

THE HIGH COST OF BIBLICAL RECONCILIATION

The Lausanne Consultation on Jewish Evangelism – North America
April 20-22, 2015

GALEN PETERSON, D.Miss.

Executive Director, American Remnant Mission, Pleasant Hill, California
Adjunct professor of intercultural studies, Western Seminary, Portland, Oregon & San Jose, California

Reconciliation, from the Greek term, καταλλάσσω (*katallasso*), refers to people “exchanging enmity for peaceful relations.” This paper builds upon my previous work on biblical reconciliation where it was demonstrated that two primary forms of reconciliation are evident historically and in contemporary settings—justice-based and forgiveness-based reconciliation.¹ In classical ancient extra-biblical writings, *katallasso* is employed exclusively with a justice basis. It is only in the New Testament that we encounter the term being used with an emphasis on forgiveness. Coupled with the fact that no corresponding Hebrew term exists in the Old Testament, we are left with the conclusion that the pivotal event of the New Testament—the atoning death of Messiah—brought a transformation of the concept of reconciliation that was not present before the cross.

Nevertheless, the history of Christianity, underscored by the Crusades and the Inquisition, is tragically marked with failures of applying biblical reconciliation and resorting to compulsory forms of justice. And just as in those earlier times, it remains possible today to persist in employing methods of reconciliation that do not rely upon the spiritual transformation that results from saving faith in Jesus (Rom 12:2). Thus it is imperative that we recognize the distinctions between these forms of reconciliation in order to remain steadfast in practicing what God has established in His written Word, not according to the traditions of men. In summary, non-biblical reconciliation bears the following characteristics:

- The *initiator* is usually the offending party seeking to appease the offended party.
- The *means* is based on justice and equity.
- The *extent* is unidirectional—limited to the parties of the dispute.
- The *result* is a change from enmity to peaceful relations that may or may not endure.

Biblical reconciliation, on the other hand, is grounded in the writings of the Apostle Paul (Rom 5:8-10; 1 Cor 7:11; 2 Cor 5:18; Eph 2:13-16; Col 1:19-20). Collectively they describe the transformed reconciliation of Jesus with these characteristics:

- The *initiator* is not the offender, but the one who is offended. Moreover, the act is not dependent on the worthiness of the enemy, as exemplified in the reconciliation of God being offered “while we were yet sinners” (Rom 5:8).²

¹ “Proclaiming the Prince of Peace: Missiological Implications of Biblical Reconciliation,” presented at the Evangelical Theological Society annual conference, Baltimore, November 20, 2013, and the Lausanne Consultation on Jewish Evangelism – North America annual conference, Chicago, March 4, 2014, (<http://www.remnant.net/Reconciliation.pdf>).

² To reinforce the lack of worthiness of humanity, Paul employs a measure of synonymous parallelism by also stating that the reconciliation of Christ was enacted “while we were still helpless” (v. 6) and “while we were enemies” (v. 10).

- The *means* is forgiveness of sin through Christ's death on the cross, which also satisfies the foundational need for justice (Rom 5:9).
- The *extent* is bidirectional—a concurrent process vertically with God and horizontally with other people.
- The *result* is a change from hostility to peaceful relations between God and people that endures. The same is true for barriers that separate people from one another when the above principles are practiced, resulting in “one new man” (Eph 2:15). In Scripture, the reconciliation between people is not directly sought, but is rather a beneficial byproduct of the reconciliation established between God and people.

Reconciliation responses among Palestinian Christians and Messianic Jews

Within the context of conflict between Palestinians and Israelis, both forms of reconciliation are evident in our present day. Some efforts are organized by groups with the intent of facilitating reconciliation, while others are more informal. As shown in my previous paper, reconciliation between believing Arabs and Jews within Israel has largely been realized because of opportunities to build relationships and to practice love, forgiveness and empathy.

But in light of the current socio-political environment, cross-border relationships between Palestinian and Israeli believers have become constrained, and thus reconciliation has remained elusive. Three primary responses have arisen from this isolation. Proponents of Palestinian liberation theology³ have engaged in a polemical approach, punctuated by their archetypical document, “Kairos Palestine.” Their version of reconciliation is manifested in two ways. One is to blame Israel for all sins and evils associated with the conflict, subsumed under the term “occupation,” while minimizing any responsibility within their own Palestinian community.⁴ The other is to pressure Israel to bend to their will through the BDS movement (boycotts, divestment and sanctions) that has been promulgated in partnership with Muslim and secular organizations, Palestinian political parties, student groups and denominations.⁵ The BDS movement is promoted as being a non-violent form of “resistance to the occupation.”⁶ But in reality it is a form of economic violence that is not just a protest, but is intended to cause harm by coercion. It stands resolutely in opposition to the teachings of Jesus who practiced non-resistance (Mat 5:38-42; 1 Pet 2:23), and of Paul who called believers to “overcome evil with good” (Rom 12:2). Altogether, one might rightly characterize the approach of liberation theologians as an extreme form of justice-based reconciliation that is, more precisely, non-reconciliation.

