new creation to the world. In order to live a life in accordance to God's will, we must reconcile with God and with our fellow brothers and sisters to enjoy the harmony of creation in our daily living.

## **Questions for Discussion**

1. How must we create and restore peace and harmony in this broken world today, where conflict and hostility overshadow the hope and security of nations?
2. How do we reconcile with God and humankind in order to create new heaven and new earth? Give some practical examples or cases of re-creation that are carried out by the church and social movements.

# **The Groanings of Creation for Transformation**

Rev. Dr. Jayasiri Theodus Peiris\*

## **Scripture**

*“He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.  
And what does the Lord require of you?  
To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”  
(Micah 6:8 NIV)*

## **Introduction**

On Easter Sunday - 21<sup>st</sup> April, 2019, there were a number of bomb attacks in Sri Lanka that took away many valuable lives, including those of children. Worshippers in three Churches - two in the western and one in the eastern province - as well as locals and foreign visitors in three hotels in Colombo were the main targets. Over 250 were killed and around 450 persons injured. These terrorist attacks brought immense suffering to the people. Some people have lost their livelihood. By and large both the Sinhala and Tamil communities mistrusted and stereotyped the Muslims. There was always a feeling that they were not integrated. In general, all Muslims are considered terrorists at present, just as all Tamils were considered Tigers earlier in this weeping island. Some churches did not hold services on the following Sundays - 28<sup>th</sup> April and again on 5<sup>th</sup> May in fear. During search operations, large stocks of ammunitions and weapons were ‘found’ and many were taken in for questioning. The investigations are on and suspects will normally be brought before tribunals if there are no interferences by higher authorities. The general opinion among the public is that those who hold high positions neglected their duties and failed to take preventive measures despite having received prior information about possible attacks from intelligence sources. Would medical care, psychological support, search operations leading to recovery of weapons and apprehension of persons, legal action, and banning the organizations solve the problem?

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The attacks could be attributed to the following direct/indirect causes:

- (1) The setbacks suffered by ISIS on the battlefield,
- (2) The employment of Muslims in Saudi Arabia (principally), leading to the gradual '*Arab-isation*' of the hitherto moderate and tolerant Islam practiced for hundreds of years in Sri Lanka,
- (3) The possibility of indoctrination while being employed overseas,
- (4) The driving of deprived communities to extremism in religion – for both material gain and 'pie-in-the-sky' solutions,
- (5) The possible public distraction from the seizure of drug traffickers, and
- (6) The possible retaliation or response to the March 2019 New Zealand mosque attacks.<sup>1</sup>

It is important to wrestle with the question as to why and how the IS originated. Some hold the view that a few western countries were instrumental in creating the IS due to their national and international ethno-religious policies; mainly against Muslims and Islam.

Thus, the Jihadis justify their actions by their own victimhood! They are the victims, they say, while Christians belong to the 'Empire'. Though they take this stance, sometimes the victims and perpetrators embrace each other, at times, they complement each other, and at other times, they exchange roles. What could be the reason/s for the justification of their action? Isn't it due to the continuing colonization agenda of the 'Christian' states, (often working in subtle ways with corrupt, autocratic local rulers) who aim to maintain their strategic and economic interest, at the cost of justice and liberty to the people?

This 'Empire' is described as "the massive concentrations of power that permeate all aspects of life and that cannot be controlled by any one actor alone...Empire seeks to extend its control as far as possible; not only geographically, politically, and economically...but also intellectually, emotionally, psychologically, spiritually, culturally, and religiously" (Rieger, Christ and Empire, 2-3).

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<sup>1</sup> This was expressed by the State Minister of Defence in Sri Lanka; and was quickly countered by the Prime Minister of New Zealand.

When we do theology, we need to be concerned with the Empire for two reasons:

Firstly, the Empire shapes the way we do theology - how we think about who God is, what humanity is, and how we are related to God and creation. Secondly, the history of colonialism and the expanding process of globalization makes the Empire one of the primary issues to which theology must respond today; as the Empire is a fact of our everyday lives that must be resisted - if we hope to bring about the kind of justice Jesus sought to bring about in solidarity with those on the underside of the power of the Empire.

In Lamentations 1:12-13, the orator invites people through a question to witness and then says who is responsible for the situation of immense suffering. As human beings, we seek the solidarity of others when we are faced with a problem. Further, there is a tendency among some to blame God for suffering or to be unconcerned about the situation and to maintain a 'mind your own business' attitude.

"Is it no concern to you who pass by? If only you would look and see; is there any agony like mine, like these my torments with which the Lord has cruelly punished me in the day of his anger? He sent down fire from heaven." Most of us would not subscribe to the latter.

Rom. 8: 22 says that the entire creation is groaning in travail. The Judeo-Christian belief is that God is the creator of the entire universe. The universe consists not only of humans, animals and plants, but also of geographical features such as waters, seas, sand, mountains, and also of astronomical bodies such as stars, planets, comets... It is the entire creation that groans. All those groans are due to suffering.

We have to ask what the reasons for suffering are. Could suffering be due to various injustices, lack of love, mercy and of shared community life? Do they arise because of the actions of the powerful? They create the powerless and victims. In other words, the issue is between the Empire and its victims.

Micah<sup>2</sup> was a contemporary of the prophet Isaiah. Micah proclaims the word of the Lord in the capital, and declares that his announcements of judgement against Jerusalem moved the king and the people to repentance. Unlike Isaiah, who was a native of the holy city, Micah was an outsider from the countryside and would most likely have been a controversial figure. He would have been unpopular with the leaders whom he condemned (3:1-4), and the wealthy whom he criticized (2:1-5). He disassociated himself from priests and other prophets, who he considered corrupt (3:5-8). Many modern scholars consider Micah as exclusively being a prophet of doom and only three out of the seven chapters in the book are attributed to him. The exciting prophecy of peace and justice in Micah 4:1-5 is identical to Isaiah 2:2-5 and Isaiah 32:17; and it reads, "The effect of justice will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever."

Micah is aware of the tradition that Zion is the Lord's chosen place, but he is critical of the popular view that this election ensures the city's security (2:6-13, 3:9-12). The prophet being God's mouthpiece announces the approaching punishment of God's people by means of military defeat and exile because of their failure to establish justice. The political and religious leadership did not wish to listen to such messages. After this punishment, God promises to bring the people back to their land and establish lasting peace. God does not require worship absent of justice, love, care, community and humility (6:6-8).

Micah 4:1-5 and Isaiah 11:2-9 are interesting passages. The challenging message is that there will be no violence in any form; no tension between religions, identities, and humankind. War weapons will be transformed into tools for production to provide food for people, and for the rest of the creation. There will be security for all. There is *shalom* (well-being) for everyone and the entire creation. When there is *shalom*, there will be no ethno-religious tensions.

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<sup>2</sup> The book of Micah contains prophetic activity during the reigns of three kings of Judah: Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. It identifies him as a resident of Moresheth, a village in the Judean foothills. The solitary reference to Micah outside the book (Jer. 26:17-18) places him in the reign of Hezekiah and says that he went from his small town to the capital to prophecy.

Violence operates in the world in many subtle ways. Sometimes, there are no direct attacks, bloodshed, displacements, and physical harassments. Attitudes and perspectives contribute to violence. Empire and victimhood operate through human attitudes. There is another interesting story on ethno-religious 'violence' in John 4. We can identify the tension between two ethno-religious communities; the Jews and the Samaritans, each claiming superiority over the other. Both communities came from the same source, but some later developments brought division and animosity between the two groups, and thus ethno-religious differences emerged. Both groups believed in the creator God. They worshipped in two separate locations and considered that each of them was unique. Both the Jews and the Samaritans in this story were victims, each of these ethno-religious communities belong to the 'Empire' at different times, at times they collaborated with each other as victims to fight their 'common enemy', and at times they complemented each other, and at other times they exchanged roles.

Violence continued in a subtle way between the two communities; through their attitudes and mentalities. Jesus addressed the issue when he was confronted with that tension between the two groups. Jesus wanted a new world where ethno-religious violence could be overcome with purity of heart, love and justice.

Psalms 15 is also closely linked to what we discuss here. The Psalmist raises the question - who shall dwell in God's tent? Who shall dwell in God's holy hill? The Psalmist then answers his own question and calls the worshippers to have the following characteristics: be blameless, be right, be truthful, no slandering, no evil-doing, no revenge against the neighbour, no despisal, no loaning money on interest, and non-acceptance of bribes.

After the attacks (mentioned at the beginning of this article), the Church issued statements condemning them. Churches have also engaged in pastoral care to the people, mainly to the Christian community. However, the Church has failed to adequately take care of the Muslims and few hundreds of Pakistani and Afghani refugees in Sri Lanka awaiting clearance to migrate to other countries. Almost all of them became refugees in their home countries and here again they have become refugees once again. A question we must ask is if true reconciliation is ever possible; and what the Church and theological education can do in the

midst of such violence. Generally, the Church is good at ambulance service, but not in analysing and preventing such violence and engagement in true peace and reconciliation. This is a major task for us all. It is unfortunate that many of the statements issued did not have an ecumenical spirit. So, we are challenged to act ecumenically and across faith lines to establish peace and reconciliation in God's *oikoumene*.

The state, the Church, all religions, and the civilians have a responsibility to transform the situation through repentance and by taking appropriate action, which is entirely different from repeating a confessional prayer inside a church.

## **Questions for Discussion**

1. When Micah proclaimed the word of the Lord, the king and the people did not repent. What prevents our political and religious leadership from repenting?
2. What are the obstacles to ethno-religious co-existence in Asia and what are the steps we could take to transform this situation? Identify some texts to promote peace and reconciliation in our communities and the creation.

# Living a Life of New Creation

Dr. Lalrindiki Ralte\*

## Scripture

*“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.” (2 Corinthians 5:17-19)*

## Introduction

One important concern of Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians is the pride and arrogance displayed by some of the church members in Corinth. Those members consider themselves to be spiritually superior to other believers and even questioned the authenticity of Paul as the apostle of Christ. Paul responded to the claims made by such people in particular, and also to the whole Corinthian church in general, as to how the community of Christ should live together.

In 2 Corinthians 5:17-19 Paul gives a theological explanation of the reconciliation between God and the world through Christ which is over and against sinful human pride and arrogance. Pride and arrogance fragments and destroys the community of God, while humility and compassion builds up the community of believers.

Reconciliation has a particular significance in an age of ecological crisis which is currently threatening the existence of all life-forms in the world. The present-day ecological crisis is the culmination of unlimited extraction and destruction of nature due to the pride and arrogance of

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human beings who think that we are above the rest of the creation. Therefore, it is essential for us to reflect upon our faith affirmation of God's reconciliation with the world through Christ, which opened up the opportunity for us to become 'new creation'.

## Reflection

In 2 Cor. 5:17, Paul talks about the change experienced by those who had come to believe in Christ. Those who experienced such changes are called 'new creation'. In the past their perspective and behaviour came out of the 'human point of view' (v.16). They were guided by their pride and self-interest. But after believing in Christ they started adopting new perspective and behaviour and thus, became 'new creation'.

Becoming a new creation in Christ means a change in one's perspective and behaviour towards God, towards each other, as well as towards the rest of the creation. In the modern day consumerist society, people look at nature and other creation only in terms of their benefits to human beings and not as something valuable and beautiful in its own right. But to those who have become new creation, they begin to see in other creation the glory and goodness of God. The life-giving and life-sustaining role of nature is seen as something to be respected and not to be taken for granted.

Change in perspective towards other creation reminds me of a Mizo<sup>2</sup> myth. There once was a young woman called *Chawngtinleri* who was taken by the female spirits called *lasi* to live with them in the forest. In the Mizo belief, the *lasi* were the spirit guardians of the forest and they had power over all the animals who lived there. In the beginning, *Chawngtinleri* longed to go back to the human world away from the forest. But after the *lasi* changed the shape of her eyes from horizontal to vertical, *Chawngtinleri* lost all her longing to go back, and became the queen of the *lasi* in the forest.

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<sup>2</sup> The Mizo are one of many tribes who live in the hills of northeast India.

The changing of the shape of *Chawngtinler's* eyes indicates a change in perspective. To those who are far away from the forest (nature), forest is seen as a dangerous place for human beings and hence, humans have the right to kill, plunder and subdue its inhabitants. The forest/nature is also seen as a dumping ground for all harmful wastes produced by human society. But for those who have an intimate relationship with the forest (such as tribal communities), the forest is a life-giving entity. It is a place where they get their daily food, and where they find safety and security along with all its other inhabitants. Respect must be given to the forest because it is the abode of the spirits who are safeguarding the forest from harm and destruction. Change in perspective towards nature after becoming a new creation through Christ is very close to this kind of worldview.

The opportunity of becoming new creation through Christ is possible only because of the initiative taken by God who wants to reconcile the world/the cosmos into His loving embrace. Cosmos includes all the inhabitants of the world, animate and inanimate, and which God, the Creator, finds very good (Gen.1:1-25). The word 'reconciliation' assumes there has been a breakdown in the relationship, but now there has been a change from a state of enmity and fragmentation to one of harmony and fellowship.

Harmony means a just adaptation of different creatures and life forms, including human beings, to each other in such a way that the flow of life continues through the interdependency and interconnectedness of the whole creation. Harmonious relationship does not mean leaving nature to thrive on its own without human interference. Human beings cannot survive without interacting with nature in one way or the other and other creatures need each other for food and sustenance. However, in a harmonious relationship the interaction between different creatures and life forms are guided by the cessation of such activities once the needs are met. This is in contrast to the unceasing exploitation and destruction of creation by human beings who are guided by the logic of capitalist market economy to satisfy their unlimited greed and desires. The *Subsistence Economy*<sup>3</sup> and the

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<sup>3</sup> Subsistence Economy is often understood as something which is extremely primitive and which glorifies poverty and scarcity. However, the Subsistence Economy practiced by modern-day small and independent producers includes the selling of their products in the local markets for cash income which provide security and certain amount of comfortable existence. The organizing principle of

*Ethics of Enough*<sup>4</sup> practised by many indigenous/tribal communities and small peasants are important pointers in developing harmonious relationship between human beings and the rest of the creation.

It is necessary for believers to learn sustainable ways of interacting with other creations. This is because just as God reconciled God-self with the world through Jesus Christ, those who believe in Christ are entrusted with the responsibility of carrying forward the message of reconciliation in words and deeds, not only among themselves, but also between human beings and the rest of the creation (v.19). From the beginning of creation, God had given special responsibility to human beings in taking care of the rest of God's creation (Gen.1:26). Because of sinful pride, arrogance, and selfishness, human beings had violated the task entrusted upon them by God. This had resulted in breaking down the harmonious relationship not only between God and human beings, but also between human beings and the rest of the creation. The present-day ecological crisis is the result of distorted and fragmented relationships among the different life-forms on earth at the hands of sinful human beings.

Therefore, we need to repent from our sins and be actively engaged in the work of reconciliation among all creation in order to testify to the truth of our status as new creation through our faith in Christ. Otherwise, how can we expect to experience true reconciliation with God if we continue to plunder and exploit the rest of God's good creation? How can we continue to disregard and disrespect other creation if we claim to be the recipients of the salvation and liberation of God in Christ for the whole world from the bondages of sin and death?

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Subsistence Economy is need-based and the primary objective is to satisfy the needs of the family and the community.

<sup>4</sup> Ethics of Enough is the underlying principle of conduct among many tribal communities. Once people get what they need from their cultivation and the surrounding forest, it is enough for them. They do not keep on plundering the resources at their disposal for making profits. The Ethics of Enough is the opposite of the Ethics of Consumerism which cannot get enough to be satisfied.

## **Conclusion**

Bringing about reconciliation among all creation has become one of the most urgent tasks in this world which is rapidly disintegrating under the onslaught of ecological crisis. For this, we need to be firmly rooted in our theological affirmation and conviction that we have the mandate from God to be engaged in this crucial task. At the same time, it is not enough just to have good reflection and creative discussion regarding the state of the world today. We need to engage ourselves in works of restoration and preservation of creation as well as in the struggle against destructive forces which continue to destroy nature at the cost of terrible sufferings experienced both by human beings and the rest of the creation. We also need to engage ourselves in finding out alternative ways of organizing human communities which relates to nature in a mutually enriching and sustaining ways.

In a multi-religious and multi-cultural world, the work of reconciliation has to be done in partnership with people who belong to different religious backgrounds and who do not have particular religious convictions, but have a deep sense of justice for the whole creation. Christians need to be creatively engaged with others who have already taken crucial steps in response to the challenges of ecological crisis. We also need to learn from other communities, such as tribal communities and those who have practised different ways of organizing their community, their worldview and lifestyle, which are more in tune with harmonious co-existence with the rest of the creation.

## **Questions for Discussion**

1. Identify the forces in today's world (socially, politically, economically and ideologically) which are particularly destructive to nature.
2. How can churches and Christian communities work with people of other faiths and secular movements who are engaging themselves with the works of reconciliation between human beings and the rest of the creation?

# Has the New Era of Reconciliation Come?

Dr. Fujiwara Sawako\*

## Introduction

During my time at a Christian university in a local city of Northeast Japan where most of students encounter Christianity for the first time, I found it interesting that firstly, many of them are not eager to move out of their comfort zone, but remain under the influence of the conservative view in the region, and secondly, they believe that the Bible (which is known as the 'holy book' in Japanese) is simply a collection of religious documents that only contains *holy* proverbs, the life histories of *sacred* people, and *good* teachings. However, it may be fairer to say that the Bible is filled with difficulties such as the fall, the lost paradise, the first murder, selling Joseph into slavery, and the enslavement of the Israelites in Egypt. In the Scriptures, everyone appears to experience difficulties. Paul the Apostle is no exception; Paul had to write a letter to the church in Corinth, which opposed him and had chosen to follow a group of false apostles who treated him with disrespect.

However, I am of the view that most people have experienced being the object of an attack by opponents. Our words and deeds often have the opposite effect of we intended. Furthermore, sometimes our good intentions rebound. However, like the examples in the Bible, God transforms us by helping us to discern what is important from the less important in our lives and ministries through the difficulties we experience.

In this bible study, I have attempted to firstly, examine 2 Corinthians 5:16-20 with special emphasis on keywords such as '*kata sarka*', 'new creation', and 'reconciliation'; secondly, describe the controversy about the name of the new era in Japan; and thirdly, reveal churches' responses in order to reflect on the theme: Reconciliation - towards the harmony of creation.

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## **An examination of 2 Corinthians 5:16-20**

There was no person more qualified in the Jewish tradition than Paul. In Philippians 3:4, he stated, “Even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh. If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more.” He added that he was “circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless”.

### *(1) Kara sarka (5:16)*

Paul came to regard these things as loss because of Christ. His perception of Christ as well as of humanity changed radically by his conviction that Christ died for all and all died with him. Before his conversion on his journey from Jerusalem to Damascus, Paul looked at Jesus of Nazareth and Christians from a merely human point of view (*kata sarka*) and persecuted the church, but after his conversion, he no longer did. Rather, he was more interested in the eschatological reality of the resurrected life that had begun in Christ’s resurrection.<sup>6</sup> Translated literally, *kata sarka* means ‘according to the flesh’ and not according to the Spirit. Following Paul who no longer viewed or judged anyone from a carnal perspective (*kata sarka*), our behaviour should not be determined by what is carnal and destined to perish.<sup>7</sup>

### *(2) New Creation (5:17)*

The reason Paul no longer viewed anyone as *kata sarka* is that if someone is in Christ, that person is a ‘new creation’ (*kainektisis*). This was quoted from Isaiah 65:17 in which the prophet referred to a renewal of the whole creation; however, in verse 5:17, Paul meant that those who are in Christ are a new creation. In Ephesians 2:15 that speaks of a ‘new humanity’ (*kainosanthropos*), Paul also described the person who has been renewed in Christ. As noted earlier, the newness alluded to is that of realized eschatology. Paul understood Christ to be the new Adam, the representative of the new creation while the old Adam who symbolized

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<sup>6</sup> Craig S. Keener, *1-2 Corinthians*, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 185.

<sup>7</sup> Frank J. Motera, *2 Corinthians: A Commentary*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2003, p. 135.

disobedience in humanity represented what is old and passing away.<sup>8</sup> In other words, the image of God and the glory of God lost in the old Adam are restored in Christ, the new creation.<sup>9</sup>

### *(3) Reconciliation (5:18-20)*

This new creation is the result of God's work of reconciliation (*katallage*) through Christ (*dia Christou*). Humanity cannot be extricated from a sinful situation by itself. God always initiates salvation because everything that occurred in Christ's life was ultimately the work of God.<sup>10</sup> Paul gave the life-giving ministry of the new covenant the ministry of reconciliation, which involves enemies making peace and becoming friends (Romans 5:10; Ephesians 2:14-16).<sup>11</sup> God promised Israel *the new era* in Isaiah 65:17-18 ('new heavens and a new earth') and therefore, the new creation in Christ is reconciled to God. However, the world has not yet completely become a new creation unless we accept the message and Christ's agents.<sup>12</sup> Paul's plea to the church in Corinth to be reconciled to God suggests that the Christians there appeared to be between the world of *kata sarka* and being ambassadors for Christ.<sup>13</sup> We may ask the question, what about us? Are we still living *kata sarka*? Has the new era come?

## **Controversy over the *new era***

Emperor Akihito announced his abdication at a ceremony, which ended his 30-year reign, on April 30, 2019. Emperor Naruhito, his son, was presented with the Three Sacred Treasures, namely, a mirror, sword, and jewel at a solemn ceremony in the Imperial Palace on May 1. This marked the end of the former emperor's reign called *Heisei*, and the beginning of the *Reiwa* era, which means beautiful harmony- auspicious (*rei*), and peace or harmony (*wa*).

The majority of people celebrated the start of the *new era* during an unprecedented Golden Week of 10 days of holidays for this imperial succession. According to television news reports, many people went to

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<sup>8</sup> Motera, p. 137.

<sup>9</sup> Keener, p. 185.

<sup>10</sup> Motera, p. 138.

<sup>11</sup> Keener, p. 186.

<sup>12</sup> We are not concerned with Paul's concept of apostleship because of space limitations here.

<sup>13</sup> Keener, p. 186.

Tokyo's Shibuya district, known to be one of the world's busiest scramble crossings, to join the crowd waiting for the countdown while others got married at midnight, when the name of the era changed from *Heisei* to *Reiwa*. Japanese producers of food, stationery, and other goods rushed to release products featuring the new era name to boost sales on this occasion. Not even a small number of people showed their gratitude during on-street interviews to the Emperor as the *Heisei* era came to an end in peace, which means free of war, even though that was questionable.<sup>14</sup> For example, *The Wall Street Journal* reported in December 2018 that Japan would become the largest customer outside the United States for Lockheed Martin Corp.'s F-35 jet fighters in response to pressure from President Donald Trump to spend more on American military hardware.

Furthermore, despite the fact that the tradition of the Japanese era names is based on ancient China's culture, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe emphasized that *Reiwa* was the first era name to be taken from national literature; more specifically, from *Manyo-shu*, a poetry anthology. It is very ironic that the passage that inspired the new era name was apparently influenced by a classical Chinese poem. What exactly does 'beautiful harmony' mean in the name of the new era that emphasizes national identity? Have people forgotten that the number of foreign nationals in the country reached a record 2.56 million and made up 2% of the population for the first time? Why is President Trump the first state guest to meet the new emperor?

While the overwhelming majority of news media got excited about the beginning of the *new era*, I was disappointed that my favourite radio program, *Kyokei Arakawa's Day Catch!* (TBS Radio) came to an end along with the former *Heisei* era. Because the program had very critical journalists and academics, and resisted the Abe administration, it seemed to be eliminated by pressure before the new era began.<sup>15</sup> Fortunately, another radio program, *ChikiOgiue's Session-22* survived and held a discussion on the topic: the era name has changed, but nothing else has changed. This program criticized the excessive celebratory mood that prevailed throughout the country.

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<sup>14</sup> In 2003, the Japanese government deployed a troop of the Self-Defence Forces to Iraq at the behest of the U.S.

<sup>15</sup> The Press Freedom Index 2019 ranked Japan at 67th. See <http://rsf.org/en/ranking>.

I am of the opinion that no matter how much the government tries to reinforce national identity and cut its connections with other Asian cultures, this will be impossible unless we adopt historical revisionism. The new era name will never afford us a magic spell to solve unsolved problems since the end of Japanese colonial period. Although people have stated that it is the beginning of the *new era*, there is no reset button to erase all the difficulties we have in Japanese society. Has God ever equipped us with the ministry of reconciliation when we are unable to see what the real situation is like? How can the churches respond?

### **Churches' responses to the *new era***

Since 2018, the Korean Christian Church in Japan, the United Church of Christ in Japan, the Anglican-Episcopal Church in Japan (*Nippon SeiKo Kai*), the Japan Evangelical Lutheran Church, and others denominations have conducted a distinct protest against performing the large-scaled Imperial-Family event as a state occasion financed by public funds. Prior to the imperial succession in 2019, one of the committees of the National Christian Council in Japan (NCC) that is involved with the Yasukuni (Shinto) Shrine issue, held a joint press conference in Tokyo on April 30, along with ecumenical colleagues from the Japan Catholic Council of Justice and Peace, the Japan Evangelical Association, and the Japan Baptist Convention. Their aim was to voice their complaint about the ascension ceremony for the new emperor that violated the separation of state and religion, the principle of democratic sovereignty, and the equality of the religions stipulated in the Constitution. They further wanted to express their apprehension about a resurgence of the State Shinto, which inevitably leads to inflaming patriotism. It is noteworthy that in addition to these issues, the Japan Baptist Convention objected to the use of the *new era* name. Since it is extremely difficult to raise questions about the so-called tradition in Japan at present, we may conclude that these churches' responses were very courageous and faithful.

Contrary to these prophetic witnesses, there are Christians who simply welcomed the *new era* of beautiful harmony. For example, there are a few Christian schools that still fly the national flag (sun-mark flag) on holidays. Furthermore, they suppress criticism that the mark symbolizes loyalty to the former colonial Empire and ignorance of people's suffering in Asia and the Pacific. If we call for the renewal of their traditions, the answer should be "Do not disturb the *harmony*."

## Reflection

Viewed in this light, it is evident that to be a new creation is indeed quite challenging even in the present time. Like Paul, we cannot avoid being exposed to criticism sometimes. However, as the *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement* (2002) defines reconciliation as the renewal of our relationship with the Triune God accomplished for us in Jesus Christ and offered to us in the Word and sacraments through the church,<sup>16</sup> the ministry of reconciliation will never be achieved as long as we refuse to be renewed and never stop behaving *karasarka*. People say that the *new era* of beautiful harmony has come, but as Paul stated all the newness, reconciliation, and harmony in creation is the result of God's work of reconciliation through Christ who helps us to have courage to face difficulties in our present situations of church and society. If Paul's conviction that Christ's death was the sacrifice of sacrifices for all is true, we need to make sure that any other sacrifices will never be necessary and should no longer be made. Thus, I pray, "God of life, transform us, and help us discern what is important from what is less important, through all the troubles we have in our lives and ministries today."

