Christianity in the Middle East – the Biblical Challenge for Evangelicals

We have been called to a ministry of reconciliation. As believers in the Lord Jesus, we are called to be **one** and this includes all our Arab/Middle Eastern brothers and sisters who may be Muslim background believers, Christian background believers or Christian background Arabs from a variety of churches – Coptic, Maronite, Greek Orthodox etc. We also need to include Jewish background believers.

We have a tendency to make a clear dichotomy between those who are saved and those who are lost. So the whole of the human race is divided into two groups. As evangelicals we tend to divide people to one of these groups.

We need to remember that both Arabs and Jews are Semitic peoples. In many parts of Europe there is a rising tide of anti-Semitism against both Jews and Arabs!

As evangelicals, in some quarters we have created a theology that assumes the creation of the State of Israel is a prerequisite to the return of the Lord Jesus. The early church lived with the assumption that the Lord Jesus could return to the earth at any moment. For many centuries evangelical believers have prayed "Maranatha" – 'come quickly Lord'. No one assumed that His return was contingent on the creation of the State of Israel.

I don't think any of us, as believers, are on the programme committee for the second coming of the Lord Jesus, but hopefully we will all be – in one way or another – in the welcoming crowd! Paul wrote to the church in Thessaloniki (4:13-5:6) that they should be expecting the Lord's return at any moment!

For the many Arab evangelical believers their major problem is not the state of Israel, but that it should have been created **with justice**. People should not be refugees in their own homeland. The Palestinian people are also a people. Sociologically a 'people' is created by having something in common – a common sense of victimisation. Both Israel and Palestine were created in the context of Palestine and the post WWII immigration of the Jews. They have a shared consciousness of terrible oppression. The Palestinian people may not have been a nation before the 20th century, but the events of WWII have certainly made them a nation now – a nation created out of a common sense of persecution, injustice and oppression. In their persecution and suffering they have found themselves not only oppressed by the Israeli State, but also by fellow Arabs! The Lebanese, Syrians and Jordanians have not been very hospitable to them. But they do sense that they must all hang together.

So how do we, as believers in the Lord Jesus who are not Middle Easterners, react in the context of all this. As a European (British) by nationality, am I anti-Semitic including anti-Arab? If I am, then there needs to be a great deal of repentance! I should repent because of the British public being aware of the destruction of the Jewish people by Hitler, but yet doing little and leaving it too late to prevent the deaths of thousands in Auschwitz (the death camp in Poland during WWII).

But although we should affirm the right of Jews to have their state, Israel, that doesn't mean we must deprive our Arab friends of their rights. The same Gospel is for both the Jew and the Arab. Sadly our behaviour as believers in the Lord Jesus makes it appear to many, particularly Arab Muslims, that we are antagonistic towards them.

As evangelical believers we need to remember Francis of Assisi. At the time of the Crusades, when the European crusaders were marching against the Arabs and the Muslims, Francis "crossed the line" into the Arab camp. He went to the tent of the Sultan himself and told the Sultan that the Lord Jesus loved him!

What was the basis of Francis' theology? His views on nature are still very relevant today. He was somewhat of a 'mystic'. He wanted himself and others not only to believe in God, but also to experience God at work in their hearts and lives. He had a view that God uses people 'sacramentally'. In a communion service we drink a sip of wine and eat a morsel of bread and we believe that the Lord Jesus is 'present' there even though the two elements remain what they are.

Francis taught that people are 'sacramental' like that! We are what we are. It is true that Francis had a special place in his heart for the poor and the oppressed. He had no illusions. We are sinners like everyone else. Being poor doesn't help you to be holy, but the Holy Spirit comes to dwell in our hearts and control our minds. So as we encounter people, regardless of who they are, in some way they are able to encounter the Lord Jesus.

So when you meet Muslims, look into their eyes with compassion and into their very being as you reach out to them. Love them and as you do so, you begin to experience the Lord Jesus Himself. It is crucial that we do this because all service to these people could be only 'arrogant do-gooding' filled with pride.

So in our encounter with Muslim people we need to be filled with the Spirit of the Lord Jesus. We need to hear His voice, ***"Whatever you do to the least of these brothers and sisters, you do to Me"*** (Lk. 9:48)

I am an evangelical, so I believe in the "right stuff" – i.e. all who believe will be going to heaven – all who believe the correct theology! But there is no indication that when we get to heaven Peter will meet us at the door and hand us an exam paper with a lot of questions with the instruction to check the box: 'I agree', 'I agree strongly' or 'I disagree' with questions on topics such as the virgin birth.