The second response comes from evangelicals, a minority subset of Palestinian Christianity, who have been the primary proponents of reconciliation in the region. Their approach incorporates elements of biblical reconciliation, but also with a stronger emphasis on justice. The same is true for Musalaha, a Jerusalem-based organization that has been working toward reconciliation since the early 1990's and has both Arabs and Jews engaged in their work.

³ The innovator of Palestinian liberation theology is Anglican priest Naim Ateek and the founder of the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center based in Jerusalem.

⁴ “Kairos Palestine: A Moment of Truth” (<http://www.kairospalestine.ps/sites/default/Documents/English.pdf>), 2009, p.12.

⁵ The theological rationale is described in “Kairos Palestine,” p.13. For a list of signatories to the “BDS Call,” see “Palestinian Civil Society Call for BDS,” (<http://www.bdsmovement.net/call>).

⁶ For an explanation of this connection, see “Palestinian Nonviolent Resistance to Occupation Since 1967,” in *Faces of Hope: A Campaign Supporting Nonviolent Resistance and Refusal in Israel and Palestine*, Fall, 2005, (<https://afsc.org/sites/afsc.civicactions.net/files/documents/PalNonviolentResistOccupation1967.pdf>).

The third response comes from many Messianic Jews who have been indifferent to reconciliation with Christians in the Palestinian Authority, in part due to the apathy that arises from not having to deal with the daily struggles Palestinians face, and in part by needing to maintain a focus on their own struggles for acceptance within Israeli society.⁷ In addition, theological issues cannot be minimized, especially differences of opinion over entitlement to the land as a divine right. But Messianic Jews are also troubled by liberation theology teachings that make unity currently unrealistic with that large segment of Palestinian Christianity. Much of that concern centers around the particular form of liberation theology practiced in Palestine that denies the authority of the canon of Scripture, especially regarding the Old Testament, which they say justifies Zionism.⁸

Messianic Jews retain a measure of indifference to Palestinian evangelicals as well. Most notably a great dispute has arisen over the three biennial Christ at the Checkpoint conferences because they have been perceived by many Messianics as being manipulative and a vehicle for using Scripture to delegitimize Israel. This dispute is further enhanced by the inclusion of CATC speakers who hold to liberation theology, endorse BDS, and some who are considered to harbor anti-Semitic leanings, thus prompting many Messianic Jews to doubt the sincerity of evangelicals who call for reconciliation but leave an unclear separation from those who are calling for Israel's replacement by a Palestinian state.⁹ This indifference is not without exceptions. Evan Thomas, Lisa Loden and Dan Juster, among others, are Messianic Jews who have been engaged in reconciliation efforts for many years. Nevertheless, a comprehensive dedication to reconciliation has yet to emerge from the Messianic community.¹⁰

In circumstances marked by conflict, costs are inevitable. So it seems pertinent to identify the costs associated with reconciliation models, as well as the cost of failing to engage in any form of reconciliation.

The Cost of Doing Nothing

It is easy to talk about reconciliation, and to preach it. But it is mere lip service if we fail to back up our words with our deeds and end up doing nothing about it. We lose credibility on every side by virtue of failing to live out our convictions. It results in a disunity that has been called “a scandal to the gospel.”¹¹ In his assessment of contemporary models of forgiveness, Célestin Musekura identifies two arguments that inhibit forgiveness and thus reconciliation. One

⁷ Salim J. Munayer and Lisa Loden, *Through My Enemy's Eyes: Envisioning Reconciliation in Israel-Palestine* (Milton Keynes, England: Paternoster Press, 2013), 98. For a discussion on apathy and justice, see “The Anatomy of Apathy” in Ken Wystma, *Pursuing Justice* (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson, 2013), 183-197.

⁸ For example, Naim Ateek holds to classic liberation theology in terms of locating revelation in the human struggles of history, not in Scripture. He states: “It is important to emphasize that faith for many Christians is not totally dependent on the historical accuracy of the biblical documents.” (“The Letter Kills, But the Spirit Gives Life,” *Cornerstone* 67 [Fall 2013], p. 4). He further declares his antipathy for the Old Testament: “Whatever does not agree with the hermeneutic of God's love for all people has no authority for us and must not be read even if it is written in the Bible” (“Today the Scripture is Fulfilled,” *Cornerstone* 68 [Winter/Spring 2014], p. 3).

⁹ This objective is manifested in a variety of ways, from speeches, writings, videos, artwork and other forms of symbolism, and religious-political movements such as Hamas, whose charter calls for the removal of the “Zionist invasion” (Article 35) and replacing it with an Islamic state from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea (Article 6).