## Questions for Discussion

1. What kind of 'reconciliation' does your church need to achieve?
2. What can we do to motivate our church to be truly renewed?
3. Why do we sometimes fail to see problems in our church and society?

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<sup>16</sup> Nicholas Lossky, et al., eds., *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, WCC Publications, 2002, p. 961.

# **Reconciliation: Towards the Active Harmony and Revival of Israel and Beyond**

Dr. Farhana Nazir\*

## **Scripture**

*“If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.” (2 Chronicles 7:14)*

## **Introduction**

There are few societies and contexts where religious harmony, pardon, social justice and peace seem impossible. For example, Assia Bibi’s (a Pakistani Christian woman) accusation and death sentence was condemned internationally when it was urged that her ‘dignity and fundamental rights be fully respected’.<sup>2</sup> Assia Bibi’s case also provoked a storm nationally, when it was argued that she should be pardoned or at least receive a lesser punishment than death. The verdict was legally declared unsound not only for a presidential pardon but also for her release in November 2019.

In December 2010, the government publicly reneged on a commitment to review the blasphemy laws, announcing that it had ‘no intention’ to repeal or amend the law. Sensing the government’s lack of resolve and supported by sections of the media, extremists offered head money to anyone who killed Assia Bibi and issued death threats to opponents and critics of the blasphemy law.<sup>3</sup> Assia’s case received serious attention when the Governor, Salman Taseer, a Muslim, visited her in jail to

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<sup>2</sup> Amnesty International, *Urgent Action: Pakistani Woman Sentenced to Death*, Index: ASA 33/011/2010; “Pope Pleads for Life of Condemned Pakistani Woman”, *BBC News*, 17 November 2010, <http://bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-11777482>.

<sup>3</sup> Mariam Faruqi, Ed. *A Question of Faith: A Report on the Religious Status of Minorities of Pakistan* (Karachi: Jinnah Institution, 2011), 4, 43.

help her to get justice and bring religious harmony. In December 2010, Taseer took a huge step at a political level by asking for Assia's forgiveness. In reviewing religious intolerance, peaceful social life, and human rights in Pakistan, he concluded that, "the sentence against Assia is inhumane...I have handed over the appeal (for Assia Bibi) for a presidential pardon."<sup>4</sup> Helping Assia to get justice was offensive enough because he did not live to see any pardon or release and peace of Pakistani Religious case caused by Assia Bibi. He was assassinated by his bodyguard, Mumtaz Qadri on 4 January 2011 in Islamabad.

Unfortunately, after nine years of solitary confinement of Assia Bibi until 29 January 2019, despite acknowledging possible violations - particularly the right to an adequate defence and fair trial- the Supreme Court decided to uphold Assia Bibi's conviction and death sentence. It was observed that violent protests erupted across Pakistan, damaging social and religious solidarity and demanding the execution of the Muslim judge and Christian Assia Bibi. She is technically free, but actually not, as she is not welcome and safe to stay in Pakistan. The question arises, as to why religious harmony in such a case was not possible. Why did the Pakistani judiciary highlight the misuse of blasphemy laws in Pakistan, but failed to propose effective safeguards for the protection of minorities? The Supreme Court went a long way to disapprove the conduct of those who have brought false blasphemy cases against minorities. Nevertheless, it did not recommend an adequate punishment for such persons in Pakistan.

In few societies and contexts, the religious have less or no harmony, pardon, social justice and peace. Such a situation reminded me of 2 Chronicles 7:14, especially when it was difficult to see the healing and peace of Pakistani land. Though the circumstances of 2 Chronicles 7:14 cannot be associated with the Pakistani context, the peace of the land of Israelites, forgiving the people and objectives of recompilation in 2 Chronicles 7:14 explains similar situations around the world and indeed in Pakistan that can be seen in the following theological reflection.

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<sup>4</sup> Salman Taseer in "Violence Brings Pakistan's Women Advocates to Aid Religious Minorities," published on 19 August 2011: <http://womennewsnetwork.net>; Zahid Husain and Tom Write, "Pakistan's Killers has Revealed Plans," *The Wall Street Journal*, 5 January 2011.

## Theological Reflection

The surrounding context of the text demonstrates that 2 Chronicles 7:14 is a promise to the people of Israel, not Christians. Where then, does “Reconciliation: Towards the Active Harmony & Revival of Israel and Beyond” stand? Historically, the immediate context is the aim of Solomon to build the temple (2 Chron. 2-5) to worship God. The first thing to consider carefully is that the misinterpretation explains less or no understanding of the original context; that has a significant influence on meaning.

The text is actually the answer of the prayer Solomon offered for the pure theism, miraculous providence, divine moral perfection and grace (2 Chronicles 6). In the prayer, Solomon also encourages Israelites to keep hope, have fear of the Lord's displeasure and keep walking faithfully according to His commandments. In the prayer, geographically, Israel's country or land was presented as the area of deprivation that remained as a thermometer to check Israelites' spiritual journey (2 Ch. 6:25, 27, 28, 31).

Such prayer is followed by God's graceful answer (2 Chronicles 7:1-22). Chapter 7 is also about the dedication of the temple that has been chosen to worship Yahweh who said: “I have heard your prayer and have chosen this place for myself as a temple for sacrifices. When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command locusts to devour the land or send a plague among my people...” (2 Chron. 7:11-13). According to verse 14, ‘the revival and harmony’ is possible to regard God's stipulation between God and Israel. Theologically, such stipulation can be seen by looking at the first words, ‘if’ and ‘my people’.<sup>5</sup>

The Hebrew context of the first word, ‘if’ (*‘im*, *‘illu*, *lu*, *‘ilmal*) is *not* a conditional promise but a declaration of future actions and judgement of God for Israelites who were seeking deliverance.<sup>6</sup> It can be called, firstly, as a declaration of God's law (7:13–16), and secondly, as obedience to the divine decrees (7:17-18). Theologically, Israelites were called to be obedient. Solomon would then enjoy the full benefit of God's blessing, such as establishing the throne of God's Kingdom as covenanted with King David, and most importantly, “there shall not fail thee a man to be ruler in

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<sup>5</sup> For more information see Luke A. Johnston, *An Exegesis and Interpretation of 2 Chronicles 7:14* (Pennsylvania, Clarks Summit, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> Skip Moen, “Hebrew Word Study”, <https://www.skipmoen.com>.

Israel”(2 Chron. 7:17-18). All blessings were awaiting Solomon and Israel ‘if they remained faithful and walked uprightly by the laws of the Covenant.

Traditionally, the author of Chronicles, Ezra recalls Israel’s history in order to provide the postexilic Israelites a reminder of the past that will again become prosperous. It can be said that the original audience, the Jews, were those who have experienced the collapse of the Kingdom and the exile. However, the following generation returns to the broken Israel. Now the author exhorts these people to be faithful to God and remember what God did in the past and that God has bought them back so that they can once again rise to prominence.<sup>7</sup> The phrases ‘my people’, and ‘who are called by my name’ in 2 Chron. 7:14 clearly show that the Israelites belong to God in pre- and post-exile. However, here the Gentiles who occupied the land when the returning Israelites arrived are and will be calling them ‘God’s people’.<sup>8</sup>

The question arises, is it God who calls His nation by His name or is it the Nation that calls itself by God’s name? Here, the word *qara* means that Israelites are the people who call themselves by God’s name because God is not merely naming them as part of His tribe, but to be His people.<sup>9</sup> The overall thrust is that God has chosen His people, this place/country and the temple, to worship and offer sacrifices (7:12, 15-16). But how is this union possible, and can it be remained faithful to in the future?

## **Possibilities of Reconciliation**

In 2 Chronicles 7:14, God clearly gives the answer that people must ‘humble themselves’ which is one of the most important objectives of this reconciliation towards the active harmony and revival of Israel. It cannot be denied that the most challenging act for a human being is to humble him/herself. The book of Chronicles includes many events leaving an appealing message- “Repentance begins with humility.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Larry Richards, *The Bible Reader's Companion* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1991), electronic ed., accessed through Libronix Digital Library System.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Skip Moen, “Hebrew Word Study”, <https://www.skipmoen.com/2004/07/called/>

<sup>10</sup> Brine Wintle, *South Asian Bible Commentary* (Cumbria: Open Doors Publications, 2015), 506.

This word 'humble' is used in military contexts for kings. In 2 Chronicles it especially describes those who did not 'humble' themselves before God (2 Chron. 33:23; 34:27; 36:12). Humility requires submission before God, and this is necessary for leaders. In fact, one measure of a person's leadership is whether they have submitted to God or not.

In the context of 2 Chronicles 7:14, this humility required Israel to '*kana*', meaning submission to God before experiencing the following blessing. '*Kana*' strongly signifies the complete submission to fulfil God's will. It discourages arrogance and self-sufficiency, and demands acceptance to face the consequences ('either submit or die')<sup>11</sup>. Here, it is important to see that 'humility' has to be the *first* action of Israelites who claim to be called God's people. If they want to "pray and turn away from their sins" they should make themselves 'humble' first. Therefore, 2 Chronicles 7:14 indicates the key to receive reconciliation that comes with a humble attitude. We must check our humble spirit first before asking why God may not answer our prayers.

God constantly reminds us of one of the most important words, 'turning away' in various events in the Old Testament. The word 'turning' in Hebrew is called *shub*, which allows Israelites to turn away from idolatry, mystical super-powers, and sins. *Shub* also denotes the meaning of 'turning away from evil' and turning towards righteousness, towards a new path of the future.<sup>12</sup> The future of Israelites cannot be secured if they do not repent and turn away from their sins. They were aware that God may "shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command locusts to devour the land or send a plague among my people" (2 Chron. 7:13). Not only will heaven not be blessed, but the Israelites too will be left to their own desires. Therefore, the nation must be willing to "turn away" *from* the path of death and turn *towards* God (2. Chron. 7:17).

In 2 Chron. 7:14, *shub* also means "abandoning one direction completely and going the opposite way". It is interesting that there were so many 'U-turns' in the Israelites' life to return to God and again to embrace evil. Compromising with evil desires in the faithful life is completely discouraged. Therefore, God commands them to turn to Him and *Torah* "once for all." Although it is said for Israelites, such an interpretation

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<sup>11</sup> Skip Moen, "Hebrew Word Study", <https://www.skipmoen.com/2004/07/Humble/>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

reminds one of the Pakistani Government's scandals of making many promises to support the minorities and oppressed; but it takes the opposite direction to slow justice and its promises. Consequently, religious harmony loses its meaning critically, and that can clearly be seen in Assia Bibi's case who spent 9 years in jail without any acquittal of her crime.

It is only a humble spirit that can have a powerful experience of prayer with the main objective of seeing God's face. Such prayer seeks the mercy and favour of God for the removal of judgment. This intense desire is not possible if they do not return to God wholeheartedly, from whom they have revolted. Indeed, God has an everlasting reward for this true reconciliation.

## **Reward of Reconciliation**

All of the actions or practices mentioned in 2 Chronicles 7:14 are the key steps to receive reconciliation such as humbling, praying, seeking God, repenting, or an active and positive call to turn to God from sins as mentioned above. Before giving a broader conclusion for the contemporary context, first it must be noted that the author Ezra was reminding the restored audience, Jews, about God's covenant and blessing and judgment that can be rewarded according to their actions, which is the main emphasis in the entirety of Chronicles.<sup>13</sup>

Chronicles records the benefits for Israel to stay firm in its ongoing relationship with God after the Exile. A faithful person may receive great rewards, such as God will open His heaven to answer prayers, forgive their sins, and heal their land. God has listened and answered the prayers not only to bring Israelites back to the Promised Land but also to experience graceful reconciliation for the spiritual revival and harmony.

God's mercy of forgiving sins makes ways for healing (Ps. 103:3). Therefore, healing plays important role to bring the body, mind and spirit together to experience reconciliation, harmony and peace. However, in 2 Chronicles 7:14 the *healing* of the land stands for the spiritual revival of Israel.

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<sup>13</sup> Raymond B. Dillard, "Reward and Punishment in Chronicles: The Theology of Immediate Retribution," *Westminster Theological Journal* 46 (1984):164-72.

Is it applicable to the Christian faith and the nations in which they reside? Pakistani Christians were promised to be protected when Pakistan came into being in 1947. Historically, in Islam, it has been argued that anyone who believes in God, the Prophets of God, Gospel, final judgement and angels is a believer. There are different religious groups who practice a diversity of beliefs who are not believer in the Islamic teaching. First, Islam accepts Christians as 'People of the Book,' *ahl al-Kitab* because they believe in the elements of faith that have been mentioned above. Can Muslims and Christians as monotheistic religions live with respect and harmony in Pakistan? Many scholars have argued that Christians are respected as a People of the Book but it also has been argued that Christians are not People of the Book but the 'People of *Muahid*' meaning People who were *promised* to be protected in Pakistan after 1947. How Christians can bring peace and healing to the 'Land'? Positively, if this principle were faithful, the Apostle's Church outside Israel would have seen a healing of the land. However, the following religious communal violence started pushing minority groups to silence is an example that Christians can join their co-religionists in Islamic and other non-Christian religions but the claim of peace and harmony seems critical.<sup>14</sup>In such situations, how can the theological claim of harmony hold up under real-world practice, and how can 2 Chronicles 7:14 be applied to the contemporary contexts?

## Conclusion and Questions

In 2 Chronicles 7:14, humble spirit, prayer, repentance and forgiveness of sins, and reconciliation through the blood of Christ have also been regarded as part-and-parcel of the Christian spiritual life. The Israelites renewed the promise to a covenant focusing on their faithful status and life in Israel. The New Covenant in Christian faith that has been made through Jesus is not about certain land or nation, but for the global Church. The broader objective of this covenant is not about bringing blessings to certain nation, but sharing the mission of bringing the divine message of peace and harmony to the world.

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<sup>14</sup> Akbar S Ahmad, *Pakistan and Islamic Identity: The Search for Saladin* (London: Routledge, 1997), 166.

In Christianity, *suffering* equips Christians to become a channel of peace. When a faithful person passes through fiery trials, they may find that God becomes a source of “real help to offer...to help sanctify another person’s deepest distress.”<sup>15</sup> With this power, the context of 2 Chronicles 7:14 makes anyone able to share the reconciliation, peace and harmony. It also makes anyone to stand firm in the contexts where Christians face tribulations and suffering.

The Church is not meant to be losing its objective, which is to “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2). Within this virtue, the Church must humble itself to bring peace to the world amongst an unjust policies and intense situations. It has been discussed in this Bible Study that *kana* strongly signifies the complete submission to fulfil God’s will. However the example God has given is His Son Jesus’ sacrifice. The most appealing example of humility is Jesus’ “emptying himself”(Phil. 3:7). Along with various meanings, here the word “*kenosis*” becomes a term for the humiliation of the Son.<sup>16</sup> Such humility denounces the misuse of power and unites the spirit of human being. The one who has this faith, reflects humility, seeks God and becomes His vessels of reconciliation. 2 Chronicles 7:14 includes a national as well as global application that can be seen through its context and beyond.

## Questions for Discussion

1. Explore further the discussions and evaluations of our practical faith, and how theological claims of harmony hold up under real-world practice; with special reference to the application of 2 Chronicles 7:14 to contemporary contexts.
2. How and where we can use the characteristics mentioned in 2 Chronicles 7:14 to bring peace in the Church and in the non-Christian lands?

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<sup>15</sup> John Piper, (Editor), *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), 166.

<sup>16</sup> A. Thomas, “The Kenosis Question” *The Evangelical Quarterly* (1970): 142– 51.

# Jesus and Reconciliation in an Asian Context: Re-reading John 4:5-26 in a Reconciliation Perspective

Rev. Dr. Ngurliana\*

## Scripture

*“So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to this son Joseph. 6 Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon. 7 When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, “Will you give me a drink?” 8 (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food). 9 The Samaritan woman said to him, “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?” (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans). 10 Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.” 11 “Sir,” the woman said, “you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? 12 Are you greater than our father Jacob who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock?” 13 Jesus answered, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, 14 but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” 15 The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water so that I won’t get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water.” 16 He told her, “Go, call your husband and come back.” 17 “I have no husband,” she replied. Jesus said to her, “You are right when you say you have no husband. 18 The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.” 19 “Sir,” the woman said, “I can see that you are a prophet. 20 Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.” 21 “Woman,” Jesus replied, “believe me, a time is coming when you will worship*

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*the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. 22 You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. 23 Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in Truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks. 24 God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in the Spirit and in truth. 25 The woman said, "I know that Messiah" (called Christ) "is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us." 26 Then Jesus declared, "I, the one speaking to you—I am he." (John 4:5-26)*

## **Introduction**

While working in a college where most students were multi-ethnic, comprising over twenty racial or ethnic groups from different parts of the country, I used to interpret this text in a reconciliatory perspective with the aim of establishing harmonious living in a multi-ethnic community in the college in Mandalay, Myanmar. The theological vision focuses on Jesus as foundation of reconciliation, or Jesus as a reconciler that brings peace and harmony in Myanmar. It is in this light that this bible study, "Jesus and Reconciliation in an Asian Context" is prepared. The theological vision is to restore harmony out of the existing racism, religionism and sexism in contemporary Asian multi-ethnic and multi-faith contexts.

To achieve the goal, after this introduction; firstly, the historical background of the Jews and the Samaritans will be presented with the purposes of digging the historical roots of hatred between the Jews and the Gentiles and their theological differences. This will introduce the then-existing problems of racism, religionism and sexism. Then, to solve these problems, the research methodology of 'reconciliation approach' will be adopted. Next, in the light of the reconciliation approach, the biblical text on Jesus and the Samaritan Woman will be reinterpreted in the context of contemporary Asia, focusing on how Jesus can be seen as a reconciler of racism, religionism and sexism. Finally, conclusion will be drawn in a new perspective with points of discussion.

## Historical Background and Theological Critique

The encounter of Jesus with the Samaritan woman at the well has been interpreted by several biblical scholars, mostly from the perspective of sin-repentance-salvation oriented interpretation. Generally, most of the commentators describe how Jesus approached one of the villages in Samaria, how Jesus began a conversation with a Samaritan woman and how she did not understand 'living water,' and finally, how she understood it and was satisfied forever (John 4:10-15).

Historically, the Jews and the Samaritan people were of the same root. However, the hatred between them began from the time of BC and continued to AD, Jesus's time. It has a long history. The Samaritans were the product of the Assyrians' conquest of the northern kingdom in 722 BC. As the Assyrians' policy was to move conquered peoples into other countries, they had taken the Israelites into foreign captivity, they resettled people from other parts of their empire into the cities of the former northern kingdom, mainly in the region around Samaria (2 Kings 17:6-24). These settlers tried to avoid punishment from Israel's God, Yahweh, by combining the worship of Yahweh with their own religious practices (2 Kings 17:25-33). They also intermarried with the Israelite people left in the land, resulting in the emergence of a new racial group, the Samaritans. By the time the Jews had returned to Jerusalem (after Persia's conquest of Babylon in 539 BC), the Samaritans were well established in the land.

Religiously, when the Jews began to rebuild Jerusalem and its temple, the Samaritans offered to help, but the Jewish leaders rejected them. They saw the Samaritans as a people of mixed-blood and mixed religion, and feared they would introduce corrupt ideas into Israel's religion. The Samaritans reacted bitterly and opposed the Jews throughout their building program (Ezra 4:1-5; Neh.4:1-9). Although the Jews eventually completed the building program, some of the leading Samaritans, through cunning and deceit, gained influence in Jerusalem. They introduced corrupt religious and social practices, but within a few years were driven from the city in disgrace (Neh. 13:1-9,23-28).

These social, political and religious issues were really problematic in the context of Jews and Samaritans at the time of Jesus. To engage with the aim of searching solution to these problems, we have to search for a proper methodology.

## Reconciliation Approach

The historical, theological and sociological context is in dire need of reconciliation. Therefore, reconciliation approach will be the most relevant one. The word 'reconciliation' comes from the Latin word '*reconciliatio*'. It means the act of reconciling parties at variance, renewal of friendship after disagreement or enmity. In Scripture, the means by which sinners are reconciled and brought into a state of favour with God, after natural estrangement or enmity is the atonement expiation. It means adjustment or agreement of things that are seemingly opposite, different or inconsistent.

Biblically, the core concept of reconciliation is rooted in love. It is divine initiative and indicative as well, to make reconciliation not only between God and human beings, but also for the two rival groups or enemies; and still further between human beings and creation. The gospel of Jesus Christ not only reconciles humans to God but provides the basis for reconciliation between people who are natural enemies. In NT times, the natural enemies who heard the gospel were Jews and Gentiles. Jews, whose faith rested on the OT, comprised all of the earliest converts to faith in Christ (Acts 2:41; 4:4; 11:19). The Jewish Christians did not want to consider Gentiles as Christians until they first became Jewish converts (Acts 15:1). One of the triumphs of the NT church was recognizing that all humans stand on level ground before the Cross of Christ—equally needy, equally redeemed by His death, equally worthwhile in His body (Eph. 2:11–18).

Epistemologically, the Greek word for reconciliation is *katallage* (Rom. 5:11; 11:15; 2 Cor. 5:18, 19). It basically means 'change' or 'exchange' for a positive transformation. In the context of relationships between people, the term implies a change in attitude on the part of both individuals, a change from enmity to friendship. When it is used to describe the relationship existing between God and a person, the term implies the change of attitude on the part of both the person and God. The need to change the sinful ways of a human being is obvious; but some argue that no change is needed on the part of God. But inherent in the doctrine of justification is the changed attitude of God toward the sinner. God declares a person who was formerly His enemy to be righteous before Him. Reconciliation and friendship with God really forms the basis of all rational and true enjoyment and peaceful coexistence.

Logically, reconciliation has an interconnectedness of renewal and restoration. When reconciliation takes place, there is a simultaneous renewal in the Samaritan woman's faith and a restoration of peace with God and human beings as well. In the light of this methodology, the author will approach the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman in the Asian context.

## **Jesus and Reconciliation in the Contemporary Asian Context**

Asia is not free from racial or ethnic conflicts, religious fundamentalism and sexism. In fact, some Asian countries are deprived by the problems of racial discrimination, ethnic conflicts and strife, which became the root-causes of civil wars, migrant workers, internally displaced people, refugees, and even statelessness. Further, it is seen that religious fundamentalism is increasing and taking many lives and threatening not only Asia, but also the whole world. Still further, sexism (discrimination based on gender and sex) is also one of the realities in Asian countries. By re-interpreting the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman in the contemporary Asian context today, we can identify key theological hermeneutics for reconciling racism, religionism and sexism.

### **Jesus' method of reconciling racism**

Racism in the multi-ethnic Asian context has long been bringing hell in Asian soils. This hellish racism must be transformed by reconciliation so that we may move towards the harmony of creations. Reconciliation approach sees Jesus Christ breaking the existing racism between the Jews and the Samaritans to engage in reconciliation. In addition, Jesus can be seen encouraging a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy.<sup>2</sup> The story clearly manifests that the existing racism between the Jews and the Samaritan had been creating hell in that context. There was a mutual rejection. The Jews thought that the Samaritans were mixed-blood, impure and half-caste; and must not intermarry at all. Even the pots and pans, the utensils of the Samaritans were not to be used by the Jews (Jn. 4:9). It developed pollution and purity and mutual hatred and prejudices leading to separation. Even to go through the Samaritan village was counted as pollution and the Jews usually went

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<sup>2</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies- The Key Concepts* (New York: Routledge, 2007 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed), 118.

around the Samaritan village. Jesus, however, had no such bias,<sup>3</sup> and removed racism; thus reconciling the Jews and the Samaritans. The woman had introduced the villagers to Jesus as a Saviour whose blessings were not limited to selected races or nations (John 4:39-42). This can be applied to reconcile the existing racism which is the root of injustice not only in a certain country in Asia, but all over the world. It is a sin and sheer violation of human rights today.

In a multi-faith context in Asia, it is a scandal in the church of Jesus Christ to exclude minority groups based on ethnic identities and cultural issues. It is sinful to despise and exclude any other ethnic groups from various Christian congregations. One of the most powerful witnesses to the reality of the work of God in the modern world is interracial reconciliation (John 17:20–23). Hatred and suspicion cannot be easily solved by education and legislation. Only a renewal that changes the fearful human heart (2 Cor. 5:16–20) brings about reconciliation. Let the Church be the Church of Christ based on supernatural love of Jesus Christ (Eph. 2:19–22). Our hope is that as Jesus ends racial discrimination, ethnic conflicts and wars through reconciliation, so will the Churches in Asia engage in ending war refugees, migrants, human trafficking and statelessness through their ministry of reconciliation.

## **Jesus' way of reconciling religionism**

Today, religionism or religious fundamentalism has been creating hell in Asian countries.<sup>4</sup> Reconciliation approach sees that only through reconciliation between religions, the reign of God will be built here and now. Jesus breaks the existing religionism to engage in the ministry of reconciliation. By religionism it is meant that treating a person or group differently because of the particular beliefs which they hold about a religion. This includes instances when adherents of different religions, denominations or non-religions are treated unequally due to their particular beliefs; either before the law or in institutional settings, such as employment or housing, or any other discriminations.

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<sup>3</sup> Nelson NKJV Study Bible, Notes on Jn 4:4, p. 1663.

<sup>4</sup> Happening in Sri Lanka, on the day of Easter, 21<sup>st</sup> April 2019.

Religiously, the Jews saw that the Samaritans were heretics by spoiling the Pentateuch, creating their own Samaritan Pentateuch with several modifications and interpretations. In this context, the more they maintained superiority and marginalized the Samaritans, the more they became religiously orthodox. In return, the Samaritans also did the same. This is the root-cause of religionism that promoted mutual rejections and hatred between the Jews and the Samaritans.

Jesus introduces the true worship which can be practiced by every true believer in God to bring reconciliation in a multi-faith context. Jesus does not mention the superiority of the religion he professes, but discusses with the woman by going back to the roots and essence of true worship of God in spirit and in truth. Regarding a place of worship between the Jews and the Samaritans, Jesus goes beyond and reconciles the two with true worship of God—worship of God in spirit and truth. Religious fundamentalism and discrimination that appears as religionism, is removed and reconciled through interreligious dialogue. Making other religious adherents as co-pilgrims and building peaceful co-existence is Jesus' reconciliatory paradigm in that context.

