

Conference on World Mission and Evangelism

Moving in the Spirit: Called to Transforming Discipleship

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Bible Study 3

Transforming the World: Equipping Disciples

2 Corinthians 5:11-21

¹¹ *Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we try to persuade others; but we ourselves are well known to God, and I hope that we are also well known to your consciences.*¹² *We are not commending ourselves to you again, but giving you an opportunity to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast in outward appearance and not in the heart.*¹³ *For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you.*¹⁴ *For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore, all have died.*¹⁵ *And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.*

¹⁶ *From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way.*¹⁷ *So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!*¹⁸ *All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given 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 the message of reconciliation to us.*²⁰ *So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.*²¹ *For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

Introduction

The theme for today's Bible study, "Transforming the World: Equipping Disciples," works with the assumption that disciples are the agents that drive God's mission in the world through the power of the Spirit. In order for them to carry out this task effectively, they must be equipped. For us to get the best from the main text for this Bible study, 2 Corinthians 5:11-21, we should read it in light of the broad context of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. In this Bible study, we will look at the text itself in light of this context and then draw some thematic issues that could be related to the contemporary readers' challenges and opportunities for mission.

In brief, Paul demonstrates clarity in his missionary orientation. He is aware that (a) he is only engaging in mission in service to God and not himself or his own interest; (b) he is a mere human who needs the guiding power of the Holy Spirit in order to discharge his duty of proclaiming Christ even in the midst of opposition; and (c) success and failure of his missionary execution is dependent on how he nurtures people's relations with God and their relationship with one another.

The Text in Its Context

Paul did not write letters to the church just for the sake of writing something. Most of the time he sought to respond to some prior communication he had received from the churches he had established; as such, his letters are dialogical and the agenda of the dialogue has been set by Paul's interlocutors.¹ While reconstruction of such context and information about readers is never easy, it is necessary in order to hear what is going on. As such we must look at what was going in Corinth that occasioned the writing of this letter.

Due to its strategic location for business routes, Corinth was a very rich city. Even when Paul, stayed there, he supported his ministry by making tents with his business associates (Acts 18:3). Corinth was administratively run by the Romans through the office of the proconsul. When Paul first visited Corinth, Proconsul Lucius Iunius Gallio (CE 51-52) was in charge. Given the metropolitan nature of the city, several languages would have been spoken in Corinth, but Greek and Latin were dominant.

Paul sent the first letter to the Corinthians from Ephesus by Titus in which he addressed a number of problems. In this first letter, he addressed issues related to factions in the church, incest in the congregation, squabbles in the church that ended up in the public courts, chaos at the Lord's supper, loss of love among believers, and even doubts about the resurrection. After dispatching this letter, Paul wanted to know how the church responded. The news from Titus was encouraging. There were many positive changes in Corinth. Actually, the church had responded in "godly sorrow leading to repentance" (2 Cor. 7:10). They had treated Titus very kindly and filled Paul with joy and confidence by their response (2 Cor. 7:5ff).

¹ Jerome Murphy-O'Connor OP. (1991) *The Theology of the Second Letter to the Corinthians*. Cambridge University, Cambridge, p. 3.

But Titus had also brought some news of bad developments. Some factions and teachers were poisoning the minds of the Corinthians by discrediting the legitimacy of Paul as an apostle and the truth of his message. In their accusations, they pointed out that Paul could not be trusted because he had changed his itinerary (1 Cor. 15ff; 1 Cor. 16:5ff). His accusers had accused him of not being genuine since he had not brought letters of recommendation (2 Cor. 3:1). They assert that while Paul's writings sound bold, in appearance he is timid and weak. They claim that when Paul is present, he is not impressive in his authority and speech (2 Cor. 10:10; 11:6). They go on to say that his message was worthless because, unlike the Greek rhetoricians, Paul had not charged any money. They added that the reason why Paul did not want to receive material support from the Corinthians was because he did not love them (2 Cor. 11:11; 12:13ff). They went on to say in fact that Paul was stealing the collections for the Christians in Jerusalem that the Corinthians were making (2 Cor. 12:17ff).

Paul argues that he had to delay his visit because he wanted to go not just for a short time, but for a long time, and he also pointed out that the Corinthians knew better than his accusers about the soundness of Paul's character. Regarding his character, Paul reminds the Corinthians of his endurance and suffering for the sake of the gospel, to which they are all witnesses (2 Cor. Chapters 4-6). Paul points out that these false apostles, driven by another spirit, use tricks of rhetoric to bring a different gospel, a different Jesus (2 Cor. 11:2ff). Paul's refusal of money shows that he freely received the gospel and did not need to charge for it. Instead, he chose to work with his own hands (2 Cor. 11:9). Paul promises that when he visits, he will exercise the full force of his apostleship if it is necessary (2 Cor. 12:14ff; 13:1ff). He hopes that before he arrives, they will take heed of this letter's contents and disregard the false prophets (2 Cor. 13:3ff).