¹⁰ This broad spectrum of engagement/disengagement is illustrated in online petitions that endorse reconciliation (see <http://www.comeandsee.com/view.php?sid=1254>) and those that reject programs claiming to be reconciliatory but are considered to be flawed (<http://www.petitionbuzz.com/petitions/doi>).

¹¹ Ross Langmead, “Transformed Relationships: Reconciliation as the Central Model for Mission,” *Mission Studies* 25 (2008) 16.

is that forgiveness is for the weak. The other is that forgiveness perpetuates injustice. He asks:

“Might such ideas have contributed to the fact that though many religious groups say they greatly value forgiveness, they actually fail to forgive specific offenses? They fall into the malaise of Christian forgiveness—the gap between extensive Christian teaching on forgiveness and actual accounts of interpersonal forgiveness on the part of Christians.”¹²

As Jesus unequivocally declared: “If you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions” (Mat 6:15; cf. Mat 18:35). Paul makes a similar linkage by calling upon believing communities to exercise forgiveness because of the forgiveness they have received (Eph 4:32; Col 3:13). This concept can be understood as a description of a person whose heart (or way of thinking) has not been transformed through faith in Jesus and thus does not comprehend the nature of true forgiveness. So it can be a statement with eternal implications and an affirmation of the critical nature of communicating the gospel. But it can also be understood as a statement regarding credibility. In the New Testament, ἀφίημι (*aphiemi*), generally translated as “forgive,” is frequently used in a business sense of forgiving debt. In such cases, punishment is cancelled and abated, and the former debtor is able to regain his ability to function in the community. But without such forgiveness of the debt, his credibility (or what we might call today his credit rating) would be damaged.

And so it is in terms of the debts of sinful behavior that pile up in situations of conflict. The believing Palestinian and Israeli communities, and Christianity as a whole by association, are taking a great hit on credibility as long as forgiveness is not realized. Thus the perpetuation of the status quo not only harms the communities in tangible ways of violence and hardship, but the credibility of what they believe.

The cost of unbiblical or incomplete reconciliation

Several organized reconciliation efforts are evident in the Israel-Palestine context. One model practiced in the Arab culture known as *sulha* emphasizes securing justice first before forgiveness.¹³ Likewise, those from a Palestinian liberation theology perspective invariably focus on issues of perceived injustice and only make allowances for forgiveness at the conclusion when the desired measure of justice has been reached.¹⁴ Another Christian model lists “50 Ways to Act for Peace with Justice,” including lobbying, utilizing international courts, practicing civil disobedience, engaging in economic and academic boycotts, and praying for peace and justice. But there is no mention whatsoever of forgiveness, the gospel, or teaching from Scripture.¹⁵

¹² Célestin Musekura, *An Assessment of Contemporary Models of Forgiveness* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2010), 138

¹³ See Elias J. Jabbour, *Sulha: Palestinian Traditional Peacemaking Process* (Montreat, NC: House of Hope Publications, 1996), 31-43, 52-57. The steps are: 1) A mediating delegation is formed. 2) The grievances of the victim’s family are heard. 3) The offended family renounces retaliation and agrees to a truce. 4) The offending family makes a payment of justice-based financial compensation. 5) The families meet for a shaking of hands ritual. 6) The senior member of the offended family makes a declaration of forgiveness. 7) The offender’s family serves a meal to the offended family. For Palestinian Christian applications of this model, see Abu El-Assal, *Caught in Between: The Story of an Arab Palestinian Christian Israeli* (London: SPCK, 1999), 119-124.

¹⁴ See Naim Stifan Ateek, *A Palestinian Christian Cry for Reconciliation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 185-86. His steps are: 1) Confront and analyze the roots of the conflict. 2) End the Israeli occupation and Palestinian violence. 3) Implementation of international law, forcing “Israel to put an end to its injustice.” 4) Accepting peace. 5) People of faith work toward healing. 6) Forgiveness.

¹⁵ Michel Nseir, Manuel Quintero, Pauline Nunu, Nader Muaddi & Yusef Daher, eds., *Faith Under Occupation: The Plight of Indigenous Christians in the Holy Land* (Jerusalem: Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel/Jerusalem Inter-Church Centre/World Council of Churches, 2012), 84-86.