## **Jesus' technique of reconciling sexism**

Sexism in diverse Asian social contexts has long been an oppressive tool to create a hell in Asia. Reconciliation approach sees that Jesus is a reconciler of the then-existing sexism in that very context. The Jews' attitudes towards women at the time of Jesus was totally degrading, and deprived of the dignity of women. A religious leader was not supposed to speak to women in the public squares. The more they oppressed women, the more religious they became. Oppression of women became part of their religiosities. It is a scandal of religious practices. Jesus, by approaching the Samaritan woman, goes beyond the Jewish traditional concepts and practices against the women and reconciles the existing sexism that separate men and women with transformation.

Today, sexism is generally understood as discrimination based on gender, especially discrimination against women, and the belief that one gender is superior to the other, especially that men are superior to women. In the light of Jesus' reconciliation, men and women are equal without any discrimination. Jesus treats the woman as his equal and even makes a theological dialogue with her. It can be seen that Jesus is not only treating

the woman as his equal, but also empowering the woman to be the witnessing disciple in the Samaritan village.

It is a great theological challenge for Churches in Asia to what extent the process of reconciliation is initiated towards the issues LGBTQ.<sup>5</sup>

## **Concluding remarks**

As Jesus Christ is the reconciler in the context of the Jews and the Samaritans, so is Jesus Christ to be the sole reconciliation of Asian people in contemporary Asia. In the process of reconciliation, divine indicative and our human imperative will be paradoxically complementary to each other. It is not only divine indicative but also our human imperative that leads towards the harmony of creation. Today, Asian societies and communities are not free from racism, ethnic conflicts, religious fundamentalism, and gender-based discriminations. It is in the midst of these critical situations that Christians are called to engage in the ministry of reconciliation. Reconciliation takes its roots in loving neighbours and strangers as ourselves.<sup>6</sup> When reconciliation takes place, simultaneously, renewal and restoration to God's will also take place. It is in Christ that we become the agents of reconciliation towards the harmony of creation in Asia today.

It is expected that Jesus' reconciliation, rooted in love, will hopefully lead towards the harmony of creation:

- by minimizing or ending racial discrimination, ethnic conflicts and civil wars, civil wars that will lessen or end refugees, migrants and statelessness in the context of Asia;
- by neutralizing, lessening or ending religious fundamentalism that has been depriving, devastating and taking the lives of many innocent people and threatening the Asian people; and,
- by sensitizing and ending discriminations based on sex, gender and sexual orientation, and empowering women.

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<sup>5</sup> Today, the Churches in Asian countries are under the threat of sexism in one way or another. Some Churches in different parts of the world are split due to the problems of same-sex marriage. This is the ongoing process of cultural changes. Taiwan becomes the first county that officially recognized Same-Sex Marriage in Asia.

<sup>6</sup> Dewi Hughes with Mathew Bennett, *God of the Poor: A Biblical Vision of God's Present Rule*, Milton Keynes: OM Publishing, 2006), 233.

Christians in Asia are called to engage in the ministry of reconciliation in our respective contexts by building the reign of God here and now on earth. Peace and reconciliation in and through the works of Christ was a divine initiative and divine indicative as well. This compulsion to follow the footsteps of Jesus Christ is our imperative today. As Jesus Christ is the model of reconciliation, so we are challenged to be the agents of reconciliation in the multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-sexism contexts in Asia.

### **Question for Discussion**

1. Will the model of Jesus' reconciliation be relevant of divine indicative in the context of Asia?
2. How can Christians be agents of reconciliation towards the harmony of creation between God-human; human-human; and human-creation in Asia?

# **The Unseen God and Visible Creation: A Perfect Harmony of Co-Existence**

R. Christopher Rajkumar\*

*“He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together”  
(Col. 1:17, NRSV)*

## **Scripture**

*“He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, 14 in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. 15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; 16 for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. 17 He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 18 He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. 19 For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 20 and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. 1 And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, 22 he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him— 23 provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven. I, Paul, became a servant of this gospel. (Colossians 1: 13 -23, NRSV)*

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## **Introduction**

'Environmental Pollution', 'Deforestation', 'Carbon Footprint', 'Global Warming', 'Green House Effect', 'Non-Biodegradable Waste', 'Dangers of Nuclear Plants', 'Climate Change/Challenge', and the like are all very familiar terms in our times. We talk about such phenomena and express our anxiety about the future of the earth but do nothing about it. There is an increasing frequency of natural disasters such as earthquakes, tsunamis, floods, cyclones, tornados, etc. but we seem to be passive spectators of these happenings on electronic media, without being roused to critically examine the signs of the times.

The Bible begins with a description of God's 'good' creation and concludes with yet another description of a new heaven and a new earth. As Christians we talk about the reign of God on earth and the fullness of life which Jesus came to facilitate, but we have not given sufficient attention to the responsibilities which the Gospel of Jesus Christ demands of the disciples. We need to recapture the biblical understanding of the human stewardship of God's creation.

At the same time, we have to realize that stewardship is to be carried out, not in some idyllic context, but in a situation where political and economic super-powers tend to be obsessed with their consumerist pleasures and self-centred privileges while promoting their own developmental projects, and are unmindful of justice issues. Injustice is done to the weak, the people on the margins, be it the poor, indigenous people, Dalits, women, or for that matter, even mother earth (with all her rivers, forests, mountains, birds, animals, etc.) who become victims of the ways of the rich and the powerful. They suffer from problems related to loss of (home-) land, livelihood, food security, health security, economic inflation, etc. Therefore, stewardship of earth has to be integrated with justice. Hence the term, 'eco-justice'.

The given theme and portion motivates us to see Christ the invisible God in creation, who is the reconciler; and the act of reconciliation is the image of God which we see in Christ who was before and over creation. Please reflect upon the following questions, and consider biblical, theological and ecological responses:

- Is it not a mind-blowing thought that, God visited our 'planet Earth' in human form named Jesus?
- Identify sections of the Bible that are used to refer to how God in Jesus relates to the World.
- Do you also agree with Lyn White's observation that, Christian theology is the cause for ecological catastrophe of today?
- If yes, how? If no, why? Identify the sections contributing to these arguments.

It is a common opinion that, the Judeo-Christian interpretation of the Christian Scriptures has caused the misuse of the God's creation as if humans are the 'crown of creation' and they could use and misuse the creation for the benefits and luxury of human existence. One could react to these schools of thought either by rejecting as non-sense or accepting as truth and reality.

## Background of the Text

Colossians 1:13-23 affirms Jesus as a '*reconciling-figure*'. Using very grand language, this passage conveys the full reality of who Jesus was. Everything was created '*through*' him and '*for*' him.

The reconciliation dimension in Colossians 1 comes in verse 23, which says that Jesus' message affects and has effects on every single creature on planet Earth. According to this passage:

- He sustains the entire universe, maintaining its existence. He is God's ultimate representative to the planet Earth, and the one to undo the effects of our fall from grace.
- So cosmos operates through one person – Jesus – and enables everything in the cosmos to relate back to God.
- The writer of Colossians brings parallels with the Old Testament or the Jewish Torah, in the ways that speak about wisdom.
- Colossians subverts and reinterprets these themes: Adam was made to be wise 'in' the image of God, but Jesus 'is' the image of God. In other words, created humans (the Adams and Eves) somehow represent God by reflecting the image of God, but Jesus is God, and the ultimate example of how to live, justly.

- But, Richard Bauckham in his book, *The Bible and Ecology*, explains Jesus is our fellow creature; not just our ruler, but the one who holds everything together.
- This brings a shift in perceptions towards positioning ourselves as one kind of creature, and gives the Christians unique responsibility of contributing towards the reconciliation through dialogue on science, faith and ecology.

## Theological Themes<sup>2</sup>

### (1) *Christ, the invisible/unseen image of God in Creation*

Verse 15 tells us that God's 'beloved Son' (v. 13) is the 'image' of the unseen or invisible God in creation.

- An image, of course, is a visual representation, the copy of an original.
- The very fact of using a word such as 'image' suggests necessarily that there is a difference in identity between the copy and the original.
- When one looks in the mirror, one sees an 'image' of the self. The person does not consider the mirror-image to be another person 'behind the glass', rather the self who is 'in front of the glass'.
- The word 'image' establishes, by its very meaning, that Christ is not God because the image is not the same as the original, and in this case, the original is God.
- The image of God is not the physical image but the attributes (character) of God. Here, Christ is seen as a reconciler which is one of the images (attributes) of God the creator.

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<sup>2</sup> Adapted from William Wachtel's essay on '*Colossians 1:15-20 – Preexistence or Preeminence?*' Available at: [http://covenanthouseone.org/theological-conferences/2004/colossians-1-15-20-preexistence-or-preeminence#\\_ftn1](http://covenanthouseone.org/theological-conferences/2004/colossians-1-15-20-preexistence-or-preeminence#_ftn1)

## (2) *Christ the First Born*<sup>3</sup>

Verse 15 continues by calling Christ the Firstborn of ‘every creature’ or ‘all creation’ (NIV, NASB).

- If ‘first’ in the word ‘firstborn’ means only precedence in time, if ‘creation’ means the original creation of Genesis 1, then the case for Christ’s personal pre-existence must stand.
- The Arians and Athanasians would have to be right in their claim that Christ existed as a person before his birth and that this person in fact abandoned his previous mode of existence in order to become a human being.
- Let us begin by examining the word translated as ‘firstborn’ - *prototokos*. This word is used a number of times in Scripture, often to designate the child born first in a family. When Esau came to his father Isaac to receive the blessing that was due to him, he pleaded the fact that he was Isaac’s firstborn — his *prototokos* (Gen. 27:32 LXX). Jacob, the second born son, had already deceived his father and received the blessing intended for Esau the first born.
- The custom of conferring special privileges or a major inheritance on the firstborn son is not only seen in the Bible, but also in the later laws of primogeniture in most societies, awarding the family inheritance to the eldest son with responsibility of accompanying the siblings till the end.
- So here, Christ the firstborn has a responsibility as a reconciler who accompanies the earth communities including human communities.

## (3) *Christ Over and Before All Creatures*<sup>4</sup>

Verse 17 declares that Christ is ‘before all things’ — *pro panton*. This phrase has been seized upon as proof of his personal pre-existence.

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<sup>3</sup> William Wachtel, *Colossians 1:15-20 – Preexistence or Preeminence?*  
Available at: [http://covenanthouseone.org/theological-conferences/2004/colossians-1-15-20-preexistence-or-preeminence#\\_ftn1](http://covenanthouseone.org/theological-conferences/2004/colossians-1-15-20-preexistence-or-preeminence#_ftn1)

<sup>4</sup> William Wachtel, *Colossians 1:15-20 – Preexistence or Preeminence?*  
Available at: [http://covenanthouseone.org/theological-conferences/2004/colossians-1-15-20-preexistence-or-preeminence#\\_ftn1](http://covenanthouseone.org/theological-conferences/2004/colossians-1-15-20-preexistence-or-preeminence#_ftn1)

But care must be taken to notice that the verb here is in the present tense — ‘is’ — not ‘was’! Paul does not tell us that Christ ‘was’ before all things, evidence for pre-existence. But what does ‘before’ mean?

The Greek word used here — *pro* — has three common uses: before, in the sense of place- ‘in front of’; before, in the sense of time- ‘prior to’; and before, in the sense of pre-eminence, rank, and advantage. The latter usage is seen in 1 Peter 4:8 — *pro panton*, ‘before all things’ or ‘above all things’ - ‘most important of all’. Here, *pro* has nothing to do with time or place, but rather stresses how Christian love is pre-eminent above all other virtues. James 5:12 provides another example of the same usage and of the phrase *pro panton*.

- This is underscored by the last statement of the next verse, describing him as having, in everything, ‘the pre-eminence’, ‘the supremacy’, ‘the first place’. To emphasize this pre-eminence even more, Paul adds the personal pronoun *autos* to the verb *proteuo*, meaning that HE, Christ himself, is being given first place in all God’s universe!
- One suggestive definition is ‘reconcile’. All things reconcile in Christ and provide a reconcile meaning to the universe.
- He is the reason for it all, because he is God’s only-begotten Son, the perfect image of the Creator! Another definition is ‘to have one’s proper place’. All things in the universe have their own proper place, designed by the Creator, YHWH, to be in perfect relationship and harmony with “the Son whom God loves” (v.13).
- Christ’s headship over the church is a frequent theme in Paul’s writings. Verse 18 declares that headship, and goes on to call him *arche*, ‘beginning’.
- This word also means ‘ruler, authority’ who plays a role of reconciler. It gives further emphasis to Paul’s theme of Christ’s pre-eminence and supreme authority under God. In that now conferred authority, all things begin and end in Christ.

#### (4) *Christ is the Fullness of God*<sup>5</sup>

“God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him” (v. 19). The past tense here, combined with the immediate mention of Christ’s reconciling work in his death on the cross (v.20), seems to indicate that Paul has in mind the period of Christ’s mortal lifetime.

- It was then that Christ was already filled with God’s fullness, just as believers are called upon to seek that fullness for their own lives today (Eph. 3:19). In Christ’s case, however, there was no limit to the Spirit working in him — he was totally filled with God’s Spirit and power throughout his earthly ministry.
- “In Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form.” Since his resurrection to bodily immortality and his being granted ‘all authority in heaven and earth’, Christ is exalted by his Father to the highest place in the universe, next to God himself, and is given the highest name (Phil. 2:9).
- He can be described, therefore, as possessing the fullness of the Deity. How could his pre-eminence be emphasized more powerfully than this? But all of this is short-circuited and spoiled by Trinitarian notions and the teaching of Christ’s personal pre-existence!
- If those ideas were true, he already possessed — in person — total pre-eminence long before he was born, before he had been obedient unto death. But, as Paul insists, it was this very obedience — and the humility from which it sprang — that was the reason for, and the cause of, that exaltation and that pre-eminence!

### Questions for Discussion

1. Can we see ecological catastrophe as death which is natural? According to this interpretation, death needs no longer be seen as negative, but a necessary and natural stage in the existence of all things.  
In fact, Jesus destroying or nullifying death through his resurrection.
2. What could be done in terms of renewing and restoring creation?
3. What could the reconciliation process be, to restore creation?

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<sup>5</sup> William Wachtel, *Colossians 1:15-20 – Preexistence or Preeminence?*  
Available at: [http://covenanthouseone.org/theological-conferences/2004/colossians-1-15-20-preexistence-or-preeminence#\\_ftn1](http://covenanthouseone.org/theological-conferences/2004/colossians-1-15-20-preexistence-or-preeminence#_ftn1)

# Heading to Reconciliation, Restoration, and Renewal of Creation

Rev. Dr. Retnowati Wiranto\*<sup>1</sup>

## Scripture

*“...and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised. 16 From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. 17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. 18 All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; 19 that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting us to the message of reconciliation. 20 Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.” (2 Corinthians 5:15-20)*

## Introduction

2 Corinthians 5:15-20 was a letter that was written by Apostle Paul when he was in Macedonia in which it was sent to the congregation in Corinthians. This letter was written because there were congregation members who doubted the apostolicity of Paul. They doubted him because of his track records and backgrounds as one who had, in the past, really hated Christ and His disciples. Paul had persecuted, hated, and killed the disciples of Christ. In his journey to Damascus, he pursued followers of Christ and would have killed them, but now it was over, hatred turned into love and friendship because Paul's life was renewed to be a true follower of Christ. Have we, as the disciples of Christ and as a church, been renewed

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by Christ? If yes, what are the things that we have produced, what are the creations that we have shared for our fellows and the world?

## **Changes in Paul's Life**

Paul's life changes occurred because he had a personal relationship with God in Christ, which was a new relationship that had the power to fight sin. *"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (v.17).* The new human is the human who can control his life, ego, mind, and words that consistently lead to the wisdom and righteousness of God. Whatever is done leads to the way God works, and not to the will and desire of the human itself. *Physically, Paul was the same person; but his character, attitude, behaviour, and actions had undergone renewal. Now, Paul had a new heart, a heart that was full of mercy, forgiveness, and love.* This is what Jesus meant of a new-born (John 3:3) - that a person should be reborn to be able to see the Kingdom of God.

Paul said that to be a new human, one cannot rely on human effort alone, as it is impossible for humans to do good things by themselves. Humans may experience changes in attitude, character, and behaviour only when God Himself is willing to do that. The question is, do we want to open ourselves so God may work through our lives? This is God's work in Christ for the people who believe in Him. Paul's life experienced a transformation because God was willing to change Paul. Before he met Christ, Paul had done many works which were, according to him, useful and correct; pursuing and persecuting the Christians. After he met Christ, he realized that all of his effort to persecute Christians was useless. His judgement on Christ and His followers was merely a human thought with limited sense and mind. According to his opinion, persecuting and fighting Christ and His followers was a truth and a necessity. That was a limited and narrow human thought. However, his encounter with Christ in Damascus had opened and changed his mind and all his life. What he thought previously as the truth then was considered waste and useless. Paul's life experiences which were useless were told to the people of Macedonia: "Now the new has come and the past has gone". Paul asserted that as a 'new creation' he was called, along with Christ's fellow servants, church, and everyone who believes in Him, to do *ministries of Reconciliation*. God wants everyone who has reconciled with Christ to realise their call as the servant of *the ministries of Reconciliation*; leaving the old way of life and starting a real

new life with fellow humanbeings and all creations. This is along with what God has done in Israel's life that is stated in Joshua 5:9-12. After Israel entered the land of Canaan, they started a new life and learned to leave their past ways of life, when they were both in Egypt and during their journey in the desert. They could enjoy their meal; and even though they did not eat manna anymore, they ate Canaan's land crops.

## **Relationship with Christ affects the Relationship between Fellow Humans**

The unlimited love of God entered Paul's life and restored the relationship between Paul and his fellow humans. In a new relationship with Christ, Paul's life was free from all hatred and bondage of sins. Pursuing a hateful relationship with his fellow humans was now rendered futile. His meeting with Christ had freed him from that hatred. A Christian can't say that he loves Christ when he hates his brother that he can see. When Paul experienced the renewal of life because of Christ, his new life was then impactful to others' lives. His fellow humans also received blessings and kindness of God through Paul's life. As Paul's perspective of Christ changed, so his perspective on human fellows also changed. He was a Christian-hater but he was a lover then; those he once persecuted, he now blessed. Paul testified: "Life is a change from the old to the new one." Paul's testimony did not lead to physical change but it led to the change of character, mind, and way of life, behaviour, and daily actions. *He had left his attitude of life in hating others.* This new way of life had changed his perspective on others. Others were no longer "the other persons" in relation to subject-object, employee-employer, and master-servant in the context of conventional-transactional. A transformative relationship with the other fellows becomes the standard of a meaningful life.

## **Christian people and the Church do not live for themselves**

In verse 14, Paul said that every believer had died with Christ and no longer lives for himself. The life of an individual believer and also the collective church is no longer for pursuing worldly vanity. Adorning oneself, enlarging and enriching internal areas, being busy with own business does not mean that it is unnecessary, but only that it is futile. The human's limited mind only focuses on the accumulation of the material and physical,

but God's wisdom teaches us that worldly pleasures are futile. The new way of life changes minds, attitudes, mind-sets, and perspectives on everything. The point is not to pursue what we get and produce, or to the products that we have made, but why and how we do that for our fellows and the world. Motivation and purpose are more important than the result itself. This is a new way of life that is meant by Paul. Paul said that the 'death' of a believer is the death of natural sin that has been crucified together with Christ. They are buried with Him, and similar to Him that has been raised up by God, we are also raised to 'live in new life' (Romans 6:4). A *new person* who has been raised up is what Paul discussed in Corinthian 5:17 as '*new creation*', the past has gone and the new is coming. The past refers to everything in the past nature, they were vanity, the joy of sinning, reliance on personal effort and opinion, our past habits and lust. But now the new has come. Things that we maintained, such as love to ourselves, self-justification, self-promotion, etc. now have been crucified as futility. As the new creation then, life is no longer centred on one's ego, group, or religion; but it leads to Christ.

The characteristic of Christian people and church that have been renewed is the presence of life changes. God creates human with a purpose to make them able to give contributions to all creations through their life, 'to *empower* and to *conquer all creations*', not only to utilize for profit or exploit natural resources. The Christians and the church are called for a great mission, they are sent to the world as God's representative "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (John 20:21b).

## **The New Way of life of Christian people and the Church**

I want to share my experience as a Christian who lives in Indonesia. I am used to living with people who are different from me, either in race, ethnicity, culture, and religion. I am fully aware that the difference in race, religion, culture, language, and ethnicity are blessings from God for Indonesia, and we have to be grateful for that and take a good care of them; although it is not easy. In our daily life, when we speak carelessly, it may create problems in our relationship with others. There are times when we have friction, conflict, and hostility with other people because of those differences; however it should be solved and ended. When we can't solve and end it, we will have a hostile and fragmented life as a nation. In this case, we need modesty and a 'different' way of life. Therefore, as Christians who live in Indonesia, we have to learn how to accept other

people with new mind-sets and perspectives in Christ. Christ teaches us how to respect, to accept, and to live in peace with our fellow humans without looking at their religion, ethnicity, nation, culture, social status, etc. This way of life of Christians and the church is the thing that 'differentiates' them from the other people so that their presence may influence the Indonesian people in general. If Christian life cannot influence other fellow humans, then it will be useless. This way of life is the one that Paul meant as a new way of life.

I consider this new life-call a challenge and also a chance. In every challenge there is a chance, the challenges that occur in the middle of Indonesian plural society becomes a chance for me to testify, to practice my recognition in Christ for my fellows in this nation who have different beliefs from me. It needs courage, but it is not because we feel strong and great, but because (I borrow Paul's term), "*it is no longer me who is alive but Christ who lives in me*", and so my life should be meaningful for others. To *salt* and to *lighten* the world should not be excessive (because we feel strong and great) so that it does not become another stumbling block. Just like salt, if it is too much, it will ruin the taste of the food. And for a lamp, if it is too bright, it will be blinding and people finally will abandon it. Therefore, the important thing is the presence of the church and Christian people may give *meaning* for the environment.

## **Closing and Reflection**

The new soul and spirit are signed with a life that favours divine things. Purpose, feeling, desire, and understanding for everything are focused for many people, to provide a better life. Perhaps, for all this time we have served and produced works for others, but why is it plain without any specialities? However, when our life has been renewed, our services and works for others seem to be different and meaningful. There is beauty in serving that we may have never felt before. There is motivation that is based on sincere love for the people we serve, although we may never know them. There is a new feeling for the others, there is sincere acceptance of people who had once hurt us, there is a warm relationship, and there is no suspicion. We aren't afraid to testify because there is no fear in love. This new experience reminds us that our surrounding environment has changed; as if we live in a new world, and the sky and the earth are full of new things. We have 'left' the old humans and their

behaviour (Colossians 3:9) and it has worn 'new human who has been created according to God's will in real truth and holiness' (Ephesians 4:24).

CATS-IX which is held at this moment takes us to renew our commitment to be the ministry of Reconciliation; to have willingness to build a new relationship with all people, to make reconciliation, to make peace and to be friends with our fellow humans and the earth along with its contents in order to realize God's mission in each capacity. Bible Study theme 'Heading to Reconciliation, Restoration, and Renewal on Human Fellows and Nature' takes us as a person or a church in our own place to open ourselves for friendship with our fellows. The church may present in the world by performing the face of a 'mother' who always wants to take care, nurture, raise, and love everyone, just as characteristics of a mother. The church must be willing to forget itself for a better life for others.

## **Questions for Discussion**

1. In every challenge, there are chances, and in every chance, there are challenges; how does the church respond to the challenges and chances that occur in order to answer the great mission, 'the ministry of Reconciliation'?
2. Is the renewal of life given to us *impactful* for the people around us? Please share your experience with the other participants of CATS-IX.

# Christ as the Reconciler of the Cosmos

Rev. Dr. Binsar J. Pakpahan\*

## Scripture

*“The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. 16 For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. 17 He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 18 And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. 19 For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, 20 and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.” (Colossians 1:15-20)*

## Introduction: Our Ecological Concern

Our earth is in crisis. We are now facing substantial environmental problems globally: air pollution, destruction of tropical forests, rampant extinction of animals and plants, clean water crises, global warming, new diseases as a result of human modification of nature, and much more. No country in the world is safe from environmental threats of varying intensity. Fighting climate change is a global effort of not only politicians or the state in the form of international agreements such as Kyoto Protocol (2005), the European Union Emissions Trading Scheme (2005), Asia-Pacific Partnership on Clean Development and Climate, etc., but also individuals and local communities. In a publication on the political theory of climate change, Steve Vanderheiden rightly states,

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“Since climate change is a fully global environmental problem, it defies non-global policy responses and necessitates international cooperation in a manner, unlike other environmental issues that can be addressed by the actions of a limited number of states or other actors. Moreover, its global nature defies conventional assumptions about state sovereignty and the geographically-bounded nature of the principles of justice.”<sup>3</sup>

Because of the nature of climate change that affects us all, we have to deal with the issue collectively. The United Nations report earlier this year stated that the world has only until 2030 to drastically reduce carbon emission, or we would be in an irreversibly warmer earth. Asia especially faces severe environmental challenges that we need to address before 2030; namely, water management, air pollution, food security, and regional stability.<sup>4</sup> These problems are made more complicated with urban growth and migration, deforestation, overfishing, water mismanagement, transnational plantations, corruption, and the lack of political will to tackle any of these issues.<sup>5</sup> The high level of corruption is a critical issue in addressing climate change in Asia.

There have been discussions on the role of religion in contributing to global warming. A theological conception that considers humans as the noblest creation among others (anthropocentric view) has supported human’s dominance and mastery over nature. The anthropocentric view in Genesis 1:28, for example, has given humans the legitimacy to rule over the earth and other creatures.

However, Asians have a more harmonious way of looking at nature. We are not the masters of the world; we are merely a part of it, among other creatures. How do you find a different approach to human’s role on earth that does not focus on humans as the ‘master’; instead, as part of nature itself? Therefore, amidst our ecological concerns and the positive growing numbers of theological explorations on eco-theology and economy,

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<sup>3</sup> Vanderheiden (2008), xiv.

<sup>4</sup> Howes and Wyrwoll (2012).

<sup>5</sup> Chandrappa, Gupta, &Kulshrestha (2011), p.112.

we will look at how Christ's image in Colossians 1:15-20 can contribute to the ongoing discussions of the harmony of creation.