I think I would pass, for I am a fairly educated theological believer! But on that great day I think I will be asked, 'Do you recognise the presence of the Lord Jesus in the least of my brothers and sisters?'

So when you look at an Israeli or a Palestinian or someone from Saudi Arabia or Morocco or Oman, Iran, Pakistan etc. try not to see their ethnic background. Try as best as you can, by the grace of God and with the power of the Holy Spirit, to see into the depths of their soul as a human being as you experience the presence of the Lord Jesus Himself in your own heart and mind.

We have all seen the picture of the Lord Jesus standing at the door and knocking painted by Holman Hunt. The idea is that if you open the door, the Lord Jesus will come in. The Lord Jesus chooses to be where He chooses to be. He isn't governed by our theology or prejudice.

We can be agents of reconciliation, but not on the basis of our theology and not by going over history for we will quickly disagree about what history means. We become agents of reconciliation when we have "this mind in us which was also in Christ Jesus" and we develop the capacity to look into people's eyes and sense the presence of the Lord Jesus through us for them.

So when we bring all sorts of Arabs together because we know that they are loved by the Lord Jesus, we can never take the Lord Jesus to where He is not! Wherever you go the Lord Jesus was there before you ever got there. And He desires to reveal Himself to every people group for He loves all people and He gave Himself to die on the Cross for each one of them.

When Paul spoke on Mars Hill in Athens (Acts 17:22-31) there was an interesting background to this event. Before this a plague had hit Athens and many people had died. The City Fathers had got together and prayed and asked all the religious leaders to call upon the various gods that the Greeks worshipped asking them to deliver the people from the plague. But nothing worked. Finally, they asked a very wise man to help them. He left his hermit location on a small island in the Aegean Sea and came to Athens. He told them there was a great God who loved us and cared for us all. He told them that this God was the Creator of all people and what is more He was a healing God who could deliver the people of Athens. He only had one problem; he didn't know the name of this God. But he

believed that if he was as good and just and loving as he believed, then he would respond if they called on him even if they didn't know his name and he would help them.

So according to the Greek historians, the people of Athens called upon the unknown God for a week. Athens was delivered from the plague almost instantly. So out of gratitude for this deliverance they constructed a temple with an altar to the unknown God. So Paul was able to say to them, ***"For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription 'To an unknown God'. Now what you worship as something unknown, I am going to proclaim to you – the God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hand. And He is not served by human hands as if He needed anything, because He Himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man He made every nation of men that they should inhabit the whole earth and He determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek Him and perhaps reach out for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us. For in Him we live and move and have our being. As some of your own poets have said, "We are His offspring". Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the Divine Being is like gold or silver or stone – an image made by man's design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now He commands all people everywhere to repent. For He has set a day when He will judge the world with justice by the man He has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising Him from the dead."*** (Acts 17:22-31)

So this 'unknown God' is **Jesus**! Either Paul was lying or the Lord Jesus had previously made a visit to Athens before He was ever incarnated! This same Lord Jesus reveals Himself in strange ways and in strange places to different people!

Always tell new recruits arriving on your team to listen and find out what people already know about the Lord Jesus because He has not left Himself without a witness to any people anywhere.

Some American Baptist workers went to Burma. In Rangoon they learned the language of a tribal people further north in the mountains. It was a large group of mountain people. They translated the Bible into the language of this mountain people and then began to distribute the Word of God among them. What they didn't know was that in the religious concepts of that people group was the belief that there was once a Great Creator God who loved humanity, but humanity had sinned so greatly that God had become angry. They believed that one day He would send His Son to be an agent of reconciliation and that two men with white skin would appear one day carrying a black book. That book would tell them about the Son of God and through the message of that book they could be reconciled to that God.

Can you imagine what happened! When these Christian workers arrived they were surrounded by thousands of these people who said to them, "We know why you have come. You have come to tell us about the Son of God. You have a black book that tells of this. Isn't this right?"

In such a case what would you say? They didn't say, "You are wrong, we have nothing to do with your religion!" Rather they said. "Yes, we have come to tell you about the Son of God and we do have a book that will tell you all about Him."