Musalaha practices a structured approach with six stages:¹⁶

1. Establishing relationships—with the goal of creating friendships and building trust.
2. Opening up—participants “discuss issues related to the conflict” and “unload their grievances on each other.” During this time Palestinians “initiate the process by telling the Israelis about their lives and the suffering they endure because of the occupation.” In turn:

Israelis feel as though they have come to meet with Palestinians out of a genuine desire to make friends, to learn and to fellowship. Instead, they now find themselves being ambushed, blamed for the occupation, and made to feel responsible for the suffering of their Palestinian brothers and sisters. Sometimes they respond with their own grievances and counter the Palestinian accusations with accusations of their own.¹⁷
3. Withdrawal—“Because of the difficult discussions, many simply withdraw from the process,” a result that is “expected.”¹⁸
4. Reclaiming identity—participants challenge their own perception of “who we are” and gain a “sympathetic awareness of the ‘other side.’”¹⁹ At this point, participants decide whether to continue toward greater vulnerability or to stop the process altogether.
5. Committing and returning—the remaining participants continue to listen to the other side’s grievances and develop “a capacity for healthy self-criticism,” with a particular focus on the necessity for social justice.
6. Taking steps—participants engage in confession and forgiveness, followed by joint actions and advocacy for social justice.

This model is having a measure of success in bringing people together for dialogue in a variety of settings. But getting to the point of forgiveness has been admittedly difficult to reach. As a result, it seems wise to ask why is forgiveness relegated to the end of the process in light of its elevated status in Scripture? And would the likelihood of more people enduring throughout the process be greater if confession and forgiveness were taught and advocated from the very beginning, instead of repeatedly fostering opportunities for people to air their grievances? As Miroslav Volf has astutely stated, “To accuse wrongdoers by simply insisting on strict justice is to drive them down the path of self-justification and denial before others and before themselves.”²⁰ It should also be noted that when an individual has attempted to ask for forgiveness early in the relationship-building stage, that act has been interrupted and halted so that all grievances can be first exhaustively expressed. Clearly Musalaha practices a model that leans more heavily on justice than forgiveness, embodied by the statement, “there can be no true reconciliation without justice.”²¹

But what then about forgiveness? Is it possible to have reconciliation without forgiveness? Clearly reconciliation models that principally demand justice incur the cost of the

¹⁶ Munayer and Loden, 224-232.

¹⁷ Ibid., 226.

¹⁸ Ibid., 227.

¹⁹ Ibid., 229.

²⁰ Miroslav Volf, “Forgiveness, Reconciliation, and Justice: A Christian Contribution to a More Peaceful Social Environments,” transcript of The Capps Lecture Series in Christian Theology, University of Virginia, February 8, 2001 (<http://livedtheology.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Volf.pdf>), p. 25.

²¹ Munayer and Loden, 231.

suppression of forgiveness—a foundation stone of the Christian faith. Volf argues, “the ‘first justice, then reconciliation’ stance is impossible to carry out.”²² The result, in his view, is that “forgiveness could never take place.”²³ Ultimately the great cost for communities that do not make forgiveness the highest priority is the perpetuation of the conflict. The Israeli-Palestinian context, including the believing communities, is evidence of that fact. Wherever forgiveness has been practiced, reconciliation has occurred. Where it has been avoided, the conflict remains and suffering persists.

The Cost of Forgiveness

Forgiveness brings an entirely different kind of cost. Since it is at the very core of biblical reconciliation and is the means for securing it, we ought to expect forgiveness to parallel reconciliation concerning its usage in Scripture. Indeed, just as there is no Hebrew term for reconciliation, no command is given by God for people to forgive one another in the Old Testament. All such terms are only used in the sense of God forgiving people.²⁴ Additionally, there is no record of a person using those terms to express an act of forgiveness of another person.²⁵ This suggests that the natural inclination of human beings is to oppose forgiving others. As Lewis Smedes has observed: “Forgiving seems almost unnatural. Our sense of fairness tells us people should pay for the wrong they do.”²⁶ That means we need a divine transformation that changes our fallen and self-centered nature.

With the coming of Jesus, we encounter the first instructions for people to practice interpersonal forgiveness, according to His teachings (Mat 6:12-15; 18:21-35; Lk 17:3) and those of Paul (Eph 4:32; Col 3:13). Clearly a mandate for interpersonal forgiveness has become possible because of the atoning work of Christ, coupled with the empowerment of the Holy Spirit after Pentecost in Acts 2. The same is true for reconciliation. As Richard Lischer rightly observes, “We preach toward reconciliation but also from a reservoir of forgiveness that, had we not received it and shared it among ourselves, we could not speak now.”²⁷ But for those who have not received the redemptive work of Jesus and the indwelling of the Spirit, it is akin to dwelling in the days that preceded their arrival. In that case, true forgiveness and reconciliation will remain unattainable.

²² Volf, 15.

²³ Munayer and Loden, 18.

²⁴ The primary verbs are סָלַח meaning “forgive or pardon,” כָּפַר “cover or atone,” נָשָׂא “lift or bear,” and מָחַה “erase or blot.”