## **Context**

Colossae was a city located on the Lycus river in Asia Minor (now, Turkey), and at the main road from Ephesus and Sardis to Euphrates. It was a commercial city with its wool industry. Colossae later lost its importance due to competition, and in several years before Paul, was relegated to a small town. By the time Paul wrote to the congregation there, the city was already in decline. Culturally, Colossae had Phrygian, Greek, and Jewish settlers. It was also hit by a couple of earthquakes (17 and 60 CE), and had completely vanished after 400 CE. The congregation was not a result of Paul's direct ministry, and Paul never reached Colossae. The ministry reached Colossae through Epaphras (Col. 1:7, 4:12); and Philemon, Apphia, and Archippus were in the church as well (Phil. 1:2). The authorship of the letter to the Colossians has not been clearly established; and could be attributed either to Paul himself during his home-imprisonment in Rome, or perhaps to one of his disciples.

The content of the letter is about the supremacy of Jesus' place as the firstborn of all creation (1:15-18); and in Christ we are reconciled with God (1:21-23); to see the fullness of God's saving act (1:24-27), that everyone should hear about the good news (1:28-29); so that all will be united in love, and receive the fullness of life in Christ.

We also read about the false teachings in the congregation that occupied them in discussing what it meant to be Christ's disciples. The writer suggested two important factors to remember; that first, as disciples, Christ had redeemed and reconciled us with God, and second, because of such special status, all other legal and formal conditions of becoming believers in Christ were deemed irrelevant as long as one was rooted and built with Christ as the foundation (2:7). One did not become a believer on the grounds of following the Law (2:16) or attending rituals (2:18). Christ's action of salvation did not depend on human-made rules and conditions. Therefore, the writer suggested that Christians were to leave the will of the flesh (3:5). In the end, Christ will renew all, and one would receive a new status as God's chosen ones. There will be no other identity, "In that renewal, there is no longer Greek nor Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!" (3:11). One

was to do everything in one's lives in the name of Christ while giving thanks to God (3:17). It is a profound conviction that in Christ, one will be reconciled with God, renewed, and receive a new status, and urged to do everything.

## Theological Reflection

Vv.15-20 are often used in liturgy to celebrate Jesus as creator and reconciler of the universe. The importance of Christ's saving act reaches not only humans but also all creation. At the time that it was written, 'all creation' meant non-Jews; however, it can also be interpreted as how Christ is the reconciler of all creatures.

In v.15, Jesus was mentioned as the 'image (*eikon*) of the invisible God', and the 'first-born' (*prototokos*) of all creation. The two terms are closely connected. 'First-born' does not imply 'the first one to exist', but refers to a position of preference and predominance. Barth and Blanke<sup>6</sup> suggested translating the word '*eikon*' into 'manifestation', 'embodiment', or 'representation'. Christ's position is not compared to God's being, rather it is a position that deems Christ as the ultimate towards all creation. The title given here is to show the universality of Christ the Messiah. In Christ, all things (*ta panta*) in heaven and on earth (the whole *cosmos* in Greek cosmology) were created (v.16). There is no power on earth or anywhere in the cosmos that is out of Christ's supremacy. It is because of these capabilities that we do not have to worry about how we should act to reach God, because there is no other power that could help us compared to Christ's reconciling ability.

The statement in v.17 indicates that Christ pre-exists all others, he holds and sustains the creation together. In v.18, the writer once again reiterates Christ's central position as the head of the church, thus rejecting the notion that the congregation should do something first (in terms of obeying the Law), before they could become Christ's disciple; or that a person could claim to be the 'head' of the church. We see that the cosmological position in previous verses has shifted to the church (1 Cor. 12). There are three meaning that we can derive from the sentence that Christ is the head of the church: that the head protects the body, that it provides for the body, and that it guarantees the growth of the body.

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<sup>6</sup> Barth and Blanke (1994), p.195.

The universal Christology that the writer explained could bring us into the understanding of universal reconciliation of all creation. The reconciliation is not only between God and God's people, but also the church and the society, as well as humans and all of creation. With the understanding that Christ is the ultimate reconciler, we understand this sentence,

*“For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 20 and through him, God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.”  
(Colossians 1:19-20)*

Christ offers hope and reconciliation to the people who were once in the state of hostility, thinking and doing evil deeds (Col. 1:21); by repenting and shifting their evil deeds, to be reconciled. The gospel does not stop at the reconciliation among God and God's people, it continues to the cosmos, and that is why the gospel is to be proclaimed to all creatures (Col. 1:23b). When Christ gave his body as the ultimate sacrifice, we do not have to offer another body for our own atonement. Christ's sacrificial act brought freedom and liberation to all creatures.

## **Conclusion**

As a place of multicultural identities, Asia, Australia, and the Pacific are challenged to see that we are part of the cosmos where Christ is the first-born, the one with the supremacy to reconcile every creature. When we realise that Christ is the head, we must also acknowledge that we are not part of the cosmos body, and thus should not harm each other. The body of Christ is not only the church but the whole creation. And because of that, we should not be detrimental for others, for doing so would imply us hurting our own body, which is the body of Christ. Harmony between the members of the body should be the goal of every member of this cosmic body.

With a new understanding of the role of Christ as the reconciler, we can now have a complete understanding that humans are *not* the ultimate. Humans are simply members of the body, together with all of creation, and with Christ as our head. Our task would be to take care of each other and grow together as members of the body of Christ.

## **Questions for Discussion**

1. What is your opinion on the idea that humans and other creations are part of the creation with Christ as the head, instead of humans as the 'stewards' of the earth?
2. What image do you have in your local stories that are similar to the message that Christ is the head of the cosmos, and that we have to live in harmony with other creatures as members of the same body?



**Subtheme II:**

**Renewal**

*Towards the Fullness of Life*

# **A Christian Commitment to the Well-being of People**

Rev. Dr. Pervaiz Sultan\*

## **Scripture**

*“He called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness.”  
(Matthew 10:1)*

## **Introduction**

### *Biblical*

Renewal is a mission and ministry paradigm of the Church for renewed views of the kingdom of God and righteousness to address situations across the world. Chapter 10 of St. Matthew’s Gospel is a strategic understanding of the calling of Jesus to follow his way as an itinerant preacher of a sacrificial commitment of holism towards the fullness of life.

Renewal is to do with restoration to the original for a greater blessing. It is a Scriptural discipline. “He (God) gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength.”(Isaiah 40:30-31).This affirmative exhortation of Prophet Isaiah carries great encouragement for those who face frustration and are at the verge of losing their purpose of life.

The major components of the verse under study are the driving out of evil spirits and the healing of all kinds of diseases and sicknesses (weaknesses). This has a clear Hebrew thought of looking to God as he is the one who forgives all sins, heals all diseases, redeems life from the pit, and crowns with love and compassion; he is the one who satisfies the desires with good things and renews the youth like that of the eagle. (Psalms 103:3-5). The Psalmist continues with the broader themes of

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renewal subscribing to the Lord God that God works righteousness and justice for the oppressed(v6).

### ***Jesus' example***

The Lord was inviting the disciples to adopt a 'see and do' pattern, following what he had done, and thus set an example for them. Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people (Matt. 4:23). This comes with reference to Prophet Isaiah who is quoted here saying, "He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases" (Matt. 8:17).

The narration of Jesus' holistic ministry of teaching, preaching and healing is continued in Matthew 9:35-36, "Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." Jesus' asking his disciples to ask the owner of the harvest to send more workers (9:37) puts the situation as the dawn of the end time (*eschaton*); a manifestation of Jesus' inaugurating the end time. His ministry was proof of that, and the Church appears as the end-time community. With this background, Chapter 10 opens with a mention of Jesus' authority and sending of his disciples to drive out demons and heal every disease and sickness - a representation of Christ's victory over any evil that resists the kingdom of God.

People accepted Jesus' authority in his teaching (Matt. 7:28-29), he himself declared that he; the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins(Math 9:6). The healing of the crippled person at the pond of Bethesda was the climax of Jesus' commitment to the well-being of people (John 5:1-11).

### ***Apostolic Ministry***

The Apostolic commitment and activities in helping destitute people to stand on their feet is visible from Saints Peter's and John's healing of the crippled man (Acts 3:16). St. Paul was saying exactly the same when he referred to the Creation groaning in birth pains looking towards the sons and daughters of the kingdom to appear to show solidarity with the suffering humanity (Romans 8:22-23).

## ***Ecumenical Commitment***

'Renewal' as a theme of participation has been a priority in ecumenical circles. Willem A. VisserHooft, the first General Secretary of the WCC says, "Christians have more reasons than anyone else to be advocates of humanity because God is on that side and his Son died for it."

At the Fourth Assembly of the WCC (Uppsala 1968), Mission as Humanization was the dominant theology of mission.<sup>2</sup> The final report from the Uppsala study section, as adopted by the assembly, promoted new humanity in Christ as the goal of mission, linking evangelism to that theme. This puts the ecumenical hermeneutic of mission and ministry on biblical theological lines as this is exactly what we see in our Lord's commitments as head of humanity when he said, 'I have come so that they may have life, life in fullness.' (John 10:10)

## **Theological reflection**

We note in Matthew 10 that Jesus was sending his disciples to minister to the lost sheep of Israel to renew the situation. This, of course, was the start of a bigger ministry, commonly known as the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20), yet to be handed over when Jesus promised his disciples of his unending presence with them as a proof of his backing of a ministry of learning and obedience to the kingdom values which he taught them.

This comes with Jesus' authority (*exousia*) and his own involvement in teaching, preaching and healing. This raises the challenge of solidarity with the sick and suffering humanity everywhere, while seriously appreciating that God in Christ comforted the church so that she may be able to comfort others (2 Cor. 1:3-4).

The Old Testament theme, 'Yahweh is helper-healer/restorer' based on Psalms 23 and other texts, supports the well-being of all people. God shares his fullness with humans as Shepherd. The fullness of the earth belongs to God (Psalms 24:1). The Old Testament scholars have termed it Yahweh's divine capacity. It includes restoring, rehabilitation, and repairing the damage caused by Yahweh himself or by other forces. The metaphor of healing has a public dimension in which Yahweh can restore the well-being

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas, Norman, "Readings in World Mission", 1995, London, SPCK.

of a wounded city or people (Psalm 60:2, Hosea 14:4, 2 Chronicles 7:14). Brueggemann<sup>3</sup> with reference to Jeremiah 8:22 says that Yahweh feels hurt when people are not healed. Jewish scholars have been using a term *Tiqqun Olam*– ‘mend (heal) the world’– to renew from human perspective with God.<sup>4</sup>

All that Yahweh felt, initiated and accomplished as per his attributes is seen in Jesus’ authority over diseases, natural and evil forces. The New Testament writers put up that in the context of the first century, which has implications for us today in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks<sup>5</sup> says, “Equally characteristic of the rabbinic literature is the refusal on the part of the sages to see the sufferings and injustices of the world as given, unchangeable, part of the divine will.” This challenges fatalism backed by religious views that whatever God has appointed would come on people anyway.

Luke 10 is a relevant text where Jesus is mentioned for sending off 72 disciples ahead of him to the towns where he was about to go. This shows Jesus’ confidence in them to carry out his ministry. They returned with the joyful news that the demons submitted to the name of Jesus, there Jesus replied to them, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy.” Casting out demons is Christ’s imperative of the Kingdom to combat evil’s resistance to the evangel. He still had disciples’ attention to a higher state of affairs saying, “However do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven” (Luke 10:20). This refers to the divine approval of a commitment to transform societies to uphold human dignity, worth and integrity.

## **Implication**

As Matthew 10 is a strategic chapter of mission and ministry among one’s immediate community, it is important to note cultural and religious parallels. In Pakistan, we have concepts of renewal, reformulation,

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<sup>3</sup> Brueggemann, Walter, “Theology of the Old Testament- Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy” 1997, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, pp.252-255.

<sup>4</sup> Emil Fackenheim, *To Mend the World: Foundation of Post-Holocaust Thought*, New York: Schocken Books, 1989 also see Sacks: 2005:77-79.

<sup>5</sup> Sacks, Jonathan, “To Heal a Fractured World- The Ethics of Responsibility”, 2005, London, Continuum, p.80.

restoration and rehabilitation for better human conditions. *Tajdeed* is renewal in the political, and *Islah* in ethical areas, whereas *ijtihad* implies reformulation and is the socio-religious commitment for a progressive hermeneutics of the Scripture. *HaqooqUllah* are God's rights and *Haqooqulabad* is the rights of other humans on a believer as a *farz*, religious duty. Christians have upheld the great commandment of 'loving one another' and 'loving thy neighbour as thyself'.

Despite such fine socio-religious aspirations, oppression of the poor, women, religious minorities and corruption continues at different levels. Famous Pakistani philanthropist Abdul Sittar Edhi, saw society divided into *zalim* and *mazloom*, exploiter and the exploited. This is proven from the poor conditions of the *kammis* (the farm labourers in the Punjab), *haris* (the bonded labourers of Sindh), and street sweepers from Christian and Hindu *bustis* (ghettos all over Pakistan), where, despite prohibition on religious and Constitutional bases, discrimination still persists at multiple levels.

The crux of the issue of our study is to follow the Lord Jesus' words and example for the renewal of human conditions on earth for the well-being of all people. 1960s was the decade of "green revolution" which resulted in capital development in Pakistan as well. Despite great economic development, the level of social development of people did not increase. The benefits of development need to filter down to everyone, and not just get accumulated in a few hands.

A Muslim as a *mureed*, a follower, follows a *murshed* - religious *pir*, or an elder. A Hindu will listen to the 'guru' - a generic term now used for a mentor. As followers of Christ we have an obligation to obey him in our calling to renew human conditions for the kingdom of God.

## **Conclusion**

Renewal is not restricted to an exclusive physical healing and spiritual use of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, but rather, the church has a greater calling to renew the earth and all that is on it. It is not patchy engagements of personal ministries of individuals but an ongoing commitment of solidarity by the church with the destitute of different kinds, whether they are physically sick, demon possessed, or politically victimized, as our study's focus was. All that Jesus did, there was no hint of reluctance

in it, and rather, he did all things joyfully. The Kingdom's values of compassion and care will lead us to the protection of rights at different levels, for those there are biblical warrants; and Matthew Chapter 10 is one among them.

## **Questions for Discussion**

1. How can we engage with our communities in obedience to our calling as Christian believers for the well-being of all people, and thus, renewing the situations to the provision of fullness of life?
2. How can we clear the hindrances in the way of that commitment?

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# Healing brings Renewal and Life

Rev. Dr. Jeaneth H. Faller\*

## Scripture

*“And they came to Bethsaida and they brought a blind man to Jesus and implored Him to touch him. 23 Taking the blind man by the hand, He brought him out of the village; and after spitting on his eyes and laying hands on him, He asked him, “Do you see anything?” 24 And he looked up and said, “I see men, for I see them like trees, walking around.” 25 Then again, he laid His hands on his eyes; and he looked intently and was restored, and began to see everything clearly. 26 And He sent him to his home, saying, “Do not even enter the village.” (Mark 8:22-26)*

## Introduction

Today we admit that we are in constant need of renewal; the persons, the church and the society need renewal. Even our theology and life practices need renewal that leads to experiencing the fullness of life. Renewal can mean a fresh start. It can be a time for turning over a new leaf. Hence, we oftentimes equate renewal with New Year resolutions.

Many times, we human beings inwardly long for a new beginning. Sensing we're 'old' and worn out, we try different things to make ourselves feel new. We look for a new place, new partner, new hobbies, new clothes, a new diet, or even a new haircut! And for a time sometimes we do feel new but then sooner or later we discover all these do not last for they are not genuinely new. Then these new things that we thought eventually become old, and we're back where we began, feeling like both our situation and we ourselves are old.

Hence, the only way we can do is to really *be renewed*. In the biblical parlance, renewal comes in many forms: (1) in Psalms 104:30; it means to give a new appearance, to refresh, to restore the face of the earth; (2) in 1 Samuel 11:14, to establish more firmly the kingdom by

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reinstalling King Saul; (3) in 2 Chronicles 15:8, to rebuild or repair the broken altar; (4) in Lamentations 5:21, “renew our days”, restore the favours of former days; (5) in Isaiah 41:1, “let them gather together, or marshal their strongest arguments for answer”; (6) in Psalms 103:5; Isaiah 40:31, it refers to the restoring of spiritual strength; (7) in the New Testament it invariably refers to spiritual renewal, e.g. Romans 12:2; 2 Corinthians 4:16; Ephesians 4:23; Colossians 3:10; Titus 3:5; Hebrews 6:6; all derivatives of *kainos*, ‘new’.

## **The context of the text**

Mark 8:22-24 is one of the two miracles that one finds only in Mark. There are many miracles that Matthew, Luke and John narrated that are in more than one gospel. However, there are only two in the gospel of Mark that aren't anywhere else – and they appear in chapters 8 and 7. Chapter 7 is where Jesus healed the one who was deaf and mute. It is interesting to read Mark 7 because of the parallels of both miracle stories. They brought to Him one who was deaf, just as they brought the blind man. They implored Him to lay His hand on him, just as they asked for the blind man that Jesus would touch him. And again, Jesus took him aside from the crowd, just as He did the blind man, taking him out of the village. He put His fingers into His ears, touched him, spit, touched his tongue just as He touched the blind man's eyes and put spit on them.

The story in Chapter 8:22-24 is both unique and strange at the same time; especially when Jesus asked “Do you see anything?” This is a question you do not expect Jesus to ask. We expect him to make an authoritative statement that the man has in fact been healed. Instead, Jesus asks the man, “Do you see?”- As if to say, “Did the miracle work?” What is even stranger than Jesus' question is the response of the blind man. Verse 24 tells us that the man says, “I see men, like trees, walking around.” Either this man has found himself in a village surrounded by very large men with extra extremities, who look like trees, or perhaps somehow the man is seeing, but he is not seeing clearly. At the end of verse 24, we find a man that has been healed-sort of. His sight is restored-partially. He can see-but not clearly. So, Jesus goes at it again. Verse 25 tells us that Jesus looked at the man intently, “Then again He laid His hands on his eyes.”At the end of the verse, it says, “and he began to see everything clearly.” The second work of Jesus seemed to fully heal the man. Jesus, aware that the man had been healed, tells him not to go back to the village

and not to tell anyone what happened. After two attempts, the man finally sees clearly and went away with clear instruction.

## **Before the Healing: He holds the man by the hand**

Jesus *hears* the request of the people, *takes* the blind man by the hand, *touches* him as requested, but the expected miracle or healing did not happen. Nothing visible took place. Nothing took place as far as the crowd is concerned; but something very profound occurs here. Jesus takes this man by the hand and begins to lead him out of town. They begin their journey in the middle of town (v.23). Imagine Jesus leading him around the obstacles that were in his path. I can hear Jesus as He patiently and kindly leads this poor blind man along one step at a time, all the while holding his hand.

We hold other people in many different ways; a handshake, for example. Some hold us with malice but some demonstrate a connection between us. For example, at a conference, one probably shakes dozens of hands a day. . It is a simple greeting. It is a common gesture. A handshake allows us to make a physical connection that is not threatening, aggressive or uncomfortable. For those whom we are familiar or acquainted already a good firm handshake says, "Hello, it's good to see you," or for those new to us it could mean "Hello, it's good to make your acquaintance," A handshake is something many of us experience on a daily basis. It is just a little physical connection with our fellow human beings.

But, holding someone's hand for a long period of time in a very special way by a very special person is more than a simple gesture, and communicates far more than a simple "Hi, it's nice to meet you." In this story we can say that holding someone's hand says, "I care!"

We see in here a beautiful picture of how the Lord leads the lost, the blind and the sinners to the place of salvation (fullness of life). He showed them *care*. He made them feel the importance of caring for those in need. When we show care to people in darkness, in pain, in sickness, people who are disabled and suffering from HIV/AIDS, they not only experience healing of their disease but also healing from their brokenness. When we show care to people who are migrants, stateless, refugees and IDPs, they experience the healing from being accepted and welcomed by the community. When we say *I care*, it should also mean, *I am ready to help and bring you to salvation!*

## During the Healing: He Spits and Touches

I mentioned above that this text is quite strange and unique because this is the only time in the gospel record where Jesus healed someone in stages. Usually, Jesus either touched them or spoke to them and they were healed. In this story Jesus uses a two- step process to open this man's blind eyes.

First step-Jesus *spits* in the man's eyes. To us that sounds disgusting. If someone were to spit in your eyes, you would be ready for a fight. However, in ancient times, people thought differently than we do now. They believed there was healing power in human saliva. We still believe that to a certain degree today. If you get a small cut on your finger, what is the first thing most people do? They stick it right in their mouth. Why? Saliva has soothing qualities. Of course, it's full of deadly germs, but that is another story. So, Jesus spits in his eyes and immediately *touches the man*. Jesus was saying to the man, by His actions, "I am about to do something for these eyes of yours," but the spitting is immediately followed by the Lord's tender touch. This man can't see, but he can feel. The Lord is working in a way that makes no sense to us, but it was understood by the blind man.

Renewal cannot happen in a way we want it to be. We have to trust God on how he will do it for us. In the story, the healing comes not in a way the blind man or even the crowd expect it to happen. It went through a process. Jesus spits his saliva, and it was only during the second time when Jesus touched the blind man that total healing happened. Healing does not come at a snap of a finger; it has to go through a process. On the other hand, Jesus is the only one who renews us and we have to accept his method of doing this for us. I would imagine that someone spitting on us would be a disturbing thing to us. It is true that there are times when we have to be disturbed by different forces in order for renewal to happen to us. On the other hand, fullness of life does not come easily; it has to go through a process and the process can also be disturbing.

Second step-Jesus touches the man: The first touch did not work well. "When the man opens his eyes and looks around, he says, "I see men as trees, walking." Then, Jesus touches him again, and this time, everything becomes crystal clear. His healing is complete. His eyesight is restored. The saliva coming out of His own mouth, touching the man symbolized the transfer of power. The power is in Christ, if flows from Him

to the eyes. First touch did not work well. And the second touch brings a clinical healing in the most magnanimous way, when it says “and he looked intently”; that’s *diabolepoin* Greek which means literally “to see through,” penetrating sight, the fog is gone, to look through, to see accurately would be another way to understand it. His sight “was restored,” from *apokathistemi* which means “back to perfect vision”. If 20/20 is perfect vision, he instantaneously had 20/20 or something perhaps even more wonderful than that, clearer than that. His eyesight was restored to what it should be by the Creator Himself. So he sees accurately. He sees perfectly. “He began to see everything clearly.”

## **Conclusion**

The power to renew comes from Christ alone. And that power is transferred to anyone who seeks for renewal. Christ’s renewal can bring everyone to absolute perfection, to fullness of life. No partial healings, not like the TV healers. This is perfect vision, penetrating sight, 20/20 vision. Because healing is perfect, it brings renewal to every individual, to every nation, to all who are sick, broken, to those who are disabled and to those HIV/AIDS infected people.

The healing that was experienced by the blind man enabled him to see far off clearly. It gives him the perfect vision near and far, the power to focus, the power to concentrate, the power to distinguish. When we are healed, we are given the power to see even the smallest thing in our hand, the power to be in solidarity with migrants, stateless, refugees and IDPs. Healing gives us also the gift to reconcile even with those existing abusive authorities and also the gift to see clearly the thing that’s far away, that are destructive and oppressive. And above all, Christ’s healing that brings us to perfection is a consistent kind of healing, no rehabilitation and no aide, it is instant, it is total, it is complete and it is liberating.

Healing brings renewal, healing gives us power and healing offers fullness of life. Fullness of life can be experienced not only in the end time or end of our earthly existence, but fullness of life can be experienced many times and at any time.

## **Questions for Discussion**

1. In this story, what makes healing that leads to renewal possible? What kinds of healing will bring restoration towards the fullness of life in Asia?
2. In all aspects of life we hope to experience fullness of life. Personally, when can we say that we have achieved this?

# **Renewal: Towards the Fullness of Life - Person-with-Disabilities Perspective**

Rev. Arulampalam Stephen\*

## **Scripture**

*“And they came to Bethsaida and they brought a blind man to Jesus and implored Him to touch him. 23 Taking the blind man by the hand, He brought him out of the village; and after spitting on his eyes and laying hands on him, He asked him, “Do you see anything?” 24 And he looked up and said, “I see men, for I see them like trees, walking around.” 25 Then again, he laid His hands on his eyes; and he looked intently and was restored, and began to see everything clearly. 26 And He sent him to his home, saying, “Do not even enter the village.” (Mark 8:22-26)*

## **Introduction**

Sri Lanka is once again in deep shock and saddened by the attacks on the peaceful worshipers on Easter Sunday (21<sup>st</sup> April, 2019) and the innocent visitors from abroad and from within Sri Lanka, who were at the hotels. Before this happening, the Christian Conference of Asia had chosen “Reconciliation, Renewal, and Restoration: Divine Indicative and Human Imperative” for the CATS-IX theme. This offers us the opportunity to reflect on it contextually.

The word ‘reconciliation’ is not only a religious word, but is also political. Reconciliation can be divided into three main areas: reconciliation between God and human beings (2 Cor. 5:17-21); reconciliation between human and human (Eph. 2: 14-18); and reconciliation between humans and nature (Rom. 8:22). The greatest mission Christ has given us is to concentrate on the mission of reconciliation, renewal and restoration (2 Cor. 5:17-20).

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This paper focuses on 'Renewal: Towards the fullness of Life'.

We live in a pluralistic society in which different religions and ethnic groups, while maintaining their separate identities, strive to participate in a common civic society. The differences can be a source of interminable conflict and tension, but it can also be an opportunity for mutual enrichment and creativity; provided each group realizes how much their lives are bound up with members of the other groups. This mutual acceptance is at the heart of the gospel restoration, fullness of life and enables communities to enrich and widen their horizon by mutual acceptance and solidarities.

## **Biblical Reflection – Mark 8:22-26**

This miracle of Jesus can be divided into three main areas: casting out demons, authority over the nature, and healing the sick people. They are signs of the reign of God and mission of Jesus Christ (John 10:10). Gospel according to Mark refers to two important miracles of blind people. It is the healing of the blind man at Bethsaida (Mark 8:22-26) and the healing of Bartimaeus on the way to Jerusalem (Mark 10:46-52). In both these stories, Jesus healed these people in order to renew their identities and helped them to restore their images in the society.

V.22: After crossing to the other side (Ch. 8:13) Jesus and the twelve reached the district of Gaulanitis, Bethsaida Julis, situated on the Northeast shore of the sea of Galilee in the territory of Harold Philip (cf. Ch. 6:45) This was one of the large sites on the lake which had the size of a city but the organisation of a village, and Mark's designation of it as such in verse 23 is precise. There, a number of persons brought a blind man to Jesus and begged him to touch the man in healing.