The Lord Jesus was there long before these workers arrived. Please understand that what makes people believers in the Lord Jesus isn't just believing that He exists. It is surrendering to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. So often here in the UK we have churches that are fairly well filled with people on a Sunday, but many of them have never surrendered to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. We must boldly declare the need to surrender to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. We have many who call themselves 'believers', but we are short of disciples! Disciples are those who have yielded completely to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

In the Arab World, the Lord Jesus is at work in the hearts and lives of both Christian background and Muslim background believers. Those who call Jesus 'Lord' and live out their Lordship daily in their

lives are our brothers and sisters in Christ. What I am pleading for may sound strange. It is a radically new way of looking into the eyes of Arab brothers and sisters we meet and not trying to make friends with them in order to manipulate them. We want to see the Lord Jesus in them. We want to become one with them in Christ Jesus and help make them one with us in Christ Jesus. So often with Christian background Arabs, let alone the Muslims, they have not yet really discovered the joy of true faith in the Lord Jesus. They don't know how to walk with Him daily in a vibrant relationship. Sadly, many grew up in various 'Christian churches' but they don't really believe in the present, daily reality of the Lord Jesus and they don't follow Him. They may say that He taught good things, but over the centuries the churches exaggerated a great deal. So they don't really believe that the Lord Jesus is who we evangelicals say He is!

With such people it is helpful to ask them to describe the Jesus they don't believe in! When they have finished the description you can say, 'Well done!' and explain that before you can accept the real Lord Jesus you have to get rid of all the false concept of the Lord Jesus you have created in your imagination. We need to help people destroy their false images of the Lord Jesus. We can tell them, "You are not really rejecting the Lord Jesus, since you have never met Him. He is far too wonderful to reject. He is too beautiful to turn away from!"

So our Arab friends, whether they are Muslim or Christian – Orthodox, Maronite etc., have not rejected the Lord Jesus, but they may well have rejected the images of the Lord Jesus that Christians past and present have constructed for themselves. Our task is to tell them about the Lord Jesus who loves them and who is prompting them to be reconciled to God and to one another.

The last thing I want to say is this: we need to believe that any person – all people – can be reconciled to God. We need to believe in the future!

We believe that the Lord Jesus will return and establish His Kingdom here on earth. Then the Kingdom will come in its fullness! It is part of our responsibility to start seeing that Kingdom come into being now. At His coming the Lord Jesus will accomplish all the things He promised, but He has no instructions that we should 'twiddle our thumbs while we wait'! We are to be, in some sense, 'Kingdom Builders'. The Bible says, ***"He who has begun a good work in you*** (building the Kingdom) ***will complete it on the day of His coming."*** (Phil 1:6)

So we are not to be passive and just wait for the trumpet to sound! We are to be active Kingdom Builders bringing justice to bear, reconciliation, hope to the world. Isaiah 55 describes this Kingdom. Please take time to read the whole chapter.

I believe that Isaiah's vision will happen! But I don't think it will happen without those of us who are believers in the Lord Jesus being deeply involved. We are to come into the "room". We don't come as know-it-all superiors, but as sinners who have been saved by the Lord Jesus. Jews, Arabs, Muslims of all backgrounds can come and surrender to His Lordship.

It is 'Friday'. The Lord Jesus is dead! But 'Sunday' is coming – the Resurrection! The difficulties in the Muslim World will not end in destruction. 'Sunday' is coming. The end will not be with a bang or a whimper! The Kingdom will come!! So we must go on with that optimism and that hope. The Muslim World doesn't believe in any sort of peace process with God or with each other. But God is building His Church in the Muslim World. We need to proclaim the Good News! The Good News is this: "Are you ready? Now it is 'Friday', but 'Sunday' is coming! We are going to see the breakthroughs. It might appear that we are not seeing many breakthroughs. We are just seeing slow progress with many setbacks and some Muslim background believers falling away. It appears to be 'Friday' when the disciples thought they were seeing all their hopes and expectations of Jesus being the long expected Messiah die with Him. But Sunday was coming! The church was born! Although it was soon attacked, it survived and grew. It is still growing and will continue to grow until, ***"This Gospel of the Kingdom is preached in all nations and then the end will come."*** (Mt. 24:14)