²⁵ The nearest usage of these terms in the context of interpersonal relationships are Joseph’s brothers request for forgiveness from him in Gen 50:17; Pharaoh’s request to Moses (Ex 10:17); Saul’s request to Samuel (1 Sam 15:25), and Abigail’s request to David (1 Sam 25:28). But in no case did any reply explicitly grant their request by using these same terms. Some writers ascribe the spirit of actual forgiveness to some Old Testament passages in spite of the absence of the proper terms. See, for example, Peter H. Monsma, “Forgiveness,” in *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. Merrill C. Tenney, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975), 596; and Célestin Musekura, *An Assessment of Contemporary Models of Forgiveness* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2010), 26-27.

²⁶ Lewis B. Smedes, *Forgive and Forget: Healing Hurts We Don’t Deserve* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1984), xii. For his discussion on the interaction of forgiveness and memory, see “Biblical Focus: Forgiveness and Reconciliation,” in *Reconciliation: A Theology of Embrace in an Age of Exclusion*, ed. World Vision International-Washington Forum (Washington: Institute for Global Engagement, 1997), 32; and *The Art of Forgiving: When You Need to Forgive and Don’t Know How* (Nashville: Moorings, 1996), 176.

²⁷ Richard Lischer, *The End of Words: The Language of Reconciliation in a Culture of Violence* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2005), 163.

The resistance to forgiveness is especially strong in cultures with tribal backgrounds where honor and shame, and their active counterparts of justice and vengeance, predominate. For that reason, when reconciliation is the goal, a concerted effort must be placed on elevating forgiveness in any cultural setting with a collective orientation. It must be continually taught and advocated, not relegated to a later stage that is generally never reached.

When justice is demanded before forgiveness is granted, the inevitable question is “How much justice is necessary to bring about appeasement?” The corollary is: “Who determines the identity of the perpetrator and the victim?” The temptation will invariably be to make a determination that favors oneself.²⁸ With history as our witness, this self-gratifying way of thinking is steadily marked by failure.²⁹

At first glance, forgiveness seems to leave conflicted circumstances in an inequitable state. One may have been victimized while the other benefits. Or two groups have been concurrently victimized, but in different ways that are difficult to equate. But the reality is that a price *is* being paid. The one offering forgiveness does so out of a willingness to absorb the debt personally. In essence, you voluntarily forfeit any claim to retribution. This way of thinking and manner of behavior is, indeed, unnatural. But it is at the very core of the Christian message, which calls everyone who names Jesus as Lord to act in faithfulness to this principle. And it can only be done with the empowerment of the Holy Spirit.

This biblical principle is easily lived out in circumstances where the debt is small (i.e. a lie or a personal insult). But what if the debt involves the loss of life or suffering of any sort? Our thinking again is informed by the message of God’s Word that does not manifest a hierarchy of sins and debts, and thus no hierarchy of forgiveness (Ezek 18:4; Rom 5:18; Ja 2:10-11; 1 Jn 1:9).

Moreover, the greatest debt of all has already been paid. For sin is always at the heart of conflict, and its debt has been “nailed to the cross” (Col 2:14). From the perspective of Gregory Jones, genuine forgiveness is a response to the redemptive work that God has accomplished, not a response to the injuries felt by people.³⁰ He calls it “a sign of the costliness by which such forgiveness is achieved.”³¹ Ultimately, failure to forgive one another demeans the redemptive work of Christ, and is analogous to saying that His death has no meaning for a particular context. It can be said that in a setting of conflict like that among Israelis and Palestinians, practicing forgiveness serves as the sign that the presence of God and the act of redemption is a reality in their midst.

The Cost of Bearing Burdens

What, then, are we to say about the circumstances that arise from conflicts between people? When forgiveness is granted, it seems cavalier and heartless to ignore the plight of others, especially if the circumstances are more favorable to one group than the other. As Volf observes, “We need to look for an alternative both to forgiveness and reconciliation outside of

²⁸ This way of thinking is consistent with the way that Aristotle argued that every society has a moral obligation to make things equitable, but if no law addresses a particular situation, the individual is entitled to get even on his own (*Nicomachean Ethics* 5:10).

²⁹ For a discussion on the failures of vengeance as a means of obtaining equity, see Joseph Blenkinsopp, “Reconciliation in the Middle East: A Biblical Perspective,” *Theology Today* 65 (2008), 344-355.

³⁰ L. Gregory Jones, “Crafting Communities of Forgiveness,” *Int* 54 (2000), 125.

³¹ Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 5.

justice and to forgiveness and reconciliation after justice.”³²

In Galatians 6:2 the Apostle Paul gave the exhortation to “Bear one another’s burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ.” The precise meaning of the phrase, “law of Christ” has been described in diverse ways and is beyond the scope of this paper, but a strong case can be made that it relates to the way that Jesus interpreted the Law of Moses by saying:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets” (Mat 22:37-40).

Throughout the gospels Jesus upheld this association between loving your neighbor and specific aspects of Mosaic Law. In the case of the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:29-37) in which He taught that our neighbors include our enemies, its foundation was already established in the Mosaic commandment:

If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey wandering away, you shall surely return it to him. If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying helpless under its burden, you shall refrain from leaving it to him, you shall surely release it with him (Ex 23:4-5).