V.23-25: It is difficult to be certain why Jesus led the blind man out of the town. It was not his usual procedure to isolate himself from a congregation of people when healing or exorcising unclean spirits (Ch. 1:23-28; 3:1-5; 9:14-27) and he does not do so at a later occasion when he restored the sight of Bar-Timeous (Ch.10:46-52). Moreover, in all of the relational summaries where Mark speaks of healing and exorcism he indicated the presence of crowds around Jesus (Chs.1:32-34; 3:7-12; 6:53-56). Mark usually tends to represent miracles that were conducted in the public sphere, and not in secret. The three exceptions to this general observation derive, apparently, from a set of circumstances inherent in the

situation itself. This is certainly true in Ch 5: 35-43 where Jesus excludes the scornful, unbelieving group of professionals.

The application of spittle to the eyes and the laying on of hands in healing have significant parallels in Jewish practice and in the Gospel (see on Mk. 6:5, 7:33). By these action Jesus entered into the thought- world of the man and established significant contact with him. The report of the healing, however, contains three elements which are without parallels in the evangelical tradition: (1) Jesus' question if his action has been effective ("Do you see anything?"); (2) the explicit reference to only patronal healing ("I can actually see people, but they look to me like trees- only they are walking") ; (3) the laying on of hands a second time, resulting in complete restoration of sight ("I see everything clearly – even at a distance"). These features distinguish this incident of healing from all of the others and suggest that the man's sight was restored only gradually and with difficulty. It is impossible to recover the larger context of the situation which would shed light on many questions prompted by these unique features.

The reference to walking men who resembled trees indicates that the man had not been born blind. People blind from birth do not have an exact idea of objects and cannot properly visualize a tree. On the other hand, optical images become modified as blindness continues, and the visualization of men under the form of trees indicates that the man had been blind for a long period of time. The vivid progression from verse 24 to verse 25 expresses something of the man's excitement and intense involvement in the dynamics of his recovery of sight, and stresses the completeness of the restoration.

## **Creating Inclusive Communities**

Disability issues are historically at the margin of the Church agenda. From biblical times, people with disabilities have been stigmatized and intentionally excluded from participating fully in church practices and worship by restricting access, as theological assumptions regarding impairment have been developed. As a result, the Bible itself has often been used to oppress people with impairments and keep them out from fulfilling their God-given calling in the church. Yet the fact remains that disabled people continue to be a minority in most church congregations. Therefore, it is important to develop a theology of disability amongst the congregation.

Unless churches take this seriously, people with disabilities will never feel fully integrated, included and welcome in the body of Christ.

The Church must confess its role in the systematic exclusion of people with disabilities in society. The Church must take steps to encourage the active participation of people with disabilities in worship and it must allow positive readings of scripture regarding disability to be heard from church pulpits. This will educate the congregation and enable people with impairments to connect their lived bodily experiences to their faith. Within disability studies the language used to describe people with disabilities has become particularly important. Terms such as 'the handicapped', 'the crippled', or 'the disabled' generalize and often stigmatize large groups of people. Such terms demean the value of the human being and oppress people socially. Therefore, I would like to highlight some suggestions to create an inclusive community where persons with disabilities are enabled to renew and restore their human dignity and enjoy the fullness of the life.

## **Image of God and Disability**

There is a traditional teaching of the image of God among humans. Patrick McArdle describes the theological link between *Imago Dei* and humanity. This theological construct positions human as a perfect individual who has self-reliance, rationality and autonomy. These dominant perspectives are missing among the disabled. And the image of God in Jesus individual, male, whole, celibate, no defects of mind or body communicates the theological inconsistency in the nature of God. Therefore, he opines that theology should engage with the brokenness of humanity, which is mirror to humanity and this brokenness is not to be eliminated but to be celebrated. He introduces 'mutual vulnerability' and 'inter-subjectivity' which has the potential to confront the inconsistencies. McArdle quotes the relational encounter of Immanuel Levin as that for the one who confronts the other is an essential 'other' who pleads not to be rejected and, ultimately, not be killed. He says the face of the other, one is confronted by his/her own vulnerabilities and frailties. John Swanton travels in a different path that says there is a shared experience of oppression and there are no individual impairments. All the experiences are melded together in the shared oppression. Therefore, there is collective experience for all the disabled.

Samuel George quotes Nancy Eiesland's view that disability is not to be seen as a distortion of the image of God but rather that human beings reflect the disabled image of God. The image of God is manifested in all humans with dignity and value. It is not dependent on what one accomplishes or contributes but the dignity and value that are permanent, which are the essential attributes bestowed by God. Every human life is sacred and every human is to be treated with honour. There is a distortion of value in understanding the image of God.

## **The Nature of Spirituality**

Human spirituality is that which transfigures and transcends the biology of the human. When we speak of transcending the biological, we refer to those potentials of the human being which enable him or her to make the biological organism instrumental to non-biological purposes. These potentials include abstract thought, imagination, empathy, the ability to represent biological experiences symbolically, and the capacity to integrate experience and knowledge around a significance or a meaning which goes beyond the pleasure and pain of the individual. Language and money are the two finest achievements of the human tendency towards the spiritual, because being relational in their character, they articulate and facilitate the experience of solidarity with other people. The capacity of the human will to become integrated with others, or to dominate others, as the case may be, is incarnate in money and in language.

When we speak of spirituality as transfiguring the biological, we refer to the fact that the biological is never left behind by transcendence. The body is not the antithesis of the spiritual, but is its organ. We should not contrast the spiritual with the material, nor should we regard the spiritual and the biological as being on altogether different levels. Rather, we should speak of transfiguration: the material infused with the spiritual, the body becoming the form of inter-subjectivity.

In Christian faith, the typical representation of spirituality is to be found in the story of the transfiguration of Jesus (Mk. 9:2-8). The body was not left behind but shone with radiance. This could not occur to an isolated body, but only in the context of others, and of the speech which links person to person. This is why Jesus is seen on the Mount of Transfiguration with Moses and Elijah, and they are speaking with each other (v.4). Even the resurrection does not leave his body behind (Lk.

24:39, Jn. 20:6f), and with the ascension, the transfigured body is raised to universality (Acts 1:9). The ascension into heaven of the prophet Elijah (2 Kgs. 2:11), the figure of the resurrected Christ (Jn. 20:27) and the bodily assumption of Mary all indicate that Christian faith confesses a biological spirituality, and believes in the resurrection of the body as the fulfilment of human potential (Rom. 8:23, 1 Cor. 15:42, Phil. 3:21).

Nevertheless, the body is transcended as well as transfigured. This takes place when the body of the other person is valued like my own body, felt like my own body, and even loved as my own body (Eph. 5:29). The body which is not transcended remains encircled within the membrane of the skin. Egocentricity is the enclosed body. The senses, although they appear to open the body out upon the world, do not do so unless they are met by the answering sense of the other. In the reciprocity of eye contact, or skin contact, or conversational contact, we transcend the biological nature which is transfigured in the process.

## **Conclusion**

The inspiration for the blind person in the action of Jesus who not only touched the stranger affected with the impaired sight but also treated him with saliva(v.23) – an utmost personal touch. This story is a sombre reminder of the fact no quantity of words will heal the wounds person with disabilities except for the intimate human touch which alone can totally restore their humanity and fullness of life.

## **Questions for Discussion**

1. What are the barriers that persons with disabilities face in their endeavour to enjoy the fullness of life?
2. How can alternate biblical interpretations help to overcome such barriers?

# **New Exodus, New Covenant, and Fullness of Life – Re-reading Jeremiah 31:31-34 from Myanmar Perspective**

Dr. Naw Eh Tar Gay\*

## **Scripture**

*“Behold, the days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, 32 not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband,” declares the Lord. 33 “For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the Lord: “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 34 And no longer shall each one teach his neighbour and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord’, for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the Lord. “For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.” (Jeremiah 31:31-34 ESV)*

## **Introduction**

Many parties or groups from politics, religions, economic organizations and even family members or couples make agreements, commitments, covenants or treaties. A covenant is made for the benefit of both parties. Some agreements or covenants are broken because of one party's or both parties' irresponsibility or lack of commitments, trust, transparency, or misunderstanding. Some cannot keep their promise, commitment or covenant from the beginning. When a covenant or an agreement between the two or more is broken, the two parties may easily become enemies. Covenant is usually made between the two or more partners.

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Likewise, there are many covenants mentioned in the Bible. There are two types of covenant in the Bible, the parity treaty which was made between the two equal parties and a suzerainty-vassal treaty which was made between a ruler and the ruled. The ruler promises to grant blessings and the ruled agree to fulfill obligations.<sup>2</sup> Most covenants in the Bible are suzerainty covenants and they are made between God and the people of Israel (with Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, etc.) or with the followers of Jesus. When the covenant or treaty is broken, renewing it becomes very important. What is the renewal of covenant in Jeremiah 31: 31-34 about? What is its relationship with fullness of life? Can renewal of covenant lead to fullness of life? How? What does the text say about fullness of life? Fullness of life can be seen in the covenant of God as it guarantees and promises the basic needs will be met, such as land, security, food, the prosperity of life and full identity. When a covenant is broken, the people lose the privileges, rights and promises which come with the covenant.

### **Backdrop of the text: The broken covenant**

Some scholars believe that Jeremiah wrote most or all of the book; others that it was Baruch (his secretary) and for still others, it is the work of several editors, or some combination of all of the above. What is for sure, though, is that the text is the work of an exilic Deuteronomy prophet.<sup>3</sup> The possible date of writing is around 600 BCE. The book reflects the prophecies made during the reign of Josiah who made religious reform, the destruction of Jerusalem and Judah and the exile of many of its leaders and citizens. The decline of Assyria and the rise of Babylon comes with the religious reformation of Josiah who removed all Assyrian religious practices. His political reform included taking control of the Assyrian provinces in the northern kingdom, Israel. After Josiah was killed at Megiddo in 609 BCE, the Babylonians began to control Syria-Palestine in 605 BCE. Josiah's successors such as Jehoiakim and Zedekiah could not oppose Babylon, and

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<sup>2</sup> Tim Hegg, "The Covenant of Grant and the Abrahamic Covenant, read at the Regional Evangelical Theological Society, 1989. 1-13.

[https://torahtalkonline.com/Articles/Grant\\_Treaty.pdf](https://torahtalkonline.com/Articles/Grant_Treaty.pdf), accessed on 11, 5. 2019.

<sup>3</sup> J. Coleman Baker, *New Covenant, New Identity, A Social-Scientific Reading of Jeremiah 31:31-34*, *The Bible and Critical Theory*, Volume 4, Number 1, Monash university Press, 2008, 7.

later, many were taken to exile in Babylon. Some fled to Egypt, and Jeremiah and Baruch were taken to Egypt.<sup>4</sup>

Jeremiah 30-33 is about 'hope'. According to Global Bible Commentary, the text was written for consolation or giving hope to the people in this situation of exile with catastrophic events, unspeakable horror and prolonged suffering. It is a survival literature.<sup>5</sup> During that time, the people were suffering which can be found in 30:12-15, 23-24, because they had broken the covenant with God by forsaking God, and worshipping other gods.<sup>6</sup> The consequences of the broken covenant were clearly written in Jeremiah 31: 21-40. It also clearly reflects the situation of the country. The people were away from their homeland and they were weary. The land was destroyed. The people tried to survive and so the prophet talked about hope. Jeremiah sees hope beyond destruction to newness and beyond despair to glory.<sup>7</sup> The old order will go away and the new order will come. The pain of the people is God's pain (Jer.30:12-13). Therefore, God will make a new covenant. This hope is not only about spirituality but reality. It will happen in this material world in which the diaspora will celebrate and feast (Jer.31:10, 14).<sup>8</sup>

## **Understanding the Text: Renewal of the Covenant**

Jeremiah 31:31-34 forms one part of Jeremiah 31:23-40, in which there are five short salvation oracles. Verses 23-26 tell of the return to Judah; vv.27-30, the promise of new life; vv. 31-34, the promise of new covenant; vv. 35-37, God's assurance of Israel's eternal duration; and vv. 38-40 is about God's promise that Jerusalem would be rebuilt. Jeremiah 31:31-34 is in the middle of the five oracles. What kind of covenant is this? Are the other four oracles of salvation included in the covenant? Is this covenant a brand new one or a renewal of a previous one?

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<sup>4</sup> Leander E. Keck, Ed, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VI (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 555-560.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Patte, (edit), *Global Bible Commentary*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), 223.

<sup>6</sup> Gerald L. Keown, Pamela J. Scalise and Thomas G. Sothers, "Jeremiah 26-52," *Word Biblical Commentary*, (Dallas: Word Books Publisher, 1995), 131.

<sup>7</sup> John Goldingay, *Jeremiah for Everyone*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 159

<sup>8</sup> Daniel Patte, 223-224.

For Jeremiah, the covenant made with Moses was more important than the one made with David concerning the temple (Chaps. 7, 26). For him the temple covenant would surely fail.<sup>9</sup> The previous covenant found in the text was Moses' covenant. It is made with God who was a husband of Israel. The covenant included Law on tablets. God brought the people out of the land of Egypt. However, that covenant was broken. Therefore, Jeremiah 30-31 introduces a new covenant, which will be for both northern and southern kingdoms. This is the only Old Testament text that talks about new covenant. Jeremiah emphasizes that the discontinuity between the old and new covenants, when he uses language such as "not like" (32) and "not anymore" (34).<sup>10</sup> The continuity can be seen when he uses the same content of the old covenant (Exo. 19-24). Both covenants include the commonalities of nation, land, blessing and kingdom. However the differences are that the covenant will be written on human hearts and their sins will be forgiven. It means the transmission and the observance will be changed.<sup>11</sup>

The purpose of renewing the covenant is to avoid final destruction, which will come due to their violation of the old covenant.<sup>12</sup> In a way, the renewal of the covenant is obtaining the privileges, rights, and responsibility included in the covenant. The new covenant has five elements. First, the covenant will be made with the house of Israel and Judah. Second, the law will be written on their hearts. Third, they shall be the people of God. Fourth, all people will know God; and finally, God will forgive their iniquity and will not remember their sin. All these elements are related to the identity of the exilic people who now lost their identity, which comprised of land, people, laws, integrity and belief.

The first significant factor is that the covenant will be made with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. Jeremiah mentions the two together for eight times while the whole Bible mentions the two together nine times. This implies that this unity was crucial for Jeremiah. The two nations shall be reunited. This is similar to the Mosaic covenant, which mentions the land as a united Israel. This new covenant will be made only to the land as a whole.<sup>13</sup> Two nations will become one as a whole. It also creates a 'common

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<sup>9</sup> Wayne A. Meeks, *The Harper Collins Study Bible*, (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1989), 1111-1112.

<sup>10</sup> Gerald L. Keown, 130.

<sup>11</sup> J. Coleman Baker, 6.

<sup>12</sup> Gerald L. Keown, 131.

<sup>13</sup> J. Coleman Baker, 7.

in-group identity'. A covenant is made not only between two parties but also among several parties simultaneously.<sup>14</sup> This means that God accepts them as His partner with whom the covenant can be made. The third and fourth factors mentioned in the text support the idea of the partnership in the formation of covenant or treaty. Being the people of God and knowing God are the facts enough for them to be a party to have covenant with God.

The second significant factor of the new covenant is that *the law was written on their hearts* and not on stone tablets. Even though the Old Testament talks about asking the people to take the law in their hearts in Deuteronomy 6:6, in the new covenant, God himself is the person who will write the laws on their hearts. In the past, the hearts of Israelites were inscribed with sin. Now the law will be inscribed. The law is internalized. God initiates the writing so that people will obey His law from their heart. The laws of this covenant will reach everyone, as it will be written on the heart. Everyone can have access to God and they no longer need the religious leaders who will assist them with the laws. This new covenant is more individual than communal.<sup>15</sup> With the Law of God written on their hearts, the people know their responsibilities to sustain their covenant. When we look at Jesus' interpretation of the law, and the prophets' as primarily being about loving God and neighbour, Jeremiah also had something like that in his mind, and that was knowing God.

The most significant facts in the content of the covenant is the forgiveness of sins. This kind of matter cannot be found in Moses' covenant.<sup>16</sup> What kind of sin is forgiven? There is sin committed by their parents. Jeremiah 31:29 says that because of the parents' sins, the children suffered. John Goldingay calls it a pattern of the sins of the ancestors, which has been in Israel for many generations.<sup>17</sup> Their sin is apostasy; and in a way, their parents committed adultery by following the new partner by abandoning the husband who is their God (Jer. 31: 32). They broke the old covenant. However, now according to new covenant, God will not punish them for their parents' sins. Unlike their parents who broke the covenant, those people who will worship God will return to their country. God will not remember their sin

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>15</sup> J. Coleman Baker, 8.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>17</sup> John Goldingay, 159

and not forget his promise and forgive their sins.<sup>18</sup> In a promised country (31: 21) with new covenant (31:31), the children will no more say that their teeth are set on edge as their parents ate sour things.<sup>19</sup> The new covenant will be actualized with the new exodus of the people. The new exodus is from the bondage of Babylon. The new exodus came true after seventy years in Babylon with rebuilding temple, walls and renewing of the laws. With the renewal of the covenant, the people regain their original status as God's children or people who have full rights, responsibilities and richness with land, kingdom and prosperity.

## **New Covenant and Early Christianity**

The new covenant found in Luke 22:20, 1 Cor. 11:25; 2 Cor. 3:1-14; Heb. 8:8-13; 9: 15 10: 16-17 and 12: 24 reflects the new exodus of Christianity in the first century. Heb 8:8-12 is a full quotation of Jeremiah 31: 31-34. The contents of each covenant are mentioned below:

<b>New Covenant (Jer. 31:31-34)</b>	<b>New Covenant (NT)</b>	<b>New Covenant (Heb. 8: 8-12)</b>
With both Judah and Israel	-	With both Judah and Israel
Written on the hearts	New covenant of Spirit (2 Cor. 3:6)	Written on the hearts
People of God	Those who are called (Heb. 9:15)	People of God
Knowing God	-	Knowing God
Forgiveness of sins	Redeem them from transgression (Heb. 9:15)	Forgiveness of sins
God as initiator	Jesus the mediator	Jesus as the mediator
-	The cup or the blood which is poured out for you (Lk. 22:20 and 1 Cor. 11: 25)	-

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 159-160.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 159

In New Testament time, Christianity was a new generation, which was chosen by God to be his covenant partner. Christianity is an exodus of a chosen people of God. In this new exodus, the mediator is Jesus Christ. Because of the mediator, the two parties are reconciled and come back to make a new covenant. A mediator paid his blood to redeem and reconcile. With the covenant come the promises as the people of God who are redeemed with Christ's blood. Christian has a new identity, new law of Christ to love one another and to love God and the places to be Christ and God. Here in Christ, all people regardless of their gender, race and status become God's chosen people (Gal 3:28), they will have abundant life or fullness of life (John 10:10). 2 Corinthians 3:6 says "(God) has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life." This new covenant is made of the Spirit, who gives life. In making the new covenant with God through Christ, God's Spirit will bring life.

## **Main Themes of the New Covenant and the Implications for Today**

Covenant is a sign of an exodus, a partnership and an identity. It aims to reach a better goal. Keeping the promises and practicing the obligations are essential. Renewal of all covenants between churches, churches and congregations, political leaders and the people, husband and wife, children and parents are required from time to time. In Myanmar, the Panglong treaty was made in 1947 in order to establish a federal system in an independent Myanmar (then Burma) from British colonization. But that treaty was not realized for 70 years under the military dictatorship. Nowadays, political leaders are trying to renew this treaty so that a peaceful society with peaceful co-existence among the ethnic groups can be built in Myanmar. Simultaneously, amending 2008 constitution plays a crucial role. The cease-fire agreement with all ethnic groups also needs to be renewed and practiced. Maintaining a covenant is a way to promote the human rights and dignity. All development programs are implemented and the promises and vows given by the political leaders are realized. This leads to the benefits of both parties. The treaties among the Churches in Asia and between the churches and the society need renewal. Today, the new covenants in Jeremiah and New Testament confirm that the covenants are renewed to confirm that all negative consequences from breaking a covenant

are ended and a new hope for better relationship is guaranteed. Moreover, a renewed covenant can lead to prosperity and fullness of life for both parties.

### **Questions for Discussion**

1. Is it a new or a renewed covenant mentioned in Jeremiah 31:31-34?
2. What are the covenants and agreements that CCA needs to renewed and reinforce?
3. How can we implement the new covenants mentioned in the book of Jeremiah and New Testament in our divided world?

# Be Opened in the Asian Contexts

Rev. Dr. Van Kung\*

## Scripture

*“And looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened”. 35 And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.” (Mark 7:34-35)*

## Introduction

I am deeply honoured to be invited to write one Bible study for the forthcoming CATS-IX. I understand that the Bible study that I contribute must be the supporting resource material of the theme of the Congress, particularly, to the subtheme, “Renewal: Towards the Fullness of Life”. In fact, I have a keen interest in the theme of the Congress of Asian Theologians, “Reconciliation, Renewal and Restoration: Divine Indicative and Human Imperative,” which will bring social, political, economic, religious and ecological transformation not only in Asia, but also all over the world. The subtheme “Renewal: Towards the Fullness of Life” that is based on the biblical concepts, has its theological foundation in the Gospel. “The gospel is the power of God to salvation that can be opened the ears of the deaf.” So, in this Bible Study, I would like to share the meaning of *Ephphatha*, and its contextual theological reflections by answering the question, “What does it mean to ‘be opened’ for Asian Christians?”

## Background

The Gospel of Mark has many healing stories and interesting narratives. For instance, we read of several healings of Jesus in his ministry such as casting out an unclean spirit (1:21), healing Peter's mother in law (1:29), many healed (1:32), a paralytic healed (2:1), healing on the Sabbath (3:1), healing the demon-possessed man (5:1), healing a woman (5:21), making many well (6:53), healing a deaf-mute (7:31),

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healing a blind man(8:22). The biblical text for our Bible study today is one of the stories of healing out of these several healings.

In Mark chapter 7:24-30, a Gentile woman asked Jesus for healing her daughter. But after having long debate between Jesus and the girl's mother, Jesus changed his mind and healed the gentile girl. In the beginning of their conversation, Jesus seems to be reluctant to heal this non-Jew girl, but because of the girl's mother's faith, Jesus extended his mission beyond the boundary of Jewish circle. After Jesus healed the Gentile girl, he went through the region of the Decapolis. When he reached a certain place, a deaf-mute was brought to Jesus. Jesus put his fingers into the deaf person's ears, and after spitting touched his tongue. He look up to heaven, and sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha", that means 'be opened'. After saying that word, the deaf person's ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he then spoke plainly.

## **Word Study and its Relevant Meanings**

*"Looking up to heaven"*- He looked up to heaven, because from thence comes all good things - words for the dumb, hearing for the deaf, healing for all infirmities; and thus he would teach the infirm man by a manifest sign to what quarter he was to look for the true source of his cure (Pulpit commentary).

*"He sighed"* -literally, he groaned. Why did our Lord sigh at such a moment? We know indeed that he was "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief". But now we might almost have expected a momentary smile of loving joy when he was about to give back to this afflicted man the use of these valuable instruments of thought and action. But he sighed even then; for he was touched with the feeling of human infirmity.

*He said to the deaf, "Ephphatha"*- In the Syriac language, *Ethphatha*, or "Ephphatha" is interpreted to mean "be opened; both ears and mouth." It is the precise word used, translated into Greek by Mark, meaning 'be thou opened' (thoroughly). It is closely related to the Hebrew word used in Isaiah 35:5: "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped." The command was addressed to the man, as shut up from the world by the defect of these two senses, which he then spoke. And this way of speaking is used by the Jews, of a deaf man being restored to

hearing, as of a blind man's being restored to sight; i.e. in verse 35: the deaf person's ears are opened, or his hearing is restored as mentioned in Matthew 11:5. "The blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them."

Why was that man deafened? We do not know exactly. Nobody knows. Only God knows the reason. It seems that the Bible does not concern much about with the 'why' questions for things that happen to human beings, but it talks about how God saved people from all evils; because the gospel is the power of God for salvation (Romans 1:16).

## **Reflections on the text for Asian context**

The words of Jesus, "Be Opened" is a strong word in this text because it powerfully works as supernatural power. For the deaf person, that word may mean being restored to hearing sound. For a blind person, it may mean being restored to sight. For a dumb person, it may mean being restored to speaking. Hermeneutically, "Be Opened" can be reinterpreted and its meaning be extended to healing and helping people with the aim of making them whole towards the fullness of life by identifying and reaching them with the gospel of Jesus. This is because the gospel is the power of God for healing and making people free. Of course, knowing the power of the gospel also means "knowing the truth", and people who know the truth experience how the truth will make them whole in their lives (John 8:32). "The truth", here may mean "the life of Jesus, his teachings, his actions, and his freedom".

To develop a contextual reflection in Asia, it is believed that Asian people must give theological responses to these questions: (1) What renders people deaf, dumb, or blind in our respective societies? (2) Can some causes be attributed to government policy, religion or culture? (3) Do theologians (like us) and our churches open our eyes and ears to the sufferings of the disabled, poor, and homeless in Asia?

If the gospel is the power of God for renewal and salvation, it may also mean the power to change people's lives into their fullness. In order to change the people and societies, our theologies must be based on experience and life so that it may be relevant to address for justice, peace, healing, and reconciliation for all the deprived in Asia. Theologies and life must go hand-in-hand together.

In this case, we still need a theologian like AhnByung Mu (late), a Minjung theologian of Korea, who fought against the Park military dictatorship during the 1970s and 80s. Dr. Ahn established the Galilee Church “against all kinds of injustices” in Korea. I am not sure whether the Galilee church still exists or not. Dr Ahn understood the gospel as the power of the ears of the deaf ‘being opened’.

We still need a theologian like Arvind P Nirmal (late), a Dalit theologian and a minister of the Church of North India who resisted the Indian caste system so that Indian Dalits may receive their full dignity. We need a person like the brave German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer (late) who resisted Nazi dictatorship in the 1940s so that the world may know justice.

## **Conclusion and Some Suggestions**

1. We can be blind, deaf, and dumb because of many circumstances.
2. In order to open others’ eyes, our eyes should be opened first.
3. Healing may mean our eyes being restored to seeing ourselves for who we really are.
4. Sometimes, healing occurs slowly, and in gradual steps (Mark 8).
5. Our theologies should be our lives. Words and deeds must go together.
6. If the gospel is the power of God for salvation, then our lives (moved by the gospel) should be for others so that they may have fullness of life.

## **Questions for Discussion**

1. What do you understand by the words ‘be opened’ in the Asian context?
2. Do you think our current Asian theologies are still relevant in the Asian socio-political context?