The Text in Our Context

2 Corinthians 5:11-21, which is our main text for the Bible study, is preceded by important highlights of Paul's missionary orientation in 2 Corinthians 5:1-10. Namely, that we are human beings on earth, serving God with an orientation towards heaven. Such an understanding demands that we are (a) humble in our engagements, (b) tentative in our judgments, (c) motivated by our desire to please God, and (d) aware that one day we will stand before God's judgment and be held accountable for our responsibilities. In the following section of 2 Corinthians 6:1-13, Paul shows that there is a possibility of losing focus on the mission due to suffering and opposition. The message of salvation must be taken urgently in the realization that every day those serving God are confronted by forces that threaten their commitment to the mission.

In Corinthians 5:14-15, death is a key threat to human confidence since it is a "mode of being opposed to God's design for humanity"; yet the death of Christ is presented as the "fundamental

criterion of human existence.”² It is important to know this Christ who died. To “know” Christ “according to the flesh” (5:16) is to know him after the principles of the world. To know people according to the flesh would be to know them according to their ethnicity, race, and other such identity markers after the flesh. A look at Jesus from the perspective of transformed life, says Paul, will transform the way Corinthians look at their own life in the world. This issue or orientation raised by Paul is informed by the fact that the Corinthians had entered the church as adult converts, and inevitably brought with them a way of looking at humanity which they had assimilated from a world dominated by Sin. They took for granted certain patterns of behavior simple because they were widespread: for example, jealousy, strife and party factions were a feature of social life as they knew it. In consequence they in no way disconcerted when these developed within the church; that was the way life was. In response, Paul claimed they were “fleshly” and “walking according to man” (1 Cor. 3:1-14). In his lexicon “according to man” means a judgment based on the common estimation of a sinful world (1 Cor. 9:8; 15:32; Gal. 3:15; Rom. 3:5; contrast ‘according to God’, 2 Cor. 7:9-10).³

But what does Paul mean when he refers to seeing Christ according to the flesh? Obviously, Paul’s understanding is different from that of many modern people who assume that since “Christ was a man like us,” we can understand his humanity by “extrapolating from the observed characteristics of contemporary humanity” – rather, we must first “know the humanity of Christ if we are to discern what is good and bad in human nature, because as the New Adam he reveals what authentic humanity is.”⁴ Seeing people only according to the flesh (*kata sarka*) is not only inadequate but also “tinged with prejudice and bias.”⁵ Viewing Jesus according to the flesh is easy for those who do not need to believe in him because they can see him as a good man – what is difficult is to see him as Lord and saviour demanding that you follow him as his disciple. The church can easily join the world in presenting Jesus like any other man so that it does not offend anyone. If you judge Jesus through human standards, he is not bad at all. But, he is more. The evaluation changes once you read verse 14, which states that he died for all! It demands that all respond to this.

New creation

In verse 17, Paul says that if one is in Christ, they are a new creation. Paul uses a similar concept in describing the new relationships for the faith community in Galatians 6:14-15 “May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything!”

² Ibid., pp. 57, 58.

³ Ibid., p. 59.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 59, 60.

⁵ Ernest Best. (1987) *Second Corinthians*. John Knox Press. Atlanta, Ga., p. 53

In both cases, it is the participation in the cross of Christ that obliterates all forms of flesh-based identities. Scholars are not in full agreement over whether the “new creation” refers to the new eschatological dispensation or to the transformation of the believer here and now. It should be viewed as pointing to both, since the “personal transformation that takes place when someone is “in Christ” is the evidence that the eschatological new creation has begun. Because the new era has dawned, believers can become new people. Because the new era has dawned, renewed relationships are possible. God’s offering of reconciliation goes out through his people (2 Cor. 5:18-20).”⁶

In this new creation, life is not static. It is a dynamic life of discipleship. By joining the Christian through faith and baptism, one goes through a process of growth in which they are freed from the enslavement of sin (Rom. 6:17) into “a community of opportunity where authentic values reign. As they assimilate the lesson of the death of Christ (2 Cor. 5:15), they are progressively transformed (3:18).”⁷

But this process has stalled in Corinth! “The inauthentic values of the world continued to exercise a divisive influence on the behavior of the community.” The result has a negative effect on the quality of the community life, and hence some judge Paul in worldly standards. For Paul, Christ must be re-enthroned as the standard!

Lest the Corinthians assume that transformation is achieved by human ingenuity, Paul shows that it actually has divine origin in that God accomplished it by and through the death of sinless Christ. The “sinlessness of Christ is the common teaching of New Testament writers (John 8:46; 1 John 3:5; Heb. 4:14; 1 Peter 2:22) and derives from their recognition of him as the Messiah, who, as the Righteous One (1 Enoch 38:2), would be “pure from sin” (Ps. of Solomon 17: 41).”⁸

Ministry of reconciliation

The consequence of such new life in Christ, the new creation life, is that of reconciliation:

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. (2 Cor. 5:18-20)

The concept of reconciliation is a key function in Paul’s theology. He refers to reconciliation even when he describes other ideas like salvation, atonement, and justification. As it is used in the second letter to the Corinthians, Paul seems to be keen to highlight both the vertical and

⁶ Brenda B. Colijn (2010) *Images of Salvation in the New Testament*. Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove, Ill, p. 114.