Like the Samaritan in Jesus’ parable, the donkey is immobilized along the road and also belongs to the realm of an enemy. Yet the Israelites were instructed to come to its aid in spite of the adversarial nature. They literally had to bear the burden of the donkey by removing some of its weight upon its back,³³ which ultimately meant bearing the burden of the owner of the donkey—the “one who hates you.”

These passages, taken collectively, show that God’s desire is for us to love our neighbors, meaning both the ones we like and the ones we dislike, in the same way—with acts of kindness and with the intent of taking the actual burden upon ourselves. As such, a personal price is paid by the one bearing the burden in terms of time and effort, as well as potential scorn and ridicule by peers. Nevertheless, the expectation for bearing burdens remains high.

The greatest potential human resource held by believing Israelis and Palestinians is each other. Instead of each one advocating for themselves, which is destined to prolong the status quo, advocating for each other has the capability of creating breakthroughs in terms of security and self-determination. The irony is that, in the end, the same desired goal of justice is realized. But the way it is achieved is transformed. Rather than demanding that “the other side” acquiesce, each one who has been forgiven and simultaneously forgives others will be motivated to bear the burdens of his former enemy who is now a reconciled friend. This is the blessed potential that is missed when the passion is for “justice and only justice.”³⁴

The most poignant needs for this approach are the issues of Israel’s right to exist as a nation and the welfare of the Palestinian people. Israelis currently advocate for the former and Palestinians do the same for the latter. The result is a perpetual stalemate. But what if the Messianic community would speak with one voice for the welfare of the Palestinian people, while concurrently the Palestinian Christian community would acknowledge the Jewish people as having a right to dwell in the land of their forefathers, Israel. There has never been a better

³² Volf, 19.

³³ This imagery is consistent with Paul’s use of βάρος (*baros*), translated as “burden” but literally meaning “weight” in Gal 6:2. cf. 2 Cor 4:17.

³⁴ For an articulation of the demand for justice, see Naim Stifan Ateek, *Justice, and only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989).

time than the present for the believers throughout the Holy Land to initiate the willingness to bear one another's burdens.

The Cost of Courage

We must recognize, however, that not everyone wants reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians and, in actuality, actively opposes it. There are also threats of ostracism among the respective communities for perceived disloyalty by reaching out to the "other side." Persecution is a way of life for Messianic Jews in Israel, generally instigated by ultra-Orthodox groups, resulting in harassment, destruction of property, and some incidents of physical violence. Likewise, Palestinian Christians face persecution from the dominant Muslim community, and even within their own extended Christian community, generally for taking a stand that diverges in any manner from undivided "resistance to occupation." This is especially true for Palestinians who believe that God's covenant promises to Israel remain valid and are not transferred to the church. They risk being branded as collaborating with Israel,³⁵ which can have grave consequences. The few dissenting voices tend to come from the evangelical church that is not officially recognized by the Palestinian Authority,³⁶ and thus not able to produce birth, marriage, baptismal and death certificates for its members, which are necessary documents for voting and obtaining basic services from the P.A.

But we must also recognize that there is nothing unique about the risk of speaking up for peace and reconciliation in the Israeli/Palestinian situation. As history and contemporary situations attest, the risk of persecution is a universal plight for the followers of the One who was persecuted to the point of death (cf. Mat 5:11; 24:9; 1 Thes 2:14-15).

In light of that particular aspect of the fallen nature of humanity, a recurring theme in Scripture is to "be strong and courageous" in the face of opposition (Deut 31:6-7; Jos 1:6-7; 2 Sam 10:12; 1 Chr 28:20; 2 Chr 32:7; 1 Cor 16:13). The Bible is further accented by the courage of men and women who stood up for righteousness in the face of great risk. It was Esther who went before King Ahasuerus and interceded for her people knowing that it could cost her life, yet said, "if I perish, I perish" (Est 4:16). It was Peter and John who were imprisoned and put on trial for their faith, yet proclaimed, "we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20).

These were not mythic characters. They were real people with real fears and real challenges. The same is true today. There are real fears and challenges in the Holy Land that call for the engagement of real people of courage. This is the day when courage is needed to practice reconciliation the biblical way—a calling that can be very costly, but is the only way that will produce an enduring result.

When the cost results in true dividends

Much can be learned from other settings where reconciliation has succeeded. A number of meaningful reconciliations have taken place in Africa, the most notable being in South Africa

³⁵ For an example of this type of accusation, see Michael Sabbah, "Christians in Israel and in the Middle East, our Present and Future," transcript of presentation at New Trends of Research on Palestinian Christian Identity in Israel conference, Harry S. Truman Institute, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, January 20, 2015 (<http://www.kairospalestine.ps/sites/default/files/Conf%C3%A9rence-Sabbah-en-entier-2.pdf>), p. 5.