# Renewal

Rev. Prince Devanandan\*

## Scripture

*“I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. 26 A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. 27 I will put my Spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. 28 Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.” (Ezekiel 36:25-28)*

## Activity

Symbols to use: small rocks that can be held in one’s hand, bowls of water.

Action: Each one holds a small rock in their hand. At the end of the presentation – sprinkle water on one other, or onto self. Come to the front to drop the rocks symbolising the letting go of the ‘heart of stone’, the idols that one holds on to; and greet one another with a sign of peace indicating renewal.

*“Jesus consistently radicalised the Torah by applying it to the inner self rather than simply to behaviour. What is needed was a new heart.” – Marcus Borg<sup>2</sup>*

## Renewal: a Divine Initiative and an Imperative for God’s People

Renewal is a change from bad to good. It is also a restoration to a better state, a validation of eligibility, or to a state that existed before any deterioration. For all of us, any periodic renewal is a way of validation – passport renewal, driving license renewal, and other things that we use that

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<sup>2</sup> Borg, Marcus J *Jesus A New Vision: Spirit, Culture and The Life of Discipleship*; Harper San Francisco 1991 p.110

require renewal by law. It is a certification of validity. The biblical concept of renewal is not only a validation but also a restoration. The restoration prophet Ezekiel talks about is what God initiates, and that requires a human imperative.

The passage from Ezekiel is about God talking to the people through the prophet. It is God's initiative towards a renewal from an unclean state to a clean state. The promise is to sprinkle clean water to cleanse all the uncleanness and from idols. The God of the people of Israel is opposed to any idol that causes people to stumble and fall; the idols that are not gods, but mere symbols that misguide people toward desolation and destruction. The prophet is indicative of what caused the people to be destroyed. It was by denying the God of life, the God of their ancestors, and going after idols of their choice. The prophet is calling the people to a renewed life that the God of their ancestors is offering. The pre-condition to receive that renewed life is a change of heart.

## **A Change of Heart**

A certain stubbornness persists when it comes to uncleanness of following the idols. The attachment between the idol and the people is fabricated to the extent that the people refuse to let the idol go. The people were so conceited that they hardened their hearts while following the destructive idols. To renew from idolised state to a renewed state, the people were in need of an inner change. They were told that they have a heart of stone that needs to be changed to a heart of flesh. The renewal God describes is to begin from an inner change for the people. By experience, we know that an unclean heart cannot produce any good. The way to renewal is an inner change for the people. Jesus' conversations were around an inner change. Jesus expresses his anger because of the hardness of heart (Mark 3:5).

Jesus comments, "The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks" (Luke 6:45). The cleansing required for the renewal requires the change of idolised religious practices. The prophet's confrontation is the disengagement between what is in one's heart as practice of religion. Borg describes,

“The conflict was between a way of being religious that depended upon observance of externals and a way of being religious that depended upon inner transformation. Indeed, this conflict is found in all of the major religions.”

Therefore, a change of heart is imperative for the renewal God expects. Borg concurs that this is an imperative for all people irrespective of the religion they follow. The change must begin within the hearts of the people; a change from a heart of stone to a heart of flesh (Ezek. 36:26). The Prophet is sent to tell the people that the renewal is initiated by God and the people will live in the land promised to their ancestors. The divine initiative of renewal is out of God’s love for God’s people (Zephaniah 3:17-8). The renewed state is being free from disaster. To receive that state, a change of heart is vital.

A change from a heart of stone to a heart of flesh is a requirement for the people to have God’s spirit in them. It is a clear indication that a conceited heart hardened as a stone cannot contain the Spirit of God. The Spirit of God is necessary for the people to follow the statutes and be careful to observe God’s ordinances. The people will receive God’s renewal by the change of heart. The renewal God initiates is not only for human heart but also for the land.

The Psalmist talks about the renewal of the ground: “When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground” (Psalm 104:30). A new heart is also with a new order that will make the land to produce its fruits in its season. It is a responsible utilization of the resources God has provided. When it is exploited irresponsibly, deterioration is imminent. When the land fails, the people cry to God: “Restore us to yourself, O Lord, that we may be restored; renew our days as of old” (Lamentation 5:21). People, after experiencing the deterioration because of their own actions, have come to realise that only God can renew them to the days of old. A sense of penitence comes into that prayer asking God to renew them and the ground. People cry when they are desperate. Nevertheless, whether there was a cry from the people or not, God’s initiative for the renewal continues in history.

The renewal God initiates is manifested in God's messianic mission. The incarnation, the gospel of the Kingdom of God, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ are all part of God's renewal. God who cares for and recognises the entire human family as children of God (Romans 8) makes people a new creation through Jesus Christ. The divine initiative of renewal is not the complete destruction of what is there, but renewing what is already in existence from its fallen state.

The fallen state of God's creation is groaning in pain waiting to be set free from bondage to deterioration. St Paul writes to Romans (8:18-21), "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God." St Paul's eschatological explanation is about the future restoration. It is still relevant amidst the deteriorated state of God's creation that needs to be renewed; waiting to be freed from its bondage.

## **The Renewal**

We, the children of God, are waiting to be renewed from the decaying state. The divine initiative is the sprinkling of water and a subsequent change of heart. The decaying state of God's creation, had resulted in crying in pain. The biggest idol we hold onto is greed to make money so that we can obtain everything; not realising that money cannot buy the renewal God promises through the prophet and through the Messiah. Renewal is not just of the human heart, but also the renewal of the commons – forests and land, air, and water. These commons of the community are interconnected, and they are bound to work together to maintain the balance in nature.

The powers of this world, the idols of politics and greed of humankind are deteriorating God's order. Therefore, we are in need of a renewal that is possible only through God's initiation. So, let us pray for this renewal. Let us commit ourselves for this renewal that God offers. Let us abandon the idols that we hold onto. Let us be sprinkled with the water God has given us to be clean from all our uncleannesses. When God's renewal

takes place, we will live in the land that God gave to our ancestors; and we will be God's people.

### **Questions for Discussion**

1. What are the uncleannesses of the idols in today's world that destroys our relationship with God?
2. What is the renewal we envisage?
3. What changes must we make in our hearts to achieve the renewed state?

**Subtheme III:**

**Restoration**

*Towards Affirming the Will of God*

# **The Centrality of Love for Restoring Divided Christian Communities: Discerning God's Will from the Margins**

Bishop Dr. Daniel S. Thiagarajah\*

## **Scripture**

*"For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building." (1 Corinthians 3:9)*

## **Introduction**

Since Emperor Constantine raised Christianity to the position of the state church of the Roman Empire in 313, the church has read its scriptures from a privileged position. Constantine's conversion to Christianity 'served an entirely conservative end, the preservation and continuation of the Empire.'<sup>2</sup> Only quite recently has Christianity's captivity to empirical power been challenged from within Christianity by Christians marginalised within the power of modern empires.

Perhaps our challenge for this Congress of Asian Theologians (CATS) is to be clear about whose voices we are listening to when we engage in theological reflection. So, our theme, 'Restoration: Towards Affirming the Will of God' in the light of 1 Corinthians 3:9 causes me to ask: whose voice determines what 'restoration' means?

The study theme proposes that the meaning of restoration is determined by God's will, understood in the light of 1 Corinthians 3:9: 'For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building.' Traditionally the church has read 'working together' as a call for unity between Paul and another preacher, Apollos. For example, Barrett<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> H. A. Pohlsander, *The Emperor Constantine*, Routledge, NY 2004, pp. 78-79.

<sup>3</sup> Barrett, C.K. *The First Epistle to Corinthians*. Adam & Charles Black, London. 1968. p.85.

emphasises the unity between the two apostles, with both helping in 'the task of building up the church'(3:6-8).Witherington<sup>4</sup> agrees Paul 'stresses the unity of Paul and Apollos. They are one in purpose and one in being only servants' (3:8).Murphy-O'Connor<sup>5</sup> takes the focus on unity further, stating that Paul's metaphor of the Body of Christ signified 'a unity on the level of being'.But perhaps the traditional focus on unity by these mid-to-late 20<sup>th</sup>Century male,Western scholars is anachronistic, reading back onto the text the post-world war concern for the churches to witness to unity in a conflicted and fragmented world.

More recently, Y.S. Kim<sup>6</sup> suggests 'Paul's argument presuppose(s) that the divisiveness of the Corinthian community results not from a lack of unity but from a failure on the part of its members to acknowledge and respect the diversity present in the community'.I will explore this modern interpretation by examining a conflict at the heart of western Christendom's empire, the Vatican in Roman and the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) in the US Catholic Church. LCWR is a conference of women religious leaders from orders of Catholic sisters in the United States, providing support to leaders of women's religious orders.

This conflict erupted in 2009, when the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) shocked LCWR by beginning a doctrinal assessment of LCWR's faithfulness to the church. For three years, CDF carried out its assessment, 'largely through written communication, telephone calls, and one group meeting with the bishop delegate and the officers of LCWR and a consultant.'<sup>7</sup>The women religious leaders thought their responses to CDF's requests for information had met the CDF's concerns, and so were shocked when CDF presented them with a mandate to reform their organisation. The women were told by the all-male CDF that the assessment was an invitation to 'deeper living of our vowed life to

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<sup>4</sup> Witherington III, B. *Conflict and Community in Corinth: a socio-rhetorical commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan.1995. p132.

<sup>5</sup> Murphy-O'Connor, J, OP. *Becoming Human Together: the pastoral anthropology of St. Paul*. Michael Glazier, Inc. Wilmington, Delaware. 1989. P.179.

<sup>6</sup> Kim, Y.S. *Christ's Body in Corinth: the politics of a metaphor*. Fortress Press, Minneapolis 2014, p.4.

<sup>7</sup> A. Sanders (ed), *However Long the Night: making meaning in a time of crisis*. LCWR. 2018, p.25.

obedience',<sup>8</sup> that is, to restore the unity of the church. It appeared to the women there was no room for them to have a dissenting opinion from the bishops, even when what a bishop expressed was a matter of his opinion, not doctrine. This situation is akin to that in Corinth: 'there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters' (1:17).

The unfolding conflict reflected a traditional pattern of hierarchical and patriarchal power relations between the CDF and the LCWR. But Paul is concerned that when Christians rely on their power over others to settle disputes, 'the cross of Christ (is) ... emptied of power' (1:17). When Christians believe that their identity and power is based on having received a special or exclusive promise of Christ's salvation, Paul proclaims God in Christ has turned this view upside down. 'Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ... For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles' (1:20b-22, 23). Paul derides the privileged wisdom of the world, and calls the Christian community to look beyond appeals to unity and singleness of purpose as the final arbiter of Christian practice. Instead, we are to look for the presence of Christ crucified.

But do the Vatican congregation's actions reflect the will of God? They told the LCWR representatives in Rome of their decision to impose a reform program, but it was actually uploaded onto the US bishop's website before the LCWR leaders had even touched down from their flight home to the US, let alone spoken to their Board. But in this traumatic time, the LCWR women leaders made an important decision. They decided to rely upon the faith tradition they had been cultivating over the 50 years since Vatican II – to reimagine the role of religious sisters and their images of God. They entered into a period of prayer and personal and communal contemplation that drew their members further into solidarity using established participative processes to develop a strategy that grew out of their communal discernment.

For the next three years, the women leaders were guided by their theology and spirituality to inform how they participated with the Vatican representatives, their Catholic sisters and laity, the media, and the public. They discovered how to 'work together' with the CDF to build mutual

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p.31.

understanding, trust and respect. LCWR would not be assimilated into the Vatican's reform plans, for both organisations are 'servants ... (with tasks) the Lord assigned to each' (3:5b). 'Paul deconstructs the ideology of "unity" on the part of "the strong" and reconstructs a community based on the cross.'<sup>9</sup>While the CDF began its work focussed on restoring unity in the Church, the faithfulness of LCWR, the guidance of the Spirit, and their emerging understanding and respect led them together to a new place of diversity in the church. So, for LCWR it 'is a matter of having a mind and purpose framed by the same gospel that does not empty the cross of Christ of its power'<sup>10</sup>(1:17). And as Paul begins to describe what it means for those in conflict to work together, it is evident that the cross of Christ (1:18-25) is at the centre of understanding God's power, not imposing institutional power that coerces conformity for the sake of restoring unity and a common purpose.

In the light of the cross of Christ, we who read Paul from the margins of gendered, ecclesial, and national power relations may see the journey of LCWR in its relationship to the Vatican as fulfilment of God's will. I suggest that within the women's leaders' relative weakness and vulnerability in their conflict with CDF, they were holding up Paul's mirror to the patriarchal and hierarchical systems of church and nations. 'God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world' (1:27-28).

The will of God is for justice to be restored. This is illuminated by Paul's deconstruction of any Christian fixation on belonging to the most powerful side in conflict situations. Paul sarcastically labels those who are thus preoccupied as 'infants in Christ' (3:1c), who have failed to grow into 'spiritual people' (3:1a), and so are 'worldly' (that is, 'people of the flesh', *sarkinos*) (3:1b). Jesus Christ is the foundation for 'working together' as 'God's servants' (3:9) at all times (3:11). From all that Paul has said in chapter 1-2, he is clearly referring to Christ the crucified (1:23). It is only through sharing in the powerlessness of Christ crucified that diverse groups may work together as equals, that is, equally sharing in the foolishness and

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<sup>9</sup> Op. cit. Kim, p.36.

<sup>10</sup> Op. cit. Kim, p.74.

weakness of the world and being in solidarity with the world's lowly and oppressed.

The crucified Christ as the proper foundation of the Christian community is further emphasised when Paul shifts the agricultural metaphor for the community (3:5-9a) to a metaphor of building (3:9b). If Paul views the servants of God as the parties in conflict – and in our case, LCWR and CDF – then Catholic sisters and women are possibly the 'you' who are 'God's field' and who are to become 'God's building' (3:9b). For those oppressed and marginalised by patriarchal power, even in the heart of western Christendom's power, Paul's assurance that God is fully present in solidarity with them 'in Christ' can bring comfort and encouragement and the hoped for victory of Christ's resurrection life 'for all people.'<sup>11</sup>

When Paul calls the conflicting parties to work together as God's servants for the sake of God's building, it is for the sake of all marginalised and oppressed people. And to fail in this vocation will expose the failed 'builder' to 'the Day' where 'fire will test what sort of work each has done' (3:13). For all who suffer unjustly from coercive violence, the crucified Christ promises that God will reverse their situation, taking away the human power of those now judged assinful (that is, having 'the spiritless characteristic of human flesh', *sarkikos*) (3:3). The testing fire consumes all that has been built by sinful humanity, for it is empty of God's life-giving Spirit. The cross of Christ breaks apart the self-aggrandisement of the powerful and inspires resistance to injustice.

The faith of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious was renewed as they resisted oppressive power relations through our crucified Lord's solidarity with them, trusting that his Day is dawning. On that Day, the powerful find their identity broken open and by God's grace, their hearts renewed in love. Let us wait in prayer for the restoration of justice according to God's will. Our waiting for God's restorative activity occurs in a space and time 'that is struggling toward liberation and justice for all.'<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Op. cit. Kim, p.36.

<sup>12</sup> Op. cit. Kim, p.38.

## **Questions for Discussion**

1. What difference does it make to your reading of Scripture to be aware of your power and position in society?
2. When have you experienced Paul's assurance of God being fully present when you have suffered with those who are marginalised in your society?

# Restoration-Guaranteeing Fasting

Rev. Dr. R. C. Thomas\*

## Scripture

*6 “Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:  
to loose the chains of injustice  
and untie the cords of the yoke,  
to set the oppressed free  
and break every yoke?*

*7Is it not to share your food with the hungry  
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter -  
when you see the naked, to clothe them,  
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?*

*8Then your light will break forth like dawn,  
and your healing will quickly appear:  
then your righteousness will go before you,  
and the glory of the LORD will be your rear-guard.*

*9 Then you will call, and the LORD will answer;  
you will cry for help, and he will say:  
Here am I.*

*“If you do away with the yoke of oppression,  
with the pointing finger and malicious talk,  
10 and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry  
and satisfy the needs of the oppressed,  
then your light will rise in the darkness,  
and your night will become like the noonday.*

*11 The LORD will guide you always;  
he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land  
and will strengthen your frame.*

*You will be like a well-watered garden,  
like a spring whose waters never fail.*

*12Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins  
and will raise up the age-old foundations”*

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*you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls,  
Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.” (Isaiah 58:6-12)*

## **Introduction**

After the defeat in the war at Waterloo in 1815, Napoleon Bonaparte (the chief of the French army) was brought before Duke of Wellington as a prisoner of war. As part of European etiquette, the former stretched his hand forward to shake hands with the latter. The Duke then replied: “First your sword, then your hands.” This historical passage is a reminder to any spiritual megalomaniac who thinks of their own spirituality as all-sufficient to please God. It is very interesting to see that many a time, biblical admonitions are directed to the practices of the so-called godly, devout people, rather than the ungodly and the impious.

The biblical text under study speaks to the Israelites about their need to mend their understanding of worship in general, fasting in particular. Fasting devoid of mending the social relations remains a religious farce and travesty. We have to be on our guard since it can affect us as well. If our spirituality is isolated from the material needs of others and solutions for them, we miss the mark. In order to achieve restoration, some reconciling actions are preliminary and pre-conditional.

## **Restoration: A powerful biblical idea**

The English word ‘restoration’ comes from the Latin word *restoration*.

In the English language, its use began in 1660 when the English, Scottish, and Irish monarchies were all restored under King Charles III after a lapse. In common parlance, ‘restoration’ means the act of returning something to a former owner, place, or condition; e.g. a lost key is returned to its owner; one is brought back to the residence as one lost the way, or a person regains eyesight through a surgery.

‘Restoration’ is a very powerful biblical idea both in the Old Testament (OT) and the New Testament. It forms the pivotal point of all prophetic message, including the passage under discussion now. In the OT this idea of ‘restoration’ is crucial in the prophetic message including the present passage under discussion. In the Hebrew language, words such as ‘*chadash*’, ‘*arukah*’, imply restoration. In fact, ‘*shub*’ is the root word from

which '*teshuvah*' derives. It means 'repentance of returning to God' and the word can be found at least 948 times in the whole OT.

The biblical idea 'to bring back, to restore, to refresh, to lead away, to show turning, allow to return', etc. can also be seen in the New Testament. In the original Greek sense, it meant the return of the planets to their original position after each revolution completing a circle. '*Apokatastacy*' is a common word and a Pauline favourite word in Colossians, Ephesians, etc. Other words are '*palinorthosy*', '*epistrophy*', etc (see Rom.11:32, 1 Cor.15:22, Eph.1:9-10, Col.1:20, 1 Tim.2:4 and 4:10, Titus 2:11).

### **Explication of Isaiah 58:6-12 in its Social Setting**

The whole thrust of these seven verses (6-12) may be summarised as 'restoration'.

This passage is taken from the book of Isaiah known as the 'Third Isaiah' (chapters 56-66). The period of writing dates back to BC/BCE 537 when the Israelites returned to Jerusalem after many years in Babylonian captivity. As they returned, the temple was rebuilt and many of the long-suspended temple rites and practices (such as fasting) were revived. But the socio-political conditions were entrenched in a dilapidated condition. The economic conditions were topsy-turvy. The chasm between the haves and the have-nots increased day-by-day. Due to lack of means of production, the poor borrowed money from the rich financiers and they could not pay it back. In fact, the interest crossed over the principal amount which implied their perennial slavery due to the heavy interest imposed on them. The poor became poorer and the rich richer. Hundreds of them underwent abject poverty, were thrown onto the streets without a roof over their heads, and were thus rendered homeless and possession-less. A plethora of such problems denied the victims basic amenities of life, throwing them from the frying pan into the fire. The rich people, highly devout and religious, were least bothered regarding these issues. Their selfishness and comfortable religious lives did not allow them to see the plight of the mass. In this context, the prophet addresses the issue squarely. What the priests failed to see, the prophet saw. All the problems we face in Asia today were prefigured some two thousand five hundred years in the biblical Israel.

Vv.6 and 7 indicate the parameters of a genuine fasting in contrast to meaningless ones meant for 'exhibition'. In v.6, the Lord asks and answers the question: "What is worship, specifically fasting?" These verses explicate the tension between ideal fasting and artificial fasting. Isaiah shows the chasm between the two. On the one hand, common people suffer due to many stinging problems and on the other hand a powerful religiously minded group remains reckless about the grave problems affecting larger society.

Vv. 8, 10, and 11 guarantee the positive outcome and promises of a real fasting; v.9 answers the question why the Lord remained quiescent to their supplications and v.12 provides the eschatological hope. Let us see the theological tremors created and the implications that were triggered by the prophet.

## **Restoration as 'Turning one's fasting to the feast of the poor'**

The message is clear. Fasting is a means for 'restoration' of the social relationship. Is it not that what Nicholas Berdyaev meant when he said: "Bread for me is a material need whereas it is a spiritual need for my neighbour". The devout ones failed to connect it to their society around and the problems cropping up there. That is the message of vv.6 and 7.

Spirituality traverses fasting out and out. During fasting, one relinquishes food, drink, and merrymaking, and it is voluntary poverty in contrast to imposed poverty. But it is not an end in itself to raise one's collar but a means to achieve a greater goal. People attempted to restore their relationship with God through only a narrow, singular facet. Isaiah reminds them that it is not possible without mending their social relations. Religious symbols can be oppressive or reactionary when they turn introverted and self-seeking. The prophet reminds us that our fasting or any religious ritual should prepare the way for the poor to celebrate life. The food you spare through fasting is not for accumulation but for sharing. "What I kept, I lost; and what I gave away remains with me," explains a Persian saying. St. Paul says your deficiency should become the sufficiency for others (2 Cor. 8:9). Fasting is not ultimate but penultimate only, and the ultimate task is to rebuild the dilapidated structures.

## Restoration: Overcoming the binary of worship vs. social justice

Isaiah addressed the contradiction between worship and social justice. In fact, it is one of the important themes of Isaiah (1:13). The same idea is repeated here through the example of fasting. After the return of Israelites from Babylonian captivity, temple worship in Jerusalem was revived. Fasting has been already defined by God. Enthusiastic and excited over the fact, people interpreted it according to their whims and fancies. It had nothing to do with what God envisaged. In this context, God asks: "Is not this kind of fasting I have chosen?" (v.6). Often, people would observe the rules of fasting for their own individual benefit, while wholly discounting the adversities that people around them face. They were unfazed by it. God says that this was not what He had presented. Through Isaiah, God says to his people, "Stop doing evil, start doing good."

The society of Isaiah was divided between the powerful rich and the weak poor. Vv.6 and 7 make the social situation explicit. Hundreds go to bed with hungry stomachs (v.7); many remain vagabonds as they have no dwelling places. Their ancestral properties were annexed by the rich while they were in exile. When they came back, there was no land of their own. So open fields and tree-shade became their resting place. During the daytime, they either ran petty errands, or begged for food (v.7); many were half-naked who had no proper cloths to wear. Usually male Jews owned two layers of cloth. One was an inner garment, tight-fitting to the body; and the other was a loose cloak. One was to cover one's shame and the other was like a protective cloth, to the extent that it even served as a blanket during night time. Although poor people mortgaged the outer cloak, the holy book instructed the creditors to not retain it overnight, as most people possessed only that single garment to protect themselves from the chilling cold at night (Exodus 22:25-27).

In v.6, the prophet defines fasting in terms of social liberation. A systemic chain of injustice which goes against the *zedekah* (justice) of God enchains people. Words such as 'yoke', 'cord', and 'oppressed' (v.6) are enough to reveal the pathetic condition of the poor and the marginalised. They are the Dalits in that society.

## **Restoration: Outcome of a Pro-active fasting**

The Lord promises natural outcome of a real fasting as we see in vv. 8, 10, and 11. Worship should mould the devotees. The particle 'then' is very suggestive. The worshipers asked: "When we will be healed? When our light will brake forth? (v.8); or when our light will rise in darkness? (v.10). The prophet says: "When you feed the hungry, clothe the naked, when you loosen the shackles of injustice, chains of oppression, yoke tied upon the people, *then* you will become stronger." One is to be *change itself*, rather than an *instrument* to facilitate the change of others. Seeing the exceptional cleanliness of an eighteenth century London shanty town, a visitor asked: "How does this place remain exceptionally clean?" The inhabitants then replied: "Some years before, a man named John Wesley came and stayed with us." The biblical God has no sub-agents or he does not outsource his task. The option is only between being an agent of change or not. Proxy is unknown to the biblical Lord of commissioning.

## **Restoration: As epiousian for rebuilding tomorrow**

'*Epiousian*' is a rare Greek word found on the margin of an ancient biblical document related to the Lord's Prayer. '*Epiousian*' was explained as the provision of a daily labourer's wage of the next day on the present day itself. In this vein, the prayer, "*Give us this day our daily bread*" may be recited as "*Give us tomorrow's bread today itself*".

Caring for the poor and sharing resources with them presents only one side of the story; v.12 speaks about the eschatological aspect. In fact, the whole of Third Isaiah gives the picture of an eschatological end (see 66:15-24). That idea is cited in v.12 also. Rebuilding the ancient ruins and raising up the age-old foundations indicate this hope. The prophet presents the justice done to the oppressed. Every restoration should guarantee sustainability which is out and out eschatologically biblical. V.12 throws light on the sustainability of restoration since it is not an ad-hoc arrangement. Restoration has a replenishing eschatological effect and it is not an ad-hoc arrangement. V.12 speaks about rebuilding ancient ruins on age-old foundations. Those who build will receive new names such as 'Repairer of Broken Walls' and 'Restorer of streets with houses'. The yet-to-come time is awaited.

In Asia our task is huge as social problems are seeming to accelerate exponentially. The personal choice of fasting or for that matter, it must be an impetus for *national* fasting in solidarity with humans and the whole creation. The biblical side of Sabbath tells us about a “carbon fasting” to release less energy. Such steps paves the way for restoration. The challenge before the Asian theological community is already pre-figured in the prophetic message of Isaiah. Who will come forward to restore and reconcile? After the World War II, a statue of Christ with a broken arm and one-eyed was found out of ruins and rubbles and it was erected inside a church with an epithet: “I have no eyes, hands of my own, but yours”. Only one option awaits us: “To be agents of restoration or not”. Which is our choice?

## **Questions for Discussion**

1. Discuss the biblical idea of Restoration from a missiological perspective.
2. Identify some areas of your concern in Asia where restoration seems inevitable (e.g. socio-economic concerns, or attitudes towards women).