⁷ Jerome Murphy—O’Connor *Theology of the Second Letter*, 61

⁸ Ibid.

horizontal dimensions of reconciliation. In its vertical meaning, this reconciliation is a religious or theological concept referring to the mending relationship between human beings and God. In its horizontal relationship, it is referring to the mandate of those who are reconciled to God to seek to reconcile with other human beings, as well as to share the message of reconciliation.

In the theological sense, the following key dimensions are understood to capture the essence:

1) God is always the subject of reconciliation; he is the reconciler who reconciles the world to himself; God is not reconciled and he does not reconcile himself to human beings or to the world; it is always humans that are reconciled to God and are urged to reconcile themselves to him (2 Cor. 5:20); . . . 2) Reconciliation has been effected by the death of Christ (Rom. 5:10); 3) Reconciliation denotes a real change and transformation in the relationship between God and human beings, a restoration of fellowship with God (2 Cor. 5:18; Rom. 5:10); the change refers to the human side and affects the whole state of life (the language of “new creation” is used); 4) To become effective, reconciliation needs to be appropriated; 5) There is a ministry of reconciliation to be carried out in the world by those who have been reconciled (2 Cor. 5:18-19).⁹

On the anthropological or horizontal level, the notion of reconciliation should be understood from the perspective of the notions of “enmity, hostility, estrangement, and alienation, as well as their counterparts, reconciliation, atonement, friendship, and intimacy,” all of which derive from “social intercourse of human persons or from the relations of ethnic and national groups, such as Jews and Greeks, Palestinians and Romans.”¹⁰

Implications for mission¹¹

Looking at the invitation to mission from the perspective of Paul according to 2 Corinthians 5:11-21, one must take seriously the two issues that are basic for equipping the church and disciples for mission today, namely the orientations of new life and reconciliation. These should inform our reflection in this Bible study.

Paul’s challenge for the church today regards the legitimacy of the church or members as missionaries. The question Paul would ask the church today is: ‘Where does your legitimacy to preach the gospel come from?’ – Does it come from your eloquence? Does it come from your economic independence? Does it come from your appearance of strength?

He suggests that the starting point is that of being new creation. Disciples are new creation since Christ has died for them and ushered them into a new spiritual dispensation. On the other hand, they remain in the flesh and struggle with the realities of sinfulness. While their new identity

⁹ Corneliu Constantineanu (2010) *The Social Significance of Reconciliation in Paul’s Theology: Narrative Readings in Romans*. T & T Clark, London, pp. 38-39.

¹⁰ J. Fitzmyer (1967) *Pauline Theology*. Prentice Hall: Englewood Cliffs, N.J., p. 162.

¹¹ Eckhard, J. Schnabel (2008) *Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies and Methods*. InterVarsity Press, Nottingham, U.K., p. 28.

should give them new eyes to see each other as brothers and sisters equally loved by God in Christ Jesus, their earthly disposition blinds them to their new identity and hence they still see each other through ethnic and racial lens. Discipleship in Africa today is still affected by skewed anthropologies. When women are still viewed as sex objects and their leadership potential is marginalized in the church and in society, it shows that we are seeing each other according to the flesh and are not yet living according to our higher calling as new creatures. Globally, the church is still struggling with the bigotry of race and cultural superiority, even though the cross of Christ put all people at the same level. In other words, the equalizing power of the Christ is not yet manifest among the disciples of Christ as long as the new creation is not lived out in human relationships.

There is an opportunity, though, according to Paul. While on the one hand reconciliation between human beings and God is finished, on the other hand reconciliation remains a ministry to which disciples are invited and with which they are sent. Walls that separate God's people can be destroyed through the power of reconciliation. This reconciliation is not only between groups that are in conflict over ethnic and cultural differences. This reconciliation is also required between generations. In the churches today, many young people feel that the church passed onto them does not address their needs. Reconciliation means to take seriously the orientation of the other and put this orientation in meaningful dialogue with one's own. Inter-generational dialogue is fundamental in ensuring that past and present Christian generations can envision mission as a new shared task. Such inter-generational reconciliation will result in rediscovery of the shared responsibility between young people and older people in the church. The living church of Jesus Christ will march out as one reconciled force proclaiming the full message of inviting the world to their God saying to all, "Be reconciled to God."

Questions

1. How do you convey the meaning of being a disciple of and ambassador for Christ as a new creation in your context?
2. What does the ministry of reconciliation look like in your community?
3. How can churches and mission institutions continuously equip Christians to be ambassadors for Christ and transformed disciples who can carry out the ministry of reconciliation?
4. As disciples equipped to be new creation and ambassadors for Christ, in what ways are we able both to transform and to be transformed?

Prayer

*Loving God,
through Christ you have called the disciples
to drive your mission in the world by the power of the Holy Spirit,
equip us who profess their faith in you
with the gifts of the same Spirit
to discover in which ways we are called to be transformed
so as to transform the world in ever new ways.
Amen.*

About the Author

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