³⁶ The officially recognized churches are Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic (Melkite), Armenian Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox, Ethiopian Orthodox, Coptic, Assyrian, Maronite, Anglican and Lutheran.

where its Truth and Reconciliation Commission employed the model known as *ubuntu* that is based on repentance and forgiveness.³⁷ In addition, the extensive reconciliation in Rwanda is especially instructive. In 1994 over one million people perished in fighting between Hutu and Tutsi tribes. That was followed by the displacement of three million others and a cycle of revenge killings that persisted for another four years. Célestin Musekura, a Rwandan pastor, was studying at Dallas Theological Seminary while much of his immediate family, friends, neighbors and members of his church were slaughtered. At first he was drawn towards the need for justice and revenge. But then he sensed God telling Him:

“It is up to you to make a choice: either forgive and let me take care of the rest or fail to forgive and give up your freedom, joy and peace. You can either choose to be a hypocrite who teaches what he does not practice, or you can be the wounded healer that gives the healing gift of forgiveness to the undeserving.”³⁸

He learned that:

“Forgiveness didn’t only have the power to transform communities; it was changing me first. Through this personal encounter, I began to pray that my pain, sorrow, emotions and grief would not blind me from seeing the grace and forgiveness that I had received from God. . . I learned that forgiveness can take place in the midst of unjust suffering and pain. I also learned that forgiveness is only possible when God’s power takes over my will and desire for vengeance and human justice.”³⁹

Musekura became a catalyst for biblical reconciliation among Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda. In response to his example, a movement of church leaders has spread to other African nations and has successfully introduced forgiveness-based reconciliation methods to their respective governments.⁴⁰ Their efforts have shown to be successful in bringing healing to nations that have suffered from tribal and ethnic strife.

In Northern Ireland the conflict between Catholics and Protestants that raged for three decades was largely resolved because of forgiveness-based reconciliation.⁴¹ Other cultures have practiced similar models, such as the Samoan practice of *ifoga* that has been so successfully used

³⁷ See Michael Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim, 1997) and *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report*, vol 5, (1998), 447, (<http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/report/finalreport/Volume5.pdf>). As Pumla-Gobodo-Madikizela, a member of the TRC’s Committee on Human Rights Violations, observed: “And here lies one of the successes of the commission: The requests for forgiveness made by some perpetrators, and the granting of forgiveness by victims and survivors who are the primary generation of sufferers of atrocities, in unprecedented in the history of atrocities in the 20th century. The commission’s final success is that South Africa did not plunge into a spiral of violence and revenge.” Quoted in Helena Cobban, *The Moral Architecture of World Peace: Nobel Laureates Discuss our Global Future* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2000), 142.

³⁸ L. Gregory Jones & Célestin Musekura, *Forgiving as We’ve Been Forgiven: Community Practices for Making Peace* (Downer’s Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2010), 22.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 29-31, 117-21. This ministry is known as the African Leadership and Reconciliation Ministries. In addition to Rwanda, they have brought forgiveness-based reconciliation to Burundi, Congo, Sudan, Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya and Zambia. For further evaluation of the roles of forgiveness and reconciliation in the Rwandan context, see Ervin Staub and Laurie Ann Pearlman, “Healing, Reconciliation and Forgiving after Genocide and Other Collective Violence” in Raymond G. Helmick and Rodney L. Petersen, eds., *Forgiveness and Reconciliation: Religion, Public Policy and Conflict Transformation* (Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation Press), 195-217.

⁴¹ See William Bole, Drew Christiansen and Robert T. Hennemeyer, *Forgiveness in International Politics: An Alternative Road to Peace* (Washington, D.C.: USCC, 2004), 70-71.

by church leaders that it is extremely rare for reconciliation overtures to be rejected.⁴²

In a similar fashion, the Moravian⁴³ movement, which began in the 1400's before the Reformation, stands out as an example of reconciliatory success in spite of paying a high price for one's convictions. The movement initially flourished in the lands that today make up the modern Czech Republic, as people responded favorably to their stand against unbiblical practices of the church,⁴⁴ But the religious hierarchy responded by causing the Moravians to face imprisonment, exile, torture and martyrdom, often by being burned at the stake.⁴⁵ By 1620 the movement was virtually eradicated except for a small remnant known as "the hidden seed" that managed to survive underground for 100 years.