# Restoration of the World: Towards affirming the Will of God in Luke 7:18-35

Rev. Dr. Yusak B. Setyawan\*

## Scripture

*“John’s disciples told him about all these things. Calling two of them, 19 he sent them to the Lord to ask, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?” 20 When the men came to Jesus, they said, “John the Baptist sent us to you to ask, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?’” 21 At that very time, Jesus cured many who had diseases, sicknesses, and evil spirits, and gave sight to many who were blind. 22 So he replied to the messengers, “Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. 23 Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.” 24 After John’s messengers left, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind? 25 If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear expensive clothes and indulge in luxury are in palaces. 26 But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 27 This is the one about whom it is written:*

*“I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.”*

*28 I tell you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John; yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.” 29 (All the people, even the tax collectors, when they heard Jesus’ words, acknowledged that God’s way was right, because they*

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*had been baptised by John. But the Pharisees and the experts in the law rejected God's purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptised by John.) 31 Jesus went on to say, "To what, then, can I compare the people of this generation? What are they like? 32 They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling out to each other:*

*'We played the pipe for you,  
and you did not dance;  
We sang a dirge,  
and you did not cry.'*

*33 For John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine, and you say, 'He has a demon'. 34 The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and you say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.' 35 But wisdom is proved right by all her children." (Luke 7:18-35)*

## **Introduction**

Restoration of the world towards affirming the will of God highly corresponds to the main proclamation of Jesus Christ as it continues to be highlighted in the Gospels: the Kingdom of God. New Testament scholars are in agreement that the Gospels place more emphasis on the most important proclamation of Jesus and the performance of Jesus in His teachings and actions that focus on this main message. Therefore, the topic of world restoration towards affirming the will of God can be said to be in line with the content of Jesus' preaching about the Kingdom of God. In other words, restoration of the world overlaps precisely with the theological idea of the coming of God's Kingdom.

However, it should be underlined that the term of the Kingdom of God is an improper translation for *hēbasileiatouteou*. As seen in the Gospel texts, including Luke's Gospel, this term does not indicate an entity similar to the kingdoms that exist or ever existed, that includes an area, a government, people, using a particular government system, and ways to achieve certain powers, even though it can be analogous to that. Exactly the idea of *hēbasileiatouteou* needs to be translated as God's governing or God's reigning in the world.

## **Two Contexts of Hegemony: Global Capitalism and the Roman Empire**

### *Hegemony of Global Capitalism*

The topic of restoration of the world towards affirming the will of God is strongly relevant in our contemporary context of global society. One point that is very prominent in relation to the topic of restoration of the world can be related to the dominance of global force, namely the hegemony of global capitalism. This hegemony rests on the power of capital, which today is the force that determines the social structure and the world order. Developed countries, especially those in North America and Europe are countries that have the biggest power of capital, and by it they penetrate and determine world order, in a manner that accords them the most benefits and advantages.

Due to space constraints, and by realizing the importance of information from available data, this paper will highlight critically the contemporary world order, which is dominated by the hegemony of the global capitalism. This hegemony penetration of the power of global capitalism causes a deep gap between people in countries where the power of capitalism exists and those who are 'forced' to accept that power which is generally referred to as those of developing countries, i.e., the Third World. This imbalance of capital power causes deep abyss between groups of rich and poor people both at global and national levels. In other words, the poverty that occurs in the Third World countries is a direct impact of the injustice of the world order caused by the hegemony of global capitalism.

Global capitalism is tremendously greedy in its desire to pursue economic growth and capital accumulation. In such an endeavour, the biggest victim is nature itself; given that most raw materials from nature are used as a means to this end. This is observed in rampant environmental destruction and biodiversity loss. While developed countries that control capital (and therefore become commander of the hegemony of global capitalism), tend to maintain and care for the nature and environment of their own; in developing countries, natural resources and the environment are brutally exploited to obtain a source of income, which in general is ultimately profitable to the owners of global capital.

Furthermore, because global capitalism is closely related to patriarchal structures, various issues related to it are also connected with those of domestic violence, gender injustice, and sexual violence. Research conducted in postcolonial studies show a link between various issues in the family and global capitalism. Global capitalism can be considered to be the most recent incarnate of patriarchal ideology because it is very evident that the main dominant players in global capitalism are men, although a small proportion of women also play an important role in making policy in this kind of hegemony in global capitalism. Essentially, global capitalism is an incarnation of an ancient ideology that has finally voluntarily focused on men as the centre of life and society.

### *Hegemony of the Roman Empire*

The Gospel of Luke gives very clear information about the context surrounding the writing of it which would be very useful to understand Luke 7: 18-35. From the beginning, the author of Luke's Gospel was apparently well aware of the political power that surrounded its community at that time (Luke 3:1-2). Even at the beginning of Luke's writings, Herod's name has been mentioned in Luke 1:5 in the narrative of the notification of Elizabeth's pregnancy. The Emperor of August and the Governor of Syria, Cirenus, was highlighted on the historical stage relating to the story of Jesus' birth in Luke 2:1-2.

In the hegemony of the Roman Empire, politics, religion, colonialism, oppression, and poverty were intertwined in the Greco-Roman society of the first century CE. The Roman Emperor was a ruler of the Roman Empire and at the same time a religious leader. When Augustus became Emperor of Rome, one of the titles given was *Pontifex Maximus*, the High Priest in religious celebrations. The title pinned to the Roman emperors was the Son of God and Saviour. As the Son of God and Saviour, the emperor promoted the *Pax Romana* (Peace of Rome), a propaganda for prosperity for the entire region of Rome including the colonized areas in the entire Mediterranean region. This kind of ideology is cemented by the rite of emperor worship, which was carried out by the entire population in the territory of the Roman Empire.

Considering that the Roman Empire was a dominating force that colonized the Mediterranean territory, especially since Augustus declared himself emperor of Rome and continued in the subsequent era, colonies including Palestine experienced massive exploitation to support the perpetuation of the *Pax Romana*. In Palestine, puppet kings such as Herod were watched over by guardians of the country such as Pontius Pilate, and were forced to pay taxes/tribute to the Roman Empire. As a consequence, these puppet kings withdrew taxes in covering the obligation to pay taxes/tribute to the Emperor. The lowest layer of society was of course the saddest victim of such colonial systems.

The patriarchal culture that was the foundation of the ideology of the Roman Empire became stronger and stronger. All famous figures were men; all people who were dominant in society were men. In such a culture, women were regarded as imperfect men, thanks to the decisive influence of Greek philosophy. In this situation, women and slaves became very vulnerable in their position in society. While women were to uphold men, in cases where the absence of men meant the absence of sources of livelihood, women were forced to sell themselves as comfort women in order to sustain themselves. Meanwhile, slaves were exploited to the extent that they were not considered as humans but as tools that belonged to their employers. Poverty and the suffering of women and slaves continued in the era around the writing of the Gospel of Luke (around the 75-80s CE).

## **Two Views Meet: What is the Nature of Restoration?**

### *John the Baptist: God's Kingdom and Asceticism*

According to John the Baptist, the coming of the Kingdom of God required a radical conversion so that God's forgiveness could occur. Therefore, the proclamation of the coming of the Kingdom of God was delivered with demands on individuals to repent. This repentance was followed by forgiveness from God and its symbol was to receive water baptism. However, changing attitudes and behaviour was to manifest this individual repentance. Repentance must be followed by ethics (individual one) according to the profession and their respective roles in society. Soldiers were asked to be content with their wages; tax collectors were expected not to extort money from ordinary people.

Restoration of the world towards affirming God's will according to John is through individual restoration. World restoration is self-restoration. The emphasis on repentance and individual ethics appears very clearly in accordance with how John lived. John the Baptist carried out self-control or asceticism in a clear way: living separately from the wider world and living life in the wilderness. In other words, according to John the Baptist, the Kingdom of God is understood as an entity consisting of individuals who practice asceticism and alternate lifestyles by abstaining from the pleasures of the world and practicing ethical lives in relation to others. The essence of restoration of the world and life is asceticism.

## **Jesus: God's Kingdom and World Restoration**

In the text of Luke 7:18-35, there is a very sharp difference of paradigm about restoration of the world according to John and that of Jesus. It includes, *first*, an *individual restoration*. According to Jesus, restoration of the world goes beyond John's asceticism and individual ethics, however, it still considers the importance of individual aspect. Thus, when Jesus was performing healing and delivering people from evil spirits, it revealed the restoration of the individual life. Personal repentance was not highlighted in the proclamation of Jesus.

The individual restoration includes healing of the blind (seeing), the lame (walking), and the deaf (hearing). The three are persons with disability who experience obstacles from the community to express themselves physically. While the lame and deaf people are very likely to be congenital conditions as suggested by the Greek text, the condition of a blind person has definitely occurred in the life process of that person, namely that blindness occurs after birth. Therefore, the healing experienced by the blind person is included in the terminology, 'can see again'. Individual restoration occurs in the process of healing by restoring individuals from sickness that happened from the beginning and in the process of life that is not in accordance to God's will.

The summary of the individual restoration is written in verse 21: "At that very time Jesus cured many who had diseases, sickness and evil spirits, and gave sight to many who were blind" (NIV). Three very prominent circumstances in the restoration were that Jesus heals many people from all diseases, sickness (or sufferings) and from evil spirits. In this understanding, humans not only face problems related to physical illness

and suffering but also with the power of evil spirits which are often considered as the cause of illness and suffering, although not all diseases and suffering are caused by evil spirits. The power of the spirit is beyond the limits of human ability. Therefore, liberation from sickness and suffering and from the power of evil spirits are important characteristics of individual restoration.

*Secondly, restoration of social relationships in the community.* Jesus' very fundamental action in demonstrating the presence of God's Kingdom is by making people who have leprosy become clean (verse 22). It should be emphasized that people who suffer from leprosy were not only considered physically sick but also those who were socially and religiously unclean. Because they were considered socially improper, those who were affected by leprosy were excommunicated so that the rest of people in community were not infected with impurity. Since lepers were categorized as unclean people, they were not fit to join the religious community and participate in religious ceremonies. If the leper was a priest, he was not allowed to bring offerings or sacrifices. He was removed from his priesthood until another priest declared him clean.

Being a leper was becoming a person who was marginalized and not worthy of being considered a part of society. When Jesus cleansed those who had leprosy, a restoration of relations in a community occurred, in which people were returned in communal and religious relations. Purification is the process of liberating people from alienation and dislocation and restoration of relations in society.

*Thirdly, the restoration of social structures.* While individual restoration and restoration of social relationships in community are emphasized, Jesus asserts that the Kingdom of God has come with the restoration of the social structure that is freed from impoverishing patterns. The good news for the poor or the powerless people (*ptokhoi*) is conveyed to indicate that there is hope in which the impoverishing social structure has changed. This good news is not that this poverty will soon disappear by itself, but what is emphasized is a process in which the structures which generate poverty is going to be transformed, considering that poverty (except voluntary poverty) is always related to the social structure. The change in social structure that is good news is always aimed in achieving a more humane, just, and prosperous society. Restoration of social structures is in the process of transforming the impoverishing social structures is a

manifestation of concrete God's ruling, namely the presence of *eirene*, or *shalom*.

*Fourthly, restoration of the world as a whole in which it includes the eschatological presence of God's ruling in the history of mankind and the world.* A very crucial statement in this text is that the restoration of the world includes Jesus' performance by raising the dead (Luke 7: 11-17). In the Jewish rabbinic tradition it was believed that the end of the age had arrived marked by the rise of the dead. With the resurrection of the dead, God's eschatological ruling has definitively arrived and God's power over this world is clearly present. If God's kingdom is present, then the life will be stronger than death. The event of the resurrection of the dead carried out by Jesus as a sign of the beginning of the end of the age is confirmed again in the narrative of Jesus' own resurrection. In other words, the Easter celebration is actually a form of remembrance to the Christian community that God is ruling now in the world.

## **Reflection: Theological Messages about World Restoration**

The four important points related to the idea of restoration of the world according to Jesus as outlined above invite us to enter into further and deeper reflections about restoring the world towards affirming God's will.

*Firstly*, restoration of the world rests precisely in the presence of the Kingdom of God, namely God who rules the world that transforms its order into a more humane, just, and prosperous one.

*Secondly*, restoration of the world encompasses individual and social domains. The restoration includes not only individual recovery from illness, suffering, and deliverance from the power of evil spirits but also restoration of social structures that lead to society characterized by *shalom*.

*Thirdly*, although in the presence of the Kingdom of God and world restoration center on the power of God, the implications of the creation of a just social structure are borne by humans as well.

*Fourthly*, restoration of the world towards affirming God's will is inclusive and liberating. It is inclusive because all parties of people are called and included in the restoration of community; it is liberating because

the restoration is characterized by liberation from suffering, disease, oppressive religious rules, and evil social structures that cause poverty.

### **Questions for Discussion**

1. In the context of the hegemony of global capitalism, how can God's governing be implemented so that the restoration of the world in creating a just social structure can be conducted?
2. One system of government among many ones in our contemporary world that is closely linked to the hegemony of global capitalism is 'democracy'. How should Christians respond to democracy as a political system and at the same time remain consistent with Jesus' proclamation of God's reigning in the world?
3. Restoration towards affirming God's will overlaps with the presence of God's governing in the world. How can Christians reveal the Kingdom of God and strive to restore society in their respective countries?

# God's Divine Plan for Restoration and Human Response

Rev. Dr. Bal Krishna Sharma\*

## Scripture

*“But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.” (1 Peter 3:15)*

## Introduction

I will be basing our Bible study on 1 Peter 3:15. Our CATS-IX theme is “Reconciliation, Renewal and Restoration: Divine indicative and human imperative.” When we think of reconciliation, it is towards the harmony of whole creation. Whole creation, including human beings need to experience the Shalom of God. God in Christ is active to bring that reconciliation. The original plan of God in creation is perfect and the sin has destroyed that perfection. Therefore, God is active to bring renewal in whole of creation that will lead towards the experience of the fullness of life for which God brought the creation into existence. Book of Isaiah chapter 11 talks about the renewed creation and its characteristics. God is going to renew His creation in order to restore the creation in its original place that will affirm the will of God for His creation.

The context of 1 Peter is the church in the midst of persecution and how it has to endure hardships. The epistle emphasizes that Christians need to have right attitude when they are going through hostile circumstances. They need to have the character of Christ and even in the midst of persecution, they should not seek revenge for the one who does wrong to them. Humanly speaking, it may be very difficult, but the Lord will give his grace and agape love to have such attitude towards others who oppose us. Such attitude is part of reconciliation, renewal and restoration.

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In this Bible study, I would like to concentrate on subtheme 'Restoration: Towards Affirming the Will of God'. The Bible verse under study is 1 Peter 3:15.

Reconciliation, renewal and restoration are closely related words and they have similar concepts. Reconciliation has to take place between God and humans, humans and humans and between human and creation. Such reconciliation brings a renewal in a person, family, community and nation and it will restore the original plan of God for Shalom. Let me develop this study on the above-given Bible verse concentrating of the restoration part of our study.

*(1) "But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord..."*

This verse is simple and asks every Christian to submit to Christ as the Lord. Revere also means to serve Him as the Lord. The idea of Lordship is found in the aspirations of various religions. Submitting to or revering the Lord is strong devotional aspect found in Asian context. In the midst of pluralistic Asian context, how important it is for Christians to revere Christ as their Lord and have that affection to Him from their hearts. The intimacy through devotion, prayer, holy living, and good action is an essential part of revering Christ as Lord. The words were uttered by Apostle Peter in a very religiously pluralistic context of first century where Christianity was under attack and persecuted. When a Christian reveres Christ as Lord, the Lord changes him/her internally. There is a change in attitude and lifestyle. A person is willing to be patient in the hostile environment and has a Christ-like character in dealing with others. When we revere Christ as the Lord and Master of our lives, we become stewards of His purpose. The life of humility and love will be manifested at all times. This does not mean we compromise with wrong things, or wrong lifestyle; we love everyone though we may disagree with the wrong actions people perform. How we disciple Christians with Christ-like attitude is ongoing challenge in any context, but if we continue to have Christian witness, then there is no alternative to intentional discipleship.

Living and working in South Asian context and especially in Nepal, the church is going through hostility and persecution. Christians are not accepted as others. Christianity is considered a foreign religion and Christians are oppressed at all levels. In such situation, Christians need to be sombre and follow Christ as their Lord. Christ has been example of sustaining all hardships and we need to learn from Him.

(2) *“Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have...”*

Once we accept Jesus Christ as the Lord of our lives, we are stewards of His love and we have the responsibilities of being prepared to provide an answer to everyone who is interested to know the hope we have in Christ. Christ is the hope for humanity who reconciles, renews and restores us in the image of God. He has shown us the path of righteousness in this hostile and sinful world. The Word of God gives us the direction on how we need to live in this world with the regenerated hearts and minds. Christ brings a transformation in the lives of people. Many times we do not see and experience such transformation in our lives and in the lives of others, because we are not serious in our lives and what God in Christ can do to us and others.

Christians need to be prepared to give answer to everyone. They need to be willing to give answer and walk extra mile. In order to do this, Christians need to prepare themselves in God's Word, understand their contexts where they live, be service minded and sacrifice their comfort and luxury for the sake of anyone who is in need. Christ has accomplished two major things. He has given meaning of living to each human being. Humans are created in the image of God in order to have fellowship with Him and with one another. Regenerated Christians have the responsibilities of having hope that people could be transformed in this world and they need to work towards it. They have to become agent of reconciliation, renewal and restoration of humanity and environment. They need to assure others that lives on this earth have meaning and that is to serve God and humanity. They have to clearly see the plan of God on this earth. Christians need to testify to the love of God in their lives and pray and expect that Jesus Christ has come to transform lives of people and regenerate them. There is a hope while we live on this earth. Christians also have hope for future. There is eternity and God in Christ has revealed the nature of that eternity. I became a Christian from a Hindu background in 1976 when in Nepal Christians were going through severe persecution. I was searching for the meaning of life and what happens after death. The death and resurrection of Christ was an answer for my longing to know the truth. In Asian context where *samsar*(multiple births and deaths) dominates the concept of people in regards to eternity, Bible is very explicit on the future hope. The resurrection of Christ is the hope for all people that one day they

will be resurrected. This hope of eternity can free people from their wrong perception of afterlife. And this hope of eternal life in Christ has to be told.

*(3) "... But do this with gentleness and respect."*

The ministry of reconciliation, renewal and restoration that Christ has accomplished needs to be communicated with gentleness and respect. This signifies more of our character than our mere knowledge and skills. In order to communicate our hope to others we need to have a gentle spirit and love and respect for others. We need to be sensitive to others when we share our hope to others. We should not be judgemental in our approach. We need to be light and salt to our family, community and nation. In order to be effective in our mission of sharing hope we are required to be gentle and loving. When Bible talks about gentleness and respect it also refers to the fruit of the Holy Spirit mentioned in Galatians 5:22-23. "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, fruitfulness, gentleness, and self-control". Fruit of the Holy Spirit refers to our character and how we deal with other people. Today people are looking for those who have integrity and humility. There is a saying, "If you lose your wealth, you lose nothing, if you lose your health, you lose something, and if you lose your integrity, you lose everything". The fruit of the Spirit is cultivated in our lives every day and it is progressive. The maturity develops in us as we yield to the Holy Spirit by being in the presence of Christ and using our time to study God's Word, see life experiences positively, and have the gift of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. These fruits need to be cultivated intentionally. When we talk of the fruit of the Spirit, we are giving space to our character and God's approved will is that we become like Christ. Becoming Christ is becoming like Him in love, forgiveness, suffering, patience, gentleness, kindness, faithfulness, and self-control. Romans 12:2 says: "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will."

Today there are many problems and challenges in the world. People are rejecting biblical ethical standards. Even many Christians are doing this. In the midst of this confusion, Christ is asking us to make Him our Lord, He is asking us to witness the hope He has given to us and find out the perfect will of God and act accordingly. We live in this world for a

brief time and God has a plan for eternity. Therefore, Christians need to understand God's plan for reconciliation, renewal and restoration.

## **Conclusion**

In this Bible Study, we have taken our text from 1 Peter 3:15 where three aspects have been described: revering Christ in our hearts as Lord; always prepared to provide answers to everyone who ask the reason for our transformation and eternal hope, and these need to be accomplished with love and respect for others. This verse has challenged us on how we live in this world and we are accountable for what God has entrusted to us. We are in the business of reconciliation, renewal, and restoration, and this is in the heart of our Lord. We may face oppositions and persecutions from various sources, but we need to stand firm in our conviction that we are ordained by God to bring a transformation in the lives of others with whom we live and work.

## **Questions for Discussion**

1. What is the purpose of my life in this world, and why God has allowed me to live and serve others?
2. How can I be an agent of reconciliation, renewal, and restoration in the plan of God?

# Restoration of Christian Unity as Fulfilment of God's Will

Dr. Lily Kadoe\*

## Scripture

*"For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building." (1 Corinthians 3:9)*

## Introduction

The theme of restoration is prominent in both the Old Testament and the New Testament of the Bible. The meanings of restoration, according to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, are: (1) the act or process of returning something to its original condition by repairing it, cleaning it, etc., (2) the act of bringing back something that existed before, and (3) the act of returning something that was stolen or taken.

Unlike the regular dictionary meaning of 'restoration' which is to return something back to its original condition, the biblical definition of the word has greater connotations that go above and beyond the typical everyday usage. Repeatedly throughout the Bible, we see that God blesses people for their faith and restores for their losses by giving them more than they previously had before. The biblical meaning of the word 'restoration' is to receive back more than what has been lost to the point where the final state is greater than the original condition. The main point is that someone or something is improved beyond measure.<sup>1</sup>

The meaning of 'restoration' may be interpreted and reflected in many ways: the restoration of creation, the restoration of God's image, the restoration God's people and the restoration of broken relationships, etc. This paper deals with the theme 'restoration' based on the text, 1 Corinthians 3:9.

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<sup>1</sup> What is the Biblical Meaning of The Word "Restoration"?

<http://www.newcalvarydeliverance.org/pdf/Biblical%20Meaning%20of%20Restoration.pdf>

## **Biblical background of the Text**

### *Authorship*

All scholars accept 1 Corinthians as a Pauline letter. During his three years' stay in Ephesus, Paul received bad news of the Corinthian church regarding the immorality of some church members; in response to which he wrote a letter warning them the dangers of immorality (1 Cor. 5:9, 11). Members of Chloe's household also brought reports that the Corinthian church was divided into different parties, and Paul's authority as an apostle was being challenged (1 Cor. 1:11). 1 Corinthians was probably Paul's reply to this letter.<sup>2</sup>

### *Corinth*

Corinth was one of the major urban centres of the ancient Mediterranean and one of the most culturally diverse cities in the Roman Empire. Corinth was known for its prosperity and proverbial sexual looseness of ancient Greek. Corinth seems to have continued in Roman Corinth as well.<sup>3</sup> Since Corinth had a unique location and provided easy access to east and west, it was developed into a city of importance for trade and transportation. Paul recognized the strategic importance of Corinth and stayed there for eighteen months to preach the gospel (Acts 18:11). Many citizens became Christians at that time and a very large and influential Christian community began to establish in Corinth.<sup>4</sup>

The city of Corinth was also characterized by the diverse nature of its society because of its position as an important seaport on one of the busiest routes in the Mediterranean. Roman military personnel, mystics from the east, and Jews from Palestine rubbed shoulders with the philosophers of Greece. It was the home of a wide range of religious and philosophical movements. When Paul had proclaimed the good news about Jesus in this city, a cross-section of people from this cosmopolitan society responded and came together to form the Christian church in Corinth. It goes without saying that men and women from such different spiritual,

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<sup>2</sup> John Drane, *Introducing The New Testament* (Oxford: Lion Publishing plc, 1999), 321

<sup>3</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 1993), 451

<sup>4</sup> John Drane, *Introducing The New Testament* (Oxford: Lion Publishing plc, 1999), 310

intellectual and social backgrounds brought with them into the church diverse concepts and ideas.<sup>5</sup>

### *Problem*

While Paul was there in Corinth, various sections of young congregations were held together, but on his departure these new Christians began to work out for themselves the applications of their Christian faith. As a result, the Church had been divided into four different groups (1 Cor. 1:7-10). Some claimed that their spiritual allegiance was to Paul, others to Apollos, others to Cephas, while still others claimed only to belong to Christ (1 Cor.1:12-13).<sup>6</sup> The division of the church was evidently caused by leaders claiming to be spiritually superior to one another and to adhere to the teachings of various predecessors: Paul, Cephas, Appolos, or Christ (1:12). Paul insisted that they are in error because they had elevated the status of individual leaders on the basis of their superior wisdom and superhuman power (1:18-25). For Paul, the gospel is not about human wisdom and human power, or things that may seem impressive and attractive by normal standards.<sup>7</sup>

Drane discusses that these four groups reflect the diverse backgrounds of the Corinthian Christians: the 'Paul party' would consist of libertines, the 'Cephas party' were legalists, the 'Apollos party' were devotees of the classical Greek outlook, and the 'Christ party' consisted of a group who considered themselves to be above the other parties that had developed around the personalities of ordinary men.<sup>8</sup> He insists that these groups were claiming their own interests.

The *libertines*, who claimed to follow Paul, encouraged the whole church not to worry about moral norms (5:1-13). The *legalists*, claiming to follow Cephas' example, raised the old question of what kind of food Christians should eat, though this time the argument was over food that had been offered in sacrifice to traditional deities before being sold to the public (8-9). The *philosophers*, followers of Apollos, insisted that they had a form of wisdom that was superior to anything Paul had spoken about (1:18-25).

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 322-323

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 323

<sup>7</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 331-332

<sup>8</sup> John Drane, *Introducing The New Testament* (Oxford: Lion Publishing plc, 1999), 323

The *mystics*, claiming they were following Christ, were inclined to argue that the sacraments of the church acted in a 'magic' way, and therefore they need not worry about any possible consequences of their lifestyle (10:1-13). The resurrection had already come, they claimed, and they knew it had, because they themselves had been raised in a mystical way with Christ (15:12-19). They claimed they were now living on a super-spiritual level of existence, far beyond the grasp of the followers of Paul, Cephas or Apollos (see also 4:8).<sup>9</sup>

This division was contrary to Paul's message of the gospel and the ideal of the Christian community. It is difficult to find a church within the framework of New Testament history that did not experience any discord. The church in Jerusalem was troubled with Judaizers (Acts 11:2; 15:1ff), the division among the Christians in Corinthian church (1 Cor. 1:10), and even the Philippian church had its Euodia and Syntyche problem (Philippians 4:2-3).

## **The Causes of the Problem**

The main causes of the division in the Corinthian church were carnality and immaturity. Some Corinthian Christians thought and acted according to the flesh, and not the Spirit. Roman 7 is the portrait of the carnal Christian; indwelt by the Spirit, but mastered by the flesh. The characteristics of the carnality of the Corinthian Christians were jealousy, quarrel, and dispute among them that was mentioned by Paul (1 Cor. 3:3-4).

Another cause of division among the Corinthian Christians was their childishness. They were like children in the Christian faith. Paul said that he had to feed them milk, not solid food, because they were not yet ready for it (1 Cor. 3:2). Christians are expected to come together to that oneness in their faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God. The goal of Christian life is to become a mature person, reaching to the very height of Christ's full stature (Eph. 4:13).

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 325

## **The Will of God for Christians**

Since the Church is God's field and/or God's building (1 Cor. 3:9), it belongs to God alone and Christ is the one and only foundation of the Church (1 Cor. 3:11). "The Christian's target must be blamelessness in the sight of God" (1 Thess. 3:13; 5:23; 1 Cor. 1:8).<sup>10</sup>

The idea of the Church as a building that was built on the rock (Matthew 16:18) is developed by Paul in 1 Cor. 3:9. It leads him to reflect on the idea of God's temple (1 Cor. 3:16). All believers are regarded as God's dwelling place which assumes that each Christian is the temple of God. The notion of a building thus becomes metaphorical and spiritual.<sup>11</sup>

In the future, in a new heaven and a new earth, the Church will be 'prepared and ready like the Bride, the wife of the Lamb, dressed to meet her husband' (Rev. 21:2, 9). There is no temple in the Holy City because its temple is the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb (Rev. 21:22). God will restore the Church in its perfection.

## **The Will of God for the Ministers**

In 1 Cor. 3:5- 4:5, Paul iterates to the Corinthian church that it is foolish of the Corinthians' division over himself and Apollos. He points out that they are only God's servants, partners working together for God, and using their gifts in doing the work which the Lord gave them to do. He illustrates it as farmers and builders who are working in God's farm and constructing God's building. No one is better than other; everyone is doing their own responsibility.

However, Paul warns that only the final judgment will arbitrate decisively what was in the hearts of God's servants and how well they were devoted to their work (4:3-5). Jesus is coming soon and will bring the rewards with him, to give to each one according to what they has done (Rev. 22:12). God does not reward his servants according to their success; he rewards them according to their faithful labour.

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<sup>10</sup> Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1981), 860

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 748

## **The Will of God for the Christian Unity**

Paul urged the Corinthian Christians to have unity among them, “I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no division among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought.”<sup>12</sup>

Our Lord Jesus Christ prayed for the unity of the believers, “I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one..., that they may be one as we are one” (John 17:20-21).

### **How can we have Restoration?**

Love and forgiveness are the most important elements in restoration. Broken relationships among the Christians can be restored by God’s love and forgiveness.

“I gave you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” (John 13:34)

“Be kind to one another, tender hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.” (Eph. 4:32)

### **Conclusion**

Restoration is a process and it takes time. God is restoring his Church, his people and his world according to his will. Christians are the co-workers with God in his mission. Faithful servants would be rewarded, and unity and oneness is a key of success in God’s mission.

Today, there are many ‘false doctrines’ spreading among the Christians in the world. Popular speakers have their own fans or groupies. Christians should not be the worldly disciples like the Corinthians, following popular preachers, grouping among themselves, and following denominations.

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<sup>12</sup> 1 Cor. 1:10 (NIV)

## **Questions for Discussion**

1. How is the Corinthian church a reflection of our churches today?
2. How can we restore Christian unity which is God's will for his Church?

# **The Public Role of the Churches in Myanmar**

Dr. Pum Za Mang\*

## **Introduction**

I am deeply humbled and honoured when I unexpectedly received a letter of invitation from General Secretary of the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) to make a modest contribution to the Bible Studies section of its forthcoming conference in Medan, Indonesia from 5 to 10 August of 2019. While gladly accepting his kind invitation, I almost instantly thought of some crucial and relevant topics for serious deliberation and deeper exploration theologically, contextually, and morally. As a young scholar and writer keenly interested in and extensively working on the historically complex interplay between religion, politics, and ethnicity in contemporary Myanmar, I, then, decided to prepare my biblical study based on current polarizing issues facing the Burmese public in general and Burmese Christians in particular.

Despite the slow, but not unexpected process of positive political democratization taking place in Myanmar after 2011, we, the Burmese, continue to witness a series of humanitarian disasters rapidly engulfing and mercilessly afflicting the countless lives of our fellow Burmese in many parts of the country. It must be stressed that Myanmar was under vicious direct military rule for over half a century, so anyone who has ever become familiar enough with the chilling reality of our political history knows so well that life was never easy. It is, however, possible for people outside Myanmar to now assume that such human evils always associated with military rule were left behind. That is, unfortunately, not really the case, for the simple reason that the same evils of hatred, violence, and killing continue to ruin the lives of men, women, and even little children collectively.

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Sadly and shamefully, the ruling political elites and economic cronies keep amassing their fortunes, whereas ordinary Burmese citizens, especially minorities, face many challenges tearing apart their communities. Well, out of many daunting trials confronting us, Burmese Christians, I hereby underscore 3 main points of serious concern for further deliberation: biblically, morally, and theologically.

### *Northern Rakhine*

Firstly, what has happened to minority Muslims in the western frontier of Myanmar in the recent past has captured the hearts and minds of all the people across the globe. Due to a series of military onslaughts, over 700,000 Muslims left their homes behind and sought refuge in Bangladesh; therefore prompting rights activists, journalists, religious leaders, and political leaders to denounce military rulers and Aung San Suu Kyi. The way stateless Rohingya were suppressed and persecuted has been systematic and strategic. What is possibly at the heart of this humanitarian catastrophe? Well, a combination of religious nationalism, political paranoia, and ethnic protectionism has certainly played a decisive role when they were expelled from Northern Rakhine.

### *Kachin Conflict*

Secondly, what has tested Myanmar's Christians morally and theologically in recent years is a grave humanitarian crisis facing the Christian religious minority in Kachin, in the northern frontier of Myanmar. A civil war that was bitterly fought between Kachin soldiers and the Myanmar army in Kachin State and Northern Shan State forced tens of thousands of Kachin civilians to flee their homes, and the war refugees living in temporary camps on the Myanmar-China border are estimated to number roughly 130,000. Though international and national aid groups sought to bring in some humanitarian aids to help them, the Myanmar army has frequently prevented such responsible attempts as a form of punishing the entire Kachin population collectively. As a result, Kachin men, women, and children continue lingering in unsafe and unprotected refugee camps.

## *Myitsone Dam*

Thirdly, the single most important natural resource in Myanmar is the river of Irrawaddy: primarily because over 60 percent of the Burmese depend on it, in one way or another. Irrawaddy has been extremely crucial to the Kachin ethnic identity and Myanmar's civilization for centuries, such that the modern-day people of Myanmar highly regard and dearly cherish it collectively. It is, however, now facing the spectre of a mega dam project locally known as Myitsone Dam. At present, China has pushed for the resumption and completion of this extremely controversial project even at the potential risk of fanning the flames of anti-Chinese sentiment among the Myanmar citizens. Scholars, writers, activists, and ordinary civilians all over Myanmar are leading the way in the fight to protect Irrawaddy because they know their future depends on it. Nobody knows, though, what the future holds for the single most important river in our country; as the political, financial, and economic influence of China increasingly shapes and impacts the political destiny of smaller nations in Southeast Asia just like Myanmar.

## **Theological Reflection**

As a scholar who lived in Mandalay, the heart of the civilization of Myanmar for many years, and writes many articles about religious nationalism and ethnic identity in the country, I know for sure the level of public sentiment against Myanmar Muslims in general and stateless Rohingya in particular. Even just the use of the term 'Rohingya' is prohibited, let alone talking about equality and justice for all the Myanmar people, including what the government-military tells us to call Muslims in Rakhine State.

As Christians, we, however, need to oppose all cynical government policies of racial hatred and sectarian violence against any ethnic, religious, or linguistic groups in our country, especially the oppressed, the dehumanized, the marginalized, and the demonized among us. Why? Loving, embracing, and caring the weak, the helpless, the aliens, and the least among us is at the very heart of the teachings of Jesus Christ. We are also called upon to love our neighbours of all ethnicities, faiths, and cultures as our brothers and sisters (Matthew 22:39). Moreover, we are, likewise, taught that if we truly want to see Jesus Christ, we can see him in the very eyes and lives of the least among us (Matthew 25: 35-40). In the particular

case of our country, we can meet him in the shattered lives of the least-wanted and most persecuted religious group in our country, the Rohingya.

The nature, context, and substance of my argument are not based on Myanmar's history, law, nationalism or anything like that, but singularly on what we would call moral responsibility that we are expected to embody. As responsible Christians who follow the teachings of Jesus Christ, we are entrusted with the moral and ecclesiastical obligations to stand firmly and raise our prophetic voices for stateless Rohingya. They are also the children of God, and we are all one in humanity.

The case of Kachin refugees in the northern frontier of Myanmar is also an important issue we could hardly avoid when we keep our commitment and loyalty to God as Myanmar's Christians. As part of the ministry and mission of the church, we badly need to help our Kachin brothers and sisters living in refugee camps without enough food, clothes, and other basic needs. Protecting the vulnerable, assisting the defenceless, and embracing the excluded essentially remain part and parcel of how we worship God. What is important to keep in mind, moreover, is that when we aid them, we, actually, help Jesus Christ himself, given that Jesus Christ was once a political refugee in Egypt (Matthew 2:13-15).

As Myanmar's Christians, we furthermore need to oppose any state policies that promote hatred, violence, and war among different ethnic and religious groups in our country; particularly the chronic war in the north devastating Kachin societies across the country. At the same time, we must call for the presence of justice, equality, and freedom for all the people of Myanmar biblically because God constantly calls upon us to proclaim the good news of freedom to the poor, the oppressed, and the dehumanized (Luke 4:18).

Finally, as responsible citizens and committed Christians cherishing and loving our ancestral country to the full, we must lead the way in the just and legitimate fight to protect the river of Irrawaddy against the pathetic and despicable policy of China on our natural resources in Myanmar. It must be stressed theologically here that God has given us this important river that has sustained and nourished the lives of our ancestors for centuries in the past; and as our future generations too will be dependent on it, we are morally responsible to defend it. In other words, Irrawaddy is the most important national treasure of our country and people,

and the forced use of it for Chinese interests at the expense of the people of Myanmar is immoral, unethical, and unjust. China must respect the will of the Myanmar and the integrity of our national border. God tells us to respect our border. “Do not move an ancient boundary stone set by your ancestors” (Proverbs 22: 28). The case of Myitsone dam is, after all, a matter of justice and injustice, and life and death, and the church must stand for the sake of justice and life.

## **Conclusion**

I am fully aware that contextual theology is essentially central to the life and ministry of CCA as a matter of principle. Thus, I deliberately confine myself, while writing this small paper, to the emerging public issues that the Myanmar Christian brothers and sisters encounter in their local contexts. In restoring the broken Myanmar society, we must affirm and embody the will of God by becoming an instrument of God for justice, equality, and peace for all the Myanmar people; particularly for the aliens, the oppressed, and the dehumanized. Well, when we stand for others, we can, of course, face the many dangers like defamation, arrest, and even physical violence. But, Jesus Christ, through the parable of the Good Samaritan, teaches us to do exactly that (Luke 10:25-37). What first comes to the mind and thought of the Good Samaritan is not about his own safety, but about what could next happen to a man attacked by robbers. We are called to do the same as Jesus set a role model for us, all Christians.

## **Questions for Discussion**

1. To what extent should Christians comply with the notion of separation between church and state?
2. How shall we, Christians, respond to the polarizing reality of religious nationalism?

# God's Purpose of Restoration

Rev. Dr. Majit Abel\*

## Scripture

*"But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. "Do not fear their threats' do not be frightened." 15 But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect." (1 Peter 3:14-15)*

## Introduction

On Easter morning this year, just as I was heading toward the pulpit to preach my Easter sermon of hope of the resurrection in the face of death and troubles, I was informed of the most devastating news of a series of bomb attacks in Sri Lankan Churches and hotels. The idea of the physical and emotional pain of the victims was unimaginable. Terror had struck again. My heart melted for the victims and their families. It also reminded me of the pain and suffering caused by such attacks on worshippers in my country. According to authentic reports, the overall Global Terrorism Index of the world has worsened in past 5 years. My own country is 3<sup>rd</sup> on the list of top ten countries with the most suicide bombers. Worship services have to be protected by armed guard.

As a pastor and as a church leader the first challenge that comes to mind is how does one handle a difficult trial or painful experience that disrupts one's life? How must one best approach the emotions caused by such difficult times? The task of today's Asian leaders is ever more challenging when we see our Asia marred by religious and ethnic tensions, changes in the governments, election dramas, economic struggles, natural disasters, displaced people, refugee influx, lack of clean and drinking water, arms race, weather changes, rising inequality, disparity, human trafficking, drugs, political turmoil, population explosion and the poisoning of air quality. All these challenges compounded together are pressing against life, thus draining it of its fullness. Despite all the technological development and

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economic growth,ensuring peace and maintaining stability remains a challenge.

The text of this Bible study from 1 Peter qualifies for speaking some sense out of such dark seasons and for challenging us to proactively stand against the evil that marches toward us to destroy us.

## **Context of our text**

Apostle Peter, who originally was a fisherman but now was a distinguished disciple, was a “witness of the sufferings of Christ” (5:1) in the early Christian Church. He probably wrote from Rome around A.D. 62-63 addressing the believers in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, Roman provinces in Asia Minor, north of the Taurus Mountains, and modern day Turkey. It was during Nero’s reign:a period of the first government-sanctioned great persecutionand large-scale execution of Christians. Peter sought to help church members understand that if they endured persecution, they would receive salvation and eternal glory. He reminded the saints that they were “a chosen generation, royal priesthood” (1-Peter 2:9).

Peter emphasises that those who suffer should be full of hope, because they would receive salvation through Christ’s death and resurrection. He wanted them to stand firm in the grace of God. He could imagine the persecution that they were about to suffer.

He says, “*Do not fear their threats*”– a quote from Isaiah 8, King Ahaz of Judah was in trouble because the king of Israel and the king of Syria made a coalition to attack him. Isaiah came to king Ahaz and told him not to worry about their threats. The Lord was going to take care of them.

“*In your hearts revere Christ as Lord*” –Here, Peter exhorts the believers to challenge the Roman and Greek polytheistic culture; and to proclaim Christ as God above all; that there is no other, not even Caesar. Daniel was able to boldly stand before the king, as he was determined in his heart to not let the Lord be defiled. It all must begin there. We can stand publicly because we kneel privately. Before we go into the world, we must ensure that Jesus is our Lord.

*“Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have”* – Here, ‘answer’ (*apologia, apology, apologetics*) means “defence of their faith in Christ”: just as the manner in which lawyers formally argue the defence of their clients, and not in the apology of being a Christian; i.e. “I am sorry I am a Christian”. Those who do not believe will always have good questions. Christians should have good answers. To know what you believe is not enough. You need to know why you believe what you believe. Love the Lord with all your might, and wisdom.

*“The hope that you have...”* - Through the death and resurrection of Jesus we will be resurrected. God will make every thing new; just as it was before the Fall.

*“But do this with gentleness and respect”*- The gentle manner is not win the argument, but to win souls. In 1999 Graham Staines was burned with his two sons by militant Hindus. His wife wrote a letter, which was published in all Indian papers saying, “...I am not bitter nor angry. But I have a desire that every citizen of this country establish their own personal relationship with Jesus Christ who gave His life for their sins...” This is ideally how Christians must respond.

## **The Garden of Blessing: A Theological Reflection**

The earth and the sun, moon and stars were created for the sole purpose of glorifying God through the God-fearing, holy, and free-will-living of humanity. The almighty and creator God made them in His own image, which shows the worth of every man, woman, and child, to look after the resources of nature (Gen. 1:26-30) and to share them equitably with their neighbours. God blessed Adam and Eve and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number, fill earth and subdue it” (Gen. 1:28). God’s Word makes it clear that everything God created, He gave it to Adam and Eve to manage it as responsible stewards, not as the owners (“The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it” Ps. 24:1; “The land is mine” Lev. 25:23).

Stewardship, in its broader sense, is used for human responsibility to manage wisely the things and the property that is bestowed upon them by the creator God who is the one who owns everything. All human beings are God’s creatures. God made them in His own image to glorify Him and

to care for the creation with responsibility. This responsibility included animals and all life, as well as water, minerals, energy, and environment.<sup>2</sup>

However, humans as God's image bearers have failed to recognize the full implication of their responsibility. They have opted to serve their own interests, with the consequences of greed, insecurity, violence, and the lust for power. "Now we know that God's judgement against those who do such things is based on truth" (Rom.2:2). Sin entered in human life through the disobedience of Adam and Eve. The close relationship that they cherished with God was broken. Death entered and brought curse upon the whole creation. The relationship between Adam and Eve was instantly corrupted. They fought over who was to blame for their mistakes. Their sons fought, and Cain killed Abel. Subsequently, we see an increase in violence, hatred, jealousy, pollution and divine retribution - all because of sin. Wars, destruction and disintegration, earthquakes, floods, plagues all befell humanity. According to Gen. 3:17-19, God said, "...Cursed is the ground because of you, through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you..."

Yet, instead of letting loose the holy anger on them, God immediately had a plan to restore them. He made clothes for them and promised them saying, "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel." (Gen. 3:15). Thus, God revealed the original divine purpose of restoring everything back to where it was. The subsequent scriptural and God's history reveals how God is active to ensure the fulfilment of the divine purpose of restoring the creation to a new order in which the consequences of sin would no longer appear. The preaching of the Old Testament prophets and the teaching of Jesus and the apostles presume such a restoration (Isaiah 65:17; 66:22; 2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 21:1).

Lev. 26:44 says, "Yet in spite of this, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them or abhor them so as to destroy them completely, breaking my covenant with them. I am the LORD their God."

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<sup>2</sup> *The Church in Response to Human Need*, edited by Vinay Samuel and Christopher Sugden, Grand Rapids, USA and Oxford, UK: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co. and Regnum Books, 1987

They were allowed to be “in the land of their enemy”, and their society, state, and temple was destroyed. Over and over they messed up. Yet, God preserved them in his providence as a distinct people remembering the covenant of their forefathers; until they shall all be restored to his favour under Christ Jesus, the great Shepherd. With the liberating and healing power of His Good News, He will reconcile people to God and bring all hostilities to an end.

In Rev.21:5 God says, "He who sat upon the throne said, 'Behold I make all things new.'" And after he had said it, he added, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." So God wants us to read this and be sure of it. He wants us to have assurance that no matter how much evil and suffering and futility we see now, he will make all things new. God is going to make us new: spiritually and morally; physically and bodily. God is going to make the creation and even our relationship with him new.

## **Conclusion**

Asian world is dealing with issues of wide-ranging scale, and so we must display the readiness that Peter wishes to see in the church. It is high time for all Asian churches to come forward, identify, and prioritize the key issues and concerns in order to restore the present condition of the creation to God's purpose. This calls for the obedience of the individuals and communities to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which has the power of changing men and women by freeing them from the guilt and the consequences of sin, so that they get the ability to respond toward God and toward each other with love (Rom. 5:5), and making them “new creatures in Christ” (2 Cor. 5:17). There is an urgent need for the Asian churches to make a commitment to act in mercy and seek justice in order to deal against social, economic, political, and religious systems that are marked by injustice, exploitation, and oppression. Social transformation is an intrinsic part of the churches mission of proclamation of the Gospel. It means striving to bring peace among individuals, races, and nations by overcoming prejudices, fears, and preconceived ideas about others. It means sharing basic alternatives like food, water, the means of healing, and knowledge. It also means working for a greater participation of people in the decisions which affect their lives, making possible an equal receiving from others and giving of themselves. Finally, it means growing up into Christ in all things as a body of people dependent upon the work of the Holy Spirit and upon each other.

## **Questions for Discussion**

1. What will you say if you are asked what is the reason for your hope?
2. What things can we do to collaborate with the Holy Spirit in the process of restoration?

# Repent, Redeem, and Restore

Rt. Rev. ShourabhPholia\*

## Scripture

*“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. 2 And I saw a holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with the man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. 4 He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” 5 And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.” Also, he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.” (Revelation 21:1-5)*

## Introduction

God created this world and the whole universe. God created them with a purpose and they all are interconnected and interrelated. They are connected or related to the creator as well. All creation is connected with the Creator, who is the source of all creation. When God created, everything was good. All creations had different roles to play in this universe. Even the human being also had a special role to play on behalf of the Creator to care for the whole of creation as God created them in His/Her own image. All creation played their own role and continued faithfully, but unfortunately, humankind misconstrued its role and they played a destructive role. They failed to fulfill the will of Creator but they were determined to fulfill their own selfish will. They forgot that they were *malik*<sup>4</sup> but acted as though they were *malik*<sup>5</sup> over Creation. They disobeyed God, and they were banished. They were expelled from Heaven, from God and even from the Creation. Its result is death. Losing the connection with

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<sup>4</sup> Bengali word for ‘caretaker’.

<sup>5</sup> Bengali word for ‘owner’.

God and with Creation brings death spiritually and physically. Genesis chapter 3 shows how humankind disobeyed God and its result. Though humankind failed, God tried to reconcile with them and promised to restore the whole creation; and sent our Saviour to unite all in God once again. And therefore, God proclaimed, "Behold, I am making all things new."

The new creation includes the restoration of the lost image of humankind. Humankind needs to be renewed, and must also renew their role for the whole creation. Being stewards, human beings should care for and love the creation, and restore the creation so that the will of God can be fulfilled to have new earth and a new heaven. We have done huge damage to God's creation. As humankind, we change very fast due to rapid developments, but the whole creation changes due to the interrelations of its constituents. It changes because we are harming it, we are misusing it and we are polluting it every single moment; even when we are sleeping (when using air conditioners, or heating our homes with wood, coal or gas) we are affecting the creation. As the whole creation is in a chain so the impact of our unfaithfulness towards the Creator's command affects the whole Creation but the process is slow as it affects the whole, but it is enormous destruction and mislay. Thus, the time has come to repent.

In Romans 8:22 we see Paul writing, "We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time." In the same chapter, we see that Christ and Holy Spirit came to restore the creation and our souls. Being God's creations, we need to respond to God's will and restore the creation. As we are the cause of the destruction, we need to repent and reconcile with the whole creation. To care for the creation is our calling at the present time which is the will of God. To respond to the call of God, we must repent. Yes, the whole humankind should repent, and fast! Repent because we need to respond to the will of God to restore and to make all things new. Therefore, we should stop, turn back and ask forgiveness to God the Creator. Then, we must fast as God expects from us, "Is not this kind of fasting I have chosen: to lose the chains of injustice? We should and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke." (Is. 58:6). Yes, we should return from doing injustices against the Creation and we should turn away from oppressing the Creation. If truly we repent and fast, we will be able to respond to the will of God. By repentance and fasting, we connect ourselves with our Creator and His Creation. When we are truly connected with God and the creation faithfully, only then we can be true stewards and

play our role devotedly. When we repent and fast, we are with God to restore, reconcile and renew the whole creation to have a new heaven and earth. Only then we dare to dream about a new creation.

## **Jesus came for Restoration**

God sent Jesus to restore the whole world. In John 3:16 we see it is written, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." Jesus came to restore and reconcile the whole world which includes all creation. Jesus came to place God's creation in the right place once again to make everything new. It is clearly described in Revelation that God will make all things new. In Greek, there are two words for the word "new": one is *Neos* (Nea) and the other is *Kainos* (Kaina). *Neos* is used for a new one and the *kainosis* used for renewed one. *Kainos* is not a recent one but it is renewed or changed from an old one. The word *kainos*, then, is hope for restoration. The old creation which we have damaged will be renewed. The word *kainos* is used in Revelation which gives hope for the restoration of the creation. This is the will of God which God wanted by sending His/Her son in this world.

## **Ignored Commandment and call for stewardship**

In OT, we are asked to obey the Sabbath day; and even in the Ten Commandments God asked of us, "You shall remember and keep the Sabbath day holy." Through this Sabbath, God wanted to restore the creation and wanted to reconcile all in Him/Her. God wanted us to care for the whole of His/Her creation, to restore them and help them to grow and renew. But we have ignored, forgotten and misinterpreted the commandments which God gave us to restore and care the creation. To make all things new we need to be a co-worker with God. We all need to obey God's command and should not forget or disobey the commands. God's commands are not optional, they are obligatory. Therefore, we need to take it seriously and should obey them for our own benefits and to restore the creation so that all can have abundant lives. We need to remember that we cannot choose from the commandments according to our will as they were given for us to follow and act accordingly. They were given so that we all can have the fullness of life. The new heaven and new earth is God's desire and being God's steward, co-worker, *mali*, we need to

work for the restoration and renewal of this world so that we can have the opportunity to enjoy the new earth and new heaven here in this world.

## **Conclusion**

Being a Christian, our responsibility is to serve and preserve the creation which God gave us in Genesis 1: 28, “dominion over the Earth”. By saying this, God gave responsibility to humankind to not exploit it but to exercise power over them as God does with care and love. God put Adam and Eve in the garden in order ‘to till’ and ‘to keep’ the land. The concept of the words ‘till’ and ‘keep’ often may be misleading. In Hebrew, the word for ‘till’ is used to depict the service that a slave gives to a master, and the word for ‘keep’ means to preserve for future generations. Therefore, here the mandate is ‘to serve and to preserve’ the earth. Here, God’s will was to restore and care for creation, the command was not to be exercised to serve our own wants and desires, but to serve the best interests and well-being of all Earth-community together; including ourselves. Caring for creation or greening mission is, therefore, our vocation with a hope for new creation. A fundamental principle of Christianity is the experience of oneness with creation by uniting with the Creator God. God’s covenant with Noah and all creation affirm that God’s creation is in solidarity with each other (Gen 9:8-17). This solidarity also is seen in worshiping the same creator God by all creation, “Let the sea roar and all that fills it; let the field exult and everything in it. Then shall the trees of the forest sing for joy” (1 Chr. 16:29-34). Psalm 148 also calls all creation to praise God, “Praise the name of the Lord”. Therefore, being a Christian, a part of the body of Christ we have the responsibility to be with the whole creation and to be faithful to the call of God to serve the whole creation. We need to do it by obeying God’s command, by repentance and by restoring the creation. If we do it faithfully, God has promised to make everything new for us. Let us hope and care for the creation of our own benefits and for our own generation to survive.

## **Questions for Discussion**

1. How must we understand the mystery of true repentance in order to positively respond towards just restoration?
2. How can the church re-live the experience of Pentecost in the face of global warming disaster and war; and aspire for a ‘new heaven and earth’?