In 1722 this Moravian remnant found refuge under Count Zinzendorf who allowed them to establish a village⁴⁶ on his German estate. Soon other religious refugees began settling in the village, including Pietists, Anabaptists, Lutherans and Reformed separatists. But along with this diversity came doctrinal and ecclesiastical conflict, which led to the formation of two factions within the community.⁴⁷ Zinzendorf dedicated himself to reconciling that division, and in 1727 each of the families signed a "Brotherly Agreement" that affirmed the importance of loving one another and upholding the preeminence of the Gospel.⁴⁸

The work of reconciliation culminated on one day when the entire community gathered together. Individuals sought out persons with whom they were engaged in conflict and they asked for forgiveness from one another. Zinzendorf publicly confessed the sins of the community and claimed the reconciling work of Christ on their behalf.⁴⁹

The result of that work of reconciliation was dramatic. They began what they called "night watches" that was in reality a twenty-four hour a day prayer vigil that ultimately lasted 100 years. They prayed for the salvation of people in lands far and wide, followed by sending missionaries to those countries. Moravian missionaries soon were reaching Africa, India, North and South America and elsewhere. At the time of Zinzendorf's death in 1760, from this one village that was initially home to 300 people, 226 persons were sent forth as missionaries. Tragically many of them died while serving in that calling. The legacy of the Moravian movement is the accomplishment of the work of God after completing biblical reconciliation that was based on forgiveness, plus a willingness to act without regard to the high cost that they paid personally.

In light of these historical and contemporary successes, a compelling question must be asked—what prevents a similarly successful reconciliation in the Israeli-Palestinian context? If

⁴² *Ifoga* means "bowing down." See Leilani Tuala-Warren, "A Study Into the Ifoga: Samoa's Answer to Dispute Healing," *Te Matahauariki Institute Occasional Paper Series 4* (2002), 21-28.

⁴³ The Moravians identified themselves as *Unitas Fratrum*, Latin for "Unity of the Brethren."

⁴⁴ See Edmund DeSchweinitz, *The Moravian Manual: Containing An Account of the Moravian Church or Unitas Fratrum* (Bethlehem, PA: Moravian Publication Office, 1869). They particularly objected to the practice of indulgences and salvation by works, and instead upheld justification by grace through faith alone. By the time the Reformation began there were already 200,000 Moravian "reformers" living in Moravia and Bohemia.

⁴⁵ Augustus C. Thompson, *Moravian Missions: Twelve Lectures* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1890), 23-30.

⁴⁶ Herrnhut, meaning "Shelter of the Lord."

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 16-17, 51-2.

⁴⁸ The agreement stated: "The great theme of our preaching is Jesus Christ, in whom we have the grace of the Son, the love of the Father, and the communion of the Holy Ghost. The word of the Cross, which bears testimony of Christ's voluntary offering of himself to suffer and to die, and of the rich treasures of divine grace thus purchased, is the beginning, middle, and end of our preaching." *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 54.

reconciliation can occur between Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda, and blacks and whites in South Africa, and among Pacific Islanders, why not Jews and Arabs who name Yeshua or Isa as Lord?

Costly change

Looking at the circumstances in the Holy Land today, the prospects for peace might not seem very enticing. Some might say that the conflict is too deep and has been sustained too long. But that is looking at the circumstances through a fallen human perspective. In contrast, from God's perspective, nothing is too difficult for Him (Gen 18:14; Jer 32:27). Having that understanding should motivate us to work toward difficult challenges like reconciliation without consideration of the "odds of success." It is this kind of confidence that is reflected in Jesus' declaration that we can move mountains "if you have faith and do not doubt" (Mat 21:21).

God has issued a call to us in His written Word to change the way people do reconciliation. The way of the world is to point out the sins of others, to demand satisfaction for your perceived wrongs, and to force others to agree with you in ways that you rationalize as being allowable. The way of religion is to find a divinely sanctioned basis for carrying out the way of the world. The way of Jesus is call people to repentance, to confess your own sins, to forgive others when they sin against you, and to bear their burdens. We have witnessed the failure of the former approach. In that light it seems reasonable to ask if the time has come to try it God's way. Practically speaking, that means:

- **Indifference is not an option.** The risk of damaged credibility and the need for success are too great.
- **The gospel must be at the core of reconciliation.** Since we have been given a sobering warning by Jesus that "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven" (Mat 7:21), we must not diminish the necessity of a gospel-centered transformation among the all parties of the conflict.
- **Forgiveness is of supreme importance.** All believing communities need to teach and to practice forgiveness, and its status must be elevated within formal reconciliation efforts.
- **Justice needs to be pursued in a godly manner.** It must be first found in the cross, but then promoted by bearing one another's burdens, not by demanding satisfaction for your grievances.
- **God will empower acts of courage.** Believers have the promise of hope because God is with us in the midst of great challenges (Rom 5:5).

As part of God's future redemptive plan for this world, He has promised that a day is coming when His words will ring true: "In that day Israel will be the third party with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth" (Isa 19:24). That is a picture of true reconciliation. But we need not consign that reality to an eschatological future. It is a work that can begin today if we do it the way that has been laid out for us clearly in the Word of God.